CHAPTER 5

# *Lysimache*
## *The Priestess of Athena and Her Doubles*

Freeze frame: It's Boedromion 12, 403. With his troops, Thrasybulus is marching up the Acropolis to make a sacrifice to Athena. At first sight, we can only distinguish men: On one side stand the people of the town, frightened spectators of this intimidating procession; on the other, the victorious democrats – citizens, foreigners, slaves and freedmen – who are already preparing to forgive. As the Athenian civil war comes to an end, women appear absent, as if erased from the picture.

Their presence can be sensed in the background, not only among the anonymous crowd who has come to watch, but also on the Acropolis itself. In a majestic role, the priestess of Athena Polias was necessarily present at Thrasybulus' side, since she was to help him accomplish his sacrifice in the honor of the goddess: 'For if a sacrifice could legally be organized, even carried out, by people not exercising priestly functions, it could not normally be done without the priest or the priestess, especially when consecrating victims or reciting prayers.'[1]

In all likelihood, the priestess of Athena played a central role in this ritual sequence, embodying the very specific participation of Athenian women in the resolution of the conflict. Her name – Lysimache – is known to us thanks to an extraordinary piece of evidence: After her death a few decades later, the priestess was commemorated with a bronze statue erected on the Acropolis, the work of a famous sculptor. But how did he manage to flesh out this fleeting and evanescent figure? Erased from history as written by men, she was nevertheless a central figure of the community; it is only necessary to take the trouble to read the ancient sources between the lines, being as attentive to what they express as to what they conceal.

[1] Georgoudi 1993, pp. 190–1. See also Pirenne-Delforge 2005, pp. 61–2: 'Textbooks repeat over and over that Greek sacrifice, like Roman sacrifice, does not require an intermediary between the worshipper and his god. However, in a sanctuary served by a priest, or a priestess, it is imperative to ensure her assistance.'

By means of some inscriptions and, especially, thanks to a play by Aristophanes performed in 411, it is possible to give back to Lysimache her full human dimension and to restore her singular mode of action within the city that went against the clichéd view of Athenian women as passive and legally in the minority. Better still, if we listen carefully, we can give voice to all those who surrounded her – not only the women directly involved in the cult of Athena, but more widely all Athenian women, including the foreigners to whom the priestess served as a mouthpiece in these 'dark times.'

## The Guardian of an Immutable Ritual?

In 403, the figure of Lysimache was familiar to all the members of the community who sometimes ran into her on the Acropolis, busy with her priestly tasks. A member of the prestigious *genos* of the Eteoboutadai and a direct descendant of one of the legendary royal families of Athens, she had been appointed, probably in the 420s, as priestess of Athena Polias serving at the temple of Athena located on the Acropolis, and, as such, she was tasked with presiding over all sacrifices in honor of the goddess. Even after her death, she continued to occupy this sacred space and to attract the attention of passersby, in the form of a statue erected in around 360. Archeologists have unearthed the circular base of this statue, and the skillfully restored inscription celebrates her long years spent working in the service of Athena[2]:

> [This old woman? Lysimache?] was by her descent (daughter) of Dracontides;
> she completed [eighty-eight] years;
> . . . sixty-four years she [served] Athena
> and lived to see four [generations] of children.
> *Uninscribed space*
> [Lysimache] mother of – of Phlya.[3]
> *Uninscribed space*
> [Demetrius] made it.[3]

In this short epigram time is both omnipresent and suspended: While the inscription is full of temporal markers – the age of Lysimache, the time she served as a priestess, the generations she saw pass – it is all the better for freezing the priestess out of time in the eternal practice of ritual. Cast in

[2] Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 34.76: 'Demetrius [is the author] of a Lysimache who was sixty-four years priestess of Minerva.'

[3] *IG* II² 3453 (transl. S. Lambert, https://www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGII2/3453).

Fig. 5.1 Base of Lysimache statue, priestess of Athena Polias (*IG* II² 3453), transl. S. Lambert (www.atticinscriptions.com/inscription/IGII2/3453).
*Photo:* E. Feiler, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens (neg. D-DAI-ATH-Akropolis 2296).

bronze, the priestess is presented as the guarantor that the community will always go on as before. No place is given here to the impact of history: It is as if the 'four generations of children' that Lysimache saw had followed one another smoothly and had not been bled dry by the wars and revolutions of the end of the fifth century; as if, too, the very definition of the community – and, consequently, the identity of the children who took part in it – had not been profoundly disrupted in the course of the terrible years during which she exercised her priestly office.

Tasked with performing ritual acts according to an immutable calendar, Lysimache thus seems to be placed outside of History, anchored in the repetition of biological and religious cycles – in short, the very symbol of the 'cold city' of rituals, as opposed to the 'hot city' of events.[4] Historiography tends to represent her as the simple incarnation of a line of interchangeable priestesses: 'Lysimache can act as a worthy

[4] On this established opposition, see Loraux 2006, pp. 54–6.

representative of these successive priestesses whose activity – as enforced by cult traditionalism – does not seem to have undergone any significant changes over the centuries.'[5] A priestess for life, a wife and the mother of a family, she is only one link in an uninterrupted chain that goes back to the dawn of time – that of the quarrel between Athena and Poseidon, fighting for the privilege of patronizing the territory of future communities.

It is, however, possible to animate somewhat this portrait of an ageless woman by inscribing it in its own time. Let us consider the statue of Lysimache from another angle, by looking into the reasons that caused the Athenians to erect it on the Acropolis – an unprecedented act that had no equivalent in Athens for a long time to come.[6] If the priestess was honored in this way, it is precisely because she officiated at a time of major upheaval for the community.

On a ritual level, she was attached, if not to a new cult, at least to a new place of worship, the Erechtheion, completed in 406, barely two years before the start of the civil war.[7] This religious change coincided with a thorough reworking of one of the founding Athenian myths, autochthony. The history of the first Athenian, born of the earth, is common knowledge: Seized by a violent desire for Athena, the lame Hephaestus attempted, unsuccessfully, to rape her. His semen did spatter the goddess's thigh, however, and she grabbed a twist of wool (*eru*) to wipe her leg, and then dropped it on the Attic ground (*chthon*). From that fertilized earth, Erechtheus emerged and was taken in and raised by Athena, becoming the ancestor of all Athenians.[8]

To this well-known myth – alluded to as early as the *Iliad* – the Athenians added extra material during the fifth century. In the *Erechtheus*, performed in the theater of Dionysus in 423 or 422, just before construction of the Erechtheion began,[9] the poet Euripides chose to concentrate not on the birth, but on the death of the native hero. The play portrays an Attica torn apart by internal conflicts: The Athenians are fighting for their survival against the people of Eleusis who have received the providential assistance of Eumolpos, a Thracian and a son of Poseidon. The oracle of Delphi announces that Athens can be saved on one

[5] Georgoudi 1993, p. 171.
[6] Keesling 2012.
[7] It is perhaps for this reason that she was honored with a statue on the Acropolis by the Athenian *demos*, if one follows the attractive hypothesis of Keesling 2012, p. 495.
[8] See Gantz 1993, pp. 235–6.
[9] Some commentators prefer to date the play to around 416 because of its characteristic metrical style: They question the testimony of Plutarch (*Nicias*, 9.7) that is generally used to date the play to just before the Peace of Nicias in 421. See Cropp and Fick 1985, pp. 78–80.

condition only: Erechtheus must sacrifice one of his daughters, a demand to which he and his wife Praxithea accede. Among the daughters of Erechtheus, those who are not married then make the oath to die together in solidarity with their condemned sister. Thanks to this courageous sacrifice, the Athenians prevail over the Eleusinians, while Erechtheus kills Eumolpos in single combat. Upset by the outcome of the fight, Poseidon strikes his son's murderer with his trident, driving him into the ground, the very earth from which he came. Balance having thus been restored, the play ends with reconciliation between gods and men: Athena orders the Athenians to found a new cult to Poseidon and his victim Erechtheus. At the same time, the goddess grants to Praxithea the right to make bloody sacrifices on her altar: 'To you, Praxithea, who have restored this city's foundations, I grant the right to make burnt sacrifices for the city on my altars, and to be called my priestess.'[10]

Marking a major inflection of the myth of autochthony, this play grants a crucial role to women and especially to Erechtheus' wife. Far from the misogyny that is sometimes attributed to him, Euripides thus entrusts Praxithea with the task of celebrating the autochthonous origins of Athens in a passage marked by outspoken xenophobia.[11] More broadly, Praxithea appears to be endowed with a real capacity for action. It is indeed she who takes the initiative, in agreement with her husband, to sacrifice one of her daughters.[12] There is not the slightest passivity in this woman, who goes on to proclaim: 'I love my children, but I love my homeland more.'[13]

As Claude Calame writes, 'not only does autochthony end up being also a women's affair (even if men occupy the central stage), but motherhood, far from being denied, is put at the service of the city.'[14] If Athenian

[10] *Erechtheus*, fr. 370 l. 94–6 Loeb = fr. 22, l. 94–6 Jouan-Van Looy.

[11] Euripides, *Erechtheus*, fr. 360 Loeb = fr. 14, l. 5–13 Jouan-Van Looy: 'My reasons are many, and the first of them is that I could get no other city better than this. In the first place, we are not an immigrant people from elsewhere but born in our own land, while other cities are founded as it were through board-game moves, different ones imported from different places. But someone who settles in one city from another is like a bad peg fixed in a piece of wood: he's a citizen in name, but not in reality.'

[12] Euripides, *Erechtheus*, fr. 360 Loeb = fr. 14, l. 1–4 Jouan-Van Looy: 'People find it more pleasing when someone gives favors generously – but to act yet take one's time is considered ill-bred. I for my part shall offer my daughter to be killed.'

[13] Euripides, *Erechtheus*, fr. 360a Loeb = fr. 15 Jouan-Van Looy.

[14] See Calame 2015, p. 229, which highlights the importance of the voluntary suicide of the royal couple's other two daughters, a sacrifice given as an example to all Athenians: 'It is indeed the blood of women that ensures the continuity of the city: it is necessary that native daughters are sacrificed and that their blood returns, in part, to the original soil, to ensure the continuity of the city and the reconciliation between Athens and Poseidon, the good functioning of generations. Women are necessary for the city's sustainability, not only in terms of begetting children, but in ritual terms.'

women generally benefited from this rewriting of the story, the play especially honored one of them, Praxithea, and, in turn, Lysimache, her direct descendant. For the Athenians could not fail to make the link between the very first priestess of Athena and the woman who then held this position on the Acropolis as they watched the play being performed in the sanctuary-theater of Dionysus, with an unobstructed view of the Acropolis where Lysimache fulfilled her office.[15]

At the end of fifth century, the priestess of Athena was therefore celebrated under the gaze of all the Athenians on the tragic stage. But it is on the comic stage that Lysimache was really brought to the fore, in a play by Aristophanes performed in 411, barely a few weeks before the momentary abolition of democracy: In *Lysistrata*, the priestess was presented as a key player in the political life of the city and a depositary of the hopes and fears of the whole community.

## The Priestess on Stage

The plot of the play is famous. Determined to put an end to the interminable Peloponnesian War, Greek women agree among themselves to seize power. To this end, Lysistrata, a cunning and energetic Athenian woman, convinces her sisters to withhold sexual privileges from their husbands and to launch a surprise attack on the Acropolis, where the city's treasury – the sinews of war – was stored. The plan succeeds without a hitch, and the women manage to stop the hostilities between Greeks while restoring the true values of civic marriage, the sole guarantor of the city's continuity.

Lysistrata ('she who breaks up armies') has long been recognized as a clear transposition of Lysimache ('she who breaks up battles').[16] With this slight shift, Aristophanes alerted the audience to the meaning of a name that, as is often the case in Greek literature, is also a program of action – in this case, to stop the war. Lysistrata/Lysimache is portrayed as a positive figure throughout the play, unlike the other (feminine and masculine) characters, who are constantly ridiculed.

Above all, like the Athenian political leaders, Lysistrata behaves with authority and constantly takes decisions for the common good. Hailed as 'the bravest of all' (*andreiotatē*) – a very masculine quality, as the etymology suggests – it is she who summons the women to deliberate, in the manner of the *prytaneis*[17]; it is also she who directs the rituals in which

[15] Calame 2011. [16] This identification goes back to Lewis 1955.
[17] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 14, 22, 93.

those who participated in the conspiracy are involved, presiding over the oath taken by the women as well as over the parodic sacrifice that accompanies it (v. 201–4); again, it is she who suggests capturing the Acropolis and doing so on the occasion of a sacrifice, precisely the kind of ritual that the real Lysimache performed (v. 176–9).

Once the Acropolis is taken, she asserts her authority. She becomes the treasurer of Athena, occupying de facto a role that corresponds to one of the most prestigious magistracies in the city (v. 489–98). The stakes are decisively high, insofar as the men will continue the war as long 'as their warships have feet and [as] they have that bottomless fund of money in Athena's temple.'[18] At the end of the play, Aristophanes even lends her the stature of a real legislator: Athenians and Spartans agree to consider her as the only one who can establish concord and put an end to the *stasis* between Greeks, in the manner of a female Solon (v. 1103–4): 'Why don't we ask Lysistrata to join us? She's the only person who can bring about a true reconciliation.' And the Coryphaeus adds: 'Hail, bravest of all women! To your charms all Greeks surrender! Now be awesome, gentle, noble, common, proud, experienced, tender: the two great warring states now share joint determination.'[19]

A priestess, treasurer, councilor and even legislator: Lysistrata/Lysimache receives a majestic portrayal in Aristophanes' play. It would obviously be absurd to take the poet at his word, by falling for what Pierre Vidal-Naquet called a 'sociological illusion': Comedies do not reflect the reality they claim to describe, and Aristophanes' play represents above all the way in which men fantasize about the place of women in the city. Should we then see in *Lysistrata* only a pure fantasy, giving as much power to women as they were deprived of in reality?

To confine the play to the sole register of carnivalesque inversion would, however, be to fall for the opposite illusion. For Lysistrata/Lysimache is not just another individual that Aristophanes could manipulate at will: Inspired by one of the most prominent figures in the community, his heroine has singularities that guided how the poet could imagine his theatrical plot. Thus, it is not by chance that Lysistrata acts in a way that echoes the experience of her double, Lysimache, and, in particular, manifests her intimate knowledge of the Acropolis and the rituals that take place there: Aristophanes' heroine takes action just as the real priestess of Athena did. The same is true when the poet depicts his heroine with exceptional agency: Aristophanes only overstates the point, rather than inventing it

[18] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 173–4.
[19] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 1110–1 (transl. Sommerstein 2002a).

from scratch. In fact, we know from various sources how much the priestess of Athena was *really* capable of: Since she was free to do as she pleased and received payment for her duties, she could work together with other magistrates, such as the treasurers of Athena, in order to make dedications.[20] Better still, she could manifest her piety in her own name. Recording the list of offerings dedicated in the Parthenon between 398/7 and 385/4, an inventory includes the following entry: 'A silver phiale that Lysimache, mother of Telemachos, dedicated, and on which is the *gorgoneion*, weight 3+ drachmas.'[21] In all likelihood, the inscription reflects the wording chosen by the priestess herself for the dedication of the object and, therefore, her capacity for action.[22] And that is not all: The priestess of Athena enjoyed prerogatives that, most of the time, were the privilege of male citizens, or even of magistrates alone. Thus she had the power to bring a lawsuit against someone, since the Athenian orator Lycurgus wrote a speech *On the Priestess*. This probably spoke of the priestess of Athena Polias, to whom Lycurgus was related as a member of the *genos* of the Eteoboutadai. More strikingly, she had the right to put her mark on certain official documents, in a society where the anonymity of women was the rule and where the proclamation of their name was often made only after their death on their funerary steles: Just like a priest, the priestess could 'affix her seal on the records,' which no doubt detailed monies given to the goddess and included inventories of offerings.[23]

Moving freely around the Acropolis, handling money, consecrating offerings in her name, introducing lawsuits, affixing her seal – the priestess of Athena thus seems to have had significant agency. The city recognized the exceptional character of the responsibility that was entrusted to her by forcing the priestess to account for her management of the sanctuary, just like any male magistrate in charge of public goods.[24] She even had the power to influence the policies of the community in moments of need: Just before the Battle of Salamis in September 480, it was the priestess of Athena Polias who had tipped the balance in favor of the interpretation of the oracle of Delphi proposed by Themistocles.[25]

[20] Georgoudi 1993, pp. 208–9. [21] *IG* II² 1388, side B, l. 55–7. [22] Keesling 2012, p. 493.

[23] Lycurgus, *On the Priestess*, fr. 6, 4: *sussēmainesthai ta grammata*. The fact that this speech refers to the priestess of Athena Polias can be deduced from two elements: the use of the singular (On *the* priestess) in the preserved title of the speech and the reference to the *grammata*, which cannot concern any other cult.

[24] Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* (3), 17–8.

[25] Herodotus, 8.41: The priestess had then 'made known' that the honey cake, offered every month to the great living snake 'in the sanctuary,' had not been touched by the sacred animal, identified by some as Erichthonios. It is this – as much as Themistocles' speech to the Assembly – that had

Like her illustrious predecessor from the Persian Wars, Lysimache had a real capacity for action. In a way, the very existence of Aristophanes' play reflects the influence the Athenians attributed to her: Lysimache was one of those people prominent enough to become the subject of an entire play, like the *komodoumenoi*, those politicians who were mocked on stage and whose luminous counterpart she embodies.

In the end, what best testifies to the extraordinary aura of Lysimache is the famous statue of her erected on the Acropolis after her death. While some see in this an offering made by a member of her own family (her son?),[26] the statue may well have been voted for at the initiative of the Athenian people. Admittedly, the inscription does not include the words 'the *demos* dedicated . . .' common in later honorific decrees, but this formula was not yet established in the 360s.[27] Apparently, Lysimache received the greatest honor that the city could grant, at a time when only a few great generals had been distinguished in this way in the Agora of Athens. It was undoubtedly a question of showing public gratitude toward the priestess who was the first to have served in the new temple of the Erechtheion and, perhaps, also of thanking her for the exceptional services that she had rendered during the 'dark times' of the war.

## Female Chorality: The Servants of Athena

Another question then presents itself: Is Lysimache/Lysistrata only an exception, all the more striking because the play veils the reality of male domination over the remaining Athenian women? Certainly, the priestess of Athena was an extraordinary woman, if only due to her distinctive status. Temptation is therefore great to see her only as a hapax and to revert to the vision of passive women totally dominated by their guardians, whether this meant their father, husband or son.

Such a gloomy picture deserves, however, some nuance. Let's take Aristophanes as a guide: While she is certainly exceptional in terms of her intelligence and her charisma, Lysistrata/Lysimache is far from being alone in the play. Presented as a model to be followed, she arouses forms of projective identification on the part of other women who strive to imitate her to varying degrees of success. She appears at the head of a chorus, in the literal sense of the term, being likely to act in concert with others and

encouraged the Athenians to leave their city en masse, by convincing them that the goddess had abandoned the Acropolis.

[26] Bielman 2002, pp. 22–5. [27] Keesling 2012, pp. 494–5.

even to bring the city, as run by men, to heel. If this is a pious fiction – for Athenian women never imposed their views on men in this way – the way their choral nature is portrayed invites us to take seriously the forms of solidarity and even sisterhood that were woven between women in a ritual framework.

What is the precise composition of the group evolving around the heroine? Let us start from the words spoken by the chorus of *Lysistrata* who, in the play, sketch out a collective self-portrait, in a strange oscillation between "I" and "we":

> We shall give good advice to the City:
> For my nurture, I owe her no less.
> I became, at the age of just seven,
> An Acropolis child priestess (*arrhēphoroi*);
> Then, after I'd served as a Grinder,
> To Brauron, aged ten, I went down
> As a Bear in the rites of the Foundress,
> And discarded my saffron-dyed gown;
> And finally I was selected
> The ritual basket to bear (*kanēphoroi*),
> With a string of dried figs for a necklace.[28]

*Arrhēphoroi*, 'bearess,' *kanēphoroi*: These successive statuses all refer to prestigious Athenian rituals, accessible only to young girls from good families.[29] It is therefore a group of handpicked women who sang and danced in a chorus around Lysistrata. And, there again, this comic fiction was inspired by very real ritual practices: We know that the priestess of Athena Polias supervised a certain number of young girls, hired to serve the goddess. When they made the *peplos* – the garment given as an offering to Athena every four years at the time of the great Panathenaia – the priestess presided over the inauguration of the weaving and had under her supervision all those who worked together, for a period of several months, to manufacture the garment: the two *Arrhēphoroi*, maybe the Ergastinai (young girls) and all married women.[30] Between all these women collaborating in the same ritual task a particularly strong bond was established, symbolized precisely by their weaving, which is the usual metaphor for union in ancient Greece.[31]

[28] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 638–47. [29] Brulé 1987.
[30] Brulé 1987, p. 99. The Ergastinai may be a later creation (from the second century BC?). See Mikalson 1998, pp. 255–6; Connelly 2007, p. 39.
[31] Scheid and Svenbro 1996, pp. 9–34.

Thus it is necessary to restore around the historical Lysimache a whole chorus composed of those who, year after year, had occupied these prestigious functions and worked under her direction. But the group also included a core of other women who, like Lysimache, served the goddess throughout their lives and not just for a short period of time: There were in particular the other priestesses of Athena and also the personnel attached to these various priestly functions. We are fortunate to know the name of one of the main contemporary priestesses of Lysimache: Myrrhine, the first priestess of Athena Nike.

## Myrrhine, Athena's Other Priestess

Between 440 and 420, the Athenians launched a new construction program on a bastion at the entrance of the Acropolis in order to create a temple and an altar for Athena Nike (the Victorious). An Athenian decree mentions the project and specifies the ritual put in place:

> [. . .]ikos proposed: to select (or: establish) as a priestess for Athena Nike whoever will be [allotted] from all Athenian women and to provide the sanctuary with doors in whatever way Callicrates will specify; [. . .] the priestess is to receive fifty drachmai [per year] and to receive the backlegs and hides of the *dēmosios* sacrifices; and that a temple be built in whatever way Callicrates may specify and a stone (marble) altar.[32]

The Athenians therefore decided to create a new priesthood attached to an already very old cult that went back at least as far as the first half of the sixth century BC. Its mode of appointment was a full-blown innovation: The priestess was not chosen from a family with prestigious ancestry, but drawn by lot from all the Athenian women. Such a measure was revolutionary: It potentially granted to any (female) citizen a major religious role. This was the first 'democratic' priesthood attested in Athens, open to all and not reserved to the members of a *genos*, such as the Eteoboutadai, from whom the priestess of Athena Polias was chosen. In a society where politics and religion were closely intertwined, radical democracy thus extended its egalitarian logic to the realm of cult practices, supposedly reticent to innovations.[33]

[32] *IG* I³ 35, ll. 3–8, 9–12 (transl. Blok 2014, p. 121). Perhaps this decision was taken following a previous decree that instituted public sacrifices (*dēmotelēs*) for the goddess, to be performed after military victories: The priestess apparently took charge as soon as everything was agreed, without waiting for the temple to be completed. See on this subject Blok 2014.

[33] See Parker 1996, pp. 125–7; Lambert 2010, pp. 153–6.

In addition to her singular mode of designation, it is the magnitude of the remuneration granted to the new priestess that attracts attention. She received a fixed sum, similar to a real annual salary, to which were added a share in the spoils of sacrifice, the resale of which could generate significant profits. These sums went far beyond what was generally granted to other priests and priestesses – often a handful of obols, at best a few drachmas – for the performance of specific sacrifices. The new priestess was thus given a real allowance, like the magistrates who, since the middle of the fifth century, were paid for the time they spent serving the community.

A well-preserved funerary stele bears the name of this first priestess, who died shortly after the completion of the temple of Athena Nike in the years 420–410:

> Far-shining memorial (*mnēma*) of Callimachus' daughter
> who was the first to watch over the temple of Nike.
> Her name accompanied her glory, as by divine
> good fortune she was rightly called Myrrhine.
> She was the first to watch over the statue [or seat] (*hedos*) of Athena Nike,
> (chosen) from all the Athenians by a fortunate lot, Myrrhine.[34]

In a poetic form, the inscription echoes the name of the deceased, whose sound in Greek brings to mind the myrtle often used in ritual occasions, and celebrates the care she took in fulfilling her office; the epigram makes a point of returning twice to the way Myrrhine was chosen by lot as the very first priestess of Athena Nike.[35]

To this beautifully made stele, it is tempting to associate a superb marble funerary lekythos, more than 1.30 m high, unearthed in 1873 three kilometers from the Acropolis. It shows a woman led by Hermes into the other world, passing in front of three figures, probably her husband and her children. Her name, Myrrhine, is engraved in large letters above her head, distinguishing her at first glance as the main character of the scene.

Is this the same Myrrhine as the one mentioned on the stele? Wearing an intricately draped garment, a bracelet on her right arm and a diadem on her head, she has a distinguished appearance, but this is not enough to identify her as the first priestess of Athena Nike. The estimated date of the lekythos – the end of the fifth century – nevertheless encourages such a comparison. In this case, one could imagine that the vase flanked the funerary stele, in accordance with a practice very common at the time.[36]

[34] *IG* I³ 1330 (transl. Connelly 2007, p. 227). See Brown Ferrario 2014, pp. 162–5.
[35] On the drawing of lots as a choice left to the gods, see Plato, *Laws*, 559b–c.
[36] Clairmont 1979, pp. 103–10. See, however, the doubts of Connelly 2007, pp. 228–9.

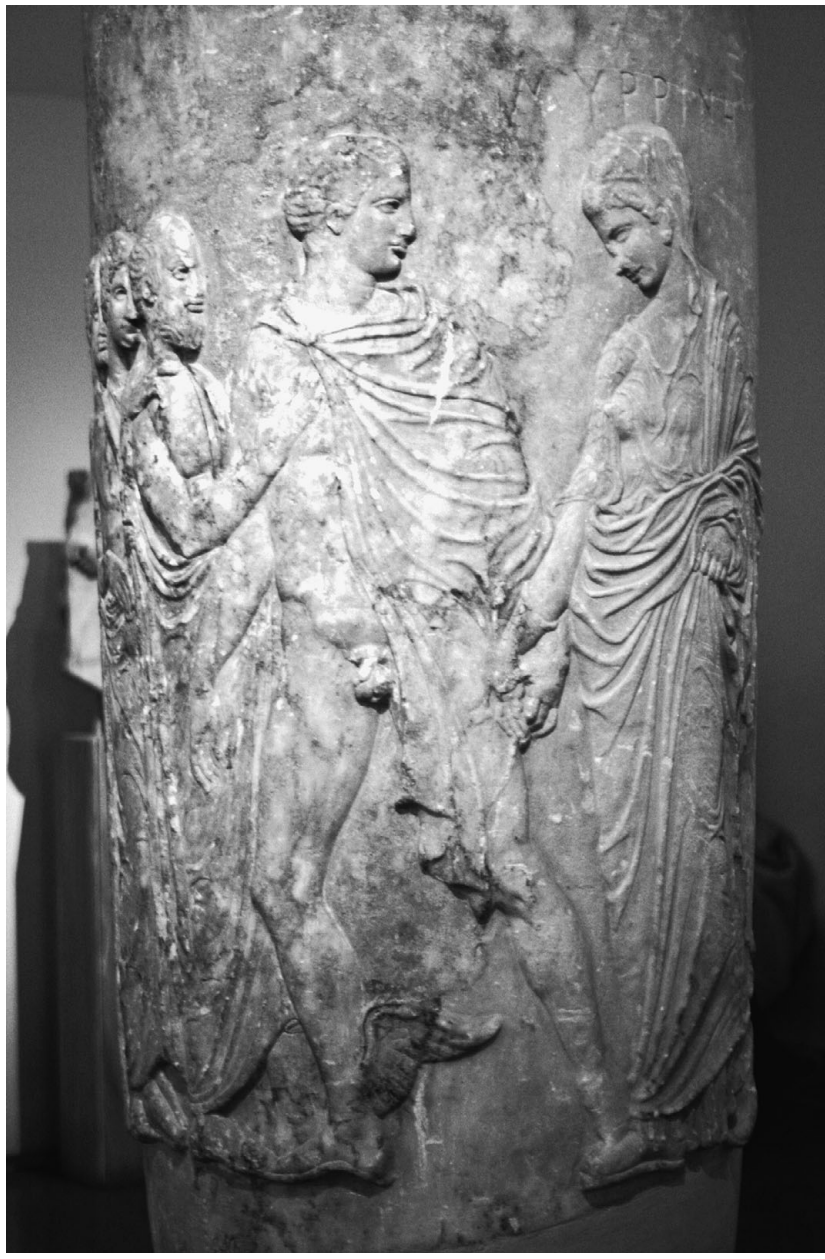

Fig. 5.2 Funerary lekythos of Myrrhine (420–410 BC).

What interactions might this Myrrhine have had with the priestess of Athena Polias, Lysimache? The two women must certainly have been in contact, since they both exercised their roles as priestesses on the Acropolis, where the temples to which they were attached were located. Were they in competition or did they collaborate for the greater glory of the goddess? If it is difficult to give a definitive answer to this question, certain indications suggest that the two priestesses did not enjoy the same recognition within the community. On the monumental level, first of all, the difference is obvious: In spite of the beauty of the lekythos and the quality of the epigram, Myrrhine's funerary commemoration cannot compare – in terms of cost and prestige – with the bronze statue of Lysimache erected on the Acropolis.[37] But there is more: In a thinly veiled form, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* establishes a clear hierarchy between the two women.

For the priestess of Athena Polias is not the only one alluded to in the play: Lysistrata is indeed assisted by a certain Myrrhine, whom the Athenians could not fail to identify with the priestess of Athena Nike who had taken office a few years prior. Not only did the poet not even bother to find a pseudonym for her, but he placed in Lysistrata's mouth a mischievous evocation of the drawing of lots, describing the moment when the female conspirators – including the famous Myrrhine – had to take the oath to abstain from any sexual intercourse with their husbands.[38] And these allusions continue in the play: While the women take over the Acropolis, Myrrhine quickly manages to get her hands on a bed, a mat, a pillow and a blanket (v. 916–36), as if she had intimate knowledge of the place, just like her alter ego, the priestess of Athena Nike.

If, in the play, Myrrhine behaves as a faithful ally to Lysistrata, she is, however, portrayed in a much less favorable light than her colleague: At the beginning, she arrives late for her appointment, attracting the wrath of the heroine (v. 70–1); we then see her reluctant to stop sleeping with her husband (v. 130), and, sometime later, she is very close to breaking her oath of abstinence, consumed as she is by *erōs* (v. 916–36). Aristophanes thus depicts her as a mercurial woman, submissive to her desires – a good representative of the average Athenian woman, from among whom she is drawn by lot. Aristophanes therefore amuses himself, *mezza voce*, by opposing the virtuous Lysistrata/Lysimache, born within a venerable *genos* and fully mistress of her actions, to Myrrhine, the democratic priestess drawn by lot, unable to keep her word without being forced. Even if one must be careful not to take too seriously these masquerades, intended first

[37] Holtzmann 2003, p. 224. [38] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 207–8. See Connelly 2007, p. 63.

and foremost to make people laugh, the poet undoubtedly relays here a feeling shared by most Athenians: In their eyes, Lysimache remained at the head of the 'servants of Athena' of whom she was symbolically the master.

If the priestess of Athena Nike did not enjoy the same prestige as her colleague, she was nevertheless equally responsible for guaranteeing harmonious bonds between the divinity and the community. This is why it was perhaps necessary to restore her presence on the Acropolis when Thrasybulus and his troop marched there. Should we imagine that these men came to a halt in front of the temple of Athena Nike, the very first religious building they had set eyes upon after several months spent unable to take part in the great civic rituals? The symbolism of the building (victory) and the mode of designation of its priestess (through the drawing of lots) must have had a particular resonance for the democrats who had just come back from Piraeus. Without hard evidence, we must remain in the register of hypothesis. On the other hand, there is another woman who must have been present when Thrasybulus sacrificed to Athena and whose image should be added to the great fresco of the Athenian reconciliation: the faithful assistant of the priestess of Athena Polias.

## Syeris, the Subordinate Double of Lysimache

On the base of a statue found on the Acropolis is inscribed, in large letters, the name of a woman who was honored in the following way:

> Sye[ris] [. .]gou S[- - -], servant (*diakonos*) of Lysimache.
> This image of my form (*tupou*), the one in the sanctuary, shows me clearly;
> my deeds and spirit now live on, clear to all. A reverend fate led me
> into the most beautiful temple of holy Pallas, where I performed
> this labor not without glory for the goddess [. . .]
> Nicomachus made [this statue].[39]

During his stay in Athens, several centuries later, Pausanias saw the statue of Syeris still standing near the temple of Athena and described it as that of an old woman.[40] Until recently, it was thought that the effigy had only been erected in the third century BC and that the Syeris it depicted was therefore not the servant of 'our' Lysimache, but a homonymous priestess, active a century later.[41] However, Catherine Keesling has recently shown convincingly that the monument actually dates from the 350s. Her argument is based both on the atypical dimensions of the pillar

[39] *IG* II² 3464 (transl. Keesling 2012, p. 469). [40] Pausanias 1.27.4.
[41] See in particular Georgoudi 1993, p. 205; Denis 2009, p. 367.

that housed the statue – shaped like many other examples from the middle of the fourth century – and on the name of the sculptor, Nicomachus, who should be identified as the painter of the same name mentioned by Pliny the Elder and active between 370 and 320.[42]

Therefore, the inscription in honor of Syeris can only refer to the assistant of the Lysimache who officiated on the Acropolis for sixty-four years. What was the exact role of this servant (*diakonos*) who depended directly on the priestess of Athena Polias? In charge of the maintenance of the sanctuary, she must have had a variety of tasks, some very prosaic (like keeping the temple clean) and others more significant: Her missions probably included keeping alive the eternal flame that remained lit, day and night, in the Erechtheion.[43] Undoubtedly she was also directly involved in the preparation and the management of all festivals in honor of the goddess, just like the 'assistants (*diakonoumenai*)' who, in Olympia, organized all the great festivals for Hera.[44] Far from being a vague subordinate, her role as 'servant' implies that she worked closely with the priestess, whom she had to assist and sometimes replace. Their two statues located on the Acropolis certainly provide the best testimony to this constant cooperation, as if, even in death, the two women were continuing to take care of the sanctuary together.

What more do we know about Syeris? The inscription is incomplete and does not tell us the name of either her father or her husband, or her exact origin. Here again we must resort to conjecture and, first of all, note the foreign consonance of her name, of which there are many examples in Egypt. It is possible that the inscription mentioned her ethnicity – that is, her place of origin outside Athens. According to Keesling, Syeris' family could therefore have come from Saïs, a city on the Nile delta.[45] This would not be surprising since some Egyptians settled in Athens as early as the classical period.[46]

[42] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 35.108–10. Keesling 2012, p. 489. The name at the top of the pillar was engraved at a later date, presumably because the original name was inscribed on a now-lost capital; it would seem the reengraving dates from the second century BC, a time when intense energy was being put into commemoration of the Acropolis' priestesses.

[43] Plutarch, *Numa*, 9.11. [44] Pausanias, 5.16.2–3.

[45] See Keesling 2012, p. 496–7 and n. 96. Some have argued, however, that Syeris may in fact have belonged to the prestigious *genos* of the *Eteoboutadai*, and could therefore be a relative of Lysimache, since the orator Lycurgus, who served as priest of Poseidon Erechtheus, was nicknamed 'the Egyptian' in Attic comedy (see Blok and Lambert 2009, p. 111, n. 2). The argument is, however, weak: There is a huge difference between a nickname *assigned* by an ill-intentioned poet and a name *chosen* by the family itself.

[46] The Egyptian presence in Attica is proven by the mention of a sanctuary of Isis founded by a community of Egyptians in the decree of the merchants of Kition in 333/2 (*IG* II² 337, l. 42–5). The mention of an Isigenes, a citizen born in about 400 (*IG* II² 1927, l. 150), allows us to think

That Lysimache's 'servant' was probably a foreigner (or a recent citizen) was not an obstacle to her integration into the Athenian community: not during her lifetime, through her association with the most prestigious cult of the city, nor after her death, through the statue set up for her on the Acropolis. This was an exceptional honor, because the erection of a statue in such a strategic place could not be done without the agreement of the people who either must have let the family do as they wished or initiated the project themselves. Whatever the case may be, such an act must be seen as a mark of exceptional recognition of the role Syeris played, under the direction of the priestess of Athena Polias, in particularly trying times when it was important to cultivate the best possible relations with the goddess.

Gravitating around Lysimache, the chorus of Athena's handmaidens was essentially characterized by strong polarities: on the one hand, between the priestesses of Athena themselves – Myrrhine, an average Athenian chosen by lot, in contrast to Lysimache, the 'über-autochthonous' descendant of Erechtheus; and on the other hand, between these different priestesses and all the women working under their direction – sometimes occasionally, such as the *arrhēphoroi* and other *kanephoroi*, and sometimes permanently, like the *diakonos* Syeris. Cohabiting the same places, living together on a daily basis and sometimes working together, these women formed a community united by strong ritual ties, transcending the barriers of status, or even ethnicity, for the greater glory of Athena. The presence of a foreigner in this group allows us to imagine that the chorus extended beyond the civic circle and was potentially open to all those who wished to enter it. Here again, it is Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* that gives flesh to this enlarged collective, dominated by the prominent figure of the priestess of Athena Polias.

## 'All of the Lysimachai!'

While Lysimache exercised her power over the 'servants of Athena,' her influence went well beyond this restricted circle. For all Athenians crossed paths with her at certain cardinal moments of their existence: The priestess of Athena received a donation upon the birth and the death of each citizen, and this had been the case since Hippias, son of Peisistratus: 'Moreover, whenever a citizen died, the priestess of the temple of Athena on the Acropolis was to receive one quart measure of barley, one of wheat, and a

that there were Egyptians in Attica from at least the fifth century. In addition, one famous – albeit 'mythical' – example is known of a place of worship founded by an old Egyptian slave: the sanctuary of Dodona (Herodotus, 2.56).

silver obol. And when a child was born, the father paid the same dues.'[47] Furthermore, she was in close contact with each woman who married: It is she who welcomed the bride and her parents to the Acropolis when they came to make a sacrifice to the goddess before the wedding; she also left her sanctuary and traveled across the city to visit young brides, if the Suda is to be believed: 'The priestess in Athens, carrying the sacred *aigis*, used to visit the [houses of] newly-married women (*tas neogamous*).'[48]

Birth, marriage and death: The priestess of Athena therefore intervened in all transitional moments – the famous 'rites of passage' dear to anthropologists – which gave her a visibility of which few men, even influential ones, could boast. In this perspective, the epigram engraved on the base of the statue of Lysimache must be understood in a completely literal way: 'She *saw* (*epeide*) four generations of children.' In a city that, by its size, guaranteed a certain anonymity to its members, the priestess was one of the rare few to have really *seen* all the Athenians and to have been seen by each of them.

In 403, Lysimache had probably already been exercising her office for more than twenty years, and, as such, she must already have welcomed many a bride and shared in their expectations, their excitement or their fears; in the minds of the Athenians, she must have been associated with their joys and their sorrows, having comforted them at deaths and having rejoiced with them at weddings and births. The effect could only have been cumulative: Over the years, Lysimache's fame must have grown until the priestess became a familiar figure, a rock to which the Athenians could cling in a city characterized by endless change (*metabolai*).

The priestess of Athena could therefore boast of knowing *visually* all the Athenian women, whatever their social or geographical origins. Furthermore, Aristophanes offers a striking theatrical representation of this when he shows Lysistrata/Lysimache surrounded by women from all across Attica: The group of conspirators includes not only Athenian women from the city, but also women from the coast, the island of Salamis and the north and south of Attica.[49] This intimate bond between Athenian women can also be found in the account of the city's origins. The priestess embodied, as we have seen, autochthony in its highest degree, since she was symbolically descended 'from Boutes and beyond, from Erechtheus,

[47] Pseudo-Aristotle, *Economics*, 2.2.4. See Georgoudi 1993, p. 205. Holtzmann 2003, p. 220, wonders whether this measure survived after the fall of the tyrant.

[48] Suda, s.v. *Aigis, alphaiota*, 60.3 Adler.

[49] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 58–9 (Salamis); 62 (north of Attica, Acharnai); 67–8 (deme of Anagyros, in the south).

son of Gaia and Hephaestus.'[50] However, since the middle of the fifth century, Athenian women could also be proud of being 'born of the earth,' just like men. The law on citizenship, created through the initiative of Pericles in 451, required two Athenian parents to be recognized as a citizen: The purity of Athenian blood was henceforth considered to be passed down from both men and women.[51] But this shared belief also transformed Athenian women into sisters sharing a common ancestor who was born on the Acropolis, where Lysimache, the most autochthonous of them all, officiated.

This imaginary kinship did not prevent the maintenance of a certain hierarchy between old and new autochthons. Aristophanes amuses himself in the play by distinguishing his main heroine from all those who surround her. While the women are frightened by the sight on the Acropolis of 'the guardian snake' (v. 759) – the figure of Erichthonius and a symbol of autochthony[52] – Lysistrata remains unmoved. Here, again, the poet is playing on the knowledge his public shares of Lysimache, whose identity is discernable under the mask of Lysistrata: It was in fact the priestess of Athena Polias who was responsible for feeding the sacred animal. She could not be afraid of such an encounter.

Aristophanes' play is an invitation to widen the chorus gravitating around the priestess still further. By no means in favor of Athens closing in on itself, Lysistrata wove links beyond the civic framework, integrating in her conspiracy Spartan, Boeotian and Corinthian women. It was together – no matter their origins – that they decided (v. 39–41) to put an end to what Lysistrata considered a war between 'relatives' bound by a common cult (v. 1128–32). And to achieve this goal, all Greek women had to join forces under the sign of *erōs*. It was indeed the birth of a community of desire that Lysistrata/Lysimache called for (v. 551–4):

> So long as Aphrodite of Cyprus
> and her sweet son Eros breathe hot desire over our bosoms and our
> thighs, and so long as they cause our menfolk to suffer from
> long, hard, truncheon-shaped tumescences – then I believe that
> before long we will be known throughout Greece as the
> *Lysimachai* ['those who break up battles'].

Here is Lysistrata's plan stated in its most radical formulation: to create an immense chorus regulated only by the law of desire, even if this meant

[50] [Plutarch], *Life of Lycurgus*, 843e. Cf. Lycurgus, fr. VI.11 Conomis. [51] Blok 2009.
[52] The snake is also the symbol of the male sex: All these women decide to go on a 'sex strike,' thus interrupting momentarily the lineage of the Erechtheidai by generating no more natives.

transgressing affiliations and inherited statuses. To achieve her ends, the heroine intended to mobilize the power of *erōs*, capable of both untying – 'undoing conflicts' (*lysimachai*) – and recomposing an enlarged community on new foundations. But there is more: With the support of Aphrodite, Greek women were all invited to metamorphose into *Lysimachai* – that is, to merge with Lysimache in a form of mimetic contagion. How better to express the central importance of the priestess of Athena Polias in this evolving community?

Obviously, Aristophanes ventures into the register of utopia here. The women in question never stormed the Acropolis, and the Athenians did not stop the Peloponnesian War until their consummate defeat in 404: The law of desire never got the upper hand over the urge to kill. The bonds uniting Lysimache to her sisters were probably too fitful and weak to translate into active solidarity and to generate forms of action: In a certain way, the chorus gathered around the priestess was as evanescent as it was encompassing.

So was this the end of the story and a return to the male norm? Not quite. The potential chorus gathered around Lysimache deserves to be taken into consideration by anyone who wishes to write, in full, the history of the Athenian reconciliation of 403, even if it means dreaming a little.

## Lysimache's Dream: The Unacknowledged Community

From one utopia to another: Let us extend for a few moments Aristophanes' reverie by taking, in our turn, a detour. For dreams are by no means the historian's enemy, as long as they are taken for what they are and nourished by a critical reading of the ancient sources. Let us therefore return for a moment to the Acropolis, on Boedromion 12, 403, just as Thrasybulus and his men arrive at the temple of Athena. Here they are welcomed by Lysimache the priestess: How lonely she seems in front of this compact mass of men swollen with the pride of victory! But let's adjust our gaze a little: Here comes Syeris, her 'servant' who has come to assist her, and, a little farther in the background, there are the other priestesses of the Acropolis and their assistants. Let us listen: Through the priestess, it is a whole chorus of women who now give voice to a prayer for peace and reconciliation. Without saying a word, Lysimache speaks for all Athenian mothers, wives and daughters, exhausted by decades of war and discord.

This already gives a more balanced view of the meeting. And let's look again: Here we go, the sacrifice has begun. The beasts are being slaughtered on the altar, the blood is flowing freely, the animals are being carved

up, and, suddenly, the gods are there. Behind the priestess, it is the shadow of Athena that appears, prolonging the mute prayer of the women of the city: 'It is necessary to forget all evils! Is there not, in my temple, an altar to Forgetfulness, intended to seal the reconciliation with Poseidon who had disputed me the territory of Attica?' It is thus an entire chorus, of women and deities together, that now demands peace from Thrasybulus. Is this all a daydream? Undoubtedly, but a Greek like Plutarch would not have found it so fanciful: By letting his resentment of Athena last, 'Poseidon was every way more *political* (*politikōteros*) than Thrasybulus, since not being like him a winner, but the loser [. . .].'[53]

Let us gaze again upon the scene at the Acropolis. What do we see there? Men, of course, waiting to receive their share of the sacrificial animals, sliced into pieces of the same size. From a distance, they all look alike, probably because 'so far as clothing and general appearance are concerned, the common people here are no better than the slaves and metics,' as the anonymous author of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, identified by some as the oligarch Critias,[54] put it. But little by little, several groups distinguish themselves: Here, one can see men crowding around Thrasybulus and eating pieces of viscera grilled on the altar – liver, heart, kidneys – which are also shares in honor. Might they not be the early fighters of Phyle, who chose to resist when all seemed lost? And, a little further on, who are these men with marked bodies? Perhaps they're slaves about to be freed for having joined 'those of Piraeus'? And those, clustered around the statue of Athena Parthenos, aren't they speaking with a slight Ionian accent? Might they be former metics rallied to the cause of the democrats? They definitely all make up a very heterogeneous troupe . . . But, at this moment, who cares? However different their origins may be, all these men had shared the same experience and fought side by side, without distinction.

Lysimache attends the scene. She stands there, near the altar, after having accomplished her service, exchanging a few words in a low voice with her assistant, Syeris: They are pleased that the ceremony has proceeded without a hitch, in spite of the palpable tension that reigns in the town. Between the native priestess and her Egyptian assistant, there is total mutual understanding. And suddenly, the men and the women present exchange glances and, in a striking mirror image, recognize themselves for what they are: citizens and foreigners communing together under the

[53] Plutarch, *Symposiacs* (*Quaestiones Conviviales*), 9.6.741b (our emphasis).
[54] Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians*, 1.10. Canfora 1989, pp. 17–8. On this hypothetical identification, see *supra*, Chapter 1, p. 40.

benevolent gaze of Athena. Hermes suspends his flight and, for a moment, status barriers seem to be abolished.

This imaginary scene is based on the very real social and ethnic mix that characterizes both the army of Thrasybulus and the entourage of Lysimache. Above all, this dream is not so far from the utopia represented on stage by Aristophanes, less than a decade before, at the theater of Dionysus. There also, for as long as the play lasted, the spectators had been able to indulge in the dream of a radically 'other' community: Spinning a long textile metaphor, Lysistrata envisages gathering into a single basket the best strands of fiber – not only the citizens, but also the metics, the debtors of the treasury (deprived of their citizenship) and, abroad, the friends of Athens and the *klērouchoi* – before 'putting them all together in one great ball of wool – and from that you can weave the People a nice warm cloak to wear.'[55] And, whatever one might claim, this project was not as utopian as it seems. In 405, as they were about to be defeated by the Spartans, the Athenians granted citizenship to the rare allies who remained faithful to them – in particular, the Samians – while they reinstated the majority of the Athenians who had been deprived of their citizenship (*atimoi*).[56]

Let us risk a last glance toward the Acropolis. On the altar, the embers are glowing and the sacrifice is being consumed. Silence falls and, suddenly, it's all over: Leaving the sanctuary of Athena, the leader of the democrats moves toward the Assembly to address citizens, males and Athenians alone: *Exit* the foreigners, the metics and the women.

> On this exceptional day, no-one had to give an order to disperse. They separated by the same countless necessities that had brought them together. They separated instantaneously, without leaving anyone behind, without those nostalgic after effects that were formed and in which the very event, which the combat groups purported to preserve, is altered. People do not act like that. They are there, then they are no longer there. They ignore the structure that could stabilize them.[57]

The whole thing had only been a dream: The emergence of an ephemeral chorus, sketching out an alternative community, dissolved at the very moment it came into being.

[55] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 585–6.
[56] Andocides, *On the Mysteries* (1), 73. See *supra*, Chapter 3, pp. 111–4.
[57] Blanchot 1988, pp. 32–3.