

First and Second Responses to the Assembly of Athens, 403 B.C.E.

A response to Assembly Session 2, followed by a response to Assembly Session 5

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Acting as Khairedemos the Bearded Artisan, Indeterminate Assemblymember

Reacting to the Past

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1. Regarding the Assembly's Exclusion of a Vote on the Enfranchisement of Women

Dearest Athenian brethren,

My name is Khairedemos; certainly some of you are familiar with me through my humble trade as an artisan. I wish to share here my unfavorable thoughts on the Assembly's decision in its second convening to grant citizenship rights to metics and slaves before considering the enfranchisement of women. As an upstanding and well-researched man of our society, I was astonished that my fellow men would so eagerly endow citizenship to metics and slaves—those foreign and of foreign blood to Athens—before our own Athenian women. I believe women should be granted citizenship and therefore voting rights, or, at the very least, be permitted a place within the ruling body to voice their concerns as vital participants in Athenian society, and I am frankly ashamed at the foolishness of the Assembly in disregarding this issue as an impertinent afterthought. I hope that I can do justice to the significance of this cause here as well as in a future Assembly session.

To provide some background on my unlikely devotion to this topic, I will admit to my fascination with the works of the philosopher Socrates (although it should be kept in mind that I bear no particular allegiance to his faction, or any other, for that matter). In my later age I have found much fulfillment in spending my free time studying the great intellectual and civic traditions of our community, and in so doing I have pored over many texts, attended many plays, and sat on the sidelines of many discussions, but what stood out to me about the work of Socrates—especially as covered by Plato in *The Republic*—was his stance on the function of women in society. The Socratic argument for the composition of the electorate is to admit within it any who have proven to be of merit. What qualifies one as meritable is based not on heredity

but on behavior; the metal alignments determined at birth or early childhood that establish one as fit for rule, auxiliary titles, or production. It should be of note that these metal alignments make no distinction on the circumstances of one's birth or, for that matter, sex. This might come across as merely an implication, but in fact it is overtly stated when Socrates declares that "there is nothing peculiar in the constitution of women which would affect them in the administration of the State" (Ober 160) and that the difference between men and women lies only in "their comparative strength or weakness" (Ober 161). The argument of the metal alignments partially lent itself to the enfranchisement of metics and slaves in the second Assembly session and was ignored in relation to women; however it is essential in our understanding of this line of thinking to see how it would also impact women's standing in society.

It logically follows that the Socratic proposal that heredity is secondary to merit would necessitate the abolition of the traditional family structure as we know it, as women would be expected to undertake full social and political roles outside of the home in recognition of their metal alignment as either ruler, auxiliary, or producer. I acknowledge that such a position is entirely too radical to many (again, I do not wholly conform to the ideas of Socrates myself!) and I therefore encourage those who are not fond of that view to consider instead the current role of women in society and how indispensable they are to its proper and fully realized operation. I will remind my fellow Athenians that the voters of our second session agreed that metics and slaves should be granted citizenship on the basis of their contributions to society and rejected the motion proposed that they should undergo any unique education to make them worthy of having a voice within the Assembly. If we are to be consistent in our logic, we must also look at the contributions of women to our society when deciding whether or not they should have a voice

within the electing body. Women acting as priestesses dictate the observation of ritual within our temples and head up most religious processions (Joint Assoc. 165). We look to women to oversee the productivity of the home through the supervision of servants and the management of finances (Joint Assoc. 168). And, of course, we entrust women with the rearing of our sons, and often attribute the strength and ability of a soldier to his good upbringing. My question then is, if women are deemed in all respects inferior, and this inferiority is used to justify denying them political agency, why do we empower them in the priesthood and in the *oikos* (Joint Assoc. 157) which are the two main institutions that could best be argued to be the cornerstones of all Athenian society? Furthermore, why do we allow them to shape generations of Athenian men from childhood? Why is it that we confide in their wisdom to lead only when their leadership is removed from political influence? It is only natural to assert that our society would collapse without their domestic governance, so why do we not also trust in their ability to govern on a larger scale? As Socrates points out, the primary point of contrast between men and women is in the bearing or begetting of children (Ober 159) and this is really not enough of a difference to justify not allowing women a voice in the Assembly.

I do anticipate the opposition to cite women's allegedly uninhibited sexual urges as a reason for not granting them a position in the electorate, and to that I present two thoughts: Firstly, I propose that we examine the origins of this belief. I think it will very quickly be found that there is no true evidence in daily life for such a claim, it is merely a cultural supposition we have made on the basis of myths passed down by our elders. And secondly, if one still decides to believe this to be in all parts true, I still do not see how it should affect the status of women in government. I am not at all calling for insurrection against the gods and the holy establishment of

our religion—and may the Athena of our beloved city strike me down herself if so—but merely more critical examination of what we conveniently decide to hold as true. For instance, the governance of the gods is structured authoritatively, with the will of Zeus above all (Joint Assoc. 89), but is not our own society a democracy that values the equal contributions of all its citizens? To apply this to the current topic, in our myths, women are often deviant temptresses who exist only to beguile and lead men astray. But in our society we give women power within the priesthood and the home to affect how both are run. If we objectively feared that they were only capable of sexual deception, would they even be permitted to have such esteemed roles as mother or priestess? Conclusively, the way we imagine and enact our government is of course influenced by, but not always wholly reflective of, our guiding myths. So why should this be any different when it comes to women?

I will end on the following note (I know that our electorate has been amended to now include male metics and slaves, but please entertain this thought with our former classification of citizenship in mind): Our most recent system of basing citizenry for our men on being “born of both an Athenian-born mother and a citizen father” (Ober 48) required us to acknowledge a man’s matrilineage. Why, in all other respects, is the mother inconsequential? Is it not a form of hypocrisy to demand that a woman’s status as Athenian be used as a metric for her son’s citizenship, but not her own? I wonder at the logical reaches that must be made in order to *require* something of women in order to enfranchise their male offspring but not extend that for their female offspring as well. The problem with our society and how it approaches the topic of enfranchising women is that women are seen merely as vehicles for the furthering of the causes of men, from their births to their deaths, and not as intelligent entities themselves. We readily

reap the fruits of a woman's labor and participation but do not allow her to speak for herself on matters that duly concern her as a laborer and participant in Athenian society.

In sum, the argument that women are innately inferior and therefore unfit to cast votes or sit in on Assembly meetings is rooted in the folklore of our predecessors, and not in the modern logic of our democracy. If we are to be forward-thinking men, we should honor those who raise us and instruct us and give their all for our betterment by allowing them a voice and a place in the Assembly.

I hope that in a future Assembly session, we can civilly return to this matter and have a better informed vote. In the meantime, may the goddesses be pleased with my proposal on behalf of their Athenian daughters.

2. Suffrage, or, at Least, a Council: Regarding the Assembly's Continued Deferral of a Decision on Women

O dignified Athenians,

I am crestfallen at the current state of our democracy. Ignoring the plights of women—rather, not simply being unaware of these plights, but *choosing* to cast aside any voices that can speak educatedly to them—is a hindrance to the effective operation of our government. To speak in more general terms: should we not consider all matters that Athenian citizens deem relevant, or is it somehow more democratic to flounder, to filibuster, to hide behind the front of faulty rhetoric in fear of the truths that the opposition may bring to light? With this in mind, there are two things I intend to cover here. As the Assembly failed to hold a vote on the issue of establishing Councils in its last session, and the second topic of tomorrow's session will be the rights of women in our society and the electorate, I will take this chance to, firstly: reflect and expand upon my previous argument for women's suffrage, and, secondly: argue on behalf of a Council for women. I will note before something contrary is pointed out to me that since no votes at all were made on the structure of our governance, it is not out of order to call for the matter of Councils to be readdressed in relation to women's rights; especially since the topic of women's rights can be interpreted fairly broadly.

Before I can go on, a brief reminder of my previous points is in order. Firstly, I acknowledged the Socratic argument for the composition of the electorate, which is merit-based and predetermined through behavior, or the metal alignments (Ober 140). I clarified how this method of classification would not discriminate on the basis of sex, namely as “there is nothing peculiar in the constitution of women which would affect them in the administration of the State”

(Ober 160). I went on to qualify this by declaring my ultimate unwillingness to align myself fully with Socrates, and to approach his ideas critically and yet with a mind to apply parts—if not all—if it would mean the objective betterment of society as a whole. Finally, I argued that the main thing to take into account when considering the enfranchisement of women are their contributions to society, which range from rearing our children, to running our households, to representing the gods in the priesthood. All of these reasons were listed for allowing women to have the right to vote in the Assembly.

However, I neglected to address a very pertinent factor in all of this, which is the unique position of women in Athenian society as primary guardians of our youth. For what man can claim that the development of his children is his first priority, if his social, vocational, and civic responsibilities largely keep him occupied outside the *oikos* (Joint Assoc. 157)? It is truer for a man to cite his loyalty to the guardianship of Athens as his utmost concern, and truer still for a woman to cite her loyalty to the guardianship of her children as hers. Of course, it is no fault of men on their own that they are at least one degree removed at all times from the inner workings of their households in relation to how their children are raised: our culture and the current ways of our democracy have seen fit to worry male members of our society with tending financially and physically to Athens through their respective trades (Joint Assoc. 181) as well as military and political assignments, while ascribing the role of child caretaker to women (Ober 45).

It is a common objection to this line of thinking that if we were to give women the ability to vote, they would only be concerned with frivolous feminine affairs. While this claim is unfounded (as how could matters that pertain well enough to Athens to be brought attention to in the Assembly and law courts possibly be frivolous?) it is also necessary to understand that

women would not only serve to bring attention to their own causes, but to that of their children. We discuss at length in our philosophical texts the best ways to steer a child in the teachings of their youth toward the furtherance of our democracy (Ober 118). It should be enough proof that we care so much about the bringing up of our sons as to have made a vote on the behalf of a public education for them the highest focus of our last Assembly session. But we do all these things knowing that at best we see our children toward the waning end of our workdays, and while we are fond of them and know them as kin, we are not the ones they come toddling to when they are wont to express a triumph, or a tragedy, or a basic need. Enfranchising women would ensure that the concerns that are of prime relevance to the wellbeing of our children—and therefore the safeguarding of a strong Athenian future—would be heard. After all, who better to speak on the matter of what is good for our sons than their very own mothers; women who toil night and day to see to it that their offspring come up gracefully for the honor of Athens?

Brothers, it is not my intent to belabor at length on the logical consistency of granting women the right to vote. If you still believe that all these factors should not rationally come together to enfranchise women, all I ask is that you take heed of the following: if it is so egregious to grant voting rights to women, why not at least appease their need for a voice (a need which, as I will soon cover in more detail, will likely come to be expressed more frequently and in possibly unfavorable ways)? I know this would qualify as a compromise, and compromise has not proved to be a common approach throughout our sessions. However, creating a Council within the Assembly for women, composed of women, would satisfy the need of women to have their interests heard, while still preserving electorate status for the men of Athens. As for which women would be eligible to lend their voices to democratic conversation, we might first consider

the wives, mothers, or eldest daughters over the age of eighteen (Joint Assoc. 202) of the acting men of our Assembly, or else draw a general lot in the same manner that we do in order to determine who serves on the *ekklesia*. This Council would be given the chance in each Assembly session to propose an agenda to the President, who would then decide whether or not a vote should be held by the men of the Assembly on the matters brought up. Although it is more ideal to grant women their own right to vote, I propose this mediative solution to what I see as a glaring point of contention among us.

How long do you think women will maintain their silence? Did not the previously unheard metic Lysias make a case for his own enfranchisement a mere four sessions ago? And before even that could happen, did not the formerly powerless *demos* under the rule of Cleisthenes rise up and demand that democracy itself—a largely infallible system that allows the common Athenian the chance at discourse that was once only afforded to tyrants—be established (Ober 26-27)? It is unreasonable to believe that women with operant laryngeal capacities will not soon put them to good use, in particular due to the pattern in our society of those without agency eventually coming to advocate for themselves. I cannot say that in the near future it will always be the civil-minded Khairedemoses of Athens who attempt a polite discourse on this topic. And while I am not promising (nor threatening) violent or otherwise more forceful dissent, given our history, the potential for such a thing should not go completely unaccounted for.

In sum, the previous points for enabling the suffrage of women still stand, as well as the newer argument that they would serve as counsel, acting in the interest of the children of Athens, in addition to representing their own needs. For those that still disagree, even if women are not allowed to vote on the matters that chiefly concern them, the establishment of a Council within

the Assembly populated by women and dedicated to their affairs would serve to ensure that their voices are nonetheless heard, and would very likely quell any future unrest.

Gentlemen, at last my ink is running dry. It is my hope that in keeping these proposals in mind, my fellow Athenians will be most inclined to enfranchise women either by way of the vote or a Council. In closing, I invoke the will of our maiden Persephone in ensuring this final session is fertile ground for change.

Works Cited

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