

The Ecclesiastusae to the Suffragettes: Gender Equality for a Better Society

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General Education

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America, the land of the free, the land of equality; our nation's history speaks of grand acts by our forefathers to deliver these rights to its people. In fact, however, they were delivering these rights only to themselves, or those like them--the white land-owner. Throughout our nation's 233-year history, there has been a struggle for minority groups to achieve the lofty dreams that our nation's credo promises and to add their voices to the harmony of the American melting pot. But for our nation's first 144 years, roughly half of the population was excluded from the rights set forth in the Constitution. The Bill of Rights was, in actuality, the "Bill of Whites," more specifically, the rights of the white man. Finally, in 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the Suffragettes would fight for, and win, the right for women to vote, a struggle whose roots could be traced back to ancient Greece and the birth of Western Civilization.

History of Women's Role in Society

Dating back to approximately 12,000 BCE, women in many cultures had enjoyed a matriarchal role in the ever-evolving social dichotomy. Gradually, the transition from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural society led to change in women's role, as they were seen as vital to the survival of the clan or community. As male dominance in society began to ebb, the resulting society was more social and communal based, and women thrived. While the men continued to hunt, the women focused on various domestic needs, such as agriculture and textile weaving; they also continued to adapt their products to better serve their clans or communities. Through these skills, and the worth they brought to the clan, women gained influence and power and shared leadership roles alongside men (Cantarella 12).

This power shift became evident in the shift in religious views. Fertility rites began to take on a central role in religion. The *hieros gamos*, the sacred union of a goddess and her *paredros* (consort), were rites used in the union of the Greek gods Zeus and Hera, and of Demeter and Iasion. The Mother Goddess, Potnia, would become a preeminent divinity in ancient Mediterranean religion, and women became the sole receivers of mystical powers by using *philtres* (potions or charms) obtained from herbs, becoming sorceresses as portrayed in the form of Circe in Homer's *Odyssey* and of Medea in the tale of *Jason and the Argonauts* (Wright 12). The preeminence and power of women in these portrayals suggests that female divinities were beginning to have the upper hand.

Matriarchy would flourish in Asia, and throughout the Mediterranean, from about 12,000 to 6,000 BCE, but growing agricultural needs led to increased male labor, and growing trade led to an increased need for military protection and increased fortification of city defenses. Wealth and power became localized within privileged groups controlled by men, whose goals were to further consolidate and conserve their power. As political capital began to fall into the hands of a few privileged males, the age of the matriarchy faded (Cantarella 13).

In observing the social systems of ancient Greek society, one can see when the division in sexual roles was born. This division codified the transition of a biological division over a cultural one, a division that cemented the perceived inferiority of women in society (Cantarella 1). The Homeric epics give us a glimpse of the transition that was taking place during the pre-Hellenic period in ancient Greece. Whether or not the situations described in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were true, their represen-

tations of social hierarchy during the period are believed to be a realistic depiction (Cantarella 25). In them we see many depictions of women enjoying a respect and freedom that would disappear in the later classical period, such as the reverence and respect Hector bestowed on Andromache in the *Iliad*, the power that Helen and Penelope seemed to hold over men throughout each epic, or the strength and independence that Nausicaa exemplified by leading the troop of women into the wilderness alone to do the wash in the *Odyssey*, and then showing the courage to alone confront a naked Odysseus. But there was already an underlying misogynist ideology that spoke to a growing mistrust of women. It is probably not by mistake that Calypso and Circe, though strong, independent female figures, were portrayed as deceitful and untrustworthy in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus himself seems to lack trust in his own wife, Penelope, by withholding his identity from her throughout most of the epic, and while the goddess Athena does closely guide Telemachus and Odysseus throughout the *Odyssey*, she is known as the virginal goddess who doesn't succumb to the usual vices of women (Wright 9).

The next several hundred years would see a growing influence of Near Eastern political and social philosophy on the Greek states throughout the Classical period; these influences would greatly affect women's position in Greek society. Indeed, during the Classical period, women were kept in seclusion and poorly educated, allowed to appear in public only during important state occasions (Delphian Course 396). There were two main tenets that were taken from these eastern influences: even a free-born woman was the property of her husband, and love between man and his property was absurd; thus romantic affection was conceivable only between men (Wright 16). A girl's marriage was arranged by her father, who held her as property and received a dowry for her hand in marriage. After marriage, which usually took place around the age of 15, the woman became her husband's property, being allowed to leave her home only with her husband's permission, and always accompanied by a slave (Delphian Course 398).

Three stories together illustrate the narrative that evolved depicting the innate capriciousness and animalistic nature of the female sex: Pasiphae, wife of the legendary King Minos of Crete, gave birth to the Minotaur after mating with a white bull, under the influence of the sea god Poseidon (Crane, Ovid *Met.* 8.81); Europa, a woman of high lineage in Greek mythology and namesake of the European continent, was seduced by Zeus, who was disguised in the form of a white bull (Crane, Horace *Odes* 3.27); and Leda, wife of Tyndareus, King of Sparta, and mother to Helen, was also seduced by Zeus, disguised this time as a swan (Crane, Euripides *Helen* 1).

This perspective also spilled over into other literature. The Greek poetess Sappho was described as having unnatural sexual and moral vices; Homer's Helen was reduced to a wanton; and Odysseus' wife, Penelope, was construed as a mere shrew. Women were reduced to simple creatures whose sole function was child-bearing (Wright 18). Men concerned themselves with wars and the affairs of the state, while women were relegated to servant and child-bearing roles. This would foster a great divide in the sexes and the male understanding of female abilities. The divide would be perpetuated by the lyric poets and writers of the Milesian Tales throughout the sixth and seventh century. The leadership of the Greek world would shift from Ionian to Athenian in the fifth century, but the view of women would not change. Throughout the time of Athenian leadership, women were seen as a subject class (Wright 57).

The fifth century would also bring with it playwrights who would use their art to perform social commentary. The father of the women's movement may have been Aeschylus (524-425 BCE). In his *Suppliant Women*, he asks the question "should a woman be compelled to marry a man she dislikes?" (Wright 72), raising the question of whether women were property or possessed free will. His trilogy, *Oresteia*, is riddled with feminine concerns. The first story in the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, raises the question of whether a woman is justified in killing her husband, which was of particular importance in a society in which women were nearly slaves (Wright 75). The second, *The Libation Bearers*, shows a range of female emotion, ranging from the lack of remorse in Electra to the compassion and affection of the nurse (Wright 76). And the third, *Eumenides*, portrays women as both the death and savior of man. Many other Greek writers throughout the fifth century would comment on women in Greek society, including Pericles, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Euripides, but the culmination of what Aeschylus had birthed would be Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*.

Aristophanes (446-386 BCE) was a renowned comic playwright in fifth century Athens. His works were considered an accompaniment to Euripides' works (Wright 150). Plays such as *The Knights*, *The Clouds*, *The Wasps*, and *Peace* earned him the epithet, "The Father of Comedy." He was a member of the Socratic Circle, which may have influenced the feminine commentary in later works such as *Thesmophoriazusae*, *Lysistrata*, and *Ecclesiazusae*. *Thesmophoriazusae* tells of Euripides' in-

filtration of an exclusive female festival to learn of the women's plot against him and his work, due to the negative portrayals of women in his plays (though these portrayals were meant to be ironic); *Lysistrata* displays the power women can have over men through their denial of sex (a plot conceived by Lysistrata) as a strategy to end the war between the Athenians and Spartans; *Ecclesiazusae* caps the trilogy with a ruse that gained women control of the Greek assembly. Aristophanes adopted three chief themes from Euripides: war is a curse; a belief in gods made in mortal shape is absurd; and women are as capable, intellectually and morally, as men (Wright 152). Aristophanes would deeply explore this third belief in 392 BCE with his *Ecclesiazusae*.

In *Ecclesiazusae*, the heroin, Praxagora, convinces the women that they could and should assume power. By disguising themselves as men, and with Praxagora's persuasive rhetoric in the Greek assembly, they succeed. Women decree a communal society, which Aristophanes may have modeled after Plato's in his *Republic*. Praxagora conveys to her husband, Blepyrus, what the communal laws will be, explaining how people and property shall be doled out equally, and then exits the play. The play takes a strange turn from there when three old women argue over who is indeed the ugliest and most deserving of the services of the handsome young man they have stopped. Praxagora's communal law decreed that for all things to be equal, the least desirable would get first choice in a sexual partner. Perhaps this was a commentary on Plato's proposed communal society. While this could only be theatre in ancient Greece, where the station of women was not much better than that of slaves, it could at least plant a seed to germinate through time.

But time would not be kind to the plight of women. Christianity would replace Paganism, and while it preached equality among men, it also ordained the subordination of women. It is also significant that Christianity immediately demonizes women as an instrument of temptation and sin, morally handicapping them at conception (Cantarella 2). Saint Paul defined their role thus: "*Woman's head is man . . . man is the image of God, and the mirror of his glory, whereas woman reflects the glory of man*" (Cantarella 2), and St. Augustine placed woman as "*destined to serving man*" (Cantarella 2) in the natural order. The word of God, conservative beliefs, and lack of economic or political clout would keep women subordinate to men for centuries to come.

The *Ecclesiazusae* itself would be dismissed throughout history as a lesser work of Aristophanes. Aside from *Lysistrata*, it has seen the fewest separate annotated editions. The first English commentary on *Ecclesiazusae* was not published until 1902, written by the English classical scholar Benjamin Bickley Rogers (Schreiber 308), and when editors did turn their attentions to it, they often took liberties in editing; only *Thesmophoriazusae* has been amended more (Cary 418). Although the evidence is circumstantial, it seemed there was a concerted effort to keep *Ecclesiazusae* out of the public spotlight. The themes that it contained were, perhaps, too contrary to a world that favored men.

Women's Suffrage in the United States

However, the seed that Aristophanes had planted in 392 BCE with *Ecclesiazusae* finally sprouted in 1848 at the U.S. Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y. It would reach full bloom with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which prohibited each state and the federal government from prohibiting any citizen the right to vote based on their gender. While this did not ensure that women would receive equality in society (they still do not receive equal pay to this day), it did allow them political capital and the opportunity to continually advance their standing in our democratic society.

Prior to the passage of the 19th Amendment, women's role in American society was not much different from their role during the Classical Greek period. Women were seen as cheap labor for the new industrial system, or as obedient servants to their husbands; their main purpose was to bear children and raise them (Zinn & Arno 11). Many women and men fought and sacrificed for women's right to vote, especially a select few who valiantly led the movement.

Suffrage comes from the Latin *suffragium* (vote) and was the driving force behind reform movements in the late nineteenth century, during what was known as the Progressive Era (Clift 4). But the movement actually took root in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY, at the Woman's Rights Convention. The convention was the brainchild of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Both had their activist beginnings in the abolitionist movement and were attendees of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England, June 1840 (Clift 4). Stanton and Mott fully expected to participate in the philosophical assemblage of world leaders, but found themselves, along with the rest of the women in attendance, behind a curtain where they could hear but not see the proceedings. They were also not allowed to

speak. An American clergyman who had arrived a few days prior had lobbied against the admission of women into the convention, silencing them temporarily (Clift 9).

Fate brought Stanton and Mott together again in Seneca Falls in the summer of 1848. Together they revived a previous call for a Woman's Convention, composing a notice the very afternoon of their meeting that would appear in the *Seneca County Courier* a few days later:

WOMAN'S RIGHTS CONVENTION- A convention to discuss the social, civil and religious condition and rights of women, will be held in the Wesleyan Chapel, at Seneca Falls, New York, on Wednesday and Thursday, the 19th and 20th of July, current; commencing at 10 O'clock A.M. during the first day the meeting will be exclusively for women, who are earnestly invited to attend. The public are generally invited to be present on the second day, when Lucretia Mott, of Philadelphia, and other ladies and gentlemen, will address the convention. (Clift 11)

In preparation for the convention, the women decided to present their own Declaration of Sentiments in the model of the Declaration of Independence, which had been written 72 years earlier. Unfortunately, it would be another 72 years before women actually received their full rights. But the grievances set forth at the convention paved the way for the suffrage movement. Their grievance was fashioned to mimic the indictment against King George III:

The men had monopolized the lucrative professions and employments, they had closed the college of higher learning to woman, they had taxed her to support a government in which she had no voice, they had deprived her of property earned by her own labor, they had called her civilly dead at marriage, they had assigned her a lowly place in the church, and all in all they had put her in the status of serfdom. (Beard 758)

To put it simply, the women demanded political, economic, and intellectual equality. Stanton finished:

Now, in view of this entire disenfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation, in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States. (Zinn & Arnove 127)

In a fictional account, Praxagora had used the men's rhetoric of her time to sway the Greek assembly; now Stanton would use the rhetoric the men of her nation had used to gain their freedom to ignite a modern movement for women's suffrage in her time. But unlike *Ecclesiastusae*, this was real, and change moves slowly when not placed into three acts.

Many battles would be fought over the next 72 years, and many courageous women would join the fight. Sojourner Truth, a black woman who had gained her freedom in 1827, would give a rousing speech at the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, OH (Clift 25). Much like Lysistrata and Praxagora, she celebrated women's services to provide a better society for all:

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them. (Zinn & Arnove 129)

Another woman, Lucy Stone, became not only the first woman to earn a college degree in Massachusetts in 1839, she was the first woman to keep her name upon marriage in 1855. She would be a strong voice in the suffragist movement (Zinn & Arnove 129). But Susan B. Anthony would be the name and face that would come to define the suffragists. Stanton would find a best friend and "soul mate" in Anthony (Clift 18), and together they would travel the country, giving speeches, organizing rallies and conventions, and growing support for suffrage. Anthony was one of fourteen women who were arrested and convicted of casting an illegal ballot in the 1872 presidential election (Zinn & Arnove 130). When given the opportunity to speak at her sentencing, she used the men's rhetoric for freedom for her cause until the Judge, Ward Hunt, cut her off.

Your denial of my citizen's right to vote, is the denial of my right of consent as one of the governed, the denial of my right of representation as one of the taxed, the denial of my right to trial by a jury of my peers as an offender against law; therefore, the denial of my sacred right to life, liberty, property and. . . (Zinn & Arnove 130)

The truths she was speaking about had no place in a man's courtroom.

The movement was in place and growing strong; all that was needed now was the political clout to achieve their goal of suffrage. Over the next 50 years, the women would learn how to play politics like men, pitting party against party for their own gain, continually expanding their lobbying

influences. Stanton and Anthony would not live to see their dream of suffrage come to fruition, dying in 1902 and 1906 respectively, but the torch would be passed to the likes of Anna Shaw, Alicia Paul, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Harriot Stanton Blatch, the daughter of Elizabeth Stanton (Clift 89). Together they would finally achieve suffrage with the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. Though these women had achieved the greatest expansion of democracy the world had ever seen, their acts and sacrifices to achieve suffrage quickly faded from public memory. The leaders of the movement built no monuments to themselves, nor formed any organizations to hand out yearly awards in celebration (Clift 5); they simply returned to their lives, much like the women in the workplace would do twenty-five years later after WWII. They had done what needed to be done for the betterment of society; no thanks or accolades were expected or needed.

It had been a long road for women in democracy, from the fiction of Aristophanes to the reality of modern times, but the equality of women had finally been established. The grand experiment that our forefathers had set in motion had finally taken its largest leap toward perfection. Women now had the power to help shape our democracy and to provide their perspectives on how our democratic society should evolve--an evolution thereafter rooted in gender equality.

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