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Mr. Cavanagh
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Daphne, Praxagoras, & Socrates²

Dramatis Personae (in order of appearance)

DAPHNE – a famous sea nymph; now a laurel tree
PRAXAGORAS – an Athenian wife
SOCRATES – a famous philosopher

Scene

In the middle of the woods outside Athens

The Play: *Daphne, Praxagoras, & Socrates*

DAPHNE

What a lovely summer day. Indeed, what a lovely day to be alive just outside of Athens. Its people are still recovering from what the Thirty had done, but all will be well in time, for all roses must die once the winter strikes, a grief caused by my dear Persephone's absence. Then the roses gradually rise with the summer sun, and the seedlings of the nearby laurel trees sprout. And all of nature whispers to the gods, reminding them they are still alive and well. Yet their words are set drift on Aeolus' prideful winds; and no father, no saving grace, no water nymph can hear my prayer for happiness.

(DAPHNE droops.)

Why must I be sad, my dear spectators? I mustn't think such sad thoughts. Not of anyone in particular, but of my past. Oh how vain I must be to you all, but I speak in earnest. You all know of

¹ The play is based on the political stances of two members of the class, Anna Nielsen and Kyle Morawski. Both of my classmates performed in my play.

² To make the play sound more authentic, "common knowledge fun facts" have been integrated into the play. As such, the essence of what a typical Ancient Greek comedy has been maintained. Author David Konstan describes the key features of Ancient Greek comedies as such: "Bold actions; earthy humor; immediate social or political relevance; personal attacks on contemporary figures that break the dramatic illusion; choruses in the guise of animals . . . all mark Old Comedy as an exuberant and satirical genre, rich in fantasy and spunk" (4). Note: Because of the low number of performers needed for the play, my comedy will not include a chorus.

my life. The circumstances that led me here was rooted in good intentions. Peneus loved me, so he transformed me into what I am today—a magnificent laurel tree. I speak to travelers as they walk by on their way to Athens. Such nice people, even though they pluck my laurels from my branches with their grubby fingers. It's all for the best; I was never really attached to my greenery anyway. Apollo comes by to tell me he loves me, but he's seeing other women on the side. Fine with me. I never liked that god, with his pride and sexual appetite. I desired not to be a doe he could slide his long arrow into; I desired not to be cattle he could whip; I desired not to be a horse he could ride whenever he wished, even when I was tired from doing what sea nymphs like me do—splash about and protect their virtue. By the wisdom of Athena and the wrath of Zeus, I shall never have my laurels plucked again! Aeolus's hungry winds may play with all my crevices—licking me with that cold, airy touch—but I declare to all of nature this: I may be here, but I am not gone.

(Sighing, DAPHNE perks up.)

But all is for the best. My father knows what's right. I am to live like a tree and be an idol of female beauty and female submissiveness forever. There's nothing wrong with that. Oh, forgive me, spectators. I ramble too much. My life would be better if I, a mere woman-tree, were silent and compliant. Now I shall nap and dream that the rains come this year; some of my laurels have already begun to wilt.

(Grimacing, PRAXAGORAS enters.)

PRAXAGORAS

Why must Hades curse my life? I have done little to offend that wrinkly old man. I have never been as offended as I am today—well, not since last year when I was propositioned by Dionysus in my brother's vineyard. He offered me wine—Dionysus, not my brother, mind you—but I knew his scheme the moment he flashed me those white teeth of his. So, spectators of Athens, what would you have me do? I played along, displaying the fidelity of Penelope and the guile of Calypso. I winked, giggled, and offered to clean his long, impressive sword. With my tongue, if he wished. Then with all the speed and sprightliness once seen by that beloved sea nymph Daphne, I took Dionysus' wine from under his cloak and spilled it over his head. Opora came and wiped him off, and together they drank and made love in the vines. No one can blame me for doing what I did. If I

had been a grape, he would have tasted me until I lost all flavor. Quite the ravenous brute, that Dionysus. And now I think the same for that old man in the town square. He refused to take me seriously.

(PRAXAGORAS sits underneath DAPHNE.)

I have thoughts. I have dreams. I have desires. My thoughts, dreams, and desires could help Athens. We just defeated the Thirty. The city is still in many ways a blank slate, like an aspiring playwright's writing tablet: chisel your thoughts, dreams, and desires on it, and embedded in the rock is a piece of you. All the things that make you special, intelligent, and charismatic are forever imprinted on that slab. But what many men want are ideas belonging to other men. Banish women to the household, they'd say. Silence women with good-natured reprimands. Summon Apollo to play with their lyre strings until they surrender. Then summon Eros to stick his arrows into them until they writhe with all the lust men have to offer. And then—why not?—summon Dionysus for his wine, and fill the ladies up until they are nothing but dicteriodes walking across the stage of some faraway playhouse, mumbling to an audience of Thirty, all men who long to stick their tyrannical stakes into their gardens and claim their fruit as their own.

(PRAXAGORAS gazes forlornly at the spectators.)

I speak too little, if you can believe it. Men say I speak too much. If Euripides or Sophocles learned of my verbose ways, they'd together write a play about how I killed the audience with my never-ending stream of words. Boredom would slaughter them, and the bloodshed would be expansive like the plague that once overtook Athens. Not even Pittalus could revive them. Instead, Athena would come at the end of the play and restore order, tricking Hades to grant the spectators their lives back so that the spectators could be given the truth—that although women talk, women never say anything of note. How tragic. How morose. How pathetic a woman's life is! But why? Why is this so!

(PRAXAGORAS starts to sob.)

DAPHNE

Oh my Zeus! Who is making such a cacophony? Have the birds returned to scream in my ear? If so, shoo! Go away, you malevolent beasts. Let Charon burst from the earth to guide you back to the pits of Hades. Maybe Pericles will swat you down and eat you all for dinner. Vermin with wings, be gone! Or at least visit the lovely lotus eaters and spend the rest of your lives there. Leave me to wallow, for I had just experienced a most terrible dream. I envisioned an Athenian wife talking about her misfortunes to spectators in a playhouse. I felt her grief. How sad. How lonesome was she. Thank the gods I am free from that dream. I can still feel a shiver crawling down my branches.

PRAXAGORAS

Does someone speak? Hello? Who's there? Are you a specter? A robber? I have nothing for you to steal. You wouldn't want the fruit under my chiton; they have long since been devoured by my husband. Go to Thasia for a decent drink! Many will give you endless wine if you can defeat Polyphemus, and, believe me, *nobody* has been able to do that. But you might be that noble nobody who can. So go, and leave me to sob.

DAPHNE

Oh my goodness! My dream has come true. Tiresias has blessed me with his gift of sight. My lady, what is wrong? Speak to me and be frank, for I am Daphne, daughter of Peneus. My father is a water god and a follower of Poseidon.

PRAXAGORAS

You're the famous laurel tree! You are a stunning creature, my wonderful Daphne. If Heracles were here, he would eat you until only your roots remain. Now he's a chivalrous person, unlike some men.

DAPHNE

Thank you, my dear. If your flattery were music, it would commandeer the hearts of all. No man would be able resist you. But tell me this: where is your man, your husband? It's uncommon for a woman to roam outside Athens without a male escort. You don't know what kind of men lurk in these woods.

PRAXAGORAS

You don't know what kind of men live in Athens. You see, I was talking to a wise man named Socrates just a few hours ago. He was speaking intelligently, using argumentation to such wonderful extents to craft the minds of all his followers. I was the only woman listening to him, but when I asked him to elaborate on his marvelous claims, he rejected me and said that because I am a woman, I needn't speak. I told my husband, a bearded artisan, about my troubles, and he consoled me the best he could. You might be familiar with my husband. Although he is old, he is kind and open-minded; he listens to what I have to say and speaks on my behalf at the Assembly meetings. But to no avail. He cares about women's rights because he knows that women can offer much to society beyond feeding children and lying on their backs whenever their men's second brains swell with ecstasy. Just the other day, the Reformed Education Law was passed with a majority vote. It guarantees "All Education shall be publicly funded for everyone." Yet at the bottom of the law, like a hidden clause, there reads, "This is for males only." Misleading and biased. Women deserve to be heard in all affairs regarding the sanctity and prosperity of Athens. They shouldn't be limited. They deserve happiness—a virtue held in the hearts of all Athenians, right?

(PRAXAGORAS rises and turns away.)

You may think I'm silly, Daphne, but I assure you I'm not. I'm not Diopithes, screaming with logic; instead, I'm just Praxagoras, speaking with earnest humility. Athens is disregarding the opportunity for women to transcend their roles as figureheads of beauty, housework, and sexual inferiority. They can build ships if given the proper education; they can fight with their fellow man on the battlefield if given the proper training; they can share their ideas during the Assembly meetings if given the opportunity to be more than what men think they are—weak-minded fools who think some schoolteacher is monitoring their lives like some omnipotent Gamemaster.

(PRAXAGORAS turns to DAPHNE.)

Forgive me. My thoughts are Sisyphus' boulder: they're constantly moving.

DAPHNE

Apologize not, my passionate Athenian. You dare to open your heart and to let your soul spill out.

Honesty comes from all sorts of places—sometimes from an unhappy Athenian woman such as yourself or, on rare occasions, from a laurel tree. Sometimes my branches rise in the morning, fall in the afternoon, and rest by my side at night, for I have more to live for than being a trophy for Apollo and a producer of laurel leaves, which, as you should know, are used to make diadems for victorious athletes. My goods, in part, become their prize.

PRAXAGORAS

How does that make you feel?

DAPHNE

That's a strange question.

PRAXAGORAS

How so?

DAPHNE

No one has ever asked me how I felt before.

PRAXAGORAS

But how do you feel? I mean, how do you feel when men mistreat you?

DAPHNE

I feel bad. But what can I do? I'm just a tree. My feelings mean nothing, hidden in plain sight. You know the old Athenian saying, "None know where my treasure lies, unless perchance it be some bird." And, believe me, many infernal birds have come my way over the years, caulking my bark with white berry splatters.

PRAXAGORAS

Except for my husband, there is no other sensible man in or around Athens for at least a hundred leagues.

(Carrying a stack of papers, SOCRATES enters.)

SOCRATES

Your estimation, Praxagoras, is misguided, I'm afraid, for I, Socrates, am here as a sensible man willing to listen to reason. Didn't you praise me a moment ago for my wisdom? You thought you found fault with me—my rejecting your questions back at the town square—but I came to share my philosophy personally with you.

PRAXAGORAS

How long have you been spying on us? You hide in the shadows like a coward. Dare I say, you are Cleonymus, so leave me and eat all the knowledge your feeble body can withstand. Yes, only cowards creep behind trees.

SOCRATES

Please, Praxagoras, listen to what I have to say. I hid only long enough to gather what I needed to know about your feelings—and Daphne's feelings as well.

(SOCRATES turns and bows to DAPHNE.)

It is a pleasure to finally meet you, my lovely water nymph. I would ask you how you are today, but you've already expressed feelings of confusion and sadness over your present state. Both of you, too, have expressed dissatisfaction with the way society is run. Am I correct?

DAPHNE AND PRAXAGORAS

Yes.

SOCRATES

Do you feel as though males see you as less than human—say, as a tree?

DAPHNE AND PRAXAGORAS

Yes.

SOCRATES

Do you want people who are smart, sympathetic, and virtuous to run Athens?

DAPHNE AND PRAXAGORAS

Yes.

SOCRATES

Then listen to my speech, and all will be illuminated like Helios.

PRAXAGORAS

I will not listen to you!

DAPHNE

Don't be cross, Praxagoras. Let's listen to what he has to say. I'm not leaving anytime soon, and as long as he doesn't bark at us like Cerberus, we shall be as fine as any nightingale that roosts in my foliage. Socrates, please explain yourself, and restore our faith in justice and in man.

PRAXAGORAS

I will not hear of it! He is a phony, a prophet of illusions, a disguised Cleon, a bearer of Pandora's Box, a swine handler who would rather steal all the cheese in Athens and all the honey in Mount Hymettus than be a reasonable Athenian citizen. He offended me with his neglect!

SOCRATES

Your insults are damaging my sensibilities, Praxagoras. A tirade delivers anger, not the brilliance of ideas. Do you want me to speak to you not as a man, but rather as a fellow Athenian? I shall for the sake of womankind. Let me assuage your frustration with calm and reason. Do not cry or sob

anymore, Praxagoras. My speech shall be long but appropriate; it shall not be bruised garlic, invoking tears of anger or despair. And if my speech summons tears, then cry over poor Daphne, for the rains have yet to arrive, and her leaves are beginning to wilt. Now sit and allow me to explain myself by teaching you the basics of my wisdom. Then let your faith in me be restored.

DAPHNE

That sounds all right with me. And I hope you two don't mind, but I prefer standing. Now, Socrates, whenever you're ready.

(PRAXAGORAS sits. SOCRATES addresses PRAXAGORAS, DAPHNE, and the spectators.)

SOCRATES

Many of you find me ridiculous. I commiserate with you. People who dare to break ignorance with universal truth run the risk of hurting people's feelings or at least stirring anger or confusion in people's hearts. I have been shocked by universal truth, yet it constantly reminds me how much I've learned about the world and about the gods. The disillusioned or the perplexed struggle with philosophy because new knowledge and better understandings of life force them to acknowledge that life is imperfect. Such an acknowledgment can be unsettling, if not daunting, to fathom. But as worshipers of the gods, we can achieve a perfect state of being in which everyone serves a clear purpose. I neither believe in tyranny nor in democracy, for power in the hands of one or in the hands of all have led societies into ruin. Take for instance this imaginary example: a politician with an affinity for bloodshed and senseless mockery enters the Assembly Hall and persuades an ignorant farmer to vote yes on a law to endorse tyrannical rule in Athens. That vote may mean little in a hall of 6,000 men, but that vote could be the difference between helping Athens grow and guaranteeing the destruction of Athens' spiritual duty to care for its people. The wise, as such, must rule. Others might contend with this notion by questioning the logic of my scenario: yes, one vote could defeat a law that endorses tyranny, but could more laws that endorse corruption appear on the docket in the future?

DAPHNE AND PRAXAGORAS

It's possible.

SOCRATES

Anything's possible in a world full of uncertainty and greed. Speaking of greed, people assume that sheer affluence guarantees happiness. Yes, money can be used to purchase food, clothing, entertainment, and sex. But I question the abuse of money. Extraneous pleasures are transitory, strengthened by egotism and hubris. Furthermore, the ignorant and the cruel and the power hungry are in love with themselves; they see no fault in themselves, but in others. These people loathe me because they fear the truth of my argument; they wish to have me killed because I threaten their so-called infallible lives. They choose to care about their constituents only when it suits them. They are too focused on being right rather than being kind; they are too focused on being stentorian rather than being reserved and judicious; and they are too focused on being unclear rather than being clearheaded and organized.

PRAXAGORAS

I admire your honesty. Men are far too fixated on themselves.

DAPHNE

Perhaps, Praxagoras, but this all sounds too draconian. Socrates, are all men like this? That is, is all of mankind like Narcissus, the god who became so enamored with his own reflection that he died by the riverside, forever doomed to admire his reflection in the River Styx? Where's the hope, my dear philosopher? According to your claims, men seem to be a lost cause after all. Maybe Praxagoras should flee Athens and seek refuge with Circe. That formidable enchantress can defend herself from the gross influence of men. In her temple, men are pigs. Literally.

SOCRATES

Circe's ability to transform men into animals is legend, Daphne. I concur. But leaving Athens now would be foolish. Persia may retaliate; the Spartans may return; and the misinformed and the corrupt members of our own society could revolt against the smart and the pure. We need people like you, Praxagoras, to make Athens exceptional. Athens needs to become a community of thinkers and doers rather than remain as a fragmented state of people who are too smitten with their wealth and impractical ideas to care about the protection and glory of the Athenian people. To answer your question, Daphne, I say this: yes, I speak with a draconian air. But only to prove a point. Men can change in correspondence to the nature of their strengths; their weaknesses do them no good—

hence why they are called weaknesses. The soul must be allowed to remain clean. To do this requires Athens to become a republic, an emblem of both the mind and heart. A place where everyone is given roles that suit their skills and passions. Men and women are capable of making this utopia a reality. Now is the time to act; now is the time to band together not as enemies but as brothers and sisters; now is the time to listen to my followers and let their knowledge of the world and of the gods guide our way of life, for our lives are in peril. There are forces who wish to sacrifice the sanctity of our humanity in order to create more pain and hardship. Now is not the time to quarrel; now is the time to reform justice not only in the government, but also in the fibers of our lives.

What do you say, Praxagoras? How have my words changed you?

(PRAXAGORAS rises, scratches her chin in contemplation, and turns to SOCRATES.)

PRAXAGORAS

To be honest, you sound like a griffin. You speak of logic and truth, but I am still confused. If I were to cut you open, I fear what I might see. Maybe I'll find a Corybant in a wrinkly human hide; maybe I'll find Zeus behind your beard; or maybe I'll find one of the Thirty nestled within your robes whispering lies into your ear.

SOCRATES

How shall I prove myself then?

PRAXAGORAS

Fetch me a sword and let me see if you are authentic.

SOCRATES

You speak like a madwoman! I've spoken neither in jest nor in subterfuge.

DAPHNE

I agree with the philosopher, Praxagoras. Let's not rely on foolishness just yet.

PRAXAGORAS

Fine. But I am still uncertain whether I should trust men.

SOCRATES

Your apprehension is natural, my cautious Praxagoras. But maybe this will change your mind.

(SOCRATES gives PRAXAGORAS his papers. One of the papers falls to the ground.)

I have been reading *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, one of the most beloved Greek comedians. A friendly thespian gave me a copy of this play, and I've been reading it with great curiosity.

PRAXAGORAS

The play speaks of female empowerment. What do you think of it?

SOCRATES

I find it interesting. Have you read it?

PRAXAGORAS

Oh, yes! Many times before. I would be happy to share my thoughts of it with you. *Lysistrata* is my favorite play.

SOCRATES

I would love to hear your thoughts. We shall discuss it on our way back to Athens.

PRAXAGORAS

Delightful! Let's go. I have much to say.

DAPHNE

Please wait! Socrates, you dropped a part of the play.

(DAPHNE picks up the fallen piece of paper and reads it silently to herself.)

DAPHNE

This is a letter from my father! How did you come across it?

SOCRATES

Hermes gave it to me on my way here. He would've given it to you personally, but he doesn't like you because you rejected his love several years ago.

DAPHNE

He tried to rape me. But that's all in the past.

PRAXAGORAS

What does the letter say?

DAPHNE

The most splendid news. My father says he will turn me back into a nymph later this afternoon. Isn't it grand? Well, I mustn't stop you two from talking more about the prosperity of Athens. I will wait here until my father arrives.

PRAXAGORAS

Are you sure you want us to go?

DAPHNE

Yes, of course! Go and be merry.

(DAPHNE and SOCRATES exit.)

DAPHNE

Life is great after all.

(Finis of Daphne, Praxagoras, & Socrates)

Work Cited

Konstan, David. *Greek Comedy and Ideology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 7 Mar. 2016.