

PRAXAGORA
What's the point, you nitwit?

THIRD WOMAN
I'm sure there's bound to be some connection . . . and anyway, I can listen just as well while I flog away at my fleece.

I have to do it.
My kids are positively nude.

PRAXAGORA
That's all we need.
Card your wool, indeed. *No man must see the slightest bit of your-body.*

We've got to hurry; the littlest slip and we're undone. I can see it all: The people assemble, Congress commences . . . and then we arrive in a flap, some woman climbs over a bench, flips up her cloak, and exposes, to all and sundry, some misplaced whiskers.

But if we get there first and take our places, we can adjust our clothing and no one'll be the wiser. And once we're there, with proper beards tied on and arranged in place, what casual observer will say that we're not men?

FIRST WOMAN*
You're right. Agyrthios started out as a woman, but then he stole a fluteplayer's beard, and pulled the wool over everyone's eyes, and look at him now: He runs the city.

PRAXAGORA
And Agyrthios, girls, is our model. By the gods of daylight robbery, let's try to pull a *coup* as big as his. Let's devise a device to take command, take charge, take over. We'll run the city, run it right and proper and well. No more sitting and drifting in a ship of state with empty oarlocks and barren masts!

THIRD WOMAN
Now, look:
We're women! What place is there on the floor of Congress for feminine intercourse? How can we fit in?

PRAXAGORA
You'd be surprised. It's agreed that the most persuasive speakers are smoothskinned, softvoiced boys who've been screwed to a pitch of eloquence—and *that* is a qualification that we possess in plenty.

THIRD WOMAN
That may be okay for rump sessions, but what's our official position? The thing we lack is practice.

PRAXAGORA
And that, in case you've forgotten, is precisely why we're here—to rehearse our speeches. Now hurry and get that beard tied on.

SECOND WOMAN
The same for those of you who've been practicing how to talk.
You mean there's someone here who doesn't know how?

PRAXAGORA
You tie your beard on. Quickly. Be a man. I'll set these wreaths down here and put mine on with the rest of you. I just might want to speak.

All the women adjust their beards. The Second woman, still beard-proud, points at the women before her.

SECOND WOMAN
The funniest thing I ever saw.

PRAXAGORA
The funniest? How?

SECOND WOMAN
That fringe around their chins. They look like roasted squids.

PRAXAGORA
Attention, please! The ritual purification will now commence. The Chaplain will pass among you, bearing the sacrificial polecat.

FIRST WOMAN
I thought they sacrificed pigs.

PRAXAGORA
We couldn't get a pig.

START
↓

FIRST WOMAN

But why a polecat?

SECOND WOMAN

It gives an odor of holiness.

PRAXAGORA

Move down front!

As if to an inattentive member of Congress.

(Ariphrades, hold your tongue. Come up and sit down.)

—Who wishes to address the assembled Congress?

SECOND WOMAN

I do.

PRAXAGORA

*Wear this wreath on your brow. * May fortune attend you.*

SECOND WOMAN

Adjusting the wreath.

This look all right?

PRAXAGORA

You may proceed to speak.

SECOND WOMAN

Before I've had a drink?

PRAXAGORA

What drink do you mean?

SECOND WOMAN

Well, isn't this party politics?

PRAXAGORA

Yes . . .

SECOND WOMAN

So where's

the party?

PRAXAGORA

Snatching back the wreath.

Get out of here. A fat lot of help

you'd be up there.

SECOND WOMAN

You mean they *don't* drink in Congress?

PRAXAGORA

Of all the fatuous questions . . .

SECOND WOMAN

They do *too* drink—
what's more, they drink it straight. They pass decrees
that sound just like D.T.s.

FIRST WOMAN

She's right. They pour
libations, too. I know they do: They're always
praying, and prayers without wine are perfectly pointless.

THIRD WOMAN

And the language. They slander each other like men on benders,
and then the police come along and sling out the drunks.

PRAXAGORA

Move along and sit down. You're worse than useless.

SECOND WOMAN

I wish to god I'd never grown a beard.
This thing absorbs saliva. I'm positively parched.

PRAXAGORA

Is anyone else desirous of speaking?

FIRST WOMAN

I am.

PRAXAGORA

Then get this wreath on. Don't hold up the agenda.
Give us a firmly grounded masculine speech . . .
and don't fall over. Use your cane for support.

FIRST WOMAN

Unaccustomed as I am, I would have preferred
to yield the floor to some more experienced speaker.
But since I have risen, I cannot refuse to attach
a widespread abuse in this city. I refer, of course,
to Corruption at the Bar. Does anyone realize
how many cases there are in Athens' taverns
filled up with water? Heavens to Betsy, * it isn't . . .

PRAXAGORA

*Heavens to Betsy, deadhead? Where did you leave
your brain?*

FIRST WOMAN

What's wrong? I didn't ask for a drink.

PRAXAGORA

No, but what man swears by *Heavens to Betsy*?
The rest was beautifully stated. Right to the point.

FIRST WOMAN

Oh.
Back into the speech.

—GODDAM IT ALL, it . . .

PRAXAGORA

Snatching back the wreath.

Stop. Enough.

Now get this straight: I won't take another step
toward commandeering Congress unless the strictest accuracy
is observed in everything we do.

~~SECOND WOMAN~~

Running back up to Praxagora.

Give me the wreath.

I want another chance to speak. I know

I've got it right this time. All practiced and everything.
Putting on the wreath and striking an attitude.

—It is my pleasure to address you, girls . . .

PRAXAGORA

Snatching back the wreath.

The same mistake again. These are not girls,
they're MEN.

SECOND WOMAN

Pointing to the audience.

It's Epigonos' fault. I saw him sitting
out there and thought I was talking to women.

PRAXAGORA

Scat.

To First Woman.

You too.

To First, Second, and Third Women.

Now sit down over there. You force me
to a hard decision: I'll do the speaking myself.
But first, the wreath.

She puts it on.

I pray the gods will direct
today's deliberations to some successful issue.
A pause, and she begins a formal address.

—My friends: I bear a share no less than yours
in this land of ours, and feel compelled to confess
to a mounting distress. In fact, my grief is great
at the state of our City: Something is rotten in Athens.
Our leaders, our elected officials, are routinely vicious;
if one steps out of line and delivers a day

END