

ASPASIA

ASPASIA

(ARTICLE BY ELIZABETH LYNNE BEAVERS)

SUMMARY

Aspasia was the mistress of Pericles, the leader of Athens during the Classical Age. She was a hetaira, a trained and paid companion who accompanied upper-class men to the symposiums. According to some ancient sources she was skilled in rhetoric and took part in the intellectual discussions of the leading men in Athens, including Socrates. As the mistress of Pericles, she suffered attacks from his political enemies. Aspasia and Pericles had one son, who was later legitimized. After the death of Pericles she married Lysicles a man of humble birth who became a successful politician in Athens through her assistance. Factual information about Aspasia is difficult to locate in the ancient sources. Playwrights, biographers and other ancient authors use Aspasia to illustrate their views on philosophy, rhetoric and Pericles.

FAMILY

Modern scholars agree that the basic facts of Aspasia's life as recorded by Diodoros the Athenian (FGrHist 372 F 40_rpar; Plutarch ([Plut. Per. 24.3](#)) and the lexicographers are correct. She was born in the city of Miletus between 460-455 B.C., the daughter of Axiochus. Miletus, part of the Athenian empire, was one of the leading cities in Ionia, an area of Greek settlement located along the coast of Asia Minor.

It was probably in Ionia, before she left for Athens, that Aspasia was educated. Women in that part of the Greek world were generally given more of an education than women in Athens. As a hetaira she would have been trained in the art of conversation and of musical entertainment including singing, dancing and playing instruments.

BIOGRAPHY

Arriving in Athens as a free immigrant around 445 B.C., Aspasia worked as a hetaira. In fact Aspasia, which meant "Gladly Welcomed," was probably her professional name. Hetairai were much more than just high-class prostitutes. According to ancient literary sources and scenes from vase paintings, many hetairai were intelligent, beautiful, well-dressed and had fewer restrictions on their lives than the respectable, married women in Athens (Athenaeus, [Deipnosophistae](#) 583f.). This description would also apply to Aspasia. As a hetaira, however, she would not have had financial security or any legal or family protection.

As the paid companion of aristocratic men Aspasia attended symposiums, drinking parties combined with political and philosophical discourse. At the symposiums she met the most influential and powerful men in Athens, including Pericles. Sometime around 445 B.C. Aspasia began to live with Pericles, who at that time was the leader of Athens. He had been divorced from his wife for five years, with whom he had two sons. According to Plutarch, it was an amiable divorce because the marriage was not a happy one ([Plut. Per. 24.5](#)).

Plutarch relates more information about Aspasia than any other ancient author. Unfortunately, Plutarch's [Lives](#) are full of distortions and historical inaccuracies. His

purpose in the Lives was to exemplify the virtues and vices of great men, not to write history. In respect to Aspasia and Pericles he states that Pericles valued Aspasia's intelligence and political insight, but he emphasizes that Pericles' feelings for her were primarily erotic. This may be an attempt on Plutarch's part to remove the stigma from Pericles of having been overly influenced by a woman.

Plutarch describes the relationship between Aspasia and Pericles as a very happy one. He states that she was so loved by Pericles that he kissed her everyday when he left the house and again when he returned (Plut. Per. 24_rpar;). Plutarch portrays Aspasia as the influential courtesan. He writes that Aspasia was trying to emulate Thargelia, a famous Milesian courtesan whose lovers were the most powerful men in Greece. Using her influence over these men Thargelia helped win Thessaly over to the Persians at the time of Xerxes' invasion.

Plutarch blames Aspasia for Pericles' decision to start the war against Samos, a wealthy and powerful member of the empire. The Milesians and the Samians were involved in a border dispute. The Samians refused to submit the conflict to Athenian arbitration. Supposedly, Aspasia pressured Pericles to take military action against Samos (Plut. Per. 25.1). Although it would have been natural for Aspasia to take the side of her native city, she and Pericles both must have realized that the loss of Samos to the empire would have meant the rapid end of Athenian domination of the Aegean.

The exact status of Aspasia's relationship with Pericles and her position in Pericles' household is disputed. While some say that she was his a παλλακή (concubine), Plutarch (Plut. Per. 24) seems to imply, and Diodorus the Athenian (FGrHist 372 F 40_rpar; says, that she was his ἄκοιτις. She and Pericles had one son also named Pericles. As the mistress of Pericles' household and hostess to his friends and supporters, Aspasia participated in discussions revolving around politics and philosophy with the leading men of the Athenian empire. According to several ancient authors, Socrates respected her opinions (Plut. Per. 24.3; Xen. Ec. 3.15; Cicero, De Inventione 31.51_rpar;). As a pallake she would have been outside of the legal, traditional role of an Athenian wife. Freed from the social restraints that tied married women to their homes and restricted their behavior, Aspasia was able to participate more freely in public life.

Strong evidence that Aspasia's role in Athens went beyond that of mistress to Pericles is given by Plato in the Menexenus. In this dialogue Plato has Socrates recite a funeral oration composed by Aspasia that glorifies the Athenians and their history. The Menexenus is a humorous vehicle for Plato to make a serious, but negative comment on rhetoric and popular opinion in Athens. Everything in Aspasia's speech is selected, arranged and stated by Plato in order to produce the greatest possible irony. By satirizing a speech "written" by Aspasia, Plato acknowledges her role as a leader of rhetoric in the Greek Classical Age.

In Cicero's book on rhetoric he uses as an example of the Socratic method a dialogue attributed to Aspasia by Aeschines a student of Socrates. In this dialogue Aspasia skillfully proves to a husband and wife that neither one of them will ever be truly happy with the other because they each desire the ideal spouse. Aeschines and another student of Socrates, Antisthenes, both wrote dialogues titled Aspasia. Unfortunately, only fragments of these works survive. (Diogenes Laertius, Antisthenes 6.16.)

Several ancient authors state that Aspasia herself operated a house of courtesans and trained young women in the necessary skills (Plut. Per. 24.3). Aristophanes and others refer to "Aspasia's whores" (Aristoph. Ach. 527). Although as Pericles' pallake she was taken care of financially, Aspasia may have been preparing for her future after the death of

Pericles. According to Plutarch, she was known in Athens as a teacher of rhetoric. Perhaps these women were her pupils ([Plut. Per. 34](#)). Aspasia's hetairai would have had as patrons the elite men of Athens, especially the supporters of Pericles.

Around 438 B.C. Pericles' political enemies began attacking those close to him in court and eventually brought charges against Pericles himself. Soon Aspasia became a target. She was brought to trial on charges of impiety and of procuring free women. She was acquitted thanks to a passionate and tearful defense by Pericles ([Plut. Per. 32.1-3](#)). Although her political wisdom was valuable to Pericles, not having an Athenian citizen as a legal wife, but rather living with a foreign hetaira in an unofficial marriage may have been a political liability for him.

In the contemporary comedy The Acharnians, Aristophanes parodies the imputations that Aspasia had undue influence on Pericles' political decisions. One of his characters blames the start of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C. on the abduction of two of Aspasia's hetairai ([Aristoph. Ach. 527-530](#)). The joke worked because the audience knew that Aspasia had some influence on Pericles, but not enough to start a war.

The plague in Athens in 430 B.C. killed both of Pericles' sons by his first wife. This led him to ask for an exemption from the citizenship law, which he himself had enacted, for his illegitimate son by Aspasia. The citizenship law decreed that only persons whose father and mother were both Athenians could be legal citizens. The people of Athens agreed to Pericles' request. His son was legitimized and made a citizen of Athens. He later became a general, but was executed in 406 B.C.

In 429 B.C. Pericles died from the plague. A year later Aspasia became involved with a sheep seller named Lysicles in another unofficial marriage. He was an uneducated man of humble birth who rose to prominence thanks to her guidance. She taught him how to speak in public and gave him the benefit of her valuable insights and personal contacts in Athenian politics ([Plut. Per. 24.6](#); Scholia to Plato, Menexenus 235E). He was one of the new type of political leaders who came to prominence after the death of Pericles. This was probably the same group who had led the earlier attacks against Pericles and his friends, including Aspasia herself. Questions remain regarding Aspasia's decision to marry so quickly after Pericles' death. She might have been in need of a protector from Pericles' enemies. The selection of another politician as her husband might also suggest a desire to remain involved in the politics of Athens.

There is no information about Aspasia's life after this point. Although the actual extent of her influence on Athenian politics and society during Athens' most glorious period will never be certain, she did become one of the few women in the ancient Greek world to be noted and remembered. She became so famous that Cyrus, a prince of Persia, Athens' most hated enemy, gave the name Aspasia to his favorite concubine. Through the succeeding centuries ancient authors, including playwrights and biographers, used Aspasia as a well-known historical figure to illustrate their views on philosophy, politics, rhetoric, Pericles and Socrates.

SOURCES

The primary sources give little information about Aspasia. Plutarch relates more than the other ancient authors, but he seems almost wholly dependent on Athenian comedy and stories from the Socratic circle for his information, all of which is difficult to verify. The secondary sources tend to discuss Aspasia in relation to Pericles or Athenian politics and society. *[In the full online version, a list of primary and secondary sources follows.]*

PLUTARCH: LIFE OF PERICLES

After this, having made a truce between the Athenians and Lacedaemonians for thirty years, [*Pericles*] ordered, by public decree, the expedition against the isle of Samos, on the ground, that, when they were bid to leave off their war with the Milesians they had not complied. And as these measures against the Samians are thought to have been taken to please Aspasia, this may be a fit point for inquiry about the woman, what art or charming faculty she had that enabled her to captivate, as she did, the greatest statesmen, and to give the philosophers occasion to speak so much about her, and that, too, not to her disparagement. That she was a Milesian by birth, the daughter of Axiochus, is a thing acknowledged. And they say it was in emulation of Thargelia, a courtesan of the old Ionian times, that she made her addresses to men of great power. Thargelia was a great beauty, extremely charming, and at the same time sagacious; she had numerous suitors among the Greeks, and brought all who had to do with her over to the Persian interest, and by their means, being men of the greatest power and station, sowed the seeds of the Median faction up and down in several cities.

Aspasia, some say, was courted and caressed by Pericles upon account of her knowledge and skill in politics. Socrates himself would sometimes go to visit her, and some of his acquaintance with him; and those who frequented her company would carry their wives with them to listen to her. Her occupation was anything but creditable, her house being a home for young courtesans. Aeschines tells us, also, that Lysicles, a sheep-dealer, a man of low birth and character, by keeping Aspasia company after Pericles's death, came to be a chief man in Athens. And in Plato's *Menexenus*, though we do not take the introduction as quite serious, still thus much seems to be historical, that she had the repute of being resorted to by many of the Athenians for instruction in the art of speaking. Pericles's inclination for her seems, however, to have rather proceeded from the passion of love. He had a wife that was near of kin to him, who had been married first to Hipponicus, by whom she had Callias, surnamed the Rich; and also she brought Pericles, while she lived with him, two sons, Xanthippus and Paralus. Afterwards, when they did not well agree, nor like to live together, he parted with her, with her own consent, to another man, and himself took Aspasia, and loved her with wonderful affection; every day, both as he went out and as he came in from the market-place, he saluted and kissed her.

In the comedies she goes by the nicknames of the new Omphale and Deianira, and again is styled Juno. Cratinus, in downright terms, calls her a harlot.

"To find him a Juno the goddess of lust
Bore that harlot past shame,
Aspasia by name."

It should seem also that he had a son by her; Eupolis, in his *Demi*, introduced Pericles asking after his safety, and Myronides replying-

"My son?" "He lives: a man he had been long,
But that the harlot-mother did him wrong."

Aspasia, they say, became so celebrated and renowned, that Cyrus, also who made war against Artaxerxes for the Persian monarchy, gave her whom he loved the best of all his concubines the name of Aspasia, who before that was called Milto. She was a Phocaeon by birth, the daughter of one Hermotimus, and, when Cyrus fell in battle, was carried to

the king, and had great influence at court. These things coming into my memory as I am writing this story, it would be unnatural for me to omit them.

PLATO: MENEXINUS

[A more or less humorous dialog from the philosopher, in which Socrates describes the wisdom and oratorical ability of Aspasia]

Menexenus : And do you think that you yourself would be able to make the speech, if required and if the Council were to select you?

Socrates: That I should be able to make the speech would be nothing wonderful, Menexenus; for she who is my instructor is by no means weak in the art of rhetoric; on the contrary, she has turned out many fine orators, and amongst them one who surpassed all other Greeks, Pericles, the son of Xanthippus.

Menexenus: Who is she? But you mean Aspasia,¹ no doubt.

Socrates: I do and; also Connus the son of Metrobius; [236a] for these are my two instructors, the one in music, the other in rhetoric. So it is not surprising that a man who is trained like me should be clever at speaking. But even a man less well taught than I, who had learnt his music from Lamprus and his rhetoric from Antiphon the Rhamnusian,¹—even such a one, I say, could none the less win credit by praising Athenians before an Athenian audience.

Menexenus: What, then, would you have to say, if you were required to speak?

Socrates: Nothing, perhaps, myself of my own invention; [236b] but I was listening only yesterday to Aspasia going through a funeral speech for these very people. For she had heard the report you mention, that the Athenians are going to select the speaker; and thereupon she rehearsed to me the speech in the form it should take, extemporizing in part, while other parts of it she had previously prepared, as I imagine, at the time when she was composing the funeral oration which Pericles delivered; and from this she patched together sundry fragments.

Menexenus: Could you repeat from memory that speech of Aspasia?

Socrates: Yes, if I am not mistaken; for I learnt it, to be sure, from her as she went along, [236c] and I nearly got a flogging whenever I forgot.

Menexenus: Why don't you repeat it then?

Socrates: But possibly my teacher will be vexed with me if I publish abroad her speech.

Menexenus: Never fear, Socrates; only tell it and you will gratify me exceedingly, whether it is Aspasia's that you wish to deliver or anyone else's; only say on.

Socrates: But you will probably laugh me to scorn if I, at my age, seem to you to be playing like a child.

Menexenus: Not at all, Socrates; but by all means say on.

Socrates: Nay, then, I must surely gratify; you for indeed I would almost gratify you [236d] if you were to bid me strip and dance, now that we two are alone. Listen then. In her

speech, I believe, she began by making mention of the dead men themselves in this wise: *[Aspasia:]* In respect of deeds, these men have received at our hands what is due unto them, endowed wherewith they travel their predestined road; for they have been escorted forth in solemn procession publicly by the City and privately by their kinsfolk. But in respect of words, the honor that remains still due to these heroes the law enjoins us, and it is right, to pay in full. [236e] For it is by means of speech finely spoken that deeds nobly done gain for their doers from the hearers the meed of memory and renown. And the speech required is one which will adequately eulogize the dead and give kindly exhortation to the living, appealing to their children and their brethren to copy the virtues of these heroes, and to their fathers and mothers and any still surviving ancestors offering consolation. [237a] Where then could we discover a speech like that? Or how could we rightly commence our laudation of these valiant men, who in their lifetime delighted their friends by their virtue, and purchased the safety of the living by their deaths? We ought, in my judgement, to adopt the natural order in our praise, even as the men themselves were natural in their virtue. And virtuous they were because they were sprung from men of virtue. Firstly, then, let us eulogize their nobility of birth, and secondly their nurture and training ... *[The speech attributed to Aspasia continues for a while]*

XENOPHON: MEMORABILIA

[A conversation about friendship between Critobulus and Socrates, in which Aspasia is mentioned as a friend of Socrates' wise in the ways of matchmaking.]

"A kiss for the fair," exclaimed Critobulus, "and a thousand kisses for the good! That shall be my motto, so take courage, and teach me the art of catching friends."

"Well then, Critobulus," said Socrates, "when you want to make a new friend, will you let me warn him that you admire him and want his friendship?"

"Warn him by all means: no one hates those who praise him, so far as I know." [34]

"Suppose I go on to warn him that your admiration makes you well disposed towards him, you won't think I am slandering you, will you?"

"Nay; when I guess that anyone feels well disposed towards me, a like goodwill towards him is begotten in me." [35]

"Then you will permit me to say this about you to those whose friendship you desire. Now if you will give me permission to tell them besides that you are devoted to your friends and nothing gives you so much pleasure as good friends; that you take as much pride in your friends' fair achievements as in your own, and as much pleasure in your friends' good as in your own, and never weary of contriving it for your friend's; and you have made up your mind that a man's virtue consists in outdoing his friends in kindness and his enemies in mischief; then I think you will find me a useful companion in the quest of good friends." [36]

"Now why do you say this to me? as if you were not free to say what you choose about me."

"Not so indeed: I can quote Aspasia against you. She once told me that good matchmakers are successful in making marriages only when the good reports they carry to and fro are

true; false reports she would not recommend, for the victims of deception hate one another and the matchmaker too. I am convinced that this is sound, and so I think it is not open to me to say anything in your praise that I can't say truthfully." [37]

"It appears, Socrates, that you are the sort of friend to help me if I am in any way qualified to make friends: but if not, you won't make up a story to help me."

SOUDA: ASPASIA

[The Souda is a dictionary of people and places from classical antiquity, dating from the 10th century CE.]

She became notorious. She was Milesian in descent, clever with regards to words. They say she was simultaneously teacher and beloved of Pericles. It is supposed she became the cause of two wars, the Samian[1] and the Peloponnesian.[2] It also seems that Pericles had a bastard child with the same name, Pericles, by her.[3]

[Note] that there were two courtesan Aspasiases.[4] Pericles had the sexual use of one of these, [and] provoked to anger on her account he wrote the decree against the Megareans, forbidding them to be permitted into [Athens](#). Hence these people having their way barred by the Athenians fled for refuge to the Lacedaemonians. Aspasia was a sophist and a teacher of rhetorical principles. And later she became his wife.

All sources from the Perseus Project