

# Who was Aspasia?\*

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## Prologue

*[The actor sets the scene, describing Athens of 440 BCE and outlining some of the events in the history of Athens]<sup>1</sup>*

It is the time of Pericles, about 440 BCE. Athens is a prosperous city of about 250,000 people, many more than any other Greek state. There are about 100,000 slaves and many thousands of people who have not been born in Athens and are regarded as non-citizens. Pericles has worked hard to make Athens the most beautiful city in Greece. He has enhanced the city with great buildings of stone, wood, gold, bronze and ivory. The finest craftsmen, carpenters, goldsmiths, and stonemasons have poured into our city. Work is available for everyone and Athens has thrived.

On the highest part of the city, the great engineer Pallikrates, the designer, Ikitinos and all the best workers and craftsmen in Athens, have built in stone what is regarded as the most perfect of buildings, the great house of Athena of the City, known as the Parthenon. *[Indicate the Parthenon]* It is a temple in Doric style and at its top step measures about 70 metres by 30 metres. Pheidias has adorned the building with wonderful sculptures and this magnificent temple will stand from the time of Pericles, until it is partially demolished in 1687, blown up by a German gunner in the service of an Italian general. In the early years of the 19th Century, Thomas Bruce, 7th Lord Elgin and British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire will remove many of the sculptures and much of the architectural details and ship them to England where they are now displayed in the British Museum.

Pericles lived from 490–429 BCE. He was elected to the position of *strategos* in 461 BCE. Ten generals are elected each year to form the *strategia*. Pericles maintained his position of power for thirty years. He is renowned as powerful and persuasive speaker who has been taught by some of the most famous thinkers of his time.

Plato wrote that Pericles associated with many wise men, including Damon, the musician and Zeno the philosopher, but the most influential was Anaxagoras, who escaped the death penalty but was exiled for proposing a radical new philosophy and declaring the sun to be a red hot stone.

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\* Paper given as a performance activity during the conference.

<sup>1</sup> The stage directions are presented in italics and square brackets to differentiate them from the body of the text.

The position of women in Athens is in some sense paradoxical. Many of the Gods in Greek mythology are women, including Athena, the Goddess of wisdom, Artemis the goddess of the hunt and Hera the goddess of fertility and yet women are often portrayed as cunning and conspiratorial who use their beauty and intelligence to the detriment of men. In Homer's *Odyssey* Clytemnestra is an adulteress who kills her husband Agamemnon when he arrives from Troy.

The ghost of Agamemnon says:

So  
*There's nothing more deadly, bestial than a woman  
 Set on works like these — what a monstrous thing  
 She plotted, slaughtered her own lawful husband!  
 Why, I expected, at least, some welcome home from all my children, all  
 my household slaves  
 When I came sailing back again...But she —  
 The queen, hell-bent on outrage — bathes in shame  
 Not only herself but the whole breed of womankind,  
 Even the honest ones to come, forever down the years.*

(Homer, *The Odyssey*, XI 482–490)

Helen of Troy is blamed for the Trojan War and Aspasia, described by many as Pericles' concubine, was blamed for the war against Samos. [*directly to the audience*] Why is it that men blame women for the wars they fight?

Even the great thinkers and writers do not represent women well. In the *Timaeus*, Plato wrote about the creation of living things. His scenario describes men as being created first and all the lesser creatures evolving from men with moral weakness. The creation of women is presented thus:

*Of the men who came into the world, those who were cowards or led unrighteous lives may with reason be supposed to have changed into the nature of women in the second generation (Plato: 91).<sup>2</sup>*

Although in the Periclean Era, Athens is regarded as a democracy, women cannot own property, do not have the right to attend political debates, cannot vote and cannot enter into any substantial business transaction. Women, even high-born women, have limited education and usually live in separate quarters in the house. Women from outside Athens cannot marry an Athenian.

<sup>2</sup> The normal convention of referring to passages in Plato has been followed — i.e. page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works edited by Stephanus. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in Plato, 1965.

## Who Was Aspasia?

*[The drama commences with the old Aspasia on stage]*

I am Aspasia.

I have lived a long life with much happiness and great tragedy.

And now, I have time to savour my memories and ask: Who was Aspasia?

*[She is now transformed into the young Aspasia]*

I, Aspasia, am charged with impiety by that vile and vulgar Hermippus.

*[She is distraught and irate and paces the stage]*

Hermippus charges me with impiety, when it is he, who writes such salacious comedies. He claims that I have procured women for Pericles' sexual pleasure.

*[She speaks to the audience]*

I, who have loved and am loved, by the great Pericles; and have borne him a son.

Why do they persecute me? Is it to embarrass and distress Pericles?

Is it because I am a woman and an outsider, not born in Athens?

Pericles has been forced to go down on his knees and in tears, plead for my innocence. What pleasure do they take in seeing this great man humiliated for the sake of me, the woman he loves.

*[Aspasia breaks the moment and sits and looks in a mirror then she turns towards the audience]*

My life has taken so many twists and turns. I was born into an aristocratic Milesian family. My father was Axiochos who saw that I had a good education unlike many other women of the day. I had a happy life in Miletus until I reached womanhood in about 449 BCE.

At about that time a group of men within the government of our city caused havoc and turmoil when they set about engineering the secession of our city from the Delian League. It was a frightening and hideous time. My father was killed and I felt all alone. My sister and her husband, Alcibiades<sup>3</sup> decided to flee to Athens and thankfully they agreed to take me with them.

*[Her mood takes on a much lighter and even flirtatious note]*

I lived in Athens with my sister and her husband for some time. I enjoyed the city and came to know many prominent individuals, such as Anaxagoras, a man of great intellect and reason and also the famed philosopher, Socrates. Men thought me beautiful and I delighted in the company and conversation of men of power and of intelligence. I was often compared with courtesans of earlier days. My beauty or my intelligence brought me to the attention of that great general of Athens, Pericles. From about 445 BCE until his death we lived together. I bore him a son, whom we named Pericles, after his father.

Pericles was a great man who learned much from the wise men of Athens, such as Zeno and Anaxagoras. Zeno is renowned for his arguments and refutations that silence all his opponents. Timon of Phlius said:

*...Zeno had a tongue that could argue both ways with a fury resistless... (Plutarch's Lives XXIV).*

Or as is said today he could argue black was white.

Anaxagoras, the man they call Nous, which means mind, encouraged Pericles to see the world not through the eyes of superstition but through reason, and bade him understand the causes of nature.

Pericles once told me a tale in which the reason of Anaxagoras defeated the superstition of the people.

*[Then in the voice and manner of Pericles act out the story]*

*A farmer brought me a ram's head with only one horn through the middle of his forehead.*

*Many thought this was supernatural, the work of the gods. At the time there were two opposing factions in the city, one of Thucydides and the other of me, Pericles. The birth of the ram was seen as a sign and it was said by the superstitious that the one who owned the property on which this animal was found would hold the government. But Anaxagoras cleaved the skull of the ram asunder and exposed the brain to all the people and showed that that the horn had a natural cause, like the horns of all other rams... Anaxagoras was admired throughout Athens for his explanation (Plutarch, Pericles, VI).*

<sup>3</sup> Alcibiades had been exiled to Miletus. He is the grandfather of the notorious Alcibiades.

*[Pause as Aspasia reminisces about her life with Pericles]*

I was only about 20 when I met Pericles. He was married and had two sons, Xanthippus and Paralus. His marriage was unhappy and, as he wanted to live with me,

*...he legally bestowed his wife upon another man, with her own consent and himself took me, Aspasia and loved me exceedingly well. Twice a day, as he went to the market-place and then on his way back, he would greet me with a loving kiss<sup>4</sup> (Plutarch, Pericles, XXIV).*

As I was not an Athenian citizen, Pericles could not marry me.

In 440 BCE war broke out between Miletus and Samos. The dispute that led to war concerned the possession of Priene, a city port just north of Miletus across the Latmian Gulf. Pericles supported the Milesians and with nearly 200 ships blockaded Samos for nine months until they surrendered. The war was expensive both in money and Athenian lives and Pericles suffered much criticism, but they blamed me for the outbreak of war, because I came from Miletus. *[Pause]* It was thought that I had used my female charm, like the enchantresses of old, to persuade Pericles to go to war. *[with a laugh]* Pericles was a great general and needed none of my persuasion.

Centuries later Plutarch wrote a greatly exaggerated account of my role. It went like this:

*Now, since it is thought that he proceeded thus against the Samians to gratify Aspasia this may be a fitting place to raise the query what great art or power this woman, that she managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms at great length...they say it was in emulation of Thargelia, an Ionian woman of ancient times, that she made her onslaughts upon the most influential men. This Thargelia, a great beauty, was endowed with grace of manners as well as clever wits. She lived on terms of intimacy with numberless Greeks, and attached all her consorts to the king of Persia; she stealthily sowed the seeds of Persian sympathy in the cities of Greece by means of these lovers of hers, men of the greatest power and influence. And so Aspasia, as some say, was held in high favour by Pericles because of her rare political wisdom...however, the affection, which Pericles held for Aspasia, seems to have been rather of the amatory sort (Plutarch, Pericles, XXIV).*

Well what did Plutarch think, Pericles was a powerful middle-aged general and I was a young and beautiful woman, he was in love with me. Of course our relationship was of the amatory sort. However I also offered him advice of a political and philosophical nature.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the quotes have been altered to read as if said by Aspasia (dramatic licence).

Like all those who hold power, Pericles had many enemies and rather than attack him directly they often attacked his friends through the political and legal processes.

*Diopethes brought in a bill providing for the public impeachment of such as did not believe in gods, or who taught doctrine regarding the heavens. This last clause was directed against the philosopher Anaxagoras who, as we have heard, taught that the sun was a red hot stone (Plutarch, Pericles, XXXII).*

Poor Anaxagoras was forced to flee Athens. He established a successful school of philosophy at Lampsacus on the Hellespont. In our home Pericles treated me not only with affection but also with respect for my learning and intelligence. Many of the great thinkers and their wives visited me and sought my advice in rhetoric and estate management.

Aeschines Socraticus of Sphettos<sup>5</sup> wrote Socratic dialogues and one he attributed to me, Aspasia. He recounted a dialogue between Xenophanes, his wife and me.

I asked Xenophanes' wife,

*Please tell me Madam, if your neighbour had a better gold ornament than you have, would you prefer that one or your own?*

*That one.* She replied.

*Now, if she had dresses and other feminine finery more expensive than you have, would you prefer yours or hers?*

*Hers, of course.*

*Well now, if she had a better husband than you have, would you prefer your husband or hers?*

The woman blushed; I then addressed her husband, Xenophon.

*I wish you would tell me, Xenophon, if your neighbour had a better horse than yours, would you prefer your horse or his?*

*His.*

*And if he had a better farm than you have, which farm would you prefer to have?*

*The better farm naturally.*

*Now, if he had a better wife than you have, would you prefer yours or his?*

Xenophon fell silent.

*Since both of you have failed to tell me the only thing I wished to hear, I myself will tell you what you both are thinking. That is, madam, you wish to have the best husband, and you, Xenophon, desire above all things to have the finest*

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<sup>5</sup> Cicero, *De Inventione*, xxxi 51–53.

*wife. Therefore unless you can contrive that there be no better man or finer woman on earth you will certainly always be in dire want of what you consider best, namely, that you be the husband of the very best of wives, and that she be wedded to the very best of men* (Cicero, *De Inventione*, I. xxxi 51–53).

This method of argument is the same as that I taught Socrates, it is known as rhetoric. It employs a conversational method and involves asking questions in order to draw out the answers. It is a most persuasive method of argument!

My skill at politics and writing has been acknowledged by some prominent men. After the war with Samos in which many Athenian lives were lost a public burial was held and Pericles delivered the funeral oration.

Socrates in Plato's *Menexenus* attributes this speech to me. Socrates, when asked by Menexenus if he could write such a eulogy, replies:

*For she who is my instructor is by no means weak in the art of rhetoric; on the contrary she, Aspasia, has turned out many fine orators, and amongst them one who surpassed all other Greeks, Pericles* (Plato, *Menexenus*).

He went on to say that he had overheard me whilst I was rehearsing the funeral speech, which Pericles delivered.

My life provided the enemies of Pericles with much fuel for their gossip. In Athens writers of political comedy flourished and I was a rich and boundless source of inspiration for many.

Aristophanes' play *Acharnians* was produced in 425 BCE, four years after the death of Pericles, and in it he casts me as the cause of the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes' play relates that some young drunks stole a prostitute from Megara, a city near the Isthmus of Corinth. In return, the Megarians stole two of Aspasia's whores and then:

*...in wrath, the Olympian Pericles,  
Thundered and lightened, and confounded Hellas,  
Enacting laws, which ran like drinking songs,  
That the Megarians presently depart,  
From earth and sea, the mainland and the mart.  
Would you have sat unmov'd? Far from that  
Ye would have launched three hundred ships of war,  
And all the City had at one been full  
Of shouting troops... (Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 58).*

Although this made for hilarious theatre it was not the truth. Pericles had certainly imposed the Megarian Decree, an embargo on Megara's Aegean trade. The embargo undoubtedly contributed to the War, but the start of the war had nought to do with drunken louts and harlots.

Eupolis was another cruel jester who mentioned me in three of his comedies. He compared me to Helen of Troy who, like me was accused of sexual impropriety and of being the cause of wars and the deaths of many men.

Even more damaging to my reputation occurred in the comedy *Philo*. Eupolis calls me *Omphale*, the mythical figure, who enslaved Apollo for her sexual pleasure, as I was thought to have ensnared Pericles. These writers had much fun at my expense.

*[Condescendingly but with a touch of haughtiness]* They seemed to have great difficulty in understanding that a woman could have brains and beauty and that a great general and leader could love such a woman without becoming enslaved.

*[Aspasia changes mood and recalls tragedy and sorrow and her mood is sombre]*

The Peloponnesian War resulted in many deaths. Pericles pursued a policy of staying inside the fortified city as the Spartans invaded the territory of Athens. In the crowded city a plague broke out and spread rapidly. It seemed there were dead bodies everywhere. The Athenians blamed Pericles for bringing the war and the plague and angrily voted him out of office. The deathly plague soon touched Pericles' family and he lost his sister, and Xanthippus, his son by his first wife, and many other friends and relatives. His heart was heavy and he grieved deeply.

The leaders that had taken over after Pericles had been voted out, were soon found by the populace to be inferior and the Athenians begged Pericles to again take over the running of Athens. He forgave the citizens their previous insult, and in order to make amends to him, they allowed my son, the illegitimate child of the harlot Aspasia, to become his lawful heir and take his father's name, Pericles.

*[With delight and pride]* I was overjoyed both for my son and for Pericles. My joy was soon overshadowed as the most dreaded event overtook Athens. Pericles was infected with the plague.

*[Aspasia looks at Pericles]* His suffering was slow and long and he wasted in strength both of body and mind. I stayed with him to the end, and mourned the man, who had loved me and treated me well.

*[Aspasia walks slowly to the other side of stage. Her shoulders droop and she is now a woman without confidence]*

After his death, I was alone and undefended. I was reviled by many Athenians, I could not become a citizen and I had no right to marry. I needed a protector. After some time had passed, I kept company with Lysicles, a sheep dealer and a prominent politician.

*[Pause and Aspasia is transformed to the old Aspasia as at the beginning of the monologue]*



The time of my death is not known but it is thought that I lived for another 28 years after the death of Pericles.

[Pause]

Now you have heard some of my story.

Who am I? [Confront the audience]

A harlot, and the cause of two wars and the death of many Athenian men; a procurer of women for the most powerful man in Athens? Am I merely a woman of beauty and brilliance, skilled in writing and politics, subjected to character assassination by gossip, rumour and innuendo by the vicious invective of the comic and satiric writers of the day and the enemies of Pericles? [Looks directly at the audience]

You be the judge.

THE END

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