

Texts on Women and Leadership: ASPASIA

Aristophanes *Acharnians* 522-531 (5th CENTURY BCE)

Now granted, this was trivial and strictly local. But then some tipsy, cottabus-playing youths went to Megara and kidnapped the whore Simaetha. And then the Megarians, garlic-stung by their distress, in retaliation stole a couple of Aspasia's whores, and from that the onset of war broke forth upon all the Greeks: from three sluts! And then in wrath Pericles, that Olympian, did lighten and thunder and stir up Greece, and started making laws worded like drinking songs, that Megarians should abide neither on land nor in market nor on sea nor on shore.

Athenaeus *Deipnosophistes* 13.569 (2nd CENTURY CE citing 5th CENTURY BCE sources)

Socrates' friend Aspasia also imported large numbers of good-looking women, and prostitutes who belonged to her filled Greece, as the witty Aristophanes observes in passing, when he says regarding the Peloponnesian War that Pericles brought the trouble into full flame because of his love for Aspasia and because of the servant-girls the Megarians kidnapped from her (Ach. 524–9):

Some young men who'd gotten drunk playing Cottabus went to Megara and abducted a whore named Simaetha. After that the Megarians, who were upset and looking for a fight, responded by abducting two whores who belonged to Aspasia. That's the origin of the war that broke out and involved all the Greeks: three professional dick-lickers!

Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistes* 13.589 (2nd CENTURY CE citing 4th CENTURY BCE sources)

Antisthenes Socraticus claims that Pericles was in love with Aspasia and went into and out of her house twice a day just to say hello to her, and that at one point when she was on trial for impiety, he spoke on her behalf and wept more than when his own life and property were at risk.

Athenaeus *Deipnosophists* 12.533 (2nd CENTURY CE citing 4th CENTURY BCE sources)

Heracleides of Pontus in his *On Pleasure* asserts that Olympian Pericles evicted his wife from his house, adopted a lifestyle devoted to pleasure, and lived with the courtesan Aspasia of Megara, on whom he wasted most of his money.

Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 3.14 (4th CENTURY BCE)

“But what of the husbands who you say have good wives, Socrates? Did they train them themselves?”

“There’s nothing like investigation. I will introduce Aspasia to you, and she will explain the whole matter to you with more knowledge than I have. think that the wife

who is a good partner in the household contributes just as much as her husband to its good; because the income for the most part is the result of the husband’s exertions, but the expenses are controlled mostly by the wife’s management. If both do their part well, the estate is increased; if they act incompetently, it is diminished. If you need any further demonstration as regards other branches of knowledge, I think I can show you people who acquit themselves creditably in any one of them.”

Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.6.36 (4th CENTURY BCE)

“But that’s not so, as I once heard from Aspasia. She explained that good matchmakers are successful in making marriages only when the good reports that they circulate 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.”

“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.”

Cicero *De Inventione* 1.31.51-52 (1st CENTURY BCE citing 4th CENTURY BCE sources)

All argumentation, then, is to be carried on either by induction or by deduction. Induction is a form of argument which leads the person with whom one is arguing to give assent to certain undisputed facts; through this assent it wins his approval of a doubtful proposition because this resembles the facts to which he has assented. For instance, in a dialogue by Aeschines Socraticus Socrates reveals that Aspasia reasoned thus with Xenophon's wife and with Xenophon himself: "Please tell me, madam, if your neighbor 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," she replied. "Well now, if she had a better husband than you have, would you prefer your husband or hers?" At this the woman blushed. But Aspasia then began to speak to Xenophon. "I wish you would tell me, Xenophon," she said, "if your neighbor had a better horse than yours, would you prefer your horse or his?" "His" was his answer. "And if he had a better farm than you have, which farm would you prefer to have?" The better farm, naturally," he said. "Now if he had a better wife than you have, would you prefer yours or his?" And at this Xenophon, too, himself was silent. Then Aspasia: "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, you, madam, wish to have the best husband, and you, Xenophon, desire above all things to have the finest 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."

Plutarch *Life of Pericles* 24 (2nd CENTURY CE)

24 After this, when peace had been made for thirty years between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians, he got a decree passed for his expedition to Samos, alleging against its people that, though they were ordered to break off their war against the Milesians, they were not complying.

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 had, that she managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms and at great length. That she was a Milesian by birth, daughter of one Axiochus, is generally agreed; and they say that it was in emulation of Thargelia, an Ionian woman of ancient times, that she made her onslaughts upon the most influential men. This Thargelia came to be a great beauty and was endowed with grace of manners as well as clever wits. Inasmuch as 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, who were men of the greatest power and influence. 3 And so Aspasia, as some say, was held in high favour by Pericles because of her rare political wisdom. Socrates sometimes came to see her with his disciples, and his intimate friends brought their wives to her to hear her discourse, although she presided over a business that was anything but honest or even reputable, since she kept a house of young courtesans. 4 And Aeschines says that Lysicles the sheep-dealer, a man of low birth and nature, came to be the first man at Athens by living with Aspasia after the death of Pericles. And in the "Menexenus" of Plato, even though the first part of it be written in a sportive vein, there is, at any rate, thus much of fact, that the woman had the reputation of associating with many Athenians as a teacher of rhetoric.

However, the affection which Pericles had for Aspasia seems to have been rather of an amatory sort. For his own wife was near of kin to him, and had been wedded first to Hipponicus, to whom she bore Callias, surnamed the Rich; she bore also, as the wife of Pericles, Xanthippus and Paralus. After, since their married life was not agreeable, he legally bestowed her upon another man, with her own consent, and himself took Aspasia, and loved her exceedingly. 6 Twice a day, as they say, on going out and on coming in from the market-place, he would salute her with a loving kiss.

But in the comedies she is styled now the New Omphale, new Deianeira, and now Hera. Cratinus flatly called her a prostitute in these lines:—

"As his Hera, Aspasia was born, the child of Unnatural Lust,

A prostitute past shaming."

And it appears also that he begat from her that bastard son about whom Eupolis, in his "Demes," represented him as inquiring with these words:—

"And my bastard, doth he live?"

to which Myronides replies:—

"Yea, and long had been a man,

Had he not feared the mischief of his harlot-birth."

So renowned and celebrated did Aspasia become, they say, that even Cyrus, the one who went to war with the Great King for the sovereignty of the Persians, gave the name of Aspasia to that one of his concubines whom he loved best, who before was called Milto. She was a Phocæan by birth, daughter of one Hermotimus, and, after Cyrus had fallen in battle, was carried captive to the King, and acquired the greatest influence with him. These things coming to my recollection as I write, it were perhaps unnatural to reject and pass them by.

Lucian, *Imagines XVII* (2nd CENTURY CE)

Next we must delineate her wisdom and understanding. We shall require many models there, most of them ancient, and one, like herself, Ionic, painted and wrought by Aeschines, the friend of Socrates, and by Socrates himself, of all craftsmen the truest copyists because they painted with love. It is that maid of Miletus, Aspasia, the consort of the Olympian [Pericles], herself a marvel beyond compare. Putting before us, in her, no mean pattern of understanding, let us take all that she had of experience in affairs, shrewdness in statescraft, quick-wittedness, and penetration, and transfer the whole of it to our own picture by accurate measurement.