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Aspasia & Opportunities for Women in Classical Rhetoric

In ancient Athenian society, women did not participate in the public intellectual sphere. Aristocratic women were married off very young, and were not educated. Only Athenian born men were granted citizenship, and so women were viewed as vessels in which to pass on citizenship from their fathers to their sons. In Athenian society, a “good woman” was patriarchally defined as one who was docile and obedient, so these women were socially restrained from participating in public oratory. When describing the system of the polis (Greek city), Glenn notes “the extraordinary preeminence of speech over all other instruments of power.” This showcases not only the Grecian value of rhetoric, but their exclusion of women from the polis highlight the apparent exclusion of women from rhetoric — Grecian society’s most esteemed form of power — at least in the public sphere.

However, Aspasia, a foreigner who settled in Athens, was able to break through these gender barriers and become a prominent — and the only female — rhetorician of that day and age. Aspasia was born in Miletus, a “Greek” city located along the coast of modern-day Turkey. It was precisely the fact that Aspasia was a foreigner, that gave her the social power to surpass

the gender restrictions. Because she was foreign, she was in a way “exempt” from these rules and was able to transcend them.

All we know about Aspasia is through second-hand accounts, as she has no written works of her own. The fact that there are no primary accounts of women in Ancient Greece demonstrates the lack of female voice and reflects the highly patriarchal aspect of Greek politics, philosophy and oratory. The exclusion of women from these “intellectual” subjects highlights the societal notion of women as intellectually inferior, and thus their voices were silenced. Aspasia was able to break through this barrier, yet her voice was still “muted” and only heard through the lens of men.

Additionally, in ancient Athens there was a class of women called the “hetaerae,” who were basically educated prostitutes. Men became bored with their uneducated wives, and so the hetaerae were educated so that they could hold intellectual conversations with men, thus entertaining them intellectually as well as sexually. The existence of hetaerae highlights two things: 1) the role women had in rhetoric in ancient Greece and 2) the Grecian culture’s — or perhaps innate human — fascination with rhetoric. One (especially a sophist) could argue that by engaging in intellectual discourse with these men, the hetaerae were able to engage in and practice rhetoric. However, this form of rhetoric is highly problematic as its exigence was simply for the pleasure of men. Although these women were only educated for the sake of male entertainment, they still had their own schools and the opportunity to become educated. This creates a murky gray zone as to what degree this inherent problematic exigency hampers whatever agency and rhetoric these women exhibited.

Aspasia was a hetaera for Pericles, a powerful statesman known for his oratory skills. Pericles later married Aspasia and was very publicly affectionate with her. This came as a shock to Athenian society. Glenn states that the public would not have been surprised if Pericles engaged in sexual acts with young men, but his marriage to his hetaera and his loving treatment towards her was unheard of. This not only demonstrates the subjectivity of morality, but also highlights the misogynistic aspects of Athenian society.

Aspasia proved not only to be his lover and confidant, but his teacher as well. In his *Epistole 73*, Philostratus claims “Aspasia of Miletus is said to have sharpened the tongue of Pericles in imitation of Gorgias” (Philostratus). Additionally, after studying Pericles’ documents, Quintilian believed that Pericles’ written works and his speeches were composed by separate people, which leads modern-day scholars to believe that Aspasia heavily influenced Pericles’ rhetoric. This is revolutionary as Pericles is known as one of the greatest figures in Ancient Greece due to his great rhetoric and oratory skills.

Aspasia was part of the highest intellectual circle in Athens, influencing not only Pericles, but Socrates and other important philosophers and rhetoricians of the time. Years later, she heavily influenced Plato as well (Sex, Lies). In Plato’s *Menexenus*, the character of Socrates claims Aspasia was not only his “teacher,” but that he “heard her only the previous day composing a funeral oration” (Plato). In real life, Pericles gave a very famous funeral oration that became known as one of his greatest speeches. In *Menexenus*, Socrates (and by extension, Plato) claims that Aspasia created this great funeral oration herself, which implies her as the powerhouse behind Pericles’ intellectual throne. Additionally, Aspasia was a highly respected intellectual influence on Socrates in real life. *Menexenus* claims that she was Socrates’ teacher. While she would

not have been a formal teacher as Socrates was to Aristotle, she was definitely a heavy influence. It is said that Socrates would listen to Aspasia speak about rhetoric, and he would bring his friends and their wives (Sex, Lies). This is incredibly interesting as Athenian wives were seemingly not supposed to be educated or engaged in these types of intellectual activities. Perhaps since it was in a more private and less public eye, Athenian wives did in fact engage in such intellectual scandals. This raises the question of the existence of a sort of hidden sphere of women, perhaps including both Athenian wives and hetaerae, that were involved in rhetorical discourse that we simply do not know about.

Aspasia was known for her great rhetorical abilities and charm. In *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, Plutarch states that Aspasia could charm the greatest statesmen, and that she garnered respect from her fellow male rhetoricians and philosophers. He adds, “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” (Plutarch). This focus on “beauty” begs the question — is there a relationship between beauty and rhetoric? Does her physical beauty enhance the content of her speeches and the believability in the claims she makes? Does her intellect make her more physically appealing? Does this in turn produce a positive feedback loop, in which the two keep building off of and enhancing one another? These questions revolving around beauty and rhetoric can help us examine the rhetoric of courtesans/hetaerae and the role it plays. As a courtesan and hetaerae, both Thargelia and Aspasia were inherently placed in positions of attaining and maintaining both physical and intellectual beauty in order to physically and intellectually stimulate their men — the idea of beauty is intrinsically entangled in whatever rhetoric they effectuate.

The rhetoric of women in classical Greece that we know of is contained within the sphere of men. The hetaerae seem to have expressed some form of rhetoric (depending on how you define rhetoric) in their ability to engage in intellectual conversation with men. However, the only reason they were placed in this position and educated on topics such as philosophy was for the sole purpose of entertaining men. Aspasia was a very prominent female rhetorician and probably a key player in the formation of Pericles' ideas of democracy and Socrates' ideas of rhetoric that are so foundational to our modern day philosophy. Yet her fame and credit were undermined by the men around her. Additionally, all our knowledge about her comes through secondary accounts told by *male* scholars, and so everything we know about her is still through the lens of men.

Works Cited

Glenn, Cheryl. *Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric*.

Philostratus. *Epistle 73*.

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