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Wise and Devoted or Shrewd and Shameless? The True Face of Aspasia of Miletus

Abstract: Aspasia – Greek courtesan, the mistress of the Athenian politician Pericles. As a non-Athenian from Miletus, she could not be recognized as his wife, but Pericles lived with Aspasia, having parted from his wife, until his death 429 BC. No author has ever written about Aspasia herself. If she is mentioned, it's because she was the wife of Pericles. She is in fact a historical unperson. Still, she is mentioned several times. Several sources portray Aspasia as a woman of great intellectual powers who “taught Pericles how to speak”; she is thought to have had a great influence over Pericles. As a hetaera, she differed from most Athenian women in being educated and having independence, so she was allowed to participate in the public life of the city.

Key words: Athens, Pericles, Aspasia of Miletus

Are we able, nowadays, to write anything new about Aspasia of Miletus? Because of small and not always reliable information about her life, we know very little and we may think that everything was already written about her. However I believe she is worthy of remembrance, she who was the most important and the most controversial woman of the second half of 5th century before Christ, woman of personality quite unusual as for the époque she was to live.

The little number of remained information about Aspasia is explained by the simple fact that no one wrote about women; women did not participate in public life, but led a quiet life in seclusion closed in *gynaeceum*, so they did not constitute to an essential element of this society, which was in fact a society of men. What was worth noting were the lives and ideas of great figures of science and philosophy as well as their literary heritage, but that involved world that mainly consisted of men. There were no women that actively participated on social surface, there was no

famous women philosophers which names would be written on the pages of history, there was no women that would engage in mathematics or historiography. What could become of a women in Greece in the époque of Pericles? If she was employed anywhere (it should be mentioned that in general women did not work – only if their material position was forcing them to) she could be a saleswoman or an midwife, but was it an occupation as profitable as a politician speaking in agora?

Aspasia of Miletus was a quite unusual figure as for that time and her cohabitation with the most important and the most dignified statesman was the source of numerous speculations and gossips, which – as we may easily presume – trembled the whole 5th-century Athens. So we do not know if everything what we can read about her is an honest and reliable information. The greatest source of information about Aspasia is Plutarch's *The life of Pericles*¹ where the whole chapter is devoted to her. The author writes who she was, where did she come from and how did she appear in Athens, he writes also about her influence on Athenian statesmen.

Plato also writes about her in one of his dialogues *The Menexenus*² – about a woman of exceptional rhetoric talent. Her name appears also in Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae*, where he mentions her rhetoric talent and calls her "Socrates' wise teacher of rhetoric"³. Diogenes Laertios gives an information that two dialogues of Socrates' followers: Aeschines and Antisthenes⁴ were devoted to her. None of them did last to our times, but we do know the matter of one of them thanks to Cicero who quotes Aeschines in *De inventione*⁵. Also Xenophon makes a little remark about her in *Memorabilia*⁶. We also have numerous references to Aspasia's figure in the comedies: Plutarch says that comedies call Aspasia new Omphale and Deianeira⁷ as well as Hera, "dog-eyed whore" (Cratinus)⁸ and bastard's mother (Eupolis)⁹. Aristophanes in his *The Acharnians*¹⁰ mentions about "Aspasia's whores". There is also one remained effigy of this beautiful Milesian: in The Vatican Museums there is a bust with the name of Aspasia on the foundation. It was discovered in 1777 and it is a Roman copy of 5th century before Christ original. The sculpture portrays a face of a young women of harmonic countenance and subtly arranged hair wearing a veil what indicates a matron. It may be a copy representing Aspasia's sepulchral stele.

However it is still too less to fully capture her personality. As Robert W. Wallace writes in his commentary to Madeline M. Henry's book entitled *Prisoner of*

¹ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV.

² Plato: *Menexenus*, XXII.

³ Athenaeus: *Deipnosophistae*, V, 219.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius: *Vitae philosophorum*, II, 61; VI, 16.

⁵ Cicero: *De inventione*, I, 31. 51–52.

⁶ Xenophon: *Memorabilia*, II, 6. 36.

⁷ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV, 28–30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁹ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV, 10–11.

¹⁰ Aristophanes: *Acharnenses*, 525–527.

History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition: “Aspasia herself possesses and can possess almost no historical reality. We can form no impression of her as a person”¹¹. However in the lights of these texts, we can ascertain that Aspasia was an unusual woman as for her times. For women, that lived in Athens in the époque of Pericles actually lived in a world totally monopolized by man and they were not treated as an equal partners in social life. They had no access to political rights; they could not represents themselves towards law. The specification of that period was a fact that the whole life was focused around the agora, so the woman were, so to say, pushed from this society.

There was a division of social duties in the mentality of the ancients, for the sake of “natural predisposition” of sexes; Ischomachos’s words describe this in the fragment of Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*: “[...] Because, as well as inside house and outside, work and effort is needed, the nature itself was prepared by god to this purpose. He made that frost and sweltering heat, journeys and wars are better withstand by man’s flesh and spirit and that is why he was given work outside house; than again woman was given body of smaller toughness and she was given work inside the house. Knowing that women was to nourish and nurture infants, she was given more love to her newly born children [...] Custom considers beautiful everything what is, from god’s will complaisant with the nature of it. It is more beautiful when women stays in house than when she runs through the city, man is supposed to take care of issues outside the house rather than sit in house”¹². It is why custom dictated that well-educated Athenian led a quiet life by her husband’s side behind the wall of *gynaecium*. Greeks did not tolerate women aspiring to equal position of men. This situation is depicted by words of Pericles himself: “it will be a great praise for you, if you act accordingly with woman nature and lead a life so that men would not speak about you, nor positively nor negatively”¹³. Therefore women did not need an education or the ability to “be often”; it was a trump of courtesan, who could – only them – take part in symposium, where the Greek intellectual and political elite met to spend time on philosophical and literary discussions, what drew courtesans and allowed them to “shine”. They could not only entertain and charm the guests but also could lead a discussion on high level. Participation in the feast was considered as an act of prostitution, what explains why “common” women did not take part in it. Greeks used to say that they had courtesans for pleasure, concubines for body’s needs and wives to procreate a legal offspring with them¹⁴.

Aspasia, who traveled from Miletus to Athens, did not inscribe into this canon. She possessed trumps which she cleverly could used for her own sake. For she was

¹¹ R.W. Wallace: The review of: M.M. Henry: *Prisoner of History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition*. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. [In: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1996/96.04.07.html>].

¹² Xenophon: *Oeconomicus*, VII, 1–43.

¹³ Thucydides: *De bello Peloponnesiaco*, II, 45–46.

¹⁴ Demosthenes: *In Neaeram*, 122.

a women of beauty, intelligence and initiative; she had ambitions to actively participate in public life of Athenians and in order to achieve it she revolved in the circle of the most influential politician in Athens. Plutarch writes that she, in her behaviour, took pattern from Targelia from Ionia, who once tried as well to impress the most remarkable people from Hellenic world, to gain them for Persian king¹⁵. Aspasia of Miletus was undoubtedly a women more educated than an average Athenian woman, whose education did not emerge beyond preparing to home works and elementary learning of singing and dancing what was useful during partaking in religious celebrations. It seems that the custom on Greek island was not as rigorous as in Athens: island Teos had a school for boys as well as for girls, at Chios girls could, as well as in Sparta, to participate in exercises or even in games. After Persian wars Athens featured a dominating role in Hellas, it was where the arena of political life moved its place. Removal of woman outside the political life dominated by men was considered as a mode and progress; that is why women appearance in public place was associated with reality common to Homer's epos and was considered as an anachronism and backwardness.

Aspasia's education, so it seems, was not limited only to ability of singing and dancing; many authors certify that she mastered the rhetoric art. Plutarch reminds of this fact and writes referring to Plato's *Menexenus*: "[...] in Plato's *Menexenus*, in spite of introduction written in playful manner, there is historical truth that this little woman had a fame of a great orator and many Athenians were friends with her"¹⁶. Indeed it must have been an unusual phenomenon in Athens, since Plato through the lips of *Menexenus* says: "For Zeus, Socrates, you can call Aspasia happy if she can compose such oration"¹⁷. Athenaeus calls her wise and also reminds that she was Socrates' teacher in the scope of rhetoric. Aspasia's education and skillful mastery of words enabled her to closer to influential political circles. It was also possible because of the fact that Aspasia arrived in Athens most likely as a courtesan and was affirming a house of young courtesans, what is certified by Plutarch in his *The life of Pericles*¹⁸. Still, all of the social elite of Athens met at her place: even Socrates himself with his students. She must have been an extraordinary women if she was acknowledged by the "wisest of wise men".

Pericles met Aspasia probably during of those meetings. He held Aspasia in high favour because of her "rare political wisdom". Plutarch, too, questions "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"¹⁹. Soon relation between her and Pericles started to trans-

¹⁵ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15–17.

¹⁷ Plato: *Menexenus*, XXII, 271.

¹⁸ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV, 10–11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19–24.

form into passionate affection. This concluded in distancing Pericles's previous wife, with who he already had two sons. Relation between Pericles and his wife wronged soon after meeting Aspasia. However Pericles could not marry Aspasia because Miletus had not, at that time, the right of epigamia. Despite this fact Aspasia entered Pericles's home and soon after that gave birth to their son, which she named after his father – Pericles.

Pericles and Aspasia made an extraordinary couple in 5th-century Athens. According to testimonies of numerous authors Pericles kissed Aspasia every day, both when he left the house and when he returned. It was not a common thing as well as not accepted by Greek custom to show affection towards women in such straightforward way. As M. Delcourt writes in his essay about this Athenian politician: "No one remembered that he loved young boys and treated badly his first wife against Pericles, but everyone considered scandalous that he acknowledged his second wife as a human and lived with her instead of sending her away to *gynaecium*, and that he invited friends with their wives. All of it was so shocking that it could not be perceived as a natural thing, and Aspasia characterized with too big intelligence to be perceived as an honest women"²⁰. Symposias took place in this famous couple's house, in which all of the Athenian social elite participated. Names that can be mentioned and which appear in literature connected with Aspasia are: Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Sophocles, Euripides, Phidias, Hippocrates, Herodotus, Iktinos, Meton. Also all the guests' wives were invited to this feasts. It seemed even more shocking for Athenians, because Aspasia – considered to be a courtesan should be in dinette and in bedroom – the right place, according to public opinion, for a courtesan. Instead she was there where important disputes determining country's faith were run. That is why Aspasia and Pericles became an aim of malicious gossips. Political bias against Pericles caused that he was influenced by Aspasia and accused him of being weakened by her persuasions. It was rumored that she was the impeller of the expedition against Samians. This expedition was supposed to force them to stop war against Miletus. Pericles was also charged with accusations that due to Aspasia he was too lavish in embellishing Athens. As it was said before Aspasia who was a gifted orator was credited with authorship of Pericles's speeches.

All of the political events were undoubtedly reflected on the stage, that is why the famous couple became an aim of indiscriminating jokes of the comedists. Famous, at the time, Cratinus²¹ called Aspasia the new Omphale and Deianeira, and even Hera. All of these terms were very distinct allusion: all of them showed Pericles's complete submissiveness towards Aspasia. Associations were emerging to Athenian spectators: Pericles became a prey fulfilling his lady's whims, just like Hercules serving to unquenchable Omphale. Hidden sexual implied meaning was even more enjoyable for Athenians. Hera – the almighty and envious goddess was

²⁰ M. Delcourt: *Pericles*. Paris 1939, p. 77.

²¹ A. Krawczuk: *Perykles i Aspazja*. Wrocław 1967, p. 189.

perfidiously defied with agnomen “κυνῶπις” that is dog-eyed; it showed a malicious, deceitful and impertinent woman. Aristophanes in his *The Acharnians*²² writes that the cause of Peloponnesian war was kidnapping of “Aspasia’s whores” by Megarians in retaliation for kidnapping their courtesan Simajta.

Undoubtedly there was lot exaggerations in what comedies authors wrote, nevertheless there must have been the grain of truth. And it is not the whole Aspasia’s profile which was purposely deformed by comedists, but the particular feature of her character, which did not escape authors’ attention; I have in mind her charisma, her ability of persuading or even forcing others to her will, what was justly noticed by Plutarch. It is rumoured that after Pericles’s death, who died because of plague raving then in Athens, Aspasia united with Lysicles – a man of low origins, who thanks to relations with Aspasia distinguish himself for an excelling position²³. Her name become so famous and well known all over the world that Cyrus named his favorite concubine – Milto after Aspasia, who came from Fokai. It must have been a significant name and only extraordinary women were named after her, because Milto after Cyrus’s death was obtained by the king (that is Artaxerxes) and as Plutarch writes – she influenced him greatly. Claudius Aelian in *Historical Miscellany* quotes this story²⁴.

Pericles must have regretted his own words that he uttered and decrees that he passed himself, and if he was to live few centuries later he would have to, just like the medieval custom told the monks to, to stand on the crossroads and “retract” his own words that came from his mouths, and which concerned women. It is fate’s irony that a man who considered meekness, silence and anonymity as women’s most desired features loved woman who was intelligent and educated and could in fact – use him to her own purpose. We can even risk claiming that under Aspasia’s influence, who on the social and political surface did not retreated before men, appeared first shy philosophical ideas treating about equality of both sexes and demanded noticing woman not only as a female, but as a human being capable of independent thinking and feeling. Even Socrates himself willingly spent time with Aspasia and praised her intelligence, education and talent. You can trust this authority cause Socrates was an objective and adamant man. Although he stood against all the Greek tradition he initiated new idea about fundamental equality of both sexes. One of the Socrates’ followers, Antisthenes, was an author of adage that virtue is of the same value both for man and woman²⁵. The law of moral equality if both sexes was assumed in dialog entitled *Aspasia* written by Aeschines Socraticus (called to in order to distinguish him from Aeschines – orator with the same name).

²² Aristophanes: *Acharnenses*, 525–530.

²³ Plutarchus: *Pericles*, XXIV, 10–13.

²⁴ K. Elian: *Opowiastki rozmaite*. Przeł. M. Borowska. Warszawa 2005, pp. 201–206 [XII, 1].

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius: *Vitae philosophorum*, VI, 12.

This dialog is an conversation between him, Aspasia, Xenophon and his wife and it talks about pursuing the perfection in marriage is a moral duty of both husband and wife²⁶. Continuator of this idea was partly Plato, however in Plato's works we deal with not with equality but with mixture of the two sexes. For Plato is a believer of educating women and allowing them to actively participate in social life, however only for objectives like country's defense and in active service. In his vision of the perfect country woman would be, just like man a functional "cog-wheel".

So what was the actual role played by Aspasia in the history of Athens? Because as Plutarch said – she did play a role. In the light of these few sources that we have, we cannot answer this question, but we can say with certainty that Aspasia was not an ordinary woman, neither in moral nor political sphere. She outstripped the époque that she lived in, because only after Peloponnesian war the situation of women changed under every aspect. The conditions of peace treaty dictated to Athens fore-judged their failure of their splendor and superiority over Hellas. The weakness of Greek countries was used by Macedonia after victory in Chaeronea in 338 before Christ, when they deprived the Greek πολεῖς from their independence. They could not lead their separate politics, in consequence citizen previously devoted to issues concerning almost entirely state issues was withdrawn from participating in political life. The mingling of cultures resulted in emerging of new forms in the sphere of political and social life. Citizen withdrawn from politics turned his mind to personal issues; thanks to new conditions woman gained considerable liberty. She was allowed to study and male company, she was given the right to control her own fortune. Nobody was shocked anymore when woman entered the streets and spent her time in male company.

Criticized by some, by some admired this woman must have been influential. She broke loose from all known rules and canons. She opened the minds of this specific microcosm of Athenian people because she has shown that a woman can be a human being in full understanding of this word.

²⁶ Ajschines: *Aspazja*. In: T. Sinko: *Historia literatury greckiej*. T. 1. Warszawa 1949, pp. 491–495.