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Only Through Men

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"Women and slaves—inferior beings in every way—were condemned to *silence* as their appointed sphere and condition. And most women spoke no memorable alternative—that is, except for Aspasia. But even Aspasia's voice is muted, for she speaks only through men." (193 emphasis mine)

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

INTRODUCTION

Aspasia, one of the first female rhetoricians in Athens during the fifth-century B.C.E., has been marginalized throughout history to the point of almost disappearance. As Cheryl Glenn, one of the leading rhetoricians involved in the formation of Aspasia's recognition, points out, "For the past 2500 years in Western culture, the ideal woman has been disciplined by cultural codes that require a closed mouth (*silence*), a closed body (chastity), and an enclosed life (domestic confinement). Little wonder, then, that women have been closed out of the rhetorical tradition, a tradition of vocal, virile, public—and therefore privileged—men" ("Sex, Lies" 180 emphasis mine). This forced silencing of females living during her time period has written Aspasia out of textbooks, out of history, out of the teachings of future rhetoricians.

It is true that little is known of this intellectual woman. There exist no primary sources—it is unknown how she became educated, how she was able to enter an intellectual circle among men like Socrates and Pericles, and how we should perceive her based on the little that we do know. Admittedly, Aspasia is only known through texts written by men. At times, these voices have cast Aspasia as an intellectual prowess, a highly respected woman of great political and rhetorical skill. However, it is also true that at times throughout history she has been regarded as simply a satiric metaphor, a figure that is only meant to be laughed at, not to be taken seriously. I intend to demonstrate the reasons why Aspasia should be taken seriously.

Through this study, my aim is to examine the marginalized voice of Aspasia and how she was able to escape the realm of silence in which she was trapped. We will begin by studying the rhetoric of silence, specifically issues concerning gendered silence. The main focus will be describing how silence works and how Aspasia was able to overcome this marginalization. Also, by examining the primary texts of her male peers, I seek to propose the different contributions that Aspasia may have added to the rhetorical tradition, even in the face of the gendered oppression present in ancient Athens. It must be said, however, that all evidence of Aspasia and her influence is based on the accounts of others and some still argue as to whether or not this evidence can be seen as

fact or fiction. There has been much debate over Aspasia's level of participation in the rhetorical tradition; a consensus has yet to be reached. I aspire to present evidence surrounding the existence of Aspasia as well as her involvement and contribution to the art of rhetoric in hopes that her voice will be further recognized in discussions concerning Greek philosophers and rhetoricians.

WHAT IS SILENCE?

Silence is a tool that has been used in various ways throughout history. Defining such a term has proven to be quite a troubling task for many; however, according to Glenn "the meaning of silence depends on a power differential that exists in every rhetorical situation: who can speak, who must remain silent, who listens, and what those listeners do" (*Unspoken* 9). In truth, silence can be defined in multiple different ways. For example, Robin Clair, a communications professor at Purdue University, claims that ideological silence within a society refers to the political and cultural practices that enable institutions to "legitimize their existence by silencing women, children, and minorities" (qtd. in Agee 53). Such marginalization was largely present in Athens during the fifth century B.C.E. and for Aspasia, this is just one of the types of silencing techniques that aimed to mute her voice, degrade her intelligence, and minimize her contribution.

Marginalization is one of the largest purposes of repressive silence. This type of silence is the silence of the oppressed—it is not chosen, but rather, forced upon its victims (Glenn *Rhetoric Retold* 1-3). Aspasia fell victim, in some ways, to this type of silence; but she was able to liberate herself from it as well. As A. Cheree Carlson, professor of Communication at Arizona State, points out, "Women… were so oppressed that they rarely gained enough education to contribute to scholarly conversation. If they did, they probably quickly were *silenced*." (26). Oppressive silence is arguably most effective when paired with a power dimension. For example, in Athens men were the most powerful and women typically were not even recognized as full citizens ("Sex, Lies" 185). Because of this, Athenian men were able to keep women oppressed. Women were typically not given a voice and therefore, had no outlet to express this social and cultural injustice. Glenn asserts that "rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said); therefore, canonical rhetorical history has represented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision of allowance for females" (*Rhetoric Retold* 1-2). Jean Bethke Alshtain, professor of Social and Political Ethics at University of Chicago, goes a bit further, claiming that "those silenced by power—whether overt or covert—are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it" (qtd. Glenn *Unspoken* 10). But this has not always been the case

throughout ancient history. There were some females that were able to break free from this repressive role, one of whom was Aspasia of Miletus. Aspasia *did* have something to say; and through the social connections she made with influential men throughout her life, she was able to create a space for her voice. In the face of an oppressive governing body and an all-powerful, dominant male presence, it is quite remarkable that a woman such as Aspasia was able to leave her mark on the rhetorical tradition.

Ultimately, Aspasia was marginalized by an oppressive, gender-based society that had the potential to completely remove her from the rhetorical conversation. Luckily, her voice was not entirely stifled by the society in which she lived. As Glenn points out, "silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible. It can mean powerlessness or emptiness—but not always… it can be equated with a kind of emptiness, but that is not the same as absence. And silencing, for that matter, is not the same as erasing" (*Unspoken* 4). And indeed, it is not.

WHO IS ASPASIA?

In 440 B.C.E., Aspasia migrated to Athens from Miletus—significant because Miletus was home to some of the influential philosophers of Western civilization (Bizzell and Herzberg 56). While it is not known for sure whether or not Aspasia came in contact with the earlier teachings, philosophies, or theories of any of these influential philosophers such as Anaximenes, Thales, and Anaximander, it makes sense to assume that these men—who were previously so present in the intellectual space of Aspasia's place of origin—influenced her ways of thinking in some way (Jarratt and Ong 10). Some critics agree that Aspasia received a much more advanced education than most women of her time. Patricia Bizzell, professor at the College of the Holy Cross, and Bruce Herzberg, professor at Bentley College, report that "girls attended in their teenage years, before marriage, and studied poetry, music, dance, and athletics. Advanced students studied rhetoric, philosophy, and political theory" (27) Unfortunately, this ability was only reserved to girls of the upper class and since there exists very little factual evidence of Aspasia's early years, we are still uncertain as to how Aspasia was able to become so intellectually skilled. Whether she was traditionally educated in a school, within her family, or "as a pupil of a philosopher in her native town" has yet to be determined, but based on the accounts of the men she influenced, her intelligence seems undeniable and unsurpassed by any other woman of ancient Athens (Bizzell and Herzberg 59).

All public aspects of Athens during fifth century B.C.E. were strictly controlled by men. Glenn argues that "Aspasia's appearance among the educated, accomplished, and powerful was unprecedented at a time when the construction of gender ensured that women would be praised only for such attributes as their

inherent modesty, their inborn reluctance to join males…for society or dining, and their absolute incapacity to participate as educated beings within the polis" (*Rhetoric Retold* 38). Athenian-born women were, therefore, not politically active and were legally seen as equivalent to children (Bizzell and Herzberg 56). Upper class married women were consistently confined to the home except for special extenuating circumstances such as a funeral or some other religious ceremony (Bizzell and Herzberg 56). Aspasia, on the other hand, was not Athenian-born. Because of this, she was not legally allowed to marry an Athenian man. Bizzell and Herzberg claim that "if a woman was not someone's wife—or someone's slave—virtually the only social roles open to her were varieties of prostitution. She might be a common prostitute or a better-educated and more expensive one, called a hetaera" (57). Aspasia was considered a *hetaera*, and while many critics disagree about what this title means in regards to her actual position in the scholarly circle, it must be recognized that this social status allowed for her to make intellectual connections with influential men that were not available to other women living in fifth century B.C.E. Athens.

The fact that Aspasia was not Athenian born, and therefore not recognized as a citizen, means she was able to disregard some of the "severe strictures of aristocratic Athenian women, whose activity, movement, education, marriage, and rights as citizens and property-holders were extremely circumscribed by male relative" ("Sex, Lies" 182). In addition to her title as a *hetaera*, Aspasia's status as a foreigner was an essential element that allowed Aspasia to escape the realm of silence that enslaved most of the women who lived in Athens during this time period. Furthermore, Aspasia was also unmarried, and thus, freed even further from any male constraints in her life. Ultimately, because she was an educated, spouseless, non-Athenian woman, "Aspasia could ignore—even rupture—the traditional enclosure of the female body" ("Sex, Lies" 182). And she does just that.

ASPASIA AND PERICLES

Another aspect of Aspasia's life that could have helped to shield her from the silencing mechanisms that were placed on women in Athens in fifth century B.C.E. was her relationship with Pericles. After divorcing his wife, Pericles and Aspasia began living together until Pericles' death in 429 B.C.E.—how to properly define the dynamics of this couple has been the center of critical debate for centuries (Bizzell and Herzberg 57). Was Aspasia his companion? His courtesan, his mistress, his concubine? We cannot know for sure.

Regardless of what Aspasia's title might have been in relation to Pericles, one thing is for certain—Pericles and Aspasia shared more than just a home—the pair obviously cared about each other. Plutarch attests to this bond through his

observations of the couple, describing that Pericles "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" (Bizzell and Herzberg 66). And this social attachment to Pericles would have helped Aspasia to break free from the gendered silence that the men of the Athenian *polis* attempted to enforce. Madeleine Henry, a Classical Studies professor at Iowa State University with a focus in women's history in ancient Greece, furthers this point by suggesting that "If, as the tradition suggests, she [Aspasia] was highly intelligent, the love of a powerful and wealthy man could have protected and nurtured her, allowing her to develop her mind in ways not open to other women who lacked either her wisdom or the materially and emotionally supportive environment provided by such a love" (13). Ironically enough, it turns out that one of the most prominent silencing devices during this time period—men—actually helped to give Aspasia her own voice.

ASPASIA AND SOCRATES

Another extremely influential man of ancient Athens who also helped to give Aspasia her voice was Socrates. Like Aspasia, none of Socrates' work exists in primary sources but what rhetoricians and historians have collected from other sources suggest that Socrates was one of Aspasia's greatest admirers (*Rhetoric Retold* 40). Socrates' high level of approbation in regards to Aspasia is recorded through his various references to her in works written by Plato, Cicero, Athenaeus, and Plutarch. As Glenn points out, "the fact that Aspasia is even mentioned by her male contemporaries is remarkable" ("Sex, Lies" 182). This is just another example of a man enabling Aspasia to break free from the gendered silence that was forcibly instituted in attempt to mute any public female contribution.

Aside from the primary texts that support Aspasia's inclusion in Greek philosophy—which we will return to shortly—Socrates also helped Aspasia enter the intellectual dimension by visiting her with some of his intellectual acquaintances (Bizzell and Herzberg 66). This social interaction allowed her to branch out of her female role by instructing many men other than just Pericles and Socrates, including Xenophon and even some of the wives of her frequent male associates ("Sex, Lies" 183). According to Glenn, "by every historical account, Aspasia ventured into the common land, distinguishing herself by her rhetorical accomplishments, her sexual attachment to Pericles, and her public participation in political affairs" ("Sex, Lies" 184). Because of such attention to distinguishing herself as a voice in her own right, we must begin to take notice of Aspasia—she deserves a voice in the rhetorical tradition.

WHAT WERE ASPASIA'S CONTRIBUTIONS?

There are many existing primary texts that allude to Aspasia's involvement in the rhetorical conversation during fifth century B.C.E. Although writing years after her time, Plutarch provides one such account of Aspasia's role, specifically through her relationships with Pericles and Socrates. He remarks that "Aspasia, some say, was courted and caressed by Pericles upon account of her knowledge and skill in politics" (Bizzell and Herzberg 66). He continues, claiming that "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" (Bizzell and Herzberg 66). Not only does Plutarch attest to her skill as a scholar and a politician but also as somewhat of a marital counselor—helping her male contemporaries with problems that occur in the home. By this fact alone, it is easy to see that men obviously held Aspasia in high-esteem, especially if these influential Athenian *men* were willing to take the advice of a *woman*.

In Cicero's *De Inventione*, he confirms Aspasia's ability at providing marital advice through her sophistic means of rhetorical induction (Bizzell and Herzberg 64). Cicero restates a dialogue by Aeschines which details Aspasia's use of the Socratic Method when discussing marriage with Xenophon and his wife. Some critics (Carlson; Glenn) wonder whether or not this conversational method can be fully accredited to Socrates. As Bizzell and Herzberg point out, Aspasia seems to take an egalitarian view of rhetoric and "it is easy to imagine that such an indirect method originated with a woman who was legally powerless, in a compromised and vulnerable position, but who attempted to advise and influence men of great power" (59). In addition, Athenaeus describes her as "the clever Aspasia, to be sure, who was Socrates' teacher in rhetoric" which may also support the possibility of Aspasia's involvement in the creation of the Socratic Method (Bizzell and Herzberg 65). However, it must be said that, as with all primary texts, we cannot always take these words as fact—especially since none of Aspasia's first-hand accounts exist. But if these primary texts are truthful, then it seems possible that Aspasia may have taught or at the very least helped to create the Socratic Method.

One of the most famous primary texts that references Aspasia and her skill as an instructor of the art of rhetoric is Plato's *Menexenus*. In this dialogue, Plato's Socrates describes to Menexenus that Aspasia composed Pericles' famous *Funeral Oration* and also instructed him on the proper ways of performing such a speech (Bizzell and Herzberg 61). This evidence is dicey at best. Over the centuries, historians and rhetoricians have questioned the validity and seriousness of Plato's text—many believe that Aspasia "becomes a 'metaphor' for Pericles, which allows Plato to refer to the hero of Athens in slightly negative ways without

directly attacking him" (Carlson 38). If this is true, Aspasia would simply be used as a satirical agent to ridicule Pericles by pointing out that a woman was his ghost writer. Ironically enough, though, this helps Aspasia to escape the silence that was placed on her sex. "That Plato would expend so much effort on Aspasia attests to her remarkable character. That he would do so in a dialogue on sophistic rhetoric attests to her expertise" (Carlson 35) and this is true. To even mention her at all, even if it is simply to attack her reputation as a Sophist, suggests that Plato "thought she was worthy of the same treatment he afforded Gorgias and Lysias" (Carlson 39). Carlson continues, claiming that "this alone should be reason enough to accept Aspasia's skills as genuine" (39).While there are many benefits and pitfalls of relying solely on ancient texts to promote the inclusion of Aspasia in Greek philosophy, it is undoubtedly significant that Aspasia is mentioned, by name, so often by many different influential men. Overall, rhetoricians and historians need to cast Aspasia in a proper light—she was not a man; she was disregarded by most, and undercut by many. Because of this, we must examine the larger picture. She is a *woman* who lived in ancient Athens and has appeared in works by Plutarch, Athenaeus, Cicero, Xenophon, Philostratus, Aristophanes, Antisthenes, and Plato (Carlson 27-40). While she has not always been portrayed in the best light in many of these works, the fact that she is portrayed at all is a testament to her influence and presence in the rhetorical tradition. So why is it that historians and rhetoricians want to keep Aspasia perpetually imprisoned in the margins? Surely this is not the case with Socrates, who is also only known through the accounts of others (*Rhetoric Retold* 40). Why should Aspasia continue to be silenced? Truthfully, she should not.

HOW IS ASPASIA PERCEIVED NOW?

Today, historians and rhetoricians are still unsure as to whether or not Aspasia should (or even can be) written back into the rhetorical tradition. Xin Lui Gale, a professor at Syracuse University, believes that "the absence of any written texts by Aspasia herself and the scarcity of historical documents that bear direct evidence of her existence or intellectual life make historical reconstruction a nearly impossible task" (362). However, we must take notice that many of the ancient texts—such as those attributed to Aristotle as well as Socrates—were culled by students of these authorities, so any claim toward genuine authorship must be suspect. There are not any surviving texts by Socrates; and yet, Plato (along with some of Socrates' pupils) was allowed to give Socrates a voice. It is illogical to expect such a thorough account of a woman living in a time period that was built largely on gender inequality—a concept of Athenian society which worked to silence women. The fact that Aspasia is mentioned at all is such a monumental fact that it forces those rhetoricians who are truly dedicated to

providing an adequate survey of the rhetorical tradition to take notice of Aspasia of Miletus. How can we ignore her? And if we do, we are only helping to keep Aspasia trapped within the margins. Hopefully, through this work, I have helped to liberate her from the shackles of silence. It is time to give Aspasia a voice.

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