Cheryl Glenn

sex, lies, and manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric

A fellow rhetorician recently gave me a nineteenth-century print entitled “Alcibiades and Aspasia.” In beautiful detail, French artist J. L. Gerome (best-known for transfusing his journeys to the East with an exotic and erotic charm) presents Aspasia reclining seductively on Alcibiades, her hand cupping his breast, her head suspiciously near his stomach and wide-spread legs, while Alcibiades looks away from her and reaches out to grasp Socrates’ hand. Thus Aspasia comes down to us as an odalisque, while Alcibiades, the object of her attention, comes to us wreathed in laurel.1

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).2 Little wonder, then, that women have been closed out of the rhetorical tradition, a tradition of vocal, virile, public—and therefore privileged—men. Women’s enclosed bodies provide lacunae in the patriarchal territory of rhetorical practices and displays, a gendered landscape, with no female rhetoricians clearly in sight. But just as recent feminist scholarship has begun to recover and recuperate women’s contributions in the broad history of culture-making—in philosophy, literature, language, writing, societal structure, Christianity, history, education, reading, psychology, and gender—so too have feminist historians of rhetoric begun to re-map rhetorical history.3 In her “Opportunities for Feminist Research in the History of Rhetoric,” Patricia Bizzell accounts for various disruptions that could realign and regender the rhetorical terrain and anticipates the consequences of refiguring the role of women on that terrain.4 And in “Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the History of Rhetoric,” Barbara

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Biesecker works to “forge a new storying of our tradition that circumvents the veiled cultural supremacy operative in mainstream histories of Rhetoric” (147). Such challenges not only restore women to rhetorical history and rhetorical history to women, but the restoration itself revitalizes theory by shaking the conceptual foundations of rhetorical study. More than theory is, of course, at stake here. For in challenging the dominant stories of the West, feminist scholars are challenging the contemporary academic and cultural scene as well.

Aspasia of Miletus

As part of the feminist challenge to the history of rhetoric, I want to reconstruct and refigure a woman whose texts, life, and manuscripts have been annexed by men: Aspasia of Miletus. In fifth-century BC, Miletus was a Far-Eastern Greek subject-ally, a cultivated city (in what is now Turkey) renowned for its literacy and philosophies of moral thought and nature. A non-Athenian, citizen-class Greek, Aspasia arrived in Athens brilliantly educated by means that have never been fully explained. Whether she was educated within a literate Milesian family or within a school for

*J. L. Gerome, Alcibiades and Aspasia*
hetaerae (upper-class courtesans), she was exceptionally fortunate, for "there is no evidence at all that in the classical period girls attended schools, and it is entirely consistent with what we know about the seclusion of women in Athens that Athenian girls did not do so (some other cities may have been less benighted in this respect)" (Harris 96). Married at an early age, Athenian women neither attended schools nor participated in the polis. Yet the system of the polis, which implied both civic consciousness and "the extraordinary preeminence of speech over all other instruments of power" (Vernant, Origins 49), tripped the mechanism that powered the active diffusion and acquisition of literacy among Greek males (proper citizens). And we must assume that at least a few Athenian or Athenian-colony women of the citizen class, even those defined by good families and cultural constraints, became literate—and became conscious of civic rights and responsibilities (Cole 222–23; Harris 103, 107). Aspasia of Miletus was one of those women.

As a free woman brought up in the transitional society of Asia Minor, Aspasia was freed from the rigidity of traditional marriage and from the identity that arose from that fixed role. And upon emigrating from Miletus, Aspasia emerged in Athens linked with the great statesman Pericles (fl. 442 BC), the aristocratic democrat who placed Athenian democratic power "in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people," with everyone equal before the law (Thucydides 2.37.1). Thus this non-Athenian, or "stranger-woman," was subject to Athenian law but did not have citizen rights. Nor was she accountable to the severe strictures of aristocratic Athenian women, whose activity, movement, education, marriage, and rights as citizens and property-holders were extremely circumscribed by male relatives. Aspasia could ignore—even rupture—the traditional enclosure of the female body. She could subvert Pericles' advice for ideal womanhood: "Your greatest glory is not to be inferior to what God has made you" (Thucydides 5.46.2). She could—and she did.

We know about Aspasia much the same way we know about Socrates: from secondary sources, for neither of their work exists in primary sources. Although the historical tradition has readily accepted secondary accounts of Socrates' influence, teaching, and beliefs, the same cannot be said about any female counterpart, especially a woman described so briefly and in so few accounts. But the fact that Aspasia is even mentioned by her male contemporaries is remarkable, for rare is the mention of any intellectual woman. Surviving fragments and references in the work of male authors provide tantalizing indications that the intellectual efforts of Aspasia were, at least occasionally, committed to writing—and to architecture. Aspasia is memorialized in a fresco over the portal of the University of Athens, in the
company of Phidias, Pericles (on whom she leans), Sophocles, Antisthenes, Anaxagoras, Alcibiades, and Socrates.

When other women were systematically relegated to the domestic sphere, Aspasia seems to have been the only woman in classical Greece to have distinguished herself in the public domain. Her reputation as both a rhetorician and philosopher was memorialized by Plato (437–328 BC), Xenophon (fl. 450 BC), Cicero (100–43 BC), Athenaeus (fl. AD 200), and Plutarch (AD 46–c.120)—as was, of course, her enduring romantic attachment to Pericles. For those authors, Aspasia clearly represented the intelligentsia of Periclean Athens. Therefore, I want to consider seriously this historical woman who merited such documentation, for the story of her intellectual contributions to rhetoric may suggest the existence of an unrecognized subculture within that community, and the artistic and literary uses of Aspasia of Miletus may configure an emblem of Woman in rhetorical history.

The best-known source of information about Aspasia is Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans (AD 100), an account written several hundred years after her existence. Nevertheless, all earlier mentions of Aspasia confirm this inquiry about the woman, what art or charming facility she had that enabled her to captivate, as she did, the greatest statesmen, and to give the philosophers occasions to speak so much about her, and that, too, not to her disparagement. That she was a Milesian by birth, the daughter of Axiochus, is a thing acknowledged. And 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; she had numerous suitors among the Greeks. . . . Aspasia, some say, was courted and caressed by Pericles upon account of her knowledge and skill in politics. Socrates himself would sometimes go to visit her, and some of his acquaintances with him; and those who frequented her company would carry their wives with them to listen to her. Her occupation was anything but creditable, her house being a home for young courtesans.

. . . [I]n Plato’s Menexenus, though we do not take the introduction as quite serious, still thus much seems to be historical, that she had the repute of being resorted to by many of the Athenians for instruction in the art of speaking. Pericles’s inclination for her seems, however, to have rather proceeded from the passion of love. He had a wife that was near of kin to him, who had been married first to Hipponicus, by whom she had Callias, surnamed the Rich; and also she brought Pericles, while she lived with him, two sons, Xanthippus and Paralus. Afterwards, when they did not well agree, nor like to live
together, he parted with her, with her own consent, to another man, and
himself took Aspasia, and 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. (200–01)

By every historical account, Aspasia ventured out into the common land,
distinguishing herself by her rhetorical accomplishments, her sexual at-
tachment to Pericles, and her public participation in political affairs. Her
alleged connection with the courtesan life is only important so far as it
explains her intellectual prowess and social attainments—and the surprise
of an Athenian citizenry unaccustomed to (or perhaps jealous or suspicious
of) a public woman.\(^\text{11}\) As Marie Delcourt wrote in her study of Pericles:

No one would have thought the less of Pericles for making love to young boys
. . . but they were shocked by his treating [Aspasia] like a human being—by
the fact that he lived with her instead of relegating her to the gynaikeion
[women's quarters], and included his friends' wives when he issued invita-
tions to dinner. It was all too amazing to be proper; and Aspasia was so
brilliant she could not possibly be respectable. (77)

Aspasia opened an academy for young women of good families (or a school
for hetaerae, according to some sources) that soon became a popular salon
for the most influential men of the day: Socrates, Plato, Anaxagoras,
Sophocles, Phidias, and Pericles.\(^\text{12}\) Aspasia's appearance was unprece-
dented at a time when the construction of gender ensured that women
would be praised only for such attributes as their inherent modesty, for
their inborn reluctance to join males (even kinsmen) for society or dining,
and for their absolute incapacity to participate as educated beings within
the polis; at a time when a woman’s only political contribution was serving
as a nameless channel for the transmission of citizenship from her father
to her son (Keuls 90); and at a time when Pericles pronounced that “the
greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they
are praising . . . or criticizing” (Thucydides 5.46.2).\(^\text{13}\) It is difficult to over-
emphasize how extraordinary the foreign-born Aspasia—a public woman,
philosopher, political influence, and rhetorician—would have been in
fifth-century BC Athenian society.

Fifth-Century BC Athens

In the burgeoning democracy of Periclean Athens, men were consciously
forming human character in accordance with the new cultural ideals of
military strength and justice (dikê) tempered by the traditional concepts of
areté (excellence of virtue, usually associated with the well-born and
wealthy citizen-class). Only aristocratic male citizens, equal in their homonoia (being of one mind), argued for civic and political areté, the essential principle of government by the elite—a democratic oligarchy. Yet the Platonic Socrates called for areté according to social role, be it male or female, free or slave (Republic 353b), and later Aristotle would write that both the rulers and the ruled, males and females alike, “must possess virtue” and that “all must partake of [moral virtues]… in such measure as is proper to each in relation to his own function” (Politics 1260a5; 1260a7). Thus was manifested the complex tension between the elitist areté and a more democratic homonoia.

In The Origins of Greek Thought, Jean-Pierre Vernant tells us that “Greek political life aimed to become the subject of public debate, in the broad daylight of the agora, between citizens who were defined as equals and for whom the state was the common undertaking” (11). Such public oratory fed the spirit of panhellenism, a doctrine sorely needed to unify the Greek city-states, just as it satiated the male appetite for public display. Vernant describes the polis as a system implying “the extraordinary preeminence of speech over all other instruments of power, [speech becoming] the political tool par excellence, the key to authority in the state, the means of commanding and dominating others” (49). In what would be an inestimable contribution to a democratic oratory possessed by aristocratic characteristics, former logographer (speech writer) Isocrates practiced rhetoric as a literary form, one imbued with civic, patriotic, and moral purpose. Confident in the power of words, he practiced and taught a morally influenced and rhetorically based system of general culture that profoundly individual responsibility as well as political and social action. No longer were men deferring to their sovereign or the gods, who could reinforce nomos (beliefs, customs, laws, as enforced by universal opinion) with physis (nature, reality). “With this denial of the absolute status of law and moral things, the stage [was] set for a controversy between the two… [and for drawing] different practical conclusions from it” (Guthrie III: 60). Individuals would be responsible for their own actions and collectively responsible for the actions of the democratic state, the polis.

The Athenian polis was founded upon the exclusion of women, just as, in other respects, it was founded upon the exclusion of foreigners and slaves (Vidal-Naquet 145). Although females born of Athenian-citizen parents were citizen-class and subjects within the polis, they were not actual citizens in any sense. Nor could foreign-born women or men hope for citizenship, regardless of their political influence, civic contributions, or intellectual ties with those in power. Therefore, noncitizens such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Anaxagoras, and Aspasia functioned within the polis, yet outside its restraints.
If we think of gender as a cultural role, a social rank, "a social category imposed on a sexed body" (Scott 32), or as "a primary way of signifying relations of power" (Laqueur 12), then we can more easily trace Aspasia's movement across gendered boundaries of appropriate roles for women and men in fifth-century BC Athens. She seems to have profited by her excursion into the male domain of politics and intellect, even at the expense of her respectability, reputation, and authority. Named among the rather short "list of Athenian citizen [class] women" known to us from literature (Schaps 323), the assertively intelligent Aspasia has been interpreted as self-indulgent, licentious, immoral. Historical records have successfully effaced the voice of the ideal Greek woman, rendering silent her enclosed body. And those same historical records have defaced any subversion of that ideal woman, rendering her unconfined body invalid.

Thus, even though her contributions to rhetoric are firmly situated and fully realized within the rhetorical tradition, those contributions have been directed through a powerful gendered lens to both refract toward and reflect Socrates and Pericles. Ironically, then, Aspasia's accomplishments and influence have been enumerated by men, and most often attributed to men—or installed in the apocryphal, the safest place for wise (and therefore fictitious) women. And as for Aspasia's popular salon, it's often accredited to Pericles instead of to his female companion.

Aspasia, Pericles, and the Funeral Oration

Pericles, perhaps the most socially responsible, powerful, and influential of Athenians, was indeed surrounded with the greatest thinkers of his age—with Sophists, philosophers, architects, scientists, and rhetoricians. In his Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens, Josiah Ober refers to Pericles' intellectual circle as the "'educated elite' of late fifth-century Athens" and "a brain trust," describes the Sophists as "experts in political manipulation who were flocking to Athens from other Greek poleis," and places the "educated courtesan Aspasia . . . among Pericles' closest associates," calling her "the power behind the throne" (89–90).15 For forty years, the Athenians applauded Pericles' eloquence, often invoking his wise and excellent companions, including rhetorical Aspasia and philosopher Anaxagoras. In the Phaedrus, the Platonic Socrates calls Pericles "the most perfect orator in existence" and attributes Pericles' eloquence to the successful combination of his natural talents with the high-mindedness he learned from Anaxagoras, who "filled him with high thoughts and taught him the nature of mind . . . and from these speculations [Pericles] drew and applied to the art of speaking what is of use to it" (269e4 ff.). Cicero later concurred that Pericles' teacher was indeed Anaxagoras, "a man distinguished
for his knowledge of the highest sciences; and consequently Pericles was eminent in learning, wisdom and eloquence, and for forty years was supreme at Athens both in politics and at the same time in the conduct of war” (De Oratore III.xxxiv.138–39).

Yet several centuries later, Philostratus (fl. AD 250) wrote in his Epistle 73 that “Aspasia of Miletus is said to have sharpened the tongue of Pericles in imitation of Gorgias,” with “the digressions and transitions of Gorgias’ speeches [becoming] the fashion” (qtd. in Sprague 41–42). Philostratus echoes Plato, the earliest writer to mention Aspasia. In the Menexenus, the Platonic Socrates reveals Aspasia to be the author of Pericles’ Funeral Oration (Epitaphios), an assertion I explore below. Aspasia becomes implicated even more in Pericles’ education if we consider the “familiar knowledge at Athens that Aspasia had sat at the feet of Anaxagoras in natural philosophy” (Courtney 491). And several hundred years later, when Quintilian (AD 100) examined Pericles’ written works, he concluded that some other pen had composed them: “I have been unable to discover anything in the least worthy of [Pericles’] great reputation for eloquence, and am consequently the less surprised that there should be some who hold that he never committed anything to writing, and that the writings circulating under his name are the works of others” (Institutio Oratoria 3.1.12). The rhetorician most closely associated with Pericles would no doubt have served as his logographer, as logography (the written composition of speech) was commonly the province of rhetoricians. Hence, Aspasia surely must have influenced Pericles in the composition of those speeches that both established him as a persuasive speaker and informed him as the most respected citizen-orator of the age.

Although Plutarch credits Aspasia with contributing greatly to intellectual life, specifically to philosophy, politics, and rhetoric, many scholars have since discredited her. In the aforementioned “Life of Pericles,” Plutarch draws on a now-incomplete work of Aeschines (450 BC) to describe Aspasia, but neither his nor Aspasia’s case has been strengthened by the fragments of Aeschines that survived. Those fragments present a controversial statement on gender equality: “the goodness of a woman is the same as that of a man,” an assertion Aeschines illustrates with the political abilities of Aspasia (qtd. in Taylor 278). Both Xenophon and Cicero (and later, medieval abbess Heloise, perhaps best-known for her attachment to Abelard), however, tap that same complete text, giving credence to the text—as well as to the existence of a historical Aspasia.

According to several ancient authors, all of whom knitted together secondary sources to shape a reliable Socrates, Socrates deeply respected Aspasia’s thinking and admired her rhetorical prowess, disregarding, it seems, her status as a woman and a hetaera. In Xenophon’s Memorabilia, for
instance, Socrates explains to Critobulus the "art of catching friends" and of using an intermediary:

I can quote Aspasia . . . . She once told me that good matchmakers are successful only when the good reports they carry to and fro are true; false reports she would not recommend for the victims of deceptions hate one another and the matchmaker too. I am convinced that this is sound, so I think it is not open to me to say anything in your praise that I cannot say truthfully. (II.36)

In Xenophon's Oeconomicus, Socrates ascribes to Aspasia the marital advice he gives to Critobulus: "There's nothing like investigation. I will introduce Aspasia to you, and she will explain the whole matter [of good wives] to you with more knowledge than I possess" (III.15). Plutarch writes that "Socrates sometimes came to see her [Aspasia] with her disciples, and his intimate friends brought their wives to her to hear her discourse . . . as a teacher of rhetoric" (200); Athenaeus calls Aspasia "clever . . . Socrates' teacher in rhetoric" (V.29) and goes on to account for the extent of Aspasia's influence over Socrates:

[I]n the verses which are extant under her name and which are quoted by Herodicus . . . [she says]: "Socrates, I have not failed to notice that thy heart is smitten with desire for [Alcibiades] . . . . But hearken, if thou wouldst prosper in thy suit. Disregard not my message, and it will be much better for thee. For so soon as I heard, my body was suffused with the glow of joy, and tears not unwelcome fell from my eyelids. Restrain thyself, filling thy soul with the conquering Muse; and with her aid thou shalt win him; pour her into the ears of his desire. For she is the true beginning of love in both; through her thou shalt master him, by offering to his ears gifts for the unveiling of his soul."

So, then, the noble Socrates goes a-hunting, employing the woman of Miletus as his preceptor in love, instead of being hunted himself, as Plato has said. [Socrates] being caught [as he was] in Alcibiades' net. (V.219)

Furthermore, in the Menexenus, the Platonic Socrates agrees that were the Council Chamber to elect him to make the recitation over the dead (the Epitaphios) he "should be able to make the speech . . . . for she [Aspasia] who is my instructor is by no means weak in the art of rhetoric; on the contrary, she has turned out many fine orators, and amongst them one who surpassed all other Greeks, Pericles" (235–36). But it was Pericles—not Aspasia—who delivered that speech.

The Menexenus contains Plato's version of Socrates' version of Aspasia's version of Pericles' Funeral Oration, further recognition of Aspasia's reputation as rhetorician, philosopher, and as influential colleague in the So-
phistic movement, a movement devoted to the analysis and creation of rhetoric—and of truth. Moreover, the Funeral Oration itself held political, philosophical, and rhetorical significance: by its delivery alone, the Funeral Oration played out “rhetoric’s important role in shaping community” (Mackin 251). In The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City, Nicole Loraux clarifies the funeral oration as an “institution—an institution of speech in which the symbolic constantly encroached upon the functional, since in each oration the codified praise of the dead spilled over into generalized praise of Athens” (2). Besides conflating praise of the Athenians with praise of Athens, this institutionalized and specialized epideictic was useful for developing “consubstantiality [homonoia]” and creating a “similar rhetorical experience” for everyone present, be they citizens, foreigners, or women related to the dead.18 The shared experience of this rhetorical ritual linked everyone present even as it connected them “with other audiences in the past” (Mackin 251). As “one of the authorized mouthpieces of classical Athens,” the funeral oration translated into “Greek patriotism,” for it was “Athenian eloquence” “adapted to the needs of patriotism,” for it was “Athenian doquence” . . . a given historical situation” (Loraux 5). As such, the issues of translation and adaptation easily connect the Epitaphios with Sophistic philosophy.

In Rereading the Sophists, Susan Jaratt reminds us that “for the Sophists, human perception and discourse were the only measure of truths, all of which are contingent” (64); therefore, they focused on “the ability to create accounts of communal possibilities through persuasive speech” (98). And Loraux tells us that in every epitaphios, “a certain idea that the city wishes to have of itself emerges, beyond the needs of the present” (14). Thus the beliefs and practices of Sophists overlapped beautifully with one basic requirement of an epitaphios: “the personality of the orator has to yield to the impersonality of the genre . . . as an institution and as a literary form” (11). Aspasia’s Sophistic training, political capacity, and powerful influence on Pericles’ persuasive oratory easily translated into Socrates’ pronouncement to Menexenus that she composed the famous funeral oration delivered by Pericles:

I was listening only yesterday to Aspasia going through a funeral speech for [the Athenians] . . . [S]he rehearsed to me the speech in the form it should take, extemporizing in part, while other parts of it she had previously prepared, . . . at the time when she was composing the funeral oration which Pericles delivered. (236b)

That Aspasia may well have composed Pericles’ speech makes sense, since after all, being honored by the opportunity to deliver the Epitaphios, he would have prepared well, seeking and following the advice of his col-
leagues, including Aspasia, on points of style and substance. That she wrote it becomes more convincing when we consider Loraux’s assurance that “the political orator must have the ascendant over the logographer” (11) and that the Sophist would preserve the “essential features of the civic representations” (107). For reasons of Aspasia’s proximity to Pericles and her intellectual training, Quintilian was right, then, to doubt the originality of Pericles’ work.

Before demonstrating her expertise at composing moving, patriotic epideictic oratory, Aspasia reminds Socrates of the efficacy of rhetoric. In the Menexenus, the Platonic Aspasia explains that “it is by means of speech finely spoken that deeds nobly done gain for their doers from the hearers the meed of memory and renown” (236e)—an accurate description of contingent truth. Jarratt explains the sophistic rhetorical technique and its social-constructionist underpinning with her definition of nomos as a “self-conscious arrangement of discourse to create politically and socially significant knowledge...thus it is always a social construct with ethical dimensions” (60).

Hence, the author of the Epitaphios—whether viewed as Aspasia or Pericles—makes clear the power of oratory to influence the public’s belief that its history was other than it was. Loraux explains that “a Sophist and a rhetor [would have] used the official oration in order to write a fictitious logos; within the corpus, then, the ‘false’ follows hard upon the ‘true’” (9). Accordingly, the most aggressive exploits of Attic imperialism are represented as “[bringing] freedom [to] all the dwellers of this continent” (Menexenus 240e), as “fighting in defence of the liberties of the Boeotians” (242b), as “fighting for the freedom of Leontini” (243a), as “setting free . . . friends” (243c), and as “saving their walls from ruin” (244c). In offering this version of Pericles’ Funeral Oration, an exaggerated encomium abounding with historical misstatements and anachronisms, Plato makes explicit his own feelings about the use of rhetoric—just as Thucydides uses his own version of the Epitaphios to make explicit his belief in the necessary subjection of individual citizenship to the polis: “A man who takes no interest in politics is a man . . . who has no business here at all” (II.40).

Thinly disguised in the Menexenus is Plato’s cynicism. In his opinion, the development of oratory had negative consequences for Athens, the most glaring defect of current oratory being its indifference to truth. A rhetorician such as Aspasia was, indeed, interested more in believability than in truth, more interested in constructing than delivering truth, more interested in nomos than physis—interests leading to Thucydides’ claims that such—“prose chroniclers . . . are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public” (1.21). In the opening dialogue of
the *Menexenus*, the Platonic Socrates disparages the orators in much the same way he does in the *Symposium*, saying that “in speeches long beforehand . . . they praise in such splendid fashion, that . . . they bewitch our souls. . . . [E]very time I listen fascinated [by their praise of me] I am exalted and imagine myself to have become all at once taller and nobler and more handsome . . . owing to the persuasive eloquence of the speaker” (235b). Thus Plato recoils from the touch of rhetoric.

**Aspasia’s Influence**

Aspasia was an active member of the most famous intellectual circle in Athens, her influence reaching such well-known thinkers as Socrates and such exemplary orators as Pericles. Most importantly, her influence extended to Plato, coloring his concept of rhetoric as well. Like Aspasia, Plato taught that belief and truth are not necessarily the same, a sentiment he makes evident in his *Gorgias* when Gorgias admits that rhetoric produces “[mere] belief without knowledge” (454). Plato also agrees with Aspasia that rhetoric, which is the daughter of truth-disclosing philosophy, does not always carry on the family tradition; rhetoric can be used to obscure the truth, to control and deceive believers into belief. In the *Gorgias*, his Socrates says, “[R]hetoric seems not to be an artistic pursuit at all, but that of a shrewd, courageous spirit which is naturally clever at dealing with men; and I call the chief part of it flattery” (463). And in the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that “in the courts, they say, nobody cares for truth about these matters [things which are just or good], but for that which is convincing; and that is probability” (272e).

Like Aspasia, Plato approved of a rhetoric of persuasion; he too sees the political potential of public rhetoric. But his rhetoric is foremost a search for the truth; only truth—not fictive effect over accuracy—should constitute persuasive rhetoric. His perfect orator of the *Phaedrus* “must know the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks and writes . . . [and] must understand the nature of the soul” (277c), for the ideal rhetorician speaks “in a manner pleasing to the gods” (273e). What Plato could have learned, then, from Aspasia was the potentially harmful uses of rhetoric as a branch of philosophy—as well as the as-yet uncalibrated potential of rhetoric to create belief.

In addition to influencing Socrates and Plato, Aspasia also influenced Xenophon and his wife, specifically in the art of inductive argument. In *De Inventione*, Cicero uses her lesson in induction as the centerpiece for his argumentation chapter. Like others before him, Cicero too acknowledges Aspasia’s influence on Socrates as well as the existence of the Aeschines text:
[I]n 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 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,” 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 neighbour had a better horse than yours, would you prefer your horse or his?” “His,” was the 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.” To this instance, because assent has been given to undisputed statements, the result is that the point which would appear doubtful if asked by itself is through analogy conceded as certain, and this is due to the method employed in putting the question. Socrates used this conversation method a good deal, because he wished to present no arguments himself, but preferred to get a result from the material which the interlocutor had given him—a result which the interlocutor was bound to approve as following necessarily from what he had already granted. (I.xxxi.51–53)

Few women participated in the intellectual life of ancient Greece. Aspasia was a striking exception.

Although Aspasia was a powerful force in Periclean Athens and seems to have affected the thinking of Plato and Socrates, few Greek thinkers accepted women as mental equals. Aristotle makes no provision for the intellectual woman, except for his nod to Sappho: “Everyone honours the wise. . . . [T]he Mytileneans [honour] Sappho, though she was a woman” (Rhetoric 1389b.12). Otherwise, Aristotle denied any philosophical or rhetorical contributions of women. He quotes Sophocles when he writes, “Silence gives grace to woman”—though that is not the case likewise with a man” (Politics I.v.9). Reasoning from Aristotle’s basic premise, Aspasia could not have become a teacher, much less a rhetorician. By the principle
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of entelechy (the vital force urging one toward fulfilling one’s actual essence), she would have naturally followed her predetermined life course, her progress distinctly marked off and limited to a degree of perfection less than that for a man. The power politics of gender, the social category imposed on each sexed body, both gives rise to and then maintains the social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. Denied the telos of perfect maleness, Athenian women were denied a passport into the male intellectual battleground of politics, philosophy, rhetoric. But Aspasia had approached the border—and trespassed into masculine territory.

For the most part, Aristotle’s accounts of woman, buttressed by the defective scientific understanding of reproduction and biological processes, belie woman’s participation in the making of culture, leaving her daughters without access to any knowledge of a female tradition or intellectual underpinning. For Aristotle, men and women differed only in outward form—but the inequality is permanent. Unlike Plato, he could not see beyond the contemporary and seemingly permanent inferior status of Greek women. In the Politics, Aristotle writes “between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” (I.i.12); in the Poetics, he pronounces goodness as possible “even in a woman . . . though [she] is perhaps an inferior . . . but it is not appropriate in a female Character to be manly, or clever” (15.1454a.20–24); and in the Rhetoric, he writes that “one quality or action is nobler than another if it is that of a naturally finer being: thus a man’s will be nobler than a woman’s” (1.9.15).

And those naturally finer beings (men) were awarded a public voice, which enabled them to participate as speakers, thinkers, and writers in the polis, in the “good” of public life. A public voice was the right and privilege of those who were declared to possess reason and goodness to its fullest extent—men only. In the polis—the public sphere of action, the realm of highest justice, the world of men—women and slaves should be invisible and aphonic. “Naturally” then, 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.

Aspasia’s Challenge to the History of Rhetoric

Aspasia colonized the patriarchal territory, but her colony was quickly appropriated by males. Although she herself escaped enclosure, although she publicly articulated her intelligence and her heterosexual love, she did not escape those who defined her. Her influence has been enclosed within
the gendered rhetorical terrain—and neutralized. "And the trouble is," Myra Jehlen writes, "that the map of an enclosed space describes only the territory inside the enclosure. Without knowing the surrounding geography, how are we to evaluate this woman's estate . . ." (80). Few of us have ever heard of Aspasia of Miletus, teacher of rhetoric. But if we locate her colony within "its larger context" and "examine the borders along which [she] defined herself" (81)—the writings of the men she influenced, Plato, Socrates, and Pericles—we can better map out how Aspasia was perceived by those men and, perhaps, how she might have perceived her estate within the surrounding geography.

But even now, Aspasia's intellectual estate seems to be "off-limits," except in that her story serves as a morality tale for women who insist on entering the rhetorical arena: such a woman will be used, misappropriated, and eventually forgotten. Or worse, perhaps, they will be disfigured in artistic renderings such as Gerome's, inscribed with masculine fantasy and curiosity. Gerome's idyllic rendition of Aspasia and Alcibiades is both inaccurate and unfair: Our Mother of Rhetoric, life-long companion of Pericles and influential colleagues of famous men, is the harem girl to the arrogant, dissolve, untrustworthy, love-object of Socrates, Alcibiades. Thus the example of Gerome's print brings to the fore the whole notion of women's place in rhetoric. Where on that landscape we call rhetorical history should we begin to look for women? How many women remain hidden in the shadows of monumental rhetoricians? How many others remain misidentified as holes and bulges on out-of-the-way territories? And how much of rhetorical history is itself, as Carole Blair describes, "rhetorical iterations, saturated with the impure representations, intrinsic interestedness, and general obstreperousness of any discourse" (417)?

By acknowledging that rhetorical history is not neutral territory, the refiguring of Aspasia's role in the history of rhetoric has ramifications on past study as well as implications for future study. The most powerful ramification is an awareness of women's place on the rhetorical terrain. Until most recently, we had not even thought of looking for a woman in rhetoric. It had already been assumed, a priori, that no woman participated in the rhetorical tradition. We had been willing to believe the tautology that no women have been involved in rhetorical history because not a single rhetorical treatise by a woman appears in lists of primary works (we resolutely ignore Lucia Olbrechts-Tyteca) and because not a single woman appears in the indices of the most comprehensive histories of Western rhetoric. But upon examination, the fault line of gender reveals that women have indeed participated in and contributed to the rhetorical tradition, and that fault line reverberates down the corridors of past scholarship to the foundations of the Greek intellectual tradition.
Our first obligation, then, as rhetorical scholars is to look backwards at all the unquestioned scholarship that has come before; then, we must begin to re-map our notion of rhetorical history. By simply choosing which men and women to show and how to represent them, we subtly shape the perceptions of our profession, enabling the profession to recognize and remember—or to forget—the obvious and not-so-obvious women on our intellectual landscape. But looking backwards will not be enough; we must attend to the current professional scene as well. For example, the early and influential work of Ann Berthoff, Janet Emig, Janice Lauer, and Mina Shaughnessy could easily fade out of our professional consciousness if we don’t keep these foremothers of composition studies in our professional narratives, if we don’t know or remember the scholarship on which we’re building our own work. Perhaps the most important consequence of refiguring rhetorical history, however, is the effect on our students, for we also shape the perceptions of them. By writing a more inclusive history of rhetoric, we can more easily enable and encourage both our female and male students to participate in a literature, in a history, in a profession, or in communities of discourse from which they may feel excluded or detached.

Fortunately, rhetorical scholars—females and males alike—around the country are involved in various feminist historiographic projects. And their archeological findings are serving to challenge the history of rhetoric to recognize the full range of its texts, its lies, its manuscripts, its practices, and its theories. In fact, it’s the “theoretical understanding of rhetorics of the past [that] underwrites our capacity for further theorizing” (Blair 404). And Aspasia’s contribution to rhetoric is just one of many stories that disrupt, refigure, and then enrich what has long been held as patriarchal territory. Until recently, we didn’t seem to realize that the rhetorical map had flattened out the truth, leaving scarcely a ridge on the surface that could suggest all the women, and the otherwise disenfranchised, that are buried beneath the surface. The significance of Aspasia’s challenge lies in recharting the plains, valleys, and borders of rhetoric, and accounting for all the pockets of as-yet-unaccounted-for activity. Having passed through the familiar and patriarchal territory of exclusionary rhetoric, we are moving into a frontier—the rhetorics of the future that await our exploration, our settlements, and our mapping.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Robert Connors for the print, to Cynthia Selle for sharing her work on Aspasia, and to Jon Olson for his careful readings of this essay.
2. Bodily definition maps out class as well as gender: “Silence, the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to women’s enclosure within the house” (Stallybrass 127).
3. In general, feminist scholarship has helped create a space for reconceiving and
thereby transforming the rhetorical tradition (Ballif, Biesecker, Bizzell and Herzberg, Blair and Kaul, Glenn, Jarratt and Ong, Lunsford, Peaden, Selfe, Swearingen). Edward P. J. Corbett anticipated women's rhetorical contributions. "Rhetoric is one of the most patriarchal of all the academic disciplines. But because of the active feminist movement, we may be on the verge of recovering the names of women who could lay claim to being rhetors" (577). Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg include for consideration the rhetorical discourse of a number of Renaissance and post-Renaissance women. Andrea Lunsford is editing a forthcoming collection of women's rhetorical endeavors, *Reclaiming Rhetoric*.

4. A regendered history does not reproduce traditional gendered categories of the "empowered" and "other," nor does it reduce them, but rather imagines gender as an inclusive and nonhierarchical category. In *Rhetoric Retold* I locate women's contributions to and participation within the rhetorical tradition and write them into an expanded, inclusive tradition.

5. Joan Kelly tells us that "women's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women.... In seeking to add women to the fund of historical knowledge, women's history has revitalized theory, for it has shaken the conceptual foundations of historical study" ("Social Relation" 1). Carole Blair contests the histories of rhetoric both when she interrogates the politics of preservation as well as when, together with Mary L. Kahl, she argues for revising the history of rhetorical theory. And Barbara Herrnstein Smith's "Contingencies of Value" eloquently demonstrates how such inclusions do and must problematize genres.

6. Miletus had relatively large numbers of literate citizens, among them the philosophers Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Thales (Harris 63; Vernant, *Origins* 127, *Myth and Thought* 343 ff.; Kirk and Raven 73 ff.). In *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, Jean-Pierre Vernant writes that alongside moral thought, "a philosophy of nature starts to develop... in the Greek cities of Asia Minor. The theories of these first 'physicists' of Ionia have been hailed as the beginning of rational thought as it is understood in the West" (96).

7. Most scholars (Bloedow, Flaciere, Halperin, Just, Keuls, Licht, Ober, for instance) have labeled Aspasia a courtesan, schooled in intellectual and social arts. But both Eva Cantarella and William Courtney argue that the Athenian suspicion and misunderstanding of such a powerful, political, non-Athenian, unmarriedable woman living with their controversial leader, Pericles, led automatically to the sexualized and undeserved label of *hetaera*; Nicole Loraux refers to Aspasia as a foreigner and as a non-politician; Mary Ellen Waithe calls her "a rhetorician and a member of the Periclean Philosophic Circle" (History 75); and Susan Cole writes only of Aspasia's intellectual influence and measure of literacy (225).

8. Cantarella clearly describes the *hetaera* as "more than a casual companion," "more educated than a woman destined for marriage, and intended 'professionally' to accompany men where wives and concubines could not go [namely social activities and discussions]" (30). "This relationship was meant to be somehow gratifying for the man, even on the intellectual level, and was thus completely different from men's relationships with either wives or prostitutes" (31). Robert Flaciere agrees that "in practice, if not in law, they [hetaerae] enjoyed considerable freedom" (130). He goes on to quote Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* (XIII) that the *hetaerae* "applied themselves to study and the knowledge of the sciences" (131).

9. H. D. F. Kitto places Athenian women in Oriental seclusion: "In this pre-eminentilly masculine society women moved in so restricted a sphere that we may reasonably regard them as a 'depressed area'" (222). He accepts such restrictions as sensible.

10. Keuls suggests that a female educational underground might have been the source of male anxiety, for the philosopher Democritus wrote, "Let a woman not develop her reason, for that would be a terrible thing" (Fr. 110, qtd. in Keuls 104). And a character in a lost play by Menander pronounced that "he who teaches letters to his wife is ill-advised: He's giving additional poison to a horrible snake" (Fr. 702 K. ibid.).

11. Roger Just reminds us that "Aspasia's notoriety and the popular resentment her supposed influence aroused should... be remembered—a resentment transmuted into mockery by comedy" (21). In the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes writes that the Megarians "abducted two whores from Aspasia's stable in Athens" (523); Plutarch
writes that Cratinus, "in downright terms, calls her a harlot": "To find him a Juno the goddess of lust/Bore that harlot past shame,/Aspasia by name" (201). Flaceliere assures us that "the Athenian comic poets never tired of repeating that Aspasia led a life of debauchery, though apparently she was as well behaved as she was well informed, and even a scholar" (131). And Cantarella writes, "It is not surprising that many Athenians hated Aspasia. She was not like other women; she was an intellectual" (54-55).

12. Pomeroy, Goddesses 89: Just 144. But Hans Licht (a pseudonym for Paul Brandt) explains that "the preference for Aspasia shown by Pericles afforded a welcome excuse for his opponents to attack him; people would not hear of a woman having anything to say in political life, especially one who was not an Athenian but was brought from abroad, and even from Ionia . . . . which was notorious for the immorality of its women. . . . Hence she was severely criticized by the comic poets . . . . [A]ccording to a statement in Athenaeus . . . . she was said to have maintained a regular brothel. . . . When she was accused of asebeia (impiety) and procuring, Pericles defended her and secured her acquittal." (352-53)

13. Pierre Vidal-Naquet writes that "the sole civic function of women was to give birth to citizens. The conditions imposed upon them by Pericles' law of 451 was to be the daughter of a citizen and a citizen's daughter" (145). Women of low reputation could be spoken of publicly and freely; for some, Aspasia fit such a category. For others, Aspasia's intellectual and political gifts earned her a measure of public distinction. David Schaps asserts that there were three categories of women whose "names could be mentioned freely: disreputable women, opposing women, and dead women" (329).

14. Arete is variously referred to as various manifestations of human excellence: as virtue (the prerequisite of a good human life; cf. Democritus' "On Arete or Manly Virtue"), as a combination of self-control, courage, and justice, as moral nobility, or as valor. See Guthrie III: 253 ff.

15. The tautology of Jean Bethke Elshtain's argument rightly encompasses Aspasia: "I am not impressed with the claims made for powerful women who influenced men through their private activities—in Athenian society this claim is frequently made for the hetaera . . . . Were such 'women-behind-the-men' to have attempted to enter the public arena to speak with their own voices, they would have been roundly jeered, satirized, and condemned" (14–15 n. 11).


17. In her epistolary arguments with Abelard, Heloise relies on ancient authorities. In one particular case, her crown auctoritas is Aspasia. Quoting from the now-missing text of Aeschines, Heloise argues for the excellence of a good wife and a good husband (Montcrieff 58). In her reading of Heloise's letters, Andrea Nye challenges the philosophical community to be "informed by Heloise's and Aspasia's wisdom, their subtle, sensitive, mobile, flexible women's tongues." She also wants us to admit that "a woman can be the teacher of a man" (17).

18. Thucydides writes, "Everyone who wishes to, both citizens and foreigners, can join in the procession, and the women who are related to the dead are there to make their laments at the tomb" (II.34).

19. For example, recent issues of both CCC (October 1992) and Rhetoric Society Quarterly (Winter 1992) center on feminist readings of rhetoric and composition, theories and practices. Also see notes 3, 4, 5.

Works Cited


Biesecker, Barbara. "Coming to Terms with Recent Attempts to Write Women into the