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Intimate Citizens: Aspasia and the Demos

This paper examines the figure of Aspasia as a site for thinking through questions of citizenship and political authority in fifth-century Athens. As a foreigner, woman, and hetaira, Aspasia was the archetypal anti-citizen, but through her extraordinary position as Pericles' mistress she also represented an intimacy between the citizen and the state that was fundamental to Athenian democracy.

A highly sexualized character, Aspasia represented the pleasure that inheres within the citizen's relation to the city, but also the potential dangers of that pleasure. In his *Epitaphios* in Thucydides, Pericles famously urges the citizens to become lovers of the (feminine) city (2.43.1). Plato tendentiously suggests that Aspasia herself wrote this speech (*Menex.* 236b), and thus invites us to imagine this sexy hetaira as a model for civic eros. Pericles rigorously avoids any hint of the hetairic in his representation of the love between citizen and city: his Athens (like her patron goddess) inspires desire but herself remains chaste, repaying her citizens' love with undying praise. But Pericles' enemies spell out the sexual implications of his erotic metaphor, figuring the city as a garish woman, tricked out with precious jewels bought at the allies' expense (Plut. *Per.* 12.2). Thus one can ask of the city what the comic poets asked about Aspasia: was she an Olympian consort or a depraved whore (Cratinus 259 K-A, Plut. *Per.* 24.6), and were her lovers noble citizens or *katapugones*?

Plato tries to purify civic eros, replacing Athens as hetaira with Athens as mother. The *Menexenus* attributes this view to Aspasia herself: in her *Epitaphios*, the city is a beneficent mother, nurturing her citizens with maternal love. Like the erotic metaphor of citizenship, this relation is imagined as both pleasurable and ennobling, but by associating it with Aspasia, Plato insinuates the scandal of illegitimacy into this familiar autochthonous genealogy. Aspasia's son with Pericles was a bastard, a fact often noted by the comic poets (e.g., Eupolis 110, 192 K-A). As a mother no less than as a lover, Aspasia makes an equivocal model for citizenship: does her presence transform citizens into *nothoi*?

Aspasia represented the citizen's relation not only to the polis but also to its leaders. The comic poets satirized her influence on Pericles, figuring her as an Omphale, Hera, or Deianira dominating a henpecked Heracles (Cratinus 259 K-A). Her political influence was represented as rhetorical influence: she was said to have taught both Pericles and Socrates to speak (Pl. *Menex.* 235e) and to have transformed Lysicles from a lowborn nobody into Athens' first man (Aeschines *Socr.* = Plut. *Per.* 24.4). While this trope draws a derogatory connection between politicians and whores (for Aspasia trained hetairai as she did orators), it also attributes to Aspasia the demos' power of political authorization: through her the demos articulates a king-making role that was actually its own. Similarly, the tradition that Pericles started the Samian War to please Aspasia (Ar. *Ach.* 516-39, Plut. *Per.* 24.1) appropriates for her personal pleasure the policy-making authority of the demos. On the one hand, then, Aspasia's influence is pictured as antidemocratic and dangerous, a conduit for foreign interference (e.g. Plut. *Per.* 24.2). On the other hand, in

her intimacy with Pericles, Aspasia represents the democratic ideal of the individual citizen's proximity to political power. Thus when Callias (21 K-A) and others claim that Aspasia taught Pericles to speak, they are not only insinuating an illegitimate (sexual, rhetorical, political) influence, but also giving expression to the fundamental democratic fantasy that the demagogue's voice is that of the demos and the power of the city is the demos' own.