



The Greek historian Thucydides reports that Pericles, the famous 5th century leader of Athens, delivered a speech to his fellow Athenians in which he claimed that the greatest glory would accrue to a woman "who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad"; Pericles, like most Athenian men, believed that women had no public role to play in the city-state, but were to lead quiet lives within the household. How ironic, then, that Pericles himself became involved with a woman who was much talked about by others: the courtesan Aspasia.

The ancient biographer Plutarch, in his *Life of Pericles*, tells us that Aspasia was born in the Greek city-state of Miletus (in present-day Turkey), the daughter of one Axiochus; modern historians place her birth sometime around 470 B.C. (making her some 25 years younger

than Pericles). Her profession was that of a *hetaira*, a "companion" for men who was not only physically attractive but also intellectually stimulating. How Aspasia got into this line of work is uncertain, although some scholars suggest that her parents had "dedicated" her to a temple of Aphrodite, since (in the words of F.J. Frost) "this was a perfectly legitimate way of getting rid of expensive and unwanted girl children, who had to be fed and whose dowries might cost a whole year's income" (*Greek Society*, 133). Frost goes on to postulate that Aspasia somehow gained release from temple service and "went into private practice".

However, had Aspasia remained in Miletus, we might never have heard of her. Fortunately (for Pericles) she moved to Athens, a booming city in the mid-fifth century where immigrants might strike it rich. There Aspasia quickly gained attention, not so much for her physical charms, but for her obvious intelligence; as Plutarch writes, "Pericles was attracted to her because of her rare political wisdom; Socrates visited her from time to time, and some of his close friends even brought their wives to listen to her conversation, despite the fact that she was engaged in a trade that was anything but honourable or even respectable". Clearly Aspasia was a phenomenon in a city such as Athens, where most women were uneducated and unable to discuss politics, philosophy, or rhetoric - topics that Aspasia excelled in.

Pericles, however, became thoroughly captivated by Aspasia, and created quite a scandal when he divorced his wife in order to live with this Milesian hetaira - something that was "simply not done" in Athenian high society. Legally, Pericles and Aspasia were not married, but they certainly treated each other as man and wife; for example, Plutarch tells us that the usually very reserved and proper Pericles "greeted her with a kiss every day, when he went out to the marketplace and when he returned". In time, Aspasia bore Pericles a son, also named Pericles.

As a man of extraordinary influence in Athens, Pericles had a number of enemies, but (like Ronald Reagan) he was a "teflon man" to whom no wrong-doing could be attached. And so, perhaps in desperation, his foes began to attack his friends, especially the notorious Aspasia. The comic poets, in particular, had a grand time mocking Aspasia - she was once called a "new Omphale" after the mythical queen who had made the hero Herakles put on women's clothing, or a "Deianeira" after the mythical wife of Herakles who caused the hero's unhappy demise. Others spread rumours that Aspasia was meddling in Athenian politics - using Pericles to support her own causes; she was alleged, in fact, to have written Pericles' speeches. At one point, she was brought to trial, but was acquitted. Obviously, life in Athens could not have been easy

for Aspasia, but she and Pericles remained together until the latter's death in 429 B.C.

What became of Aspasia after Pericles' death is not entirely clear. She seems to have become the mistress of one Lysicles, a wealthy wool merchant and would-be politician. However, Lysicles was killed in battle in 428 B.C., and Aspasia disappears from our records. As a result, "we know nothing more about this remarkable woman, one of the few Greek women to break down the barriers of masculine prejudice to become a person not only of beauty and grace, but power and influence as well" (Frost, 137). While some may today cast a dubious eye upon her profession, no one can deny the impact this woman had on mid-fifth century Athens; after all, to paraphrase W.C. Fields, anyone who exchanged ideas with Pericles and Socrates could not have been all bad!