

Capital as Power: A Discussion on the Social Ascent of Aspasia

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Abstract

Aspasia of Miletus remains a somewhat enigmatic figure, overshadowed by the flood of male-centric narratives from fifth-century Athens. Her legacy is often reduced to her relationship with Pericles or her background as a hetaera, but there is far more to her story. Beneath these popular preconceptions lies a formidable individual whose social and political influence in Athens was significant. This paper aims to provide an overview of the factors that contributed to Aspasia's extraordinary rise through the social strata. By examining how Aspasia effectively utilised her social capital—a collection of relationships, resources and reciprocated trust—we will demonstrate the relevance of capital accumulation within a social sphere and show how this contributed to Aspasia's ascent to social prominence.

Keywords

Aspasia, Capital, Hetaera, Legacy, Social Mobility

1. Introduction

The early biography of Aspasia remains largely enigmatic, due to the limited availability of surviving sources and the fact that certain “categories of women [...] are less well-documented than others such as professional women who worked in shops as prostitutes and courtesans; [and] the social rules and customs applied to them are even more vague” (Cartwright, 2016: para. 3). Aspasia, is believed to have been born c. 470 BCE (d. c410 BCE, location unknown) in the Ionian city of Miletus. Apart from her father's name, Axiochus, very few details are verifiably known about Aspasia's formative years or the circumstances that prompted her relocation to Athens. A plausible hypothesis (Nails, 2023) would be that she was orphaned around the time she reached marriageable age, and as a member of Al-

cibiades of Scambonidae's household emigrated northwest to Greece. After her arrival in Athens, however, Aspasia's presence and influence become more evident, largely due to the observations made by the biographer Plutarch.

Aspasia's life unfolded remarkably as she achieved prominence as a hetaera¹, emulating Thargelia² in her pursuit of influential men (Plut. *Per.* 24). Renowned for her political and rhetorical acumen, she earned the esteem of Socrates, whose intimate circle reportedly brought their wives to hear Aspasia's discourse. Her fame was far reaching, with Plutarch³ noting that even Cyrus bestowed the name Aspasia upon his favoured concubine. Ultimately, Aspasia became the consort of Pericles, bearing him a son, Pericles the Younger, and remained by his side until his death in the autumn of 429 BCE.

Perhaps due to her metic/foreign status, chosen profession, growing reputation, or her connection with "one of the most controversial families in classical Athens, the Alcmaeonids" (Kennedy, 2014: p. 83), who were consistently accused of collaborating with the Persians following the Battle of Marathon (490 BCE), Plutarch tells us that Aspasia frequently came under criticism from playwrights. Interestingly, this criticism coincides with two periods of ascendancy: the 440s for Pericles and the 420s for Alcibiades. In these comedies, Aspasia was depicted as the new Omphale, the new Deianeira (the man-destroyer) and even as Hera⁴. These references were as disparaging of Aspasia's character as they were of Pericles, implying that Aspasia's unconventional womanhood might somehow corrupt Athen's beloved Pericles.

In Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros*, Aspasia is seemingly likened to Helen of Troy in relation to Pericles, which carries several implications (Kennedy, 2014: p. 83). Comparing Aspasia to Helen casts a negative light on both her and Pericles: it emphasises her metic status, suggesting she may have influenced Pericles into the war with the Samians (an old rival to Aspasia's Miletus) in 440 BCE, and portrays Pericles as weak for being swayed by a woman, much like Paris was swayed by Helen. This notion of wars being incited over Aspasia is further echoed in Aristophanes' comedy *Acharnians*, which depicts the war as beginning due to "some drunken young men kidnapping a whore from Megra, the Megarians stealing two of Aspasia's girls in return, and then Olympian [Pericles] in a rage thundered and lightened and stirred up all of Greece" (Storey, 1998: p. 110). Yet despite the abun-

¹Hetaera were professional courtesans (and distinct from *pornē* (prostitutes were considered far lower down on the social spectrum) known for their physical beauty, cultured minds and talents that exceeded the average Attic woman. They enjoyed state protection and a freedom that surpassed that of married women. See also: Glazebrook & Henry (Eds.) 2011. *Greek prostitutes in the ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE-200 CE*.

²Thargelia was known for her great beauty, good manners, and clever wits. Plutarch (*Per.* 24) asserts that she spread Persian sympathy throughout the cities of Greece by way of her powerful and influential male clients.

³"[Aspasia was] so renowned and celebrated [...] that even, Cyrus, the one that went to war with the Great King for the sovereignty of the Persians, gave the name of Aspasia to that one of his concubines whom he loved best" (Plut. *Per.*, 24, Trans Waterfield, 2008).

⁴Omphale, the queen of Lydia, made Heracles work wool; Deianeira unwittingly murdered her husband, Heracles, and Hera was the consort of Zeus.

dance of ridicule, Aspasia, as Henry (1995: pp. 3-4) argues, was a crucial figure within fifth-century Athenian intellectual and political history, as well as being an important figure in Greek philosophical dialogue.

Aspasia was a woman of notoriety who, despite the cultural and social restraints, appears to have thrived within a male-dominated Athens, reaching an unprecedented level of social status. However, it would be a mistake to attribute Aspasia's societal influence solely to her association with Pericles. As, Plutarch observes: "Lysicles the sheep-dealer, a man of lowly and humble character, came to be the leader of Athens as a result of living with Aspasia after Pericles' death" (Plut. *Per.* 24). This example of Lysicles' social advancement suggests that Aspasia possessed a keen understanding of the social dynamics at play and a remarkable ability to harness and administer social capital.

2. Social Capital

Several theorists have offered insights into how social capital should be defined, with Putnam (1995, 2001), Bourdieu (1986), and Coleman (1990) adopting an economics-based discourse. They argue that social capital is conceptually supported by three principal pillars: relationships, reciprocated trust, and resources. Relationships refer to the networks created between individuals and groups; trust characterises the strength of these bonds; and resources denote the benefits gained through social ties and active participation within those networks. However, Field (2003), critiquing Putnam, suggests that the conceptual definition of social capital becomes ambiguous when removed from an economic context and applied to the social sphere. To address this conceptual vagueness, Field proposes that social capital should also be considered as a source of social inequality, as one group or individual will inevitably hold more power over the other, coining the phrase "the darker side of social capital"⁵. This implies that an elevated amount of social capital can not only change relationships, but also shift the power dynamics in a manner reminiscent of Foucault's theory of power/knowledge. Foucault (1975/2020) argues that knowledge is always an exercise of power, and power is always a function of knowledge, so in the context of social capital the greater the network the greater the knowledge; the greater the resources the greater the power; an amalgamation that gives those with more social capital greater agency. To understand social capital in the context of Aspasia, it is essential to consider two elements that granted agency: sexual and physical capital, and the environment in which they were used.

3. Sexual and Physical Capital

The Athenian prostitution industry operated without legal restrictions, and the presence of state-regulated brothels allowed Athens to incorporate "th[e] trade

⁵The imbalance of power that results from the misuse of social capital is referred to as the "darker side" of social capital; see Field's (2003: pp. 71-89) *Social Capital*, where this angle of inquiry is discussed further.

into the finances of the city-state by means of taxation” (Kapparis, 2018: p. 265), demonstrating its economic value to the city. However, the existence of state-regulated brothels points towards more than economic importance; it highlights how sexual behaviour was shaped into a social construct⁶. As Arkins (1994) explains, it was “organised to meet the needs of the adult male citizen, whose body was the focus of all power in the state. All other human beings [...] existed sexually in relation to the adult male citizen and existed for his sexual gratification” (Arkins, 1994: p. 21). Prostitutes in Athens included both boys under the age of eighteen and women. Female prostitutes were categorised into various tiers, ranging from slaves in brothels and street walkers to dancers, flute players, concubines, and, at the highest-level courtesans like Aspasia. These courtesans were well “educated women who were perhaps the closest to being seen as liberated” (Arkins, 1994: p. 32), honing their intellects and talents to a level far surpassing what was typically permitted for the average Athenian woman. They held a prestigious and financially comfortable position, with both state protection and taxation, offering them a social freedom far greater than that of married women. The increased freedoms and social value enjoyed by the courtesans meant that they would be invited to attend symposiums.

The symposium was exclusively for Greek males, respectable “women of citizen families were certainly excluded [...] although a woman could be present as a paid entertainer (a flute girl for instance), and *hetairia* (courtesans) are known to have participated alongside men” (Franks, 2018: p. 15). The symposiasts gathered in the host’s private home, reclining on couches in a designated room, the *andrōn*. The level of formality varied, ranging from philosophical debates and poetry readings to music performances and lively drinking sessions⁷.

In this setting, courtesans had the opportunity to display their charms and wit to the affluent male patrons, a role in which Aspasia particularly excelled. The symposium also created an environment of free-flowing information, which had the potential to become an invaluable resource for any courtesans within earshot. Inebriated guests, discussing a wide range of topics, from politics and personal issues to financial matters, military strategies, fashion, trade, and the general gossip, might inadvertently reveal sensitive snippets of information. Although the advantages courtesans gained from overhearing such discussions is not known, it is plausible to assume that they could leverage sensitive information for their own

⁶Herodotus (*Hist.* 1. 93) tells us that the Lydian women worked as prostitutes until they had earned enough money for a dowry, allowing them to secure a husband. Since the Lydians were also the “first people to strike gold and silver” (Hdt. *Hist.* 1. 94), creating coins—although technically the first Lydian coins were made of electrum (Holland, 2013: p. 630)—they contributed to an economic phenomenon where money and sex became intertwined, creating a social construct that still exists today.

⁷A fragment from a play by Euboulos (fr. 94 *apud*. Athen. 2.36b) describes the effects: Because I mix up only three bowls of wine for sensible people. One is dedicated to good health, and they drink it first. The second is dedicated to love and pleasure, and the third to sleep; wise guests finish it and go home. The fourth bowl no longer belongs to me but to outrage. The fifth belongs to arguments; the sixth to wandering drunk through the streets; the seventh to black eyes; the eight to the bailiff; the ninth to an ugly black humour; and the tenth to madness extreme enough to make people throw stones. (Franks, 2018: p. 23).

benefit. By actively engaging in symposiums, courtesans could build relationships, acquire resources (including misspoken information), and expand their network, thereby growing their social capital.

In Plato's *Symposium*, the dialogues feature several prominent Athenian men, including a segment where Socrates recounts a conversation with Diotima about love (201d f). What is unusual, however, as D'Angour (2019: p. 39) argues, is that Socrates, in a room full of men, attributes his teachings to a woman. In fact, *Symposium* is one of the few dialogues in which Socrates is clearly portrayed as receiving instruction from a woman. The only other instance in Plato's works is in *Menexenus*, where Socrates receives guidance from Aspasia. This has led some scholars to propose, though not conclusively, that Diotima may be an artistic stand-in for Aspasia. As D'Angour (2019) points out, the younger Socrates underwent numerous "transformational experiences, of which his relationship with Aspasia may have been the most significant" (D'Angour, 2019: p. 6). Given this, it seems plausible that Plato's portrayal of Diotima mirrors Aspasia, not only in terms of persona but also in reflecting the social circles she was part of.

Sexuality and its exploitation have long been integral to economic ventures, much as they are today. In contemporary society, numerous industries cater to enhancing sexual appeal, ranging from plastic surgery and fitness regimes to provocative fashion lines, fragrances, among others. These industries strive to amplify one's attractiveness and desirability, or more precisely, the current social perception of allure. In ancient Athens, brothels also sought to capitalise on sexual allure to attract clients. The business model of Athenian brothels was therefore designed with the male gaze specifically in mind. Brothels that boasted the most visually appealing women were likely the most successful, as their revenue was directly tied to the attractiveness of their offerings.

As a result, the owners found it advantageous to boost the sexual allure of their workers to maximize profitability, which in turn, increased their popularity. It is important to note that while Aspasia and her fellow courtesans were likely seen as commodities, they were also part of a network that created bonding social capital⁸. Success within this network was closely connected to each other's achievements. The more popular a courtesan became, the greater the earnings, which allowed for better clothing, makeup, and increased appeal; creating a perpetual cycle of growing sexual appeal and profitability for both owner and worker alike.

This pursuit of sexual allure both inside and outside of Athenian brothels, can be referred to as sexual capital. The term sexual capital describes the value and influence that sexual attractiveness and appeal can hold in both social and economic contexts. Although Kaplan and Illouz (2022, *Sex*, Chap. 3) assert that sexual capital was first conceptualised in the context of LGBTQ studies, its relevance extends to contexts and to historical figures like Aspasia, highlighting the universal

⁸Bonding social capital, as Putnam (2001) defines, are close-knit, continuous, and robust networks. These networks consist of individuals with similar backgrounds and tend to be homogeneous, creating a community of like-minded people. As a result, they can also appear exclusive, as they mainly include those who share similar characteristics.

nature of sexual appeal as a tangible form of capital.

While Aspasia can be analysed through the lens of sexual capital, with beauty being a key aspect of that allure, it is debatable whether beauty alone constitutes a form of capital. One major issue with viewing physical and aesthetic attributes as capital is the assumption that social interactions are purely about capital exchange and that people are primarily focused on accumulating capital (Sarpila et al., 2021). And, of course, not everyone is invested in or even aware of the need for capital accumulation. Bourdieu, for example, did not see capital as universally applicable but rather as context-dependent: “the sports market is to boys’ physical capital what the system of beauty prizes and related occupations, such as being a hostess, is to girls’ physical capital” (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 832 cited in Sarpila et al., 2021: chap. 1). Which suggests that beauty or physical appearance is closely tied to the social expectations of a given era. This dynamic becomes more evident when we consider the modern application of perceived allurements, such as the rise of Western reality TV dating programs. In these programs, both male and female participants often exhibit similar physical appeal that aligns with the prevailing social narrative of beauty.

For Aspasia, beauty was a vital component of her overall sexual capital, significantly enhancing her attractiveness and therefore her social leverage. Physical appeal is a key asset in sexual exchange and is often linked to upward mobility, particularly for women (Mulford et al., 1998: p. 1566). However, for courtesans like Aspasia, non-sexual interactions were also important for their social advancement because they fostered relationships that went beyond mere objectification. Such relationships, existing outside of the purely physical realm, could be, in theory, more wholesome and enduring. Therefore, physical capital (beauty) carries with it distributional implications; more attractive courtesans, like Aspasia, were likely to be preferred over those considered less attractive, which directly impacted their socioeconomic opportunities. Many of us have experienced or witnessed how a physically appealing friend or colleague receives preferential treatment due to their perceived attractiveness. Therefore, it was crucial for Aspasia to actively enhance her physical capital, regardless of moral perspectives on female objectification. By doing so, she not only increased her sexual capital but also strengthened her social capital through the gathering of resources, building relationships, and establishing trust.

Aspasia was not unique in the ancient world for being noted for her beauty. Cleopatra VII, for instance, was also famous for her beauty, and used her sexual and physical capital to secure Roman support through the seduction of Julius Caesar. However, often overshadowed in the narrative was her remarkable intellectual prowess—she was multilingual and well-versed in subjects like philosophy, diplomacy, mathematics, chemistry, medicine and economics. Perhaps this lack of recognition, beyond physical appearance, is the reason why the lives and contributions of classical women were scarcely documented.

By strategically utilising both her sexual and physical capital (gaining distinc-

tion among her fellow courtesans and securing the favour of Pericles) Aspasia successfully elevated her social position. Her enhanced status not only solidified her influence within elite circles but also opened doors to the most powerful men of her time. As she mingled with these prominent figures, she adeptly accumulated social capital, expanding her network and influence. This enabled her to attain a prominent position in both political and cultural life.

4. Political Life

The escalating tension between Samos and Miletus had been building for some time, but the armed conflict in 441/0 BCE over Priene eventually drew Samos into confrontation with its hegemon, Athens; “Miletus was getting the worst of the fighting, and she appealed directly to Athens” (Legon, 1972: p. 148). The war with Samos was a complex political issue, one that both Athens and Pericles might have preferred to avoid. It also raised questions among the Athenian people about the extent of Aspasia’s influence. Some were “convinced she had prodded him (Pericles) into a nasty war [...] to support her native Miletus. Others even made her responsible for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta that decimated the Greek states” (Salisbury, 2001: p. 24), which gives a good indication of the level of scepticism, the Athenians felt towards the political power they believed Aspasia held, and the sway she may have had over Pericles. The speculation about Aspasia’s influence was so intense that Aristophanes, in a parody of Herodotus, (Most of the women got away, but few were seized—and one was Io. Into the hold the captives were bundled, up came the anchor and off sailed the ship for Egypt (Hdt. *Hist.* 1.1), sought to blame her, as seen in the lines: “Then the Megarians, garlicked with the smart, Stole in return, two of Aspasia’s hussies, From these three Wantons o’er the Hellenic races, Burst forth the first beginnings of the War” (Ar. *Ach.* 526-528, Trans. Rogers, 1924). This excerpt humorously attributes the onset of war to Aspasia, illustrating the extent of the rumours and animosity surrounding her.

Aristophanes often incorporated contemporary events into his comedies, so it is reasonable to assume that Aspasia was somehow blamed by a significant portion of the Athenian populace to merit such references. However, we cannot determine with absolute certainty whether Aspasia truly played a role in Pericles’ decision to take action against Samos or if the conflict would have proceeded independently. This leaves conjecture at best: was Aspasia that politically influential, or was Aristophanes simply pandering to the mood of the people?

As mentioned, the Athenian people harboured suspicions about Aspasia, and politically, the concern centred around the perceived threat of her influence. As a metic and a woman, Aspasia was seen as having no rightful voice or accepted position in the political arena. Nevertheless, Pericles, who was, at the time, essentially the embodiment of Athens, popular with the people and respected by the army, may indeed have been under her influence. For Pericles’ critics, this possibility was extremely troubling.

Plutarch notes the depth of Aspasia's and Pericles' relationship: "it is said that every day, both as he left the house and as he came back from the city square, he used to greet her with a kiss" (Plut. *Per.* 24). For the more critical Athenians, this public display of affection suggested that Aspasia did indeed hold influence over Pericles and was, "by general Greek standards, rather a grotesque display" (Beneker, 2012: p. 51) that indicated a weakness that was detrimental to an androcentric Athens. That said, our attention should remain focused on the appeal of Aspasia and her strategic use of both sexual and physical capital, which likely made Pericles confident enough to express his affection so openly. Changing traditional views on public displays of affection was no small feat and may have begun to set a new standard for such displays among the Athenians.

While it is clear that Aspasia was socially active, well-placed within influential circles, and understood the role of sexual and physical capital, factors that provided a significant contribution to her social capital, the precise extent of her role in Athenian politics remains speculation. Another area of debate is Pericles' famed Athenian Funeral Oration, for which he is perhaps most well-remembered.

The debate over the Funeral Oration centres not on whether Pericles delivered it, as Thucydides confirms (*Pel. War*, 2.36-2.46), but rather on whether he should be credited with sole authorship. There have been "claims that Aspasia was [...] the ghost writer for some of Pericles' speeches – such as the Funeral Oration" (Baird, 2016: p. 62). Plato (*Menex.* 236b-236e) also suggests that Aspasia may have been responsible for its composition:

Socrates: Nothing perhaps my own invention; but I was listening only yesterday to Aspasia going through a funeral speech for these very people. For she had heard the report you mention, that the Athenians are going to select a speaker; and she repeated to me the speech which he would deliver, partly improvising and partly from previous thought, putting together fragments of the funeral oration which Pericles delivered, but which, I believe, she composed.

Menexenus: Could you call to mind that speech of Aspasia?

Socrates: Yes, for she taught me; and would correct any mistakes, as she went along (Pl. *Menex.* 236b-236e, Trans. Jowett, 2005).

Furthermore, Tyrell & Bennet (1999: pp. 37-39) argue that it is implausible such words would have come from Pericles unprompted. They refer to Thucydides' (*Pel. War*, 2.45.2) remark: "if I am to speak of womanly virtues to those of you who will henceforth be widows [...] To a woman not to show more weakness than is natural [...] and not to be talked about for good or for evil among men". Kakridis interprets this as evidence that Aspasia was the subject of gossip and that the "real" Pericles would not have made such remarks. One must consider, however, why Pericles would have included them. Given the relationship between Pericles and Aspasia, Thucydides' inclusion of "not to be talked about for good or for evil among men" might imply that Pericles' speech was in part a plea to the people to stop the negative talk about Aspasia and their relationship. If this were true, it would not only highlight Aspasia's influence but also the significant impact of the

relational social capital she had thus far established with Pericles.

A surprising aspect of Pericles' oration, as noted by Sicking (1998: p. 126), is his shift from the traditional epideictic style to a more political tone. Rather than focusing on the military achievements of previous generations, Pericles chooses to concentrate on Athenian political institutions and way of life (Thuc. *Pel. War.* 2.36.4)⁹. Sicking (1998: p. 126, n. 35) argues that for traditionalists who valued the glories of the past, this departure from tradition would be akin to a Christian priest deciding not to recount the familiar story of Bethlehem at Christmas. Such a break from convention likely raised questions about the oration's authorship. However, Pericles' choice to deviate from tradition allowed his audience to focus more attentively on his message, deeming it more relevant than simply honouring the deceased. This strategic shift provided an ideal opportunity to articulate Athenian ideals. It was a clever rhetorical move that (if we consider the passage above - Pl. *Menex.* 236b-236e) a skilled rhetorician like Aspasia would more than likely have known how to employ effectively.

In addition to the possibility that Aspasia may have assisted Pericles with the Funeral Oration, we must also be mindful that the speech may reflect Thucydides' portrayal of Pericles rather than the "real" Pericles himself. Thucydides "must have heard Pericles speak many times, just in the most impressionable years of his own youth, and Pericles impressed him as no other human being ever did" (Else, 1954: p. 153), indicating that Thucydides was a great admirer of Pericles. Consequently, the written account of Pericles' speech could be coloured by Thucydides' own interpretations and emphases. In essence, the Funeral Oration "provides us with Thucydides' account of the kinds of things Pericles would have said" (Samons, 2016: p. 165), which introduces enough ambiguity to cloud any definitive conclusions about its authorship. This brings us back to Aspasia, who was reputed to be an intellectual rhetorician, making it entirely plausible that the drafting of Pericles' Funeral Oration was well within her capabilities.

According to Aeschines¹⁰, Aspasia played the role of advisor to Xenophon and his wife, so it is plausible that she also served as a confidante to Pericles. Given Aspasia's extensive social interactions and involvement in Athenian society, it is not surprising that she would be well-informed about the political climate and current events. Her time in brothels, where she collected snippets of information using her physical and sexual capital, would have provided valuable insights. Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that Aspasia maintained connections with other courtesans, forming a network of relationships akin to that of a spy-master.

⁹"Of the military exploits by which our various possessions were acquired, or of the energy with which we or our fathers drove back the tide of war, Hellenic or Barbarian, I will not speak; the tale would be long and is familiar to you. But before I praise the dead, I should point out by what principles of action we rose to power, and under what institutions and through what manner of life our empire became great. For I conceive that such thoughts are not unsuited to the occasion, and that this numerous assembly of citizens and strangers may profit from listening to them" (Thuc., *Pel. War.* 2.36.4, Trans. Blanco & Roberts, 1998).

¹⁰Cicero, in *De Inventione* (I.31. 51-52, trans. Hubbell, 1949), quotes a lost dialogue by Aeschines to demonstrate Aspasia's ability to counsel Xenophon and his wife.

This network would have allowed her to collect resources, build trust, and grow her social capital. Such “insider knowledge” might explain why Pericles could have diverged from conventional practices in his oration, potentially reflecting the influence of Aspasia’s insights and connections.

Let us consider, as a provisional hypothesis, that Aspasia played a more significant role in crafting the Funeral Oration than Pericles, with democracy and freedom representing “the golden thread in the fabric of the speech” (Else, 1954: p. 154). This raises the question: why would Aspasia frame the speech in this way? One possible answer lies in her personal connection to Athens. Having made Athens her home, where she flourished and shared a close relationship with Pericles, it is plausible that the advice and guidance reflected in the oration.

stemmed from Aspasia’s views on how society should ideally function and her own envisioned role within it. It is also conceivable that Aspasia saw herself as a custodian of Athenian society, retrospectively aligning with the Guardian qualities described by Plato’s Socrates: “philosophical disposition, high spirits, speed, and strength” (Pl. *Resp.*, 376c, trans. Lee, 2007). Thus, Aspasia’s interactions with prominent thinkers might have influenced her perspective on how Athens should operate, suggesting that her ideology quite possibly subtly underpinned the speech’s subtext. If this hypothesis holds true, it illustrates the advantages of capital accumulation and demonstrates Aspasia’s astuteness in not only amassing a wealth of capital but also in skilfully managing and executing it to her benefit. The significance of this cannot be overstated. A female *metic* shaping a vision of a harmonious society by influencing male voices is as refreshing as it was ambitious; and the tools required to make such a political impact were found within her social capital toolbox.

5. Social Life

What distinguished Aspasia from other Athenian women was her departure from the traditional expectations placed on citizen women. Her freedom of movement can be attributed to her initial status as a foreigner, which granted her a unique social position. Moreover, Athens itself was atypical compared to other Greek city-states. As Blundell (1999: p. 113) notes, Athens was far larger, wealthier, and more powerful than most other city-states, Athens had a significantly higher population of slaves and metics when compared to other Greek states. Its democratic constitution was likely to be more radical and innovative than those found elsewhere. These factors considerably impacted the lives, status, and perceptions of women in Athens. That said, marriage also played a crucial role in determining a woman’s social status and her social capital.

Marriage is the union of two individuals, but in the context of social capital, it represents more than the merging of two networks. When two people come together, “some parts of two partners’ personal networks overlap and others remain separate and connected via the partners” (Lin & Erickson, 2008: Chap. 16, p. 342). Moreover, it is generally accepted that in most societies, marriage is predomi-

nantly between a man and a woman, and women's social networks are often less resource-rich than those of men. Women's networks tend to be denser, women-centred, kin-oriented, and connected by similar sociocultural ties. As a result, married women are likely to move away from their own social connections and be drawn into their partners, ultimately "maintaining their partners' social networks and preserving their partners' social capital" (Lin & Erickson, 2008: Chap. 16, p. 344).

Blundell (1999: p. 124) argues that while marriage did not alter a woman's legal or political status, it was a significant transition socially and emotionally. In reality, women were merely transferred from one form of male control to another, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. However, Aspasia's relationship with Pericles circumvented the conventional constraints of marriage, potentially symbolising a degree of equality between them, or as close as possible in a male-dominated society. If we disregard the emotional aspects of marriage, women typically entered these relationships as adolescents, between fourteen and eighteen years old, while most men married around the age of thirty (Blundell, 1999: pp. 119-120). This age difference often gave men an advantage and illustrated another means by which male society exerted control over women. A view supported in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*:

"Ah, Ischomachus", said I, "that is just what I want to hear from you. Did you yourself train your wife to be of the right sort, or did she know her household duties when you received her from her parents?"

Why, what knowledge could she have had, Socrates, when I took her for my wife? She was not yet fifteen years old when she came to me, and up to that time she had lived in leading-strings, seeing, hearing and saying as little as possible (Xen. *Oec.* 7.4-7.5, Trans. Heinemann, 1979).

What stands out about this passage is the clear objectification of women and the assumption that a man could instruct them in areas where he might actually have less knowledge. It also reflects the expectations men had for their wives, especially regarding the traditional domestic role of managing the household. This immediately suggests that Aspasia did not conform to the conventional role of a married woman. Although Aspasia was not legally married to Pericles, society would have expected her to conform to female traditionalisms within the domestic space as his companion. This point is crucial as it demonstrates Aspasia's ability to operate outside the conventional confines of Athenian society. One could argue that Aspasia's age (around 25) when she met Pericles made her less susceptible to conventional pressures. Combined with her lifestyle and status as part of the "only significant group of economically independent women" (Blundell, 1999: p. 148), suggests that she was too strong-willed to be fully bound by traditional expectations. This strength of character was not a flaw, but rather a driving force behind her personal ambitions and her prominent position within elitist circles.

It would be inaccurate to assume that Aspasia exclusively associated with men, her social circle likely included female friends from various backgrounds and so-

cial classes. As [Blundell \(1999: pp. 137-138\)](#) notes, while sexual seclusion might have been an ideal for men, managing an entire social group posed a greater challenge. Blundell suggests that only wealthy women, who were in the minority, faced such strict male control. In contrast, women from lower classes, who naturally had more reasons to interact with the outside world, were less restricted. These lower-class women as [Cohen \(1989: pp. 8-9\)](#) notes, formed close friendships and assisted one another with daily tasks such as going to the marketplace, borrowing ingredients, or caring for the sick and elderly. This suggests that, just as men had their own circles of friends, women also cultivated social networks, particularly with their neighbours, and that such social practices were common and accepted.

Aspasia adeptly navigated both social spheres, maintaining a respectable upper-class image while also enjoying the social freedoms and interactions typical of lower-class women. This freedom of movement enhanced her ability to build social capital, as her relationships and resources came from both sides of the proverbial divide. As a result, Aspasia gained a unique and more comprehensive understanding of how Athenian society actually operated.

It is clear that men and women had different social lives in Classical Athens. However, studies of modern Mediterranean societies ([Cohen, 1989: p. 3](#)), reveal that the same male-female role divisions seen in Classical Athens are characteristic of traditional Mediterranean societies more broadly and do not necessarily imply complete seclusion or exclusion from social, economic, and, to a lesser extent, public life. Although, we must be conscious of the fact that most of the ancient evidence, we have come from a male perspective that was inherently prejudicial towards women.

Social interaction was a crucial part of daily life in ancient Athens, encompassing everything from religious festivals to casual gatherings at water fountains. However, the extent to which both genders participated in social activities is subjective. Male social lives are well-documented and richly sourced, whereas the social interactions of women are less so. This scarcity of evidence, that is also free from male bias, makes it challenging to accurately understand how and when women socialised in Athens. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to conclude that Aspasia had a vibrant social life in Athens, bridging various cultural divides. Given her relative popularity and status, her social calendar would have been both busy and strategically managed. Aspasia's societal climb in Athens was clearly intentional, so it follows that social gatherings were carefully orchestrated affairs. These occasions would have allowed her to network, build connections, gather resources, and gain trust; in short, they were opportunities for her to amass social capital.

6. The Aspasian Affect

In reality, our knowledge of Aspasia's life is limited. However, the information we do have has sparked significant intrigue, establishing her as a "floating signifier" ([Henry, 1995: p. 127](#)) and an "erotized icon of the woman intellectual" ([Skinner, 1997: p. 432](#)) in Western culture. Aspasia's multifaceted persona is captured by

the quote: “When we need Aspasia to be a chaste muse and teacher, she is there; when we need a horizontal, she is there; when we need a profeminist, she is there also” (Henry, 1995: p. 128). This complex image contributes to Aspasia’s enduring investigative appeal. Aspasia was deeply embedded in the heart of Athenian culture, politics, and philosophy, not merely as a bystander but as an active and influential member. Although her achievements are often trivialised and frequently sexualized, it is essential to recognise that these assumptions should not overshadow her significant contributions, both as a metic and as a woman.

Aspasia set a high standard for Athenian women, demonstrating that nonconformity could be advantageous, even if this realisation was likely to be retrospective for many. She impacted female society in several ways. Firstly, for Greek men of a certain social and economic status who kept their wives and daughters as “ornaments in the drawing room, wholly withdrawn from physical toil and the world of men” (Kitteringham, 1975, p. 127, cited in Scheidel, 1995: p. 207), Aspasia represented a new way of living. While Aspasia may not have inspired women to completely break from the traditional Athenian domestic roles, she offered a glimpse into the social freedoms that could be attainable for themselves and their daughters. Secondly, Aspasia’s economic success could have inspired fellow businesswomen, motivating them to seek similar fame and fortune. Thirdly, Aspasia represented hope for other female *metics*, demonstrating what could be achieved through commitment, drive, and the use of sexual and physical capital, social capital. To these groups, Aspasia was undoubtedly an apotheosised figure. Additionally, Athenian men, particularly those of higher social standing, may have also been secretly in awe of Aspasia’s social and economic accomplishments.

The full extent of Aspasia’s social impact on her Athenian contemporaries remains largely undocumented in ancient sources. Most ancient writers did not attribute significant social changes to her, and while we can only speculate about the reasons, her gender was certainly a factor. For instance, “Herodotus’ *Histories* mentions women nearly four hundred times, while Thucydides, his successor, discusses women far less frequently” (Chrystal, 2017: p. 59). This omission of detailed references to women by ancient historians contributes to the obscurity of figures like Aspasia. Although the androcentric nature of fifth-century Athens might partially account for the minimal focus on women, Aspasia’s deviation from Athenian norms would have been both intriguing and unsettling to those invested in upholding traditional, male-centred social values. Her success may have further contributed to her marginalisation; if Aspasia was indeed an anomaly in fifth-century Athens, male historians and decision-makers alike might have been reluctant to acknowledge her achievements, as they conflicted with Athenian androcentric ideology. Even the domestic sphere was subjected to the prevailing narrative, leaving what should be “a tidy, fixed or closed category” (Foxhall, 1989: p. 24) vulnerable to male perspectives.

Aspasia’s deviation from Athenian functionalisms has undoubtedly impeded her recognition, much like Cleopatra VII, the ruler, diplomat, naval commander,

polyglot, and medical author, who is still reduced to being the seducer of Caesar and dying by snake bite. Ultimately, as Seltman (1955: p. 119) points out, the classical world was dominated by a masculine perspective that suffocated the true breadth of women's contributions, with many historical interpretations tainted by prejudice and misunderstanding. Therefore, it becomes even more crucial to critically evaluate both our own perspectives and those of past scholars when piecing together the extant fragments of the female role.

We cannot overlook the fact that Aspasia was linked to Pericles and lived in a time when Athens was extensively documented. However, Aspasia is particularly notable because her rise was a direct result of her own actions, which likely provoked reactions and spurred cultural shifts within Athenian society. Her social charm and freedom of movement positioned her at the heart of Athenian popular culture, making her a prominent figure who was satirised by playwrights and admired by philosophers and politicians alike. Aspasia's ability to navigate and bridge social divides is what made her a significant and influential presence in Athenian society.

7. Conclusion

Henry (1995) argues that Aspasia was a prisoner of history, constrained by historical context itself, but a more accurate interpretation is that she was confined by her gender and the dominance of a male-centric narrative. This gender-biased perspective becomes the prevailing framework among historians and continues to obscure modern interpretations. Furthermore, any positive contributions by women in the ancient world were often devalued, causing their significance to be quickly dismissed by male contemporaries. As a result, the study of Athenian women, including Aspasia, has often been driven more by speculation than by solid evidence. Nevertheless, theorising about Aspasia's life, with the inclusion of social capital as an influential agency, provides a more nuanced understanding of both her individual impact and the complexities of Athenian society.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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