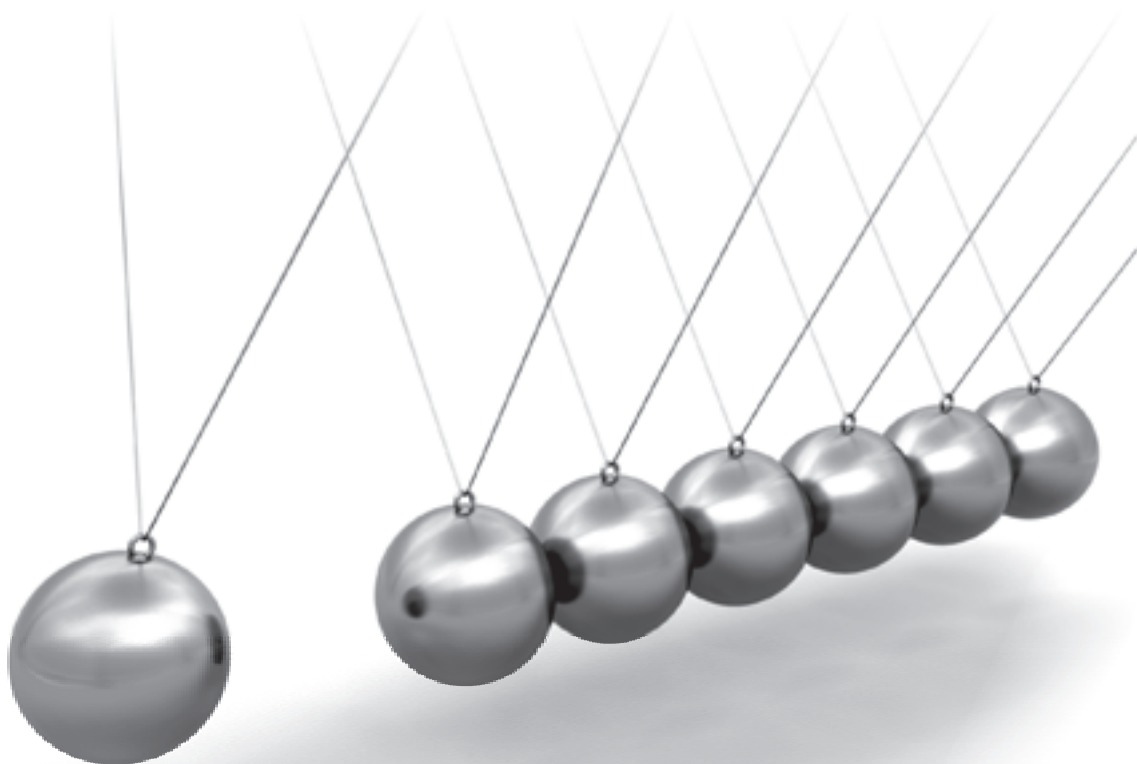


Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



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Irina Deretić*

ASPASIA: WOMAN IN CRISES

Abstract: Like Socrates, Aspasia did not leave any writings. We know about her from secondary sources. In this paper, I will show a number of things in the reports of what Aspasia said and did that are philosophically interesting, especially in what they show about dealing with various kinds of crises, from marital to political ones. First, I will argue for the most probable reconstruction of her life. Second, I will elucidate what kind of method Aspasia employed when considering marital issues. Third, I will endeavor to prove that Plato's representation of Aspasia was not a mockery, as some authors argue. Furthermore, the most significant philosophical points of Aspasia's Funeral Speech will be highlighted and assessed. Eventually, I will attempt to figure out what Plato's reasons might have been to ascribe this speech to a woman.

Keywords: Aspasia, philosophy, Aeschines Socraticus, funeral oration, *Menexenus*

Introduction

In the history of humankind, Aspasia¹ is not the only woman of real talents who was maliciously slandered and ruthlessly mocked. In Athenian Old Comedy, she is a “dog-eyed concubine” who “bears” Pericles “shameless lust” (259 K-A).² Moreover, Aspasia and her two prostitutes were accused for beginning of the Great War in all Hellas (*Ach.* 515–537). From Cratinus to Eupolis and Aristophanes, in comedy, Aspasia was nothing but a courtesan who employed her devilish charisma to accomplish shameless and evil goals. On the other hand, Aspasia is considered to be a sagacious woman with an excellent intellectual reputation both in rhetoric and philosophy by the most distinguished and prominent authors including Plato (c. 427–347 BC), Aeschines of Sphettus

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1 Like Aspasia, Saint Monica was one of the intellectually influential women, who did not leave any writings. In this volume, D. Dimitrijević insightfully writes on the intellectual contribution of Monica to Augustine's thought.

2 K-A/PCG stands for *Poetae Comici Graeci*, ed. R. Kassel and C. Austin.

(c. 425–350 BC), Xenophon (c. 430–354 BC), Cicero (106–43 BC), and Athenaeus (fl. AD 200). The opposed assessments seem to adduce that she, virtuous or not, played an important role in the public life in the Athens of her time.

In this paper,³ I will show a number of things in the reports of what Aspasia said and did that are philosophically interesting, especially in what they show about dealing with various kinds of crises, from marital to political ones. First, I will argue for the most probable reconstruction of her life. Second, I elucidate what kind of method Aspasia used when considering marital issues. Third, I will endeavor to prove that in the *Mexenus* Plato did not treat Aspasia as a laughing stock. I will highlight what are the most significant philosophical points of the Funeral Oration. Finally, I will attempt to find out what Plato's reasons might have been to ascribe this speech to a woman.

The Controversies Regarding Aspasia's Life

The problem with a reconstruction of Aspasia's *bios* is not a lack of information but, rather, too much of it that is controversial and inconsistent. The best-known source of information about Aspasia is Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (AD 100), an account written several hundred years after her existence. Plutarch's description of her life, which is a part of Pericles' *bios*, is a combination of Socratic sources and some allusions to Aspasia given in the comedies. According to Plutarch, Aspasia was Milesian by birth, the daughter of Axiochus, who was adored by Pericles not only for her sexual appeal, but also for her knowledge and political skills. Socrates and the Socratic philosophers respected her intelligence, education, and oratory skills. Plutarch says that she was a *hetaira* whose house was "a home for young courtesans," and also claims that Aspasia taught spouses of Athenian aristocrats. Aspasia's home seems to be a gathering place for the Athenian aristocrats, where she met Pericles, who fell in love with her.

Another reconstruction of Aspasia's *bios* has been offered by Peter J. Bicknell, which seems to be more credible.⁴ According to his research, based on the literary and epigraphic evidence, Bicknell has reconstructed Aspasia's life as follows: She was born around 470 BC in Miletus, in the

3 I gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments and suggestions given to me on this paper by Nicholas D. Smith.

4 See Bicknell, 1982, pp. 240–250.

family of Axiochus, a Milesian aristocrat,⁵ where she received an excellent education. The Athenian Alcibiades, the elder, was married to Aspasia's sister, who upon his ostracism in the spring of 460 BC took up residence in Miletus. He and Aspasia's sister had a son, whom they named Axiochus⁶ after his Milesian grandfather. Their second son was named Aspasius.⁷ Aspasia moved to Athens in 450 BC with her brother-in-law's family, because of political upheaval and threats to the family. Given that Pericles was closely associated with Alcibiades' family, he met Aspasia in their home and fell in love with her. After divorcing his wife, Pericles and Aspasia lived as husband and wife. Aspasia gave birth to Pericles, the junior.⁸ Bicknell compellingly argues that evidence in "favour of her having been a free woman at the very least [is] the legitimization of Pericles the younger" (Bicknell, 1982, p. 247).

The union of Aspasia and Pericles, which lasted eleven to thirteen years, seems to be based on mutual respect and emotional support, allowing Aspasia to develop her mind in ways rare for women of that time. Pericles died of the plague in 429 BC, which in all likelihood created another crisis for Aspasia. Soon after Pericles' death, Aspasia seems to enter into a subsequent union with Lysicles, a successful politician of democratic orientation, who died in 428/7 BC.⁹ Bicknell does not mention that she was *hetaira* either before or after her time with Pericles.

In the aftermath of the plague that killed Pericles and so many other Athenians, Aspasia might have chosen another intimate relationship for social and financial reasons. As a naturalized Athenian (assuming Bicknell's proposal is correct), Aspasia would not be legally permitted to possess wealth of her own, and would thus need an Athenian patron or else face personal and economic ruin. We cannot ascertain what other motives she may have had for this second union, which was realized so soon after Pericles' death. What is certain is that the choices available to women in

5 Aspasia's Milesian origin and the name of her father are attested by Plut. *Per* 24.2 and Diodorus of Athens in schol. Pl. *Menex.* 235e = Diodorus of Athens, *FGrH* frag. 40.

6 Although the name Axiochus was not rare among the Greeks of Asia Minor, "no earlier Axiochus is attested at Athens and the indications are that the name remained extremely uncommon there" (Bicknell, 1981, p. 246).

7 "Both born before Perikles' citizenship law of 451/0, Axiochos and Aspasius were immune from its provisions" (Bicknell, 1982, p. 247). According to this citizenship law of 451/0, citizenship would be conferred only on children whose both parents were Athenians.

8 See Eup. 110 *K-A/PCG*.

9 For Lysicles and Aspasia, see Plut. *Per.* 24.6, and additional testimonia in Krauss: *Aeschinis Socratici Reliquiae*, items VII, IX, X, as well as pp. 45–47.

her situation were very limited, and marriage to Lysicles would obviate many of the ones that would have been extremely difficult for her.

Aspasia and Marriages in Crisis

Aspasia is represented very favorably by Socratic philosophers such as Xenophon and Aeschines of Sphettus. The latter wrote a dialogue bearing her name. In *De Inventione*, Cicero cites parts of the dialogue written by Aeschines, in which Aspasia interrogates both Xenophon's wife and himself. Cicero acknowledges Aspasia's clever form of reasoning by employing her examples of ἐπαγωγή in his own argumentation chapter. First, Aspasia questions Xenophon's spouse, and then Xenophon himself in the same fashion:

"I wish you would tell me, Xenophon," she said, "if your neighbor 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. (*De Inventione* [I.31.51–52])

After Aspasia's cross-examination, both spouses were ashamed: Xenophon's wife blushed, and Xenophon was silent. These emotional reactions are analogous to the responses of Socrates' interlocutors who become ashamed when acknowledging that their beliefs are false because Socrates shows their inconsistency. Shame does not always block the thinking of an ashamed person; it rather calls their attention to the fact that something is wrong with one's argument that thus requires further thought and revision, if not abandonment. As for Xenophon and his wife, they are also aware that they made an error in reasoning.

Why are their responses faulty? Reply to this question will require understanding that "the dialectical strategy" Aspasia employs here "moves the discussants up along a set of" (Henry, 1995, p. 44) apparently similar alternatives asking whether one prefers a better or worse alternative. One of the critical features of Greek thought in general, and Socrates' in particular, is to opt for a better, not a worse alternative. So it is not odd that the interlocutors nod to everything usually assessed as better. However,

both interlocutors prefer not just the better, but the better that belongs to someone else, i.e., to their neighbor, which makes their preferences morally problematic. The assent has been given to all these apparently non-contentious statements, such as preferring neighbor's better horse, his better property or neighbor's wife better jewelry. Both interlocutors, however, stopped nodding when they were asked whether or not they would prefer a better neighbor's wife or a better neighbor's husband. At that moment, both Xenophon and his wife grasp that coveting what is another's is a moral fault.

What Aspasia wanted is to bring both spouses into a situation where they will both self-examine their own roles in the marriage. She argues that if one prefers and wants a better spouse, one should be a better spouse. Each partner in a marriage should do everything possible to become a better person, including correcting oneself if she or he wishes to be loved and respected fully by the other partner. In addition, she highlights in a Socratic manner that only through the ἀρετή of both spouses, which implies a process of constant moral improvement, can they achieve εὐδαιμονία. Moreover, Aspasia and her Socratic friends consider that both spouses are equal and should engage in decision-making and practicing virtue.¹⁰ They should be the self-aware subjects in a relationship whose primary goal is the pursuit of ἀρετή. There is no indication that Xenophon's and his wife's marriage was in crisis, but from Aspasia, they could learn how to avoid eventual marital crises.

What makes Aspasia's method successful and philosophically interesting is that she leads husband and wife gradually, through analogy conceded as certain, to acknowledge what really matters in marriage. Her approach might not be so effectual if she had asked the last question at the beginning of her interrogation. The meaning of marital life might not be so evident if it were not prepared by the dialectical questioning, referring to analogical examples. According to Cicero's Aeschines, Aspasia invented a kind of ἐπαγωγή: the form of cross-examination in which an interlocutor responds to several uncontroversial examples and the questioner finds a general principle fitting all the responses. "The principle will then undermine what the interlocutor had said or claimed to believe about the controversial subject at hand" (Pappas & Zelcer, 2015, p. 54, n. 53).¹¹

Unlike Aeschines', Xenophon's Aspasia neither appears as a character in his works nor speaks directly. She is mentioned in the *Memorabil-*

10 For more on virtues of women in Ancient Greece and Rome see also Plečaš's essay in this volume.

11 Their argument is based on Cicero. See Cicero, *De Inventione* 1.31.51–52.

ia and the *Oeconomicus*. In both dialogues, as Henry rightly highlights, “Xenophon evokes a woman whose life and thought was neither dependent on nor mediated” by her relation with Pericles (Henry, 1995, p. 46). He is never even linked with Aspasia, who is praised by Xenophon’s Socrates as an honest, intelligent, and truthful person. In the *Memorabilia*, she describes a good matchmaker as not only the one who is skillful “at bringing people into marriage,” but also the one who says what is *true*¹² about a woman or a man who is supposed to be married. Aspasia considers veracity and honesty as the preconditions for the spouses to avoid marital crises. If the matchmaker lies about women and men who are supposed to be married, they might end their marriage hating each other. In the *Oeconomicus*, Aspasia not only advocated women’s education but also seemed to educate future spouses. Education is one of the conditions for equality of men and women in a marriage. The education of wives was not very common in the Greece of their times, which implies that both Xenophon’s Socrates and Aspasia seem to introduce an important novelty.

Aspasia and War Crises

One of the worst crises that can happen to humans is to be in a war. This is particularly difficult for women because they must stand by helplessly while facing the potential loss of sons and husbands. If their husbands die, they become responsible for the entire family’s survival, and yet, their own control over the means of survival is extremely limited. Aspasia is chosen by Plato to represent the voices of the dead. Although Aspasia is not interlocutor in the *Menexenus*, her *logoi* are dominant in this Plato’s dialogue. Her speech consists of both the *epitaphios* proper and a speech within a speech (246d1–248d6) wherein she conveys to the audience what the dead warriors advise their parents and children to do and feel. The first and second conversational interchange (234a1–236d2, 249d1–e7) between Socrates and Menexenus provide the opening and closing frame of the dialogue. The latter “expresses gratitude and amazement,” as Henry notes, “and Socrates promises to impart other political speeches (*politikoi logoi*) that Aspasia has also recited to him” (Henry, 1995, p. 33).

Jan M. Robitzsch (2017) distinguished the views on Aspasia in the *Menexenus* based on how the dialogue itself is understood. The first reading, which he calls traditional, sees Aspasia as “someone devoid of any

12 Emphasis by I.D.

serious merit” (Robitzsch, 2017, p. 228). It is consistent with the interpretation that the *Menexenus* is a parody.¹³ The second is a feminist interpretation, which holds that Plato, in fact, diminishes Aspasia’s contribution to the history of rhetoric and philosophy. This reading approaches the dialogue seriously.¹⁴ The middle way, to which Robitzsch belongs, interprets Aspasia and the dialogue as playful, neither completely serious nor entirely ironic. I will add to Robitzsch’s reconstruction Nickolas Pappas’ and Mark Zelcer’s view,¹⁵ who consider “Socrates’ ascription of the speech to Aspasia as a nod to her genuine rhetorical skills” (Pappas & Zelcer, 2015, p. 31). Moreover, they interpret the dialogue as “an intended improvement” upon the traditional funeral oratory, including the speech of Pericles (Pappas & Zelcer, 2015, p. 7). Overall, they positively assess both Aspasia and Plato’s *Menexenus*.

Concurring with Pappas and Zelcer, I will argue that speech within a speech is seriously intended. Through Aspasia, Plato expresses his views, which can be read in the framework of his ethics. Additionally, I will point out why Plato deliberately chose a woman to convey the advice of the dead warriors. Moreover, Aspasia’s speech contributes to our topic of crisis because her *logoi* are about the greatest crisis in one’s life when one is permanently deprived of one’s beloved who died in the war.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Aspasia is said to be a teacher in oratory of both Pericles and Socrates (*Menex.* 235e6–236a2). Plato seems to be ironic that Aspasia would write a better eulogy than Pericles did. How can she be the teacher of such an experienced politician and speaker as Pericles was? He was a successful rhetorician and politician before meeting her. Nevertheless, it might not be true that Plato mocked Aspasia and even her relationship with Pericles. First, by mentioning Pericles in this context, Plato alludes to his famous funeral oration in Thucydides. Additionally, Plato seems to mean that Aspasia was good at giving advice and that Pericles consulted with her as an intelligent person who understands politics well. She certainly belonged to his “internal intellectual circle.”¹⁶ Socrates himself also characterized Aspasia as his teacher in oratory. There may be Socratic modesty here, but it seems to be more than that because if Socrates could make speeches like that, why would he

13 See, for example, Pohlenz, 1913, pp. 261–262, Henry, 1995, pp. 33–36, etc.

14 See, for example, Glenn, 1995, pp. 37–39, Blair, 2012, etc.

15 Although Pappas and Zelcer (2015, pp. 31–37) regard Aspasia positively their reading of the *Menexenus* seems not to be characterized as a feminist one.

16 Robitzsch assumes this. It is, however, for him “difficult to gauge the exact level of influence Aspasia had on Pericles’ speeches and thinking.” See Robitzsch, 2017, p. 219.

need to avoid politics?¹⁷ The tone in the *Menexenus* suggests that Aspasia should be regarded similarly to Diotima. Both of them were portrayed as skilled and wise.

Although some question the serious character of the dialogue, there seems not to be anyone who criticizes its closing section, which is Aspasia's speech within the speech. She conveys what the dead would want their parents and descendants to feel and do to overcome the inevitable psychic crises that happen when their beloved ones are irrevocably cut off from their lives.

At the very beginning of Aspasia's oration, the dead, who lived (and died) nobly, made an appeal to their descendants to live as nobly as possible (εἶναι ὡς ἀρίστους, *Menex.* 246c). The fear of shame and the elimination of threats to one's homeland, family, and friends are what motivates warriors to fight in the war. Not only did they not want to shame themselves, but they also wished to save their fathers and descendants from shame as well, in this way showing that their life is linked to the past and future of their family. If their dilemma is to die, or live in shame, they prefer the first option because they find that life is not worth living for those who shame themselves or those they love (246d1–6). In this reasoning, we can find the same view represented as the one expressed by Socrates in Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, who shows there that he would prefer to die honorably than live a shameful life that is thus no longer worth living.

The dead soldiers, as Aspasia conveys their words, appeal to the unity of virtues (246e ff.). This is an important element of the ethical thought of Plato's Socrates, and supports the interpretative hypothesis that through Aspasia's oration Plato conveys his own philosophical views. Virtue is the condition for attaining happiness, the well-being of any person. If one does not pursue virtue, but allegedly more attractive aims such as wealth, beauty, and bodily strength, then this person will lack internal harmony, integrity, and dignity.¹⁸ How can a person who is in disharmony with herself, lacking stability and honor, be happy and live a good life? Aspasia contends that wisdom must be united with justice and the other virtues, such as courage and moderation, or one will merely be cunning, and not genuinely wise. Consequently, only if knowledge is united with all other virtues can any of us achieve well-being.

Another potent, undoubtedly heroic appeal, coming from death, is uttered in an even higher tone. The dead convey, as Aspasia understands

17 In the *Apology* (31c3 ff.), Socrates explicitly says that his *daimonion* prevented him "from taking part in public affairs" (31d4–5).

18 This idea also appears in the work of Serbian philosopher Ksenija Atanasijević. For more on her philosophy see Petrović's essay in this volume.

them, that their defeat will be in vain if their sons are not better off than they are. The descendants should not treat the honor and glory of their fathers as if it were their own. This is not meant to imply that the sons ought not to be aware, remember, and celebrate their fathers, but to act independently, endeavoring to accomplish honors with their own strength. The dead fathers appeal to their sons that they should affirm the honor and glory of their fathers by their own courageous actions. Moreover, what the dead would want is not only to be privately or publicly remembered, but much more than that, that their spirits will be present in the brave deeds of their descendants.

Given that the dead know that the grief¹⁹ of their parents will be the greatest, it is a special assignment to find how to console those who have experienced this most terrible loss. In the history of humankind, women have been regarded as more empathic, because they intuitively know how to console those who suffered the most. Plato's Aspasia is represented in this way. Consonant with deeper understanding and empathy, the advice to parents, intended as a proper remedy for their pain, implies what kind of emotion grief is and what implications it produces. Aspasia acknowledges the inner pain a person can suffer because of some significant loss, especially in the case of the death of a beloved one. She contends that if we share lamentation with parents who lost their sons, their pain will increase. Mourning with persons who are in such anguish, would, in fact, encourage them to indulge in intense and deep grief, which is self-destructive. Instead, the bereaved parents should contend with their grief: (i) by being moderate in bereavement, (ii) "by turning their minds to the concerns of the living" (248c), and (iii) by limiting lamentation of the dead (249c).²⁰

In Plato's account, Aspasia's attitude to grief is in accordance with the Greek ethical ideal. Her advice is consonant with the famous Greek saying "Nothing too much," by affirming that the deceased do not want their parents to grieve excessively but to overcome their pain. Nevertheless, Plato's Aspasia's message is far beyond any emotion or even beyond any particular state of affairs. She associates *μηδέν ἄγαν* with happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*), as the utmost purpose of one's life, which consists in practicing virtue in general, and justice and moderation in particular. What Plato's Aspasia is pledging, conveying the will of the dead warriors, is that their deaths should not result in permanent reductions in their loved ones' and descendants' capacity for happiness in life.

19 I discuss about grief in detail in: Deretić, 2022 (forthcoming).

20 Deretić, 2022 (forthcoming).

Why a Woman Represents the Wishes of the Dead

There are significant reasons, in my opinion, why this speech is ascribed to a woman²¹ in general and Aspasia in particular. First, in the history of humankind, women were expected to empathize with those who suffer, especially when those who grieve are parents whose bereavement is caused by the permanent disappearance of their sons. This might be called, as Mark Zelcer did, “empathic feminine perspective” (Zelcer, 2018, p. 34). Second, this speech proves what we know from the historical evidence that she was engaged with political and social issues. Nickolas Pappas and Mark Zelcer hold that Plato de-domesticates Aspasia so that she could apply her intelligence on issues that are beyond marriage and courtship (Pappas & Zelcer, 2015, p. 36).

Who is missing in the speech of the dead? Absent are wives of the deceased warriors, although wives are necessary to implement their dead husbands’ wishes. As it seems to me, the most important reason why Plato represents Aspasia is the fact that she is a woman who relates well to the wives of those who passed away. It is the wives who better than anyone else understand their husbands’ last wishes. They also know to carry out in a practical life how to make their wishes true. Furthermore, Aspasia, as a clever woman, who in her own life successfully overcame many crises, is the one who with all seriousness understands what the dead soldiers would wish and appeal for regarding what should be done after the lost war, if only they could speak for themselves. Plato purposefully chooses Aspasia to represent the wishes of the dead warriors because this politically educated and wise woman is deeply aware of the social and political implications of the lost war. Given such a sober and yet also uplifting and virtuous point of view, we should not mistake Plato’s praise for mere mockery.

Recently, Mark Zelcer (2018) offers another interpretation of why Aspasia is a “natural choice as the author of the dialogue” because she is portrayed persuasively “as having once been pro-Pericles but is now sympathetic with Socrates” (2018, p. 41). Additionally, Zelcer points out the fact that is “generally overlooked” that Aspasia lost her and Pericles’ son in the war. Pericles the Younger was one of the Captains in the Battle of Arginusae. He was “executed along with the other defendants who returned to Athens to face the trial” (2018, p. 40). Zelcer argues that had the author of the *Menexenus* mocked Aspasia, he would have been mistreated cruelly

21 In this volume, V. Knežević provides an interesting view about the women’s subjectivity and the cult of the dead in the Ancient Greek society.

“grieving mother of a citizen in a funeral oration, no less, which clearly alludes to the death of her son” (2018, p. 42).

Aspasia was a woman whose whole life was full of crises. As a young woman, she came to Athens without attested Athenian citizenship. Nevertheless, with Pericles, one of the best and wisest Athenian politicians of all times, she lived together in mutual love and respect, and they had a son, Pericles the younger. She was known as an intelligent and thoughtful person, who in the writings of Socratic authors had a prominent place, not only for giving martial and economic advice but for a contribution to an important method of reasoning. How the Athenians lived during the plague is so strikingly described by Thucydides. She got out of this crisis by entering into a union with another very powerful Athenian politician, who soon died. Because of the defeat in the Battle of Arginusae, her son was executed. There was not a word in any historical reports of how she reacts to this infamy. Approximately more than a decade after she died, Plato represented her philosophizing about a broad and complex subject, unifying in the funeral speech both Athenian and her own tragedy.

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АСПАЗИЈА: ЖЕНА У КРИЗИ

Апстракт: Попут Сократа, ни Аспазија није оставила ниједно писано дело. О њој знамо само из секундарних извора. У овом тексту тежићу да поткрепим тезу по којој је много тога што се приписује Аспазији од филозофског значаја, те да покажем како се она бавила различитим врстама криза, од брачних до оних политичких. Прво, настојаћу да утврдим која је реконструкција њеног живота највероватнија. Друго, размотрићу коју је методу Аспазија користила када је реч о браку и брачним односима. Треће, тежићу да покажем како Платон није приказивао Аспазију у комичном светлу, како тврде неки аутори. Затим ћу критички преиспитати најзначајније поенте Аспазијиног погребног говора, који је од ње чуо Сократ. Истражићу Платонове разлоге који су га навели да управо овај говор припише жени.

Кључне речи: Аспазија, Есхин, филозофија, погребна беседа, *Менексен*

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