Dancing Naked with Socrates: Pericles, Aspasia, and Socrates at Play with Politics, Rhetoric, and Philosophy

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Though you’re supposed to be giving a speech, you’re making jokes; you force me to be on guard against your speech in case you say something funny, although you should come out to speak in peace.

*Symposium* 189a6-b1

The *Menexenus* defies smooth interpretation. It goes neither quietly into pre-conceived categories, nor can it be quickly co-opted into the canon. Its inherent ambiguity, insistent recalcitrance, and playfulness are indeed its greatest resources. But philosophers are a solemn bunch. They turn a joke into a riddle and immediately set out to locate a solution, a firm foundation upon which an unambiguous interpretation can be established. So in the literature on the *Menexenus*, we find those intent on pigeonholing the dialogue, some arguing that it is a political pamphlet of the utmost seriousness,1 others that it is pure irony (see, e.g., Bloedow 1975). There are even those who argue that in order to understand the *Menexenus*, the reader must already know the ‘Good’ so that this dialogue, along with all the rest, may be comprehended as a ‘representation device’ for such absolute knowledge (Stern 1974, 208).

Fortunately, recent interpretations of the *Menexenus* have increasingly embraced the playful ambiguity of the dialogue. Rosenstock 1994, for example, suggests that Socrates is a revenant, a ghost of the historical Socrates, and that the dialogue is a sort of palimpsest, written upon, erased and written upon again such that shades of meaning emerge in the play of images.2 Whatever the limits of this reading may be, its greatness lies in the justice it does to the playful spirit

1 Huby 1957 makes much of the unanimous acceptance of the seriousness of the speech among the ancients. In arguing that the dialogue should be taken seriously as a political pamphlet, she appeals to Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Hermogenes and takes Cicero at his word when he suggests that the *Menexenus* was read each year at the funeral games in Athens. She suggests that perhaps Plato “tossed it off quickly” in an attempt to convince the Athenians not to betray their promise to care for the orphans of the war dead. Kahn 1963 agrees that the dialogue is a political pamphlet, but he suggests a broader purpose: To nudge the Athenians out of complacent self-admiration and to put them in a more critical state of mind.

2 Salkever 1993, 134 too embraces the playful dimensions of the text and argues quite convincingly ‘that the dialogue is a playful comment on one of the most solemn moments of Athenian politics and that its commentary is not merely negative and dismissive but carries with it some opinions as to how to think about the possibilities and limits of democratic politics’.
in which the *Menexenus* itself seems to have been written. To embrace this spirit of playfulness is to throw off the yoke that demands imposing a single, comprehensive account on the dialogue. It is to approach the text not as some inanimate object to be interpreted, situated into categories, solved, but as a living invitation to think reflectively about the enigmatic relationship between politics, rhetoric, and philosophy.

The rather strange story Socrates tells Menexenus about how he came to be in possession of the *epitaphios* he will recite itself encourages such creative critical reflection. Having encountered Menexenus on his way from the council where a decision as to who would be the best to speak over the dead was being considered, Socrates offers to recite a speech he heard the day before from Aspasia. Specifically, he says that having heard that the Athenians were considering this decision Aspasia ‘narrated [a funeral oration] for me—at times improvising the sorts of things one should say and at times [including things] she had considered previously when she composed, as it seems to me, the funeral oration that Pericles spoke—by sticking together (*συγκολλώσσα*) certain leftovers (*περιλείμματα*) of that speech’ (236b3-6, my trans.). By characterizing the speech he is about to give first as Aspasia’s and second as ‘leftovers’ she ‘stuck together’ from the famous speech she composed, although it was publicly spoken by Pericles, Socrates both distances himself from the speech he is about to recite and taps into to the intrigue of the politically and sexually charged relationship between Pericles and Aspasia with which the Athenians had been obsessed for at least a generation.3

Socrates’ strange suggestion that the speech is made up of leftovers from Pericles’ famous oration invites us creatively to imagine a dialogue between Aspasia and Pericles concerning the precise content of the speech itself; a dialogue in which certain themes and ideas emerged that were, for whatever reason, abandoned by Pericles himself in the public act of speaking.4 Aspasia’s speech is said to have been stuck together from remnants, from things left out of that speech spoken in 431 BCE to a multitude cramped together within the confines of the beleaguered city of Athens. If this is the image, then perhaps it is possible to read Aspasia’s speech as one half of a dialogue, the other side of which is Pericles’ funeral oration.5 Such a dialogue would be a kind of play in which the two

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3 Henry 1995 explicates the extent to which Socrates’ characterization of Aspasia here is consistent with the depictions of her as a whore and producer of the illegitimate in Old Comedy.

4 Most commentators agree that the speech put into the mouth of Pericles by Thucydides is one of the targets of the *Menexenus*. Support for this can be found not only in the explicit mention of Aspasia and Pericles (236a7-b6), but also, the reference to a pupil of the rhetoric of Antiphon (236a) points directly to Thucydides. Kahn 1963, 221-223 presents the evidence for the link quite clearly. This is not to suggest that there are not other targets as well, but the links between Aspasia’s speech and that put into the mouth of Pericles are strong enough to justify the appeal to an imagined dialogue between them.

5 The various filters through which this dialogue between Pericles and Aspasia may be discerned—the rhetorical play of Socrates, the absence of Plato’s unequivocal voice, the complex and controversial methodology of Thucydides’ writing of history—renders the dialogue itself ambiguous,
voices, when heard together, give rise to a broader, more complete picture of politics than either provides in isolation. Taken in this way, the speech Aspasia offers would need to be recognized as consistent with the basic thrust of the Periclean position, though critical of its one-sided emphasis on certain themes that emerge as decisive.\(^6\) Both speeches bring great rhetorical skill to bear on the question—as pressing today as it was in ancient Athens—concerning the relationship between the citizen and the city. On the face of it, Pericles and Aspasia offer two different models according to which this relationship may be thought. For Pericles, the citizens are to become lovers of the city, the relationship founded upon freedom. For Aspasia, the city is to be parent to the citizens, the relationship grounded in justice. When read together, however, the two speeches may be seen to complement one another in such a way that there emerges a powerful new vision of a politics determined as much by freedom as by justice. Yet however powerful this new vision is, what is missing, and what the tension underlying the logic of the imagined dialogue itself can provide only in a very limited way, is a truly critical analysis of the position which together they establish.

The dialogical play between Aspasia and Pericles therefore must be inscribed by another, more critical play; one in which Socrates, the philosopher-citizen, deploys rhetoric and indeed humor not only critically to challenge the methods of manipulation by which such political ideologies are established, but also to hold the more dangerous dimensions of which they remain unaware in check. By bringing the epitaphios of Aspasia into dialogical relation with that of Pericles, Socrates introduces a powerful vision of politics in which the freedom of the citizens is tempered by a deep concern for justice. However, by presenting this vision of politics as a play of ideologies and by highlighting the manner in which these ideologies themselves not only reinforce, but also subvert one another, Socrates opens the space from which critically to engage the authority of either ideology taken in isolation. In so doing, Socrates himself emerges as a sort of specter of the model philosopher-citizen: One who perturbs the minds of those he encounters by refusing to be taken in by the simplistic dichotomies posited by political ideologues intent on supplanting the subtle ambiguities of contingent existence with the absolute certainty of their own political ideology. In response to this, Socrates, the philosopher-citizen, deploys a twofold strategy. First, by engaging in a playful parody of the rhetoric itself, he undermines the aura of authority on which such political ideologies depend. This sort of playfulness is incomplete, fragmentary. Yet these are precisely the dimensions of the imagined dialogue that open up the space for the creative and critical engagement with the text offered here.

\(^6\) Coventry 1989, 3 asserts: ‘In representing his epitaphios as containing perileimmata from the speech of Pericles (236b6), Plato suggests that it uses material which, while not included by Pericles, is not out of keeping with the concerns of the oration for which it was originally designed. In associating the orations in this way, Plato indicates his intention of continuing Pericles’ analysis of Athens by other means’. Despite the rather presumptive assumption that Plato’s own intentions can be clearly discerned, this passage, at odds with much recent commentary on the Menexenus, indicates the extent to which Aspasia’s speech is fundamentally compatible with that of Pericles.
designed to foster a heightened presence of mind in those who encounter it—for one must, quite literally, be on guard against the speech so as to be able to delineate the serious from the silly. Second, this heightened presence of mind in turn opens up the space from which it becomes possible to discern the truly liberating and just dimensions of the political position buried under its layers of cosmetic rhetoric. By attending to Socrates’ skillful use of rhetoric, humor, and ambiguity in the Menexenus, perhaps we too may gain some insight into how to respond to the political ideologies forced upon us in various new and ever more complicated ways.

I. Prelude to an Imagined Dialogue

Socrates’ initial conversation with Menexenus is most insightful when it is at its most playful. Two specific issues emerge immediately that introduce important elements of the imagined dialogue between Aspasia and Pericles. The first involves a subtle shift Socrates signals in his very first response to Menexenus. Gently chastising Menexenus for believing himself to be at the end of his education and engagement with philosophy, Socrates suggests that Menexenus, though young, is eager to rule (ἀρχεῖν) in the tradition of his family who have always provided someone as a care-taker (ἐπιμελητήν) of the older generation (234a4-b2). By determining ἀρχεῖν as a sort of ἐπιμέλεια, Socrates already suggests that ruling involves more than securing control and solidifying power, but also entails a responsibility to care for those who are governed. The responsibilities the city has for taking care of its citizens will in fact emerge as a central theme of Aspasia’s funeral oration, a theme nearly completely missing from Pericles’ speech. With this pregnant but subtle suggestion that ruling is a sort of care taking, Socrates points directly to the central tension of the debate between Aspasia and Pericles.

The second theme that Socrates introduces in his initial discussion with Menexenus is the mesmerizing effect rhetoric can have on its audience. The words spoken at a funeral oration are designed to steal away the soul, to dull the critical capacities of the citizens. They seek to instill an unreflective faith in the nobility of those who died, though they may have been, as Socrates suggests, good for nothing in life (234c4). Just this has happened to Socrates himself: Upon hearing such words of praise for the fallen heroes and indeed for the entire city, Socrates began to feel as if he along with his city had become more wonderful than they were before. Socrates says:

And this sense of majesty (σεμνότης) remains with me for more than three days; in this way the fresh words and sounds of

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7 In pointing to the ‘aura’ of political rhetoric and insisting upon the ‘heightened presence of mind’ Socrates’ playful approach to such rhetoric instills, I borrow from Benjamin 1968. Benjamin speaks of the decay of the aura of the work of art in the age of technical reproduction and the heightened presence of mind modern film, with its capacity to shock, engenders in its audience. For a detailed discussion of the meaning of the aura in that context, see Long 2001.

8 Salkever 1993, 136 emphasizes the importance of this determination.
the speaker enter into my ears with the result that not until the
fourth or fifth day do I remember myself and perceive where
on earth I am, before this, however, I think that I all but live on
the Isle of the Blessed. So clever are the rhetors with us.
(235b8-c5)
Socrates deploys playful irony in leveling his familiar critique of those rhetori-
cians who manipulate the multitude. The irony is captured by the use of the word
σεμνότης to designate the feeling their words generate. In its positive sense,
σεμνότης means ‘solemnity’, ‘dignity’, and ‘majesty’. But the word also has a
dark side, for it can mean 'pomposity'. When dignity and solemnity are trans-
formed into pomposity, the mesmerizing effect of an epitaphios turns dangerous.
In the funeral oration pride, loyalty, and patriotism mix with pain, sorrow, and
rage to generate a powerful and indeed combustible political potion. These emo-
tions can easily cause an audience to ‘forget themselves’, that is, to relinquish
their capacity for reflective self-critique. One antidote for such a potent political
potion is parody. Laughter can shatter the mesmerizing aura of such powerful
words; it breaks up the moment, forces a pause that allows the mind once again to
catch up with and attempt to regain control of the thrust of emotion.
This is indeed the pharmakon Socrates attempts to give Menexenus whose
unwillingness to laugh with Socrates throughout betrays an inelasticity of mind
that hinders his capacity for critical reflection. Menexenus’ impetuous desire to
hear Socrates give a funeral oration, his intolerance of Socrates’ repeated insis-
tence that the speech is not his, but Aspasia’s, and his uncritical acceptance of
the excellence of the speech itself suggest that he lacks the philosophical sophis-
tication to get the joke and, as a result, may not be as prepared for politics as he,
for all his eagerness, might have hoped. Socrates, by contrast, is unequivocally
playful. Before beginning the recitation he expresses concern that Menexenus
might laugh at him because at his age he still is at play with words. The earnest
young man assures him—alas—that he will not laugh and insists upon the
speech. With one final flourish, one last valiant attempt to move the boy to laugh-
ter, Socrates says ‘But indeed there is such a need to gratify you that if you
ordered me to dance naked, I would gratify you, since we are alone’ (236d1-2).
The image is striking indeed: A wizened old man stripped naked, gyrating, his
body parts, snubbed and otherwise, exposed and all aflutter. Ironically, however,
what makes us laugh at this image is not so much the picture of old Socrates alive
in playful dance, but the juxtaposition of this obstreperous liveliness with the
stolid earnestness of young Menexenus.12

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9 For a more detailed discussion of the importance of σεμνότης here, see Loraux 1986, 319-321.
10 Loraux 1986, 304 speaks of the liberating effect of humor and reads the Menexenus as an anti-
dote against the spell of fascination fostered by the rhetoric of the funeral oration.
11 See 236c6-7, when he eagerly insists that Socrates speak whether it be Aspasia’s speech or
anyone else’s. See too, the end of the dialogue, 249d10-e1, when Menexenus expresses his gratitude
to Aspasia or to he who told Socrates, and even more to Socrates who told Menexenus.
12 Bergson 1999, 82 links comic laughter to precisely this sort of juxtaposition between fluidity
But rather than stripping naked, Socrates puts on a mask, plays a part that involves a bit of fancy footwork, if not outright dancing. Taking on the voice of Aspasia, Socrates does not return to himself, nor do we know where on earth we are, until at the end he says: ‘This is the speech of Aspasia the Milesian for you, Menexenus’ (249d1-2). Because of this, we shall ourselves join in the game and speak not of Socrates’ oration, nor indeed, of Plato’s, but rather of Aspasia’s. This is not meant to obfuscate the fact that Aspasia is here in fact a double construct, first of Plato and then of Socrates. Rather it is meant to open up a site from which to imagine a dialogue between Aspasia and Pericles in which the relationship between the citizen and the city is at issue. If, however, Aspasia’s speech has been stuck together from the leftovers of the speech spoken by Pericles, it makes sense to begin with the main course.

II. Pericles: The Citizen as Ἐρωστής

Monoson 1994 has convincingly argued that the animating metaphor of Pericles’ conception of the citizen is that of the lover, Ἐρωστής. Taking her cue from Pericles’ admonition that the citizens should ‘contemplate the power of the city in its daily work and become lovers (erastai) of it’, Monoson suggests that the model according to which Pericles thinks the relationship between the citizen and the city is that of the male lover and his beloved. Although we shall be critical of a few of the conclusions she draws from her analysis, the approach proves highly instructive as an interpretation of the Periclean oration and suggestive for the vocabulary to contrast with Aspasia’s position. By thematizing the citizen/city relationship in terms of the erastês/eromenos vocabulary, Pericles seems to eschew the private sphere and to posit freedom—from both the necessities of life and the commands of another—as the very essence of politics. Aspasia, however, understands the citizen/city relationship in familial terms, and rigidity: ‘The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and events’. Menexenus’ rigidity points to a certain absentmindedness—an incapacity to reflect critically on his own position, his relation to Socrates, and to the ideologies he encounters. Socrates’ gesture to dance naked for him is an attempt to undermine this inelasticity of mind. His ultimate disguise (to speak as Aspasia) reinforces the need to be skeptical in the face of ideological rhetoric.

13 The entire speech is firmly framed by Socrates’ insistence that he speaks in the voice of Aspasia. See 236d2-3 for the introductory indication.
14 See also Monoson 2000, ch. 3 which is little changed from the earlier article.
15 Thucydides 1942, ii 43.1. Monoson legitimately translates the participle θεωμένως as ‘to gaze’ in order, it seems, to underscore the importance of visual stimulus within the economy of ancient Athenian erotics. For a discussion of this see, Halperin 1990, 267. I have chosen the more traditional ‘contemplate’ in order to emphasize the intellectual dimension of the erotic relationship.
16 For a discussion of the importance of the public sphere as the space in which freedom from the necessities of life and the command of another emerged as the condition for the possibility of genuine political action for the Greeks, see Arendt 1958, 32ff.
analogous to that between child and parent, and so seems to embrace a politics of care with the other-regarding virtue of justice as the central principle of politics.\textsuperscript{17}

To clarify the manner in which the \textit{erastès}/\textit{eromenos} vocabulary points to a politics of freedom, it is helpful to adumbrate the complex set of norms and customs that governed this sort of relationship. In \textit{Symposium} 180d ff. Pausanias speaks of two kinds of love, the one is 'common', bound to the body and the necessities of procreation, the other is 'heavenly', sharing not in the female, but only in the male, for it concerns itself exclusively with the soul and intellect. Pausanias goes on to outline how highly formalized rituals surrounding such erotic relationships between males in Athens served to moderate and control the very real possibility that young boys would relinquish their allegedly natural inclination to be active and develop a perverse desire for submission. Monoson suggests that Pericles' injunction that the citizens are to become 'lovers' of the city was predicated not on the male-female model of \textit{eros}, but on the model of the erotic relationship between adult male citizens and adolescent, free-born boys. The male-female model would have placed the city in far too subservient a position, a role that the Greek prejudice against passivity could not abide and that Pericles' own praise of the city as highly active could not sustain.

Monoson goes on to develop the implications of the metaphor, two of which ought here to be emphasized. First, in \textit{erastès}/\textit{eromenos} relationships there is a high degree of reciprocity. While the lover receives pleasure, the beloved receives guidance, friendship and above all, education. Indeed, if Pausanias is to be believed, the relationship itself is undertaken for the sake of virtue and for this reason endures long after the physical dimension has disappeared. To apprehend the city as \textit{eromenos} is to position the citizen-city relationship in a ritualized setting that makes demands on both sides. While the citizen must treat the city appropriately, not forcing it into positions contrary to its nature and destructive of its excellence, the city must respond by allowing each citizen to pursue his happiness. Thus, between the walls of the city, the citizen discharges his freely chosen duties. Pericles praises the dead for having freely chosen to die for the sake of the city and admonishes those present to be willing to do the same (ii 41.5). For its part, the city remains open so as to maximize the degree of freedom, culture, and

\textsuperscript{17} At first glance it may seem odd to identify justice with the politics of care, for according to traditional liberal political theory the private sphere of the family is governed by a unity of affection and interest that renders the concern for justice superfluous. However, this highly idealized and misguided conception of the family not only fails to recognize the diversity of perspectives that manifest themselves in families, but also the extent to which, despite such diversity, there remains a fundamental concern for the well-being of the other that renders the family the first, most significant, sphere in which justice is at issue. Here, justice is not predicated on the abstract supposition of universal equality, but on the concrete concern for the other. By thematizing the public, political relationship between the citizen and city in terms of the familial relationship between child and parent, Aspasia asserts the political importance of this more concrete conception of justice. For a critique of the traditional idealization of the family, see Okin 1989; for an indication of the ways this critique forces us to reconsider the nature of the public/private distinction, see Long 1998.
education available to the citizens (ii 39.1); in it, the citizens can pursue, both in private and in public, those activities each deems most worthy (ii 37.2). By fostering the excellence and power of the city, the citizens receive freedom and thus happiness. Pericles expresses the economy of this exchange beautifully to the citizens: ‘Now you, imitating them [i.e., those who died for the sake of the city] and judging happiness to be freedom, but freedom to be good courage, do not shrink from the dangers of war’ (ii 43.4). The city offers happiness, understood primarily in terms of freedom, in exchange for willing sacrifice, the gift the citizen as erastês bestows on his beloved.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, freedom emerges as decisive: It is the middle term that links happiness to willing sacrifice in the logic of Periclean politics.

Another implication of the erastês metaphor is the importance of self-control. In the sexual encounter between erastês and eromenos, the boy is supposed first to refuse to yield, second to permit only intercrural penetration, and finally to resist the temptation to become aroused. Monoson 1994, 263 states, ‘The boy is represented [in the iconography] as yielding only in gratitude for clearly defined benefits received, not out of sexual appetite or his own erotic madness.’ When mapped onto the citizen/city relationship, this implies that the city must act moderately with respect to the citizens. The city is not to succumb to erotic madness; the erotic encounter itself is understood to cultivate an ability to retain rational control of the passions. Thus, the erotic relationship between free males should foster mutual respect and a reciprocal sense of self-sufficiency. Both of these dimensions are captured by Pericles, the latter in his insistence that the present generation has furnished the city with all that it needs to be self-sufficient (ii 36.3), the former in his claim that the words spoken in praise of the city’s greatness themselves serve as the eulogy of the citizens who died for its sake (ii 42.2).

For all its power and insight, however, Monoson’s analysis falls short in two respects. First, she insists that the erastês/eromenos metaphor points to a relationship between the citizen and the city that is ‘one of mutuality and reciprocity between unequals, not one of dominance and subordination’.\textsuperscript{19} She is certainly correct to assert that Pericles is not concerned with the problem that the city might abuse its power and exceed its authority. Yet, it is less clear that the erastês/eromenos relationship is devoid of the dimension of domination. If anything, the empowering image of the citizen as lover serves to cover over those dimensions of domination and power that are always already operating in every political relationship. That Pericles chooses the metaphor he does may have more to do with control and domination than Monoson recognizes. The historical con-

\textsuperscript{18} Monoson 1994, 267-268 points to the passage at ii 43.1-2 in which Pericles suggests that the dead have given the ‘finest contribution’ (καλλιεργηθηκαν ἐρωταν) to the city to emphasize the notion that there is a reciprocal exchange implied by the relationship between the city and the citizen. She points out that the term ἐρωταν refers to the sort of gift that is freely made and implies the expectation of some return.

\textsuperscript{19} Monoson 1994, 263. She repeats the claim at 267 when she says that the relationship is ‘one of free, mutual exchange, not dominance and subordination’. 
text in which the speech was delivered must be taken into account: During the winter of 431, when Pericles spoke, his innovative but highly controversial strategy to allow the Spartans to cut up Attica while the Athenians were to remain secure behind the city walls was under fire. The citizens would have been growing restless and impatient. By calling the citizens ‘erastai’ and enjoining them to remain loyal to their beloved city, Pericles at once affirms their active power and secures their obedience. Even the sort of moderation that Monoson insists belongs to the erastês/eromenos relationship is deployed to this end, for not only is the beloved to act moderately, but so too is the lover. This is clear when Pericles none too subtly reminds the citizens: ‘we do not transgress the law, but always obey those in power and the laws, and especially those that are set down as a benefit against injustice and those that, although being unwritten, bring suitable shame [to the transgressors]’ (ii 37.3). Thus, while the erastês/eromenos relationship clearly does important rhetorical work in the speech, as Monoson suggests, it does not eliminate the dimension of domination. To the contrary, in covering over this dimension of the political relationship, the metaphor serves rhetorically to reinforce Pericles’ position of power.

The second limitation of Monoson’s analysis is her categorical insistence on ‘the complete absence of any suggestion on Pericles’ part that the relationship between citizens and city is in any way like that between children and parent’ (Monoson 1994, 266). Pericles’ epitaphios is exceptional in at least two respects. First, unlike other epitaphioi in which the preceding generations are extensively praised, Pericles moves swiftly to his own generation, mentioning those who came before in a scandalously superficial way. Second, he does not, for the most part, thematize the relationship between citizen and city in terms of familial bonds. However, there remains in the speech a trace element of precisely such a conception of the relationship. This occurs at the very end of the speech, when Pericles insists that ‘the city will nourish (θρέψει) the children of [those who died] on public expense until they reach puberty’ (ii 46.1). By using the verb τρέψειν here, Pericles makes an implicit gesture to the familial model of the citizen/city relationship. Thus, although Monoson is perhaps too enthusiastic when she categorically claims that Pericles does not in any way understand this relationship as analogous to that inhering between parent and child, she is quite correct to emphasize the fact that this model of the relationship, so rife in other examples of the genre, is almost completely missing from Pericles’ speech.

Thus, although freedom emerges as decisive for the Periclean vision of politics, there remains here a trace element of the politics of care, with its deep concern for justice. This is manifest in Pericles’ appeal to the erastês/eromenos relationship—with its insistence on reciprocity—and the resulting reassurance that the city will nourish the children of those who gave their lives for the love of

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20 For an interesting interpretation of the funeral oration as historically situated, see Bosworth 2000. For a contextual interpretation that suggests one possible reading of the infamous admonition to women, see Tyrrell and Bennett 1999.
the city. This suggests that our initial opposition between the Periclean politics of freedom and the Aspasion politics of care, while to some extent justifiable, was perhaps too simplistic, for it eclipses the dimension of justice still discernible, though muted, in the Periclean oration.

It is only as the two positions are brought into relation with one another by the playful rhetoric of Socrates that the limitations of such an unambiguous opposition between them first comes into view. By suggesting that the speech he is about to recite is made up of 'leftovers' of the Periclean oration, Socrates both brings together and sets apart the two speeches in such a way that neither is able to achieve unequivocal authority. The complex dialogical relationship between the two orations that emerges out of the shadow of this playful suggestion opens a perspective from which to evaluate the Periclean vision of the citizen/city relationship.

Although it is tempting at first to interpret Aspasia's deployment of the familial model to thematize the citizen/city relationship and her hyperbolic emphasis on the long, autochthonous history of Athens as diametrically opposed to the position developed by Pericles, this temptation is at once subverted by the suggestion that Aspasia's speech is itself made up of 'leftovers'. To be a leftover is to have been part of a larger whole, yet one that has, for whatever reason, been deemed superfluous. If we take this playful image seriously, Aspasia's speech should not be seen simply as a polemical attack on the Periclean vision of the citizen/city relationship, but also as an attempt to fill out the picture left incomplete by Pericles himself. Thus, when read together, the two speeches point to a far more robust and complex vision of this political relationship than either presents on its own: As the Periclean position posits the primacy of freedom, Aspasia insists on the importance of justice; as the Aspasion position grounds equality in eugenics, Pericles emphasizes excellence of action and equality under the law. This more robust vision of politics is inherently unstable, however, because each position seeks to render the other superfluous by asserting the authority of its own standpoint. In the end it is Socrates, the philosopher-citizen, who, by bringing the two positions together, is capable of thinking his way into the instability of this tension, recognizing it as the very topos of politics in which the establishment of the ultimate hegemony of one ideological position is already the destruction of both freedom and justice. In order to apprehend what Socrates is up to here, it is necessary to set the Periclean position over against that of Aspasia. Let us turn, then, to the other side, to the leftovers themselves.

\[21\] Pericles himself introduces a dimension of care into the political sphere and so does not eschew the private sphere altogether, though the public realm of free activity is clearly given pride of place. From this perspective, Arendt's contention that the rise of the 'social sphere' which blurs the distinction between the public and the private by rendering private cares matters of public concern is not as quintessentially modern as she suggests (Arendt 1958, 38-50). However, she is perhaps correct to argue that the realm of the social takes on a qualitatively different dimension with the emergence of the importance of private property and the influence its owners wield in modern times (68ff.).
III. Aspasia: The City as Parent

After indicating the general trajectory of her speech, Aspasia begins by emphasizing the myth of autochthony and the importance of ‘good birth’, issues Pericles sought to suppress.22 Athenians are true children of the soil; the land is not a stepmother (μητριμα) to them, adopting them as her own though they were born elsewhere, but rather a true mother (μητηρ), bearing, nourishing, and receiving them into the place that is their natural home (237b7-c2). Indeed, the land is said to be worthy of praise not only because it is dear to the gods, but also because, while the whole earth was producing all sorts of beasts and monsters, this land gave birth to all humankind (ἀνθρώπων), who, Aspasia emphasizes, alone of all the creatures has justice and religion (237d6-e1).23 For Aspasia, it is this land, as opposed to the Earth as a whole, that originally produced and continues to nourish the best of beings. Finally, she maps this conception of the nourishing land onto the political: ‘For government is the nurture (τροφή) of human beings’ (238c1-2).

The metaphor is obvious and strikingly different from that developed by Pericles. At first blush it seems as if Aspasia is attempting to retrieve the feminine dimension of the political eclipsed completely by the Periclean politics of freedom. But it is more complicated than this; for as Madeleine Henry suggests, by raising the Athenian Mother Earth to a position of preeminence, Aspasia forces genuine human motherhood into the background. Aspasia says: ‘In her conception and generation, the earth does not imitate the woman, but the woman the earth’ (238a4-5). This sort of subordination of actual motherhood to the abstraction of the productive Mother Earth—particularly because it is effectively put into the mouth of a woman represented by (at least one) man—suggests not that Aspasia is retrieving the feminine dimension of the political, but further obfuscating it.

There is, however, another possibility. Perhaps Aspasia’s speech is designed neither to retrieve nor to obfuscate, but to transcend the rigid distinction between the male and the female. This possibility is suggested by Aspasia’s own insistence that the city also takes on the male role: ‘she has taken on the role of heir and son to the dead, to the sons, that of father, and to the relatives, that of guardian, taking care (ἐπιμέλειας ποιούμενη) all the time of all of them’ (249b7-c2).24 Here we find the full expression of what was only dimly intimated

22 If we were to speculate about why Pericles might have thought it necessary to suppress the myth of autochthony and ‘good birth’, we would do well to keep in mind the extent to which such myths are bound up with the intimate ties between a people and its land, land that had been sacrificed to the Spartans according to Pericles’ own strategy. Perhaps now was not the time to remind the Athenians of their intimate ties to the land!

23 Loraux 1993, 38n4 points out that the Menexenus is unique in the corpus of epitaphioi in more inclusively affirming the Athenian earth’s generation of humankind (ἀνθρώπων) and not exclusively of the male (ἄνδρες) as do the other epitaphioi.

24 See also 249a4-7: ‘she was a father to them when they were still children, and when they go into full manhood, she sends them to their several duties clad in full armor’. These passages are
at the end of Pericles' speech, namely, that the city will take care not only of the orphans of the dead, as with Pericles, but of all the citizens and for all time. By linking the city to the land, calling it a 'mother' and insisting that the government nourish the citizens, Aspasia affirms what may be called the 'feminine' dimension of politics; but, at the same time, by insisting that those who died were good because they 'came from good men (ἐξ ἀγαθῶν)' (237a6), calling the city a 'father', and emphasizing the care-taking responsibilities of this role, Aspasia seems to subvert the simple dichotomy between male and female, thus suggesting a more inclusive model of politics. Indeed, by taking on the voice of the male—not only via Socrates in the Menexenus and perhaps even through Pericles himself, but also through the prosopopeia in which she powerfully takes on the voice of the dead fathers admonishing their sons to live lives of virtue—the very figure of Aspasia herself is gender-bending, subversive of the gender dichotomy that haunts Greek politics. One advantage of bringing Aspasia into dialogue with Pericles is that it elucidates the extent to which her epitaphios logos both subverts the Periclean politics of freedom and power and, because it does not negate it abstractly, transforms it into a new, more inclusive politics of justice and responsibility.

By emphasizing the significance of the notion of 'leftovers', we have already suggested that the Aspasion speech is not an abstract negation of the Periclean. That Aspasia does not simply reject Pericles can be seen in the way they respectively name the sort of government operating in Athens. Pericles explicitly calls it a 'democracy' and emphasizes that no citizen is judged worthy because of their good house or because of their poverty, but because of their excellence (ii 37.1). Aspasia says that the government of Athens has always been an aristocracy, though 'it is sometimes called a democracy, according to the pleasure of men, but in truth it is an aristocracy with the approval of the many' (238c7-d2). Aspasia does not reject Pericles' designation, rather she accepts its legitimacy and points to its deeper truth. She then suggests that Athens has always had kings, at first hereditary and then chosen, but 'they give power and authority always to those who seem to be best (τοῖς ἀεὶ δόξασιν ἄριστοις εἶναι)'.

And no one is rejected either because of weakness, or poverty, or unknown origin, nor honored because of the opposite, as is the case in other cities, rather there is one criterion: He who seems to be wise (ὁ δόξας σοφός) and good rules and has authority. That which is responsible for this government of ours is equality of birth (238d4-e1).

Whatever is going on with the repeated play on the verb δοκεῖν, this passage seems to echo the basic position endorsed by Pericles, namely, that people are deemed worthy not because of their poverty or family of origin, but because of their wisdom and goodness. However, whereas Pericles ascribes this state of

emphasized by Loraux 1986, 284n118 as well.

25 One is tempted to read the insertion of δοκεῖν here as a trace of Socrates' own voice. The sub-
affairs to the recognition of equality before the law, Aspasia ascribes it to the Athenians’ equality of birth. That these two claims amount to the same position becomes clear once it is recalled that the Athenian citizenship law, set forth by Pericles himself in 451/450 BCE, seems to have been predicated upon the citizen’s having two Athenian parents.26 Thus, Aspasia’s insistence upon the equality of birth does not contradict Pericles’ affirmation of equality before the law, it merely uncovers the deeper origin of this fundamental equality, an origin that, for whatever rhetorical and political reasons, was left out of the account spoken by Pericles.

A similar dialectic is at work in Aspasia’s systematic distortion of history.27 Charles Kahn rightly warns against reading too much into these distortions first because the public did not expect nor did they themselves possess a high level of historical accuracy and second, because a funeral oration is itself not meant as a work of historical research.28 He focuses on three specific issues, one of which—the designation of the Athenian democracy as an ‘aristocracy’—has already been shown to be not so much a distortion as a clarification of the deeper truth behind the term ‘democracy’ itself. The second, which concerns the total omission of reference to the Athenian empire, is easily explicable if Aspasia’s speech is read as the stuck together remnants of the Periclean oration; for surely, if there is one remnant that is not left out, it is praise for the empire. There would have been no need for Aspasia to include this, not because she was opposed to it, but because it had already been adequately covered by Pericles. What had not been covered and what Aspasia does emphasize is the long, great history of Athens. Pericles moves swiftly from distant ancestors, through the generation immediately preceding his to his own generation in order to claim for himself credit for establishing the great imperial power of Athens (ii 36.1-3). Aspasia’s extensive treatment of Athenian autochthony expands upon the story of the distant ancestors which Pericles simply dismissed with the simple participial phrase: ‘having always inhab-

tle shift to ‘appearance’ may be a sort of improvisation designed to criticize implicitly the validity of popular judgment. Although Socrates says Aspasia was ready to strike him as she taught him the speech because he was always forgetting, one can imagine that this ‘forgetting’ was simply Socrates’ recalcitrant resistance to learning the rhetoric by rote (236b9-c1). It is possible to imagine that Aspasia may have threatened to strike him for precisely this sort of resistant improvisation that subtly subverts the authority of the rhetoric.

26 Henry 1995, 11-12 discusses the fluidity of the law and how it might have affected Aspasia herself.

27 Among other things, Aspasia ignores the role of the Plataeans at Marathon, reserving for Athens exclusive credit for the victory (240c1 ff.); she couches every war, not only the Persian War, in terms of a battle for liberty over oppression (e.g., 242a, 243a); she minimizes the significance of the Peloponnesian War and particularly the causes of it, claiming that it was due to the other Greeks’ ‘envy’ and ‘jealousy’ of the honor in which Athens was held (242a); and finally, she claims that Athens was hostile to Persia in the Corinthian War, when in fact, Athens was allied with the Persians against Sparta. For a good discussion of all the distortions of history in the Menexenus, see Henderson 1975.

28 Kahn 1963, 225. Huby 1957, 110 also claims that the Athenians were apparently not very well versed in their own history.
ited the land' (τῆν γὰρ χώραν οἱ αὐτοῖς αἰεὶ οἴκοντες, ii 36.1). Her hyperbolic praise of those who fought in the Persian War, particularly her emphasis on those who died at Marathon, rectifies the nearly blasphemous understatement Pericles makes concerning the generation immediately preceding his, namely, that they earned the power which they handed down 'not without labor' (οὐκ ἀπόνως, ii 36.2). The litotes here refers to nothing less than the Persian War.

Finally, by reading Aspasia's speech as a sort of rejoinder to and expansion upon that of Pericles, an account can also be given of the third issue of historical distortion Kahn deems it necessary to explain—that is, Aspasia's insistence on Athenian hostility to Persia in the Corinthian War. This may be understood not only to reinforce the powerful myth of autochthony she herself presents, for it assumes the common calling of all Greeks to thwart oppression, but also further to accentuate the theme of freedom Pericles never tires of emphasizing. Aspasia's insistence on the steadfast Athenian loyalty to liberty and her systematic obfuscation of the repression of the Athenian empire serve this purpose well. What emerges here is not an Aspasia absolutely opposed to the Periclean vision of politics, but rather an Aspasia dedicated to it, yet cognizant of its shortcomings.

Nowhere is this dedication to and critique of the Periclean position more clearly presented than in Aspasia's speech to the children of the dead in the voice of the fallen heroes. Most commentators recognize a change in tone in the prosopopeia that signals an important shift in the speech. Those seeking the serious core of the dialogue often point to this section as the place where Socrates finally speaks in earnest. Just before taking on the voice of the dead, Aspasia seems to echo the words of Socrates in Apology 29d-30b, saying: 'I order you now and in the future, whenever I happen upon you, I will remind and exhort you to be eager to be as excellent as possible' (246b6-c1). In contrast to the general consensus that takes this echo of the Apology as an implicit indication that what follows will be something more genuinely Socratic, Lucinda Coventry, admitting that this could be taken as the beginning of a Platonic protreptic, argues instead that it may be meant to draw a strong contrast between what Socrates spoke there in earnest with what he, in the voice of Aspasia, playfully and ironically speaks here. Coventry 1989, 14-15 points to the basic difference: Where Socrates exhorts those he addresses to follow eloquent examination in the Apology, Aspasia...

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29 Salkever 1993, 139 suggests that Aspasia's emphasis on the victory at the land battle of Marathon over that of the sea battle at Salamis serves to reinforce the connection between superior nobility and the land set forth in the myth of autochthony.

30 Henderson 1975, 45 expresses this position by suggesting that it 'seems to more truly reflect genuine Socratic and Platonic ideas'. She continues: 'However much Plato may have disapproved of the policies of Athens, the fact remains that Athenians had died to carry them out. Critic of Athens Plato may have been, he was still an Athenian. This may well explain the curious shift in tone of the work'. Rosenstock 1994, 340 seems to agree, suggesting that this is the most serious part of the text and could have been meant as an exhortation by Socrates himself. Monoson 1998, 502-504 also seems to concur. See too, Collins and Stauffer 1999a.
sia in the *Menexenus* offers rather rudimentary precepts to both the children and the adults.

To the children, Aspasia—speaking in the voice of the fallen fathers—begins in a strikingly un-Socratic, but deeply Periclean vein: ‘Sons, that you are of good fathers, this event now informs the public, for although it was possible for us to live ignobly, we chose rather to die nobly’ (246d2-3). Such words further advance Pericles’ insistence that the glory of the action of dying in battle rightly nullifies an entire life of ignobility (ii 42.4). However, they directly contradict Socrates’ ironic critique of funeral orations in which he falsely praises dying in battle as a noble thing precisely because the dead are lauded even if, in their previous lives, they had been good for nothing (234c1-4). Yet what makes the prosopopeia difficult to interpret is that Aspasia does say a number of things that seem to sound genuinely Socratic. The first and most conspicuous of which is her claim that ‘all knowledge, when separated from justice and the other virtue appears to be villainy and not wisdom’ (246e7-247a1), ‘The other virtue’ here could well be the piety of which Aspasia spoke at the beginning of her speech when, in laying out the myth of autochthony, she praised the earth for producing in Attica superior beings, humans, who had both justice and religion (237d7). Although by insisting on the intimate link between knowledge and justice or piety, Aspasia seems to echo a genuinely Socratic sentiment, the appearance here of the verb φαίνεται, ‘to appear’, infuses a certain degree of ambiguity into the entire comment. We begin to wonder if this is indeed ‘genuine Socratic doctrine’, if such a thing exists, when Aspasia goes on to command the children thus:

Try to earnestly (or zealously) (προθυμίαν) hold as your first, last and all-encompassing [goal] that you especially exceed us and your ancestors in good fame (εὐκλεία), but if you do not, and we prevail over you with respect to virtue, know that the victory bestows shame upon us, but when we are beaten [by you with respect to virtue], the defeat bestows happiness (247a3-6).

The identification of good fame (εὐκλεία) with virtue is highly un-Socratic, and yet the dead heroes seem somewhat obsessed with the notion of good reputation. In admonishing their parents, Aspasia has them insist that the prayers of the parents have been answered, prayers that did not ask that their children become immortal, but that they be good and renowned (ἀγαθούς καὶ εὐκλεῖα, 247d4-5). Again, it is difficult to imagine Socrates identifying goodness with notoriety in this way. Something else must be at work here. The identification of fame and virtue is far more Periclean than Socratic, and the prosopopeia may be read as Aspasia’s basic endorsement of this dimension of Periclean thinking.

That there is an echo of Pericles’ position here is not surprising given that the speech has been constructed from the remnants of Pericles’ oration. Pericles also appeals to the *eukleia* of their children in comforting the parents (ii 44.4).31

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31 Interestingly, this is the only place in all of Thucydides’ *History* where the term ‘eukleia’
Indeed, Aspasia reinforces the Periclean idea of the importance of self-sufficiency and endorses his implicit injunction that the parents temper their emotional responses when she commands them to remember the old saying ‘Nothing too much’ and not to become too reliant on other people or external goods, but to be moderate and self-reliant (247e7-248a7). In fact, Aspasia’s insistence on the importance of self-sufficiency is far more audacious than anything found in the Periclean oration: ‘For the man who has everything that leads to happiness dependent upon himself or that which is close to him, and who does not hang upon other people by whose actions, good or bad, his own affairs are forced to vacillate, has ordered his life best. This is a wise man, this is a brave and prudent man’ (247e6-248a4). This is hackneyed, conventional Greek moralizing—not a genuine expression of Socratic ethics. Aspasia here gives the survivors precisely what they want to hear: Comforting and familiar moralistic platitudes designed to assuage their grief. By putting such advice—to excel in reputation, to be moderate and to be self-sufficient—into the mouths of the dead as they admonish their children and parents, Aspasia remains loyal to and even, as the last passage indicates, boldly reinforces the Periclean vision of the politics of freedom and self-sufficiency.

There emerges in the prosopopeia another dimension of Aspasia’s position, however, one that is far more critical of the Periclean vision. This more critical element has already been highlighted by Aspasia’s appeal to justice and piety. Where Pericles praises freedom and bravery as the highest virtues of the citizen, Aspasia emphasizes the importance of justice and piety. This concern for justice and piety fits in well with the general model according to which Aspasia conceives the citizen/city relationship, for she insists that the city must recognize and willingly embrace the responsibility it has to care for its people. She ends the prosopopeia by having the dead enjoin the city to take care (ἐπιμελησοντω) of the children and elderly, to educate orderly the former and to cherish the latter (248d1-6).

appears. Perhaps it is possible to speculate that this was one of the words actually uttered by Pericles himself. If so, perhaps the concern with eukleia was genuinely Periclean rather than Thucydidean.

32 The characterization of the appeal to moderation as a similarity between Pericles and Aspasia conflicts with the claim of Collins and Stauffer 1999b, 15-16 that the appeal for moderation in the parents goes directly against Pericles’ injunction to be a daring lover of the city. However, Pericles seems to have been concerned to maintain order and moderation in the city even while attempting to inspire a willingness on the part of the citizens bravely to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the city. The full analysis of the citizen as lover, who himself must act moderately towards the beloved, reinforces this (see, the discussion of the erastēsieromenos relationship above and Monoson 1994, 263). Furthermore, Pericles’ (in)famous reproach to women that they should give as little occasion for rumor as possible (ii 45.2) may also be understood as an attempt to secure moderation in the face of great emotion. For precisely such an argument based on a re-contextualized reading of the funeral oration, see Tyrrell and Bennett 1999.

33 Collins and Stauffer 1999b, 18-19 have suggested that Pericles pays little attention to the question of justice and even less to the gods. Sacrifice is mentioned at ii 38.1 as a form of relaxation, injustice at ii 37.3 as that against which the laws are set forth.

34 Huby 1957, 107 suggests that this injunction is the true impetus behind Plato’s ‘political pam-
There emerges here a model of the citizen/city relationship not directly opposed to that offered by Pericles, but certainly designed to fill in the gaps missing from his account. Where Pericles emphasizes freedom, law, self-rule, and the culture and institutions of the city, Aspasia affirms necessity, nature, care, and autochthony. Insofar as he embraces liberty as his highest political ideal and understands the fundamental purpose of the city to be to maximize the freedom of individual citizens, Pericles anticipates certain dimensions of the great tradition of liberal political thought. Yet Pericles’ position is in fact more temperate than modern liberalism, for by implicitly thematizing the city as the ‘beloved’, he infuses a dimension of reciprocal responsibility into the relationship that is often lacking in liberalism’s unequivocal affirmation of the priority of the individual. However, this temperance seems to have extended only to the boundaries of the city’s walls, for ultimately, the Periclean politics of freedom led Athens, in the name of its own liberty and self-sufficiency, to adopt a foreign policy of enslavement and oppression that resulted in the utter destruction of Athenian freedom. Indeed, the very ideal of freedom that determines the meaning of happiness for Pericles and for the liberal tradition, when maximized and permitted to eclipse a concern for justice with respect to otherness, becomes ultimately destructive rather than liberating.

Insofar as she understands relations with others as a natural, intrinsically valuable and determining dimension of human existence and recognizes justice, with its concern for otherness, as prior to the freedom of the individual, Aspasia anticipates certain dimensions of the great tradition of communitarian political thought.\textsuperscript{35} By insisting that the relationship between city and citizen should be governed primarily by justice, Aspasia retrieves an important dimension of politics that Pericles seems, if not to leave out altogether, at least to underemphasize. The obligations the city has to its citizens and its citizens have to one another are emphasized by the familial model to which Aspasia appeals. However, although this sense of mutual responsibility seems to extend beyond the city’s walls to all Greeks—and thus seems far more inclusive than the Periclean conception of erotic reciprocity—it remains fundamentally grounded in the dangerous and xenophobic myth of autochthony (245c9-d9). Indeed, the very ideal of justice that determines the meaning of happiness for Aspasia and for the communitarian tradition, when grounded in the mythology of autochthony and permitted to sub-

\textsuperscript{35} For a good introduction to the basic differences between what is being called the tradition of liberalism versus that of communitarianism, see the Introduction of Avineri and de-Shalit 1992. For a strong and nuanced critique of liberalism, see Sandel 1982. Although Sandel speaks of the limits of the liberal conception of justice—which is understood rather abstractly as simple fairness—and although he is critical of the liberal tradition’s attempt to establish the priority of this sort of justice, he is quite clear to point out that one of its main limitations is that it is based on an incoherent conception of the individual as a free, autonomous subject. Thus, one way to thematize the limits of the liberal conception of justice is to suggest that it is grounded ultimately on a conception of freedom that fails to recognize the individual as always already embedded in and involved with others. To assert the equi-originality of justice and freedom is to attempt to redress this failure.
vert the free autonomy of the individual, becomes ultimately authoritarian and unjust.

When read together, however, the Periclean erotic politics of freedom undermines the efficacy of the ideology of eugenics, wresting the question of equality from the dangerous myth of autochthony and forcing it into the sphere of the law. For its part, the Aspasion filial politics of care holds the expansive, imperial politics of freedom accountable to the ultimate question of justice. What emerges is a vision of the relationship between city and citizen in which freedom is tempered by justice, apathy by active participation, entitlement by mutual responsibility. Yet the condition for the possibility of such a dynamic vision of politics is the presence of citizens with the capacity to reflect critically upon the resources and limitations endemic to both ideologies. Without such citizens, the middle way between the erotic politics of freedom and the filial politics of care is not navigable, and the dangerous dimensions of both ideologies, now no longer held in check, begin to be capable of determining political reality.\footnote{In denying that the Aspasion speech is an ‘abstract negation’ of the Periclean and suggesting that there is a ‘dialectic’ between the two speeches, Hegelian vocabulary has been deployed. However, the insistence in what follows that the active, critical engagement of Socrates is required if a middle way between the two ideologies is to be secured intentionally rejects any attempt to conceptualize the relationship between the two speeches in terms of the impersonal, neutral progress of the Hegelian dialectic. There is no ultimate reconciliation between the Aspasion and Periclean positions— the new vision of politics that emerges out of their encounter does not calcify into yet another ideology. The playful figure of Socrates stands singularly against the possibility of such a reification.}

IV. Socrates: The Philosopher-Citizen

In the Menexenus Socrates emerges as just such a critical citizen. He is able to use his own rhetorical skill, irony, and playfulness to undermine the aura of authority each ideology seeks to establish. This playfulness forces all who encounter Socrates to be on guard against his speech, lest he says or does something funny. This heightened presence of mind is precisely what undermines the capacity of each ideology to establish its own ultimate authority, for the audience is in each case thrown back upon its own intellectual resources in evaluating the merits of the position presented. The philosopher-citizen has internalized this heightened presence of mind, and by engaging in the play of parody, begins to engender it in others. Yet there is more to Socrates than the therapeutic deployment of play. By juxtaposing the two ideologies, Socrates is able at once to render them problematic and point to the dimension of truth contained in each. If the Periclean politics of freedom is to be tempered by the Aspasion politics of justice so as to hold the former’s imperialist tendencies in check, and if the Aspasion emphasis on care is to be divorced from the xenophobic myth of autochthony by the Periclean vision of equality under the law, then there must be citizens capable of discerning that which is liberating and just in each ideology without succumbing to the alluring aura of either. This sort of detached engagement requires critical distance.
Socrates establishes this critical distance in two ways. First and most immediately obvious is his decision to take on the voice of Aspasia to give the *epitaphios*. To place this speech in the voice of a woman, and not just any woman, but specifically that of Aspasia, is at once to link the speech to Pericles—that is, to establish the relationship between the politics of freedom and the politics of care—and to distance himself from its content. Notice, however, that despite this distancing, Socrates never severs the tie completely. Rather, he remains deeply involved, deploying ideology against ideology in order to undermine the hypnotic aura of either. The tension that Socrates establishes between freedom and justice, the masculine and the feminine, the native and the foreign, rule and care can only be checked and balanced by the critical engagement of the philosopher-citizen who remains engaged enough to respond, yet distant enough not to become mesmerized.

Distance is established for Socrates by speaking in the voice of Aspasia. But it is reinforced and deepened by the perplexing anachronism that haunts the text. Socrates, having been executed in 399 BCE, could not have given the speech he ascribes to Aspasia in which events of Athenian history are narrated down to the Kings’ Peace of 385 BCE. Is the Socrates of the *Menexenus* some sort of specter of the philosopher-citizen haunting Athens from beyond, challenging those young men eager to move beyond philosophy to the serious business of governing to reflect more critically upon their endeavor? Perhaps. Here the distance takes on another dimension, for the ghost of Socrates is no frightful phantom spouting precepts from the great beyond. Even as revenant, even in returning to the cave to discuss politics with Menexenus, Socrates remains ironic; indeed, he is downright playful. Socrates, the friendly ghost, cajoles Menexenus, seeking to engender in him the heightened presence of mind needed for genuine philosophical-citizenship by subtly nudging him to a deeper, more critical understanding of the profession into which he so earnestly desires to be initiated. Menexenus himself, though willing to submit to Socrates’ advice concerning his fitness for politics, remains rigid and humorless. As such, he shows himself to be incapable of reflection upon the speech he has just heard.

‘Blessed’ is Aspasia for being able to give such a speech, says Menexenus in the end (249d2), and so unwittingly hits upon something of the truth.  

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37 Salkever 1993, 135 has emphasized this dimension of the *Menexenus* by linking it to the Eleatic Stranger’s description in the *Statesman* of the true *politikos* who neither takes direct rule nor withdraws from politics altogether, but is a master weaver who operates behind the scenes of public life: ‘Socrates in *Menexenus* is shown away from the public world of the agora, trying to weave together the strands of gentleness and virility, of the female and foreign (Aspasia) and the male and native (*Menexenus*).’

38 This is precisely the reading Rosenstock 1994 suggests in his excellent and thought provoking article.

39 This is really as close as Menexenus comes to being playful, although the play is eclipsed by irony as he doubts that, as a *woman* and perhaps even as a prostitute (*Menexenus* says that he ‘knows what sort of woman she is’), Aspasia should be able to produce something so excellent. In his seriousness, he surmises, as have many after him, that the speech is unequivocally Socratic.
something otherworldly about the speech, something mysterious and authorita-
tive—or at least so it seems to Menexenus. So he too has been bewitched by the 
epitaphios logos, just as Socrates had warned. And we still are continually 
bewitched, manipulated by the words of the politicians, deaf to the spirit of 
Socrates, the philosopher-citizen who remains assiduously attuned to the mes-
merizing aura of such speeches. Socrates begins to inoculate us against the 
enchanting words of the politicians by administering a complex and potentially 
dangerous pharmakon that includes not only rhetoric, humor, irony, and ambigu-
ity, but also the highly suggestive juxtaposition of apparently competing political 
positions. He is even willing to dance naked if such a gesture would stir us to crit-
ical self-reflection by shattering the aura of ideological authority and spur us to 
establish a more nuanced and subtle political posture. Yet Socrates clearly fails 
with Menexenus, whose rigidity undermines his capacity for critical self-reflec-
tion. Success for Socrates—or for his spirit—with us depends upon our willing-
ness to accept his invitation to dance and so to shed the clothes of ideology and 
become genuine philosopher-citizens, seeking the self-reflective path between 
spellbound patriotism and deaf disengagement, between a politics of freedom 
and one of justice. In an era in which an acute awareness of the inherent insec-
urity of human existence augments the seductive power of political rhetoric, it 
becomes increasingly urgent to learn how to dance naked with Socrates.41

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40 Both Aspasia and Pericles seek to manipulate the minds of their audiences: Aspasia does this 
by repeatedly enjoining them to imagine themselves into particular positions—as being oppressed by 
the Persians (239d5), as being there at Marathon (240d1), and, most effectively, as being spoken to 
directly by the dead (246a6-7); Pericles does this by painting an idealized picture of the city and say-
ing, as he himself admits with candor, what is ‘convenient’, ‘serviceable’, most ‘expedient’ 
(προσφηρον, ii 46.1). Contemporary politicians speak in the same manner, though with far less can-
dor.

41 I am grateful for the helpful comments of Alexander Alexakis on an early version of this arti-
cle, and specifically for his keen sensitivity to the nuances of the Greek language.


