Aspasia of Miletus is unquestionably one of the most intriguing and enigmatic women of Greek antiquity. She appears in a wide variety of ancient literature but perhaps most notably in Plutarch’s Life of Pericles, which includes a lengthy discussion of her life and an account of her “erotic” relationship with Athens’ leading statesman (Per. 24). In this paper I argue that Plutarch, although he reports many anecdotes and rumors about Aspasia, has arranged this information in the Pericles so as to describe a couple bound together by an intellectual rather than merely a sensual attraction. In support of this argument, I also propose that this characterization is in accord with Plutarch’s overall approach to Pericles in this biography.

Before turning to the depiction of Aspasia, I would like to establish the context for her role in the Life by considering Plutarch’s interpretation of Pericles. He establishes the framework for describing an important element of Pericles’ character in the prologue to the Pericles-Phaidra pair, which is usually read as an injunction to the reader. The theme is the contemplation of the virtuous actions of good men, which inspires in the observer a desire for imitation and deeper understanding (2.1-4). Plutarch wants his book to serve the same purpose. Thus, as Philip Stadter explains, he intends “to present the deeds of his subjects in such a way as to evoke from the reader a decision (proairetis) to imitate the virtue which they have shown”.

1 P. A. Stadter, 1987, pp. 252-3; see also P. A. Stadter, 1989, pp. xxix-xxx.
since the objects of contemplation must be absorbed through the senses, and these may receive sights and sounds of varying quality and value. The only things really worthy of perception and contemplation are virtuous deeds that lead to moral improvement (2.2). The main injunction of the prologue, then, has to do with discernment: one must select and observe virtuous actions before applying them to the development of one's own character. Tim Duff, as he builds upon Stadter's analysis and extends it to the *Parallel Lives* as a whole, explains this process in intellectual and philosophical terms:

The Lives will also provoke in [the reader] a reasoned attitude, a desire for imitation which follows upon full moral knowledge, or, as Plutarch puts it, "the investigation of the deed" (τῇ ἑσπέρῳ τοῦ ἔργου). In essence, we have here, as throughout the whole prologue, a contrast between sense and intellect, between passion and reason.

This intellectual approach is important for Plutarch's audience but is also fundamental to his characterization of Pericles. In *Life* the reader encounters not only a doer of virtuous deeds, worthy of imitation, but also a hero who takes an intellectual approach to his own life and who applies reason where others act from the impulse of passion. In describing his education, for instance, Plutarch devotes several chapters to the influence of various philosophers, paying special attention to Anaxagoras, whose teaching had the greatest impact. In addition to helping Pericles develop a dignified and mild disposition (5.1-2), he made the statesman superior to superstition, which, Plutarch writes, generates "amusement" (ἐύθυμος) in people who are ignorant of the causes of celestial phenomena. Conversely, a "reasoned account of nature" (διὰ φυσικῆς λόγου), possessed by men like Pericles, instills a "firm and hopeful sense of piety" (6.1). Plutarch's purpose here is to introduce the anecdote of the one horned ram (6.2-5), by which he demonstrates how he and, by implication, Pericles strike a balance between science and religion as they reconcile conflicting explanations of this strange discovery. But at the same time, as Pericles is said to have overcome superstition and relied instead on reason, we understand that the statesman's actions are guided by his intellectual outlook.

He would not call the δήμος to assembly, fearing that they would act rashly and counter to reason (γνώμη), but just as the καβανεῖς of a ship at sea when the wind is high, having put everything in order and drawn the ropes tight, employs his nautical skill and ignores the fearful begging of the frightened passengers who are sailing with him, so Pericles, having locked down the city and put everything under guard for its protection, employed his own reasoned plans (καβανεῖς), paying scant attention to those who were shouting their discontent (33.6).

3 The intellectual is only one dimension of Pericles' character, however; see P. A. STADTER, 1975 & 1987, for comprehensive studies of Plutarch's goals and techniques in both the *Lives* and the *Parallel Lives*.
5 For translations of Plutarch's terminology and discussion of how the ram anecdote relates to science, religion, and superstition, see J. P. HENSHULL, 1982, pp. 141-2, and P. A. STADTER, 1989, ad loc.
6 For an example of Pericles acting religiously but not superstitiously, cf. Per. 13.12-13, where Athena shows him in a dream how to treat a fatally injured workman and he, pious and grateful, sets up a thanksgiving offering on the Acropolis. Plutarch later reports Theophrastus' story that Pericles lapsed into superstition while suffering from the plague but then is quick to show that even on his deathbed he was more insightful than the "best of the Athenians." (38).
7 Although Plutarch uses this anecdote to characterize his hero, he admits that it might be more paradigmatic than historical when he adds, "This, then, is what is said in the philosophers' schools." For problems of chronology, see P. A. STADTER, 1989, ad loc.
8 Cicero, Rep. 1.16.25: "Pericles ... loqui ultra intuituri id quod ipse ab Anaxagoras audito fuerat acceptum, certo ille tempore foret et necessario, cum tota ac luna sub orebus sola subicisset;" Valerius Maximus 8.11.1 ext. 1: "... Pericles processit in medium et quae a praepotente suae Anaxagorae pertinentia ad solis et luna cursum acceptum dies naturae tenuerat creavit et ab ipsis tenuerat cives suos in se metu praebuit;" Quintilian, Inst. 1.10.44: "An vero, cum Pericles Athenis eos solis observatione terrae reddidit eius rei causa metu liberavit,"...
9 Per. 35.2: "Everyone was stunned as if witnessing a great omen. When Pericles saw that his heliometer was especially fearful and disorientated,..."
10 On the translation of καβανεῖς as "reasoned plans," see T. E. DUFF, 1999, pp. 80-1. The political leader as καβανεῖς, a natural development of the "ship of state" allegory (cf. Alcibiades frs. 6 and 326 Lobe-Lapte), is employed elsewhere by Plutarch and other authors; see LSJ, καβανεῖς, and...
Thus as we read of Pericles calming his helmman and explaining the eclipse, we see the metaphorical antecedent in contrast to the true kubernetes: the one possess a valuable skill but is not a person worthy of emulation, while the other, as he applies reason to fend off the people’s irrational demands and to steer the city through formidable straits, is just the sort of man whom the reader should observe and imitate.

It is against this backdrop of intellectual conduct that we should read the characterization of Aspasia. Plutarch has carefully arranged what he knows are varied, imaginative, and even vituperative accounts of her life, and as he records the evidence, his aim is not simply to construct her biography but, as always, to cast light upon the character of his principal subject, Pericles. Plutarch, therefore, introduces the topic of Aspasia as he addresses the competing explanations for Pericles’ attack on Samos: in passing the decree, Pericles justified the action on the ground that the Samians were making war on Miletus, but “he was generally believed”, Plutarch writes, to have started the campaign in order to please his Milesian lover (24.2). He goes on to establish Aspasia’s persona by reporting the story that she consciously imitated Thargelia, an Ionian woman of an earlier generation (24.3–4). This woman was beautiful (ἐνύπνησιν) and also combined grace with cleverness (τινά τέχνην ἢ δόξαν ἰδέωσα), and so she was able to seduce many powerful men and influence their cities’ politics. With Aspasia following this sort of model, we should expect the rational Pericles to be attracted by more than her beauty. This is, in fact, what follows, as Plutarch writes: “For some say that Aspasia was sought after by Pericles because she was a woman wise in politics (ὡς σοφὴν των καὶ πολιτικὴν, 24.5). Plutarch then supports his portrait of the wise Aspasia with several bits of evidence: an anecdote about Socrates and his friends coming to hear her speak, even bringing their wives despite the fact that their instructor was managing a brothel; a report from Aeschines the Socratic that the man who married Aspasia after Pericles’ death went from humble sheep-dealer to leading man in Athens thanks to her influence; and a citation from Plato’s Menexenus that calls her a teacher of rhetoric (24.5–7). The historical veracity of all this information may be questioned, but its inclusion helps to establish the relationship of Aspasia and Pericles on an intellectual and political footing.

Turning to the more personal side of the relationship, Plutarch next describes the nature of the couple’s love, introducing the topic by claiming that “Pericles’ affection for Aspasia, however, was clearly something rather erotic (φιλοσταθεὶς μένοι μᾶλλον ἐρωτικά τις ἢ τοῦ Περικλέους ἀγάπης γενόμενα γὰρ Ἀσπασίαν, 24.7). The most straightforward interpretation of this statement suggests that Pericles and Aspasia had what we might call a passionate love affair, but this seems contradictory in light of Plutarch’s presentation of their relationship to this point. It would be an even greater inconsistency if this rational statesman, who is so dispassionate in all his other undertakings, would grant free reign to his eros for a woman. Pericles, in fact, submits to passion only once in the Life, when his latest legitimate son succumbs to the plague, and Plutarch treats this behavior as exceptional (36.8–9). I suggest that we may discover a more rational eroticism, so to speak, if we read this statement in the light of some of Plutarch’s other statements about love and relationships.

In the Amatorius, Plutarch makes a lengthy argument in favor of marriage and, more importantly, the erotic bond that may exist between a man and a woman. His interlocutors assert that sexual attraction to a woman is merely a base desire (ἐφικτή), which they contrast with the noble eros for the beautiful soul of a young man (750d–e). Plutarch, however, uses eros as the basis for a loving relationship that in turn makes both parties, regardless of gender, more virtuous.
(766c-767b). But Plutarch goes even farther, asserting that eros is not only beneficial but even necessary in a marriage. Those who marry simply to reproduce or to acquire property are amnestes and neglect their relationships (767c-d). This sort of union, he writes, "when erotic persuasion and sexual relations have gone, is scarcely held together by love and fear as though by yokes and reigns" (752c-d). Thus for Plutarch, eros is an essential element of a true marital relationship.20

But eros, though necessary, is also dangerous. This is especially true for younger couples, who may not yet have learned self-restraint. "In the beginning they seethe and fight the yoke", Plutarch writes, "and even more so if eros is present, for like a wind against a ship with no helmsman, it disturbs and confounds the marriage of those who are either unable to lead nor willing to be led" (754c-d). If eros is the wind, what might be the helmsman in this storm? Plutarch does not say explicitly, but the continuation of his argument shows that it must be reason. He points out that at no stage of his life is a man without guidance, whether it is provided by a nurse, a teacher, an older male lover, or the law. Then he asks, "What is so terrible if an older woman, provided she is sensible, steers the life of a young man?" (τι δένον ει γυνή νομίζω ἐκουσάραι καθαρίως νά νομίζαι βίον σπουδάζει; 754D). Thus the younger man, who Plutarch has warned may not yet have learned to control his own eros, may acquire a kubernētēs in the guise of an older, sensible wife. Her possession of a noun is an absolute prerequisite, and we may assume that as the young man matures under her guidance and increases in virtue, his own reason will assert itself and control the gusts of eros.

Plutarch is of course relying on similar imagery when he represents Pericles' management of Athens. But we saw in the biography that the general was not merely steering the "ship of state"; he was also applying his intellect to guide the irrational tendencies of the demos. The metaphor of the kubernētēs, then, really applies to Pericles' internal disposition as much as his external actions. His intellectual approach to government was the result of his philosophical training, which first allowed him to gain control over his own behavior before attempting to tame that of the people.21 This is the full meaning of Per. 33.6: Pericles is projecting his personal virtue on to the state as he resists the cries of the discontented and clings resolutely to his κυριακοῦς, his plans developed in a calm, rational manner.22

20 Plutarch expresses a similar sentiment in the Conflavillos μαραθῶν (142C), on which see M. B. Crawford, 1999, pp. 295-6.
22 As is argued by T. E. Duff, 1999, pp. 81-2.

Jeffrey Beneker

Returning to the relationship of Pericles and Aspasia, it seems more than reasonable to argue that the adjective "erotic" in light of Plutarch's good governance of self and state. And even though the arguments made in the Amantai are in support of married couples rather than those who simply cohabit, Plutarch appears to give Pericles and Aspasia the benefit of the doubt, as can be seen when the passage is considered as a whole:

Pericles' affection for Aspasia, however, was clearly something rather erotic. For his wife was a blood relation and was married first to Hipponicus, by whom she bore Callias, called "the wealthy". Then she bore to Pericles Xanthippus and Paralus. Later, when this marriage was no longer pleasing to them, Pericles married her to another man with her consent, and he took for himself Aspasia and cherished her dearly. For when he was leaving for or coming home from the agora, as they say, he greeted her every day with an affectionate kiss (24.7-9).

This passage is constructed so as to explain the erotic nature of Pericles' affection for Aspasia in terms of his former, and rather formal, marriage. We can easily detect there the union that lacks eros as described in the Amantai: the couple come together to bear children, then, their goal having been accomplished, find the marriage displeasing and agree to divorce. In contrast, Plutarch says that Pericles felt real love for Aspasia, using the verb ἐγείρειν, which carries no implication of excess or irrationality. Therefore, the anecdote about the kisses, which he adduces to prove his claim, should be read as a manifestation of their loving affection rather than an indulgence of their passion.23 Plutarch clearly believes that such feelings arise from erotic relationships, for he argues in the Amantai that sexual relations between spouses, though their pleasure is brief, are the source of loving friendship (φιλία) as well as long-term "respect, goodwill, mutual love (προσφοράς φιλίας, and trust" (769a).24 Thus Pericles' love for Aspasia, which is sparked by her political wisdom and grows to be "something rather erotic", balances the intellectual and the sensual, corresponding exactly to the parameters of the biography and to the overall characterization of Pericles.

The next section of the chapter introduces some of the sarcastic criticism aimed at the couple by comic poets (24.9-10). The passages that Plutarch describes or quotes here stand as the characterizations of their authors and are not incorporated in any meaningful way into his own portrait. But they remind us that Plutarch can-

23 P. Walcott, 1998, p. 180, writes that Pericles' habit of kissing Aspasia was, by general Greek standards, "grotesque", but if the reader were meant to feel such an aversion here, the kisses would fail to explain how Pericles "cherished her dearly" (δοξάζει δικαιώς).24 Plutarch goes on to commend Solon's law that married couples should sleep together at least three times a month, not for pleasure's sake, but "like cities, to renew their treaties periodically" (769a-b).
not create his Aspasia out of whole cloth. Despite her reputation, however, Plutarch has arranged his material so that her loving companionship with Pericles is solidly established before her questionable lifestyle is brought to the foreground. The only early hint of her notorious past appears in section 5, where Socrates and his companions visit her with their wives despite the fact that she runs a brothel (24.5), but the mention of her distasteful occupation there seems designed to emphasize the magnetism of her intellect rather than to attack her reputation. Plutarch then completes this chapter by reiterating his opening theme, Aspasia's political wisdom. He writes that she earned such a reputation as a powerful patroness that Cyrus, brother of the Persian king, named his favorite lover after her and that this woman went on to acquire great influence in the royal court after her death (24.11-12).

After Plutarch has concluded his essay on Aspasia, he returns to the topic that caused him to start it in the first place: "But as for the war against the Samians, they claim that Pericles had it authorized on behalf of the Milesians at Aspasia's request" (25.1). Could the Athenian general have launched this war in order to please his lover? Such an indulgence would be singularly uncharacteristic of Plutarch's Pericles. Everything that he has written so far suggests that Pericles' "erotic affection" for Aspasia was a real passion, but restrained and guided by reason. The narrative of the Samian war bears out this: having inspired his hero against a general charge of erotic excess, Plutarch explains that, even if Aspasia played some role in starting the war, there was also a legitimate and defendable political cause. "The Athenians", he writes, "ordered [the cities] to cease fighting and to submit to arbitration at Athens, but they did not obey, and Pericles sailed out and destroyed the oligarchy that was ruling in Samos" (25.1)\(^\text{25}\)\(^\text{26}\). The idea that Aspasia may have suggested or promoted the war only reinforces the general characterization of Pericles as a rational man who allowed his passion to energize his plans without letting it determine his actions\(^\text{26}\).

WORKS CITED


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\(^{25}\) Plutarch is similarly unwilling to credit some verses of Aristophanes, which claim that Pericles rashly enacted the Megarian Decree, and谣ably the Peloponnesian War, after two prostitutes were kidnapped from Aspasia (30.4-31.1).

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