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Cory Geraths & Michele Kennerly

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Despite pioneering reclamation efforts, feminist rhetoricians have only scratched the surface of the multilayered historical reception and representation of Aspasia, a fifth-century BCE Milesian woman famous for the company she kept. Aspasia’s penchant for historical perseverance means that her recovery must extend far beyond the ancient world. Throughout the centuries roused by the so-called Woman Question, she was on the lips and brush-tips of many on the lookout for antecedent and analogous women to serve as models or antimodels. Focusing on nineteenth-century Europe, we illustrate her powerful presence in art. Our discussion showcases Aspasia conversing (Nicolas-André Monsiau), instructing (Honoré Daumier), and contemplating (Henry Holiday). In their work Aspasia resists attempts to mute her colors and reemerges as a painted lady.

By all ancient accounts, Aspasia led a colorful life. Other than her origination from Miletus—on the southwest coast of present-day Turkey—and her immigration to Athens, the only detail uncontested by rhetoricians and historians is that she coupled with the fifth-century BCE Athenian statesman, Pericles. In her own time she was called and has been remembered regularly as an ἑταῖρα (hetaira), an ancient Greek noun of feminine gender meaning “companion” but often translated as “courtesan.” Deemed a painted lady of the scandalous sort, Aspasia has often been overlooked or looked at askance by those assembling histories of the Golden Age of Athens or inventories of ancient figures worthy of esteem and emulation.

Within rhetoric Aspasia summoned a minute circumference of influence until two decades ago, when she led the charge mounted by feminist historians of rhetoric to restore to the tradition women occluded by and excluded from even our most ostensibly comprehensive histories. As Susan C. Jarratt and Rory Ong have argued, her very existence is “of profound importance for the project of recovering women in the history of rhetoric” (10). Aspasia’s penchant for historical perseverance, however, means that her recovery must extend far beyond the ancient world. One nineteenth-century painting of Aspasia-as-courtesan has become a critical touchstone in the Aspasia literature: Both Cheryl Glenn and classicist Madeleine Henry point to Socrate venant chercher Alcibiades chez Aspasie (Socrates Seeking Alcibiades in the House of Aspasia, Figure 1), an 1861 painting by French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. Glenn begins her 1994 article with a description of the painting: “Aspasia reclining seductively on Alcibiades, her hand cupping his breast, her head suspiciously near his...
stomach and wide-spread legs, while Alcibiades looks away from her and reaches out to grasp Socrates’ hand” (“sex, lies, and manuscript,” 180, 194; see also the frontispiece to Glenn’s Rhetoric Retold). Henry specifies the suspicion: Gérôme “shows her just before or after fellating Alcibiades” (96). Gérôme’s painting visualizes the pornographic tendencies that typify how Aspasia has been frequently remembered and represented.

Our point of departure is that Gérôme’s depiction of Aspasia is exceptional rather than typical of nineteenth-century representations of her. We have found scores of paintings, lithographs, sketches, and other renderings of Aspasia assuming much less compromising positions: discussing, dancing, daydreaming. Among the assortment of Aspasias discovered during our explorations of the visual culture of the nineteenth century, this essay treats four: two by French painter Nicolas-André Monsiau, one by French lithographer Honoré Daumier, and one by English artist Henry Holiday. We frame each image within a compressed account of the cultural conditions of its creation and reception, pulling, when we can, from texts (contemporary to the respective image) in which Aspasia’s presence gestures to a larger appraisal of a woman’s place, with regards to ideas and spaces. Extending across the century, these three artists embody standard neoclassicism (Monsiau), satirical neoclassicism (Daumier), and Pre-Raphaelitism (Holiday). Our work limits biographical background about the artists, all of whom were men, to details that inform our interpretations of their respective Aspasias. Similarly, each section briefly explores the central themes of those three artistic movements to frame how they affect and inflect Aspasia’s appearance.

Despite the pioneering recovery efforts of Glenn, Jarratt and Ong, and others, rhetoricians have only scratched the surface of Aspasia’s multilayered historical reception and representation. Appearing in the mid-1990s, the same time as Glenn’s and Jarratt and Ong’s reclamation efforts, Henry’s account of Aspasia’s life and afterlife seemed certain to entice rhetoricians to move out of the ancient world with its teasing fragments and to enlarge the scope of Aspasia’s recovery. That did not happen, however. Instead, what arose was debate and dialogue about methods and methodologies in feminist historiography. While such discussion represented and generated the kind of
scholarly reflectiveness that is emblematic of the most rigorous feminist scholarship, it did not yield much additional study of Aspasia. Xin Liu Gale’s provocative preference for Henry’s book over Glenn’s and Jarratt and Ong’s shorter pieces, for instance, amplified minor methodological differences between how a feminist classicist and feminist rhetoricians refigured an ancient woman. As Hui Wu emphasizes in her reflection on the Aspasia debate, much of what Gale finds meritorious about Henry’s study—for example, that it “trac[es] the evolution of the competing discourse traditions’ rendering of Aspasia” by “confront[ing], rather than evad[ing], the formidable task of collecting, sifting, ordering, and evaluating evidence of a bewildering quantity, quality, kind, and date (not to mention datability) from Antiquity to modern times” (Gale 380, 379)—lies outside the tight confines of what one can achieve in a single article or book chapter rather than outside of what feminist rhetoricians are trained, equipped, or desirous to do (Wu 103). What seems to be a contestation over methodology may be a confrontation of the limits of the shorter forms of scholarly publication.

When read in that way, Gale’s article seems to invite more research on Aspasia’s long afterlife (see also Gale 362). Since its publication and the suite of responses to it, however, rhetoricians have published little primary historical work on Aspasia. The exceptions are Melissa Ianetta’s two Aspasia pieces, which move Aspasia out of antiquity and demonstrate the fruitfulness of continuing Aspasia’s recovery. Whereas Ianetta relies upon nineteenth-century novels to add dimension to our understanding of Aspasia’s purpose and purchase in Western culture generally and rhetorical culture specifically, we gesture to the profusion of nineteenth-century artistic renderings of Aspasia. Many of those images exploit the ambiguity of Aspasia’s ancient epithet, picturing her as a companion—and sometimes sans he whose companion she was—and not (only as) a courtesan. We isolate such non-erotic images, of which there are many, to demonstrate that Aspasia has not always been reduced to her sexuality in ways that distract or detract from other pleasurable and stimulating activities in which she may have participated.

The nineteenth century resounded with answers to the so-called Woman Question, an insinuative about and scrutiny of women’s expectations, allowances, and constraints that first arose in the sixteenth century under the French moniker Querelle des femmes. Women’s engagement in intellectual culture and politics came to the fore in both public and private debates, and with vehemence by those who resented or resisted women’s increasing presence in public life (Bergman-Carton 5–18, 78). Aspasia’s circulation throughout the nineteenth century accords with this widespread cultural curiosity. A preeminent woman of ideas, she was on the lips and brush-tips of many on the lookout for antecedent and analogous women to serve as models or antimodels.

Aspasia’s reclamation is complete, but her recovery remains an ongoing effort. While piecing together the details of her fifth-century BCE life may be “a nearly impossible task,” critically imaginative reconstructions of her long afterlife in different historical periods are not only possible, they are also necessary (Gale 361–62; Royster and Kirsch 17–21). Aspasia’s story was not finished 2,500 years ago: Due in no small part to the reverberant power of that which is deemed classical, it echoes throughout later eras. Turning to art enables rhetoricians to craft more holistic, or simply less partial, historiographies of women and others slighted in or by the textual record. As Richard Leo Enos has rallied in his work on nontraditional rhetorical artifacts, drawing upon “sources that are not only visual but tangible” makes for a history of rhetoric that is “more inclusive and comprehensive” (65–66). Nineteenth-century artists render Aspasia—who bends away from the patriarchal arc of history—visible in new forms, extending the possibilities for her ongoing recovery. Art gives rhetoric’s histories a different cast.
Aspasia extends beyond the page. The diversity and sensuality of artistic forms and movements show the kaleidoscopic and anachronistic power of figures like Aspasia, and her ongoing recovery necessitates a multimodal treatment. Paint and ink illuminate Aspasia during a century ablaze with inquiry about a woman’s place. In many pieces of nineteenth-century art, the overhanging historical portrait of her as whoring 

**hetaira**
is painted over. Within the new scenes and landscapes surveyed below, Aspasia comes into focus as a speaker, teacher, and contemplator situated comfortably within the intellectual communities of Periclean Athens, nineteenth-century Europe, and contemporary rhetoric.

**Painted Conversations: Aspasia’s Voice**

Within Parisian *salon* culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was not uncommon for men to call a favorite *salonnière* an “Aspasie” (Mason, *The Women of the French Salons* 118). The custom may have originated with the famous courtesan and *salonnière*, Anne de L’Enclos, nicknamed Ninon (c. 1620–1705), who was known as the “Aspasia of France” (see de L’Enclos). Several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers and painters identified or alluded to Aspasia and Pericles’ home as “the first salon that history has made known to us” (Carroll 198; see also Mason, *Woman in the Golden Ages* 69–104; and Glenn, “sex, lies, and manuscript” 184).

Such analogies plucked Aspasia out of ancient Athens but not out of the cultural and intellectual milieu in which Parisians imagined she excelled. Two paintings by Nicolas-André Monsiau (1754–1837) explicitly featuring Aspasia took form in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. Emerging amidst ongoing political and social revolutions, neoclassicism peaked while French cultural debates were increasingly focused on the “proper” role of women. European neoclassical artists imbued their representations of ancient figures with newness, especially with the principles of their time’s enlightened political consciousness (Bietoletti 8). As a genre, neoclassical paintings tend to focus on the small subset of ancient moments, ideas, and figures deemed “classical.” As such, neoclassical scenes quickly became part of a much more culturally extensive troping—a turning back—to antiquity. Embedded within this turning back was a (re)generative power that infused moralistic conceptions of the past with an evolving sense of reason and law (Palmer 2).

Within the “grand genre” of history painting, neoclassical artists stood out for their use of imagination; inventionally, the genre necessitated both a thorough knowledge of the past and the artistic genius required to bring historical figures back to life (Palmer 5–6).

While Monsiau is not remembered as an élite neoclassical painter, his paintings nevertheless embody the spirit of the movement. As neoclassical painters were wont to do, Monsiau’s visual invocations of Aspasia invest the old with a new shimmer that speaks to the shifting social attitudes of the day. His treatments of Aspasia are rich in invention and imagination; in portraying Aspasia actively, he remembers her as a speaker who could command the attention of the most celebrated public men of her time. Monsiau’s take on Aspian Athens gestures toward the “timeless virtues of tradition and form, [to the] timeless reverence for the order of the past” that mark the neoclassical movement (Lipking 183). His Aspasias speak—they have voice—and they are heard.

Monsiau gained attention in his early artistic career while exhibiting his work in the salons of Paris, and his treatments of Aspasia are his contributions to the *Woman Question* (Sievers 123). Because of the dominant preference for treatments of so-called great men, it was less common for nineteenth-century artists to present flattering portraits of women writers, political thinkers,
and rhetors; Aspasia’s uptake testifies to her recovered status as a woman of ideas (Bergman-Carton 170). Though there was, at the time, a “growing fascination with the subject of courtesans in antiquity,” Monsiau does not depict Aspasia as a *hetaira* in the “painted,” sexualized sense (Bergman-Carton 170). His Aspasias look the part of neither courtesan nor contemplator; instead, they receive a new guise, taking form as magnetic contributors to culture through conversation with its prime movers.⁹

Monsiau’s *Socrate et Aspasie* (Socrates and Aspasia) (1801, Figure 2) is a revision of an earlier painting he exhibited at the Salon of 1798 (Sievers 123). *Socrate et Aspasie* seats Aspasia, dressed in an airy white *chiton* (tunic), at a table opposite Socrates, who sits, and Pericles, who stands. All three lean into the discussion. Laid across the table are three pink blooms, a lyre, and an unfurled book-roll. Bergman-Carton hints at the rhetorical dimensions of the scene: Aspasia “communicates her ideas not through a musical instrument but through the traditionally male devices of aggressive gestures and spoken words” (172). “Aggressive” seems too harsh a descriptor, but Aspasia does appear expressive and assertive. She could be speaking about any number of topics. Perhaps she is sounding out a new oration. Perhaps she is enumerating for her betrothed and her student some Milesian figures of speech, which would account for her gesture of counting. The key takeaway is that it is Aspasia alone, of the three figures depicted, who instructs, corrects, insists. Socrates and Pericles are po(i)sed to listen and learn.

Monsiau’s imaginative treatment of Aspasia may be best understood when put into relief with his 1806 painting, *Aspasia s’entretenant avec les hommes les plus illustres d’Athènes* (Aspasia Conversing with the Most Illustrious Men of Athens, Figure 3). Monsiau “seems to have drawn
on the 1801 painting for the position of the figures and certain details of the setting of his 1806 canvas” (Sievers 123). Alongside Socrates and Pericles, the 1806 painting adds several new members to Athens’ preeminent salon: Sophocles, Euripides, Phidias, Plato, Alcibiades, Xenophon, Parrhasius, and Isocrates have joined the party (Sievers 123–24; Janson 77). Some sit, others stand. The painting’s Salon description explains that Aspasia’s renown drew “[l]es guerriers, les philosophes, les gens de lettres et les artistes les plus distingués se réunissaient chez elle” (“warriors, philosophers, men of letters, and the most distinguished artists to her home”) to hear her speak (Janson 77). Rejecting fifth-century BCE cultural mores that would have rendered her silent in the oikos (home, household), this Aspasia captivates her company. She gestures in a similar fashion; right arm outstretched over an unfolding book-roll, her words appear to have struck Socrates and Pericles in particular. Aspasia again stares across the table, as if awaiting a response. Socrates, head cocked in curiosity, occupies the center of the image. Has he been sufficiently persuaded?

This painting completes the scene first set in Socrate et Aspasie. Monsiau’s twofold treatment of Aspasia presents a progression; between the first image and the second, word has gotten out that Aspasia is worth attending upon. Both paintings gesture to Aspasia’s power of speech; not silenced, her voice is heard. Alongside Socrates, Pericles, and other well-remembered Athenian men, she speaks her mind, outlines her case, and reminds us to continue listening and looking for “the speech of Aspasia of Miletus,” just as Socrates advised Menexenus (Menexenus 249d1). Monsiau does not remember Aspasia as Athens’ preeminent hetaira; instead, his Aspasias exemplify the power of transgressive speech. In the midst of fervent discussion and debate at the outset of the century, Monsiau’s Aspasias reflect growing attention to women’s voice, and voices. One senses the Milesian has plenty of answers to the Woman Question.
Painted Lesson: Aspasia’s Fiddle

Certain versions and visions of antiquity continued to occupy a privileged position in French culture throughout the nineteenth century. Allusions to and representations of the ancients took many forms, and, because particular figures were so commonly aggrandized, satirists had plenty of shared forms upon which to practice their distinctive arts of diminution and amplification. For satire and parody to do their public work, that is, rhetorical work, the objects they treated had to be broadly recognizable even when egregiously distorted.

Growing up in the midst of this postrevolutionary flux, Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) apprenticed in Paris before stepping out on his own, and stepping out of line (Wilker; Jordan; Powell and Childs 14–20). In 1832 he spent six months in prison for a piece of overtly political satire, a still infamous rendering of the so-called “Citizen King” Louis-Phillippe as François Rabelais’s insatiable Gargantua. That same year he struck up a relationship with the newly established, satirical daily newspaper, Le Charivari. Upon Daumier’s release, he slid back into his subversive ways, but Louis-Phillippe’s 1835 outlawing of political caricature pushed Daumier’s talents in less dangerous directions. Our interest lies with his representations of a small but influential cadre of mythical and historical women of antiquity popular in nineteenth-century French culture.

Daumier’s series, Histoire ancienne, ran in Le Charivari from December of 1841 through January of 1843 and featured fifty lithographs, eighteen of which feature or focus on mythical or historical women. A notice written by Le Charivari founder Charles Philipon introduced the series with flamboyance, and without fidelity to Daumier’s method: “We have sent Monsieur Daumier to Greece, alone and without any scientific support. He worked day and night to reveal the Greek soul of the past. . . . Daumier brings antiquity back to us” (translated in Jordan 9). Whether Daumier presented a grittier antiquity for antiquity’s sake or to spite neoclassical reverence is a matter beyond our current scope, but it was not resolved by critics of Histoire ancienne in its own time, and we relish rather than seek to rectify that irresolution.

Socrates chez Aspasie (Socrates at the House of Aspasia, Figure 4), the tenth lithograph in Daumier’s Histoire ancienne series, appeared on June 5, 1842. Its kinetic core is Socrates kicking up into a cancan, a dance current viewers may hastily presume was the performative province of women, and a particular kind of woman, at that. When the cancan emerged in the 1830s, it was first danced by working-class men, and it was scandalous because it departed so animatedly and farcically from modes of dance that showcased “the rational, classically-influenced” body (Parfitt-Brown 4). Mocking order and orderliness, those shared values of mid-fifth-century BCE aristocratic Athens and mid-nineteenth-century aristocratic Paris, the cancan gives legs to Daumier’s disruptive aims.

Daumier needed to take no liberties with fifth- and fourth-century BCE descriptions of Socrates to humble the high and mighty ancients of neoclassicism. The historical Socrates seems to have been a talking, walking affront to the aesthetic valuations of his time, which celebrated symmetry, beauty, and balance. His contemporaries describe him as bald, bug-eyed, snub-nosed, and thick-lipped (see Zanker 32–39). One may grant that Daumier exploits Socrates’ notorious physical ugliness whereas other artists have given it a lower profile. Nevertheless, Daumier’s Socrates is no more ridiculous than the silliest accounts of him in antiquity.

For instance, in Plato’s Menexenus Socrates tells Menexenus he would gratify any request he made of him, even to strip and dance (236c–d). Quintilian mentions Socrates’ late-in-life lyre lessons (Institutio Oratoria 1.10.13). In The Dance Lucian’s Lycinus recounts, likely mockingly, Socrates’ zeal for that very activity, connecting Socrates’ fondness for frolicking to his lack of reluctance
to learn from all sources, from flute girls to Aspasia (§25). In even the ancient imagination, then, Socrates shimmied and strummed, ever the eager pupil. In Daumier’s image, however, it is not clear who is teaching whom, or what manner of lesson it is, although Aspasia’s possession of the fiddle suggests Socrates dances to her tune.

Aspasia herself angles away from the viewer; thus one may surmise that Daumier intends for Socrates to be the central figure. Yet Daumier has not visually satirized Socrates beyond the bounds of very easy recognition, which could mean that he directs our attention to his rendering of Aspasia. Of the women appearing in the *Histoire ancienne* series, Aspasia seems least visually caricatured; Daumier’s Helen is a burly boor, Calypso a husky crone, and Sappho an aged waif with stringy hair. By stark contrast, the comparatively young-looking Aspasia, with tidy coif, trim waist, and delicately muscled calf and thigh, embodies and reflects what classicists call “the ideal of youthful female beauty that dominates fifth-century Greek art: slim and graceful, with small and firm breasts” (Fantham et al. 117). Daumier’s Aspasia exercises control over her body; turned away from the viewer, she rouses curiosity. For some satisfaction, we can turn to the jaunty French verses accompanying the image, attributed to Jean Vatout, which read:

**SOCRATE CHEZ ASPASIE. HOUSE.**

Aimant le vin et les filletes,
Socrate après diner laissat sagesse en plan,
Et comme un Débardeur chez d’aimables Lorettes,
Il pinçait son léger cancan.

**SOCRATES AT ASPASIA’S**

Loving wine and girlies,
Socrates left wisdom behind after dinner
And like a docker at the house of an Amiable loret,
He danced a nimble cancan.
Vatout, a Parisian historian, did not author or likely even authorize those verses. According to Nicole Jordan, *Le Charivari* staff writers penned them: “While Daumier satirized his fellow artists, the captioners took [on] the scholars, writers, and other learned minds of the day” (14). The verses prompt the reader-viewer to look upon the relationship between Aspasia and Socrates with a particular eye. Daumier’s title is clear: The scene unfolds on location at “chez Aspasie.” That Socrates visits Aspasia in *her* house, and that her house appears to be simply rather than sumptuously appointed, are details that afford her independence from the contexts in which ancient writers routinely situate her (Pericles’ house; brothel). She is on her own turf.

In Jordan’s judgment the captions “attributed to Vatout all bear a certain French quality, and are excellent examples of transmissions of the ancient myths into contemporary French society and life” (123). Socrates’ designation as “un Débardeur” and Aspasia’s as “Lorette” are illustrative. A dockworker was a working-class occupation, but deciphering the manner of work and the class specified by “Lorette” presents a critical challenge. Likely coined by journalist Nestor Roqueplan around 1840, “la Lorette” was a woman denizen of the low-rent apartments lining the newly constructed Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, which abutted the neoclassical church of the same name (Solomon-Godeau 141). That entire quarter of Paris was known as *La Nouvelles Athènes*: The New Athens. In 1841, the year before *Socrate chez Aspasie* appeared, Paul Gavarni illustrated the caricaturing pamphlet, *Physiologie de la lorette*, which begins by telling the reader that “La Lorette échappe à la définition”: the Lorette escapes definition (Alhoy 11). Two years later, Alexandre Dumas, the father of the novelist, published *Filles, lorettes et courtisanes*, an analysis of the three tiers of women who provide company for men. The section on *courtisanes* begins in ancient Greece, and “Aspasie” flits in and out of his narration (Dumas). She is not, in his estimation, a middling Lorette. In 1857 the poet Charles Baudelaire used simple, direct language: “La Lorette is a free person [une personne libre]. She comes and she goes. She has an open house. She has no master; she frequents artists and journalists.” “Lorette” came to refer to “loose, vulgar, or ‘liberated’ women of all persuasions” (Jordan 72); as such, the concept finds in *hetaira* an ancient antecedent that also has a presumptuous wink about it. Presented in her own home, Daumier’s Aspasia claims the space of the *oikos*: she calls the tune, not the man of the house. On show is not only Socrates’ *bonhomie* but also her spirit of transgressive independence. Perhaps because Aspasia was reputed to be a “free person”—that is, not, like Helen, the most beautiful woman on earth, or, like Calypso, the most enchanting—Daumier did not find in her a vaunted figure needing to be taken down a few pegs. Instead, she was already common, familiar, perhaps even occupying the apartment down the street. Daumier did not need to show viewers her face: They already knew it.

**Painted Place: Aspasia’s Border Crossing**

Crossing the English Channel, we find in Britain a similar co-existence of reverence and irreverence for classical culture. Productions of Aristophanes permitted both attitudes at once. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, public stagings of Aristophanes’ plays were not uncommon in Britain, but some plays were more common than others. As Edith Hall explains, “[T]he male environment of the universities, the longstanding aversion in that environment to transvestite acting, and the perceived need to avoid obscene or political material, all contributed to an inevitable attraction toward Aristophanes’ more intellectual comedies *Birds* and *Frogs*” (85). It was not until the next century that the edgier *Lysistrata, Ekklesiazousai*, and *Acharnians*—in the last of which Aspasia is accused of starting the Peloponnesian War—were performed. The ancient Athenian women of
Ekklesiazousai disguise their voices and bodies as men and take over the ekklēsia, the crowded and rowdy assembly of thousands of citizens that met on the Pnyx. Painted in 1888, years before Ekklesiazousai was publicly staged in Britain, Aspasia on the Pnyx (Figure 5) shows two women occupying that same space.

Henry Holiday’s (1839–1927) Aspasia took shape near a “beautiful statue of Hermes” in his London studio (Holiday 314). She boldly entered the heart of Athenian democracy under the watchful eye of the Greek god of speech, messages, thresholds, and border crossings. Holiday’s Aspasia is neither hetaira nor housewife but has, atop the Pnyx, ventured across the threshold of the oikos into the communal spaces of ancient Athens (Aspasia). She looks casual—comfortable, even—in her public rebellion. Reflective and inquisitive, Holiday’s Aspasia appears to have an unapologetic sense of her own intellect and power. Surveying the public and patriarchal space of the polis, she seems in no hurry to return to what some might deem her rightful place in the oikos, down below and inside.

In 1854 Holiday was admitted to the Royal Academy—still a highly prestigious London school of art—where he spent his late adolescence among Britain’s most talented artists (“Reminiscences” 28–30). In time, the young painter encountered the emergent group of “controversial” artists, poets, and thinkers who had christened themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Prettejohn, “Introduction” 1; Holiday 41–42; see also Boime 225–91). “The first avant-garde movement in British painting,” Pre-Raphaelitism took center-stage on the English art scene during the Royal Academy’s 1850 exhibition (Bullen 1, 6). In many ways a “British critique of modernity,” Pre-Raphaelitism was met with scorn from early critics (Helsinger xi; Boime 254–55, 263–64). Criticism largely stemmed from the Brotherhood’s youthful tenacity and inventional gumption in the face of Victorian-era traditions and values (all original members were younger than twenty-five); “burning with ambition to make their mark on English society,” the Brotherhood worked to “revitalize the
whole of English painting” (Boime 225–26). Pre-Raphaelite painters often favored historical, literary, and religious material. The burgeoning collective derived its energy from its mixture of media and forms, from paintings to poetry.

Inventionally, the Pre-Raphaelites made extensive use of historical figures, just as neoclassical artists did. One of their founding documents is particularly striking. “A List of Immortals” is a registry of fifty-seven Western figures ranked from zero-to-four stars. Jesus Christ (the only member of the Pre-Raphaelites’ four-star club) appears, as do William Shakespeare (three-stars), Homer and George Washington (two-stars), Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (one-star), and Joan of Arc, Edgar Allan Poe, and Isaac Newton (all were left starless by the Pre-Raphaelites) (Hunt 159; “The Pre-Raphaelite ‘List of Immortals’” 277–78; Armstrong 15). Aspasia was not “immortalized.” Holiday, however, clearly deemed her appeal to be enduring, if not eternal.

What Holiday called his “Athenian picture” depicts Aspasia, resplendent in gold, semi-recumbent on a stone seat, a young companion at her feet (Holiday 312). Reflecting on the painting’s invention in his memoir, Reminiscences on My Life, Holiday explains that Aspasia is modeled on Kathleen Douglas-Pennant, the daughter of Lord Penrhyn, an acquaintance of Holiday’s wife (313). As a model, Douglas-Pennant, then in her early twenties, blends nineteenth-century English peerage with Aspasia’s own complicated ancestry (Dod and Dod 368–69). Her unnamed counterpart’s visage is taken from seventeen-year-old Hilda Urlin (Holiday 313; Drower 231–33). Urlin’s parents were also friends of Holiday’s, for whom “she was persuaded to sit as a model. . . . With her heart-shaped face, clear blue eyes and fair hair, she was just the type of beauty he was looking for” (Drower 232–33). Holiday’s memoir provides insight into his creative and compositional processes; his Aspasia, equal parts British aristocrat and Athenian border-croasser, invites us to consider new silhouettes among the many faces of her afterlife. She is modeled from nineteenth-century English aristocracy and, above Athens, she models the transgressive power of public appearance.

Draped atop the Pnyx in an open and unguarded pose, Aspasia “contemplat[es] the recently completed buildings on the Acropolis” (Holiday 312). This setting offers a unique opportunity for imagining Aspasia within the heart of Periclean Athens. Holiday gives Aspasia a pensive air and an expansive space in which to do her thinking. Over what might she be mulling? What is that book-roll in her left hand? A hot-button Athenian forensic case or deliberative debate? Her working draft of Pericles’ famous funeral oration? Her own work, a long-lost original treatise for which Enos and many others long (75)?13 The details, sharp yet sparse, allure.

Holiday’s selection of this ancient site abounds with significance and suggestiveness. The Pnyx was a central site for public, rhetorical, democratic exchange in ancient Athens. A hill in the southwest region of the ancient polis, the classical Pnyx was “a rhetorical tool for the orchestration of collective seeing and thus the creation of a common political identity” (Fredal 188). Unlike treatments that keep Aspasia indoors (including the three previously discussed in this essay), Holiday’s emboldens her as a public figure. Aspasia is not found seductively lounging atop Alcibiades’ bare chest, but is instead positioned in a privileged, public seat atop Athens’ preeminent hill.

From the Pnyx one could have easily seen and been swept away by the luster of the sights and the bluster of the sounds of democratic Athens, including the Theater of Dionysus, the Acropolis, the Areopagus, and the agora. Seated there, one could encounter topos of both the rhetorical and physical sort; the spaces on and around the Pnyx showcased the prominent rhetors of classical Athens. This Aspasia joins a long line of men (and Aristophanes’ band of women) who have occupied Athens’ most populous venue of democratic debate. In contrast to hyper-sexualized portraits of Aspasia as an indoor hetaira, Aspasia on the Pnyx empowers Aspasia through a change of scenery. Holiday’s Aspasia exemplifies the transgressive power of public border crossing. Having crossed the threshold
of her oikos, she is recast as the woman in gold. Neither anxious nor timid, she is comfortable in her publicness. Text in tow, her gaze fixed on Athens’ cityscape, Aspasia confidently contemplates.

**Drawing upon Aspasia’s Past**

For 2,500 years Aspasia’s stories have been rendered and shaped across genres and media. Extending Aspasia’s afterlife, the paintings of Monsiau, Daumier, and Holiday add new colors and textures to her memory. Aspasia must be an ongoing project for historians of rhetoric precisely because artists and writers working well beyond antiquity project onto her aesthetic values or political principles of their own times and places to instruct, delight, and move viewers and readers. Representations of Aspasia’s appearance and activities offer a wide variety of imaginative and creative interpretations that stretch the narrow limits of how a very few ancient, aristocratic men chose to record and remember her. Anachronistic Aspasias—that is, Aspasias out-of-time—look back and look forward.

There is much, though, that Aspasia has left to say and to show. As rhetoric adjusts to nontraditional domains—the queer, the silent, the material, the corporeal, the digital, the visual—historians, theorists, critics, and teachers gain opportunities to revisit the tradition from new perspectives and with new priorities. Among those new domains, the affordances of digital tools, in particular, made this project possible, and we encourage rhetoricians to continue to view and review our histories through digitally infused or enabled perspectives (see, among others, Solberg; Enoch and Bessette). Our analysis treats a mere handful of the dozens of nineteenth-century Aspasia paintings. While our scope was limited to that century, other Aspasias await consideration in all manner of media. Our research uncovered a groundswell of Aspasion enthusiasm in the nineteenth century, but artists before and after have given life to her rhetorical and cultural power. For instance, in the twentieth century, Aspasia appears as a model on a softly pornographic photograph in the 1920s, a pin-up girl on a periodical cover in the mid-1940s, and a flourish of letters on a place-setting at a table for banqueting women in Judy Chicago’s famous 1979 traveling installation, *The Dinner Party*. Aspasia has also taken shape in contemporary novels (see Henry 113–25), most recently in Karen Essex’s *Stealing Athena*. Scholars across rhetoric have ample opportunities for the further recovery of Aspasia.

Aspasia’s painted afterlife boasts lively, political, and colorful qualities. We see her not in fla-grante but rather in the middle of discussion, instruction, and contemplation. Luminous whites, warm oranges, lush golds, and deep greens pull Aspasia out from the shadows of history and envelop her in polychromatic possibility. By focusing on visual media, we encountered new artifacts and new methods for making a case for Aspasia’s ongoing disciplinary importance. Aspasia’s vivid treatments by Monsiau, Daumier, and Holiday showcase her perseverance and relevance in a century reeling from revolution and the valuation of old verities, especially about women. Made art, Aspasia resists attempts to mute her colors and reemerges, unapologetically, as a painted lady.

**Notes**

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Painted Lady

209

historicize and theorize Aspasia’s “companion” status. In the spirit of feminist collaboration, the authors intend to reverse the order of authorship in the next publication.

2 All translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

3 Aspasia’s presence in art often gets fleeting attention. Jarratt and Ong open their chapter with a reference to a fresco featuring Aspasia at the University of Athens (9–10). We take this and other passing references to Aspasia in art as invitations to pursue her afterlife across media.

4 Though the length of Henry’s book affords her space to trace the long arc of Aspasia’s history of representation, Henry still must pick and choose. She briefly attends to two nineteenth-century images of Aspasia: one by Nicolas-André Monsiau (which we also treat, but in much greater detail) and this one by Gérôme.

5 Google’s image-search function proved helpful for locating images, as did Pinterest for organizing them. For more on Pinterest’s rhetorical potential, see Geraths and Kennerly. The copia (abundance, plentitude) of images we collected can be found here: https://www.pinterest.com/kennerlymichele/aspasia-in-art/.

6 Following Gale’s methodological comparisons of Glenn, Jarratt and Ong, and Henry, College English published comments by Glenn and Jarratt, as well as reflections by Hui Wu and Gale herself. Read together, Gale’s article and the subsequent comments and responses to it speak to the need, then and now, for both recognizing the plurality of methodological perspectives involved in doing feminist historiography and bringing them to the fore in ongoing disciplinary conversations.

7 That is not to gush that seeking out art, especially that which is displayed in major museums, results in a trove of images and artifacts that utterly overturns what we can glean from the texts of a respective period in terms of diversity and inclusivity. For more on the limits of museum holdings in particular, see Demo.

8 Monsiau exhibited his painting, Molière lisant le Tartuffe chez Ninon de l’Enclos (Moliere Reading Tartuffe at the Home of Ninon de L’Enclos), at the Salon of 1802.

9 In some respects, this “new” look resembles Aspasia’s ancient one as imagined by Plutarch (Life of Pericles 24.3–4).

10 Online images of and further background about Daumier’s lithographs can be freely accessed through the Daumier Register: http://www.daumier-register.org/.

11 Le Charivari, from its outset, was heavily resistant to “women of ideas” and the changes they symbolized; the paper routinely mocked, ridiculed, and satirized such intellectual women—women writers, leaders of the growing feminist movement, as well as mythological, historical, and/or classical figures (Bergman-Carton 67–70).

12 Daumier satirized 101 Salon paintings with classical names in their titles that were showcased between 1783 and 1842, including both of Monsiau’s Aspasias (Wilker; Jordan 335–49).

13 We, too, hope for such a discovery.

Works Cited


———. *Socrate et Aspasie (The Debate of Socrates and Aspasia).* 1801. Oil on canvas. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.


Cory Geraths is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University. He is currently working on his dissertation, a feminist recovery of Mary Magdalene’s voices in Christian rhetoric and visages in Renaissance and contemporary art. His work appears in *Communication Teacher.*

Michele Kennerly is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University and director of the undergraduate foundational communication course. Her work appears in *Rhetorica, Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* and *Advances in the History of Rhetoric.* Her current book project, about ancient Roman textual culture, argues against the common view that verbal polish indicates the loss of the public function of words during times of reduced freedom.