

## Show 6: Pericles and Aspasia



As certainly as my name is Pericles, I will be dead before the next day's light from this cursed sickness that has taken my sons and so many that I know and love. This black death is as merciless in a time of war, defeat and starvation as any Spartan troops at the gates, though I still find reason to hope.

My hope comes from this timeless and peerless city, which I have labored all my life for. Freedom belongs to those with the courage to defend it and that which has made Athens great is much larger and more durable than what besets it. Even with so many troubles, what I leave behind will not be measured by monuments or marble but what I have woven into the lives of others, including you, dear Aspasia.

This city of Athens will rise above the terrible sickness that has robbed her of so many noble souls, mine included. My only sorrow is for what I leave behind me.

I will walk no more in this loveliest of all the world's cities, speak no more in the Agora or be here to celebrate our eventual victory in this accursed war. I leave all this behind with nothing more than the usual regret that anything is allowed to happen despite my absence. No, I leave all that behind as normal when one is ready to pass from this life. What I cannot accept is to leave you, Aspasia, and the love we have known.

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Your mind, your soul – these are things I will be lacking in the next world. You have been my equal and more than that, Aspasia. I call on all the gods and goddesses to witness a love that will last beyond this life and into whatever follows.

*Rest, my love, save your strength*

For what? We both know I won't be alive tomorrow. I would dwell on the only truth I've ever found.

*Truth can be a shadow – seen but impossible to put your arms around. At least I have been a little more accessible to you than that and certainly a lot more fun to be with than our philosopher friends.. They have no power to measure what we have shared, any more than they have words to describe it. What we have endured for this love we share has always quietly amazed me.*

Your life will go on whatever I do, you know. The most notable philosophers of our world, Socrates and Plato, sing your praises, you have faced down prosecution and persecution from your inferiors in a trial which captivated all of Athens, you have loved who and where you deemed worthy, born a fine son with me and you have graced my life through it all. You will continue to hold court in your own salon, attended by admirers and be a power to be both courted and respected.

*Pericles, my love – I am reminded how very much I will miss you, but the world you describe exists only in your fevered dreams. Women live in a very different world under the light of a very different sun than men do.*

### MUSIC

[HOST] The Athens of around 400 BC was a self-appointed light in a world of moving shadows. Kings and occasional queens held absolute powers of life and death over their subjects in all the known world, from the pharaohs in Egypt to the halls of the Great King in Persia, except for the democracy which flourished in Athens.

For better or worse, democracy ruled in Athens, even if sometimes by fits and starts. The notion that citizens might have a say in how their lives were lived was revolutionary. Of course, "citizens" and the right to vote in elections, meant those who were free and male. Women, slaves, children and foreigners were

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regarded as not being fit to be free.

For the rest of the world's rulers, the Athenians were mad and represented a threat to rich oligarchs and the divine rights of kings and deserved either obliteration or the slaver's block.

Even Greece, itself, was divided into jealous and brawling city states which were mostly ruled by a mix of aristocrats and the rich, the notable exception being the military society of that great rival of Athens, Sparta.

The Spartans regarded themselves as the strongest power in Greece and therefore the rightful leaders in all the territory regarded as "Greater Greece" spread around the Mediterranean Sea. The thousand and one cities, colonies, trading outposts and islands in Greater Greece the Spartans regarded as their wards who required Spartan oversight and the occasional reminder of what professional warriors were capable of. The Spartans lived for war, trained for it constantly and their society was organized like an army, tended to and supported by servants and slaves. The upstarts in Athens had moved into a position of social and political status that rivaled the leadership position of the Spartans.

The free flow of ideas, public debate and the sometimes brawling society the Athenians were building produced a series of exceptional leaders as Athens rose in size and prestige during the fifth century BCE or Before the Common Era. One of these men was born into a family of wealth and influence and was named Pericles.

Well-educated, a gifted public speaker, rigorously trained to debate and sway public opinion, Pericles blazed across the night sky of Athenian politics and became acknowledged as "the first citizen of Athens" and the time of his leadership as "The Age Of Pericles". Builder of both the Parthenon and the new, muscular foreign policy of Athens, his influence spread to other cities across Greece, many of whom turned to Athens and Pericles to settle disputes, broker treaties or to seek justice.

Pericles took his position in Athens seriously, shunning the loud, drunken banquets many Greeks were fond of and preferring a quiet evening discussing philosophers with friends to the drinking games and other leisure activities pursued by his wealthy and well-connected contemporaries.

Despite his preference for quiet evenings, the bare knuckle style of politics in Athens led to the imprisonment, banishment or elimination of the political

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opponents of Pericles and he found himself in his 40s as the undisputed leader of Athens, a properly married man and the father of two sons.

### **MUSIC**

While women in the ancient world were always visible as workers, mothers and slaves, those from conservative families were frequently expected to stay inside their houses in order to remain separated from the eyes of strangers. This was often true for those families who were wealthy enough to be able to afford to educate their girls via private tutors.

One of the few public roles available to educated women in that time was as a paid companion to wealthy men. There were, of course, the common prostitutes which have existed in all human cultures around the world and they were certainly a common sight in Athens, but the Greek hetaira was much like the geishas of feudal Japan – educated, refined, fashionable women, able to make music or hold a learned conversation, skilled in the arts of love and expensive to maintain.

Into this setting came a blazing comet of a woman named Aspasia. Born in Greater Greece outside of Athens, she arrived in the city as an immigrant. As a woman and immigrant, little of her early life was deemed worth recording and there is little known about her arrival or her early years. We can guess that her family must have had money because she was much better educated than a poor family's younger daughter would be and she put that education to work for her as she made her way in a strange city.

She eventually appears in recorded history in Athens as a hetaira. As a hetaira, she received those ultimate acknowledgments in Greek society: freedom of movement and being subject to taxation. A hetaira was free of those restrictions which kept other women secluded in the family home and was not only able to move where and when she wished, but also to mingle with men other than her family members. The taxation meant that she was regarded as a woman of independent means in Athenian society and not dependent on the money of a husband or father.

Aspasia thrived in this environment and she soon established a home of her own which drew social gatherings of artists, statesmen, generals and philosophers to drink wine and discuss events. Able to quote from the latest play, discuss subtle details in philosophy or the sciences and influence the course of politics and current events through her friends, Aspasia became a bright light in Athens. Her

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lecture and debate skills earned her a favorable reputation among the city's intellectuals, even earning the respect and friendship of the famous philosopher Socrates, who was a frequent guest at her gatherings and someone whose work she was said to have influenced.

Another guest was, inevitably, Pericles who was among the leaders of Athens that she entertained at what was by now the most influential salon in the city. She discovered in him a lively intellect, an open mind to the role of women and the magnetic attraction of exercised authority when he was in his mid 40s and she somewhere in her 20s.

The attraction between them was too strong to be denied and they fell into a love that had as many consequences for Athens as it did for them. They became inseparable and a topic of amused gossip and then scandalized outrage. Pericles soon ended his marriage and the anonymous appendage that was his wife fades from history. In the meantime, Aspasia became pregnant.

### **MUSIC**

It can be safely guessed at that a knowledgeable woman with Aspasia's money and connections would not be pregnant unless she chose to be, and she bore Pericles a son whom she named after his father. As a foreigner residing in Athens, Aspasia was forbidden to marry an Athenian citizen like Pericles, but their marital status could hardly have mattered as gossip soon turned to outright personal hostility in marketplaces, dining rooms and theatres across Athens.

Aspasia's home had been the site of an informal school for the instruction of girls in speaking, logic, philosophy and other disciplines they had no other opportunities to learn because of their being kept in seclusion. Aspasia found that she had gone from being a literal role model for those young women of means whose families encouraged them to learn to comport themselves at dinner parties to being slandered as a dangerous influence on impressionable young minds and her school was condemned.

She was enough of an intellectual force that she was soon alleged to be the steel in the spine of Pericles, the woman who taught him how to speak and who had influenced him as the leader of Athens. This was a blatant attempt to undercut Pericles because the greatest insult to a man in that age was to insinuate that he was under the influence of a woman instead of directing his own affairs.

Much of this animosity, of course, was the result of political enemies made by

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Pericles and the conservative elements in society who opposed the populist leanings of Athenian government that he represented. Their love was now a convenient lightning rod for playwrights and comedians – the late night television talk show hosts of their day - who gossiped about Aspasia's school for girls being a front for a brothel and existing to provide young girls for the depraved attentions of Pericles.

### MUSIC

Eventually, criminal charges were laid against Aspasia for corrupting Athenian society and its leader and she was brought to public trial before a jury of 1,500 citizens of Athens – a large jury being a common approach to high profile criminal cases back then. Lacking anything like a city or state attorney to lead the prosecution, a famous comedian and known critic was appointed to press the charges against her.

Most of the speeches, motions and records of that trial have disappeared behind the veil of the passing centuries, but Pericles spoke passionately – even tearfully - in her defense at the trial and all charges against her were eventually dropped.

The toll on Pericles, however, drew attention as the trial's aftermath found him moody, depressed, largely friendless and widely reviled in a city ragged and depopulated by a long-running war with Sparta which had brought the city to its last reserves of strength. That was when a return visit from the plague arrived in Athens on a ship.

### MUSIC

The plague ravaged a city that had been under military siege for years by their mortal enemies the Spartans. The city's blood and treasure had been poured out far from home as well as defending the city walls in their attempts to keep the Spartan army at bay. The disease killed around a third of the citizens in Athens, including the two sons Pericles had with his first wife.

Tired, defeated, cynical and depressed, Pericles soon contracted the illness himself and died, although not before seeing his son with Aspasia legally confirmed as his heir.

*I, too, will miss our counsel and conversation, for where else in this world will I find a man who will not try to chain me to his kitchen or sleeping chamber? With your passing, I am truly alone in this world, especially for having known a*

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*freedom I will never taste again.*

*I grieve. I grieve for you – to be struck down by this foul and accursed sickness after a life of bold and noble actions. I grieve for Athens, doomed to lose your leadership when you are most needed to conduct this war against the hellspawned Spartans. I grieve for your friends and followers, who will only find disappointment and disillusionment in any who attempt to take your place.*

*I grieve for all of them, my love, but most of all, I grieve for myself. You will be accounted as one of the world's great men, your words carefully noted, your actions lauded as brilliant and audacious. You will be spoken of as Homer spoke of the heroes of old.*

*But me? Your equal in wit, wile and wordplay? Your match in the race for the prize, fearless in those areas I am permitted to strive in? When you die, I will suffer that small death which will happen when I can no longer live my life in the shelter of yours.*

*The effort, the sheer effort it has always taken to appear heedless and fearless is more than I can sustain without you. Like a swimmer in the ocean, you men need only keep your own heads above the water to thrive and go places. For women, we must expend effort not only on ourselves, but we must also carry the weight of the expectations of those around us if we are to even survive, let alone make progress towards anywhere. Without you, I simply do not have the strength to carry on as I have and will sink into that dark and quiet place where women dwell who do not seek to swim against that tide with all that weight on their backs.*

Aspasia, friendless and adrift in an impoverished war zone which had no appetite or money for intellectual gatherings, eventually married an acquaintance of Pericles who had grown quite wealthy as an uneducated seller of sheep. Digging in her heels, she coached this strong, good-natured and shrewd man over several years into becoming a leading political force in Athens who was eventually appointed to lead an army, a position he was holding when he died far from home in battle.

Aspasia, bereft of any comfort in this life, passes into obscurity after the death of her last great hope and her eventual end is as unremarked and unrecorded as her beginning. Except with you there - listening to us here - at History's Greatest Love Affairs.