Historical Studies and Postmodernism: Rereading Aspasia of Miletus

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In recent years, feminists in composition and rhetoric have attempted to change the male-dominated history of rhetoric by recovering marginal voices or texts of women in history and by restoring women’s places in the rhetorical tradition. Responding to those who view the feminist project with suspicion, C. Jan Swearingen explains that “there are traditions there that should be reclaimed as a part of women’s history” and that “you have to have something to problematize, and if you have no history at all, no knowledge at all of those people, then you’re talking about a nonexistent problematic” (“Octalog” 22). While I have no quibble with the feminist endeavor as a whole and support heartily Swearingen’s position on the issue, I believe that feminists’ reconstruction of alternative rhetorical histories has brought to the fore important and interesting questions concerning truth and method, the role of interpretation, the definition of history and historiography, and the influences of postmodern theory on historical research. It is these questions that I will explore in this article.

To avoid mere abstract theoretical and methodological argument, I will read three historical studies of Aspasia of Miletus to substantiate my discussion. I am fully aware that, though they were all done by feminist historians, the three histories or historiographies differ substantially in scope, purpose, and theoretical orientations. Since my purpose here is not to judge which study is better or whose scope is more comprehensive but to call attention to the difficulties of doing history, especially the kind of history that feminists are trying to do, I do not believe that these differences present

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major obstacles in my study. Further, in my attempt to evaluate the diverse means
these feminist historians adopt in dealing with the various difficulties— theoretical,
methodological, historical, perceptual, rhetorical, and political—in feminist historical
reconstruction, I wish to help develop a sensitivity to the complexities of writing alter-
native histories in the institutional context and, meanwhile, provoke and challenge femi-
nists to search for more productive, more coherent, and more convincing ways of
reconstructing women’s rhetorical histories in the male-dominant academy.

I chose Aspasia for several reasons. First, Aspasia is an interesting historical fig-
ure. Traditionally known as a high-class courtesan who attached herself to men of
power in the fifth century BCE, Aspasia is portrayed in the histories reconstructed by
feminists as one of the silenced voices and buried glories of antiquity. Rejecting the
traditional representation of Aspasia as a porne and procuress, feminist historians in
composition and rhetoric, including mainly Susan C. Jarratt, Rory Ong, and Cheryl
Glenn, have written a new kind of history that recasts Aspasia as “the first female ora-
tor in the Western tradition” (Jarratt and Ong 22) and “an active member of the most
famous intellectual circle in Athens,” whose influence reached not only Socrates and
Pericles but also extended to Plato (Glenn, “Sex, Lies” 191; Rhetoric Retold 43).

Second, perhaps no other woman in Western history presents a greater chal-
lenge than Aspasia for historians. The challenge comes not only from the traditional
male chauvinistic assumptions about women but also from the traditional methods of
doing and writing history. First of all, the absence of any written texts by Aspasia her-
self and the scarcity of historical documents that bear direct evidence of her existence
or intellectual life make historical reconstruction a nearly impossible task. The extant
literature consists of much conjecture and little good evidence for the period during
which Aspasia lived. Moreover, the historical texts that are available (most of them
are fragments) were most often written by men who “perceived, identified, evalu-
ated, and described their female and male subjects very differently” (Henry 5). Usu-
ally, male historians either did not mention women’s intellectual contributions at all
or mentioned them only indirectly. And historical accounts written in different his-
torical periods often differ greatly in their perception of the same historical figure
and can hardly be treated as “the same” evidence (5). Thus, how to evaluate and
interpret these male texts across time and space become important issues in femi-
nists’ historical research. Above all, working within the confines of the disciplines of
rhetoric, classicism, and history—which are still the domains of men and strongholds
of Enlightenment rationality, truth, and objectivity—feminist historians are faced
with decisions about subjects of inquiry, theory, methodology, and rhetorical strate-
gies in their rebuke of the traditional practices of these disciplines. If they want their
new history to have any effect at all on their audience in these disciplines, they have
to find new ways to relate to the established theory and practice of these disciplines
and to their audience as they try to valorize women’s ways of thinking, talking, writ-
ing, and researching. It is a paradox that feminist historians have to find a way
around: they have to challenge the traditional masculine assumptions about women and women’s ways of thinking and writing and at the same time seek their colleagues’ acceptance of the legitimacy and credibility of their research and scholarship. In short, overcoming these obstacles demands of the feminist historian both commitment and ingenuity. It is a tremendous challenge to write Aspasia (and other historical women) into the canonical rhetorical tradition.

Last, and most important, in the process of unwriting that which renders Aspasia’s existence unworthy of any serious scholarly notice and rewriting that which bars her from the rank of significant rhetoricians and philosophers, feminist historians have to address a series of questions concerning truth and evidence, interpretation and representation, and other theoretical and methodological issues in their historical studies of the Miletian/Athenian woman. In doing so, feminist historians make these questions subjects of inquiry in their own right. In fact, my interest in questions of truth and method was rekindled by my reading of the new histories of Aspasia. Glenn’s study of Aspasia—which turns to historiography, feminism, gender theory, and postmodernism for theoretical validation—invites inquiry into the tension between the traditional historical method and the postmodern, feminist historiographical approach to history. Inevitably, issues of truth and evidence in the writing of history become the difficulties Glenn has to cope with. Jarratt and Ong’s study of Aspasia, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for exploring the role of interpretation in historical research. Since the study exemplifies Jarratt’s theory of sophistic historiography and feminist sophistic—a feminist theory that challenges the traditional male perception of history and the traditional historical method—an analysis of the possible gains and losses of Jarratt’s theory in view of the Aspasia story may contribute to a better understanding of the differences between history and historiography. Lastly, Madeleine Henry’s book-length research on Aspasia’s biographical tradition employs a synthetic historical method that combines the traditional philological method, a feminist perspective, and the postmodern wisdom of the “situatedness” of the text and the researcher. In doing so, Henry’s study suggests possibilities of revising, rather than abandoning altogether, the traditional historical research method and the traditional notions of truth and evidence. By (re)reading the three stories of Aspasia, mainly their underlying assumptions and proclaimed theories and methodologies, I hope that this study will contribute to the much needed debate over truth and method in our field and to the feminist endeavor to change the male-dominant history of rhetoric by reconstructing alternative rhetorical histories of women.

I. ASPASIA AS “OUR MOTHER OF RHETORIC”: QUESTIONS OF TRUTH AND EVIDENCE IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

Cheryl Glenn’s study of Aspasia has appeared in “Sex, Lies, Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric” (1994), “Rereading Aspasia: The Palimpsest of
Her Thoughts” (1995), and Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance (1997). With very little variation, all three accounts represent Aspasia as a great intellectual whose contributions to the rhetorical tradition have been erased from history by men, and much effort is made to establish Aspasia as rhetorician, philosopher, and the first and only public woman with political influence in fifth-century BCE Athenian society. In all three accounts, the story of Aspasia follows similar lines: owing to her romantic relationship with Pericles and her status as a foreign-born woman who was not restrained by Athenian laws, Aspasia was able to move across “the gendered boundaries of appropriate roles for women and men in fifth-century BC Athens” (“Sex, Lies” 186). Her knowledge and skill in politics earned her not only love and respect from Pericles but admiration and recognition from Socrates, Plato, and many other lesser rhetoricians. Through her teachings, speeches, and her role as Pericles’s logographer, and through her academy for young women of good families and her popular salon for the most influential men of the day—Socrates, Plato, Anaxagoras, Sophocles, Phidias, and Pericles—Aspasia became a “powerful voice in Periclean Athens and seems to have affected the thinking of Plato and Socrates” (192). As the “ideal Greek woman” (186), Aspasia “colonized the patriarchal territory” (193). However, “her colony was quickly appropriated by males”: “Her influence has been enclosed within the gendered rhetorical terrain—and neutralized,” and “few of us have ever heard of Aspasia of Miletus, teacher of rhetoric” (193–94).

One may well read this story as a feminist fiction of an ancient woman’s life, a modern woman’s imagination of the possibilities and accomplishments of her ancient counterpart, a newly created space for women’s voices to be heard, or a purposeful distortion of history to challenge the male story of historical women. Read this way, the story of Aspasia becomes what Richard Rorty calls “Geistesgeschichte” in philosophy, the major goal of which is to “reconstruct people who were ‘significant’ in the development of something—if not philosophy, then perhaps ‘European thought’ or ‘the modern’” (“Historiography” 259). Rather than attempting to address questions such as whether Aspasia was “really” a major philosopher or rhetorician in her time, a Geistesgeschichte in rhetoric would reconstruct imaginatively an Athenian woman’s thinking and teaching in the absence of any primary texts written by her. Read as a feminist tale of a talented woman whose intellectual and political accomplishments were erased from the male history, Glenn’s Aspasia story is exhilarating and inspiring, for, after all, according to Rorty, one of the best things about contemporary feminism and about feminist writing is its abandonment of notions of objectivity and reality (“Feminism and Pragmatism” 210). Rorty says,

Much feminist writing can be read as saying: We are not appealing from phallist appearance to nonphallist reality. We are not saying that the voice in which women will some day speak will be better at representing reality than present-day masculist discourse. We are not attempting the impossible task of developing a nonhegemonic dis-
course, one in which truth is no longer connected with power. We are not trying to do away with social constructs in order to find something that is not a social construct. We are just trying to help women out of the traps men have constructed for them, help them get the power they do not presently have, and help them create a moral identity as women. (210)

What Rorty is saying here is that feminists should not attempt to prove themselves better than men at presenting reality or truth and that feminist writing should focus on representing women's perspective rather than trying to develop a nonhegemonic discourse. For Rorty feminism, as well as Christianity and the Enlightenment, is not a “case of cognitive clarity overcoming cognitive distortion. Each is, instead, an example of evolutionary struggle—struggle guided by no immanent teleology” (206), and “there is no larger entity which stands behind that cluster [of genes or memes] and makes its claim true (or make some contradictory claim true)” (“Feminism and Pragmatism” 207).

Glenn's Aspasia story can be considered Rortyan in that she does not treat historical truth or reality about Aspasia in the traditional sense. She announces unequivocally that her method is postmodern and historiographical, which emphasizes “angle” and imagination and which allows the feminist historian “to resist received notions of both history and of writing history” and to piece together fragments to “connect the real and the discourse” when proofs are unavailable (Rhetoric Retold 6). Glenn's angle is facilitated by gender theory, which “has served as an exceptionally useful analytical category for rereading rhetoric history to include Aspasia of Miletus” (“Rereading” 36). As Glenn explains,

[Until I began to view Aspasia's intellectual and social context through the lens of gender studies, she appeared in my view as a hetaera (upper-class courtesan), who successfully and perhaps wisely exploited her sexual access to Pericles to gain access to his intellectual and political circle. But by contextualizing Aspasia within the gender limits and expectations of her time, I can now explain her political and intellectual influence—and her rhetorical accomplishments—in terms other than erotic. (36)

Combining the gender “angle” with feminist strategies of resistant reading and reconstruction, Glenn advances a new definition of historiography: “Historiography, reading it crookedly and telling it slant, could help me shape—re-member—a female rhetorical presence” (Rhetoric Retold 8).

All three versions of Glenn's Aspasia story are passionate and effective, and they have no doubt helped create a place for Aspasia in composition and rhetoric and contributed to the feminist historical reconstruction project in our field. At the same time, Glenn's historiography raises important questions about truth, evidence, method, political agenda, and community interest. First, Glenn does not limit her historiography to just “explain” Aspasia's “political and intellectual influence.” She aims at establishing a series of historical truths about Aspasia's accomplishments and, by moving
the focus away from the Athenian woman’s identity, Glenn attempts to establish what Aspasia “really” was in history as opposed to her (unfair) portrayal by men. But this concern with historical reality brings Glenn’s historiography closer to traditional historical studies than to the kind of history writing that Rorty describes. She is compelled to cite historical and contemporary sources to “prove” that her configurations of Aspasia’s life is a better history, and thus the door is opened to the legitimate, albeit traditional, question whether the evidence used is valid, reliable, and adequate enough to support the truth-claims she makes. In the context of Glenn’s postmodern historiographical methods, feminist goals, and gender angle, the question about historical truth and historical evidence is particularly complex: Should we eschew the traditional concern about validity, reliability, and adequateness of historical sources when we purposefully turn away from the traditional way of doing history? Does the postmodern view of history and of doing history necessarily entail an abandonment of the traditional concern for truth and evidence? Would the feminist goals and the gender lens be enough in themselves to justify any “crooked” reading and “slanted” writing? Or should there still be some kind of consensus about the definitions of “crookedness” and “slantedness” and their acceptance as new ways of measuring the persuasiveness of the new kind of rhetorical history?

I argue that, while Glenn’s allegiance to postmodernist and feminist theories and methodologies is articulately announced, her Aspasia stories nonetheless reveal a deep contradiction in thinking: on the one hand, we are asked to accept the postmodern belief that we are never able to obtain objective truth in history; on the other hand, we are asked to consider the reconceived story of Aspasia as a “truer” reality of women in history, a rediscovery of the obliterated “truth” independent of the existing historical discourse of men. This contradiction is demonstrated in a series of dissonances in theory and practice in the study of Aspasia. For example, in theory, the postmodern conception of truth as relative and contingent is endorsed; in practice, the time and context in which historical sources were created and interpreted are ignored, and the researcher’s personal “truth” of Aspasia is rendered as timeless and universal. In theory, the postmodern doctrine that history and writing are both suspect is embraced; in practice, Aspasia’s life is rendered in an assertive and unproblematized manner that does not directly acknowledge the intrinsic arbitrariness of the discourse—with its established categories and entrenched masculine values—nor the subjective nature of the researcher’s own personal experiences, emotions, and interests. In theory, the importance of imagination and discourse in constructing a women’s rhetorical tradition in fifth-century BCE Athens is stressed; in practice, the binary power relations between men and women are only reversed, with Aspasia being presented as an “ideal” woman “who colonized the patriarchal territory” (“Sex, Lies” 193). Aspasia’s contributions to the rhetorical tradition are
asserted but not substantiated or imagined. If Aspasia’s conversations with Pericles or Socrates or Plato over rhetoric or philosophy were substantially imagined, like Socrates’ conversations in Plato’s *Phaedrus* or *Gorgias*, the Aspasia stories would greatly help us gain insight into the inner life of Aspasia as a rhetorician and philosopher, a recounting that would tremendously enrich the content of feminist rhetoric. But we do not as yet have such a recounting.

Reading the use of evidence in Glenn’s version of Aspasia’s story from a postmodern vantage point, one could argue that it ignores the contingency of the historical sources on their purpose, context, cultural and social milieu, and their relationships to other historical documents or artifacts. The evidence is used in a decontextualized manner, a seeming use of ahistorical methods in doing history. For example, at one place, to establish Aspasia’s status as a public figure and political influence, the claim is made that Aspasia opened in Athens “an academy for young women of good families” (“Sex, Lies” 184). While such a possibility might well exist, the claim conflicts with Plutarch’s authoritative description of Aspasia’s enterprise as “a home for young courtesans” and Hans Licht’s more direct name for it, “a regular brothel” (183). In cases of competing claims like these, we might expect the historian either to provide new historical sources that would show Plutarch and Licht were wrong about the nature of Aspasia’s school, or to provide new insight into the political reasons behind Plutarch’s and Licht’s negative representations of Aspasia’s educational endeavor, or to make clear that different interpretations could be derived from the same texts. In Glenn’s formulation of historical truth, the competing historical truth-claims are not addressed, with the effect of lessening the persuasive power of the historical vision.

Too often texts are read without considerations of their historical, cultural, and rhetorical contexts. For example, in a passage stating that Pericles’ power as a great statesman and orator came from Aspasia, Josiah Ober is cited as an authority who placed the “educated courtesan Aspasia . . . among Pericles’ closest associates” and who called her “the power behind the throne.” Philostratus is cited for writing in his *Epistle* 73 that “Aspasia of Miletus is said to have sharpened the tongue of Pericles in imitation of Gorgias.” And Plato is cited, whose Socrates in the *Menexenus* revealed Aspasia to be the author of Pericles’ Funeral Oration (*Epitaphios*) (Glenn, “Rereading Aspasia” 37–38). Because these people lived hundreds of years apart from each other, and since each was writing in a specific historical period for a specific audience with specific rhetorical purposes, it is necessary for the historian to render careful differentiation and interpretation of these sources in their respective historical contexts. When these people are quoted briefly in an ahistorical fashion in the same paragraph to support the truth that Aspasia indeed influenced Pericles and the Athenian *polis* through the speeches she wrote for him, questions ensue as to whether Ober really
had the authority on Aspasia’s intellectual life and her power over Pericles, or whether Philostratus, a third-century sophist derivative of the classical period, might have simply tried to please her majesty with hearsay on Aspasia’s influence on Pericles in his seventy-third letter to Julia Domna, the learned Roman empress (Henry 77). As for Plato, since he composed *Menexenus* in 385 BCE to satirize the Periclean “Golden Age” with all of its patriotic commonplaces and distortions and falsifications of history (Grant 209), his report through Socrates’ mouth that Aspasia wrote the Funeral Oration for Pericles perhaps should be read with a consideration appropriate to the genre rather than be treated as historical fact (a point I will discuss further in later sections). Moreover, those who have read Donald Kagan’s study of Pericles’ life and learned about his philosophical training and political convictions would likely demand more than three brief quotes to convince them that Aspasia wrote Pericles’ speeches and influenced his political policies.5

The point I am trying to make is this: Had the story of Aspasia been written as feminist fiction, we would not have to take the truth-claims in the story seriously. But if the truth-claims are presented as historically true, we inevitably require that these truths be supported with adequate and validated historical evidence, even when we are postmodernists. When a historian intends for a semifictional work to be read as less distorted history that reflects a truer historical reality, he or she undermines the validity of the argument. For example, Glenn’s “Rereading Aspasia: The Palimpsest of Her Thoughts” seems to rest on a statement with contradictory premises:

> Even though [Aspasia’s] contributions to rhetoric are *firmly situated and fully realized within the rhetorical tradition*, those contributions have been directed through a powerful gendered lens to both refract toward and reflect Socrates and Pericles. Ironically, then, *Aspasia’s accomplishments and influence—all of which have been enumerated by men and most often attributed to men—come to us in the form of a palimpsest*. (37; emphasis added)

This suggests a desire to have it both ways: when there is no historical account of Aspasia’s achievements, we can claim that Aspasia’s great thoughts were stolen by men and erased from history; when there are scratches of accounts of her life, we can claim that Aspasia was so great that even those misogynist men couldn’t help but describe her glory. With this logic, the truth about Aspasia’s greatness becomes self-evident and undebatable, to the point of overriding even contradictory claims. Thus we find at one point the claim that “By every historical account, Aspasia ventured out into the common land, distinguishing herself by her rhetorical accomplishments, her sexual attachment to Pericles, and her public participation in political affairs.” Two pages later, a contradictory claim appears: “Historical records have successfully effaced the voice of the ideal Greek woman, rendering silent her enclosed body. And *those same historical records have defaced any subversion of that ideal woman, rendering her unconfined body invalid*” (“Sex, Lies” 184, 186; emphasis added).
Inevitably, then, historical records or no historical records, that Aspasia achieved much in politics, rhetoric, and philosophy is a historical reality existing outside the discourse of history, a truth that feminist historians need to represent whether or not there is evidence.

While few would argue with Glenn over the tremendous significance of “the story of Aspasia’s contributions to rhetoric,” which “brings to the fore the whole notion of woman’s place in the history of rhetoric” (“Rereading” 41), the appeal to the common interests of women has its potential risks because what is quietly assumed in this story of Aspasia is not only the unquestionable assertion of Aspasia’s important place in the rhetorical history but also a questionable attitude toward research method in historical studies. In accepting it, we must also accept this: as long as one speaks for women and tries to help change the wrong perception of women’s intellectual role in history, one can create truths favorable to women in one’s historiography. This message, or assumption, I argue, may have serious repercussions in scholarly work and teaching.

Observing the reluctance in our field to debate research methods, Reed Way Dasenbrock criticizes the current practice that “the theory itself defines what is to count as evidence for it” (548). He believes it is postmodern theory that makes it impossible for us to evaluate methods. For if Enlightenment rationality, scientific objectivity, and universal truth do not exist anymore, we are left with little to discuss about what counts as truth across communities. We either belong to a certain community and accept the truth the community as a whole accepts and thus feel no urge to question or examine the method with which the truth is obtained, or, if we question a certain truth and criticize a certain method, we risk being ignored because we do not belong to the community or being accused of sabotaging the community’s normal way of thinking and doing things. As a result, Dasenbrock laments, questions about truth and method either become irrelevant or lead to counterproductive exchanges among people who belong to different communities or theory camps.

Dasenbrock’s sensitivity to the harmful consequences of the claims of community-relative truths is admirable, but by assigning blame to postmodern theories advanced by Kuhn and Foucault he seems to overlook the intricacies of interpreting theory and the complex relationship between theory, method, and practice. I do not think that Kuhn’s skepticism of objectivity should be read as his saying that there are no valid goals to achieve. Rather, Kuhn’s notion of “scientific community” calls attention to the difficulty of obtaining objectivity in writing history of science. Kuhn’s scientific community refers to a multilevel, multiculture, multisubject group of members sharing a paradigm: the most global is the community of all natural scientists. At a lower level are the main scientific professional groups: communities of physicists, chemists, astronomers, zoologists, and the like. Major subgroups can also be isolated by similar techniques, such as communities of organic chemists, solid-state and high-energy
psychicists, radio astronomers, and so on. At the next lower level may appear some
groups prior to their public acclaim, such as the phage group that may have only one
hundred members (177–78). The scientific community, in Kuhn’s view, is the compli-
cated social nexus of relationships and social context in which scientific inquiries are
pursued, scientific theories are tested, scientific methods are invented and experi-
mented with, truths are discovered, revolutions occur, and paradigms change, all
through interactions among various subcommunities and subgroups whose members
are differentiated by subjects of inquiry, membership in different professional soci-
eties, and journals read. Kuhn’s scientific community is nothing like what some will
call a “partisan” group, for not only are all the subcommunities in the global scientific
community interrelated to one another, but “usually individual scientists, particularly
the ablest, will belong to several such groups either simultaneously or in succession”
(178). In Kuhn’s scientific community, scientific revolutions occur not through “par-
tisan fabrications” (Consingy 255) but through “competition between segments of the
scientific community,” which is the “only historical process that ever actually results in
the rejection of one previously accepted theory or in the adoption of another” (Kuhn
8). In short, Kuhn’s community is where competing theories and paradigms drive sci-
entific inquiry. It thrives on dissent and disagreement.

If we are postmodern in the Kuhnian sense, we would then agree with Dasen-
brock that it is highly necessary to carry on a conversation about truth, evidence, and
method when we advance truths, even if we admit that the truths we advance are con-
tingent and relative to our perspectives. If we are Kuhnian, we would also believe that
communication about differences and disagreement among different communities are
not only possible but absolutely desirable and indispensable to our scholarship.

Some may turn to Foucault in Glenn’s defense and point out that Foucault
advances a community-relative view of truth in his genealogy. But if we would have
C. G. Prado’s reading of Foucault, we would see that Foucault’s notion of truth is
more complex than what has been attributed to him. Prado interprets Foucault’s
truth as consisting of five “faces”: First, it is discourse-relative, in that “what is true in
given discourses is determined by the various criterial procedures of those dis-
courses” (Prado 124). Second, it is relative in perspective, denying “the possibility of
descriptive completeness” (126). Third, it is power-produced, in that truth is also “a
product of nonsubjective, impersonal power” (146). Fourth, it is extrapolated from
our experiences rather than found “in a series of historically verifiable proofs” (136).
If we have read Foucault’s The History of Sexuality and Discipline and Punish, we would
agree with Prado that Foucault’s truth is the sum total of all the complexities of
relationships that discourses embody and formulate. By writing a discursive history
of sexuality and of the prison, Foucault sends the powerful message that truth is
created linguistically and is contingent and situated because no truth can come
into existence without having gone through all these complex relationships that are
constitutive of as well as constituted by discourses. To say that truths are simply community-constructed beliefs is evidently a grave misunderstanding of the postmodern notion of truth conceived by Foucault.

On the other hand, the assumption that because the story of Aspasia benefits women it is necessarily good is actually a rhetorical strategy that should be viewed with skepticism. In the first place, all women do not belong to the same community, all women are not feminists, all feminists are not women, and even all feminists do not belong to the same community. Further, the establishment of the truth, even if it were possible, that Aspasia “colonized men's territory,” would not help end the male oppression of all women and serve the interests of all feminists. If we entertain a Kuhnian sense of community, we will then see that the project of Aspasia involves at least six disciplinary communities: philosophy, gender studies, feminism, rhetoric and composition, classical studies, and history. We will then recognize that appealing to women's interests alone is not enough to validate one's research method and findings. If the study of Aspasia crosses the borders of all the six subcommunities, then all these communities will decide to accept or reject the “truth” of Aspasia according to their respective criteria. To ignore or dismiss these disciplines and their research methods, therefore, would reduce the impact of feminist historical reconstruction projects on the way scholarship is produced in these disciplines.

If we truly embrace the Foucauldian notion of truth, we would resist rather than allow partisan or community interests to dictate our research method and research outcome. While serving the common good of our communities is one of the important goals of our scholarship, its downside is that too often and too easily the claim of serving community interests becomes the sole justification of the “truth” and a means of control, a dangerous tendency that Foucault tries to resist with his genealogy. Barry Brummett pleads that we recognize the rhetorical nature of community interests. His insight is useful.

“Community interests” sounds like a fine thing. But the question, “Whose community?” could legitimately have been raised in Plato's time as well as today. Community means hegemony, the dominance of established power interests. . . . To pretend there is a community interest to be served is actually to hide the interests of empowered groups behind the facade of “the community.” Those privileged interests are presented as community interests. The “citizens” of Athens in Plato’s time, even if they served “community interests,” were in fact only about 15 percent of the population. Their community interests were highly partisan. . . . In the unmelted pot of fragmented and diverse American culture, using rhetoric in the service of “community interests” lends itself more to using rhetoric in the service of entrenched powers and principalities. (23; final emphasis added)

Does our frank admission of our deliberate “partiality” in our scholarly work make the danger of possible hegemony of community disappear? My answer would
be "no," unless such an admission is meant to invite other perspectives to correct our own partiality. If our admission of our partiality serves only to privilege the truths we represent, then such an admission would do just what feminist historians accuse the male historians of doing—claiming the high moral ground of knowing the historical truth and excluding the competing truths. If we read Glenn’s announcement of “reading it crookedly and telling it slant” as a challenge to the self-righteous canonical history written by male historians, we would then accept the need to discuss and debate the limitations of her theories, methods, and practice. In this way, Glenn’s Aspasia story provides us with a place to start debating issues related to truth, evidence, method, theory, and political agenda in historical studies in the postmodern academy.

II. ASPASIA AS “RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION”: QUESTIONS OF INTERPRETATION AND SPECULATION IN HISTORICAL STUDIES

Rather than try to prove that Aspasia is the founding mother of rhetoric, Jarratt and Ong’s “Aspasia: Rhetoric, Gender, and Colonial Ideology” focuses on Aspasia as a “site” for interpretive work to explore the “intersection of discourses on gender and colonialism, production and reproduction, rhetoric and philosophy” (10). They acknowledge at the very beginning the complexities of the task of writing a history of Aspasia, the problems of “finding and authenticating sources” as well as dealing with “layers of representation, with their inevitable colorations of ‘envy and ill will,’ ‘favor and flattery’” (9). Therefore, they say, their reconstruction of Aspasia will “no more accurately recapture the ‘real’ woman than do the figure in the fresco or the character in Plutarch’s and Plato’s texts, but rather will reflect back to us a set of contemporary concerns” (10). In other words, if Glenn’s work can be called (loosely) *Geistesgeschichte*—picking up great dead philosophers or rhetoricians to form an alternative canon—Jarratt and Ong’s can be described as “rational reconstruction”—putting current questions into the dead philosophers’ (or rhetoricians’) mouths.7

In their study of Aspasia, Jarratt and Ong try to answer three questions: Did Aspasia exist? Can she be known? and Is that knowledge communicable? They swiftly skim through the first two questions with affirmative answers and focus on the third, making claims along the way that Aspasia “taught the art of rhetoric to many, including Socrates, and may have invented the so-called Socratic method” (13). Jarratt and Ong, however, do not try to present Aspasia as the only great rhetorician in the Western rhetorical tradition, as Glenn seems so inclined. As they claim Aspasia’s invention of the Socratic method, they point out at the same time that Protagoras is also believed to have created a method of questioning taken up by Socrates. By putting dissenting sources side by side, Jarratt and Ong make it clear that disagreement exists over who might have created the “Socratic method” (15). By leaving
room for “multiple” historical truths rather than one single feminist truth, Jarratt and Ong show respect for the research done by their colleagues in classical studies even when they are challenging the history created by their male counterparts.8

On the other hand, Jarratt and Ong’s study depends so heavily on interpretation and speculation, with a preoccupation for their feminist goals, that it accentuates the question of the roles that interpretation and speculation play in writing history. For example, Plato’s Menexenus is used not only as “evidence for Aspasia’s method of teaching” and as a text for “locating Aspasia within the realm of sophistic rhetoric,” but also as the principal source for an understanding of issues of “gender and colonialism, production and reproduction, rhetoric and philosophy” in fifth-century BCE Athens (15, 16). Considering that the Menexenus was written in 385 BCE, long after Aspasia’s own time, and that the dialogue between Socrates and Aspasia is fictitious (Grant 209), hinging the study of Aspasia on this one text causes problems. At one point, Jarratt and Ong assert that “Aspasia” represents for Plato a collection of ideas including not only the fifth-century democracy and rhetoric in general but a sophistic rhetoric practiced almost exclusively by non-Athenians,” a representation of a “cluster” of ideas that “Plato spent much intellectual energy opposing” (17–18). This reading of the “Aspasia” created by Plato suggests that Aspasia is a rhetorical construct without any real historical validity. Recognizing the satirical nature of the Menexenus, Jarratt and Ong interpret Aspasia—a foreigner/woman/sophist—as Plato’s rhetorical ploy to ridicule those naive enough to listen to the words of an outsider. Plato’s rendition of Aspasia reveals “Plato’s disdain for the foreigner/woman/sophist who would presume to have knowledge about the virtues of Atheno-androcentric citizenship” (20).9

At other points, however, Jarratt and Ong use the same Menexenus as a historical document to support the argument that Aspasia is “a key member of the sophistic movement” (15). When the text is put to this use, Jarratt and Ong have to make an interpretation that contradicts their other reading: that Plato’s Aspasia actually was respected by Socrates, who not only admits that Aspasia was “indeed his teacher” but also reports that “he heard her only the previous day composing a funeral oration” (15). The question raised by the contradictory interpretations of the same text is whether a satirical text with fictitious scenes can also be treated as historical evidence. If we accept that Plato’s Aspasia is an ideological construct and a butt of ridicule, we will be unable to accept the same Aspasia as a real historical woman whose intellectual accomplishments are recorded by Plato in the Menexenus. If we take Socrates’ descriptions as historically true, then more important questions need to be answered: If Aspasia did write the funeral oration, what caused her, a foreigner/woman/sophist, to embrace the Athenian values that were so obviously against her own interests? Why did she advocate the birthright of the Athenian male, insist on the authenticity and priority of the male citizen’s birth from the soil of Athens, and diminish woman’s
power and creativity in the funeral oration (Jarratt and Ong 19)? What particular conditions was Aspasia living in that allowed her to change from a courtesan and Pericles’ mistress to a rhetorician, philosopher, sophist, and political influence in Athens? Why did the same conditions not turn other courtesans into great rhetoricians like Aspasia? Since these questions cannot be satisfactorily answered with interpretation of only one text, they are simply overlooked in Jarratt and Ong’s historical study of Aspasia.

It seems safe to say that Jarratt and Ong’s study reflects much of Jarratt’s theory of sophistic historiography/feminist sophistic. Thus perhaps a more fruitful approach to understanding and critiquing their methodology is to examine the theory. At the core of Jarratt’s sophistic historiography and feminist sophistic is the premise of the parallel exclusion of the “other”—the First Sophists and women, together with their rhetorical practices—from the canonical history of rhetoric. Rejecting the traditional historical method with its insistence on uncontested evidence in history, its belief in progressive historical continuity, and its privilege of logos in the Aristotelian/Platonic tradition, Jarratt advocates writing history as narratives that will “set aside the ‘history of rhetoric’ in favor of ‘rhetorical histories’”—provisional, culturally relevant “fictions of factual presentation” (“Toward” 168). Her sophistic historiography abandons logos in the Aristotelian/Platonic tradition in favor of two prelogical language techne, antithesis and parataxis. And it embraces literary, fictional, and mythic elements in its historical narratives that are excluded from the traditional history of rhetoric (179). Evidently, treating the historiography of Aspasia as mainly an interpreting activity is a practice congruent with Jarratt’s theory.

In many ways, Jarratt’s sophistic historiography suggests the influence of Michel Foucault’s genealogy, which aims to “record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality,” which “seeks out discontinuities where others found continuous development, which avoids the search for depth,” and which “seeks the surfaces of events, small details, minor shifts, and subtle contours” (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 139). Like Foucault’s genealogy that “shuns the profundity of the great thinkers our tradition has produced and revered” and that considers Plato its “archenemy” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 106), Jarratt’s historical method veers away from the Platonic Truth in favor of truths (and histories) that are constructed rhetorically, with the help of sophistic techne and feminist strategies of reading and writing.

However, in many other—and major—ways, Jarratt’s feminist sophistic/sophistic historiography differs from Foucault’s genealogy. Foucault’s subjects are abstract. He studies the history of thought, the formation of discourses, disciplines, and institutions over a period of several hundred years, not great men or women or great historical events that are usually subjects of traditional history. Jarratt’s subjects are more practical, as she studies the rhetorical aspects of classical texts by sophists and women rhetoricians, with a focus on contemporary feminist concerns. Foucault’s genealogical study of sexuality is not intended to expose the deceptive manipulation
in order to enable circumvention or defeat of that manipulation. It does not intend to
discover truth but to show how power relations operate in the deployment of sexual-
ity and penalty. And Foucault does not believe in absolute liberation, for there is no
discourse-independent truth, the discernment of which can free us from power
(Prado 104). Jarratt, in contrast, is intent on writing women into the history of
rhetoric for the purpose of exposing male oppression and exclusion in order to liber-
ate and empower women. Foucault's history of sexuality attempts “to account for the
fact that [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and
viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak
about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (Foucault, History of
Sexuality 11). In other words, it studies “the way in which sex is ‘put into discourse’”
(11). These questions, on the other hand, seldom concern Jarratt in her study of
Aspasia. Most important, Foucault's genealogy, “if anything, is more deeply con-
cerned with historical data than is the quest for origins, which takes a broad view of
historical data in trying to discern large-scale patterns supposedly revelatory of great
forces at work” (Prado 40):

Genealogy can only focus on minutia, so it “depends on a vast accumulation of source
material” and “demands relentless erudition.” Genealogy needs archives, chronicles, diaries,
juries, logbooks, memoirs, official records, and registries that are the historian’s raw mater-
al. Without that material to work with, neither genealogy nor essence-seeking history could be
attempted. (40; emphasis added)

By contrast, Jarratt's sophistic historiography is concerned less about searching
for the historian's “raw material” and relies more on reinterpreting some canonical
texts. For example, Jarratt advocates changing the genre of history to accommodate
“literary” or “mythic” quality. To do so, she reads Gorgias' “Encomium of Helen” and
Plato's Protagoras as models for the practice of rhetorical historiography, as texts
representing history in a discontinuous and critical mode. For Jarratt, “Encomium”
and “Protagoras” are exemplary historiographies because “[t]he opportunities for
speculation provided by the narrative situation in each case—on the power of logos in
‘Helen’ and on the role of language in our evolution as a species in ‘Protagoras’—
supersedes the establishment of the ‘factual’ status of the materials themselves as a
goal for the discourse (“Toward” 171).

By turning history into a matter of reinterpretation, Jarratt rereads Gorgias’
“Encomium of Helen”—a text originally written to demonstrate the power of
rhetoric in changing public opinion—as an exemplary practice of a sophistic histori-
ography “in the subjunctive mode.” For Jarratt, Gorgias’ speculation of the four pos-
sible causes of Helen’s abduction throws into question the existing version of a
well-known story and casts doubt on Helen’s responsibility for the Trojan War, and
thus “disrupts a stable historical narrative and subverts the teleology of its analog”
What Jarratt finds significant in this sophistic piece is a “multiplicity of subjects comprehended under rhetoric [that] are interwoven into a historical narrative” that allows literary, fictional, mythic, and speculative elements that are excluded from the traditional history of rhetoric (170). More important, this historical narrative speaks in praise of a woman and defends her reputation. In this sense, Gorgias uses the power of logos to reconstruct a history of Helen’s abduction and thus frees her from others’—mostly men’s (?)—rebuke.

Jarratt has created a rather exciting way of doing history, through reinterpretation and speculation. However, her equation of history with rhetoric borders on rhetoricism, “an inherent danger” in rhetorical study that Derrida warns against. While it is novel to read Gorgias’ “Encomium of Helen” as a feminist historiography that righted the wrongs men did to a woman, the same principle of speculation can be used equally effectively to undo the feminist historiography. I can speculate, for example, that Gorgias’ defense of Helen reveals a more covert male chauvinistic attitude toward women that was rooted in the values of his time: a woman who has beauty is naturally virtuous, even though she has all the human frailties. And whichever of these four causes may be historically true (a point that Gorgias couldn’t care less about as a mere rhetor), Helen appears an inferior figure. In the first case, she is destined to misfortunes because of her birth and beauty as a woman. In the second case, she is violated because she is physically weaker than the man who raped her. In the third case, Helen is intellectually feeble and cannot see through the man’s deceptive rhetoric. And in the fourth case, Helen, being a woman, is too emotional to uphold any moral principles when facing her seducer. In the end, my speculation could easily lead me to ask: Aren’t these the assumptions that have helped subject women to men’s domination for centuries? Aren’t feminists still fighting today against the shackles created by these assumptions about women? In a sense, “Encomium of Helen,” even when treated as the model practice of sophistic historiography, does little to challenge the male values underlying male rhetoric.

Making rhetoric (or rhetoricism) a major means of writing history has caused much tension in Jarratt’s theory and practice. In Rereading the Sophists, Jarratt seems to be struggling with the rhetorical nature of deconstruction, her theory, and the real women’s issues in society. She evidently recognizes the limits of deconstruction and the significance of Gayatri Spivak’s warning that “women are doubly displaced in deconstruction” because “the ‘woman’ whose displacement is recognized in Derridean deconstruction is not the real women whose bodies are subject to codes of legitimacy and inheritance” (67). She quotes Spivak as saying that the dual sense of logos “marks the difference between a textual exercise and the engagement in an investigation of material conditions of textual production.” She dwells on Spivak’s distinction between “the logos to be deconstructed”—the founding principle of transcendence, presence, idea, speech—and “logoi,” “laws in the normal sense” that cre-
ate conditions under which humans in social organizations live and write.” And she seems to agree with Spivak that “‘Woman’ is oppressed by the former, but women suffer under the latter” (67).

Nevertheless, the sophistic historiography/feminist sophistic doggedly pursues one of the postmodern themes—the exclusion of the “other”—through rhetoric. In answering the question, “Can Aspasia be known?” Jarratt and Ong suggest that Aspasia can be known only if we locate her in the sophistic rhetorical tradition. Drawing the parallel exclusion of the first sophists and women from the history of rhetoric and the Western rhetorical tradition, Jarratt believes, will provide feminists with a theoretical and historical perspective from which the Aristotelian/Platonic/Male rhetorical tradition will be examined and critiqued.

Undoubtedly, Jarratt has broadened our understanding of Aspasia by creating a historical rhetorical context in which the Athenian woman’s exclusion as well as contributions can be better appreciated. She has also made us see how very often the oppression and exclusion of women (and arguably the First Sophists) in real life situations can be reflected and reinforced in and through rhetoric. Nonetheless, drawing a parallel between the First Sophists and women also entails some problems. If Jarratt has to attribute all the feminist characteristics to the First Sophists to include them in her feminist system, does she risk making the mistake of essentializing women? Jarratt sees the Sophists as representing the inferior set of qualities in the binaries: opinion versus the Truth, the materiality of the body (associated with cooking and cosmetics) versus the Soul, practical knowledge versus science, the temporal versus the eternal, the inferiority of writing (explicitly as an artificial aid to memory) versus speech (as the vehicle of intuited knowledge). She then equates these qualities attributed to the first sophists with the feminine traits: irrationality (or nonrationality), magical or hypnotic power, subjectivity, and emotional sensitivity (Rereading 65). Even in rhetorical style the First Sophists are described as favoring the syntactic structures that are thought to be nonmale: antithesis—the Sophists’ antithetical pairing that “awakens in the listener an awareness of the multiplicity of possible truths” (“Toward” 175); and parataxis—the loose association of clauses without hierarchical connectives or embedding (176–77). Like women, the Sophists favor nomos, the “real conditions (nomoi) under which texts are produced in specific times and places,” rather than logos, a “permanent” and “natural” structure of law, rationality, or language (Rereading 74).11

This parallel may well raise questions such as how the resemblance between the Sophists and women would empower women and whether her feminist sophistic would create new exclusions, such as the exclusion of man. Victor Vitanza warns that a “third space” is absent in Jarratt’s feminist sophistic/sophistic historiography, and I believe that his warning is well placed. For unless we allow a “third space” where Woman may become Man and Man Woman in a rhetorical sense, we would not be able to get out of the conundrum that Jarratt’s theory creates when doing historical
research. We would have difficulty answering the following questions: Should a feminist historian consider acceptable only women’s texts that reflect only the feminine traits, female syntactic structures, and other characteristics attributed to women by men? Should a feminist rhetorical history include women rhetoricians who wrote in the mainstream rhetorical tradition and whose works reflect the male rhetorical traits and dominant ideology? Should feminists rely on men’s representations of women in the historical texts when reconstructing feminist historiographies? Or should the male texts always be feminized first and then read as feminist texts?

Although one short historical study can hardly justify a comprehensive criticism of Jarratt’s theory, the historiography of Aspasia by Jarratt and Ong nonetheless provides a provocative site to investigate and debate the role of interpretation and speculation in historical research. Jarratt and Ong’s study also challenges the historians in composition and rhetoric to study and debate the role of genre in historical study. Should Thucydides’ history and Plato’s irony be treated as the same kind of evidence? Could rhetorical texts be interpreted as history and used as historical evidence? Could a feminist reading of male texts embrace the competing interpretations? Should speculation be different and differentiated from fabrication and imagination in feminist historical studies? Jarratt and Ong’s historiography of Aspasia forces us to confront these issues in reconstructing a new kind of rhetorical history.

III. ASPASIA’S BIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION AND THE PROMISE OF FEMINIST HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Is it at all possible to recover great historical women whose achievements have been erased from the traditional history by men? My discussion of the previous two historiographies of Aspasia may have given the impression that the difficulties in reconstructing a feminist history are insurmountable. However, that is not the case. For if we change the question from “Who are those women whose voices were silenced by men in history?” to “Is it at all possible to find out how all those historical women got lost in history?” perhaps we have a better chance of discovering some traditions that may be claimed as part of women’s history. Madeleine Henry has given a brilliant answer to the latter question with her study of Aspasia’s biographical tradition and suggested a promising direction in feminist historical research. Henry’s study of the evolution of Aspasia’s *bios* from the fifth century BCE to the twentieth century not only presents an impressive array of important documents and texts on the ancient Athenian woman and thus creates an invaluable source for future historical study, but it also offers rich theoretical and methodological implications for future feminist historical reconstruction projects.

In many ways, Henry’s project resembles Glenn’s and Jarratt and Ong’s Aspasia historiographies: her goal is political. By writing *Prisoner of History: Aspasia of Miletus*
and Her Biographical Tradition, Henry strives to change the biographical tradition that deems worthy only “an account of the life of a man from birth to death” by writing an account of a woman from birth to death (4). Her perspective is feminist. She traces the various postclassical renditions of Aspasia’s life and identities to reveal how the sexualization of her intellect has influenced (negatively) current constructions of gender roles and the ways in which women do or do not participate in intellectual discourse in the West (6). According to Henry, Heloise (ca. 1100–1164) is the “first woman known to have considered Aspasia an authority and example for the way she wanted to live her life” (83). Heloise is thought to have used Cicero’s account of Aeschines’ Aspasia to refuse to “convert” to the nunlike status of Christ’s bride, apart from her attempt to use Aspasia to convince her lover that their relationship was good (85). Henry concurs with Peggy Kamuf that Heloise’s identification with Aspasia indicates the early “feminist consciousness” (85). Henry’s central concern is the Foucauldian question: How was Aspasia “put into discourse” of men over the past 2,500 years? In this sense, she is postmodern and antifoundational, like Glenn and Jarratt.

Henry’s method, however, differs considerably from Glenn’s and Jarratt and Ong’s. Rather than eschewing the traditional historical method or twisting the male texts to suit her feminist needs, Henry takes an approach that combines feminist scholarship and postmodern concerns with traditional philological methods and has written a social history of an ancient woman who has fascinated literary artists, historians, philosophers, pornographers, women, and men alike for centuries. Her method, I argue, speaks persuasively to how a radical vision does not necessarily entail antitraditional methods. On the contrary, when it comes to questions of historical evidence and its interpretations, traditional philological methods can be put to good use for our progressive political goals, as Henry’s study demonstrates.

I believe that Henry’s meticulous treatment of historical sources is the main reason for the success of her Aspasia study. To write Aspasia into the male biographical tradition in the absence of primary texts and direct records of Aspasia’s life, Henry has confronted, rather than evaded, 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 (2). She painstakingly shows how, over centuries, various discourse traditions have constructed and construed the fifth-century woman and her identities: her bios consists of records of men’s ridicules, historians’ abuses, the Athenian woman’s sexual conquests and intellectual power, and posterity’s romantic fantasies and mythical curiosity.

Henry’s historical method is traditional in the sense that she unfolds the evolution of Aspasia’s bios by historical period: the earliest descriptions in Attic comedy in the fifth century BCE, the Socratic dialogues in the fourth century, the distilled information in Plutarch’s history at the end of Greco-Roman antiquity, and the modern creations and imaginations of Aspasia—all these sources are presented and
interpreted with admirable credibility and clarity, with candid admissions of *aporia* and of the historian's own perplexity whenever some undecipherable or undatable or undeterminable material is encountered.

But Henry's traditional method is foregrounded in the antifoundational assumption that Aspasia the Athenian woman was first and foremost a construct of discourse. Thus, instead of trying to establish Aspasia's "real" identity with truth-claims, Henry first identifies the characteristics of Aspasia's biographical tradition in its first centuries and then traces their influences on posterity. Henry admits that the attempt to search for historical documents, archives, and artifacts yields little about Aspasia's life before she came to Athens. The only known contemporary evidence of Aspasia's life—the fragments from Attic comedy in the fifth century—represents her as a *porne* and a procuress (28). The philosophical discourse of the Socratica by Plato, Antisthenes, Aeschines of Sphettos, and Xenophon in the fourth century changes the representation of Attic comedy and represents Aspasia as an "erotically alluring and intellectually formidable woman among men" (28). The descriptions of Aspasia in Plutarch's (ca. 50–120 CE) social history, *Life of Pericles*, despite Plutarch's doubts of the many sources he mentions, makes Aspasia "the archetype of the sexually alluring and politically influential courtesan" (74). The discourse on prostitutes in the Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Antique periods persistently groups Aspasia with a man, be it Pericles or Socrates, or both. And art historians have continued to situate Aspasia with men as well (81). By identifying the different Aspasias constructed by different discourses in early times, Henry sets the stage for exploring how the literary treatment of historical prostitutes, scholarship on comedy, comedy itself, and historical anecdote become locales within which Aspasia's biographical tradition develops in the postclassical period (58). By tracing the evolution of the competing discourse traditions' rendering of Aspasia, Henry sends an unequivocal message: that the "truth" about Aspasia is discourse-relative, perspective-dependent, and historically contingent, depending on whose story we take up as true. This message, needless to say, is antifoundational in its rejection of the one single truth about the fifth-century BCE woman.

Henry's claims are based on her examination of the histories, fictions, art pieces, and scholarly works in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. She tries to convince us (and succeeds) that nearly all the later works are amplifications and exaggerations of the characteristics identified in Aspasia's *bios* in the first centuries, especially in Plutarch and Plato, and that each individual in each epoch adds to Aspasia the aspirations and ideal of his or her generation and age. In the end of her search, Henry says, "It is hopeless to write Aspasia back into the history of philosophy in its traditional masculine sense, for Aspasia categorically cannot have been a philosopher. Female, feminine, Ionian, sometimes orientalized, her main achievement will merely be to have freely chosen her own sexual partners, as Becq de Fouquières observed over a century ago" (130).
Henry's conclusion may not be as exciting as Glenn's or Jarratt and Ong's. However, her conclusion commands respect, and so does her warning:

It is easy, but not enough, to say that like so many gifted women, Aspasia and her achievements were overshadowed, appropriated, and misunderstood by the men she knew and by masculinist developments of her bios. It is a longer task, but still not satisfying, to say that the West has needed, wanted, and created varying Aspasias since 440 B.C. When we need Aspasia to be a chaste muse and teacher, she is there; when we need a grand horizontal, she is there; when we need a protofeminist, she is there also. (127–28)

With a conclusion and a warning that may disappoint some who are passionate about restoring Aspasia to the rhetorical canon, what does Henry's Aspasia study have to offer? I believe that it promises a new way of looking at feminist historical reconstructions. What we can do, Henry says, is to see Aspasia and her bios as in some way contributing to our understanding of the position of women as sexual and intellectual beings in antiquity: “Because her intellect, political acumen, and sexuality were inextricably connected from almost the very start, and have continued to define her, it is the task of all successive contributors to her bios to integrate their understanding of her intellect and sexuality” (128).

Such integration will inevitably bring forth questions of theory and method, questions that Henry has brilliantly addressed in her practice through her study of Aspasia's bios. First and foremost, Henry teaches us that if the Truth about the historical Aspasia is unattainable, at least with an effective method we could find out how the multiple truths about Aspasia have been constructed in various discourses in history. Like Glenn and Jarratt and Ong, Henry's project is feminist; so is her perspective and often her interpretive strategies. What makes Henry's method more productive and her findings more credible is her sensitivity to the “situatedness” of the historical sources and of herself as a feminist researcher and scholar. By creatively coping with the situatedness, she establishes a biographical tradition of a woman in a male-dominated discipline. Perhaps it is not inappropriate to compare Henry with Sarah B. Pomeroy, whose Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity, published in 1975, won her wide recognition and admiration within and outside the discipline of classical study because of its scholarly rigor and methodological soundness. Reviewing praise by many renowned philologists, classicists, and ancient historians, Barbara McManus summarizes the key to Pomeroy's success:

The frequency of such comments in the reviews provides one indication of why Pomeroy's book was so successful at starting a revolution—she presented her unconventional subject matter and conclusions within the rubric of scholarly conventions long accepted in the discipline. Since it did not explicitly emphasize the rhetoric of contemporary theory or feminism, her book was able to present an essentially feminist approach in a manner that ensured it would be neither ignored nor summarily rejected.
by the mainstream. These reviews confirm the efficacy of this approach: an overt and dramatic challenge to the disciplinary culture would have been premature and self-defeating.13 (17)

A quarter of a century later, Madeleine Henry applied the same feminist principles in her work on Aspasia's biological tradition and achieved similar success.

Although Henry does not espouse postmodernist theory in her study, her study of Aspasia nevertheless helps us understand the skepticism that is very postmodern, or a kind of honesty that Richard Rorty endorses: “Honesty here consists in keeping in mind the possibility that our self-justifying conversation is with creatures of our own fantasy rather than with historical personages, even ideally reeducated historical personages.” (“Historiography” 270). For Henry the question whether Aspasia was “really” a towering intellectual and philosopher is not as important as the question whether there is a tradition, a discursive history, that belongs to women that can be claimed and studied. With Aspasia’s biological tradition, Henry persuades us that much can be done in feminist historical reconstruction and that much more can be done by feminist historians and rhetoricians.

IV. ONE MORE WORD ON THE NEED FOR A DEBATE OVER HISTORICAL METHODS

In Foucault, Marxism, & History, Mark Poster observes that Foucault’s new kind of history appeared in a historical context in which “the discipline of history has been revolutionized by new methodologies and new objects of study which fall under the rubric of ‘social history’ ” (70). He says,

Topics like population, the city, the family, women, classes, sports and psychobiography have risen to prominence over more traditional historical subjects. Methodologies have been imported from every social science: econometrics from economics, family reconstitution from demography, “thick interpretation” from anthropology, voting analysis from political science, questionnaire analysis and class analysis from sociology, psychoanalysis from psychology. Once a field in the humanities relying on narrative writing, history has become a potpourri of social science methods. (70)

Writing a new kind of history in this context, according to Poster, Foucault “unmasks the epistemological innocence of the historian” and “raises the discom-forting question: What does the historian do to the past when he or she traces its continuity and assigns it its causes?” (75). It is the historian’s power to interpret history and assign the causes to history that makes Foucault wary of the traditional histories. For Foucault, “history is a form of knowledge and a form of power at the same time; put differently, it is a means of controlling and domesticating the past in the form of knowing it” (75). Because of the historian’s power, Foucault warns that
the practice of the discourse of the past places the historian in a privileged position: as the one who knows the past, the historian has power. The historian becomes an intellectual who presides over the past, nurtures it, develops it, and controls it. Since, under the thesis of continuity, the historian is able to collect within himself or herself the experience of the past, he or she has an ideological interest in maintaining its importance, reasserting the inevitability with which the past leads to the present, while at the same time denying that there is a certain power at stake. (Poster 75)

In other words, Foucault's new kind of history is both resistance and critique of this continuous history, which represents a Hegelian totalization of the past and the present (76).

My critical review of the three historical studies of Aspasia seeks to remind us that the questions about which Foucault was concerned nearly twenty years ago still concern us today. How can we write radical alternative histories of rhetoric without compromising our credibility as historians and scholars? How can we do primary scholarship without having to submit slavishly to the authority of the traditional male perspective and method? How can we foreground our research in postmodern and antifoundational theory without resorting solely to rhetorical ploy? How can we enhance the social and political good without risking creating new hierarchies, inequalities, and exclusions? Since the significance of the Aspasia stories goes far beyond historical research, I believe that all of us who are genuinely concerned with the social and political impact of scholarship and teaching in our field and in society should be willing to give up the safety and privilege secured by our claims to truth or by our authority as historians/academicians and participate in the “give and take of methodological and theoretical debate” that Dasenbrock deems lacking in our field (560). We should welcome members from other communities to debate our theories and methods and question our findings and conclusions, for only through continuous and constructive conversation will we be able to resist not only the totalizing power of the traditional male history but our tendency to privilege and perpetuate our own history and discourse. And we would keep in mind that histories and historiographies of Aspasia do not belong solely to those who wrote them or to the community of feminists in composition and rhetoric. Once published, they belong to all of the communities of scholars and teachers, and they gain meaning and life only through being read, be the readings controversial, critical, or appreciative.14

Notes

1. Two ongoing debates set the stage for this study: In composition Reed Way Dasenbrock’s 1995 College English article “Truth and Methods” stimulated a series of exchanges over the impact of postmodern theory on research methodology in literary and historical studies, highlighting issues concerning truth, evidence, and interpretation (Caughie and Dasenbrock 1996; Porter 1998; Marback 1998). In rhetoric the controversy over the First Sophists, theory, and research methods in historical studies reflects

2. I wish that Glenn’s study had found a way to get around searching for “undistorted perception of moral reality,” a goal implied in her historiography of Aspasia and considered by Rorty as an “unfortunate” aspect of some feminists’ work (“Feminism and Pragmatism” 206). Rorty advocates a pragmatist perspective that will help feminists to “create women rather than attempting to describe them more accurately” (212).

3. Donald Kagan’s historical study of Pericles’ life records that Plutarch’s ridiculing of Aspasia might well have been motivated by the Athenians’ general prejudice against Aspasia because of Pericles’ affection for her and because of the scandal spread by Pericles’ political enemies. Aspasia was charged with impiety and with procuring free women for Pericles’ enjoyment. She was acquitted after Pericles successfully defended her in court (186).

4. See note 12 in “Sex, Lies, Manuscript” (197).

5. In Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy, Kagan offers a convincing analysis of the purpose behind Pericles’ Funeral Oration delivered during the Samian War. Since Pericles had commanded the campaign, he needed to justify the loss of lives to the Athenians. Kagan compares Pericles’ speech to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in 1863 and argues that both speeches tried to explain why the dead had been right to risk their lives and why the living should be willing to do likewise (141).

6. For example, Pamela L. Caughie argues that a debate over politics and ethics (in feminist and postmodern terms) should always take precedence over a methodological debate, implicitly assuming that only the political is ethical. Similarly, by labeling Edward Schiappa a foundationalist and himself an antifoundationalist, Scott Consigny implies the intrinsic superiority of the latter and also turns the debate over methodological issues in classicist studies into partisan quibbles. Some even call academic debates “catfights” and thus undercut the importance of exchanging different views and perspectives in discussions about theory and method. What we constantly need to remind ourselves is that postmodernism, antifoundationalism, and feminism, like any other master narrative, can be used to silence and exclude dissenting voices and shut down productive scholarly conversations among researchers and teachers.

7. I am using the terms Rorty invented in “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres.” Schiappa also refers to Jarratt’s sophistic historiography as “rational reconstruction,” borrowing Rorty’s term (Protagoras and Logos 67).

8. According to Michael Grant, “Socratic conversations” were attributed to no less than twelve authors; the first was reputedly Simon (a cobbler), and perhaps the best was Aeschines of Sphettus (302).

9. This interpretation is endorsed by George Kennedy in his brief discussion of Plato’s attitude toward women (18).

10. In his interview with Gary Olson, Derrida stresses that “a self-conscious and trained teacher, attentive to the complexity, should at the same time underline the importance of rhetoric and the limits of rhetoric—the limits of verity, formality, figures of speech” because rhetoric “depends on conditions that are not rhetorical” (135).

11. Both Schiappa’s and Swearingen’s studies of Greek orality and literacy contend convincingly that linguistic features such as antithesis and parataxis are products of orality. Both have also argued that, given the ambiguity of the term sophist in antiquity and the differences between the fifth-century sophists and the fourth-century sophists, it is difficult to assign any specific rhetorical contributions to the sophists.

12. In “Narratology and Narrative Techniques in Thucydides,” Simon Hornblower makes interesting observations of narrative devices used by Thucydides in his historiography. Hornblower argues that Thucydides uses these narrative devices differently from poets and novelists and that his purposes for using narratives are also different from those of poets and novelists. Jarratt and Ong’s study might have benefited from a discussion of the differences Hornblower observed.

13. While some may argue that Glenn and Jarratt and Ong are writing in the field of composition and rhetoric, not in the discipline of classics, I believe that, as feminist historical reconstruction projects
on women in Antiquity, their studies should be informed by the feminist methodological principles in classical studies. The most important of these feminists’ “new methodological principles” widely accepted in the 1970s include (1) “Women should not be treated ‘as an undifferentiated mass; groups of women (not Woman) must be studied in the specific context of socioeconomic class, culture, and time period’; and (2) “Sources must also be differentiated and interpreted with due respect for their individual codes, conventions, and biases” (McManus 18). Other principles include employing “multiple viewpoints,” embodying “a feminist perspective,” encompassing “considerable diversity” and “respectful dialogue and debate,” and requiring “an interest in theory, in conjecture, in ‘the discernment of patterns, inter-relationships, and chains of causality’ rather than the mere accumulation of ‘facts’” (18–19). I see no reason why historians in composition and rhetoric should not critically implement these principles in their historical research.

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WORKS CITED


