

The ambiguity of the public and the private spheres in the Athenian *polis* of the Tyrannicides and Pericles

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It is well known that the *Iliad* begins with a dispute between two kings, Achilles and Agamemnon, who argue over the same concubine. The young woman Briseis has been made prisoner by the Achaeans and handed over to the king of the Myrmidons as a part of the spoils of war. Agamemnon receives Chryseis, the daughter of an Apollo's priest, who, however, asks for her to be restored to him. Feeling at a disadvantage, the pastor-king of the Achaeans orders Achilles to return the young woman he had been given as a prize. This causes a fissure between the two leaders and dissension among the Achaean army, thus setting up the end of the Trojan War¹.

In the *Odyssey*, during the twenty-year long absence of the king of Ithaca, a group of noblemen take up residence in the royal palace, while waiting for the queen to choose one to be her husband and new ruler of the Ithacans. Prince Telemachus worries that his mother's suitors have taken over his house and consume his goods while waiting for Penelope to make her choice. In order to solve this problem, the prince convenes an assembly of Ithacans in Ulysses' palace and asks the suitors to relinquish this way of courting his mother, but is unsuccessful and his possessions continue to be squandered in the name of public interest².

¹ *Il.* 1.105-201.

² *Od.* 2.6-256.

These two Homeric episodes refer to supposedly private problems: in the first instance, possession and enjoyment of a concubine, the urgency of a wedding in the second instance. However, they also prove to be of public interest. In the *Iliad*, the Briseis incident leads to an argument that will ultimately affect the course of the political conflict between the Achaeans and the Trojans. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope's marriage has implications in the political and economic situation of Telemachus' estate, whereupon he tries to find a solution, thus turning his mother's marriage into a matter of the State³.

The instances mentioned above are two examples of the ambiguity between the public and private spheres that characterised the Classical Antiquity. Indeed, as in religion, where the sacred and the profane, that is, the religious and the political, become almost socially indistinguishable, so do public and private walk *pari passu*, being the line that separates their sphere of influence not always noticeable.

Throughout most of what has been called the Classical Antiquity, and unlike what is nowadays regarded as the ideal situation, this lack of distinction had an impact on how societies functioned. The elements pertaining to what the Romans have called the *res publica*, and those belonging to each individual's private life, seem to be one side of the same coin. These two aspects could hardly escape such an ambiguity, however, as the social and political institutions of these communities demanded that it be so.

Societies structured around a monarchic regime, as was the case several times during the Classical Antiquity, meant that one family (*genos/gens*) had a prominent role, so that their private lives, options and conduct were affected and limited because of their public status. The opposite was also true. Therefore, a political alliance was often strengthened by a marriage, and its dissolution could change the life of the city permanently. Pompey's story is an example of this: in 59 BC, Pompey married Julius Caesar's daughter in order to establish the first triumvirate, but, in 54 BC, the alliance was irremediably shaken by his wife's death.

³ For more on this issue, see Finley 1982, 88.

The goal of this essay is, however, to present two Athenian instances, one from the end of the archaic period and the other from the classical period, which have become archetypes for this historically ambiguous relationship. This paper will show that the distinction between the public and private spheres is not always clear, going so far as to suggest that such distinction may be impossible, for reasons internal and external to the sources.

The Tyrant-slayers Case

The first instance has become known in the history of Ancient Greece as the episode of the Tyrannicides⁴. After Pisistratus' tyranny, which ended with his death in 527 BC, his son Hippias, joining forces with his brother Hipparchus, succeeded as the ruler of Athens. Together, they controlled the affairs of the Athenian *polis*. However, the powerful families of Athens did not acknowledge the Pisistratids as their father's legitimate successors, leading the city's allegiances to divide. Furthermore, Hipparchus gained political enemies due to the lifestyle he so publicly embraced, in particular his inclination towards the arts and practices considered morally dissolute⁵.

Hipparchus was assassinated during the Panathenaic Festival of 514 BC. According to the ancient sources (Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle and Pausanias)⁶, the homicide was the consequence of a love entanglement, which would have interfered with the public life of Athens at the time. Thucydides goes so far as to say that "the fact of Aristogiton and Harmodius was undertaken upon an accident of love..."⁷.

Although there are some differences among the historical and literary sources, the story is briefly told and remains basically the

⁴ For more information on the Tyrannicides, see Taylor 1991².

⁵ Arist. *Ath.* 18.1.

⁶ Hdt. 5.55-61; 6.123.2; Thuc. 1.20.2; 6.54-59; Pl. *Smp.* 182c5-7; *Hipparch.* 228b4-229d7; Arist. *Ath.* 17-19; Paus. 1.23.

⁷ Thuc. 6.54.1, ed. T. Hobbes.

same. Harmodius was Aristogiton's lover – a relationship that may fall into the pederastic tradition of Ancient Greece⁸. Both descended from a Boeotian family and supported the Pisistratids⁹. The young Harmodius would have caught Hipparchus' eye, but rejected and reported him to Aristogiton. Feeling offended by Hipparchus' harassment, and afraid that the tyrant's status might deprive him of his lover, Aristogiton "immediately planned the destruction of the tyranny", as is stated by the historian of the Peloponnesian War¹⁰. The situation deteriorated when Hipparchus, feeling vexed, decided to publicly humiliate Harmodius by rejecting the participation of one of his sisters in the Canephorae procession, claiming that she was not worthy of such an honour (because, he implied, she was not a virgin) and that Harmodius was effeminate¹¹. Aristogiton and Harmodius decided then to carry out their revenge through a conspiracy which ended in the assassination of the Pisistratid during the celebrations of Athena:

"Falling upon him recklessly, extremely infuriated, one by love, the other by insult, they stabbed and killed him... And so it was that, because of a love quarrel, there arose Aristogiton and Harmodius' conspiracy and the execution of such a rash act of audacity."¹²

Harmodius and Aristogiton, from now on known as the Tyrannicides or the tyrant-slayers, were ultimately executed, the first one having "swiftly found death at the hands of the guards, and the other later on, after having been captured and tortured for a long time."¹³ According to Aristotle, after the foundation of Democracy in Athens,

⁸ In fact, we may also argue this relationship would be in some way different that a pederastic one was supposed to be, relying there the reason for hostilities among the Athenians. The process against Timarchos is perhaps another example to consider in this context. We'll discuss the subject in another *forum*. On Greek pederasty, see the excellent synthesis of Skinner 2010, 119-134.

⁹ Hdt. 5.55; Ferreira and Leão 2010, 116.

¹⁰ Thuc. 6.54.3.

¹¹ Thuc. 6.56; Arist. *Ath.* 18.2.

¹² Thuc. 6.57.3, 59.1.

¹³ Arist. *Ath.* 18.4.

the Tyrannicides became the object of an attempt of “heroicisation”, especially in the context of the anti-tyrannical movements observed in the *polis* throughout the 5th century BC, as can be seen in several representations of these two lovers as martyrs for the Democracy¹⁴. Kritios and Nesiotes’ sculpture, depicting the two executioners in the heroic nudity typical of the archaic and classical Greek style, shows that Aristogiton and Harmodius became the focus of public worship. In fact, the sculpture of the tyrant-slayers may have been the only representation of human individuals in the great Athenian square up until the 4th century BC, symbolizing their great act of heroism and their love of freedom¹⁵. Moreover, they became the object of *skolia* or banquet songs, to which Aristophanes bears witness, saying “never was such a man seen in Athens” when referring to Harmodius¹⁶.

Naturally, the contemporary hermeneutics believes that Hipparchus’ assassination goes beyond the love affair to which the ancient sources attribute it.

Aristogiton and Harmodius’ Boeotian origins must be highlighted, since they raise the possibility of a political conflict linked to the families’ roots and parties¹⁷. However, the fact that these sources have ascribed the event to a romantic instance, a matter that belonged to the private sphere but ended up affecting the public lives of the Athenians, is still relevant. That is, the Tyrannicides’ action ultimately led to the end of tyrannies in Athens from 510 BC on, and was an important step

¹⁴ Arist. *Ath.* 18.6; Paus. 1.23.1-2 mentions a woman called Leaena (Lioness), who may have been Aristogiton’s lover and aided in the process.

¹⁵ Paus. 1.8.5. This sculpture may likely be a second version of this subject, since the first one, a bronze monument carved by Antenor at the time of the democracy in Athens and erected in the agora, was likely stolen by the Persians in 480 BC and taken to Susa. The statue would have been brought back to Athens by Alexander, according to Arrian (*An.* 3.14), or by Seleucus, according to Valerius Maximus (2.10.1), or even by Antiochus, according to Pausanias (1.8.5), but it was ultimately lost and was never copied. A replacement of the stolen statue was then ordered to Kritios and Nesiotes, who presented it to the city in 477 BC. The original piece was also lost, but this version was copied during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, having survived until this day. One of these copies is stored in the Archaeological Museum of Naples. See Brunnsåker 1955.

¹⁶ Ar. *V.* 1225-1226; on the songs, Rocha Pereira 2012¹¹, 237 n. 129; on the songs about the Tyrannicides Jesus 2010, 157 n. 240.

¹⁷ See e.g. Lavelle 1988, 211-215.

in the institution of Democracy. To think that everything may have started with a jilted love...

Plato's words are suggestive in this regard:

“it is in the interest of the rulers, I suppose, that their subjects should not harbour elevated thoughts and that there should be no strong bond of friendship or union among them which only love, above all else, is likely to inspire... This lesson have the Athenian tyrants learned by experience, for Aristogiton's love and Harmodius' bond with him were so strong as to defeat their power.”¹⁸

The Aspasia Affair

The second instance analysed in this paper is that of Aspasia of Miletus¹⁹. There are not many sources available regarding Aspasia, and they are all from the point of view of the men with whom she had relationships. All that is known is that she was born a free woman in Miletus, circa 470 BC, in a particularly intense period regarding the political standing between Asia Minor, Persia and Athens. Indeed, this was around the time that Miletus attempted to gain Athens' protection, after having been under Persian rule. The Persians had destroyed the city in 496 BC, taking political and military control until 478 BC, at which point the Milesians joined the Delian League²⁰. At the same time, however, rebellions against the Athenian hegemony were breaking out all over the Hellenic *poleis*, such as the ones in Megara and Sparta in 446 BC²¹. When war broke out between Miletus and Samos, Athens intervened on behalf of the former, in order to gain control of the city of Priene. Aspasia played, *de facto* or not, an important role in this situation.

¹⁸ Pl. *Smp.* 182c.

¹⁹ There are several works on Aspasia, of which the following are of particular interest: Solana Dueso 1994; Henry 1995; González Suárez 1997; Jouanna 2005.

²⁰ For more on this subject, see González Suárez 1997, 12.

²¹ On biographical data, see Solana Dueso 1994, xi; see also Earp 1954, 142-147; Greggor 1953, 27-32; Barron 1962, 1-6.

It is believed that Aspasia arrived at Athens c. 450-445 BC with her sister and brother-in-law, an active Athenian politician known as Alcibiades “the Old”, who had been ostracised years before and was only now returning to his birthplace. At that time, the *polis* was going through a period of political turmoil, with conflicts between the thalassocratic faction and the land party. This opposition could be felt throughout the entire territory of the Hellenic cities. The confrontation between Athens and Sparta in the beginning of the Peloponnesian War was a reflection of that.

Aspasia’s migration to Athens can be explained by her family ties to Athenian politicians, which granted her immediate access to the local circles of power, where she gained great importance. In fact, since her arrival to Attica until 429 BC, she lived as the “wife” of the Athenian statesman Pericles and had a son who was named after his father. On the other hand, Pericles’ first wife’s name is still unknown, which may carry some significance as to the Milesian woman’s importance in his public and private life (cf. Plu. *Per.* 24.8-9).

Aspasia’s social and political path is believed to have been an intense one, socialising with individuals such as Hippodamus of Miletus, Phidias, Xenophanes, Socrates, Aeschines and Plato²². Tradition confirms that she was a Rhetoric master and Socrates’ teacher in this subject, which, if it proves true, may explain the place awarded to her in collective memory²³.

Aspasia was part of an elite, which supported thalassocratic and liberal ideals at the scale of the current Greek political framework, arguing for the Athenian supremacy in the Mediterranean. Pericles clearly fit into this context. However, the historical sources provide an alternative, and perhaps complementary, image of Aspasia of Miletus. According to other ancient texts, Aspasia may have been a *hetaira*, a free woman who fit neither the concept of the traditional wife (*politiss*

²² Plu. *Per.* 24; González Suárez 1997, 18-19.

²³ The problems surrounding Aspasia’s origins are discussed by Solana Dueso 1994, and González Suárez 1997, for example.

or *gyne*) nor that of the concubines (*pallakai*) or even the ordinary prostitutes (*pornai*)²⁴.

It is true that comedy (especially that of Aristophanes, although it is known that Cratinus and Eupolis already followed this tendency; cf. Plu. *Per.* 24.9) is the main source from which this image of Aspasia has been built. And one must not forget that, what matters the most for comic poets, is caricature and exaggeration. However, several other authors have pointed out that every woman who did not follow the norms of the Athenian society would be belittled by and subordinated to the established order²⁵. It should not be forgotten that, instead of remaining within the “legendary” *gynoecium*, as was the case of the feminine elites in Athens, Aspasia participated in social gatherings where politics were the main subject, which would be unthinkable for a woman of good family. Furthermore, her oriental background may also explain some of her more unusual behaviour within the Athenian society. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Aspasia has been represented comically.

On the other hand, Aspasia was not the main target of authors like Aristophanes. Instead, they used her as a means to attack Pericles, her “husband”/lover, at the time also the ruler of Athens – Aristophanes was an antimilitarist and, therefore, anti-Pericles²⁶. In fact, as it has been said, the Ancient authors were only interested in her because she was connected to Pericles and the little information available on her is a result of this relationship: “her arrival at and departure from Pericles’ house marks both her appearance and disappearance from History.”²⁷

Consequently, from this relationship between the statesman and the Milesian woman there arose, at the time, a spiral of ideas that started out in the private sphere and spread to the public world. This amorous liaison with a foreign woman who did not belong to the feminine elites of the *polis* resulted in Pericles being seen as sexually unre-

²⁴ On Greek women, see e.g. Curado 2008.

²⁵ Solana Dueso 1994, xv.

²⁶ Sousa e Silva 2006, 16-18.

²⁷ González Suárez 1997, 22.

strained, which had an effect in his public image and discredited his political intervention. As such, Aspasia was used as a weapon against Pericles, emasculating him, the guilt of his wrong decisions being assigned to her²⁸.

This is, then, how Aspasia's image was delineated: a foreigner who seduced an Athenian citizen with great political responsibilities, over whom she had an unusual effect, and who was moved by a personal egotism that superseded the interests of the *polis*.

Thus, it is symptomatic that Athens' assistance of the Milesians in the conflict against Samos was a result of Aspasia's involvement in the process. Plutarch states: "As for the war against Samos, Pericles is accused of having ordered it mainly because of Miletus, at Aspasia's request" (*Per.* 25.1.); or "But, as it seemed that he waged war against Samos to please Aspasia... who dominated the main politicians" (*Per.* 24.2.).

Some lines ahead, in Pericles' biography, the Chaeronean treatise writer mentions an old woman named Elpinice, whose task is to evaluate the statesman's decisions regarding Aspasia:

"What admirable exploits, Pericles, and worthy of a crown! You have made many of our brave citizens perish, fighting not against the Phoenicians and the Medes... but ruining a city of our own race and allies." (*Per.* 28.6.)

The goal was to show a politically unacceptable situation, negatively reinforced by the fact that it was instigated by the whims of a statesman's lover, through whom the council was eroticised, losing its eminently public nature and becoming a domestic topic of discussion.

Similarly, in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* – which was Plutarch's source (*Per.* 30.4.) – Aspasia is seen as the cause of Athens' economic blockade against Megara, which, for some, was the root of the Peloponnesian War. According to the poet, 'in order to avenge the offence

²⁸ *Id., ibid.*, 19.

done to her by some Megarians, who had kidnapped two of her courtesans, Aspasia convinced Pericles to defend the expulsion of Megara from the Athenian markets, reducing the city to extreme poverty.’ Acting as if he were Zeus, Pericles persuaded the assembly to pass a decree towards this end²⁹ (Ar. *Ach.* 520-535). This is, therefore, a comical explanation in the shape of political caricature and social satire, which echoes the Trojan war, begun with the kidnapping of a woman (a subject discussed by Herodotus in the preamble: Medea, Europa, Helen), of something which can only be understood within the context of the Athenians’ political ambitions at that time.

In the same sense, in the case of Samos, it would seem obvious that the historical alliances between Miletus and Athens were, on their own, enough to decide the war against the Samians, as well as their resistance to the Attic *polis*’ hegemonic intents³⁰.

Curiously, there is no mention to this *casus belli* in Thucydides. This means that, Aristophanes and Plutarch, while serving a political matter, provide testimonies that intentionally state that the Peloponnesian conflict was brought about by Pericles’ personal reasons, essentially by private matters. Therefore, the rhetoric used to construe this image brings to the discourse the elements necessary to obtaining the desired final effect.

The process of impiety (*asebeia*) in which Aspasia was involved and that ultimately led Pericles to expose himself in the public square can also only be understood within this political context, where the private life of a statesman is brought to public debate in order to weaken him (for more on the proceedings, see Plu. *Per.* 32.1). The grounds for the legal procedure that this process entailed are still discussed today, because Aspasia could not be accused of such an offence since she was not an Athenian. But it is not entirely impossible that the accusation involved pandering or pimping, where the goal was to tarnish Pericles’ character. This is, in a way, what Plutarch does when he expresses the notion that the statesman had decided to

²⁹ Sousa e Silva 2006, 43.

³⁰ González Suárez 1997, 55.

spark “the fire of war... hoping to dispel the accusations and diminish the ill attitudes.”³¹ Once more, the private became public, at the service of personal interests...

The case-story of Pericles and Aspasia, already then compared to Heracles and Omphale’s (given her strength and his weakness and sexual connotations, *Plu. Per.* 24.9), was “repeated” several times afterwards, some of them during the Classical Era. This was the case, for example, of Antony and Cleopatra (1st century BC) and of Titus and Berenice (1st century AD), which had profound public repercussions, as their contemporary sources corroborate, and have become paradigms, since, as it is known, the rhetoric with which the public is mixed and mistaken for the private has worked...and worked very well, for those who fomented it.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, it can be said that the episodes of the Tyrannicides and Aspasia, which occurred in Athens during the 6th and 5th centuries BC, are proof of an ambiguous relationship, which has continued throughout the whole of History. Both the differentiation and the separation of the public and private spheres have often depended on the interests of societies and agents, of the individual but also of the collective, of ideologies, their practices and representations, particularly visible in the political sphere, as the examples discussed above show. However, and adding to this, is also the fact that public and private are essentially modern concepts and are far away from the horizon of the Ancient³².

³¹ *Plu. Per.* 32.6. On Aspasia’s process, beyond the references cited on Miletus, see Ferreira 2010, 129.

³² See e.g. Vasconcelos e Sousa 2011. We wish to thank Sara Melo Santos her availability in translating and reviewing this article into English.

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