Stage 2 Ancient Studies – 2023

**External Assessment Cover Sheet**

Assessment Type 3: Inquiry

**SACE Registration Number:**

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**Inquiry** To what extent did Aspasia of Miletus and Michelle Obama use

their position of privilege to contribute to the social and political spheres of

their time? **word count** 1986

This **inquiry** is assessed using the following specific features:

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| **Knowledge and****Understanding** | **Research and****Analysis** | **Application** |
| KU1 | RA1 | A1 |
| KU2 | RA2 | A2 |
| KU3 |  | A3 |
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Aspasia of Miletus and Michelle Obama, two remarkable women from different historical periods, who found themselves in similar yet distinct situations which propelled them into the social and political spheres of their times. While Aspasia’s relationship with Athenian statesman Pericles gave her access to influential men in ancient Athens, Michelle Obamas position as the wife of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, thrust her into a role where she was required to contribute to social and political issues. Despite the different circumstances that led to them being prominent figures of their time and living in different eras, both Aspasia and Michelle Obama used their positions of privilege to a large extent to contribute to the social and political spheres of their times.

Aspasia of Miletus was best the best-known consort of the Athenian statesman Pericles (Mark,2021). She was born around 470BCE in Miletus, which was the wealthiest Greek city - state at the time. Aspasia was able to receive a high education because unlike women in Athens, women in Miletus from families with means could receive an education. In her later years she moved to Athens, and became a *hetaira* (courtesan), historians are unsure why she moved, some think it was 'possible she accompanied her older sister, who had married an Athenian statesman . Mark explains Aspasia’s ‘beauty and education allowed her to become a *hetaira*, became acquainted with Pericles’ (2021) and soon became his constant mistress, and later bore hima son. Aspasia became known for her intelligence and erudite conversation alongside her beauty. Michelle Obama is the wife of the United States 44th president, Barack Obama. She was born on the 17th of January 1964 in Chicago, Illinois. Raised in a middle – class family Michelle Obama attended public schools where she joined gifted programs, she graduated high school at Whitney M. Young High School. After high

school Michelle Obama attended Princeton University, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and majored in sociology and African – American studies, before attending Harvard Law school and graduating with a Juris Doctor. In 2009 Michelle Obama became the First Lady of the United States, throughout her service as First Lady she was well liked by the American public and became known for her eloquence, intelligence, and captivating speeches. Both Aspasia and Michelle Obama displayed their passion for education by advocating for girls’ education.

Aspasia lived in Athens as a *metic*, which means she was not born in Athens. As a *metic* she had to pay taxes to live in Athens and was forbidden from marrying an Athenian, which meant she had to earn money to support herself. Upon arrival in Athens Aspasia worked as a *hetaira*, and eventually opened a brothel. Young explains prostitution was legal in Athens if it was not conducted by an Athenian citizen, and Aspasia being a *metic* and a woman, she was not recognized as a citizen under ancient Grecian law (2015). Aspasia’s establishment, which was ‘cited by her critics as either a brothel or a house in which she secured young girls for upper – class men’s pleasure and trained them as courtesans’ (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.). Nonetheless her establishment was an academic centre where ideas were exchanged, which also served as a school for elite young women of Athens. Aspasia taught women about politics, philosophy, literature, and encouraged them seek education beyond sewing, weaving, dance, and flute playing (encyclopedia, 2018). Like Aspasia, Michelle Obama also helped young girls receive an education through the *Let Girls Learn* initiative. Michelle Obama launched Let Girls Learn initiative to advocate for girls who were not

receiving an education she wanted to ensure ‘every girl on this planet to have the same opportunities [she’s] had’ (Vouge France, 2020). Through collaboration between the U.S. Government, foreign Governments as seen in figure 1, Let Girls Learn aimed to create an environment which encouraged girls’ education, change views on the value of girls, and empower girls to be agents of change (The White House, 2016). As women of different times both Aspasia and Michelle Obama used their position of privilege to contribute to the social and political spheres of their times by advocating for girls’ education, but also through their public speaking abilities.



*Figure 1: Photo of a Newspaper headline line from First News about Michelle Obama expanding the Let Girls Learn initiative.*

Aspasia not only educated women, but she also trained men as orators. Alongside her beauty and intelligence Aspasia was known for her public speaking, renowned rhetoric skills and her persuasive manner of speech. Aspasia did not keep her talents to herself but rather taught them to Pericles and Aspasia which refined their speech. According to Mark, Socrates ‘marvelled at [Aspasia’s] eloquence’ (2021) and spoke of her tutoring him in human thought and oration. He was confident in Aspasia’s’ teaching and held her in a high regard and felt if required to deliver a speech he would ‘be able to make the speech…’ which ‘… would be nothing wonderful …for [Aspasia] who [was his] instructor [was] by no means weak in the art of rhetoric’ (Plato (trans. Jowett) 2013). Whilst what Socrates told others about Aspasia could be viewed as biased because of their friendship, Plato who disliked Aspasia documented Socrates’ opinions of Aspasia in his Menexenus because he felt it necessary to mention Aspasia training orators including the one who surpassed ‘all other Greeks, Pericles’ (Plato (tran s. Jowett)

2013). Mark states Pericles’ enemies spread rumours that Aspasia wrote the Pericles’ Funeral Oration to insult Pericles, but in turn they acknowledged Aspasia’s intelligence and essentially claimed she was smarter than Pericles (2021). Aspasia’s reputation as an oration teacher outlived her existence and was mentioned in Philostaraus’ Epistle 73, where he claimed ‘Aspasia … [was] said to have sharpened the tongue of Pericles’ (Glenn, 1994). These sources confirm Socrates was not the only ancient Athenian who viewed Aspasia as intelligent and a good orator. Like Aspasia, Michelle Obama also used her access different social groups to encourage, inspire, and educate others through public speeches, books as seen in figure 2, and

documentaries to discuss resilience, perseverance and overcoming adversity. Michelle Obama used her life experience to benefit others because she feels ‘when you’ve worked hard, and done well, and walked through that doorway of opportunity,

you do not slam it shut behind you. You reach back and give other folks the same chances that helped you succeed’ (Obama, 2013). Aspasia and Michelle Obama utilised their connections

*Figure 2: Photo of Michelle Obama's book, Becoming, which was the number 1 New York times bestseller.*

and privilege to impact social and political spheres by sharing the knowledge they attained through lives, which ultimately impacted how a women’s role was viewed during their times.

Aspasia’s intellect as a women left an impression on men and altered their perception of women. Aspasia challenged gender roles in a time where a women’s greatest glory according to Thucydides, was ‘not be talked about for good or for evil among men’ (Thucydides (trans. Hooker) 1960). Through conversations at dinner parties, she demonstrated that a woman was able to be intelligent and their place was not just in

the home and their lives had other purpose’s besides bearing male children. Socrates and Pericles were not the only men to recognise Aspasia’s intelligence men of intelligence and status ‘would carry their wives with them to listen to her’ (Glenn, 1994). As Glenn explains, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero and Athenaeus felt conversations about Aspasia intellect were not sufficient and decided to document her existence (1994). Aspasia’s ability to impress intellectual men and challenge societal norms for Athenian women was extraordinary, Glenn states ‘the fact Aspasia is even mentioned by her male contemporaries is remarkable, for rare is the mention of any intellectual women’ (1994). However, Glenn is a feminist historian, and therefore could have a stronger bias to women’s achievements in her work. However, Xin Liu Gale believes it does not affect the credibility of Glenn’s work (2000). Aspasia’s’ impact on Athenian culture is undeniable as men like Plato, who disliked her prominent presence in Athenian culture documented her existence and discussed her intelligence. Aspasia’s impact on ancient Athenian society lasted years after her existence, this is evident because Plutarch who was alive hundreds of years after her wrote the book *Lives of the Nobel Grecians and Romans* which is the best-known source of Aspasia’s life (Glenn, 1994). Michelle Obama also changed the American public’s view the role of a women, specifically the role of the First Lady. She achieved this through the impact she made and her progressive approach. Firstly, Michelle Obama being the first African American First Lady, broke down racial barriers and became a symbol of representation and inclusivity. Michelle Obama was also different to previous First Ladies because she was previously a successful lawyer and public servant whilst other first ladies had less extensive careers outside their role as a wife. One of the most notable differences between Michelle Obama and previous First Ladies was her approach to social issues. Whilst previous First Ladies were involved in charities and advocacy work, Michelle

Obama recognised the power she held in her position and used it to start initiatives which addressed urgent social issues. Some feminists saw Michelle Obama’s choice to prioritise motherhood and support her husband as ‘letting down the team’ (Parker,2013). Others saw it as revolutionary ‘because black women were long denied the right – or lacked the means – to simply care for their own' (Parker, 2013). Tami Winfrey explains ‘Feminists who wish that Obama would strike a blow for feminism and against stereotyped roles of women, too easily forget that all women are not burdened by the same stereotypes’ (Parker,2013). Gloria Steinem believes that Michelle Obama's ‘individual choices force us to accept that being a woman isn’t just one thing’ (Weaver, 2016). Aspasia and Michelle Obama altered how women were viewed in their respective roles which impacted the social and political spheres, which may have not been achieved if it were not for their relationships.

Aspasia and Michelle Obama may have not been given the opportunity to contribute to the social and political spheres of their time if it were not for their relationships with powerful men of the time. Whilst Aspasia was an intelligent individual, without her relationship with Pericles she may have not been able to reach important influential men in ancient Athens and therefore not be able to contribute to the social and political spheres of her time. Pericles played a significant role in making Aspasia a known figure in ancient Athens through introductions to influential men and the influence he held as an Athenian Statesman. Pericles’ power and influence may have caused people to agree with his opinions about Aspasia, though eventually they recognized her intelligence. Michelle Obama was also an intelligent individual and helped within her community, her relationship with Barack Obama placed her in a position where she had to contribute to social and political spheres because she was the First Lady. Whilst

Michelle Obama helped in her local community it appears to be if it were not for her becoming the First Lady she would not have gotten involved in social and political spheres on a large scale because ‘it was never [her] dream to call the White House home’ (Collett, 2017). Michelle’s Obama relationship with Barack Obama forced her to become involved in the social and political sphere of her time because of her role as First Lady.

Aspasia of Miletus and Michelle Obama are women from different eras and circumstances who both utilized their positions of privilege to address pressing issues of their times. They both advocated for girls’ education, taught others what they knew and changed how the role of a was viewed. Aspasia did this by opening a school for girls’, taught men oration, and broke societal norms for Athenian women. Michelle Obama achieved this by starting a government initiative, delivering inspirational speeches, releasing books, and the work she did and approach she took as the 44th First Lady. Whilst their relationships with prominent men of their times thrust them into a position of privilege their achievements can be credited to their knowledge, passion, skills, and drive to make a difference. Overall, both women largely contributed to the social and political spheres of their times.

References

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| Performance standard  | Grade achieved  |
| KU1 Knowledge and understanding of texts, artefacts, ideas, events, and/or people.  | B |
| KU2 Recognition of, and reflection on, political, social, cultural, and/or economic diversity within the ancient world.  | A |
| KU3 Knowledge and understanding of literary, historical and/or archaeological concepts.  | B |
| RA1 Research into and analysis of primary and secondary sources and perspectives.  | B |
| RA2 Research into and understanding of ideas or innovations that emerged from the ancient world, and consideration of their influence.  | A |
| A1 Synthesis of evidence and appropriate acknowledgment of sources.  | A |
| A2 Communication of ideas and arguments, using subject-specific language.  | A |
| A3 Evaluation of the nature of sources and evidence.  | A-  |
| Total:  | 1. (25)
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**Overall comment:**

Student has demonstrated evidence of achievement across the performance standards at an A-. The student has presented a clear and cohesive argument and discussion, drawing their own conclusions using the material available. They have provided a critique of the source material and acknowledged the issues of bias and differing perspectives. Student has drawn on both ancient and modern sources in their discussion, however research and use of this material could have been stronger. Student has provided some insightful analysis that connects to women across time and space. They have utilized some implied understanding of the role of women which could have been more explicit and detailed.