

**Democracy Lost The War:**  
**Holding the *Demos* Responsible in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War***

By

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Palahaniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, 1999.

## Abstract

Contrary to the belief that the Athenians were manipulated into losing the war by nefarious or incapable leaders, this thesis will argue that the fault for Athenian defeat was the *demos* itself. The *demos*' intractable emotion, the format of the Assembly, but most importantly the *demos*' unwillingness to admit its own role within the political relationship of democracy lead to the Athenian's eventual loss. These are all inherent components of democracy, and in that way Thucydides' text could be viewed as a condemnation of democracy in general. But perhaps, as this paper will argue, Thucydides' text serves more as a warning for future democracies against their own nature. This view stands in light of Thucydides' depiction of Pericles, who represents the ideal political relationship between *demos* and *strategos*, suggesting that democracy can in fact work under the proper conditions of honest leadership and accountable citizenry. It must be noted that Thucydides wrote not simply a history, but a didactic narrative which can be read often through his editing of speeches, but also in his own authorial voice throughout the text. This *History* is an argument, it calls to attention the *demos*' influence alongside its lack of responsibility, resulting in poor judgment that failed Athens in the field. This paper will analyze Pericles, the Mytilenian debate, and the Sicilian expedition, in order to reveal the people's unwillingness to be culpable, Thucydides' condemnation of that refusal, and the possibility for democracy to work.

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*Chapter 1: Pericles**“It Is You Who Change”*

Democracy is the rule of the citizens, yet throughout much of the discourse on Athenian democracy during the Peloponnesian War, the blame for its defeat goes to the leaders. Indeed, Athenian citizens renounced responsibility for ill fated decisions, as Thucydides describes in his *History*. *Strategos* and orators, even oracles are suggested to be the cause of Athens' defeat, omitting the democratic elections and processes that lead to those ill fated decisions. However, this chapter will argue that Thucydides rejects that notion, and rests the onus of defeat on the *demos* itself. His depiction of Pericles as the most adept leader the Athenians ever had lends itself to this argument, because even he was subject to the decisions of the people. Pericles was, as Thucydides writes, skilled at persuading the *demos* to the right conclusions, but even he had to govern within the confines of democratic elections. This chapter will further explore the concept that Athenian democracy was a direct democracy. That is to say, all citizens were able to vote, this right was exercised, and those votes had political impact. If this is the case, and the tangible power in Athens rested with the *demos*, then why would the *demos* not be held accountable for its loss? An answer, one that this chapter will oppose, can be found in Pericles, who, as *Strategos*, was able to successfully lead the people. However, Pericles, as Thucydides writes him, was still at the mercy of the people. Thucydides depicts Pericles, the greatest of men, as beholden to the Athenian public, thus portraying the power and culpability of the *demos*.

Pericles, though known as a great leader, could not operate outside the *demos* and Athenian law. As Vincent Azoulay reveals, “every one of [Pericles'] projects was submitted to a

vote of the Assembly that also decided how to finance it.”<sup>2</sup> Even Pericles, “the first man of his time,”<sup>3</sup> was beholden to the democratic regime. It is worth noting that Pericles was a highly persuasive orator, but this cannot negate the *demos*’ role in Athenian politics. In requiring the consent of the *demos*, it cannot be argued that Pericles was an absolute ruler of Athens. Azoulay continues that “every decision was the subject of negotiation between the orator and the people,”<sup>4</sup> and that there was always the possibility of the Athenians to change their minds. Pericles was a statesman and an orator, and though he was undeniably skilled, his ability to aggregate votes did not afford him autonomy. His political and military endeavors were still controlled by democratic approval. Even if this approval was nearly guaranteed, the very fact that Pericles had to present before the Assembly is a testament to the influence of the *demos*. Moreover, there were times when the *demos* exerted power over Pericles. In 430 BCE Pericles was “deposed, he was judged and sentenced to pay a very large fine”<sup>5</sup> to the state. He was not above the *demos*, rather, he served the *demos*.

Thucydides specifically depicts Pericles in this self-sacrificing manner perhaps to reveal the ideal democracy. Pericles represents the most successful relationship between *demos* and *strategos* throughout the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. This is evident in that Pericles was able to rally support even in the face of death, as seen in the funeral oration, and he is able to “lead”<sup>6</sup> the Athenians without succumbing to populist pacification. In Thucydides’ description, Pericles cares deeply for the *demos*, but will not pander to its desires, nor cower to its demands.

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, trans. by Janet Lloyd, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by R. Crawley, rev. by D. Lateiner, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2006), 1.139.

<sup>4</sup> Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, 147

<sup>5</sup> Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.65.

This depiction is perhaps a rhetorical device by Thucydides, considering the fact that other historians do not offer an equally noble portrait of Pericles. Azoulay argues that Thucydides wrote within “a tradition hostile to Pericles,”<sup>7</sup> with other historians depicting him as tyrannical and self serving. Conversely, Thucydides offers a positive view of Pericles, who was unmatched in “ability and known integrity.”<sup>8</sup> Thucydides further extols Pericles in that he “never sought power by improper means,”<sup>9</sup> depicting the very antithesis of a tyrant. This poses a question into Thucydides’ portrait of Pericles. As Azoulay describes, Pericles was heavily scrutinized by the people of his own time. Indeed, the Athenians themselves turned on Pericles, fearing him a tyrant, and this enmity “did not subside until he had been fined.”<sup>10</sup> Why then would Thucydides go to such lengths to depict Pericles as the best of men, as the pinnacle of Athenian citizenship.

Victoria Wohl suggests in her *Love Among the Ruins* that Thucydides is transposing himself on Pericles, specifically in the funeral oration. Both were generals, and both experienced the anger of the *demos*. But more than this, Wohl argues that during the funeral oration “Thucydides’ voice and Pericles’ are effectively inseparable.”<sup>11</sup> The funeral oration in essence describes the ideal Athenian democracy, one in which equality rules and citizens do their duty to the state. As Wohl summarizes, it describes “the Athenians not as they were, but as they wanted to be or to imagine they were.”<sup>12</sup> This imagined state is the lofty ideal Thucydides spends the rest of the text undermining. From the passionate prose of Pericles will befall a plague, civic rebellion, and the failed Sicilian expedition, but it is important that Thucydides starts here, with

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<sup>7</sup> Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.65.

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.65.

<sup>10</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.65.

<sup>11</sup> Victoria Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins: the Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2009), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins* 33

the ideal. Wohl suggests that then Pericles, in the *History*, is an emblem, a representative of the ideal state of Athens. She suggests that Pericles is the manifestation of the funeral oration he delivers. This could explain the disconnect between the historical Pericles Azoulay describes and Thucydides' idealistic *strategos*. Azoulay reveals that Pericles undeniably took part in the expansion of the Athenian empire, which he himself warns the Athenians against on his death. Furthermore, Pericles was known for ruthlessly crushing the revolts of allied cities,<sup>13</sup> perhaps undermining the reasonable depiction Thucydides affords him. But more than this, Azoulay suggests that Pericles was not worthy of the esteem Thucydides affords him in that he "was no better and no worse than anyone else and was by no means original."<sup>14</sup> Pericles was a *strategos*, as were many. Many people, some of whom Thucydides depicts in his *History*, used passionate prose to persuade the masses. Many leaders, such as Nicias in the Sicilian expedition, had the best interests of Athens at heart, and were selfless in their quest of Athenian victory. Perhaps then, it is important to understand Pericles, as Thucydides writes him, to understand the lesson of the *History*. If historically Pericles was simply one of many leaders who governed well and could speak with clarity, then why does Thucydides give his voice so much power in the text? Perhaps as Wohl describes, Thucydides is using Pericles to exemplify the ideal democracy.

Thucydides is, at least, the editor of the funeral oration, and it is therefore a considerable argument that his personal beliefs run throughout it. Pericles then becomes a vessel to convey Thucydides' message, and in looking at the funeral oration, one could argue that the message is that of civic responsibility. The funeral oration celebrates and mourns the men of Athens who completed the highest civic duty: dying for Athens. It begins by extolling the ancestors who grew Athens into an empire, and also incidentally died for it. The funeral oration ends by requesting

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<sup>13</sup> Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens* 13.

<sup>14</sup> Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*, 61.



Athenians to bear more citizens, so that they too may die for it. Pericles asks of the people before him, “still of an age to beget children must bear up in the hope of having others in their stead.”<sup>15</sup>

This may seem an insensitive request in the face of lost loved ones, but it perhaps reflects a deeper truth of Athenian democracy. The truth that a democracy cannot exist without the willing *demos*. All political regimes require subjects, but democracies differ in that their citizens have freedom to choose. Citizens, to a degree, could choose whether or not they want to die for their nation, and to that end, Athens needs willing citizens. Pericles reveals the dire need for citizens in that they are both “a reinforcement and a security”<sup>16</sup> that Athens cannot exist without. Athens needs citizens to fight and die for her, and in that way, she is beholden to the *demos*.

Perhaps, then, Pericles reveals a fundamental component in Athenian democracy that can be found throughout the *History*, the incredible power of the citizens. As Thucydides reveals, there is perhaps a difference to democracy as oppose to other regimes. In democracy, as opposed to a monarchy, the people must willingly give themselves up for Athens. Rather than sending men off to war to fight for a demagogue or king, a democracy sends its citizens to fight for themselves. Pericles, and all of Athens, remains at the discretion of the *demos*. Pericles cannot govern without their consent, nor can Athens exist without it. Citizens, the funeral oration reveals, must be willing to give entirely to Athens in order for her to survive. Pericles uses passionate language to describe this sentiment, possibly revealing the urgency of his speech. He says, “you must yourselves realize the power of Athens, and feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills your hearts.”<sup>17</sup> It is a vital demand he articulates, that the people *must* realize the power of Athens. Perhaps, in this speech, the power of Athens is the people

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<sup>15</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.44.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.44

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.42

themselves. They must fall in love with Athens, they must procreate for Athens, they must die for Athens, because if they do not, Athens will perish. The people hold the vital role in this relationship, because Pericles does describe this as a relationship. He reveals that the men who die for Athens, “their children will be brought up till manhood at the public expense.”<sup>18</sup> This reveals that Athens is indebted to those who die for her. Dying for Athens is therefore not a command, not the will of a demagogue, but the vital piece of a tenacious relationship. Athens is not a tyrant to its own people, for it owes them something for their troubles. In promising to take care of those left behind, Athens reveals the symbiotic nature of their relationship. Athens will not take the way a tyrant or monarch would, it will repay its people, thus revealing their relevancy to the political regime. As Pericles says, Athens “favours the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy,”<sup>19</sup> but it must be questioned *why* Athens favors the many. Why doesn't Athens favor the few, the powerful, the elite? Perhaps because, as Pericles' impassioned plea suggests, there is strength in numbers. The people hold a greater power than perhaps they understand, because the great nation Pericles describes in the funeral oration is in fact indebted to the very audience it falls on.

Thucydides then contrasts the influence of the *demos* in the funeral oration with their influence in the plague. The funeral oration espoused the positive results of the Athenian *demos*, in creating a city worth renown. The people of Athens, Pericles says, are the true triumph of the city. He states “the Athens that I have celebrated is only what the heroism of these and their like have made her,”<sup>20</sup> speaking of the noteworthy and noble citizens Athens claimed as her own. It is evident then that the people of Athens are capable of great good, for Athens is described as a

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<sup>18</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.45

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.37

<sup>20</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.42

great good. However, the passage immediately after the funeral oration is the plague, which contrasts the violent capability of the *demos* against the lofty funeral oration. The people, Thucydides describes, fall into “despair”<sup>21</sup> and in doing so exhibit their base nature. En masse this plague is described as gruesome, with “men dying like sheep”<sup>22</sup> in the streets and sacred places” full of corpses.”<sup>23</sup> Immediately there is a connotation of mass amounts of people, and this is the definition of the *demos*. It is perhaps then evident that the plague represents the power of the people when they operate in large quantities. For it was not merely disease that infested Athens at the time, but with it came “lawless extravagance.”<sup>24</sup> While sickness is not a fault worthy offense, lawlessness is. Yet the *demos* attempts to reduce its accountability in the chaos of the plague. Thucydides writes that the people revisited an old oracle which may have foretold of their current misery, but Thucydides does not allow this belief to stand. He states that “the verse will probably be read” in whatever way the Athenians preferred.<sup>25</sup> This according to Thucydides’ previous rhetoric, is incorrect. The people have inherent power, they are capable of creating the noble city Pericles describes and they are vital for its continuation. Yet here, the people attempt to alight from their responsibility, and this, Thucydides suggests, is a flaw.

The *demos*’ unwillingness to confront its own culpability is further exemplified in Pericles, whom the Athenians blame for their misfortune. Thucydides writes, that “they began to find fault with Pericles,”<sup>26</sup> a trope Thucydides will use frequently in describing the people’s relationship with their leaders. Pericles himself was not “unprepared”<sup>27</sup> when the people

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<sup>21</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.51

<sup>22</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.51

<sup>23</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.52

<sup>24</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.52

<sup>25</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.54

<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.59

<sup>27</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.60

“vented”<sup>28</sup> their misfortune upon him, rather, he called them out. He uses his understanding of the *demos* and the frequency with which they blamed leaders, to assuage and redirect Athenian anger. Thucydides here uses a similar rhetoric found throughout the text of acknowledging the power of the *demos* and using that culpability against it. Pericles states that he will not be “cowed by their sufferings”<sup>29</sup> thus denying the *demos* its most adept power move: voicing its dissent. Throughout the rest of the text, in the Mytilenian debate for example, the people get exactly what they want. Here, Thucydides offers a deft Pericles navigating the people’s displeasure. He rejects blame for the war by reminding the Athenians that they, “voted it.”<sup>30</sup> This, in accordance with Wohl’s argument, is perhaps Thucydides speaking through Pericles, because throughout the text the *demos* will vote on major decisions, and then refute its responsibility in that action. Here, Pericles does not allow the *demos* to recuse itself, it must be held equally accountable to its leaders because it voted, democratically, for this outcome.

This is perhaps the crux of the argument Thucydides makes in using Pericles as an example for the ideal Athenian regime. Pericles is not the demagogue, for Thucydides says he never sought unjust power, but rather he is an equal in the political relationship between *strategos* and *demos*. Because, as Thucydides revealed in the funeral oration, it was a relationship. Pericles harkens the Athenians to this companionship in stating that “I am the same man and do not alter, it is you who change.”<sup>31</sup> This is the focal point of Athenian democracy: the will of the people, which as is evident by many episodes of Athenian history, is subject to change. Perhaps as Wohl offered, this statement can be taken further in that Pericles stands emblematic of Athens and Athenian ideals, which do not change, rather its constituents do.

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<sup>28</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.59

<sup>29</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.60

<sup>30</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.60

<sup>31</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.61

It is important that this paper begin with the argument that the *demos* had power, that it was a member of a political relationship and not the passive subject of an empire. Pericles was, according to Thucydides, the ideal partner for the *demos* in part because he demanded that the *demos* take up accountability for its part in political decision making. Pericles, though a leader, remained a member of the *demos* itself. He states, “ I voted for war, only did as you did yourselves,”<sup>32</sup> reminding the Athenians that their anger with him is misguided, that he is a fellow citizen with a single vote. He may be the leader, but that does not remove him from the democratic discourse. Thucydides even writes that Athens under Pericles was “government by the first citizen,”<sup>33</sup> a line historically interpreted to mean tyranny. But perhaps in light of this argument, there is room to see Thucydides’ Pericles as a civil servant, taking his turn as leader with the best intentions in mind. For Thucydides wrote that Pericles never sought immoral power, nor did he allow the *demos* to control him. Rather, Pericles, in this idealistic form, demanded a reciprocal relationship between the leadership of Athens and the citizenry of Athens for the greater common good. Indeed, Pericles calls out to the constituents, and perhaps here, Wohl’s argument that Pericles and Thucydides are inextricable truly applies, “cease then to grieve for your private afflictions, and address yourselves instead to the safety of the commonwealth.”<sup>34</sup> It is here each citizen’s duty to do what the men of the funeral oration had done, to do what Nicias will later do in the Sicilian expedition. It is not simply for the leadership of Athens to rule selflessly and well, it is the responsibility of every single Athenian citizen to vote responsibly and with the common good in mind.

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<sup>32</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.64

<sup>33</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.65

<sup>34</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.61

This is not reflective of the Athenian mindset throughout the *History*, nor is the reading many scholars have given this text. The blame for the Athenians' loss of this war has historically been the tyrannical abuse of power from Athenian rulers, with blame falling on Cleon in the Mytilenian Debate, Alcibiades in the Sicilian expedition, and even Pericles for his powerful precedent. But as this chapter has hopefully explained, the fault cannot rest solely on the leaders. Athens was a functioning democracy, therefore, the outcome of the Peloponnesian War was the outcome of democracy as well. Thucydides, through Pericles, argues that the people must be held accountable

The *demos* did have an impactful role in Athenian democracy, and therefore, Thucydides' demand of their accountability is within reason. Josiah Ober argues that Athenian democracy did in fact work, it represented the will of the people and in effect could be argued as rule by the *demos*. He writes that "Athenian democracy proved unexpectedly workable." And indeed, historically this is true. It had a phenomenal military force, it "survived two nasty oligarchic coups,"<sup>35</sup> and even after the loss of the Peloponnesian War, democracy lived on. Democracy was capable of functioning, and Thucydides argues that it never worked so well as under Pericles and here perhaps the argument lies. Democracy works in a mutual relationship between leaders and citizens, with both taking responsibility for its outcome and both acting in the best interest of the community. For one man to act selflessly for the greater good would create a tyrannical society dependent on one benevolent man, but as Pericles states, this is a democracy for it favors the rule of the majority. This is why Pericles demands the people take ownership for their actions, and perhaps this is why Thucydides spends much of the text through the Mytilenian debate and the Sicilian expedition belaboring the people with responsibility.

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<sup>35</sup> Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent In Democratic Athens*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 5.

Whether Pericles' singularly successful democracy was real or not is not the subject of debate here, rather, Thucydides depicts Pericles as the best partner of the *demos*. This is perhaps grounds for the argument that democracy is capable of existing and of success. To begin the story with such a profound and evocative speech in the funeral oration could suggest that Thucydides did believe in the possibility of Athens' success. It would perhaps be difficult to write such emotional prose to a nation Thucydides viewed as doomed. Athens' culture, its prestige, its power, its ideals, its undeniably fervent "love"<sup>36</sup> embedded in its civic nature, "such is the Athens" which men died for. Such was the Athens which Thucydides himself fought for, and which he wrote about so that perhaps no one would ever see such a valiant city fail again. The *History* is then perhaps not a condemnation of democracy in itself, but a warning for its constituents to take responsibility for its successes and failures

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<sup>36</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.42.

*Chapter 2: The Mytilenian Debate**“More the Audience of a Rhetorician Than the Council of a City”*

Thucydides curates the Mytilenian Debate to reveal the influence of the *demos* in the form of the Assembly. In placing political authority in the hands of the *demos*, orators had to be charismatic, likable, and appeal to citizen's beliefs. In the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Assembly was not a place for honesty, but for tactical oration. This is the context of the Mytilenian Debate, which dramatizes the contest between Cleon and Diodotus over the fate of Athens' renegade ally, Mytilene. Cleon and Diodotus, the two generals chosen to speak, represent the false oratory required to achieve political success in the Assembly. The speeches are written in an emotional, theatrical form, perhaps to illustrate the power of the Assembly; citizens demanding persuasion from politicians at the expense of the truth. An analysis of Aristophanes' *Knights* lends itself to this argument, revealing the too similar characteristics of politics and theater, a similarity Thucydides criticizes in this debate. This chapter will explore the concept that the orators were not entirely at fault for the theatrical, dishonest practices of the Assembly, but rather the *demos* demanded pleasing rhetoric. In this way, the *demos* must be held equally accountable for the outcomes of the Assembly, rather than blame entirely befalling the orators.

This paper will argue that the Mytilenian Debate does not blame the *strategos* or any other orator for the Assembly's failure to secure Athens' safety, but rather the *demos* itself. This argument is rooted in Thucydides' portrayal of Diodotus as a good general, forced to use deception in the Assembly. It is also rooted in the argument that neither Diodotus nor Cleon truly win the debate, the real winner is the *demos*, for getting exactly what it wanted, twice. And



finally, this argument finds support in the theatrical nature of Thucydides' writing, which stands as a cautionary example of the Assembly's theatricality and how it distorts the political process. This analysis is aided by an examination of Aristophanes' *Knights*, written contemporaneously to the *Peloponnesian War* and with a remarkably similar censure.

This argument relies on the fact that the *demos* could effectively exert power within the Assembly. A brief review of the history and function of the Assembly is therefore necessary. In setting this debate within the Assembly, Thucydides is analyzing the power of the *demos*. It was widely accepted that "a fundamental component of Athenian democracy was the political assembly," originating with the Constitution of Solon.<sup>37</sup> The Assembly was logistically the most opportune place for the *demos* to exert their power. The Assembly was held in the Pnyx, "a theater-like area"<sup>38</sup> large enough to hold six thousand Athenian citizens. Indeed, all Athenian citizens were encouraged, and often expected, to attend every meeting possible, creating a sense of tangible power among the people, the very essence of democracy. For particularly crucial decisions, such as ostracism, a decision could not be made without at least six thousand Athenian citizens, "an eighth or so of all adult citizen males in Attica."<sup>39</sup> Although "the agenda, set by the Council,"<sup>40</sup> was not the decision of the *demos*, the outcome of every vote could only be argued as a democratic decision. The Council consisted of five hundred Athenian citizens, chosen by lot, to effectively be public servants for the democracy for a full year. As Josiah Ober put in his book *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, "the *demos* which sat at the Pnyx was demographically

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan, Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 164.

<sup>38</sup> Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, (Princeton University Press, 1989), 132.

<sup>39</sup> Pomeroy et. al, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 133.

quite similar to the ‘imagined’ *demos*,<sup>41</sup> assuring the populace that the decision made at the Assembly, whatever it was, was the decision of the Athenian people.

While citizenship was not universal, its limitation offered a sense of community and identity to those within the Athenian citizenry. By the time of the Mytilenian Debate, Athenian citizenship had been limited to “those whose parents were both Athenians,”<sup>42</sup> under the Citizenship Law of 451, promoted by the *strategos* Pericles. This continued the belief in autochthony, that Athenians had sprung from the very earth of Attica, to legitimize Athenian rule, and eternally bind its citizens to their political state. As a citizen, an intentionally limited group, Athenian males had a responsibility to their community to be an active member of politics. Robin Osborne outlines in his *Athens and Athenian Democracy* that “at the age of eighteen an Athenian boy became a citizen by being recognized as a member of the local community, the deme.”<sup>43</sup> This entrance into local politics was the foundation for the greater Assembly’s function. In reliance on a sense of familial responsibility, Athens created a politically active citizenry tied to family and country. While citizens were not beholden to any political interests, Ober writes that every citizen voted “in the best interests of his state and of himself.”<sup>44</sup> In this way, the Assembly truly was the voice of the people. However, in the Mytilenian debate, Thucydides does not portray this as a beneficial form of government.

Thucydides depicts a fundamental flaw in the Assembly’s reliance on oratory to make political decisions, which created a power struggle for popular votes. The Assembly began with the announcement of the agenda, followed by a debate, if needed, and then a vote, “normally by

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<sup>41</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Pomeroy et. al, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece*, 164.

<sup>43</sup> Robin Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 134.

a show of hands.”<sup>45</sup> To debate in front of thousands of citizens in the open air would have been an extraordinary feat of oratory, instantly limiting the voices heard to the trained elites. Although the debate was open to every citizen, “some men spoke more often than others,”<sup>46</sup> typically, those who could afford the time and cost that went into oratory training.

These vocal men were some of the most permanent fixtures of Athenian politics, as most political offices were chosen by lottery and were often restricted by term limitations. Unlike political offices, citizens were not limited in speaking in the Assembly. As Osborne writes, “continuity as Athenian politics enjoyed was provided not by the Council but by those who spoke in the Assembly,”<sup>47</sup> revealing the power of speech in politics. The very nature of the Assembly placed political and military decision in the hands of nonprofessionals, creating a need for trained specialists to enlighten and educate the masses. To those Athenians who “had advice to give”<sup>48</sup> went the possibility of swaying the entire audience with their rhetoric. Although as Osborne writes, “it was upon principles, and not on technical information, that crucial Athenian decisions depended – decisions about going to war.”<sup>49</sup> It would thus appear that in times of emotional distress, expertise was less favorable than powerful oratory suffused with cultural ideals.

In this way, the Assembly created an opportunity for charismatic orators. As Osborne suggested, the citizens of the Assembly could be swayed more by principle than by expertise or skill, a fact easily exploited by a trained rhetorician. However, it is important to note that the power was never truly in the hands of the orator, for they were always at the mercy of the *demos*’

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<sup>45</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 29.

<sup>47</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 133.

<sup>49</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 29.

opinion. The Assembly was a place of debate, of conversation, the *demos* was as much a participant as any single orator who tried to speak. Many orators were “periodically interrupted by laughter, applause, or heckling”<sup>50</sup> depending on the reaction of the *demos*. As Ober records, when the general Demosthenes spoke “during a key meeting in 346,”<sup>51</sup> his political opponents disturbed his speech with mockery, and “the Assembly men had found their quips amusing.”<sup>52</sup> It was not simply political opponents orators had to guard against, but the *demos* itself, which could turn against an orator for one failed, or boring, speech. It is particularly troubling that Demosthenes’ speech was during a key meeting, one of importance to the Athenian state, and yet when one of the *stratēgoi* spoke, the Assembly encouraged his mockery. In this instance, it would appear that the *demos* did not see the *gravitas* of their decision.

Indeed, as Arlene Saxonhouse puts forth in *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, “the Assembly holds the speaker, not themselves, accountable for their decisions,”<sup>53</sup> excusing the *demos* from blame. Even if the Assembly voted incorrectly, voted for a policy or military action that ended in drastic failure for the Athenian state, the punishment follows the orator who led them to that decision. This lack of responsibility on behalf of the Athenian citizenry creates the environment in which they can laugh at Demosthenes, for they are spectators, free of reprehension. This is particularly troubling given the power of the Assembly. Osborne writes that any form of popular “support lead to very much the same position, a position of authority.”<sup>54</sup> While the power rested firmly in the hands of the *demos*, accountability was given to their chosen orator. The Assembly held power in fundamental legal capabilities.

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<sup>50</sup> Pomeroy et. al, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece*, 165.

<sup>51</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 138.

<sup>53</sup> Arlene Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 159.

<sup>54</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 30.

Ober reports whatever the Assembly passed “ became a decree which had the force of law unless and until it was successfully challenged as having contravened the established *nomoi*.”<sup>55</sup> That is the power of the *demos*, the power to fundamentally change and order the Athenian state, yet historians seem to suggest that this power was not checked or protected from charismatic orators, or the disregard of the citizens.

This is the political world in which Thucydides wrote the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, this is the context for the Mytilenian Debate. It must be noted that the Mytilenian Debate is carefully crafted by Thucydides. This is the fundamental component of this paper’s argument, for Thucydides did not write objective history, rather a didactic narrative, of which the Mytilenian Debate is part. He has edited the story to fit a specific narrative, using Cleon and Diodotus, two generals, as representative of a greater lesson. Thucydides observes that there was “much expression of opinion upon both sides”<sup>56</sup> of the debate, yet only offers the two voices of Diodotus and Cleon. David Cohen would argue, in his “Justice, Interest, and Politician Deliberation in Thucydides,” that the debate concerns a “fundamental question of how the state ought to be governed”<sup>57</sup> and places the blame for state failure on the generals who abuse their political power. Cohen calls the debate a “moral criticism”<sup>58</sup> of demagogues, suggesting the blame for political action, much like the Athenians believed themselves, rested on the shoulders of the orators. Similarly, Felix Wasserman in his article *Post-Periclean Democracy in Action: The Mytilenian Debate* interprets the debate as the failure of the statesmen, rather than the *demos*, to secure Athens’ best interest. He puts forth that “the Mytilenian case is the first stage

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<sup>55</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 133.

<sup>56</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by R. Crawley, rev. by D. Lateiner, (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2006), 3.36.

<sup>57</sup> David Cohen, “Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides,” (Quaderni Urbaniti di Cultura Classica, vol. 16, 1984), 49.

<sup>58</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 53.

on the road to the catastrophe of 404,<sup>59</sup> and suggests that the loss of the Peloponnesian War was due to the ineffective leaders who succeeded Pericles. He holds that Cleon is the “vulgarized replica of Pericles”<sup>60</sup> rather than the *demos*. In summary, Wasserman holds that “the main responsibility for the decline of Athenian democracy: public affairs falling from the hands of the statesman into those of the demagogue,”<sup>61</sup> removing any onus from the *demos* for Athens’ loss.

From the introduction of the debate the reader knows Thucydides agrees with Diodotus in the pardoning of Mytilene. He steps out of the narrative to call the decree in favor of destruction “horrid cruelty.”<sup>62</sup> Before the debate even begins Thucydides has alerted his audience to the right side in his narrative. Another editorial decision that shapes this debate is that “Thucydides chose to report”<sup>63</sup> the second of two consecutive debates. The first debate was born out of the insurrection on the island of Mytilene, an ally of Athens that defected to the Spartans and tried to inspire a mass revolt. The Athenians halted this revolt, captured the instigators, and brought the decision of what to do about Mytilene to the Athenian Assembly. This initial debate resulted in the Athenian citizens voting for Cleon’s decree, selling all the Mytilenian women and children into slavery and killing all the men, to set a fearful precedent among all Athenian allies. The initial debate was credited to “the fury of the moment,”<sup>64</sup> but the “repentance”<sup>65</sup> of the Athenian Assembly resulted in a redo. These highly volatile terms are a criticism of the effectiveness of the Assembly. Thucydides had upheld Pericles, deceased at the time of the Mytilenian Debate, as

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<sup>59</sup> Felix M. Wasserman, *Post-Periclean Democracy*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 28.

<sup>60</sup> Wasserman, *Post-Periclean Democracy*, 33.

<sup>61</sup> Wasserman, *Post-Periclean Democracy*, 36.

<sup>62</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.36.

<sup>63</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 156.

<sup>64</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.36.

<sup>65</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. 3.36.

the “ablest alike in counsel and in action,”<sup>66</sup> for specifically advising against “anger”<sup>67</sup> in political discourse. It was this wisdom, this temperance that Pericles was known for that Thucydides lauded him for, and his depiction of the Mytilenian debate is the antithesis of that image. This must have been done with intent, perhaps an intent to reveal how ineffective the Assembly was at governing a military campaign. This second debate is particularly notable because of its impracticality; in war, there are no second chances. The depiction of the Athenian envoy hastily attempting to halt the destruction of Mytilene is as dramatic as it is impractical. The boat does get there in time and stops the destruction, but to consider this the operation of the Classical world’s greatest navy is incredible. A wavering military command controls Athens, as evident by the fact that anger won the first Mytilenian Debate, and regret incited the second.

The second debate suggests that Thucydides disavows the Athenian Assembly and by association Athenian democracy to govern during a war. Though Cleon and Diodotus oppose each other in the debate, they both agree that the act of debating such a crucial issue is dangerous and flawed. Cleon, the general in favor of leveling the Mytilenians, condemns the political assembly, calls the voting citizens “very slaves to the pleasure of the ear, and more like the audience of a rhetorician than the council of a city.”<sup>68</sup> Cleon, perhaps, does not trust the Assembly to choose his decree again, and although Cohen would argue that Cleon is espousing “demagogic oratory,”<sup>69</sup> it cannot be argued that Cleon does not genuinely believe there is danger in the Assembly’s choice. He declares to the Assembly that “your empire is despotism and your subjects are disaffected conspirators.”<sup>70</sup> He claims that “no one state has ever injured you as

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<sup>66</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.39.

<sup>67</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.48.

<sup>68</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.

<sup>69</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 49.

<sup>70</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37.

much as Mytilene.”<sup>71</sup> He proclaims to the Assembly that the “persons to blame are you who are so foolish as to institute these contests.”<sup>72</sup> He describes the debate as “suicidal”<sup>73</sup> for Athens, suggesting that in “such contests” Athens “takes the dangers for herself.”<sup>74</sup> Cleon, for all his hyperbole and inflammatory language, seems to believe in his stance. He truly seems to believe that a merciless precedent would protect Athens from harm. His fear is nearly palpable in his speech, and it can perhaps be argued that Cleon speaks honestly, that is to say, he thinks he speaks the truth.

As Saxonhouse interprets, Cleon speaks passionately, freely, “with absolute candor.”<sup>75</sup> He espouses terrible acts, as Thucydides condemns, but it cannot be said that Cleon does not speak the truth to the Athenian Assembly. For a demagogic rhetorician, he seems to offer the people the truth in an effort to protect Athens the best way he believes he can. In beginning the second debate with Cleon’s speech the audience gains a fervent understanding of the importance of this debate. The perceived consequences of this debate are perilous, as Cleon aggressively describes. Whether or not the suggested consequences were well founded is not of great importance to the debate; the crux of the matter rests on what the *demos* felt during this debate. The fear, the urgency, the fate of Athens, these may all have been rhetorical tools used by a trained orator, though this does not necessarily suggest falsehood. The fear in Cleon’s words, as Thucydides describes them, is tangible, and was perhaps the companion of every orator who depended on the volatile Assembly.

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<sup>71</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38

<sup>72</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.38.

<sup>73</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37.

<sup>74</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37

<sup>75</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 155.



While Cleon speaks candidly, Diodotus, the good guy, must use deception to persuade the audience. Although Thucydides supports Diodotus' faction as right, and propels his audience to agree from the beginning, Diodotus cannot argue for morality or justice. As Saxonhouse reveals, Diodotus' name means "gift of Zeus" and he is the "son of good power,"<sup>76</sup> a somewhat glaring signal of his morality. As noted before, Thucydides carefully curated the entire *History*, not least of all the speeches. Diodotus speaks after Cleon in the second debate, after the fear mongering, after the promise of destruction if the Athenians fail to destroy Mytilene. He must combat Cleon's diatribe in a way that overcomes the emotions of a majority of citizens in the Assembly. He begins by describing the way a political assembly should work, with honest men's words falling on honest men's ears, but remarks that "this is not our way."<sup>77</sup> Rather, the Athenians are swayed by rhetoric and distrust honesty, and it is the "the city"<sup>78</sup> that is hurt by this. He continues, "the moment that a man is suspected of giving advice, however good, from corrupt motives, we feel such a grudge against him for the gain which after all we are not certain he will receive, that we deprive the city of its benefit."<sup>79</sup> At this moment, all Athenian citizens should have been wary of Diodotus' speech. After declaring that honesty and advice were useless, he will surely not do so. Diodotus already lost the debate once. If he truly believed his decree served the best interest of Athens, he could not afford to lose again. In his speech, it seems, he is committed to lying, to telling the citizens what they want to hear, in order to do what is necessary. He openly reveals the main flaw of the Assembly to its constituents, that "he must deceive in order to succeed,"<sup>80</sup> and the citizenry still votes for his decree. He uses the rhetoric of

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<sup>76</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 156.

<sup>77</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.42.

<sup>78</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.42

<sup>79</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.42.

<sup>80</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 159.

“our interest”<sup>81</sup> to persuade the Assembly, after telling them that he did not believe honesty had any place in this debate, and it works. In reading this debate, Thucydides does not offer a hopeful interpretation of the assembly. He suggests that the audience simply did not mind being lied to by Diodotus if it meant achieving their desired ends. In this way, the Assembly disturbs that political process, without heeding honesty or expertise, and simply choosing the orator that sounds better.

This is perhaps best seen in Thucydides forcing Diodotus, the ostensibly moral character, to use deception, revealing the misguided nature of Athenian politics. Saxonhouse interprets that this debate is written with “a searing emotional and dramatic power”<sup>82</sup> unlike much of this historical prose. It is a hyperbolic, emotional, and theatrical piece, of two generals trying to save Athens by utilizing the Assembly’s power. In the first debate, Diodotus lost, but in the second he uses rhetoric to play on the Assembly’s base emotions, revealing the descent of an honorable man in Athenian politics. Cleon has defined justice to be vengeance, and the audience has already believed that story once. Diodotus, though he has justice and morality on his side, must use clever rhetoric to win the audience. The blame is not placed on Cleon, however. Rather, it is the Athenian people, unwilling to listen to an honest man, that turn Diodotus into a rhetorician. In the second debate, Diodotus is forced to adhere to the rules of the Assembly and speak things he does not believe in order to save Athens. “The tragedy of Diodotus’ speech”<sup>83</sup> is that he must betray his morals to save his city. As a good man, Zeus given, he must do all he can to save his city, even if that means moral corruption. For this, Thucydides blames the Assembly. Diodotus

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<sup>81</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.44.

<sup>82</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 151.

<sup>83</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 159.

“must practice the subterfuge he had denounced”<sup>84</sup> and corrupt his inherent goodness. This is the dramatic performance of good men in politics, as told by Thucydides.

The blame for the corruption of Diodotus, and the inability of the Assembly to function, lies with the Athenian citizens. This is supported by the fact that both Cleon and Diodotus, written through Thucydides, “blame the citizens themselves in their assembled state as the cause of its failure.”<sup>85</sup> The generals completely oppose each other in content, yet they both avowedly agree that the Assembly is to blame for any harm done to Athens in the course of this political discussion. Furthermore it is worth noting that neither general truly won the debate. Cleon’s victory was taken away from him, even though Assembly decrees were rarely subject to change. He declares in the debate that “the most alarming feature in the case is the constant change of measures,”<sup>86</sup> likely referring to his own sudden loss. But even in Diodotus’ victory, there is a lingering reminder of his corruption. Although he succeeds in saving the Athenians from committing an atrocity, “it is hardly the victory of the ‘moderate city’” which he called for.<sup>87</sup> He has to become part of the political system which Thucydides suggests is worthy of disgust. Indeed, he saved Athens from committing an atrocity, but that victory seems hardly the message of the debate. Indeed, the fate of Mytilene is hardly described, and after the debate nothing about Athens seems changed. The focus of the debate, therefore, was perhaps less to do with Athens and her allies, and the Assembly itself.

Debates appear throughout the *History* and, concurrent with this analysis of the Mytilenian Debate, few are concerned with the truth. “The Athenians put forward the view that

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<sup>84</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 156.

<sup>85</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 157.

<sup>86</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.37.

<sup>87</sup> Saxonhouse. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 163.

the assembly is a purely deliberative body” as early in *History* as the debate at Sparta.<sup>88</sup> There is a description of public speaking as practical, as opposed to moral. As Cohen would argue, “deliberation consists in the careful calculation of interest” not the inquiry of justice.<sup>89</sup> This adheres to Diodotus’ claim that “we are not in a court of justice, but in a political assembly; and the question is not justice, but how to make Mytilene useful to Athens.”<sup>90</sup> Throughout the *History*, there is a “a moral commentary”<sup>91</sup> on the relationship between ethics and service to one’s state. As Cohen observes, “many events of greater moment are either passed over by Thucydides” or barely described, but the Mytilenian Debate goes on for pages, simply in dialogue between two generals over the fate of an ally.<sup>92</sup> This attention to Mytilene cannot go unanalyzed. The suggestion that “speech in the Assembly must entail the art of deception”<sup>93</sup> and that this corrupts decent men is a fundamental argument of Thucydides’ *History*. It adheres to a broader argument that Cleon reveals, and will later be addressed in the Melian dialogue, that the Athenian empire is “built upon power, tyrannically exercised, and not upon justice.”<sup>94</sup> These fundamental components of the Assembly reveal an inherent flaw in democracy that prevents the city from benefiting, specifically because the audience of the debate sees politics as theater, a fact which Thucydides alludes to in writing the debate “more like a Sophoclean drama than conventional history.”<sup>95</sup>

The connection between theater and democracy cannot be denied, but in Thucydides’ depiction, the two have become intertwined. Athenians “in the assembly were, consequently

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<sup>88</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 40.

<sup>90</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.44.

<sup>91</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 37.

<sup>92</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 43.

<sup>93</sup> Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, 159.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, *Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides*, 60.

influenced by their experiences as members of theatrical audiences and vice versa,”<sup>96</sup> perhaps to a condemnable degree. For the Assembly and the theater to be so similar put an expectation to entertain upon political orators. Indeed both theater and democracy shared undeniable characteristics. Both were held in outdoor venues, and “the seating in the theater was egalitarian, as it was in the Assembly and in court.”<sup>97</sup> But perhaps most detrimental to political norms was that “in each case, the outcome was decided by a mass audience sitting in judgment over competing elites.”<sup>98</sup> For theater to be considered “political forum”<sup>99</sup> would not endanger the fate of Athens, but for politics to become theater might. As Ober wrote, “the political orator had much to gain from being seen in ‘dramatic’ guise.”<sup>100</sup> The ability to speak clearly, to entertain, to persuade a crowd, made for a powerful politician. The inherent function of the Assembly as a spoken political environment invested power in those who could speak well and play upon the crowd’s emotion, not unlike an actor. Comedy, like history, was “firmly grounded in the culture and politics of its day,”<sup>101</sup> and the blurred lines between the two created the distorted political world Thucydides writes on. Osborne wrote that “the relationship of Athenian drama, and perhaps also forensic oratory and public sculpture, to political life may have been particularly close,”<sup>102</sup> a relationship which Thucydides and some of his contemporaries condemned.

Aristophanes, in his *Knights*, criticizes the power of the *demos* similarly to that of Thucydides during the Mytilenian Debate. Aristophanes seems to continue the Mytilenian debate in a fictional, crude, and protracted way, with a similar outcome. *Knights* personifies the

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<sup>96</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 152.

<sup>97</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 153.

<sup>98</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 153.

<sup>99</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 152.

<sup>100</sup> Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, 155.

<sup>101</sup> Pomeroy et. al, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece*, 235.

<sup>102</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 36.

democratic body in Demos, an old man who holds the generals Nicias and Demosthenes, both present in Thucydides' work as well, as slaves. The two convince a self-proclaimed "ignorant"<sup>103</sup> sausage seller to become the new ruler over Athenian politics, and take the place of Cleon as the favorite of their master, Demos. They promise that he will become "supremely great"<sup>104</sup> once he is favored by Demos. Their initial arguments are childish, brutish, and occur in the senate.<sup>105</sup> Aristophanes' suggests that in a democracy, power is given to the man who yells louder. Indeed, the Sausage-Seller claims he has a greater right to rule than Cleon because he can "shout three times as loud."<sup>106</sup> Indeed this exemplifies one of the foundational issues with the Assembly, that to be heard the speaker had to be overtly aggressive. As Aristophanes illustrates, this led to a norm of compromise, in which substance was sacrificed for volume and power was given to the more vocal member.

Aristophanes does not make Cleon the winner of this vulgar debate, much like Thucydides' Cleon, he is at the mercy of Demos. Demos abandons Cleon for a "pair of shoes."<sup>107</sup> Indeed, he forces Cleon and the Sausage Seller to fight for his affection, declaring that "to the one who treats me best I intend to award the reins of the Pnyx."<sup>108</sup> It is this notion of "treat me best" that echoes the words of Diodotus. Demos, much like the *demos*, seeks pleasure more than righteousness, and awards political power to the orator who offers it. This offers a similar discussion to Diodotus, who spoke what the *demos* wanted to hear, rather than the truth, and was

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<sup>103</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, trans. by Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 192.

<sup>104</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 159.

<sup>105</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 285.

<sup>106</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 285.

<sup>107</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 872.

<sup>108</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1108.

victorious for it. Aristophanes seems to concur with this statement, suggesting that the *demos* does not wield power in a beneficial way.

The similarities continue during the debate of Cleon and the Sausage Seller for Demos' love. The chorus proclaims that Demos is the "king of the Greeks" yet still has none of the "blame."<sup>109</sup> This is the crux of the problem of the Assembly, that the power ultimately rests with the *demos*. Cleon is ultimately powerless, and indeed Aristophanes portrays Cleon as running around the entire play attempting to pacify the aggressive Demos. This is a depiction of any orator or statesmen, as constantly jumping to the task of the *demos*. Unlike Thucydides, Aristophanes does not have Cleon and the Sausage Seller debate for a moral decision, but the sentiment of competition remains the same. Aristophanes offers no sympathy for the Assembly, suggesting that the argument for manipulative or exploitative orators is incorrect, that orators are not the problem of democracy. Demos proclaims that "in this foolishness of mine / I relish / my daily pap and I pick one thieving / political leader to fatten ; I raise him up, and when he's full, I swat him down."<sup>110</sup> It is clear that the *demos* is the blame for the failures of democracy, not the statesmen who take on the blame. Thucydides condemns the people of the assembly for their inability to do what is right for the city, and Aristophanes agrees.

"All mankind fears you like a man with tyrannical power. But you're easily lead astray; you enjoy being flattered and thoroughly deceived, and every speechmaker has you gaping."<sup>111</sup>

The fault is of the Athenian assembly, the entire *demos*, once it comes together to make political decisions. It fails, in the instance of both Thucydides and Aristophanes, to come to the correct

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<sup>109</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1330.

<sup>110</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1129.

<sup>111</sup> Aristophanes, *Knights*, 1115.

conclusion that will benefit the Athenian regime. Though both authors wrote in very different genres, they wrote as contemporaries. Both witnessed the failure of the *demos* to protect Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and both seem to blame the *demos* for this military failure.

Aristophanes' *Knights* though hyperbolic and fictional, gives credence to Thucydides' argument that the *demos* does not serve the best interest of Athens, particularly in the form of the political assembly.

It is clear, therefore, that the Assembly, a fundamental component of Athenian democracy, was flawed not by the work of manipulative orators, but by the *demos* itself. Thucydides' depiction of the Mytilenian debate, as well as Aristophanes' *Knights*, reveals the misguided power of the *demos* over the Athenian state. Thucydides portrays Diodotus as an example of the necessary corruption involved in speaking before the Assembly, forcing a good man to speak falsely in order to fulfill his duty to the state. More than this, Diodotus tells the Assembly that he is going to speak falsely to appease their emotional reactions, and they allow it. Thucydides depicts no outcry, the Assembly seems to prefer a false, but pleasant, orator rather than an honest one. Indeed, Cleon, the demagogic orator, fails to secure the support of the *demos*. The suggested fear, by that of Wasserman and Cohen, was in the manipulative nature of orators, but Thucydides seems to refute this. Rather, it is the *demos* that manipulates the orators, bending them to the rhetoric they want to hear. Thucydides' argument is supported by his contemporary Aristophanes in his work *Knights*. Demos, the slave owner of Athenian generals, demands entertainment, gifts, and contests for his love from the orators who seek his favor.

It is notable that this interpretation is found in both *History* and *Knights* because these are the two genres in which this political problem is most apparent. It is the inherent nature of the Assembly to demand entertaining and charismatic orators, for its close proximity to theater.



Indeed, both theater and the Assembly were held in outdoor arenas, gathered large crowds of Athenian citizens, and relied on the participation and approval of its audience. This inherent value placed on the audience is the crux of the problem. Both Aristophanes and Thucydides suggest that there is too much power given to the Assembly, without the inhibition of responsibility. The Assembly was the powerhouse of the people's voice; it was the essence of democracy, yet the *demos* is not help culpable. This is a major flaw in democracy, according to Thucydides, and creates false orators out of honest men.

*Chapter 3: The Sicilian Expedition*

*“As If They Had Not Themselves Voted For It”*

Thucydides' history culminates in the failure of the Sicilian expedition. Though the text and the war continue on, this is a tangible moment of decline. Thucydides does not, however, depict the expedition as a failure of the generals who lead it. Rather, this was a failure of the *demos* who voted in favor of the expedition and made disastrous leadership decisions throughout. The speeches of Nicias and Alcibiades, the campaign in Sicily, and the death of Nicias are all purposefully written to reveal a crucial misgiving with democracy, the emotional rule of the *demos*. It is important to emphasize the democratic decisions to invade Sicily and remove Alcibiades from command. These were not decisions from corrupt or misguided elites, rather they were the true results of democracy. They were, according to Thucydides, poor decisions that lead to the failure of the Sicilian expedition, and in emphasizing their failure, Thucydides depicts another flaw of democracy in the emotional rule of the *demos*. The emotional power of the *demos* is depicted in the debates between Nicias and Alcibiades, which are rife with desperately passionate rhetoric, depicting a nearly erotic sense of national pride. This episode perhaps serves to illustrate a major flaw in democracy, the inability of mass emotions to govern.

Thucydides depicts the Sicilian expedition as effectively the end of the war. Although the Athenians did continue to fight until their ultimate defeat by the Spartans in 404 BCE, Thucydides describes the Sicilian expedition as a “total destruction”<sup>112</sup> of the Athenian navy. It is the moment the Athenians realize they are fallible. To read books six and seven of the *History*, one would assume that the Athenian polis and empire ended there. Thucydides writes that their defeat was “was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in [his] opinion, in

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<sup>112</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 7.87.

Hellenic history,”<sup>113</sup> inserting his own view into the story. He ends book seven in stating, “everything was destroyed,” suggesting a certain, if not immediate, end to Athens and the *History*. But it is not in fact the end. The text itself goes on for many more pages, and Athenian democracy exists for many more years. Even after Athens is defeated by the Spartans it continues on. Even after a briefly imposed rule by tyrants, Athenian democracy continues on. If Athens did not meet its destruction at the end of book seven, it is worth asking what did. The poignant insertion of authorial voice in the Sicilian expedition demands analysis.

This chapter will argue that the Sicilian expedition was a cautionary tale against the violent emotion of the *demos*, which went unchecked during this expedition, and was the cause of the Athenians’ defeat. This is perhaps the hopeless moment Thucydides has been preparing the reader for from the beginning. The stasis at Corcyra, the Plague, the Melian Dialogue, these moments have been slowly removing the beautiful pieces of democracy Pericles illustrates in his Funeral Oration. It is then fitting that the stories Thucydides wove together would culminate in the disastrous Sicilian expedition. Thucydides removed the veneer of civility in Corcyra, unearthed depravity and selfishness in the plague, and revealed the ignoble underbelly of political relations in Melos. In the Sicilian expedition, Thucydides takes the story down another rung and reduces democracy to a shameful defeat far from home. In this way, though the story of Athens does not end, Thucydides’ story does. Democracy falls from a noble political regime of the people to a dying man on distant shores. Thucydides does not allow the Athenians to blame the “oracles and soothsayers,” nor does he allow them to blame “the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition.”<sup>114</sup> He places blame on the Athenian citizenry, though remarks they do not take the blame themselves, rather reacting to the defeat “just as if they had not themselves

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<sup>113</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 7.87

<sup>114</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 8.1

voted it.”<sup>115</sup> The depiction of the defeat and the description of the *demos*’ reaction are both told in the authorial voice, not through speeches. They are, as Thucydides writes, “[his] opinion”<sup>116</sup> and in that way, must be depicted as a vital lesson to the story. The expedition fits within a thread of revealing and devastating depictions of Athenian democracy, culminating in what Thucydides describes as a final blow. This “total destruction” is perhaps not of the Athenian state, but of the belief that democracy is all powerful, infallible.

Thucydides describes the motivation for the Sicilian expedition as, from the beginning, the greedy decision of the *demos*. The first lines of book six are a critique of the collective Athenians’ decision to invade Sicily. Thucydides steps into the narrative to tell the reader that this expedition was a move to “conquer the island.”<sup>117</sup> There is no credence given to any argument for the Egesteans and their requested aid; this is a covetous endeavor on the part of “the Athenians.”<sup>118</sup> Thucydides further reduces sympathy for the expedition, suggesting that the Athenians invaded while “ignorant of its size and of the number of its inhabitants.”<sup>119</sup> This ignorance is not innocence, but rather carelessness as a result of Athenian desire. Thucydides writes the *demos* as “being ambitious in real truth of conquering the whole.”<sup>120</sup> Here again, Thucydides is the authority, the arbiter of “real truth,” and the reader is reminded that this is his story. The *demos* begins “a war not much inferior to that against the Peloponnesians,”<sup>121</sup> not out of necessity or safety then but ambition. The Athenians hold an assembly on whether or not they should invade, and Thucydides writes that the decision was influenced heavily by “the money, of

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<sup>115</sup> Thucydides, *History* 8.1

<sup>116</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.87

<sup>117</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.46

<sup>118</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.46

<sup>119</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.46

<sup>120</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.6

<sup>121</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.1

which, it was said, there was an abundance.”<sup>122</sup> Even though the report of their own envoys was “as attractive as it was untrue,”<sup>123</sup> the Athenians were blinded by the possibility for gain. This was a decision of the Assembly, a collective and democratic decision to invade a noncombatant threat. They “voted to send sixty ships to Sicily”<sup>124</sup> with “dubious”<sup>125</sup> knowledge and precedent. From the beginning, Thucydides depicts the expedition as a predatory move by the Athenian people.

Indeed, as with the Mytilenian debate, Thucydides uses an Assembly to portray the intractable power of the people. Nicias, who was given command “against his will,”<sup>126</sup> speaks against the expedition in the Assembly. His innocence in this endeavor is exemplified in the fact that he did not want command. He was on the right side, according to Thucydides, from the beginning. His speech in the Assembly against the Sicilian expedition reveals the nature of the crowd before him. He speaks in response to the *demos*’ decision, therefore it can be assumed that he is not the instigator of the fervent crowd. Rather, he serves as the voice of reason, revealing the flaws in their initial campaign strategies. He speaks against the group’s “ardour” and “ambition,”<sup>127</sup> which lead the Athenians to their decision. He, like Thucydides, rejects the argument that the expedition was to honor their “alliance”<sup>128</sup> with the Eggestaeans. This expedition was a war “with which we have nothing to do,”<sup>129</sup> according to Nicias. The motive was rather ““the mad dream of conquest.”<sup>130</sup> It is the far off promise of glory, the “object of

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<sup>122</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.8

<sup>123</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.8

<sup>124</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>125</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>126</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>127</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>128</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.6

<sup>129</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>130</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.10

admiration”<sup>131</sup> that is “tempting”<sup>132</sup> the Athenians. More besides, the Athenians are “puffed up”<sup>133</sup> by the misfortune of their enemies, creating an overblown sense of confidence that urges them onwards to “the conquest of Sicily.”<sup>134</sup> This expedition is therefore the result of unmitigated Athenian emotions, most notably, pride and fear. Pride from the young Athenians who are “overjoyed”<sup>135</sup> at the prospect of a successful and profitable mission of the mission. And fear from those like Nicias, who feel “alarm” at the thought of this hasty undertaking. However, Nicias himself admits the failure of his argument in that those who reject the mission will be “shamed down, for fear of being thought a coward.”<sup>136</sup> Nicias himself cannot deny that he is asking his fellow men to admit their fallibility. In voting against the expedition, the constituents would be conceding the possibility of Athens’ loss. This is the source of the “shame” Nicias attempts to mitigate, yet cannot divest from his side of the debate. Those who vote against the expedition are willing to admit that Athens is not infallible, that their great regime is in fact mortal, like everyone else’s. The unwillingness of the *demos* to admit this is perhaps understandable given the rhetoric of Athenian superiority, which Alcibiades’ champions on the other side of the debate.

Nicias’ depiction of shame and cowardice explains Alcibiades’ overzealously patriotic response. Alcibiades rejects Nicias’ wary approach, and responds as though it were insulting Athens’ ability to conquer Sicily. He describes the Sicilians as “motley rabble”<sup>137</sup> and as a

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<sup>131</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.12

<sup>132</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.12

<sup>133</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.12

<sup>134</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.11

<sup>135</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.11

<sup>136</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.11

<sup>137</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.18

“mob.”<sup>138</sup> According to Alcibiades, the people of Sicily are inferior to Athens, but more than this, so is its government. They “easily change their institutions”<sup>139</sup> and are easily divided “by fair words or party strife.”<sup>140</sup> Alcibiades has changed the nature of the debate from a conversation about Athens’ decision to invade Sicily to a competition between civilizations. Furthermore, the Sicilians are a people “without any feeling of patriotism,”<sup>141</sup> which the Athenians view as a weakness. Alcibiades argues, “in this state of things, what reason can we give to ourselves for holding back.”<sup>142</sup> To vote on the side of Nicias would, by Alcibiades’ logic, suggest that a Sicilian band of unpatriotic rabble could defeat the Athenians. This is not to say that Alcibiades manipulated the crowd into a frenzy. As stated before, the Athenians had already decided to invade Sicily before this debate. Furthermore, Nicias began the debate warding against shame and fear on his side of the decision. The crux of this issue, which was among the Assembly before Alcibiades spoke, comes from the Athenian belief that victory must be constant. Alcibiades remarks that their empire exists only with “a constant readiness to support all.”<sup>143</sup> It is constant vigilance that keeps Athens alive because, as Alcibiades says, “we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop.”<sup>144</sup> He continues that, “if we cease to rule, we are in danger of being ruled ourselves,”<sup>145</sup> in this instance, by a mob of Sicilians. To admit that Athens may not win this expedition, even for tactical and logical reasons, would concede Athens’ superiority. Alcibiades declares the war already begun, and if Athens doesn’t strike, they must “change

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<sup>138</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

<sup>139</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

<sup>140</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

<sup>141</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

<sup>142</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

<sup>143</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.18

<sup>144</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.18

<sup>145</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.17

[their] habits and make them like [Sicily's]."<sup>146</sup> Nicias' logical argument cannot combat Alcibiades' intensely patriotic plea, for the expedition was never about practicality, and entirely about pride.

This is not to say that Alcibiades was a faultless character, but rather that his faults were representative of Athens' superiority. Thucydides describes Alcibiades as "ambitious of a command" and wanting "to gain in wealth and reputation"<sup>147</sup> from this expedition. This is the exact same desire Athens has for this expedition as well. Alcibiades was seen as a "pretender to the tyranny,"<sup>148</sup> as was Athens at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, it was perhaps the reason this war began. The Spartan representatives at the first congress at Sparta depict Athens as the "aggressor" of the war, and depict Athenians as "adventurous beyond their power."<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, Pericles states that the Athenian empire is "a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, but to let it go is unsafe."<sup>150</sup> Alcibiades then is not entirely at fault for this expedition's impetus or failure. Thucydides even allows that Alcibiades' "conduct of war was as good as could be desired,"<sup>151</sup> suggesting that he was not responsible for this military failure. He further writes that when the Athenians took Alcibiades out of command they began to "ruin the city."<sup>152</sup> Athens was perhaps then already an ambitious nation, not born out of Alcibiades' speech. Furthermore, Alcibiades says that he is "naturally envied"<sup>153</sup> by his fellow Athenians, and this is perhaps more than a personal boast. Alcibiades has wealth and infamy, which Nicias states is the nefarious desire of all the men voting for the expedition. It is therefore arguable that Alcibiades, though

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<sup>146</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.18

<sup>147</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.16

<sup>148</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.16

<sup>149</sup> Thucydides, *History* 1.69

<sup>150</sup> Thucydides, *History* 2.63

<sup>151</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.16

<sup>152</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.16

<sup>153</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.18



pompous, is the kind of Athenian many desire to be. Nicias stands as his antithesis. He rejects power and this expedition even though he admittedly stands to “gain in honour by such a course.”<sup>154</sup> The Athenians choose the irresponsible possibility for power, perhaps not because Alcibiades is not the instigator of Athenian tyranny, but rather its manifestation.

The *demos* supports this argument by democratically choosing to invade Sicily. Nicias attempts to use the foundation of democracy to appeal to the *demos*' better nature; he suggests they put the decision to a second vote. He declares “if you wish to show yourself a good citizen, put the question to the vote, and take a second time the opinion of the Athenians,”<sup>155</sup> expecting them to do what he, and Thucydides, believe to be the right thing. He is betrayed, however, by the overwhelming emotional response to Alcibiades' patriotic speech. Thucydides writes that “all alike fell in love with the enterprise.”<sup>156</sup> Even after Nicias inundates the Athenians with details on how they could logistically manage an expedition of this size, they are convinced of their victory, thinking “the expedition would be the safest in the world.”<sup>157</sup> Thucydides writes that “the few that liked it not, feared to appear unpatriotic by holding up their hands against it, and so kept quiet,”<sup>158</sup> revealing a major flaw of democracy. “The enthusiasm of the majority”<sup>159</sup> overruled the voices of some of the citizens. The emotional zeal of the masses inhibited the reason and consideration needed to succeed in war. The debate was not won by lengthy tactical discussion, but by an impassioned understanding of Athenian superiority.

The actual expedition reveals the inability of the *demos* to rule even further, particularly the decision to remove Alcibiades. Though the expedition was Alcibiades' plan, and as

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<sup>154</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.9

<sup>155</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.13

<sup>156</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.24

<sup>157</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.24

<sup>158</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.24

<sup>159</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.24

Thucydides said, he was a decent general, the *demos* removes him from command due to the destruction of many Athenian herms, of which he is the suspected culprit. He is suspected of wrongdoing, and of sacrilege towards the mysteries, and before his trial defects to Sparta. According to “the citizens,”<sup>160</sup> Alcibiades was to blame for many misfortunes at home. As Thucydides writes, “in short, everywhere something was found to create suspicion against Alcibiades.”<sup>161</sup> Perhaps it was valid suspicion against Alcibiades, or perhaps it was simply jealousy for Alcibiades’ luxurious lifestyle. Regardless, the Athenian citizens intentionally removed one of their best generals from the field during a foreign invasion.

This is just one of the mistakes that the Athenians makes during their campaign however. In Nicias’ dispatch “to the Athenians”<sup>162</sup> en masse, he reveals the desperate conditions of his men. He writes his message in a letter, because “the messengers, either through their inability to speak, or through failure of memory, or from a wish to please the multitude, might not report the truth.”<sup>163</sup> The desire to please the multitude reveals a severe problem with democracy. While Nicias and his men face defeat and “famine,”<sup>164</sup> they are equally preoccupied with the failure of their own government to help them, or worse, their unwillingness to do so. Nicias writes to the Athenians that “it is your nature to love to be told the best of things, and then to blame the teller”<sup>165</sup> should things go awry. In doing so, Nicias almost surely is prefacing ill fated news, but he knows he has to appeal to the Athenians’ nationalistic pride, just as Alcibiades did in the original debate. Nicias prefaces his news that the Athenians “are not to think that either your

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<sup>160</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.61

<sup>161</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.61

<sup>162</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.11

<sup>163</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.8

<sup>164</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.14

<sup>165</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.16

generals or your soldiers have ceased to be a match”<sup>166</sup> for the Sicilians, because again, that would be shameful. He must remind the Athenians that he and his men are still Athenian, meaning superior, but at the same time must ask for either more aid or an end to this expedition. He is the self-sacrificing general at the mercy of the Athenian *demos*, as evident by his plea to be removed due to illness. He writes to the Athenian people that he “did you much good service,”<sup>167</sup> he must resign due to “disease in the kidneys.”<sup>168</sup> And even so, the Athenians “refuse to accept his resignation.”<sup>169</sup> They have removed their most successful general and detained their most ill. Thucydides, at this moment, is revealing the ineptitude of the Athenians to govern a military campaign. Their emotion, their suspicion, their inability to handle ill-fated news, all result in the loss of the campaign.

Moreover, during the campaign the Athenians enact poor foreign policy decisions. The Athenians continue fighting “two wars at once,”<sup>170</sup> as Nicias warned against, reaching a “pitch of pertinacity which no one would have believed possible.”<sup>171</sup> Thucydides continues his disbelief at the Athenian’s leadership in extolling that “no one could have imagined”<sup>172</sup> the *demos* would continue the endeavor in Sicily while Athens was being attacked. This weakened the city not only in military ability, but led to “financial embarrassment.”<sup>173</sup> Stuck in two expensive wars and without funds for either, the Athenians “imposed upon their subjects, instead of tribute, a tax.”<sup>174</sup> Rather than cancel the failing Sicilian expedition, the Athenians chose to tax their

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<sup>166</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.15

<sup>167</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.14

<sup>168</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.14

<sup>169</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.14

<sup>170</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28

<sup>171</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28

<sup>172</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28

<sup>173</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28

<sup>174</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28.

subjects. As “their revenues decayed”<sup>175</sup> the Athenians experienced continuing defeat, and for this Thucydides does not place blame upon the Athenian generals or the soldiers. This failure, at this point, is the failure of the Athenian *demos* to govern a military campaign both tactically and financially. Thucydides espouses disbelief at the continuing of the failing campaign, but this campaign was not started with logistic and military strategy at its fore. It was always a power move, and the reluctance to retreat from the endeavor perhaps is the vestige of Alcibiades’ acknowledgment, that to lose to Sicily would admit inferiority, something the Athenians would rather let soldiers die than admit.

The expedition ends with the devastating destruction of the army and the death of Nicias. Nicias leads a gruesome retreat. “The dead lay unburied” as the Athenian army ran from its place. Each man “shuddered with grief and sorrow”<sup>176</sup> as he passed his fallen friends. Though Thucydides writes that the living were to be more “pitied than those who had perished.”<sup>177</sup> As the Athenians ran, friends who were ill fell and were left behind, and so “the whole army being filled with tears”<sup>178</sup> the retreat fell to disorder. Nicias surrenders to Gylippus, again serving as the self-sacrificing general. He tells Gylippus, “to do what they liked with him, but to stop the slaughter of the soldiers.”<sup>179</sup> Thucydides here reveals that surrender and loss are not the opposite of heroism, occasionally they are its definition. The intent behind all of Nicias’ speeches are exemplified in his death, in which he sacrifices his own life for his soldiers. During the debate, the greatest Athenian fear was that they would be seen as weak if they did not conquer Sicily.

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<sup>175</sup> Thucydides, *History* 7.28.

<sup>176</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.75

<sup>177</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.75

<sup>178</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.75

<sup>179</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.84

Here, Nicias reveals that there is bravery in surrender. All the same, Nicias is “butchered”<sup>180</sup> by the enemy, and for this, Thucydides places blame directly on the *demos* for its inability.

Thucydides writes that,

“this or the like was the cause of the death of a man who, of all the hellenes in my time, least deserved such a fate, seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to decency, morality, and courage.”<sup>181</sup>

Nicias dies ill, defeated, and far from home, which Thucydides describes as uniquely horrible given his character. But even so the fate of Nicias’ soldiers is equally harrowing. Thucydides writes of horrible exposure, how the dead were “heaped together” and how the “intolerable stench arose.”<sup>182</sup> How “seven thousand”<sup>183</sup> Athenian soldiers died gruesomely in a strange land because the Athenian *demos* could not admit its own mortality. This was the “total destruction” that seemingly ended the story of Athens. And yet, the Athenians do not hold themselves accountable for this failure. Thucydides writes that, “they were angry with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition, just as if they had not themselves voted for it.”<sup>184</sup> Thucydides does certainly hold the *demos* accountable for the failure of the expedition, for the leadership, for the inability, and for the disastrous outcome.

This reading of the Sicilian expedition, as well as the other analyses in this thesis, is firmly rooted in the concept that, according to Thucydides, the *demos* holds the greatest power in democracy. The Sicilian expedition was entirely the decision of a true *demos*. This description is

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<sup>180</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.86.

<sup>181</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.87.

<sup>182</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.87.

<sup>183</sup> Thucydides, *History* 6.87.

<sup>184</sup> Thucydides, *History* 8.1.

found even earlier in the text than book six. The first introduction of the Sicilian expedition comes in book two, in describing the “host of blunders”<sup>185</sup> that lead to Athenian loss. He writes that the expedition failed “not so much through a miscalculation of the power of those against whom it was sent, as through a fault in the senders.”<sup>186</sup> Here, he is not blaming the Athenian army for inability, nor is he blaming the generals who lead it, nor is he blaming Alcibiades. He is blaming the *demos* for its decision to send troops to Sicily. He continues, “they not only paralyzed operations in the field, but also first introduced civil discord at home.”<sup>187</sup> This is perhaps the importance of the expedition. The Athenian forces did not simply lose a battle, the *demos* lost the Peloponnesian War.

The Sicilian expedition and its impact on democracy demand analysis. As Osborne writes in his *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, this was not simply a militaristic loss. This failure created “not just the prospect of military defeat . . . it was the prospect that democracy was a failure.”<sup>188</sup> This moment was fundamental to an understanding of Athenian democracy, because the Sicilian expedition was a failure, but it was the result of a fair, democratic election. This, in light of the faultless Athens depicted in the funeral oration, seems contrary. Athens is superior to other Greek states because of its superior form of government, which has lent itself to the building of incredible culture and military might, but its success is rooted in its political prowess. This was not simply the view of the Athenians, Osborne writes that other Greeks “attributed their success to democracy”<sup>189</sup> as well, and it therefore follows that its failures were attributed to democracy as well. Indeed, “the Assembly had heard the pros and cons and the misjudgment was

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<sup>185</sup> Thucydides, *History* 2.65.

<sup>186</sup> Thucydides, *History* 2.65.

<sup>187</sup> Thucydides, *History* 2.65.

<sup>188</sup> Robin Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 273.

<sup>189</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 274.

theirs,”<sup>190</sup> and that is the point. The Athenians don’t take ownership for their place in the militaristic failure of the Sicilian expedition, rather they blame the orators and oracles that lead them to this state. But Thucydides, and Osborne, seem to suggest that this is faulty, that the Athenians must take responsibility for this failure because it was they who voted for it.

The power of democracy in this episode is its fervent emotion, although as Victoria Wohl would argue, that emotion is a core foundation of democracy. This concept is explored by Victoria Wohl in her *Love among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*. As Wohl describes, the Sicilian Expedition “is a matter of desire.”<sup>191</sup> It is not a military necessity, but as Thucydides describes, it is a manifestation of the desires of the *demos*. Thucydides uses the language of consumptive love throughout the expedition, but particularly in the debates. As Wohl explains, this is a depiction of the erotic relationship between citizen and nation. The Athenian desire to conquer Sicily becomes “a fatal or diseased passion,”<sup>192</sup> ruinous in an inevitable way. Wohl reveals that “the fundamental tenets of Athenian civic ideology are rooted within the psyche of the individual citizen, so that patriotism becomes narcissism.”<sup>193</sup> Much of that statement rings true within the Sicilian expedition and indeed, throughout Thucydides’ text as a whole. A psychological frenzy consumes the Athenians in pursuit of the Sicilian expedition. Nicias’ speech reads nearly as an alarm to the Athenians, voicing all the logical and ethical problems with this expedition, yet it goes ignored. Furthermore, Nicias’ speech was uncalled for, it came not during a civic debate, but during a planning committee, once the expedition was already an agreed upon action. Nicias attempts to bring reason back into the discussion, to the

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<sup>190</sup> Osborne, *Athens and Athenian Democracy*, 273.

<sup>191</sup> Victoria Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 171.

<sup>192</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 171.

<sup>193</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 273.

deaf ears of the Athenians. Wohl uses the translation “fall morbidly in love with what is distant”<sup>194</sup> to describe Nicias’ condemnation of the young men’s eagerness for battle.<sup>195</sup> The fact that the Athenians are willing to send vast amounts of their citizens off to fight in a war they do not need is indeed morbid. It is a warmongering mentality, one that is, according to Wohl, tied to the attractiveness of victory, creating the morbid love that consumes the *demos* and deafens them to reason.

This is perhaps not a singular event in the history of Athens, but a fundamental component of democratic society. Wohl suggests that there is an “eros specific to democracy and the democratic subject.”<sup>196</sup> Wohl uses the term eros to describe the deep emotional connection between Athenians and Athens, which has been alluded to throughout Thucydides’ text, harkening back to Pericles. The Funeral Oration begins this passionate ode to Athens that Thucydides methodically breaks down throughout the *History*. The concept of a beautiful city young men would gladly die for is a morbid sense of love, but this picture is pushed even further by the possibility of glory. There is a promised glory in dying for Athens, but as Thucydides depicted during the debate between Alcibiades and Nicias, there is a tangible promise of glory, of victory, that lies in Sicily. Wohl fuses the erotic desire for glory with democratic ideology to explain that “the tyrant is not so much the opposite of the democratic citizen as he is his logical extreme,”<sup>197</sup> underscoring Alcibiades’ importance to this episode. Democracy is the rule of the people, and the people chose Alcibiades. They did not choose the logical, selfless Nicias, but rather they chose to follow their emotions, their eros, towards the dream of glory. The emotion of the *demos*, specifically, its desire in this episode, is a fundamental component of democracy,

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<sup>194</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 172.

<sup>195</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 6.13.

<sup>196</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 172.

<sup>197</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 185.



because people are by nature emotional, and emotions en masse can be destructive. Wohl writes that the Sicilian expedition reveals the fallacy of Pericles' Funeral Oration, because it promised a righteous death for all soldiers of Athens. But in Sicily, "it is a nightmare, not a democratic dream come true."<sup>198</sup> What Wohl suggests, and what Thucydides' narrative corroborates, is that democracy is inherently emotional. It is necessarily fused with desire and fear because the human beings that comprise the *demos* are naturally so. This emotion, as evident in the funeral oration, is a fundamental component of democracy. As Pericles says of Athens to the Athenian people, "feed your eyes upon her from day to day, till love of her fills your heart."<sup>199</sup> It is a necessity that Athenians feel a deep emotional attachment to Athens, but that is an uncontrollable form of government.

The Sicilian expedition proves that the *demos* had power, raw, emotional power that could lead Athens towards ruin. The same people worthy of the funeral oration, the people that made Athens glorious, were also responsible for the disastrous end in Sicily. This must be an argument that the people of Athens have the true power. The *demos* is the most powerful in Athens, more than any leader, orator, or oracle. The people hold the power in Athens, and must therefore be held accountable and responsible. This is not to say democracy is incapable of functioning. Rather, the *History* is an argument towards bettering democracy. In acknowledging the true power of democracy, the *demos*, and holding each citizen as equally accountable as their leader, democracy could perhaps work, at least, Thucydides seems to think so.

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<sup>198</sup> Wohl, *Love Among the Ruins*: 199.

<sup>199</sup> Thucydides, *History*, 2.42

### *Conclusion*

Democracy is a political relationship between the *demos* and its leaders, and this paper has attempted to reveal how tremulous that relationship is. Thucydides is perhaps not condemning democracy in its entirety, nor is he blaming the leaders of Athens for its loss against Sparta. Rather, perhaps the focal point of blame for Athenian defeat is the *demos* itself. Most notably because it refused to admit responsibility, as was evident through an analysis of Pericles. But more than this, the *demos* forced speakers to pander to their desire, as was evident in the Mytilenian debate. And certainly, the unchecked emotion of the *demos* contributed to its demise in the Sicilian expedition. These episodes reveal the true power of the *demos*, a power Thucydides seems keen to hold accountable. It is not simply the Assembly, unable to reach consensus in the Mytilenian debate, that loses the war. Nor is it simply the failure of the Sicilian expedition, though egregious it may be. There are symptoms, examples, of the deeper flaw Thucydides attempts to portray, and that is the *demos*' unwillingness to admit its vital role in the political relationship of democracy. Democracy could perhaps work, as it did under Pericles, if the *demos* was willing to admit its own power, and be as selfless in its politics as it expected its leaders to be.

My own personal endeavor into the project was born out of a desire to understand modern democracy, which during November, 2017, sounded eerily similar to 404 Athens. I wrote this thesis to explore democracy, honestly and critically. I think that in the people's role in democracy, as relevant today as to Thucydides' time, we can stave off of our own losses. I think we must hold the people as accountable as we hold our leaders, because they do, as Thucydides revealed, hold the power.

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