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Finding the Truth: A Look at the Use of Rhetoric in Thucydides

The art of persuasion is a complex beast. The objective of any great rhetorician is to not only persuade the audience, but more notably to have the audience *believe* in the truths presented. Growing up in Athens at the height of the classical era, the historian Thucydides was a soldier, a statesman, and also a rhetorician. Thucydides attempted to persuade his audience, like any great rhetorician would, that the greatness of Athens fell into decline, and thus lost the Peloponnesian War, after its' leading statesman, Pericles, died during the Plague. His work, titled *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, implemented rhetoric to construct a convincing and lasting interpretation of the decline of Athens. By employing the skills of the rhetorician, Thucydides constructed his narrative of the Peloponnesian War, "a possession for all time."¹

For years, scholars have seen Thucydides' work as a factual, accurate account of the Peloponnesian War. In fact, until the turn of the century, no one questioned his exactitude. It was not until the monumental work of Francis M. Cornford titled: *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, that scholars started to question the "truth" in Thucydides. While it is important to highlight that scholars are still dissecting the work of Thucydides, especially the prominent author Donald Kagan, that is not the purpose of this presentation. There is a direct connection to the use of rhetoric and the inconsistencies within Thucydides, and this is exactly why it is important to examine the use of rhetoric in his work.

Thucydides' use of speeches throughout his history clearly proved his insight into the world of rhetoric. The basic structure, by no means set in stone, is still prevalent amongst his various speeches throughout the text. He also utilized the three different types of speeches: deliberative, epideictic, and forensic. For the purposes of this presentation, a look into specific

¹. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.1. This and all subsequent references to this text translated by Eryn Pritchett.

speeches of Thucydides —The Melian Dialogue, Pericles' Funeral Oration, and the Mytilenian Debate — will show this relationship. Numerous scholars have questioned the narrative of Thucydides and scrutiny still persists to this day. It is important to note that *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is history. Thucydides' work was first and foremost a new genre of literature taking shape in Ancient Greece during the 5th century B.C. Underneath, however, the narrative was a rich text filled with different influences coming from all around the ancient world. Understanding the influence of Athenian rhetoric is just one way to see how Thucydides crafted his book; however, realizing this influence is the first step in comprehending the impact of Thucydides as a whole.

What is Rhetoric?

Thucydides truly did create a “possession for all time,” but in order to craft his beautiful masterpiece, he needed the proper tools. Rhetoric was that tool. In the mid-fifth century B.C. the formal study of rhetoric was founded by two Sicilians named Corax and Teisias and followed Gorgias of Leontinoi to Athens in 427.² Shortly thereafter, the Athenians took this art form and mastered it, forever being known for their rhetorical style and litigious attitude. This bled through into their literature, helping some of the greatest authors of all time break traditional bonds and excel to greatness.

Persuasion is the key to success for every Attic orator. In rhetoric, the student was taught to win any argument, regardless of the facts. By making the weaker argument the stronger, the rhetorician could manipulate any situation to fit his will.³ The speeches of a rhetorician were often broken down into smaller parts; however, this format was not set in stone and the orator could bend and break it in order to fit their own agenda. The basic structure of a rhetorical

². David D. Phillips, *Athenian Political Oratory: 16 Key Speeches* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

³. Phillips, 2.

speech was composed of an *introduction*, *narration*, *proofs*, and finally a *conclusion*. The *introduction* was used to gain the trust of the audience while the *narration* was used to set out the facts of the case. *Proofs* helped support the facts that were previously set out by the speaker in order to support his argument. As with any great *conclusion*, the speaker summed up their ideas and arguments and directed the listener on how to react. The listeners--called *jurors*—with numbers that reached into the thousands, were considered to be an accurate representation of the people of Athens. In an Athenian trial, the prosecutor would speak first and the defendant would follow, each given an equal amount of time to debate their side of the argument. This was the case in which most Athenian trials operated.

The argument from probability, otherwise known as *eikos*, was the cornerstone of Greek rhetoric. Listeners were led to conclusions based off of what the speaker said was probable.⁴ An example from Plato, and a classic example from teachers of rhetoric, investigated a fight between a weak man and a stronger man. In the aftermath, the two men went to court to convince the jury of who started the fight. The weak man said that “I am weak and he is strong; therefore it is not probable that I would hit him first.” The strong man responded that since he is the stronger, everyone would already assume he was guilty of starting the fight. Keeping this in mind, the strong man would know that others would assume his guilt and therefore he would not start the fight.⁵ A true rhetorician can take either side of this problem, or any problem for that matter, and convince his audience that his argument is correct.

Even though some of these speeches contained facts, there is a special kind of issue in using Attic rhetoric as a source of history. Men like Antiphon, Andocides, Lysias, Isocrates, Isaeus, and Demosthenes all were great orators of their time. However, these men were only

⁴. Phillips, 3.

⁵. Phillips, 4.

concerned with persuading their audiences to fit their own goal rather than make a distinction of facts. This is why a listener of Attic oratory must keep in mind the inherent bias that is associated with these speeches and maintain a healthy skepticism.

Understanding the basic concepts of rhetoric is just the first step towards understanding how Thucydides implemented this genre into his work. There was not just one type of *rhetorical speech*. They are often times divided into three categories: *deliberative*, *epideictic*, and *forensic*. Each of these speeches individually performed specific functions, which granted the speaker access to a vast array of potential platforms from which to argue their side.⁶

The first type, known as *epideictic oratory*, was meant for display. Funeral orations (like the one found in Thucydides) were considered *epideictic* because they honored those who had fallen in combat. The second type, *forensic oratory*, was used in the courtroom to prove guilt or innocence. Generally speaking, this type of oration required a *prosecutor* and *defendant*. *Deliberative oratory*, the final rhetorical style, was used in political occasions and also intends to convince the listener to either support or reject an idea. Thucydides employed each of these styles to create his narrative.

The Speeches of Thucydides

Being a gifted rhetorician, Thucydides used the three types of rhetorical speeches; epideictic, forensic, and deliberative, in his narrative. But his work as a whole can be described as deliberative, trying to prove his own political theory and argue his own agenda. Beginning with his introduction, he described the *Archaeology* and the causes of the war *according to Thucydides*. His narration starts in the middle of Book One which began with the Congress of the Peloponnesian League at Lacedaemon and the speeches of the Corinthians. His major speeches

⁶. Phillips, 3-4.

that follow, *to be discussed*, attempted to prove the Athenian downfall after the death of Pericles. His conclusion is not finished because Thucydides did not complete his narrative, but had he finished there would have been a clear conclusion. The use of rhetoric is important in constructing this history.

Rhetoric and speeches go hand in hand, so it is only fitting to first take a look at the speeches within Thucydides in order to understand how rhetoric influenced him. There are numerous speeches in his work; in fact there are one hundred and forty-one speeches, both in direct and indirect discourse.⁷ Like with any rhetorical speech, however, these speeches are not to be taken literally. In fact, Thucydides felt the need in his first book to shed light on the topic of his speeches:

“With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I have heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases *difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory*, so my habit has been to *make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them* by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.”⁸

Donald Kagan, the leading Thucydidean scholar, questions whether “Thucydides [tried] to reproduce the arguments put forward by the speakers on each occasion as accurately as he could, or did he feel free to invent arguments and even whole speeches?”⁹ While many scholars point towards rhetoric, it has rarely been recognized as the source of the numerous discrepancies within Thucydides’ narrative. However, by overlooking the influence of rhetoric on Thucydides, it is difficult to understand why he would format his narrative as such. There begins to emerge

⁷. Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, introduction provided by Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), xv.

⁸. Thucydides 1.22.1.

⁹. Donald Kagan, *Studies in Greek Historians in Memory of Adam Perry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975-2009), 71.

rhetorical patterns when looking at Thucydides in this light. A look into three major speeches within the narrative will help elucidate some of these patterns.

The first type of rhetorical speech, *epideictic*, is found in one of the most widely known works from Thucydides: Pericles' Funeral Oration. Not only is this a well-known work for Thucydides, but it is also one of the only epideictic speeches to have survived the tests of time. In Athens, according to Thucydides, at the end of each year of the war, there would be a public ceremony for those who had died. This was the way of their ancestors:

“Three days before the ceremony, the bones of the dead are laid out in a tent which has been erected; and their friends bring to their relatives such offerings as they please. In funeral procession cypress coffins are borne in carts, one for each tribe... The dead are laid in the public sepulcher in the most beautiful suburb of the city, in which those who fall in war are always buried... After the bodies have been laid in the earth, a man chosen by the state, of approved wisdom and eminent reputation, pronounces over them an appropriate eulogy; after which all retire.”¹⁰

This honor was bestowed upon none other than Pericles, a man that was and would continue to be the focus of Thucydides' work. As stated previously, this is the model for the common knowledge of Athenian Funeral Orations. Starting with the introduction, Pericles began by stating how honoring the dead is a difficult task “for it is hard to speak properly upon a subject where it is even difficult to convince your hearers that you are speaking the truth.”¹¹ After humbling himself, Pericles' continued with his narration, in which he praised the dead, first by acknowledging the ancestors and then showing how they glorified the city of Athens. In typical rhetorical fashion, Thucydides allowed Pericles to deviate from talking about the dead,

¹⁰.Thucydides 2.34.1-6.

¹¹.Thucydides 2.35.2.

and instead praise the city of Athens, which these men had fought so hard, to protect. The powerful Athens had “forced every sea and land to be the highway of [their] daring.”¹²

The speech then continued with the proofs in which the greatness of Athens was linked to the war dead. They died a glorious death for their city, “blotting out evil with good,” and benefiting their state.¹³ Their legacy was held in those who lived on; that courage led to freedom and gained eternal happiness. In the conclusion, he began with an exhortation to the living. Starting with the parents, he told them to revel in the honor that has now bestowed them and be content. To the sons and brothers of the fallen he explained the difficulty in following these precious footsteps, while he addressed the women saying, “great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character.”¹⁴ In his final words he reminded his audience that only the most noble of citizens serve the state, a call to action to those who might want to continue this legacy. Thucydides’ aim is clear; he was trying to persuade the reader of the greatness of Athens during the time of Pericles. This was the main reason for the extensive monologue on the greatness of Athens: a rhetorical skill used by Thucydides to further his agenda, regardless of the truth.

Shortly after Pericles died in the plague, a new challenge was presented to Athens. In the reconquest of Lesbos, the Athenian general Paches found Salaethus hiding in Mytilene. Upon his arrival in Athens with other prisoners from Mytilene, Salaethus was immediately put to death. The Athenians then decided “in the fury of the moment to put to death not only the prisoners at Athens, but the whole adult male population of Mytilene, and to make slaves of the women and children.”¹⁵ The next day, the Mytilenian ambassadors at Athens begged to debate once more over the fate of Mytilene, in a *forensic oration* known as the Mytilenian Debate. Cleon, a leading

¹².Thucydides 2.41.4.

¹³.Thucydides 2.42.3.

¹⁴.Thucydides 2.45.2.

¹⁵.Thucydides 3.36.2.

statesman in Athens and Pericles' rival, was the first to speak in defense of the order to execute.

In his introduction, he pointed out inconsistencies within the empire of Athens, saying that people less focused on rhetoric and oratory and are "less able to pick holes in the speech of a good speaker; and being fair judges rather than rival athletes, generally conduct affairs successfully."¹⁶

During his narration, Cleon condemned Athens for allowing a clever debate to blind them to the facts, "being as quick in catching an argument as you are slow in foreseeing its consequences."¹⁷

The proofs portion of Cleon's speech was the largest section of his speech. His goal was to show that Mytilene had caused more damage to Athens than any other state could.

"I can make allowance for those who revolt because they cannot bear our empire, or who have been forced to do so by the enemy. But for those who possessed an island with fortifications; who could fear our enemies only by sea, and there had their own force of triremes to protect them; who were independent and held in the highest honor by you-- to act as these have done, *this is not revolt*."¹⁸

The description of revolt continued, as Cleon stated that the Mytilenian did not learn their lesson watching their neighbors fall; the men of Mytilene were as much to blame as their aristocrats for this transgression. Athens was also at fault for not treating Mytilene like the other colonies, and should punish the people for joining the rebellion. There must be swift action and a fitting punishment or they will "rebel upon the slightest pretext; when the reward of success is freedom and the penalty of failure nothing so very terrible?"¹⁹ He concludes that a severe punishment is the fitting punishment, "the penalty of rebellion is death. Let them once

¹⁶.Thucydides 3.37.4.

¹⁷.Thucydides 3.38.6.

¹⁸.Thucydides 3.39.2.

¹⁹.Thucydides 3.39.7.

understand this and you will not have so often to neglect your enemies while you are fighting with your own confederates.”²⁰

Diodotus followed after Cleon, condemning the decision to execute the whole of Mytilene. The introduction was the response of Diodotus to Cleon’s accusations regarding oration. He was insulted by allegations that speakers are bribed with money, saying, “successful orators would be least tempted to sacrifice their convictions for popularity.”²¹ His narration was short but he declared that orators deserve respect and that they should be listened to. He stated that it is not justice that they seek, “but how to make the Mytilenians useful to Athens.”²² His proofs showed that even with the severest punishments, people still transgress. Hope, greed, and fortune give rise to rebellion and in order to gain the most benefit, it was better to negotiate. The common folk of Mytilene handed the city over, so it would be a mistake to execute them; “I consider it far more useful for the preservation of our empire to put up with injustice voluntarily, then to put to death, however justly, those whom it is our interest to keep alive.”²³

In Diodotus’ conclusion, he asserted that they should “try calmly those of the Mytilenians whom Paches sent off as guilty, and to leave the rest undisturbed.”²⁴ In a close vote of the Athenian Assembly, they decided to spare Mytilene. This discussion, in preparation for the later dialogue in Book 5, allowed Thucydides to continue to shape his narrative in the view that after Pericles, Athens would never be the same. A general decline in sophisticated, Athenian democracy was happening, with Cleon at the forefront. Thucydides was also making a

²⁰ .Thucydides 3.40.7.

²¹ .Thucydides 3.42.6.

²² .Thucydides 3.44.4.

²³ .Thucydides 3.47.5.

²⁴ .Thucydides 3.48.1.

connection to his rhetorical roots; he portrays Cleon as an anti-rhetorician who would, with the help of Alcibiades, eventually lead Athens to ruin.

The decision to not condemn the Mytilenians to death in the end was a clear setup for the events of the Melian Dialogue. The Melian Dialogue, the example of *deliberative oration* in Thucydides, began as a response to open hostility felt by Athens from the colony of Melos. A colony of Sparta, the Melians refused to submit to Athenian rule as many of the other islands had. First they remained neutral in the conflict but after the Athenians began “using violence and plundering their territory,” the Melians fought back.²⁵ In an effort to avoid war, the Melians sent an envoy to open up discussions with the Athenians. Although the dialogue was spoken in a more spontaneous debate rather than two separate speeches, the format of this short dialogue still followed the same structure as any deliberative oration.

Despite the fact that the Athenians speak first, they are merely giving the floor to the defendants, the Melians. In the introduction, there was a back and forth between Athens and the Melians. On the one hand, the Melians believed that they only had two choices: war or slavery, while the Athenians argued that they were concerned with the future of Melos. The Melians begin the narration, stating “it is natural and excusable for men in our position to turn more ways than one, both in thought and utterance.”²⁶ They feared that the Athenians were ignoring the needs of Melos. The Athenians replied, “since you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the *strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.*”²⁷ In an effort to discourage Athens, the Melians attempted to convince them it was in Athens’ best interest to not destroy them. The response from Athens was

²⁵. Thucydides 5.84.2.

²⁶. Thucydides 5.88.1.

²⁷. Thucydides 5.89.1.

that Melos' best interest was to surrender. The proofs are a continual debate between Athens giving reasons why Melos should surrender and the Melians begging them to reconsider. At one point, the Athenians advised the Melians to avoid hope and surrender now before they are lead to ruin.

“Some diversion of the kind you speak of you may one day experience, only to learn, as others have done, that the Athenians never once yet withdrew from a siege for fear of any. But we are struck by the fact, that after saying you would consult for the safety of your country, in all this discussion you have mentioned nothing, which men might trust in and think to be saved by. Your strongest arguments depend upon hope and the future, and your actual resources are too scanty, as compared with those arrayed against you, for you to come out victorious.”²⁸

With the drop of the mike, Athens left the conference giving the Melians time to conclude amongst them. They decided to refuse the Athenian offer and accept nothing more than friendly neutrality. Athens claimed that Melos had “staked most on, and trusted most in, the Spartans, your fortune, and your hopes, so will you be most completely deceived,” and began their siege on Melos.²⁹ It was not long before Athens had surrounded the Melians and “some treachery taking place inside, the Melians surrendered at discretion to the Athenians, who put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and settled the place themselves.”³⁰ As this dialogue occurred close to the end of his book, Thucydides attempted to show how far Athens had gone after the death of Pericles. In a clear act of hubris, the Athenians slaughtered an entire colony, leading them to their ultimate defeat at the Sicilian Expedition.

Thucydides would have been happy to conclude his history in Sicily; however, the war continued and the rest of his work reads like a list of events rather than a masterful creation. He

²⁸.Thucydides 5.111.1-2.

²⁹. Thucydides 5.113.1.

³⁰. Thucydides 5.116.4.

died before his work was completed, which explains the unfinished ending. However, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* has been revered for centuries, for both its political theory and its impact on history.

Thucydides: Man or Genius

Historians and politicians alike have studied Thucydides for his narrative, with his political theories and military strategies still being taught at war colleges around the world. His use of the Athenian rhetoric transformed his work from that of militaristic strategy into a work that will be a “possession for all time.” Thucydides was clear throughout his entire history that he wanted to be remembered. In fact, the beginning of his book was filled with concern about his eternal resting place in the minds and hearts of those who will come after him. His work was not merely a collection of truths and date-to-date happenings during the Peloponnesian War. This magnificent work was artfully crafted into something that would surpass fact and transcend truth; thanks to the rhetoricians who came before him.

As with any work in rhetoric, there is an inherent bias throughout *The History of The Peloponnesian War*. Why shouldn't we look at Thucydides with a bit of healthy skepticism, he was clearly trained in the ways of the rhetorician and the only conclusion is that he used this training in the development of his narrative. Scholars who have recently begun to dissect Thucydides have discerned discrepancies within his novel and are slowly realizing the artful craftsmanship behind the work. It is just a small leap to connect these obvious flaws with rhetorical study. Thucydides was clearly a talented individual, as it has taken centuries for people

to decipher his cryptic code. Time will only tell how scholars use this new connection to rhetoric in the work of Thucydides.

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