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# Thucydides' Mytilenean Debate: Fifth Century Rhetoric and its Representation

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*Abstract: The paper will explain the significant contribution that Thucydides' Mytilenean Debate makes to our understanding of fifth-century rhetoric and its representation: firstly, by vindicating Thucydides' controversial methodology in his representation of speeches, of which this debate is paradigmatic; secondly, by illustrating the influence that the tradition of model forensic speeches had on these deliberative ones in form and content (i.e. arguments); and thirdly, by demonstrating the ambiguity of rhetoric's dangerously powerful role in the political decision-making in Athens.*

*"I have represented how the speakers seemed to me to say what was especially necessary concerning the circumstances, keeping very closely to the general sense of what was truly said" (1.22.1).[1]*

Thucydides' self-conscious introductory statement about his speeches naturally defines any analysis of them (e.g. the Mytilenean Debate), especially when the question concerns the actual rhetoric and its representation. For herein he tells us how to understand the speeches: to what extent he represents or misrepresents the originals and to what purpose.[2] The speeches are plausible fiction, subject to each speaker's being assigned arguments that express the intention of his speech.[3] However, the crux of the controversy over Thucydides' above statement lies in whether "what was necessary concerning the circumstances" refers to what seemed necessary to Thucydides concerning *his speakers'* circumstances (i.e. to persuade *their* audience) or *his own* (i.e. to persuade his audience – contemporary and future, though he seems more concerned with future "κτῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα"[4] 1.22.4). The answer, of course, is both, but to what extent I will now turn.

Hornblower reads "τὰ δέοντα" as "the appropriate responses for any rhetorical situation".[5] If the exact words of the speaker were lost one could recall the general proposition and circumstances under which the speech was given. From these facts, Connor explains, one could derive the rhetorically appropriate strategy and thereby create an approximation of the original speech.[6] MacLeod adds that, assuming a degree of consistency in human nature, what Thucydides' speeches are designed to represent is not the words of an individual, but the levels of thinking behind a political or military action.[7] These valid and insightful interpretations help to vindicate the methodology of Thucydides' representation of speeches from the questions of accuracy and authenticity, but incompletely so. They do not address the question of

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[1] My very literal translation.

[2] Cf. Greenwood (P.60-66) who discusses the universal difficulties (i.e. selectivity and arrangement) of reconciling truth with the craft of narrative (including reported speech), explaining that, ultimately, speeches "are subject to the same conditions as the rest of the narrative" (P.66).

[3] Yunis P.62

[4] "*rather as a possession for all time than a declamation for the present moment*"

[5] Hornblower P.46

[6] Connor P.273 n.7. Thus Connor concludes, "the influence of the Sophists helps explain the otherwise baffling statement about his method".

[7] MacLeod P.64

Thucydides' own circumstances, highlighted above. Greenwood does: the speeches were never delivered in the form in which Thucydides represents them to the audience that would have heard them, so, the "necessary" additions must be made by Thucydides, to some degree, for *his* audience.[8] Therefore, paying just as much attention to Thucydides' readers as to the putative historical audience in the text, we should bring to bear what Thucydides, as a historical commentator or critic, thought necessary to say *to* and *about* contemporary audiences in his representation of speeches.[9] It is only with this in mind that we could possibly consider whether Thucydides thinks populist, demagogic rhetoric, as I will show is exemplified in the Mytilenean Debate, played a significant role in Athens' defeat; and whether the Mytilenean Debate serves a "meta-rhetorical role" of scrutinizing the conditions of speech-making and the constraints placed upon truth in the service of political rhetoric.[10] Cleon and Diodotus were not speaking to posterity, but Thucydides was.

While combining factual accuracy and appropriateness to his circumstances, Thucydides made a decision to present us with only two of the speeches that occurred that day though "ἄλλαι τε γνῶμαι ἀφ᾽ ἑκάστων ἐλέγοντο"[11] (3.36.6). This chosen form of two opposing speeches both defines and constrains the debate, which is thus paradigmatic in a second sense to the one previously discussed – the debate is paradigmatically characteristic of contemporary fifth-century forensic rhetoric and its representation.[12] The model speech tradition, of which Antiphon's Tetralogies are the best example, was the popular medium through which rhetorical instruction and discourse existed in the late fifth-century, prior to Plato and Aristotle's theoretical treatises. Typical features of this genre were to have two opposing speeches, neglecting any personal characterization of one's self or one's opponent, concentration on general rather than specific issues and arguments, and the meticulous rebutting and reworking of one's opponent's argument.[13] These are all prominent features of the two speeches in the Mytilenean Debate, as I will later show, and thus affirms that Thucydides, or at least his constructed representation of his characters, was influenced by the model speech tradition.[14] I will now discuss the particular arguments of Cleon and Diodotus in light of the antithetical model of forensic oratory.

Antithetical dualities and generalized arguments comprise this debate.[15] Both speeches provide opposing meta-rhetorical discussions of the nature of public deliberation, addressing the problems posed by the relationship between rhetoricians

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[8] Greenwood P.67-8

[9] Ibid P.68

[10] Ibid P.81

[11] "*other opinions were voiced from each of the sides*"

[12] cf. Plant P.63-4

[13] Paying little attention to fact, that Cleon and Diodotus' differing accounts of the Mytilenean demos' role in the revolt (3.39.6 and 3.47.3) do not seem to matter to them accentuates the irrelevance of facts to their arguments. Thus the debate bears resemblance to the particular model speeches of Antiphon's Second Tetralogy in which the contestants dispute not about facts (who threw the javelin that killed the boy), but about reaction to circumstances (whether the killer should be punished).

[14] Moreover, the "complexity, compression, and frankness" of the arguments in Thucydides' speeches persuade Cole (P.104-11) that they were themselves meant to be model speeches. Plant (1999) inter alii rejects Cole's analysis but agrees on the obvious influence of the model speech tradition.

[15] Ober (P.95) even notes that Cleon is represented as the winner of the previous debate as opposed to Diodotus as winner of this one, and Cleon's introduction as "βιαιότατος τῶν πολιτῶν τῷ τε δήμῳ παρὰ πολὺ ἐν τῷ τότεπιθανώτατος" (3.36.6) in contrast to Diodotus', who is famous for his lack of background.

and audience. Both profess to explain the proper foundations of state policy, drawing countering conclusions about what action they should take against Mytilene. Together they offer an insight into the deceitful, rhetorical environment of post-Periclean democratic politics and policymaking.

The argument in each half of both speakers' speeches corresponds directly to the respective half in the other speaker's. The first half of Cleon's speech (3.37-8) discusses speech-making itself, wherefore he conclusively condemns the current practice of public deliberation. Cleon opens his speech by attacking the democracy for being indecisive and thus unfit to govern the empire which, he says, they fail to see is a tyranny (3.37.1-2). The heart of the problem is the overly smart political orators (3.37.3-5) who can convince the mob to override law and custom because of the mob's desire to be pleasured by novel, unusual, and sophisticated argument (3.38.5-7). Cleon sets up a narrow and exclusionary framework to explain the motives of any Athenian who would dare to argue against him: either they arrogantly hope to show off their rhetorical prowess or have been bribed (3.38.2).[16] Cleon insists that the best policy for making political decisions is to act however one feels at the height of one's emotional reaction to being wronged (3.38.1), a retributive view of justice.

Responding directly to these points, the first half of Diodotus' speech (3.42-3) attacks Cleon's complaints against democracy and deliberation arguing that their roots, of his complaints that is, are growths from Cleon himself. Endorsing deliberation as the best policy for making political decisions Diodotus sets up his own counter-exclusionary framework to explain the motives of anyone who disagrees (i.e. Cleon): either he is a fool or has himself some private interest in the matter (3.42.2). Diodotus rebuts Cleon's advocacy of governing by emotional extremes on the grounds that "τάχος τε καὶ ὀργήν" are "δύο τὰ ἐναντιώτατα εὐβουλίᾳ"[17] (3.42.1). Furthermore, attacking Cleon's allegation of bribery Diodotus undermines him by stressing that it is in fact allegations of Cleon's sort that destroy the city: they frighten off possible good advisors from speaking by imputing any good/successful speaker with dishonesty (3.42.3-43.3). He in turn implicitly imputes Cleon with being a clever speaker and thus both a bane on the city, because of the cleverness of his maleficent allegation, and a hypocrite (3.46.4-5).

Diodotus is not lying here: Cleon's attack on clever speech is hypocritically and deceitfully embedded in clever speech. While Cleon is criticizing the Athenian audience for turning political debates into theatre he himself gives his audience a good show.[18] His speech is coated in aesthetically pleasing balanced phraseology - antitheses, conditionals, comparatives - particularly noticeable in his multiple use of paired particles such as "μὲν… δὲ…", "τε… καὶ…", "μᾶλλον… ἢ…"[19]. Many other stylized features of rhetorical speech abound such as tricolon, isocolon, parison, homoioteleuton and hyperbaton particularly at 3.38.3-7 where he rises to a "crescendo of verbal artistry".[20] Such balance and embellishment appear in Thucydides outside of this speech "seldom in such conspicuous profusion as here".[21]

Then in the second half of Cleon's speech (3.39-40), hypocritical in a second way, after attempting to destroy the possibility of deliberation, Cleon himself goes on to consider the future consequences of repealing the Mytilenean decree – behaviour

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[16] Ober P.97
[17] *"haste and anger"* are *"the two things most opposed to good council"*
[18] Greenwood P.56
[19] *"on the one hand… on the other…"*, *"both… and…"*, *"rather… than…"*
[20] Yunis P.91
[21] Ibid P.91

"just as paradoxical and equivocal as the windmill he is tilting at".[22] It is therefore appropriate that his style in these chapters should represent Thucydides at his most modernistic and Gorgianic, pandering to those very tastes of the audience which he repudiates.[23] This second half concerns justice and expediency. Cleon emphasizes the Mytilenean revolt was neither warranted by provocation nor prompted by unbearable duress (3.39.1-2) and participated in by the whole people "πάντες γὰρ ὑμῖν γε ὁμοίως ἐπέθεντο"[24] (3.39.6). This level of injustice, he argues, requires retributive destruction of the city as the most just response (3.39.1-6 and 3.40). Significantly, this half of his speech almost entirely concerns the issue of justice, trying to show that the policy he is advocating is the most just. In fact it is really only at 3.39.7-8 that he argues for his policy being also the most advantageous to Athens.

The second half of Diodotus' speech (3.44-7) corresponds directly to that half of Cleon's, rebutting Cleon by claiming that notions of justice are entirely irrelevant "ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ δικαζόμεθα πρὸς αὐτούς, ὥστε τῶν δικαίων δεῖν, ἀλλὰ βουλευόμεθα περὶ αὐτῶν, ὅπως χρησίμως ἕξουσιν"[25] (3.44.4). This remarkable statement actually explicitly acknowledges the distinction between forensic and deliberative rhetoric and their confused presence in this debate.[26] Cleon's belief that justice and advantage can be achieved together now seems unsophisticated, ill considered, and naïve as Diodotus emphasizes later "τοῦτο πολλῷ ξυμφορώτερον ἡγοῦμαι ἐς τὴν κάθεξιν τῆς ἀρχῆς… καὶ τὸ Κλέωνος τὸ αὐτὸ δίκαιον καὶ ξύμφορον τῆς τιμωρίας οὐχ εὑρίσκεται ἐν αὐτῷ δυνατὸν ὂν ἅμα γίγνεσθαι"[27] (3.47.5).[28] Kerferd relates how arguing purely from expediency overrode conventional fifth-century morality and was a distinctly sophistic development, "representing a different morality, that of nature, in contrast to the vulgar justice of traditional morality".[29] Diodotus' explicit disassociation of advantage from justice is thus typical of Sophistic rhetoric and its accompanying moral relativism. Arguing against retribution (as Diodotus does) and in favour of deciding punishment solely on the question of deterrence also defies the common and inherited notions of punishment in classical Athens, where punishment was harshly retributive and justified as such.[30] Furthermore, the emphasis on the role of argument illustrates that the issue is as much the role of logos as the fate of the Mytileneans.[31] That Diodotus argues for sheer and abject expediency over justice, deterrence over retribution, and is likewise interested in the general role of logos aside from the immediate decision shows the influence of Sophism in his rhetoric too.

While Diodotus has already highlighted Cleon's hypocritically deceitful appeals to Athenian temperament Cleon does not have the chance to uncover Diodotus'. However, with remarkable sophism, Diodotus himself does. Because of the suspicion and expectation in Athenian politics roused by Cleon-type allegations, Diodotus claims that it is necessary "ἀπάτῃ προσάγεσθαι τὸ πλῆθος καὶ…

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[22] MacLeod P.71

[23] Ibid P.70-1

[24] *"for all attacked you without distinction"*

[25] *"no we are not judging them as though justice were necessary, but we deciding over them – how they will be useful"*

[26] Connor P.84

[27] *"I think it is much more advantageous to the retention of rule… and as regards Cleon's point that the just and advantageous thing is vengeance – it is clear that in this case it is not possible for them both to occur at the same time"*

[28] Ibid P.85

[29] Cf. Kerferd P.111-31. Quotation P.124

[30] Yunis P.95

[31] Connor P.83

ψευσάμενον πιστὸν γενέσθαι"[32] (3.43.2). This suggests that he himself will employ ἀπάτη to succeed. Hesk perceives that this "novel and paradoxical conceit" concerning deceit itself in order to win over his audience invites the suspicion that Diodotus is activating the "hedonistic propensities for paradox and novelty" which Cleon emphasizes.[33] Acknowledging that he may be lying endangers Diodotus' claim to be acting in the public interest and not some private interest. Hesk adds that Diodotus' failure to resolve in any way the long-term problems of empire and revolt may indeed suggest a "hidden agenda to secure the short-term goals of those bribing him" or at the very least that he is a "manipulative demagogue in the making".[34]

Already noted above (footnote 11) is Diodotus' contradictory claim to Cleon's that the Mytilenean demos had no part in the revolt (3.47.3). This obvious contradiction and Diodotus' glossing over it does not seem justified by the irrelevance of facts. All is explained by the deception in Diodotus' claim. Thucydides reports in 3.27.1-28.1 that the Mytilenean demos responded to the oligarchic led revolt by demanding that the remaining corn be divided among all the citizens and threatened to hand the city over to the Athenians only if that were not done. Presumably, if the grain had been divided they would have supported the revolt. The oligarchs, then, not the demos, decided to call in the Athenians. So, Diodotus' whole argument that the most advantageous and just policy is to spare the Mytilenean demos is undermined (there is no beneficent part of the Mytilenean demos to protect or be seen by their other subjects to be protecting). Bribed or not, Diodotus, deceitfully spreading comforting illusions about the attitude of Athens' allies, speaks "παρὰ γνώμην τι καὶ πρὸς χάριν"[35] (3.42.6) – exactly what Cleon warned against and reproached.[36]

Similarly, Thucydides presents Cleon as deceptive in more than just the hypocrisy picked up by Diodotus and already discussed. Cleon's standing as champion of the laws rests on an equivocation where he presents the recently made Mytilenean decree (ψηφισμα) as the laws (νομοι) – a distinction which was then recognized though not yet equipped with different formal procedure.[37] Such deception, along with his hypocrisy and endorsement of governing by emotional extremes are stereotypically anti-Periclean. Cleon's first appearance (3.36.6) compares negatively with Pericles' (1.139.9). Each man is identically introduced as "παρελθὼν"[38], and almost identically "παρῄνει τοιάδε" (Pericles) and "ἔλεγε τοιάδε"[39] (Cleon). But they are starkly contrasted: Pericles was "κατ' ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον πρῶτος Ἀθηναίων, λέγειν τε καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος"[40], while Cleon is "βιαιότατος τῶν πολιτῶν τῷ τε δήμῳ παρὰ πολὺ ἐν τῷ τότε πιθανώτατος"[41]. Numerous further allusions to Pericles in Cleon's speech strengthen this contrast between them.[42] Like Cleon, Diodotus too (3.43.4-5) echoes Pericles (2.64.1) when he tells the demos that they should bear responsibility for bad decisions. But Diodotus' sophisticated and disingenuous manipulation starkly contrasts with Pericles' direct

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[32] "*to win over the crowd with deception and… become trustworthy by lying*"

[33] Hesk P.254

[34] Hesk first quotation P.254 (with which MacLeod P.74 concurs); second P.258

[35] "*something contrary to his judgment but for the sake of approval*"

[36] MacLeod P.77

[37] Ibid P.69

[38] "*coming forward*"

[39] "*he advised the following*" and "*he said the following*"

[40] "*at that time the foremost of Athenians, both at speaking and in action the most formidable*"

[41] "*most forceful of the citizens and was then the most persuasive over the people*"

[42] 3.37.2 of 2.37.2 and 63.2; 3.37.4 of 2.40.2 and 42.4; 3.38.1 of 2.61.2 and 1.140.1; 3.39.2 of 2.62.4; 3.39.5 of 2.64.3; 3.40.4 of 2.64.2. Cf. Connor P.79 n.1

challenges to his audience. The bold Periclean rhetorical directness has been replaced by a new deceptiveness of language and argument.[43]

In his conclusion to the Mytilenean Debate (3.49) Thucydides tells us that Diodotus won and thus the people of Mytilene were saved. This may suggest to some that the re-opening of the debate shows the beneficence of the deliberating democratic system, which can withstand the dangers of clever rhetoric. Significantly, however, Thucydides emphasizes how close the vote actually was - "ἀγχώμαλοι"[44] (3.49.1), how fortunate the second trireme was in their being no contrary wind (3.49.4), and finishes his account by emphasizing how dangerously close to tragedy Mytilene came "παρὰ τοσοῦτον μὲν ἡ Μυτιλήνη ἦλθε κινδύνου"[45] (3.49.4). All of this conveys an unsettling outcome representing the role of rhetoric as highly dubious. Moreover, that Athens made the right decision is not clear. Their ruthless decision to massacre the Melians in 416 BC (5.84-116), which would have been well known to most readers, is reached by the same arguments from expediency as those made by Diodutus here. Thus Thucydides' conclusion casts further doubt over clever rhetoric's power to produce right action.

Thucydides' Mytilenean Debate is paradigmatic of the author's attempts to represent fifth-century rhetoric to posterity. It represents such rhetoric as heavily influenced in form and content by the antilogistic model speech tradition characteristic of sophism. Cleon definitely makes a strong point about the dangerous and dubious power of rhetoric in Athenian politics and Thucydides shows us that both speakers here are guilty in their exploitation of it. Both their alternately arresting arguments and the ironies generated by their respective countering deployments of anti-rhetoric undermine any security we may wish to feel in hearing Cleon or Diodotus.[46] Their rhetoric and anti-rhetoric are represented as sophistic, deceptive, and both symptomatic and causal of the post-Periclean democracy's decline.

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[43] Connor P.88
[44] "*almost equal*"
[45] "*so close did Mytilene come to disaster*"
[46] Hesk P.258

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