

Rhetoric in Athens

The Greek experiment has inspired most of those who dream of a more complete, participatory and emotionally satisfying form of democracy, and Athens was a success story insofar as its democracy proved robust enough to survive for nearly two centuries. Any moral evaluation of Athens must of course be heavily qualified. In the debit column sit three major negatives, and these can either be seen as fundamental flaws that invalidate the whole Greek project, or as mere historical anomalies: slavery, women, and war. Athens relied upon slave labour, but citizens often worked alongside slaves,¹ slaves could acquire personal wealth, and an early critic of democracy complained that Athenian slaves could not be told apart from poor citizens,² while in modern European democracies it can be argued that slave conditions have been exported to overseas sweatshops, factories and plantations. Women in Athens lacked voting and property rights, but they were more than receptacles for authentic citizen seed, and whether they were free enough to attend the theatre and contribute to public opinion is a matter of continuing controversy.³ Max Weber described Athens as a 'warrior guild',⁴ and rowing warships or fighting side-by-side was a bonding activity that made democracy possible, with colonisation imposed by force of arms the consequence of an empowered *demos* hungry for land. These are the standard reservations, while on the credit side of the balance sheet sit economic prosperity, stability and cultural value. Democracy appears to have rewarded innovation, fostering trade and initiative. Rich and poor achieved a *modus vivendi* which, however troubled, fractured only briefly at the end of the Peloponnesian War, and spared Athenian democracy over the two centuries of its existence from vicious civil wars of the kind that Thucydides describes elsewhere in the Greek world.⁵ Painting, sculpture and theatre are symptomatic of the individual agency and group energy that shine through the pages of Thucydides, the great historian of the war against Sparta. Since the value of art to human beings can never be quantified, we return to the basic conundrum of democracy:

no amount of rational discussion will ever resolve the problem of what constitutes a well-lived life.

Pericles' Funeral Speech

Perhaps 'democracy' is such a murky concept today because antiquity never bequeathed us any canonical manifesto setting out a 'classical' vision of what democracy is or ought to be. The great orator Demosthenes, often held up as an icon of democratic commitment, left us the texts of many speeches but no extended statement of principle. Pericles' speech commemorating the dead at the start of the war against Sparta is the nearest thing we have to a statement of principle, and we possess it in words summarised or reinvented by the historian Thucydides. Nicole Loraux explains that this is all we have because democracy was rooted in orality and resisted the fixity implied by written documents.⁶ Thucydides' unfinished *History of the Peloponnesian War* resembles a tragic drama, with the people of Athens its flawed collective hero treading the path to ruin. The Athenians are pictured by Thucydides as men who 'analyse or mull over their decisions, and who consider that actions fail not through talking, but through failure to talk and learn before embarking on the right course of action',⁷ and as plays are punctuated by choruses so his *History* is punctuated by orations.⁸ Pericles' 'funeral speech' wraps up Act I of Thucydides' drama, defining a high point of collective idealism in response to mass casualties after the first year of war.

In this speech, which aims to instil in mourners a martial spirit and collective self-belief, Pericles articulates a core value: 'We bear the name of a democracy because we live not for the few but for the majority.' Though he insists that Athens is not ruled by the few, or in other words is not an oligarchy, Pericles veers away from any direct assertion that this means direct rule by the masses, claiming rather that the poor have equality of opportunity within a kind of meritocracy, and he emphasises the rule of law, laws being both written and unwritten. Although Pericles sounds like a modern liberal when insisting that freedom means tolerance of the diverse ways in which citizens choose to live their private lives, his voice seems very different when he condemns as useless anyone who opts out of political life.⁹ The American Declaration of Independence holds that 'all men are created equal' but that they are also 'endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. In Pericles' formulation 'happiness equates with liberty, and liberty with courage', so liberty is a positive not a negative

condition, and happiness, as a public not a private state of being, may entail surrendering one's individual life for the public good.¹⁰ For Pericles morality is group-oriented, far removed from the Enlightenment conception that individuals are possessed of 'Rights'.¹¹ Although Pericles makes no direct mention of theatre, beyond referring to *agons* and sacrifices that bring repose to the mind, tragedy played its part in defining the unwritten laws that bind society together, and the Athenian invention of tragedy as a dialogical genre underlies Pericles' claim that Athens needed no triumphal poetry from the likes of Homer.¹²

Pericles' funeral oration is not a timeless manifesto but the record of a performance at a moment in time. Delivered from a temporary platform in the public cemetery, his speech greeted the arrival of a cortege of wagons belonging to the ten artificial tribes into which Athens was divided, and these wagons carried the corpses or skeletons of tribal members ready to be interred in a collective grave as citizens rather than individuals. The funeral speech was institutionalised in order to suppress female keening over family members, using the male genre of public speech to weld the diverse Athenian public into a single body. In his preamble, Pericles refers to the trust placed in him to speak well, and the difficulty of finding measured words when each listener has personal opinions. Whether Pericles' ability to transform these private opinions into collective opinion should be admired as the work of a 'leader' or condemned as 'demagoguery' is a matter of historical judgement for the historian, and Thucydides chose to construct Pericles as the former for purposes of his narrative, conjuring up an image of the quintessential democratic leader acceptable to rich and educated Athenians.¹³ Plutarch was not alone in challenging this interpretation.¹⁴

Thucydides' Pericles turns the ritual act of praising the dead into a political argument for continuing the war, and in the historian's spare prose we miss the raw emotionalism suggested by a metaphor which Aristotle preserved from some alternative version of the speech: 'for the city to lose its youth is like a year deprived of spring'.¹⁵ We also lose from the written text the attributes of performance evoked in Plutarch's biography of Pericles: a tongue like a thunderbolt, the benefit of coaching by a musicologist comparable to the training of an athlete, and 'an aura of grandeur and more weight of purpose than any demagogue'. In addition to his command of language, we learn that Pericles had 'a composed face never distorted by laughter, a serene gait and subdued dress never disturbed by emotion, a tone of voice that was never uncontrolled, and many other striking features'.¹⁶ Monumentalised by later historians as a timeless statement, Pericles' speech was a performance designed to meet the needs

of the moment and negotiate a power relationship. Thucydides explains that Pericles was a man able to 'lead the masses rather than be led by them', a speaker who could

depress rashness into caution or raise men back from irrational fear to valour. In name a democracy, this was in reality rule by the top man. His successors, with less to distinguish between them, each struggled to be top, and abandoned statesmanship as they turned to pleasing the *demos*.¹⁷

It is not a big step from Thucydides to Plato and the charge that democracy must inevitably lead to demagoguery. To look at the funeral speech carefully is to see that there was never a perfect moment of Athenian democracy, a harmonious point of balance comparable to Pericles' Parthenon. Democracy was always a species of performance, provisional and subject to renegotiation. Just as the word 'drama' in its Greek root refers to 'something done', so 'democracy' was and is something done, a physical exertion of power.

Oratory in the Athenian Democratic System

When we take a long view of history, Greek democracy and Greek theatre seem to be convergent phenomena. An aristocrat named Cleisthenes in 508 BCE organised Athens into a network of local communities or 'demes' to ensure that no single part of the city-state (*polis*) could dominate the rest, with all citizens feeling interconnected through cross-community 'tribes', and this seems to be the decisive change in the story of democracy's emergence.¹⁸ Greek tragedy appeared during the same period, but we have no evidence for a precise chronology, nor secure data about Thespis, the shadowy figure first said to have superimposed speech on choral dance.¹⁹ The key artistic innovation came when one singer stepped out of the chorus to engage in dialogue with it, replicating the dynamic that underpins democracy where speech is deployed in order to act upon a group, within a relationship characterised by balance and interaction rather than authority. In oligarchic Sparta there was a rich choral culture, but no comparable mixing of choral dance with the art of the speaking voice.²⁰ Dancing in unison bred discipline and social integration, and these qualities were necessary but not sufficient conditions of democracy. Tragedy was an Athenian innovation that spread rapidly across the Greek world, and enough data has now emerged to show that in the late 400s and 300s BCE tragedy was broadly fostered by democracies and populist dictatorships but shunned by aristocratic oligarchies. Eric Csapo and Peter Wilson

instance the 'striking examples of cities like Rhodes, Thebes and the cities of Arcadia that embraced theatre as soon as they threw off the oligarchic yoke and became democracies'.²¹

The three sites in Athens for deploying the democratic language of persuasion were law-courts, assemblies and theatres. A panel of 6000 jurors supplied juries for the courts where no less than 201 men and sometimes thousands sat in judgement. A quorum of 6000 was required for a meeting of the Assembly on the Hill of the Pnyx, while the *boulê* or Council was a rotating executive of fifty, and there were further assemblies in the 139 demes.²² It is not clear exactly how many people gathered in the Theatre of Dionysus before the building of the great stone auditorium whose remains are visible today, and recent archaeologists have sought to bring the number down to something like the size of the Assembly on the Pnyx, challenging the idea that the Festival of Dionysus was a face-to-face encounter of the entire citizen community, which may have numbered some 50,000 men before the Peloponnesian War depleted the population.²³ Because tragedies were performed from a written text, they were reproducible, and it is clear that, just as there were assemblies in the different demes of Attica, so there was a network of performance festivals in the demes, allowing all citizens to participate in the theatrical culture of the democracy.²⁴ The centre nevertheless remained the place where important political decisions were made, and where most new tragedies were performed. Symbolically if not actually, the performance of tragedy at the City Festival of Dionysus was a gathering of the citizen body, and the presence of foreign visitors only enhanced the idea that tragedy was connected to political identity. The presence of dignitaries in the front row and a central block of seating for the presiding Council ensured that the theatre was visibly a democratic space.²⁵

Though Athens was not an intimate community where everybody knew everybody, it was certainly experienced as a face-to-face culture by a loosely defined elite. Josiah Ober presents political oratory as a kind of dramatic game that allowed this elite to maintain its dominance. In Ober's account, the political orator

had to persuade the citizens that he was both an average citizen ... and, simultaneously, that he possessed abilities and attributes that legitimised his assumption of political privileges, especially the privilege to stand before and even against the masses. The politician had to play a complicated double role and maintain credibility in both roles over a long period of time, all the while in the face of acute public scrutiny and the jibes of his political opponents.²⁶

The political orator was therefore a man who

wore a mask with two faces. On the one hand, he was the perfect exemplar of the norms of society . . . On the other hand, he was superior to the ordinary citizen, an elite in terms of his ability, wealth, and status . . . Maintaining this balance required . . . consummate “acting” on the part of the speaker and a willingness on the part of the audience to accept the performance.²⁷

When watching a tragedy in the theatre, the citizen spectator in Ober’s understanding had a similar double awareness, for he

knew that the man behind the mask was an actor, but that knowledge did not interfere with his enjoyment of the performance or with the power of the performance to affect him. Rather, the recognition of the actor behind the mask doubled and enriched the dramatic experience and made it consequentially more meaningful.²⁸

Ober recognises here that neither theatre nor political rhetoric put a premium on sincerity. Democracy turned, in fact, upon collective recognition that all politicians were rhetoricians who wore metaphorical masks.

Aristotle distinguished the rhetoric which belongs to written documents from the rhetoric of a live *agon*, explaining that ‘written language is precise, while agonistic language is performative (*hypokritikôtatê*)’, and noting also that the agonistic idiom of the political assembly is more broadbrush than that of the law-court. To help distinguish agonistic language, he offered the example of repetitions that prove strong only in performance because performers endow each repeated element with a different character and tone. Aristotle classified agonistic language on the basis of how far it turns either on character (*ethikê*) or on emotion (*pathetikê*), observing that ‘actors accordingly pursue plays of both these kinds, and such actors are pursued by playwrights’.²⁹ It is the overarching thesis of his *Rhetoric* that a speaker persuades his audience firstly through building trust in his own character, secondly through arousing emotions in the audience, and only thirdly through argument.³⁰ Whilst Ober focused on the presentation of character in Athenian public speaking, Victor Bers turned to emotion in an exploration of courtroom language, demonstrating that although Athenian litigants generally sought to demonstrate ‘mastery of their own emotions under the stress of the trial’, nevertheless in some circumstances ‘unregulated emotion can be taken as an index of authenticity of feeling, and hence of the truth’.³¹ Bers draws upon Aristotle’s insight that although ‘the listener shares the emotions of one who speaks with emotion, even when nothing is really being said’, it is unwise for a speaker to accompany harsh

words with an overtly harsh voice and face lest his strategy seem too obvious.³² Aware that the language of tragedy must have played strongly on Athenian emotions, Bers remarks that courtroom speakers rarely adopt ‘the vocabulary, phraseology, or delivery of tragic poetry as resource or inspiration’, with litigants reluctant to make direct emotional appeals for pity in the manner of tragedy.³³ When he goes on to reject Edith Hall’s claim that there is a fundamental equivalence between acting in the law-court and acting in the theatre,³⁴ Bers fails to reflect on the emotional literacy and understanding of character imparted by the courtroom to the theatre auditorium and vice versa, in a process of reciprocity.

The Mytilene Debate

Speeches in the Assembly were more broadbrush than speeches in the courtroom because the audience was larger and more volatile, and the stakes were higher. Thucydides illustrates the workings of democratic oratory in the Assembly through dramatising a debate which took place two years after Pericles’ death. When the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, or more exactly its oligarchic government, rebelled against the de facto Athenian empire which had emerged out of what was once an anti-Persian alliance, Sparta came to the rescue too late and the city was captured. In fury, the Athenians rejected pleas for pity, and urged on by Cleon, Pericles’ effective successor as the dominant voice in the Assembly, they decided to set an example by putting the entire male population to death, enslaving women and children. When tempers had cooled overnight, the Assembly reconsidered, and Thucydides distils the two days of debate down to a pair of balanced speeches by the otherwise unknown Diodotos and by Cleon, portrayed by Thucydides as a violent demagogue.³⁵

Cleon begins by equating the rule of law with respect for decisions taken, praising the deep wisdom of the uneducated who ‘place no trust in their own quick-wittedness, and presume that the laws know more than they do. Though incapable of analysing the arguments of an accomplished speaker, as impartial judges rather than contestants [*agonistai*] they generally reach the right decision.’ Orators, he continues, have a duty to avoid rhetorical artifice ‘and not get so caught up by our own energy and the battle [*agon*] to outwit each other that we ignore common sense in whatever policy we put to *you*.’ Having skilfully established his own persona as the common man, Cleon goes on to discredit any intelligent argument that his opponent might launch against him:

It's perfectly obvious: either he'll delight so much in his own powers of argument that he won't resist the challenge of proving that what manifestly *was* the case wasn't – or else, saying yes to bribery, he will deploy specious arguments as he sets out to seduce you. In this kind of contest, the city hands rewards to others, but runs all the risk herself. You are to blame for this horrible competitiveness, because you have gotten too used to being the spectators of words, and a passive audience to action. You picture future outcomes on the strength of fine talk, and rely upon your ears rather than your eyes to feel confident about what happened in the past, setting too much credit on grand words. You win the prize for heeding newfangled lines of argument, objecting to all that has undergone proper scrutiny, slaves to a paradox, dismissive of norms, and since what each of you wishes most is to hold the floor, but you can't, you race against every speaker to show how you have arrived at their conclusion one step ahead, quick to clap a pithy phrase, keen to be first in applauding a speech, but slowest to perceive the consequences of that speech, always searching for things that don't belong to, let's call it, reality, never mindful enough of the here and now. In a word, overwhelmed by the joys of listening, you are more like spectators at a performance given by sophists than men debating the future of their city.³⁶

Compounds of the word *agon* appear four times in this passage to seal the connection between competitive performance and democratic debate. Criticising the theatricality of Athenian politics is a device that allows Cleon to conceal the theatricality of his own performance as he tries to win the political contest. His speech goes on to urge that Athens must avoid three snares if it is to maintain its authority over other states: pity, love of speeches, and moderation. Cleon argues for justice not pity, and for decisiveness not reflection.

In his response, Diodotos studiously avoids any appeal to the emotion of pity, but points to the folly of anger, exposing Cleon's technique of smearing an opponent so no one can ever be trusted:

A good citizen does not intimidate the opposition, but delivers what may fairly be regarded as the best speech, and if he comes up with sound advice, a wise city will neither heap honours on him nor humble him, and should his proposal be rejected, he will neither be punished nor lose status. Were this to be the case, no talented speaker would ever be tempted to advance his career and, in hopes to please, propose motions that conflict with his own beliefs, nor would the defeated speaker in like manner try to curry favour and win control over the masses. Our practice is the opposite, and what's worse, should a speaker offering sound advice be accused of taking bribes, the very suspicion of bribery based on paltry evidence stops the city from taking advantage of a policy that is plainly beneficial. Our problem is

that good proposals set out in straightforward language are no less suspect than foolish ones, so just one tactic works: if you want to push a disastrous policy then you tell lies to win over the crowd, and conversely, if your policy is a sound one, you lie in order to be convincing. Ours is the only city which, thanks to its mental convolutions, will only accept clear-sighted advice through being deceived. It has become axiomatic that anyone open with good ideas must be secretly driven by money.³⁷

Thucydides, through Diodotos, confronts the problem that neither speaking as you feel nor telling the simple truth works in a democracy. Democracy always requires a performance.

In the event, Diodotos won the argument and in a dramatic dash an Athenian ship reached Lesbos in time to countermand the order for genocide. Clemency might be too strong a word for the outcome, because a thousand prisoners were still slaughtered, and the island was colonised. The Mytilene debate presents the historian with a conundrum: should we regard it as a triumph of democracy, because reason triumphed over anger and the final outcome was the right one, or should we regard it as a travesty of democracy because both parties relied upon deception? Cleon is a palpable deceiver, using rhetorical skill to deny the presence of rhetorical skill, while Diodotos is a more subtle deceiver, using the language of reason in order to trigger emotions of pity. Thucydides makes it clear that the Council called a second assembly because there was a widespread understanding that the anger driving the initial decision had been too 'raw', and he describes how feeling in the two crews caused the first ship to row slowly, the second to row rapidly. Diodotos evidently grasps that a personal display of anguish would have been the least effective way to arouse collective pity, for this would have undermined his image as a man of authority. He dons the mask of reason in order to demonstrate that a mass execution would have no deterrent value because human beings do not behave rationally.

Reason in the Mytilene debate cannot be prised apart from emotion. As Aristotle explains in his *Rhetoric*, it is not simple reasoning that causes people to be swayed in a debate. The emotions that generate decisions 'are accompanied by pain and pleasure, and include anger, pity, fear, and so forth.'³⁸ In order to sustain Athenian rage, Cleon plays upon the emotion of fear, imagining future revolts, while in order to assuage anger Diodotos deploys the calming language of balance. The other key element of a political speech is character, which for Aristotle is a function of narrative.³⁹ Both speakers construct a character for the men of Mytilene: while Cleon's Mytileneans are calculating opportunists, Diodotos separates democrats

from oligarchs and paints a picture of human fallibility. The two speakers also build a character for their audience, Cleon's Athenians being intelligent and strong whilst Diodotos' are only strong because they are wise. Finally, they stage their own characters because, as Aristotle explains, people's emotions are governed by their trust in the speaker, particularly in the political arena.⁴⁰ Asking the Athenians to accept that they are 'tyrants' over their fellow Greeks, Cleon shamelessly plays the strongman himself, chastising his audience for their weakness. In the passage which I have cited, Cleon builds up a long rhetorical period to ratchet up the emotions of his listeners, and my rendering 'sets out to seduce you' reflects the alliteration of the original. Diodotos' language is more broken, in keeping with his persona as a plain-spoken ordinary man, keen to lower the emotional temperature.

When Cleon and Diodotos argue about the fate of the Mytileneans, there is no thought that individual human rights are at stake, and no appeal is made to the conscience of the individual voter. In the Assembly, voting by show of hands was collective and public, and the aim of the speakers was to create what Aristotle called *homonoia*, common-mindedness. Aristotle cites Mytilene as a byword for *homonoia* at a time when the city had a charismatic populist leader.⁴¹ The unspoken moral code in the Mytilenean debate is based on reciprocity.⁴² Even though this was a religious society and when the Athenians took possession of Lesbos they donated one tenth of the captured land to the gods, neither speaker refers to the gods or to 'unwritten laws' relating to murder.⁴³ Tragedy addressed a subterranean area of collective human feeling that was excluded from the surface of political debate. Religion was an influential force much as it would be in the so-called 'Enlightenment' era when the foundations of modern democracy were laid down in Catholic France and Protestant America.

Reason and Emotion

In my first chapter I cited Jonathan Haidt who argues that 'Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second', and that seen from the perspective of a social psychologist 'moral thinking is more like a politician searching for votes than a scientist searching for truth.'⁴⁴ Haidt is representative of the way scientific thought in the 21st-century has been reshaped by evolution and neurology in a new understanding of the human being that has only begun to percolate to the arts and political science. He challenges the 'worship of reason' initiated by Plato, sustained by the Enlightenment,

and characteristic of much modern political thinking, along with its concomitant, the model of 'homo economicus', and maintains that as 'groupish' creatures we like to 'deploy our reasoning skills to support our team'.⁴⁵ While Plato portrayed the rational soul as a charioteer struggling to drive the two horses of positive and negative emotion, Haidt substitutes rider and elephant, with the controlled processes of the rider subservient to the instinctive processes symbolised by the elephant.⁴⁶ On the surface Cleon and Diodotos conduct a rational argument about tactics, but ultimately the vote had to be based on intuition and a sense of who 'we' are.

In the introduction to his *Politics* Aristotle sets out his premise that group identity is prior to collective identity, sharing Haidt's assumption about the 'groupish' nature of human beings, and in his *Ethics* he declares that: 'If the same good belongs to the individual and the city, the good of the city seems greater and more perfect to secure and conserve. The good of the individual must be prized, but more beautiful and divine is the good of the clan or the city.'⁴⁷ Not normally a man given to religious language, Aristotle voices here a spiritual intuition. In his *Rhetoric*, he makes no distinction between emotion and cognition, with anger, pity and fear understood to be modes of perception. Aestheticians have been much struck by Aristotle's analysis of the 'pleasure' provided by pity and fear in tragedy,⁴⁸ but have not often connected it to the 'pleasure' provided by an emotion like rage whipped up in the Assembly. In terms of Aristotle's analysis, Cleon purveyed pleasure because 'men linger on the thought of revenge, and the vision that then arises yields pleasure, as in dreams'.⁴⁹ Diodotos removes the source of pleasure by breaking down the object of the audience's anger, a generalised Mytilenean population.

The distilled speeches in Thucydides offer only a glimpse of their performative force, and Aristotle gives us some further insight in his history of the Athenian constitution:

So long as Pericles maintained his standing with the *demos*, politics was conducted quite well, but once Pericles died things deteriorated badly. For the first time the *demos* acquired a leader who was not respected by men of competence . . . After Pericles' death, the upper class were championed by Nicias who died in Sicily, and the *demos* had Cleon son of Cleainetos, who through his onslaughts badly corrupted the *demos*. Cleon was the first to shout and hurl insults from the rostrum, gathering up his cloak as he addressed the people, while all others observed decorum. After them, Theramenes son of Hagnon led the rest and Cleophon the lyre-maker led the *demos* . . . From the time of Cleophon, those who wanted to embolden

the many with an eye to short-term gratification formed an unbroken line of demagogues.⁵⁰

Cleon positioned himself as a leader of the people by using his voice and body in a new way, differentiating himself from the aristocratic Pericles. Greek orators wore a rectangular woollen wrap that had to be supported by the left hand if it was not to fall out of place, and Cleon threw the wrap over his shoulder in order to gesture freely. Plutarch records that Cleon 'stripped the rostrum of its decorum, and in the Assembly was first to shout and unwrap his cloak and slap his thigh and speak on the run as he made his pronouncements'.⁵¹ Through breaking the rules of constraint, Cleon signalled both his disrespect for traditional leaders, and the authenticity of his embodied emotions. His mode of delivery allowed him to express emotion freely, and transmit those emotions to his audience. In the Mytilene debate he appealed to poor men whose regular incomes derived from the revenues of empire, and who feared losing them. Cleon's father made his money through a tanning business, and Aristotle places his successor Cleophon as a manufacturer in his own right. Athenian politics became polarised on a class basis, and the word 'demagogue' entered the political vocabulary.

Aristophanes and Cleon

The comic playwright Aristophanes is responsible for the first known use of the term 'demagogue' in his comedy *The Knights*, which caricatured Cleon at the height of his influence some three years after the Mytilene debate: 'Demagogy is no longer for men of education and noble conduct, but for the ignorant and squalid.'⁵² Aristophanes' Cleon is characterised by his yelling, likened to a rushing torrent, a dog's howl or a seagull's cry,⁵³ and he is vanquished by a near-illiterate sausage-seller used to shouting his wares in the marketplace, a man who pushes Cleon's methods to an absurd extreme. In the conceit of the play, Cleon is represented by the slave Paphlagon (a name implying both foreign origins and blusterer), whose manipulations have allowed him to take control of his master named Demos. The chorus represent the opposite pole of Athenian society, effete young men rich enough to supply their own horses when fighting for Athens, and it was men from this social group who took the lead in suppressing democracy thirteen years later.⁵⁴ The two demagogues compete in trading insults and battling to get the first word in, while the horsemen picture Athens reduced to silence by this verbal bombardment,

and Demos, properly master of the state, can do no more than gape like a clown.⁵⁵ It is implied that Cleon did not just yell at the Assembly, but used to invade the Council where the agenda for debate was set.⁵⁶ Aristophanes' parodic version of Cleon does not just use his voice to dominate, but also challenges his rival to outglare him, and Aristophanes refers elsewhere to Cleon's flashing eyes.⁵⁷ One of Aristophanes' competitors dwelt on Cleon's fierce eyebrows in a parody of the Perseus story, and Aristophanes' claim in *Knights* that the mask-makers were too frightened to provide the playwright with a likeness of Cleon may refer to this earlier caricature of Cleon as a sea-monster.⁵⁸ Facial expression was a crucial part of Cleon's act. The comedy has a happy ending when Demos is magically rejuvenated and restored to his senses, recovering an identity that all members of the polarised Athenian audience might comfortably embrace, as the type that had fought off the Persians some sixty years earlier.

In his *Wasps* two years later, Aristophanes gives us a glimpse of the Athenians who supported Cleon. The protagonist is called Love-Cleon, an old man addicted to serving on a jury, and living off the jury pay funded by imperial revenues which Pericles instituted and Cleon enhanced.⁵⁹ Love-Cleon's son Loathe-Cleon tries to persuade his father to stop taking conspirators to court, and to recognise that he has become a slave to the leaders he worships. The *agon* or debate conducted in front of the chorus of waspish jurymen is a case study in how an audience can be moved to change its mind.⁶⁰ Loathe-Cleon takes notes while Love-Cleon delivers a rambling, anecdotal speech setting out all the perks that he enjoys as a juror, happy because Cleon the shouter never bites him but cradles him in his hand to keep the flies away. The jury declare Love-Cleon's speech clever and faultless, swelling with pride as they listen to their colleague, and they picture the heavenly moment when they will cast their ballots, warning Loathe-Cleon that only submission will soften their rage. Loathe-Cleon responds with statistics, appropriating Cleon's rhetorical methods to argue against Cleon's policy of maximising revenues, conjuring up all the secret benefits that Cleon and his fellow 'people-isers' purloin from state revenues with only a pittance left for the poor. He bombards the jury with cumulative lists, veering from long periods to short explosive phrases in a speech enriched by mimicry, demotic vocabulary and alliteration. Both speeches are peppered with interruptions, a reminder that the two speeches distilled in Thucydides would in practice have been interrupted by heckling and applause throughout.⁶¹

Love-Cleon is shocked to find himself won over by his opponent and describes his bodily sensations, a numb hand and a limp penis. To be

moved in argument, he reports, is an experience similar to that of sands moving under the surface of the water. The transformation is, however, not complete, for a desire to convict remains and Loathe-Cleon has to find a domestic courtroom to satisfy his father's addiction to debate. The two *agons* in *Wasps* and in Thucydides resemble each other, for in both cases the second speaker, less well known to the audience, calms the rage excited by the first in what looks like a triumph for democracy. The chorus of converted jurymen conclude at the end of the *agon* in Aristophanes:

It was a wise man who pronounced: 'Before you hear both stories, never come to a decision.' You [i.e. Loathe-Cleon] seem to me far and away the winner. You have eased our anger, so we shall lay down our sticks. And you [Love-Cleon], our age-mate and fellow-devotee, [*Here they start to sing.*] be persuaded, persuaded by his words, act sensibly, don't be so rigid, so obdurate. Ah, if only I had a parent or guardian like you to warn me off.⁶²

This is democracy in action in the sense that the audience hears an argument and changes its mind, but it is also poor democracy because it turns upon bad statistics and unsubstantiated charges of corruption. Posterity has viewed Cleon harshly, but has rarely confronted the problem: leaving aside the much mythologised Pericles, what models do we have from antiquity of a 'good' democratic leader?

The plays of Aristophanes help us to understand Cleon's success in the Assembly, but comedy was also in itself part of the democratic system. Freedom of speech has always been recognised as a basic component of democracy, and Aristophanic comedy exemplifies what seems like an unparalleled level of freedom from censorship. So long as he was subject to public mockery in the theatre, Cleon could not morph into a tyrant or dictator. Critics have long pondered how the Athenians could have awarded first prize to *The Knights* before placing their trust in Cleon a few months later through appointing him to a generalship, and there are different answers to this conundrum, once one discards the idea that art and politics sit in separate mental compartments.⁶³

Critics viewing Aristophanes through the lens of liberal democracy position him as an engaged dramatist speaking truth to power, and his campaign for peace rather than war has endeared him to modern radicals. Aristophanes' claim that he (or his producer) was prosecuted by Cleon for insulting the *demos* is a key piece of evidence for this liberal-democratic reading,⁶⁴ and the theatre on this basis becomes the pre-eminent Athenian site for the exercise of 'free speech'. The US Supreme Court in 1972 clarified the modern meaning of free speech when it interpreted the provisions

of the First Amendment: 'To permit the continued building of our politics and culture, and to assure self-fulfillment for each individual, our people are guaranteed the right to express any thought, free from government censorship.'⁶⁵ In the early years of Athenian democracy, the watchword was *isegoria*, the *equal* right of each and any citizen to speak in public, and it was only in the time of Aristophanes that the emphasis shifted to *parrhesia*, the right and duty to speak out and say *everything*.⁶⁶ What mattered in Athens was the active public challenge rather than individual freedom of expression. The generous use of obscenity and insult in Aristophanes created a context in which it seemed that anything could be said, and although there were laws of defamation Cleon had no easy way to defend himself before a mass jury without making himself seem ridiculous.⁶⁷ Those who applaud Aristophanes as the embodiment of progressive thinking tend to pass over his implicit support for the land-owning classes who had most to gain from a peace-treaty. Dramatists belonged to the leisured classes, and were closely connected to the rich *choregoi* who funded the chorus and all the production expenses,⁶⁸ while the urban poor may have been less dominant in the theatre than they were in the law-court since there was less financial incentive to attend.⁶⁹

An alternative line of argument, noting that Cleon and Aristophanes belonged to the same Athenian deme, holds that both were showmen, and masters of verbal insult with a shared interest in public controversy. The caricature of Cleon as a tanner who worked with his hands did no harm to a rich politician seeking to position himself as a man of the people.⁷⁰ Words that seem angry and personal when we read them on the page had a different ring when voiced by a masked figure with a padded stomach and large hanging phallus.⁷¹ It is clear that Aristophanic parody relishes the way Euripides broke with convention in his tragedies, and since Cleon broke the rules governing rhetorical performance no less radically and deliberately than Euripides broke the rules for tragic performance, he may have been content enough with the attention he received in the theatre.

A judge in the Constitutional Court of South Africa pronounced in 2005: 'Humour is one of the great solvents of democracy. It permits the ambiguities and contradictions of public life to be articulated in non-violent forms. It promotes diversity. It enables a multitude of discontents to be expressed in a myriad of spontaneous ways. It is an elixir of constitutional health.'⁷² If the slave Paphlagon was indeed a characterization of Cleon that both friends and enemies could laugh at with pleasure, then the contradictions and competing perspectives of public life were articulated in

a non-violent way that aided mutual understanding. However, the disappearance from comedy of attacks on politicians after the end of the Peloponnesian War forces us to ask whether Aristophanic comedy really was an 'elixir of constitutional health'. Aristophanes' ridicule of Socrates contributed, according to Plato, to the public hostility which culminated in his execution.⁷³ How to balance freedom of speech against the need to suppress hate-speech has always been a conundrum of democracy, and there is no lack of debate today about humour as a vehicle for racism and misogyny. One of the methodological issues for the historian trying to understand Aristophanic free speech is Golden Age thinking. The reality of democracy was constant change, with power relationships always having to be rebalanced. Like the conventions governing drama, the rules governing democracy had to be kept under constant review if democracy was to survive. Neither Cleon nor Aristophanes could repeat their performances without those performances losing their efficacy.

Plato and Rhetoric

Without public persuasion democracy cannot function. The term 'rhetoric' relates to an indispensable political art, but has been tarred by imputations of mendacity and manipulation. To describe the rhetorical art of Pericles, Plutarch borrowed Plato's term '*psychagogia*', a 'leading on of men's souls', and defined it as the technique of identifying 'character and emotion, which like the strings and stops of the soul need a musician to touch and play them'.⁷⁴ Plato came from a rich family and grew up during the long Peloponnesian war that culminated in military defeat. His great-uncle, a noted playwright, was one of the anti-democratic 'tyrants' imposed on the city by Sparta, killed in the uprising that followed. Plato's philosophical works raise fundamental objections to theatre, to democracy and to rhetoric, and his arguments need to be confronted in any defence of democracy and any defence of theatre. Political rhetoric is the theme of Plato's early dialogue *Gorgias*, where the unspoken context is the impending execution of Plato's mentor Socrates in a politically motivated trial.

The dialogue takes its name from the famous rhetorician Gorgias who first visited Athens in the year of the Mytilene debate, soon after Plato was born. Gorgias came from a democratic town in Sicily that lay just north of a more powerful democracy, Syracuse, and it is an accident of our historical sources that perceptions of ancient politics have been organised around Athens to the exclusion of Syracuse.⁷⁵ Both rhetoric, as a learned system

for swaying a crowd, and comedy, which entailed the freedom to speak freely, seem to have been children of Sicilian democracy.⁷⁶ Gorgias came to Athens hoping to persuade the Athenians to ally themselves with his home town against Syracuse, and his new manner of arguing proved so successful that he quickly set himself up as the first professional teacher of rhetoric in Athens. Gorgias demonstrated how the persuasive power of words rested upon stylistic devices such as antithesis and repetition, driving a wedge between the meaning of words and their style, and forcing people to conceive political speeches in the same terms as poetry. He became in his later years a kind of performance artist, doing set-piece displays of his rhetorical art, either speaking in a fictional situation or improvising in response to challenges from the audience.⁷⁷

At the start of Plato's dialogue, Gorgias has just completed a private demonstration of his skills when he encounters Socrates, who challenges him to engage not in speechmaking but in dialectical debate.⁷⁸ Gorgias defends political oratory on the democratic ground that it is 'the source of human freedom, and the means by which anyone can achieve power over others within their city', and he defines rhetoric as the ability 'to use words to persuade jurors in the courtroom, councillors in the *boulè*, the public in the Assembly, and any other sort of political gathering'.⁷⁹ Socrates complains that Gorgias' command of language does not involve knowledge of the real world, and forces him into a contradictory stance on ethics: the power of words is held to be value neutral, a force that can be used equally for good or ill, but Gorgias as a teacher acknowledges responsibility for the moral well-being of his students.

At this point Gorgias' student Polos, another Sicilian, comes to the rescue, and celebrates the fact that an orator wields more power than anyone else in the city, equivalent to the power of a 'tyrant'.⁸⁰ Young Polos is a more hard-nosed character than his mentor, and it transpires that he has written a book about the art of rhetoric. Socrates unpicks his argument, starting from the premise that the city, the *polis*, is an organism comparable to the human body. Socrates refuses to glorify rhetoric with the label of 'art' when it is merely opportunistic, and likens rhetoric to a fashion item which conceals the natural shape of the body, or to the tricks of a fancy chef whose sauces conceal the natural taste of meat. Such devices flatter the wearer or diner, hiding a flabby body.⁸¹ In terms of Plato's philosophical theory of 'forms', rhetoric offers a mere image, idea or illusion of true political leadership. Just as the body needs a gymnastic trainer or a dietician, Socrates argues, so the mind needs expertise of a kind that no mere wordsmith can provide. Unimpressed, Polos reiterates that

rhetoric is the route to political power and thus happiness. The pair mull over various demagogues or 'tyrants' who have risen to power by violent and corrupt means, and Socrates insists that these men are never actually happy, for although they may appear powerful, they are ultimately impotent, trapped by circumstance and unable to do good in the world.⁸²

Socrates' third interlocutor is Gorgias' host, Callicles, a rich young Athenian with political ambitions who is learning from Gorgias how to play the democratic system. Callicles mocks the philosophical life as something with no relevance to the adult world of political reality, and launches into a 'might is right' philosophy on the basis that nature favours the fittest. He sees democracy 'moulding the best and healthiest of us, snaring us like cub lions, then using songs and enchantments to enslave us', and sneers at the poor with their demands for redistribution of wealth. His name has vanished from the record, but his extreme views and abrasive manner suggest that the real Callicles may have died in the counterrevolution that followed the war.⁸³ Callicles' boyfriend is conveniently named 'Demos', allowing Plato to play upon the orator's courtship and flattery of the Athenian masses. Socrates again pulls apart his opponent's premisses: Does 'fittest' refer to strength, intelligence, or bravery? And is not the *demos* manifestly stronger than the elite? Comparing rhetoricians to spiritual doctors, Socrates refuses to accept that any recent political leader has succeeded in making the body politic healthier. Pericles, for example, merely gratified the desires of the people, reflecting their own views back to them, and through his welfare measures he left them lazier and more mercenary than they had been before, much like a herdsman unable to tame his unruly flock.⁸⁴

While Callicles is a hedonist accepting no higher value than personal pleasure, Socrates argues for self-discipline, and his critique of the pleasure principle leads him to cite dramatic performance as an example of collective self-gratification. Performances on the reed-pipe or stringed cithara, choral dancing and song are all designed to please the public rather than turn them into better people, he claims, and the same applies *a fortiori* to the art which combines these elements:

SOCRATES That most sacred and magical thing, tragedy, what is its aim? Is its end and purpose, do you think, just spectator pleasure? Take a scene that is delightful and pleasing but also harmful, isn't bit better to balk the spectators by keeping silent? Or take a situation that is unpleasant yet instructive: shouldn't it be played out in word and song whether it please or no? For which of these two reasons is tragedy performed?

CALLICLES The answer is clear, Socrates. It is driven by pleasure and gratifying the spectators.

- SOCRATES Did we not agree just now, Callicles, that this can be termed flattery?
- CALLICLES Yes we did.
- SOCRATES Now, if we strip tragedy of song, rhythm and metre, is anything left but the words?
- CALLICLES Nothing.
- SOCRATES These words being delivered to a massed public?
- CALLICLES Indeed.
- SOCRATES So tragedy is a mode of public speaking?
- CALLICLES Seemingly so.
- SOCRATES Public speaking, which is to say 'rhetoric'. Or do you consider tragedians something other than orators?
- CALLICLES No.
- SOCRATES So here we see a kind of rhetoric addressed to a *demos* that includes alongside children both women and men, enslaved and free, a rhetoric that we dislike since we have labelled it 'flattery'.
- CALLICLES That's right.
- SOCRATES Well then. What of rhetoric addressed to the Athenian *demos*, or to an assembly of free citizens elsewhere, how should that be regarded? Do you hold that politicians always speak for the best, with the sole aim of bettering the public through their speeches? Aren't they motivated instead by a desire to ingratiate themselves with the *demos*, concerned for self rather than community, treating the public like children, with the one aim of providing gratification, whether for good or for bad.⁸⁵

From this Socratic viewpoint, tragedy and democratic speechmaking are parallel practices that use language not to help the audience but to make them feel good. There is a slippage in this passage from the form of tragedy, where speeches are commonly addressed to a chorus of women and/or slaves, to the broader reality of a theatre audience more diverse than that in the assembly.⁸⁶ Plato suggests that tragedy infantilises, feminises and enslaves its audience through creating situations that are absurd, tear-jerking and mesmerising, and that rhetoric in the law-court and Assembly does the same. Just as Gorgias dresses up his language in flowery figures of speech, so tragedy uses verse and song as superficial forms of beautification, concealing its underlying purpose of gratifying desire.

Democratic politicians, according to Plato, have to make their audience feel good, and they use performance techniques in order to succeed. Although the word 'democracy' has always been negotiable, its range of meaning cannot possibly embrace the authoritarian regime described in Plato's *Republic*. Plato's argument challenges ancient democratic ideals and modern liberal values alike, but his case for meritocratic rule by men of wisdom stumbles on the problem that no-one will ever agree what

constitutes wisdom. At the end of the *Gorgias*, Socrates turns to religion in order to find a source of absolute ethical authority that will counter any challenge to his own ultimate rightness, and in a striking anticipation of Christianity he imagines souls stripped of their bodies before coming to the court of judgement and being assigned either to heaven (the Isles of the Blessed) or to hell (Tartarus).⁸⁷

In his *Republic*, Plato modelled his typical 'tyrant' upon Dionysius the ruler of Syracuse, describing how he (nominally Socrates but actually Plato) was qualified to portray such a figure after living in his house and witnessing not only the tyrant's public behaviour but also his private dealings when 'stripped bare of his tragic garb'.⁸⁸ Syracuse illustrates Plato's principle that by a remorseless logic democracy always slides into populist dictatorship: Dionysius succeeded in becoming a 'tyrant' because he acquired the support of the *demos*, turning them against the monied classes through persuading them that the elite had appropriated public funds dedicated to theatrical entertainment.⁸⁹ Plato attempted to turn theory into practice by imparting his own wisdom to Dionysius while transforming Dionysius' son into a budding embodiment of virtue, and he failed.⁹⁰ Dionysius cultivated a flamboyant style, and a court historian celebrated his funeral 'as though it were the closing procession in the great tragedy of his tyrantship'.⁹¹ Dionysius learned no moral lessons from his distinguished Athenian guest, but, since one of his tragedies secured victory in a theatre competition in Athens, he may have learned something about dramaturgy.⁹² Theatrical skills were of more use than philosophical skills in the real world of ancient politics.

Plato had no viable political answers, but his analysis remains crucial. He reveals how mistaken it is to suppose that if a wise man tells the truth to the masses, frankly and honestly, then that truth will prevail, for democracy turns upon rhetoric. The people have to be persuaded by means of a performance, which is to say by theatre. Theatre and democracy are interwoven. The Athenians had a deep and creative understanding of these twin performance arts, which was key to the durability of their social system. Today theatre has been marginalised as 'art' or 'culture', and in the school curriculum little value is placed on dramatic performance. In a world with no satisfactory forum for political encounters or culture of collective watching and listening, it is scarcely surprising that democracy struggles to function.