

The Erotic Theme in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War

Paul Ludwig

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Thucydides' account of the war between the Athenians and Peloponnesians is unromantic. There are a couple of places in the history where matters having to do with love—or at least sex—pop up. For reasons he leaves us to figure out, Thucydides thinks it very important that—near the peak of their civilization's development—the Greeks started to exercise naked, while the barbarians never did. When we imagine how strange it would be to go jogging with no visible means of support, or to wrestle, doing takedowns and throws and half-nelsons in the buff, we can agree with Thucydides that such behavior is at least distinctive. In addition to this brief encounter with Greek nudity, the history describes in detail one person-to-person love affair: the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the legendary founders of the democracy at Athens, a daring couple that slew the tyrant. Thucydides debunks this founding myth. A very widespread interpretation would have it that the way Thucydides debunks Harmodius and Aristogeiton is by exposing their erotic relationship; that is, he reveals that their tyrannicide was motivated not by a public desire for liberty but by a private, personal, perhaps even tawdry, love affair. I'm going to argue against this interpretation, but it seems to be too many readers' first take. The short refutation is that the Athenians already knew that Harmodius and Aristogeiton were lovers. (So the alleged exposé was not news to anyone.) The Athenians seem not to have denigrated but celebrated the fact that their love broke out of the private realm and spilled over into public affairs. Apparently, love wasn't supposed to be merely private at all—and this idea might fit together with their public nudity. The very greatest exponent of the most highly sophisticated version of a *public* love affair is Pericles himself in the Funeral Oration: Pericles exhorts each citizen to carry on an erotic affair with the city of Athens. And starting with Pericles, I will try to

show tonight that the theme of eros is a thread running throughout much of the history. And that if you pull at this thread tenaciously enough, eros opens up Thucydides' work like only a few other themes can, and the history yields up some of its riches.

Pericles in the Funeral Oration is making the case that the citizen-soldiers who risked (and lost) their lives for Athens made the right choice. It is for the living to be dedicated to the same spirit, albeit they may pray for a safer outcome for themselves. Eros is going to be his key to making this case. (In the following passage I have broken a couple of the lines like poetry to show a rhetorical parallelism; there is no line break in the original).

Do not in word alone inspect the profit—which anyone could expound at length to you who know it yourselves no worse than he, telling how many good things depend upon defense against enemies,

but rather, actively contemplate [*theomenoi*] the power of the city, day after day, and become lovers [*erastai*] of it [the power or: “of her,” Athens], and when she seems great to you, take it to heart that daring men, men who knew what was needful, and who, in their actions, were sensible of dishonor, acquired these things; and if they ever failed in an attempt, they deemed it unworthy to deprive the city of their excellence, but gave themselves away as their finest favor to her. (2.43.1)

Inspecting profit or benefits—what your country can do for you—remains on the level of calculation; profit could never inspire a citizen to lay down his life. A disinterested contemplation of the power of the city and her grandeur evoke an emotion very different from the ordinary human desire for gain. Contemplation evokes *eros* and turn the citizens into lovers, *erastai*—the same word Plato will use in the *Symposium* and other dialogues to mean men who fall in love with boys and trail around after their beloveds hoping to get a smile or a wave, some token or sign that the beloveds acknowledge their existence. What Pericles means by “lovers” is not merely citizens who feel love or eros toward an unusual object—a city. Rather, he’s asking them, on the basis of this unusual eros that they will feel, to play, in relation to the city, the social role that lovers play toward a beloved. They are to serve her chivalrously, sacrifice for her, perhaps die on her behalf (the way Greek lovers fighting side

by side sometimes died for one another), and, in this game of courtship, compete for her favors, and rival one another to show her which of her lovers is the most worthy.

Neither of the two motivations mentioned, profit or eros, which are on such vastly different levels, asks the citizen to make an unself-interested or altruistic sacrifice, as for example an appeal to duty might have done. Instead, the last word in the passage, favor—*eranos* or contribution, is a service done in hopes of a return. Few cavaliers rescue the damsel in distress out of sheer philanthropy: they want their virtue noticed, they want to be rewarded handsomely, perhaps even to be loved back: they want at least a kiss on the cheek. So what do Pericles' citizen-soldiers get in return? Pericles almost implies that, at the highest level of this sort of love, the pleasure of contemplating Athens might suffice. Love is enough. But his explicit statement of what citizen-soldiers get in return is honors bestowed on them by the city. The dead, he says, "won praise which never grows old" (2.43.2).

That the lover of Athens gets something out of it, namely honor, is important because this unusual form of patriotism that Pericles envisions, this civic passion of eros, has to compete against, and win out over, the other desire he mentioned, the desire for profit or gain, as well as other common, low, or merely selfish desires. An important word in Greek for low, selfish attachments generally is *oikeion* or *oikeia*: "one's own." The word is related to the words for house and home, and often means private matters as contrasted with public affairs.

[Our leaders] have a care for their own private matters [*oikeia*] at the same time as political affairs, while the rest, people with permanent jobs, have no small understanding of politics. And the man who refuses to participate in politics? We alone [among the Greeks] do not consider him to be minding his own business but rather to be simply useless. (2.40.2)

Pericles assumes a distinction between the few and the many, a distinction that Athenian democracy may have transcended. The normal assumption is that wealthy statesmen, who do not have to work for a living (they don't have "permanent jobs"), neglect their own (*ta oikeia*), that is, their homes and families, in favor of the public good. Ordinary folk, on the

other hand, are assumed to be too self-centered and intent on private gain to care much about, or sacrifice much for, the common weal. Pericles characterizes Athenian democracy as breaking down this distinction, since all have a share in ruling. The many, who are not independently wealthy and for whom private gain is therefore a major concern, are expected to break out of their selfishness and participate politically. The key to doing that is not grimly to undertake to fulfill their patriotic duty, but rather to open themselves to the experience of a kind of patriotism that is a falling-in-love, and which is intended to be a joy.

Achieving this higher love does not mean suppressing the lower desires. That is how the Spartans regard duty to country. At Sparta, someone is always watching you. Male Spartans rarely retreat behind closed doors to see their own families because they sleep in a kind of men's club. The amount of private property they are supposed to own is fixed. With Spartans being in many respects deprived of the private, the city is all that they have left. Athens reverses all this. Pericles' chief claim is that laws suppressing the private are unnecessary for Athenians, who, unlike the Spartans, can be trusted with a wide freedom in their private lives (2.37.2-3) and yet will still, when the time comes, freely and willingly risk their own for the common good (2.39.4). Athens therefore achieves the same (or better) civic sacrifices as Sparta does, but at less cost to her citizens' humanity (2.39.1). Pericles says that Athenians can be trusted with acquisitiveness not only in their desire for beautiful things and in their pursuit of wisdom, but even in pursuing wealth itself (2.40.1). Athenians know how to keep wealth in its place: money has no political significance because voting rights are not restricted to wealthy property-owners (2.37.1). The poor in Athens are not prevented from working their way out of poverty; indeed, they are positively shamed into doing so (2.40.1). Where Spartans are taught how to endure pain, the Athenians substitute the freedom to act in accordance with pleasure (2.37.2). Only the self-sacrifice of people who have something to give up, who have "a clear knowledge of the pleasures" that they risk losing, is truly admirable (2.40.3). For a Spartan to embrace pain merely because he has never been allowed to experience anything better is not real courage.

Why can the Athenians be trusted with pleasures and with acquisitiveness? Because they are acquisitive of a higher pleasure:

The love of honor [*to philotimon*] alone never grows old, and the better enjoyment . . . is not material gain as some say, but receiving honor (*to timasthai*, 2.44.4).

In the cases of the ones who died, specifically the enjoyment of riches and the hope of enriching themselves later in life did not stand in the way of risking their lives now (2.42.4). This was not because wealth is not a good, but because honor is a greater good. Moderating the lower desires does not mean suppressing them but rather allowing a higher desire to *override* the lower ones.

Can this Athenian freedom to follow one's heart truly permit the higher love-object, the city, to lure Athenians away from the attachment to their own? According to Pericles, the answer is Yes: freedom has been quite effective at enabling ordinary Athenians to see that "their own" is not the highest good. Here it might help to introduce another term, the opposite of *oikeion*—the *allotriion*, meaning the alien, not one's own, but the other's. Pericles shows how Athenians are better fighters than other Greeks are with (I think) less exaggeration than might first appear. Pericles assumes that the general run of humanity all fight harder in defense of their own home soil than they fight on foreign soil, when they come as invaders in someone else's land. The peculiar virtue of Athenians, according to Pericles, is that

. . . invading the [land] of our neighbors we fight without difficulty on alien ground [*en tei allotriai*] against men who are defending themselves in the midst of their own [*peri ton oikeion*] and for the most part we conquer. (2.39.2)

In their fighting, at least, the Athenians have overcome the distinction between home and abroad, between "one's own" and "the other's." Nor is this distinction erased only in their fighting. Look what Pericles says about the foreign goods and foreign commodities that come into the Athenian marketplace, the hub of a vast naval empire:

On account of the stature of our city, all things come into her from every land; whence it happens that for us, reaping the goods produced here is no more familiar [*oikeiotera*, “no more our own”] an enjoyment than reaping those of other people. (2.38.3)

Athenians love foreign goods, and perhaps even foreign fashions, at least as much as they love their own. This brings up a distinction between two senses of the *oikeion*, one’s own. Earlier, we saw how private individuals were supposed to allow the love of the community to override their attachment to their own. We now seem to be talking about Athenians allowing what is good but foreign to override (or at least to take a place in their hearts equal to) their love for *Athenian* goods. As the individual is one among many in the community, so the community is one among many in the world. In the first sense of *oikeion*, a higher entity (Athens) overrides individual “ownness.” In this second sense of *oikeion*, a yet higher entity (the whole world) overrides Athenian “ownness”—overrides Athenianness. Perhaps Athenianness will henceforth mean universality. If so, that would fit together with Greek public nudity again—wearing no clothes, shedding all that is not natural, letting go of all that is merely customary, local, or parochial.

For Athens to become universal, to embrace the whole world, could occur in at least two different ways. First, Athens could try to take over the world. It is true that the patriotism Pericles envisions goes hand in hand with imperialism. To be worthy of winning the kind of love the citizens are supposed to feel for her, Athens is practically compelled to go forth and struggle with other cities to prove that she is the fairest of them all. One of the clearest statements of this imperialism is

we have forced every sea and land to become the highway of our daring, and everywhere we have set up eternal [*aidia*] monuments to both good and evil. (2.41.4)

The eternality of the monuments means that after Athens is gone, people will still be talking about Athenians, just as we are still talking about them tonight. Thus the honor that Athens

wins for her citizens goes beyond locally-conferred honor; it has an international aspect and expands to encompass honors from all over the world.

For the whole world is the tomb of illustrious men, and not only does the epitaph on gravestones signal it in their own land [*en tei oikeiai*]; but also, in lands not belonging to them, there dwells an unwritten marker in every mind if not in fact. (2.43.2-3)

But this imperial way of becoming universal would seem to be at odds with becoming truly universal. Imperialism might mean imposing one set of local or parochial customs on the whole world. A belligerent imperialism would make the rest of the world like Athens. An alternative way of becoming universal would make Athens like the rest of the world. This second way was just barely suggested by Pericles' boast that reaping Athenian goods was an experience no more "their own" than reaping other people's goods. It was a hint that Athenians might be desirous of bringing the rest of the world to Athens rather than bringing Athenianness to the rest of the world. In any case, it now appears that letting a higher desire override a lower desire involves a principle that could set in motion a process the end of which would be difficult to predict. It is one thing if our love for our community overrides the love of our "own." It is quite another thing if some love for a yet higher entity overrides our love for our community, for that would seem to entail a loss or weakening of our patriotism. But inspiring a more intelligent patriotism that would unlock the true sources of patriotic service was the main point of the Funeral Oration; awakening patriotic service was the whole point of making patriotism erotic, the whole point of placing love of country on this sliding scale of loves—of higher loves that override lower loves—in the first place. So if a love higher than patriotism is now overriding patriotism, we may have to raise questions about what Pericles thinks he is doing in the Funeral Oration.

The thread we have been following about eros and the *oikeion*, one's own, silently connects the book 2 Funeral Oration with a book 1 speech delivered by the Corinthians at the Peloponnesian congress. At this congress, the Corinthians try to convince Sparta to declare

war on Athens. The Corinthians give voice to one of the questions we have been pursuing: just how effective the freedom to follow one's heart has been at overcoming the distinction between "one's own" and "the other's," between home and abroad, in the Athenian mind. Very effective, the Corinthians say, and strange and dangerous too. The Corinthians characterize the Athenians in the following way:

In their city's behalf, they treat their bodies as if completely alienated from them [*allotriotata*].
And on deeds in her behalf they use their intellect, though it is their ownmost [*oikeiotate*].
(1.70.6)

The Corinthians are astonished by the Athenians' reversal of all ordinary assumptions. Body is the Corinthians' definition of an individual's "own." The body is the only possession that cannot be given away or alienated without also destroying the individual himself. Yet Athenians behave as if bodies were held in common. The Corinthians are also astonished by the fact that Athenians regard their minds as their "ownmost." Mind can be made to conform with the common: minds can all register the same idea at the same time; hence the success of the mind control exercised at Sparta. Athenians, by contrast, are allowed the freedom to exercise their own minds to the fullest extent, and yet somehow their minds still turn back to the public good ("They use their intellect on deeds in her behalf, even though it is their ownmost"). In both body and mind, the Athenians treat their own as if it were everyone else's. But this reversal of expectations about one's own and the other's link up with the imperial foreign policy we were discussing before. Just as, domestically or vis-à-vis fellow citizens, the Athenians treat their own as if it were everyone else's, so in their imperial policies do they have the disconcerting habit of considering other people's property their own before they have even taken it:

When they fail to prosecute their schemes, they feel deprived of what is their own [*oikeia*]. But when they do invade and acquire something, they regard it a small deed compared with things to come For them alone, *hoping and having are the same*
(1.70.7, emphasis added)

The match-up between Sparta and Athens, say the Corinthians, is one between stick-at-homes and people who essentially live abroad (*apodemetai*, 1.70.4). Apparently, the Spartans see only their own. The Athenians have lost the exclusivity of that attachment to what was originally their own; they now see the whole earth as their own.

This erotic patriotism that we learn about in the Funeral Oration, this courtship style of citizenship, undergoes an implicit critique in the remainder of the history. I stress *implicit* because the fault is nowhere attributed to Pericles. Thucydides' explicit judgment of Pericles is very high praise, and it might be said that Pericles' management of affairs was better, more prudent, than his own Funeral Oration. But as we'll see, there is a point-by-point conformity in later events (especially the events surrounding the Sicilian expedition) that all look back to the Funeral Oration as *the* place in the history where erotic citizenship first becomes aware of itself or first becomes a consciously-chosen project.

Between the book 2 Funeral Oration and the book 6 Sicilian expedition, there intervene at least two major places where the erotic thread becomes discernible, and while we do not have adequate time to spend on them, it would be remiss not to look briefly at one of the great speeches in the history, by the otherwise unknown orator Diodotus in the debate over the fate of the Mytilenians, who had rebelled against the Empire. Diodotus' opponent is Cleon, one of the leading politicians after Pericles' death, one of those politicians of whom Thucydides says, in his eulogy of Pericles, that they were more on a level with one another, and therefore had to cater to the pleasures of the people in order to stay in power. In this debate, Cleon is in favor of massacring the entire adult male population of the rebel city Mytilene and selling the women and children into slavery. Diodotus is arguing against this genocide. Forget about justice, Diodotus says in effect, all is fair in *love*: the Mytilenians rebelled because they were acting under the influence of an erotic passion for liberty. Capital punishment in such a case is ineffectual, he says, because greater forces are at work in human nature than any rational deterrent. "It is absolutely impossible—and the mark of great

simplemindedness to think—that there is any hindering, whether by strength of laws or other fear, human nature rushing eagerly to commit an act.” Men are driven to take risks because they are mastered by something ineradicable (or “incurable”). And what masters them is

hope and eros everywhere, the latter leading, the former following on—[eros] conceiving the plot, [hope] guaranteeing the resources for a good fortune—do the greatest harm and, though invisible themselves, are stronger than visible terrors. And fortune in addition to these contributes no less to the excitement: unlooked-for, she is there, leading men on to gamble with inferior means, and this is no less the case with cities, in proportion as they concern the greatest things: freedom and empire (3.45.5-6)

If we are to believe Diodotus, eros is more widespread in political affairs than we imagined. Athens with her erotic citizenship would only be making use of—or arousing—erotic passions that could be awakened in any city to a greater or lesser degree. Just as individuals under the influence of eros will gamble their livelihood and sometimes their lives, entire cities are now said to experience a communal erotic passion, and cities will gamble everything, risking even the political annihilation Cleon has in store for them, when faced with the greatest temptations. The great prospect of winning their freedom tempts the Mytilenians to gamble. The other great temptation is said to be the prospect of ruling over other cities as an imperial power. It is difficult not to apply Diodotus’ concept of eros to the temptation which the Athenians themselves will later undergo: the temptation to increase their empire by undertaking the Sicilian expedition.

In the seventeenth year of a war in which they were having trouble holding on to the empire they already possessed, the Athenians begin to debate whether to sail against Syracuse in Sicily in order to win a whole new empire. This was precisely the kind of new acquisition that Pericles had warned them against: his strategy was, don’t do anything foolish, Athens will easily outlast Sparta in this war. But we will have to consider whether Pericles’ warning was

not unrealistic in view of the erotic passion that Pericles had made use of—or perhaps aroused—in the Athenians. It could be argued that eros was a cat let out of the bag, something which must take its course whether Pericles was around or not, while the success of Pericles' conservative strategy and his warning were dependent on Pericles' being around. But Pericles died of the plague just two and a half years into the war.

The debate over the Sicilian expedition pits the conservative Nicias against the flamboyant, young, beautiful and imperialistic relative of Pericles: Alcibiades. Nicias warns the older Athenians that their young men, meaning young men like Alcibiades, are infected by eros, or rather by *dyserotes*: dysfunctional or “sick” loves for (as he says) far-away things (6.13.1). To his way of looking at it, the young Athenians no longer love their own; they love places and things that are far away. But when Alcibiades and the pro-expedition side seem to be getting the better of the debate, Nicias reverses course and pretends to support the mission. He hopes to dissuade the assembly by staggering them with the immense cost needed to equip his vision of a vast, unsinkable armada (6.24.1-2; cf. 6.21-3). Contrary to his intention, however, contemplating that vision of their own military might awakens the desire to use it (cf. 6.31.1). This is the moment when it happens:

Eros fell upon all alike to sail forth. [It fell] upon the elders, [who thought] that either they would subdue whatever they sailed against or that a great force would in no way be overthrown. [It fell] upon the young men through a longing for far-away sights and spectacles [*opsis kai theoria*], being of good hope, as they were, of coming back safe. And the great multitude and the soldier intended to earn money, in the short run, and besides that to acquire power whence wages might accrue to them eternally [*aidion*]. (6.24.3)

This passage brings together, into a coherent whole, many of the things said earlier about eros by Nicias, Diodotus, and Pericles. First, just as Nicias said shortly before, the young men do indeed fall in love with far-away things, not with their own country. Second, Thucydides notices an optical or contemplative aspect: *opsis* and *theoria*. This contemplative eros, their desire to *look* at Sicily, corresponds to Pericles' exhortation to gaze at (*theomenoi*) or

contemplate their own city. Third, the “good hope” or hopefulness following close on after eros, answers to Diodotus’ description: eros leading, hope following on. The Corinthians, too, although they did not know they were talking about eros, remarked this *hopeful* character of the Athenians: hoping and having are the same to them. Fourth (and a great deal turns on this interpretation), the *eternal* wages seem to answer ironically Pericles’ Funeral Oration: what was supposed to be a desire for eternal (*aidia*) monuments becomes a desire for eternal (*aidion*) gain. The gain or profit that eros was supposed to override now becomes one of the main motives in the erotic Athenian policy toward Sicily. Whether or not these echoes are deliberate, this passage seems to contain the outcome of Pericles’ project. The liberation of acquisitiveness did not permit all Athenians to raise their sights; it did not enable them to seek to acquire higher things. The mass of people never liberated themselves from the desire for material gain. Now, there are three classes mentioned in the passage: the old, the young, and the multitude. I’m going to skip the old men: they are concerned primarily with security; interpreting their eros is complicated and depends on a close reading of the speeches in the debate. Perhaps we will have time for the old men in the question period. I’m going to treat the young and the multitude one at a time. First, the multitude.

Not the higher love of a beautiful Athens, but what Athens can do for them, motivates the majority of Athenians. Not only can they not leave profit and their own behind for a higher love of Athens, but profit is their number one concern. Each intends to use Athens’ military might to ensure his own source of income in perpetuity. Private gain, as opposed to the common good, is leading Athens on a fatal path. We recall that the ordinary distinction between the honor-loving few and the gain-loving many was a distinction that Athenian democracy was supposed to have transcended. Pericles had implied that honor was the higher pleasure not only for the elites but for every Athenian. Probably the wealthy elites of Athens did indeed desire honors more than profit. Since the elites were wealthy already, they could afford to seek honors rather than profits. Thucydides’ judgment on how the war was lost singles out these two culprits, profits and honor, and he seems to divide again the classes that

Pericles had united. Thucydides writes that the Athenians conducted their policies in accordance with “private honor-loving and private gain” (2.65.7). There was of course a notable example of a wealthy man who was motivated by *both* of these desires, and that was Alcibiades, who needed both money and reputation, the money to support the reputation (6.15.2-3). But conducting war for private monetary gain is the special contribution of the *masses* to Athens’ fall.

But a single group of Athenians, the elite young men of the officer class (officers because the passage distinguishes them as a separate social and economic group from the great multitude and the soldier) did indeed achieve a contemplative eros worthy of, if not identical to, what Pericles had envisioned. Thucydides does not describe the eros of the elite young men, at this crucial moment of the Sicilian expedition, as a desire for honor or self-glorification, despite that most notable exception among them: the honor-loving Alcibiades. Instead, he records the peculiarly open, militarily useless motive of sight-seeing. They desired to see “far-off sights and spectacles.” The word that Thucydides chooses to describe the young men’s passion to see, *theoria*, properly means a “spectator event,” including theatrical performances, religious processions, and games such as the Olympics. Observing these events in an official capacity at state expense was one of the perquisites of being Greek, of ruling an empire, and of being upper-class. If a citizen was on a *theoria*, he was on a junket, getting paid to travel to foreign lands and see places and sights that he had always wanted to see, in addition to being winned and dined by the locals. The odd thing about the young Athenians’ being overcome by this desire now, on the eve of the Sicilian expedition, is that *theoria* is a mission undertaken in time of peace. In the deadly struggle that awaits the young men, there will be no leisure to look. Their detachment from reality is a dangerous delusion about how amenable the world is to their own desires, a delusion at once characteristic of an erotic fantasy, and worse than useless in practical politics. The beguiled young men, for their own safety, ought to have been feeling sterner emotions as they sailed off to Sicily, from which few out of many ever returned. Anger at an injustice or fear for the safety of their own homeland

would have served them better. Even acquisitiveness, which the many felt, would have stood them in better stead for the rigors to come. A near total lack of selfishness characterizes this eros, in which beautiful sights take precedence over acquisition and replace even the desire to win glory. Pericles had recognized the generosity inherent in contemplation, and he had hoped to harness it to civic ends, but in the event the contemplative eros proves difficult to harness.

Now one might get the impression from this that Thucydides disagreed with Pericles about eros, either on practical or theoretical grounds. For example, Thucydides may have thought that a concept of citizenship in which eros was unleashed was wrong on moral or even religious grounds. It has, in fact, often been pointed out that Thucydides ends his Melian narrative where his Sicilian narrative begins, even though chronology would not have made such a close connection necessary. The Melian dialogue and its narrative show Athenian imperialism at its very worst, ruthlessly crushing the small island nation of Melos, and committing against its population the genocide that Diodotus' speech had narrowly averted from the Mytilenians more than a decade earlier. Perhaps Thucydides made the Sicilian narrative follow closely upon the Melian narrative in order to show that eros, like pride, goeth before a fall. Eros, like Ate (madness or ruin) was traditionally one of the attendant daemons of divine justice, sent from heaven to mix up the minds of those whom the gods would destroy. Although Thucydides has, up till now, merely reported the use of the word *eros* in other people's political rhetoric, having waited till this critical juncture, he now uses *eros* in his own name, to describe *the* moment in Athenian politics when their imperialism finally overreached and laid itself open to a crippling blow. The hubris that it would not have been difficult for his readership to discern in the speeches and deeds of the Athenians on the island of Melos is followed close on by the infatuation of the Athenian public for a much larger island and one not so defenseless. This "tragic" depiction of eros might have been all that Thucydides intended, if the unfinished history had broken off after the loss of the Sicilian expedition. The story would have been as simple as: "hubris punished." Instead, the history

continues on for another book; the Athenians rebound from their loss and gamely battle on, displaying many of the admirable (if also questionable) character traits they also showed before and during the Sicilian expedition. So while Thucydides shows the potential destructiveness of political eros, he nevertheless does not portray its consequences as being precisely tragic.

But perhaps Thucydides is critical of erotic patriotism in some other way; perhaps Thucydides disagreed with Pericles over what eros is and what its power is. This hypothesis contains more than a grain of truth, in my estimation. For example, Thucydides' stress on the private selfishness of the multitude and on the soft, impractical sight-seeing of the elite young men would seem to mean that he thought erotic patriotism—citizenship-as-courtship—was problematic or vitiated in ways that Pericles did not perceive. Nevertheless, the view of eros that emerges from the Funeral Oration, and the view of eros that emerges from the history as a whole, share remarkable similarities which overshadow their differences. The criticism implicit in the current passage should not be understood to mean that Thucydides simply dismissed erotic patriotism as an ill-conceived rhetorical flourish, appropriate for a Funeral Oration but lacking practical consequences in real politics. On the contrary, Thucydides carefully catalogues, with a kind of awe, how the Athenians engaged, to all appearances, in just such courtship behavior as Pericles had intended. In their preparation for the Sicilian expedition, in the period following the fatal debates, the Athenians engage in an extraordinary allocation of resources, an almost thoughtless generosity or liberality of expenditure (6.31.1-5), and total commitment to the task, all of which have the distinct character of an erotic courtship, or wooing, of Athens. What follows is a paraphrase.

The entire city went down to the Peiraeus on the day of departure. The immensity of what they were about to undertake struck them more fully at the last minute, but they took courage when they saw the sheer magnitude of their armed might. Foreigners, and the rest of the crowd who were not going, came for the spectacle, which was at once worthy of description and so incredible as to be beyond the mind's capacity to grasp it. The armada was

the most expensive and splendid ever to come into existence up to that time (of those from a single city and with Hellenic forces; 6.30.1-6.31.1). Costly figureheads and furnishings were used in the ships. Each man outfitting a trireme exerted himself to the last degree to make his ship excel the others in splendor and speed. Among the land forces, a zealous contestation, one against the other broke out over arms and bodily apparel. Strife among themselves was raised wherever any of them were posted; and it seemed, to the rest of the Hellenes, more in the likeness of an exhibition of power and wealth than a preparation against enemies (6.31.3-4). Once the fleet had sailed out, the ships raced one another as far as Aegina (6.32.2).

This intense rivalry, to the extent of preening themselves on the beauty of their equipment and their apparel, and fighting over such items, perhaps more than any other single feature resembles the actions of rival lovers vying for the hand of a beloved. One thinks of the behavior of peacocks and the altercations of bachelor males of many species during the mating season. To all appearances, and like the suitors whom Pericles exhorted them to become, the Athenians pay their court to the city Athens, wooing her in a contest in which each strives to show himself worthiest, emulating his competitors in hopes of having the honor of presenting her with a more splendid gift than anyone else could give. We are forced, however, to put this remarkable description together with the earlier criticism contained in the last passage quoted. Whatever the case with the wealthy outfitters of triremes, Athens did not hold the first place in the hearts of the multitude and of those hoplites who engaged in peacock altercations over their arms and apparel; their greatest desire was to earn money and acquire a source of eternal pay. What has the appearance of being a rivalry to serve the common good (perhaps it was an appearance which fooled even those caught up in it) turns out, on closer inspection, to be a rivalry to serve a host of private goods, private goods which happen to be temporarily congruent.

Now Thucydides does not stop here but goes on to explore both the good and bad effects of citizenship-as-courtship to the bitter end of the Sicilian debacle. In brief, Alcibiades is one of three commanders chosen for the expedition. But before the ships set sail, an affair

of bad omen occurs. The herms, or small statues of Hermes that guard private homes and sacred places, are mutilated all over the city in one night. This sacrilege also calls to mind accusations that religious mysteries have been profaned in private homes, a kind of black mass, probably only to ridicule and show contempt; but Alcibiades is implicated in the profanation of the mysteries. So the expedition sets sail under a cloud, and before it can accomplish much, Alcibiades is recalled to Athens to be put on trial for his role in the sacrilege, which has now become, in the public imagination, a full-blown plot to overthrow the democracy and bring back the tyranny that had once existed in Athens, only this time with Alcibiades at the helm.

His re-call leads to a disaster because Alcibiades really is a talented general. Thucydides says that Alcibiades' public management of the war was very good—this even though Thucydides had also praised the conservative Periclean strategy of no new acquisitions until after the war, and condemned Athens for doing exactly the opposite, for doing exactly what Alcibiades is doing now, after Pericles' death. How do we fit these two statements together? Apparently, there were several ways to win the war. Pericles' way was the safest and surest. Alcibiades' strategy was risky but also quite possible or even likely. But it would take nerves of steel. So, if you must be daring, be daring with a daring leader, don't be daring with a timid leader. But the Athenians got spooked about Alcibiades and his monarchical intentions and decided to put him on trial, removing him from the command of the war, which then fell to the conservative Nicias, who ended up losing the entire expedition: men, materiel, everything. And Thucydides explores this debacle of citizenship-as-courtship through the one explicit, ordinary love affair (if any Greek love can be considered ordinary) in the book, the story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton.

Now as I said a very widespread interpretation of the Harmodius and Aristogeiton account is that Thucydides debunks the founding myth by exposing their eros. In short,

because we moderns know that eros is merely private, we assume the Greeks knew that too, hence to attribute the tyrant-slaying to eros instead of to patriotism is enough said to debunk it. But this totally misunderstands the political character of Greek love that we have been seeing throughout the history. Everyone knew Harmodius and Aristogeiton were lovers—that did not debunk the myth at all. In fact they were celebrated as lovers. Their myth operated to show Athenians how love could provide a path to public deeds. You can read what I claim was the ordinary interpretation of the myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton in Plato's *Symposium*, in Pausanias' speech. In short, defending a boy's honor from a tyrant's lust is dimly symbolic of defending Athens' honor from—well, from a tyrant's lust: both are the work of passionate men who do not suffer an insult readily and who are willing to defend themselves and their own.

So if Thucydides is not blowing the cover of Harmodius and Aristogeiton by exposing their eros, what does he intend to accomplish by stressing their eros? For he does stress it, relentlessly. In the following quotations, the English words “erotic” and “erotically” translate the Greek words *erotike* and *erotikos*. To understand the first quotation, it is important to remember that Hippias is the actual tyrant, Hipparchus is his brother, and their father Peisistratus was the previous tyrant.

The daring deed of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was attempted on account of an erotic incident. . . .When Harmodius had become radiant through the bloom of his youth, a man of the commoners, Aristogeiton, a citizen of middle rank, had him as his lover [*erastes*]. When Hipparchus son of Peisistratus attempted [to seduce] Harmodius but failed to persuade him, Harmodius complained of him to Aristogeiton. [Aristogeiton], smarting with pain erotically and fearing Hipparchus' power, lest he should take away Harmodius by force, immediately began plotting . . . the dissolution of the tyranny. (6.54.1-3)

Thucydides relates that although Hipparchus subtly revenged himself against Harmodius for not giving in to his importunities, finding an occasion to insult his sister publicly, nevertheless the tyranny exercised by this family had generally been benign, with the rulers exercising virtue and understanding. But now, at the last minute before Harmodius and Aristogeiton set

in motion their plan to kill the tyrant Hippias and dissolve the tyranny, they mistakenly think their conspiracy is betrayed and that the tyrant has been warned. If they cannot not kill the tyrant himself, they want at least to revenge themselves against Hipparchus, the tyrant's brother, who started the whole thing:

Immediately without circumspection they fell upon [Hipparchus], as especially happens in a passion: the one's [passion] being erotic, the other's on account of being insulted. They began striking him and they killed him. (6.57.3)

...

It was with this sort of character, through erotic pain, that the beginning of the conspiracy and the irrational daring came to Harmodius and Aristogeiton out of their great alarm at the moment. For the Athenians the tyranny was harsher after this. (6.59.1-2)

Not only did Harmodius and Aristogeiton not destroy the tyranny at Athens (it endured three more years until the Spartans put it down), they were instrumental in changing a benign tyranny into a harsh one. And of course the beloved, Harmodius, over whom the struggle was conducted, was lost to his lover Aristogeiton anyway since Harmodius was killed on the spot. (Aristogeiton escaped briefly only to be caught, tortured, and executed.)

Now why does Thucydides stress their eros? Why does he bring up the old story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton at all in this new context of the Sicilian expedition? The witch hunt against Alcibiades is conducted in accordance with an analogy in the Athenian mind between Hipparchus (whom the Athenians mistakenly think was the tyrant back then) and Alcibiades, who is currently suspected of aiming at the tyranny. Popular leaders or demagogues (politicians who are Alcibiades' competition) speak in favor of recalling and arresting Alcibiades. These popular leaders are, in the public mind, the new tyrannicides, the latter-day analogues of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who vanquish the new threat to Athenian freedom. The Athenians think they are replaying the drama of Harmodius and Aristogeiton during the Sicilian expedition. However, Thucydides turns this analogy on its head. The demagogues actually hope that by driving out Alcibiades they will themselves be able to seize preeminence in Athens (6.28.2, 6.29.3). Thucydides makes a point of saying that the

harshness of Hippias' tyranny did not cause the tyrannicide. Rather, the botched attempt at tyrannicide caused the tyranny to grow harsh from that point on. The Athenians have mixed up cause and effect. Point for point, the alleged plot of Alcibiades against Athens does not cause the demagogues to arrest and recall him. Rather, their arrest and recall of Alcibiades causes him to plot against Athens after escaping the arresting officers (which is what he does). The eros for Sicily and Aristogeiton's eros for Harmodius are analogues. In wanting Sicily so much that they feel eros for it, the Athenians are likely to put the state at risk. Just as Aristogeiton harmed Athens through his erotic daring, so the Athenians now are in the process of harming Athens again. In feeling eros, both cities and individuals are vulnerable to fears and pains which make them lash out (as well as embrace) without circumspection.

Now we are in a position to recognize how systematic Thucydides' critique of erotic citizenship has been all along. What was to all appearances a productive competition between and among rival suitors for the hand of Athens that we saw operating in the massive preparations for the Sicilian expedition, just as quickly degenerates into a destructive competition in the wake of the expedition's departure, namely in the actions that Alcibiades' rival politicians take against him. The problem with the eros surrounding Harmodius was that he already belonged to one suitor, while a rival suitor looked strong enough to take him away. An analogous problem occurs with the politicians' eros for Athens. Just as Aristogeiton could not bear the thought of his beloved wrested away by Hipparchus, so the demagogues (6.51.1) cannot bear the thought of a triumphant Alcibiades returning with Sicily in hand, prepared to offer Athens such a jewel for her crown that she might be tempted to give herself into his hands perpetually. Citizenship-as-courtship only works so long as the courtship continues and the beloved (the city) remains equally aloof from all suitors—equally aloof, in this case, from all of the politicians. As soon as one suitor is poised actually to win the contest, the other suitors are not likely to bow out gracefully. Even if the unrequited suitors could perceive that a marriage or permanent alliance with the successful suitor was in the best interest of the beloved, erotic desire is often so possessive that a disgruntled suitor would be willing to do

harm to the beloved's interest rather than give her up. This is exactly what Alcibiades does later in the history, during his exile after escaping trial. He attempts to bring Athens to her knees in order to show her how much she needs him. He proves very successful at doing this. Alcibiades gives his definition of patriotism while offering his services to the Spartans (6.92.2-4). As he does elsewhere, Alcibiades puts his own characteristic twist on an idea that seemed benign in its Periclean version:

I do not think I deserve to be thought bad by any of you if I, who once seemed to be a patriot [*philopolis*], now go against my own city by force, in company with her worst enemies The true patriot [*philopolis*] is not one who refuses to attack his city, though he lost her unjustly; rather, he is the one who will attempt to take her back by any means, on account of desiring [*epithumein*] her so. (6.92.4)

Alcibiades' patriotism is erotic and, at least by this point in the history, aggressive.

Let us try to take stock of the love theme in Thucydides. In exhorting the citizens to conduct themselves as lovers, Pericles discerns perhaps the sole motive that could incline perfectly free individuals, habituated (as he says) to their own private interest and toward pursuing pleasures, to take the good of another as their own good. In the self-forgetting of eros, people in love, then as now, were routinely seen to neglect themselves. (The most striking example of courtship given in the *Symposium* is that lovers often would camp out for the night on the beloved's doorstep (183a 6).) Eros makes people willingly enter into bonds that would otherwise look like slavery. Eros is at once perfectly free and perfectly committed. And, as we said, Thucydides seconds Pericles' claim that patriotism—and political behavior more generally—can be erotic, by including Diodotus' speech and by depicting the citizens—during the preparations for the Sicilian expedition—wholeheartedly engaged in just such courtship behavior—at the very least, that is what they think they are engaged in.

Ordinary, non-erotic patriotism, by contrast, is probably based preponderantly on a love of one's own. No one ever told the Spartans, for example, to fall in love with Sparta—

yet the Spartans remain fanatically committed to their own city. They love her because she is their own. They do not love her romantically. Pericles, in basing patriotism on an erotic response to the power of Athens and her grandeur, disdains a patriotism that is a parochial, subjective sentiment or unthinking affection for the surroundings in which one grew up. Our country is a lot like our parents, and we might as well face it, we do not select our parents and love them with the free choice by which we select a beloved and love that person. We are stuck with our parents. Pericles' Athenians are supposed to perceive that mere parochial attachment, being stuck in a given patch of ground, is a low motive for patriotism when opposed to the real merit and greatness of a city. If another city were better, they would face a difficult choice between which to love, but fortunately Athens is the fairest of them all.

There is, as I started saying, another type of love that has traditionally been thought to constitute patriotism, a love implicit in the very word patriotism and its root, *patria*: land of our fathers (not to mention "land where our fathers died"). This love is not erotic at all; it is the filial love and filial piety a child is supposed to feel toward its parent. Pericles eschews this love, changing the type of love away from the love for a "motherland" or "fatherland"—in favor of the more active, energetic passion of the lover. A lover or suitor seems to have designs on the beloved; he wishes to win the game of courtship against all the other suitors, and take possession of the beloved. But the political analogue, taking exclusive possession of Athens, would be tantamount to tyranny or at least monarchy. How did Pericles know that an Alcibiades would not come along to take him at his word? Again, we have seen how Pericles attempted to transcend the love of one's own. Perhaps, as we earlier surmised, the highest eros, for Pericles, would not be selfishly possessive but would content itself with contemplating the beloved. Many written sources describing pederasty, that important person-to-person type of Greek love, do indeed seem to speak of stopping short of bodily congress, stopping short of bodily possession or incorporation, and of instead remaining content with contemplation alone: gazing at the beloved. A contemplative love for a city might look something like the Platonic eros near the top of Diotima's ladder of love in the *Symposium*—

for example, she mentions contemplating the beauty in customs and laws (210c 2-3). These would include political institutions (as Pericles also saw), and they would locate the eros of the Funeral Oration on a high rung on the ladder of love.

But in support of the traditional kind of patriotism, we have to note that filial love also worked well to the extent that it was antityrannical. A person who feels filial love toward his city protects it against others and against himself. The child's feelings for its mother, like the citizen's feelings for his motherland, are protective: citizens feeling filial patriotism would be jealous of politicians who were essentially suitors, and they would resist tyranny analogously to the way a child resists when its mother takes a new husband. The demagogues at Athens resisted Alcibiades, and patriots feeling filial love would resist him too. But unlike the demagogues, a citizen who felt filial love would not be desirous of becoming his mother's new husband himself. One of the clearest examples of this is in Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* (32.6): the night before Caesar crosses the Rubicon to attack Rome, he dreams of committing incest with his mother. Rome was his *patria* but also, Plutarch implies, his motherland, and an entity toward whom to feel eros was a crime. So Pericles' switch of the types of love that constitute patriotism was fraught with risks although we also saw its potential for high returns. It is instructive to see just how unusual it was for a statesman to place patriotism on an erotic basis. Even in the context of a society whose athletic nudity brought the material basis of eros into the public view, a society which told itself that love should forge a path to public deeds, as in the myth of Harmodius and Aristogeiton—even in this context, Pericles was attempting to do something exquisitely rare.

Just how rare—and how close to Platonic love—Periclean Athens was reaching, appears when we consider the mother of all paradoxes, the observation that when eros finally descends upon the elite young men, they fall in love not with Athens, as Pericles intended, but with a foreign land. Perhaps one should amend that slightly: they fall in love with their idea of what experiencing the sights and spectacles of Greater Greece might be like. Perhaps the most patriotic interpretation of imperialism generally, is that the citizens love their country so

much that they wish to adorn her with a jewel in her crown. They may feel deeply that their country deserves such a foremost position among nations. They dream of being the one who confers the rightful honor on their country, winning the jewel for her. But the jewel may be attractive in its own right. These Athenians, the elite young men, are attracted to the jewel. This, at least, was predictable. The beautiful and the good are not always home grown. Pericles' project to let a higher love override the attachment to one's own, works in their case, but that higher love overrides not only their attachment to their own personal "own"; it also overrides their attachment to Athens' own. Their eros overrides the *oikeion* in both senses. If, in loving Athens, they are to follow their hearts, then they must also follow wherever their hearts may lead. Why not follow one's heart to Sicily? The ordinary love of *patria* must open up to include every place or land that merits appreciation. Again, in filial patriotism, the citizen and his motherland are stuck with one another. But romantic love is fickle, and eros likes to play the field.

Now, the elite young men have not forgotten themselves to the extent of forgetting that they are Athenian. They remain hopeful of a safe return—to Athens. But they have forgotten themselves to the extent that they are forgetting their duty: under the influence of eros, they are forgetting themselves *qua* patriots, since patriots would first see to it that their city took no harm.

Ultimately, erotic patriotism tries for too much. Athens errs in a direction opposite from Sparta's error. Just as Sparta errs in attempting to stamp out the struggle of the human mind to transcend parochial limits, so Pericles' transcendent patriotism implies a disembodied mind that forgets the local and particular requirements of community. In an attempt to be universal, Periclean Athens must give up her own, give up her self: she must give herself up. Pericles' vision is humanly and philosophically superior to the Spartan way; the only matters in question are his vision's security and safety, its achievability, the ability of citizens to find a *modus vivendi* with these high expectations, and its sustainability or longevity. These factors prove decisive politically, but they do not exhaust the philosophic questions toward which this

political history of Athens points in same the way a shadow points toward its concrete object. No one can consciously and seriously accept the proposition that the only reason he loves his community is because it is his own. The human mind will strive to claim that its own is also good. But likewise it would take a quite extraordinary person, a Socrates in fact, truly to love whatever things he loves, only for their beauty or goodness, and not because they are his own. Socrates neglected his own children, and hung around other people's children, because his own children were not the most beautiful and intelligent children in the neighborhood—which in a neat way shows the monstrosity of this perfectly rational eros. Greek pederasty (there's that public nudity again) allegedly brought quite a number of adult males, at least within a certain stratum of society, halfway round to a Socratic position: pursuing beautiful boys and educating them, perhaps even while someone else pursued their sons and educated them. Possibly such a perfect reciprocity as this is only an imaginary limiting case of tendencies and aspirations within Greek pederasty: its ideal form. Notwithstanding such peculiarities (and partly because of them), the tiny Greek cities, and Athens in particular, stake some of the strongest claims to universality of any societies we know. Yet they fall short, leaving us to ponder the further question of whether the eros that inspired them may have found its fulfillment, and the universality toward which that eros pointed, may have been achieved, not by those communities as wholes, but by some of the individuals within them.

Pericles' Funeral Oration

- 1) Do not in word alone inspect the profit—which anyone could expound at length to you who know it yourselves no worse than he, telling how many good things depend upon defense against enemies,
but rather, actively contemplate [*theomenoi*] the power of the city, day after day, and become lovers [*erastai*] of it [the power or: “of her,” Athens], and when she seems great to you, take it to heart that daring men, men who knew what was needful, and who, in their actions, were sensible of dishonor, acquired these things; and if they ever failed in an attempt, they deemed it unworthy to deprive the city of their excellence, but gave themselves away as their finest favor to her. (2.43.1)
- 2) [Our leaders] have a care for their own private matters [*oikeia*] at the same time as political affairs, while the rest, people with permanent jobs, have no small understanding of politics. And the man who refuses to participate in politics? We alone [among the Greeks] do not consider him to be minding his own business but rather to be simply useless. (2.40.2)
- 3) The love of honor [*to philotimon*] alone never grows old, and the better enjoyment . . . is not material gain as some say, but receiving honor (*to timasthai*, 2.44.4).
- 4) Invading the [land] of our neighbors we fight without difficulty on alien ground [*en tei allotriai*] against men who are defending themselves in the midst of their own [*peri ton oikeon*] and for the most part we conquer. (2.39.2)
- 5) On account of the stature of our city, all things come into her from every land; whence it happens that for us, reaping the goods produced here is no more familiar [*oikeiotera*, “no more our own”] an enjoyment than reaping those of other people. (2.38.3)
- 6) We have forced every sea and land to become the highway of our daring, and everywhere we have set up eternal [*aidia*] monuments to both good and evil. (2.41.4)
- 7) For the whole world is the tomb of illustrious men, and not only does the epitaph on gravestones signal it in their own land [*en tei oikeiai*]; but also, in land not belonging to them, there dwells an unwritten marker in every mind if not in fact. (2.43.2-3)

The speech of the Corinthians at the Peloponnesian conference

- 8) In their city's behalf, they treat their bodies as if completely alienated from them [*allotriotata*]. And on deeds in her behalf they use their intellect, though it is their ownmost [*oikeiotate*]. (1.70.6)
- 9) When they fail to prosecute their schemes, they feel deprived of what is their own [*oikeia*]. But when they do invade and acquire something, they regard it a small deed compared with things to come For them alone, *hoping and having are the same* (1.70.7, emphasis added)

Diodotus' speech during the Mytilenean debate

- 10) Hope and eros everywhere, the latter leading, the former following on—[eros] conceiving the plot, [hope] guaranteeing the resources for a good fortune—do the greatest harm and, though invisible themselves, are stronger than visible terrors. And fortune in addition to these contributes no less to the excitement: unlooked-for, she is there, leading men on to gamble with inferior means, and this is no less the case with cities, in proportion as they concern the greatest things: freedom and empire (3.45.5-6)

The Sicilian expedition

- 11) Eros fell upon all alike to sail forth. [It fell] upon the elders, [who thought] that either they would subdue whatever they sailed against or that a great force would in no way be overthrown. [It fell] upon the young men through a longing for far-away sights and spectacles [*opsis kai theoria*], being of good hope, as they were, of coming back safe. And the great multitude and the soldier intended to earn money, in the short run, and besides that to acquire power whence wages might accrue to them eternally [*aidion*]. (6.24.3)

Harmodius and Aristogeiton

- 12) The daring deed of Harmodius and Aristogeiton was attempted on account of an erotic incident. . . . When Harmodius had become radiant through the bloom of his youth, a man of the commoners, Aristogeiton, a citizen of middle rank, had him as his lover [*erastes*]. When Hipparchus son of Peisistratus attempted [to seduce] Harmodius but failed to persuade him, Harmodius complained of him to Aristogeiton. [Aristogeiton], smarting with pain erotically and fearing Hipparchus' power, lest he should take away Harmodius by force, immediately began plotting . . . the dissolution of the tyranny. (6.54.1-3)

- 13) Immediately without circumspection they fell upon [Hipparchus], as especially happens in a passion: the one's [passion] being erotic, the other's on account of being insulted. They began striking him and they killed him. (6.57.3)

. . .

It was with this sort of character, through erotic pain, that the beginning of the conspiracy and the irrational daring came to Harmodius and Aristogeiton out of their great alarm at the moment. For the Athenians the tyranny was harsher after this. (6.59.1-2)

Alcibiades at Sparta

- 14) I do not think I deserve to be thought bad by any of you if I, who once seemed to be a patriot [*philopolis*], now go against my own city by force, in company with her worst enemies The true patriot [*philopolis*] is not one who refuses to attack his city, though he lost her unjustly; rather, he is the one who will attempt to take her back by any means, on account of desiring [*epithumein*] her so. (6.92.4)