

Fear, Friendship and Audience in the Speech of the Mytilenians (Thucydides 3.9-14)

Against the *communis opinio* this paper argues that the speech of the Mytilenians in Thucydides presents a consistent view of interstate relations in which balanced power creates a sense of equality between allies that can offset fear and allow for true friendship. This emphasis on equality shows the influence of intra-polis ideology on inter-polis relations, while the focus on power inequalities producing fear is part of a broader strategy to tailor the speech to its Spartan audience.

Shortly after Mytilene revolts from Athens in 428 Thucydides includes an appeal for help and alliance made by Mytilenian ambassadors to the Spartans and their allies (3.9-14). The speech is concerned chiefly with establishing the Mytilenians as trustworthy allies for the Peloponnesians, despite their sudden and seemingly mercenary abandonment of the Delian League in which they had long held a position of privilege (3.9-13.1). Accordingly, the Mytilenians begin by tracing out the proper grounds for any enduring alliance and then showing how these have been gradually undermined by Athens' growing power over the league, building to the celebrated maxim "only balanced fear is trustworthy for an alliance" (τὸ δὲ ἀντίπαλον δέος μόνον πιστὸν ἐς ξυμμαχίαν, 3.11.2). Gomme 1956 and Rhodes 1994 have noted that this pithy slice of realpolitik seems at odds with the speech's initial emphasis on friendship as the proper basis for alliance (φιλία at 3.10.1, and again at 3.12.1). I argue instead that "balanced fear" is presented not as an alternative to friendship in the forming of alliance but as its precondition, since "balanced fear" alone is depicted as creating a climate of equality between allies that can remove suspicion of ulterior motives for cooperation.

The Mytilenians open by conceding that revolt is unjustified in an alliance which combines a balance in power with equal goodwill between parties (ἴσοι μὲν τῇ γνώμῃ ὄντες καὶ

εὐνοία, ἀντίπαλοι δὲ τῆ παρασκευῆ καὶ δυνάμει, 3.9.2). As Hornblower 1991 and Rhodes 1994 have noted, ἴσοι introduces equality as a key theme that will reappear throughout the speech. It is thus the gradual disappearance of equality between members of the Delian League as Athenian strength grew that the ambassadors claim produced the power imbalance which led Mytilene to fear eventual domination and therefore revolt in good faith (3.10.4, 3.11.1 and 3.12.3: ἀπὸ / ἐκ τοῦ ἴσου; 11.4: ἰσοψήφους). Equality in alliance, accordingly, is presented as a balance in power between parties, not in an absolute sense, but only to the degree that no one party fears domination by another; balanced power offsets mutual suspicion, which produces "balanced fear," and on this basis friendship rooted in goodwill becomes possible.

The emphasis on equality between members of an alliance and the understanding of this equality as the absence of possible domination is strikingly similar in both thought and expression to the ideology of equal protection under the law (ἰσονομία), the defining quality of contemporary Greek citizenship (Ostwald 1969 and Raaflaub 2004). This use of intra-polis relations to conceptualize inter-polis problems is a common practice in Greek political thought (Hornblower 1991); thus in the same speech personal enslavement is used repeatedly as a metaphor for Athens' dominance of entire allied poleis (3.10.3-5 and 3.13.7; cf. Athens as πόλις τύραννος at 1.124.3).

The isonomic view of interstate relations is particularly well suited to a Peloponnesian audience, with its less formal structure of alliance bound by voluntary φιλία among a community of peer oligarchs. Indeed it is the perspective from which the Mytilenians can most plausibly emphasize fear of growing Athenian dominance as providing the "motives and causes" for their revolt (προφάσεις καὶ αἰτίας, 3.13.1), despite a record of active complicity in Athenian subjection of rivals (MacLeod 1978 and Hornblower 1991). The Mytilenians thus focalize their

appeal through Sparta's own fear of a rising Athens, for Thucydides the "truest motive" (ἀληθεστάτην πρόφασιν) behind the Peloponnesian War (1.23.6). Rather than just establish the situation for the great debate at Athens over Mytilene, the Mytilenian speech therefore already introduces the theme of audience manipulation through rhetoric, which will return in the debate as a central focus.

Works Cited:

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