

“Mr. Persuasion” and Cycles of Decline in Thucydides’ Corcyraean *stasis*

Thucydides’ description of the Corcyraean *stasis* (3.69-85), like much of his *Histories*, offers a cautionary view of rhetoric and its consequences (Allison 1997; see also Macleod 1975). Scholarship often turns to the Corcyraeans’ extensive reversal of language at 3.82-83 (Edmunds 1975, Macleod 1979, Williams 1985, Hogan 1989), but leading up to this climax is a series of episodes that hinge on the manipulation of words. It is no coincidence that the narrative begins with a conveniently named Peithias, for Thucydides’ characterization of this pro-Athenian statesman, along with two consecutive puns on his name (Powell 1937; cf. Hornblower 1987, 1991), places a recurring emphasis on persuasion. In sections 70-81, forms of the verb *πείθω* appear in three distinct clusters, marking three separate cycles of decline. By organizing the *stasis* narrative in this way, Thucydides examines the power and limits of persuasion and presents the unfolding events as interrelated case studies (cf. Macleod 1978 on Thucydides’ similar exploration of reasoning in the Mytilenean revolt).

We first see Peithias in the courtroom, and it is within this sphere that he flourishes. He dispenses with the charges brought against him (*ἀποφυγών*, 3.70.4) and systematically redirects the law against his accusers (Hornblower 1991). Thucydides here casts him as the epitome of persuasion, and capitalizes on his name. Once Peithias secures a guilty verdict, he convinces the jurors to exact the full penalty: *ὁ Πειθίας, ἐτύγχανε γὰρ καὶ βουλῆς ὄν, πείθει ὥστε τῷ νόμῳ χρῆσασθαι* (“Peithias, for he also happened to be a member of the council, persuades them to follow the established law,” 3.70.5). The phrase *Πειθίας...πείθει* perfectly summarizes his role: Peithias persuades. Then, lest the wordplay pass unnoticed, Thucydides repeats it in the next sentence: *ἐπυνθάνοντο τὸν Πειθίαν, ἕως ἔτι βουλῆς ἐστί, μέλλειν τὸ πλῆθος ἀναπέσειν τοὺς αὐτοὺς Ἀθηναίους φίλους τε καὶ ἐχθροὺς νομίζειν* (“they understood that Peithias, as long as he

was a member of the council, would persuade the majority to ally with the Athenians,” 3.70.6).

Once Thucydides establishes this near-allegorical link between Peithias’ name and character, he proceeds straightaway to the episode’s climax. Peithias’ opponents realize they cannot overcome him with words and, in their desperation, turn to violence. They kill Peithias and 60 others, and the first cycle of decline is thus realized. Yet Thucydides continues to stress Peithias’ name: the conspirators explicitly “kill Peithias” (Πειθίαν κτείνουσι), and the few of his associates who escape are described as “those few who were of the same opinion as Peithias” (οἱ δέ τινες τῆς αὐτῆς γνώμης τῷ Πειθίᾳ ὀλίγοι). Thucydides’ heavy repetition of the *πειθ*-root in this opening scene (three forms of *πειθω* plus five uses of Peithias’ name) establishes persuasion as a prominent force in the orator’s demise.

The remainder of the *stasis* narrative can be read in relation to this opening sequence. Thucydides organizes the major events into three interwoven cycles of discourse, collapse, and violence punctuated by various figures’ use, misuse, or outright abuse of *πειθω*. In the narrative’s first cycle above (3.70-4), Peithias takes these powers too far and sparks a violent backlash. In the second (3.75-9), the Athenian general Nicostratus is unable to take them far enough, and the Corcyraean people quickly take advantage (cf. Wilson 1987, Hornblower 1991). Abuse of persuasion reaches a highpoint in the third cycle (3.80-1), and the collapse of civil order demonstrates the full extent of its consequences. Chapters 82 and 83 are then illustrations of how far Corcyra has fallen and, more importantly for our purposes, illustrations of the connection between this fall and their use of language. Far from being helpless victims of a topsy-turvy world, the Corcyraeans are the very agents of its existence (Wilson 1982): καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιοῦσει (“and they changed the customary values of names for actions, according to their own judgement,” 82.4). From beginning to end, it

is the conscious manipulation of speech that for Thucydides best demonstrates Corcyra's downfall.

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