

## Framing the Victim: Courtroom Drama and Real-Life Trauma

Demosthenes's speech, "Against Meidias," (Dem. 21) has been used by scholars to define *hybris*. The meaning of *hybris* has traveled far from its initial reception as a word that signified an offense against the gods. Douglas MacDowell and Edward Harris, among others, have used "Against Meidias" to differentiate between the meaning of *hybris* and *asebeia*. An oversimplification of the term *hybris* amounts to an act that results in harming another's honor. *Asebeia*, on the other hand, relates to offenses against the gods. In "Against Meidias," Demosthenes accuses Meidias of both *asebeia* and *hybris*, often using the words side by side.

Studies of the speech have focused on the word *hybris* and the nature of the assault committed by Meidias against Demosthenes. The assault took place during the Dionysia in the spring of 348 when Demosthenes was the chorus-producer for his tribe. According to Demosthenes's account, Meidias struck Demosthenes in the face on the day of his tribe's performance at the festival. Physical assault, for Demosthenes, was not the issue. Rather, it was "being hit with *hybris*." (21.72) Demosthenes explains that the man acting out of *hybris* is recognized by his victim "in his bearing, in his look, in his voice, . . . when he strikes with the fist, when he strikes on the face." Demosthenes's recollection of the incident is vivid. His decision to file a *probole* brings the personal enmity between Meidias and Demosthenes into the open forum of the Athenian courtroom. In his opening remarks, Demosthenes shares with the jurors why he elected to prosecute Meidias, stating, "if any of you did suppose previously that this case arose from a private motive, you should now bear in mind that it's not beneficial to any member of the public for such an act to be permitted." (Dem. 21.8)

Demosthenes's rhetorical strategy throughout the speech seeks to highlight the nature of Meidias's character as one in which his physical assault on Demosthenes during the religious festival is the height of insolence, or *hybris*. But the assault is but a symptom of a deeper contempt that distinguishes Meidias's *hybris* from the momentary loss of control that afflicts those who lose their tempers and fly off the handle. At the time of the encounter, Demosthenes had known Meidias for 17 years. Theirs was a contested relationship from the beginning. Demosthenes had prosecuted Meidias for slander following an incident that occurred in Demosthenes's house while he was still living with his mother and sister. Demosthenes charges Meidias with multiple counts of *hybris* ranging all the way to Meidias's attack on Athenians who did not contribute money or volunteer to serve in the navy. (Dem. 21.203) Demosthenes urges the jurors to convict Meidias of the death penalty. By putting Meidias to death, Demosthenes argues that the city will be acting to preserve its security by ridding the city of a toxin that seeks to defy the gods and threaten its citizens.

In his speech, Demosthenes alternates between his experience as the victim of Meidias's insolence and the danger that Meidias poses to the city. While Demosthenes is not embarrassed to share with the jurors the details of the assault, his argument reflexively focuses on the *hybris* of Meidias. In turn, scholars have fixated on defining *hybris* as an act that causes dishonor but have not focused as much on the physical assault that *hybris* typically signals. Demosthenes does not describe Meidias as committing violence with the word *biazein*, "to overpower by force." The semantic difference between *hybris* and words stemming from the word, *bia*, bodily strength or force, serves to obscure the reality of what happened to Demosthenes. In a chapter entitled, "Violence, Modern and Ancient," Ari Z. Bryen examines the problem historians have with defining violence in the ancient world in his volume, *A Study in Legal Interpretation*. Bryen

argues that by using the word "violence" to describe physical assaults, the result will be that, "we gain additional insight into the negotiations about the nature of violence, its connections with concepts of personhood, and the ways in which that personhood is redeemed through petition once it is violated." (Bryen, 2013, 53) If *hybris* can be viewed as an act of violence, rather than insolence as it is typically translated, Demosthenes's "Against Meidias" may provide a better understanding of not only the nature of the aggression, which Meidias's behavior illustrates, but also the nature of survival as it is represented by Demosthenes's decision to confront Meidias.

### Bibliography

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