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Thucydides's Tragic Science of Democratic Defeat

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Abstract: This article reinterprets Thucydides's analysis of the post-Periclean turn in Athenian politics by reading it within the context of contemporary "tragic" and "scientific" explanatory traditions. It finds in this analysis an ambitious attempt to reinvent the traditional, tragic pattern of hubris-driven reversal by reinterpreting its underlying causal logic according to a scientific perspective in which the overdetermining effects of deities are replaced by the variable power dynamics of democratic deliberation. The resultant analysis identifies a change in the relative standing of leaders as the determining cause of democratic reversal, not the absolute decline in leadership, thus tracing the Athenian turn towards hubris, great error, and civil discord to the egalitarian ordering of the post-Periclean assembly. In so doing, it shows how Thucydides's analysis posed a powerful challenge to previous attempts, both tragic and scientific, to prognosticate the fate of imperial democracy, as well as offering an exemplary moment of Thucydides's synthetic approach towards tragic and scientific explanatory perspectives.

As Thucydides's only extended explanation of how Athens lost the Peloponnesian War, the so-called Eulogy of Pericles (2.65.5–13) is often viewed as the linchpin of his thinking on the success and failure of Athenian democracy.¹ In recent decades, however, many have called this

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¹See, for instance, Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides, Vol. 1, Books I–III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 340–41; Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 92; Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science," in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. Antonios Rengakos and Antonis Tsakmakis (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 150–53; Ryan Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens* (Princeton:

privileged status into question. Perceiving the passage to be either largely rhetorical, ironically paradoxical, or out of tune with the subsequent historical narrative, an array of commentators have argued that it is not the authoritative explanation of democratic defeat that it appears to be.² Instead, they propose, Thucydides's actual views can only be gleaned by looking beyond the abstract analysis of the Eulogy and adopting an interpretive approach that foregrounds the tensions, ironies, and upset expectations of the latter half of his text. This article does not deny the importance of accounting for the complex interplay between analytic abstraction and historical narrative in Thucydides's account of the war. It does, however, make a renewed case for taking the Eulogy seriously both as a genuine statement of the author's understanding of Athenian defeat and as an effective framework for making sense of the rest of Thucydides's explanatory project. To this end, it develops a revisionary interpretation of the Eulogy's casual logic by reading it within the context of contemporary traditions of "tragic" and "scientific" explanation. In order to understand the political effect of the analysis, it also reads it against previous prognostications of the imperial democracy's future. This interpretive approach reveals an analysis that deftly combines elements of both tragic and scientific traditions to produce a synthetic account that is more theoretically rich, politically contentious, and hermeneutically productive than commentators have appreciated.

Most who deny the Eulogy's explanatory value, as well as many who accept it, identify the crux of Thucydides's analysis to be the absolute

Princeton University Press, 2001), 148–49; Jonathan Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 237–40; Tomer Perry, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens': Democratic Theory and Advantage in Thucydides," *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 2 (2018): 242–50.

²Jeffrey Rusten, *Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 212–13, for instance, contends that the passage was meant to function as a panegyric of Pericles, not as an explanation of defeat, and pointedly asserts that the events leading to Athens's fall "are brought in only as a foil" to throw Pericles's successes into high relief. Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 28, may be read as endorsing a similarly deflationary view. Others go further, casting doubt on the sincerity and seriousness of the Eulogy's praise of Pericles. For W. R. Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 74–75, the digression is ultimately meant to be set aside as overly schematic and "ironic," functioning as part of a sophisticated rhetorical strategy leading the reader to recognize the limits of historical generalization. Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 65–67, is rather more dismissive, arguing that "the most charitable" interpretation of the passage is as a late and ill-considered addition to the text "made in haste" after the "lasting shock" of defeat in Sicily.

decline in Athenian leadership after the death of Pericles.³ For some, the critical feature of this decline was the resultant absence of an expert technician capable of understanding and managing the complex Athenian political system.⁴ For others, it was rather the loss of a leader able to sublimate the “tragic flaw” of Athenian political psychology—that restless ambition and desire for self-aggrandizement that the Athenians felt as an imperative—giving it free rein to undermine the successes that it initially fostered.⁵ An importantly different explanatory logic emerges, however, from the synthetic reading of the Eulogy that this article proposes. It reveals an analysis of Athenian defeat that employs an impersonal, amoral understanding of causation to reinvent a conventional tragic pattern of divinely sponsored reversal, thereby naturalizing its overdetermined causal logic and tailoring it to the distinct realities of a democratic collective. In doing so, it identifies a shift in the power dynamic of the assembly after Pericles’s death as the underlying cause of Athenian defeat, not the loss of Pericles’s political genius per se. The analysis thus hinges on a change in *relative* merit among Athenian leaders by foregrounding a relationship of competitive equality among aspiring leaders as the structural force that determined each stage of the democracy’s phenomenal decline.⁶

At first blush, this change in explanatory emphasis may appear slight, but it bears outsized implications for how we read Thucydides as an interpreter of Athenian democracy. In the first instance, it suggests that the tragic flaw of Athenian democracy, if it makes sense to speak in these terms, is not to be found in Athenian political psychology but in their egalitarian ordering of political life. For Thucydides, a certain degree of formal equality was an essential precondition of democratic power, but this power remained stable only when this egalitarian ordering was balanced by the presence of an authoritative leader in the assembly. When this ordering was extended into the sphere of deliberative leadership, it then proved to be the democracy’s undoing. In the second instance, the focus on a structural cause makes clear that the mere presence of a political expert akin to Pericles would not have been sufficient to prevent Athenian reversal according to Thucydides. Popular perception of Pericles’s expertise played an important role in the

³Rusten, *Thucydides: Book II*, 212–13; Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, 28; Hawthorne, *Thucydides on Politics*, 65. Connor, *Thucydides*, 61–62, also endorses this view, though he further identifies in the Eulogy two “paradoxes” pertaining to Pericles’s leadership. For versions of this reading that accept the Eulogy’s explanatory value, see Balot, *Greed and Injustice*, 145, 148, 153–54; Ober, *Political Dissent*, 92, and “Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science,” 150–53; Price, *Thucydides and Internal War*, 237–40.

⁴See esp. Ober, “Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science.”

⁵E.g., Orwin, *Humanity of Thucydides*, esp. 193–206; Balot, *Greed and Injustice*, 136–78; David Bedford and Thom Workman, “The Tragic Reading of the Thucydidean Tragedy,” *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 51–67, esp. 64–67.

⁶Cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 192–94.

production of his singular authority, but it was this singular authority that proved to be the critical factor behind the Athenian apex, not the substantive policy that flowed from it. This reading of the Eulogy suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that if the post-Periclean period had been populated by a coterie of equally expert leaders, Athens would not have fared better for it. What they needed more than good policy was someone to keep the polity unified.

In addition to providing clarity to both Thucydides's methodological project and his substantive analysis of Athenian decline, this contextualist reading of the Eulogy also illuminates the contentious political effect of its analysis. Most obviously, it reveals the challenges posed by Thucydides to both those who understood Athenian defeat to be wrought by vengeful deities and those who believed that the institutional structures of the imperial democracy might perpetuate its rule indefinitely. But the Eulogy critically engaged with tragic and scientific prognostications of the Athenian future in more subtle ways as well. By focusing on the role that egalitarian competition played in determining democratic defeat, Thucydides's Eulogy exposed the danger of analogizing the trajectory of the "democratic hero" to that of an individual autocrat in a simplistic way, as previous tragedians and historians had done.⁷ It shows that such an analogy not only lacks explanatory power by failing to distinguish between the different ways in which individuals and collectives experienced reversal. It also shows that it reinforces misconceptions that might actively contribute to the onset of democratic decline, as the tragic tradition saw egalitarian relations as the most effective deterrent to tragic reversal, while autocratic leadership was believed to be one of its most frequent causes.⁸ At the same time, Thucydides's Eulogy problematizes the complete decoupling of moral and practical considerations that was characteristic of scientific analyses of the imperial democracy. As his explication of Periclean authority demonstrates, popular perception of moral integrity worked alongside the perception of expert knowledge to produce the near-autocratic authority that, for a time, stabilized the democracy.

By reconstructing Thucydides's synthetic analysis in the Eulogy, this study seeks to reinforce the need to move beyond an interpretive paradigm in which Thucydides must be read either as a tragic thinker in the model of Aeschylus or as a scientific thinker along the lines of the sophists and Hippocratic

⁷Cf. Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 552–53.

⁸In recognizing this intervention, readers might also be encouraged to apply a more critical eye to the parallels drawn between the behavior of cities and individuals by Thucydides's speakers (esp. 6.85.1; also, 1.82.6, 1.124.1, 1.144.3, 2.64.6, 3.10.1), as well as by Thucydides himself (3.82.2). Cf. James Morrison, "A Key Topos in Thucydides: The Comparison of Cities and Individuals," *American Journal of Philology* 115, no. 4 (1994): 525, 541; Hornblower, *Commentary*, 1:231; Balot, *Greed and Injustice*, 153.

medical writers. Reaching back to Francis Cornford's controversial monograph *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (1907), and Charles Cochrane's response, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (1929), this interpretive polarity preoccupied commentators for much of the twentieth century.⁹ More recent scholarship has often recognized the impoverishing effects of reducing Thucydides's explanatory project to either tragedy or science. W. R. Connor, for instance, has argued that an appreciation of the way that the text moves between both explanatory perspectives helps to reveal the inadequacy of either to capture the irreducible complexity of the historical process.¹⁰ Working in a more philosophical vein, and towards a different end, Thom Workman has challenged the very tendency to treat these explanatory perspectives as antithetical in ancient Greek thought, insisting that it stems from the anachronistic imposition of intellectual habits characteristic of post-Enlightenment thinking onto a much more fluid intellectual scene.¹¹ The tendency to privilege one perspective over the other nevertheless continues to animate—and unhelpfully limit—recent studies of Thucydidean political thought.¹² This article supplements Workman's abstract and philosophical argument with one that is historical and textual in order to demonstrate more concretely the interpretive advantages of reading Thucydides as a synthetic thinker. To put it more plainly, this article will show not only that Thucydides was capable of developing a tragic science, but how he did so, and to what effect.

One might rightly worry about the imposed heuristic framework of thinking about Thucydides according to tragic and scientific traditions of explanation. Though it is a well-established scholarly convention, neither Thucydides nor any of his contemporaries articulated this distinction in their works. This does not mean, however, that the identification of these traditions cannot help to illuminate important aspects of Thucydides's intellectual milieu and

⁹Francis Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907); Charles Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929). On the long twentieth-century history of the debate begun by Cornford and Cochrane, see Jon Hesk, "Thucydides in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, ed. Christine Lee and Neville Morley (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), 219–24.

¹⁰Connor, *Thucydides*.

¹¹Thom Workman, "Thucydides, Science, and Late Modern Philosophy," in Lee and Morley, *Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, 512–28.

¹²For example, compare J. Peter Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chap. 6; Bedford and Workman, "Tragic Reading," 61–67; Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 4; Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science"; Josiah Ober and Tomer Perry, "Thucydides as a Prospect Theorist," *Polis* 31, no. 2 (2014): 206–32; and Perry, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens,'" esp. 235, 240.

political project.¹³ If they are to be successfully employed in this way, however, the constitutive aspects of these traditions must be adequately grounded in archaic and fifth-century source material, not in extrapolations of a scholar's intuitive sense of what is "tragic" or "scientific." I begin therefore with an explication of what explanatory moves I associate with each tradition and a demonstration of how they were used to predict the fate of the imperial democracy in the fifth century. I will then proceed to detail how Thucydides synthesized these traditions in his analysis of Athenian defeat, both in the Eulogy of Pericles and elsewhere in his *Peloponnesian War*.

Tragedy and Tragic Explanation

Often introduced without definition, the senses of "tragedy" and "tragic" applied to Thucydidean political thought are rarely self-evident. These terms carry diverse meanings, many of which are complementary, but some of which are not.¹⁴ Characterizations of Thucydides's narrative as "tragic" often suggest adherence to an explanatory perspective that foregrounds the causal relationship between greatness, hubris, transgression, and reversal. This causal relationship has been variously called the "tragic theory of the passions," the "tragic pattern," or, often, just "tragedy," and is heavily indebted to traditional Greek beliefs about divine retribution.¹⁵ Alternatively, this nomenclature can be used to suggest a catastrophe that lacks any clear explanation: particular events are often called "tragic" when great suffering appears incomprehensible or undeserved.¹⁶ One thus refers

¹³Rosalind Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science, and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), offers a compelling demonstration of the successful use of the Greek scientific tradition as a contextual framework for fifth-century political thought. For an intriguing study of the interaction between scientific innovation and religious tradition in the Hippiocratic medical writers, see G. E. R. Lloyd, *The Revolutions of Wisdom: Studies in the Claims and Practices of Ancient Greek Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁴For a discussion of the varied senses attached to these terms in literary criticism, see Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), chap. 1.

¹⁵E.g., Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, 129–243; Strauss, *City and Man*, 226; Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Rise and Fall of States according to Greek Authors* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 5, 7, 46–58; Lebow, *Tragic Vision*, 116–18.

¹⁶E.g., Adam Parry, "Thucydides' Historical Perspective," in *Studies in Fifth-Century Thought and Literature*, ed. Adam Parry, Yale Classical Studies 22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 47–48; Hans-Peter Stahl, *Thucydides: Man's Place in History* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2003 [1966]), 6, 17, 108, 118, 135–36; Tim Rood, *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 198; Balot, *Greed and Injustice*, 149; and Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52n20, 65n55.

to a “tragic mindset” or a “tragic vision” when describing an intellectual perspective that is skeptical of our ability to understand the forces that disrupt our lives and make suffering an ineliminable part of the human condition.¹⁷ Commentators often move freely between these two senses of tragedy when characterizing Thucydides’s thinking, but they sit in tension with one another. Thucydides could not at once find the historical process opaque to human understanding while explaining Athenian defeat according to an evident logic of hubris-driven reversal. This would be to explain the inexplicable.

In identifying an ancient Greek tradition of tragic explanation, this study refers to the explanatory pattern linking greatness, hubris, transgression, and reversal, not to the so-called tragic vision of humanity. The nexus of conceptual relationships that constituted this pattern was deeply intuitive for Thucydides’s original audience. The most central and enduring of these was the connection between a transgressive cognitive state (usually hubris), injustice, and its punishment.¹⁸ Such cognitive states are frequently traced back to the conditions of excessive good fortune and political unaccountability.¹⁹ Autocrats, combining both circumstances, were a customary locus of this process, and tragic reversal is sometimes considered to be the natural outcome of one-man rule.²⁰ Hubris and related cognitive states are thought to dispose individuals towards transgression as passion eclipses reason and individuals act as if exempt from normal human limits and conventions.²¹ Unbridled desires and a distorted self-conception work together to overturn the good fortune that caused them: misguided belief is encouraged by hope, lust, and gratifying persuasion, thus promoting moral and cognitive error, or *hamartia*.²² Cognitive states such as hubris also dispose individuals to disregard those who counsel against such errors, figures that are often called “tragic advisors” or “tragic warners,” thus

¹⁷See Stahl, *Thucydides*, 152; Foster, *Thucydides*, 64; and Pierre Ponchon, *Thucydide philosophe: La raison tragique dans l'histoire* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2017), 13.

¹⁸E.g., Aeschylus, *Persians* 821–28; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 763–71; Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 533; Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos* 873–82; Euripides, *Bacchae* 516–18. Among the cognitive states related to hubris within the pattern of tragic explanation are “madness” (*mania/mainomai*) (Euripides, *Bacchae* 326–27, 358–59, 882–87; Herodotus, 8.77.1) and *lussa* (Euripides, *Heracles* 823ff.).

¹⁹On excess: Solon 8.3–4; Theognis 153–54; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1044–45; Herodotus 1.32.1, 7.10.e, 8.77.1; on unaccountability: Herodotus 3.80.3–4; Aeschylus, *Persians* 211–14. References to Solon refer to the Gentili-Prato edition of Solon’s fragments, as most recently revised by Maria Noussia-Fantuzzi, *Solon the Athenian, the Poetical Fragments* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

²⁰See especially Herodotus 3.80.2–5. Cf. Plato, *Laws* 716a–b.

²¹E.g., Euripides, *Bacchae* 635–36; Herodotus 7.35.1–3.

²²See esp. Herodotus 8.77.1. See also Euripides, *Bacchae* 617; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 341–42, 385–86.

compounding the tendency for transgression.²³ Those exhibiting hubris characteristically prefer advisors who flatter their ambitions and thus encourage them towards their ruin.²⁴ Those destined to suffer such ruin typically bring about this fall through sudden reversals of fortune caused by their self-induced errors, often in ironic confirmation of the tragic warner's predictions.²⁵

This explanatory story is frequently supplemented by a variable logic of supernatural overdetermination. One prevalent version features a tit-for-tat structure, where supernatural forces are responsible for the punishment of transgression, but not the transgression itself. The story of Capaneus is exemplary of this sort of logic. As one of the seven Argive warriors to attack Thebes at Polynices's bidding, Capaneus boasts that he will take the city even if Zeus should oppose it. Affronted, Zeus strikes Capaneus down with a thunderbolt as he scales the city walls.²⁶ Here, Zeus is a strictly retributive agent reacting to all-too-human arrogance.²⁷ Alternatively, there are more thoroughly overdetermined logics. Here, the gods are also instrumental in bringing about the agent's initial transgressive mindset as well as their subsequent error and injustice, not just their retributive punishment. Such instances of tragic reversal are often embedded within a larger story of multigenerational family curses, as in the case of Herodotus's Croesus (1.13.2), thus accounting for the gods' initial antipathy.

This tradition of tragic explanation utilizes a conception of cause (*aitia/aition*) that is similar to, but also importantly different from, the post-Newtonian conception that we habitually employ today. Although certain Greek thinkers did eventually use *aitia/aition* to signify necessary, material

²³For general statements about the dismissal of good counsel, see Hesiod, *Works and Days* 295–97; Aeschylus, *Persians* 752–58; Euripides, *Suppliant Women* 229–37. For vivid examples of tragic warners, consider Halitherses in Homer's *Odyssey* (2.155–176), Teiresias and Cadmus in Euripides's *Bacchae* (esp. 309–13, 330–41; cf. the chorus's lyric at 387–401), and Herodotus's Solon (1.32.1–33.1), Artabanus (7.10.1–11.1), and Demaratos (7.101.1–105.1).

²⁴See, e.g., Herodotus 7.9.1–10.1; also, Leslie Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Political Traditions, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chaps. 3, 11; and Matthew Landauer, "Parrhesia and the *Demos Tyrannos*: Frank Speech, Flattery and Accountability in Democratic Athens," *History of Political Thought* 33 (2012): 189–94.

²⁵The focus on *hamartia* is largely lacking in archaic literature, but it increases in prevalence in the fifth century. See especially Herodotus's Croesus, who initiates a self-destructive war with the Persians based on a misunderstood oracle (1.53.2–56.1, 73.1), and Aeschylus's Xerxes, who is tricked into initiating the Battle of Salamis (360–74).

²⁶This myth can be found in various sources, most notably Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 423–31; Sophocles, *Antigone* 126–37; Apollodorus, *Library of Greek Mythology* 3.6.7.

²⁷See also Hesiod, *Works and Days* 213–24; Euripides, *Bacchae*, esp. 515, 18.

causation, this was not the conventional meaning of the word within the tragic explanatory tradition.²⁸ Rather, the word that would come to mean “cause” initially referred to moral and judicial responsibility, not impersonal, mechanistic causation, and is often best translated as “blame” or “guilt.”²⁹ Though this notion of causation may appear more primitive than our own, it is in a way more complex. The idea of efficient causation is contained within the tragic conception, but it is overlaid with a sense of moral responsibility, thus limiting the sphere of its applicability to a particular type of intentional action. To act as a cause in the tragic sense, one must not only act as the cause in a post-Newtonian sense, but also act in such a way as to incur praise or blame.

Certain hazards must be noted when calling the pattern of hubris-driven reversal “tragic.” It is customary to associate this pattern with a fixed narrative arc exemplified by Aeschylus’s *Persians*, Euripides’s *Bacchae*, or other works of Athenian tragedy. In doing so, one runs the risk of incorrectly suggesting that the pattern was a formal literary construct specific to a particular dramatic genre. The historical record indicates, however, that it was a more wide-ranging and dynamic tradition of thinking than a formalist treatment can account for. Rather, it appears to have been a deep-seated and intuitive set of conceptual relationships that defied generic and political divisions. Alongside Athenian tragedy, it is also employed in didactic poetry, historical narrative, political and judicial rhetoric, and political-theoretical analysis.³⁰ In

²⁸In Homer, this word appears only in its adjectival form to characterize a person or god who is responsible for an action or course of events. The abstract noun referring to responsibility first appears in the fifth century in Pindar (*Olympian* 1, 35). We first see this word extended to material causes in Herodotus (2.25.5–26.1, 7.125.1), and in the Hippocratic corpus (esp. *Ancient Medicine* 19.3) it comes to resemble our modern, scientific notion of causation. For a discussion of the fluidity with which fifth-century authors moved between the noun *aitia* and the substantive neuter adjective *aition*, see Mario Vegetti, “Culpability, Responsibility, Cause: Philosophy, Historiography, and Medicine in the Fifth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁹In the context of epic, lyric, and tragedy, see Homer, *Iliad* 1.153, 3.164, 19.86; *Odyssey* 11.559, 22.48; Aeschylus, *Persians* 896; *Choephoroi* 69, 117, 273, 836; *Eumenides* 99, 579; Sophocles, *Ajax* 28; *Antigone* 1173, 1312, 1318; *Oedipus Tyrannos* 109, 656; *Philoctetes* 1404, 1426. As one might expect, this sense is especially common in judicial discourse, occurring over forty times in the surviving speeches of Antiphon and over one hundred times in the speeches of Lysias. See also Democritus DK 55 B 83; Herodotus 1.1.0, 1.45.2, 1.87.2, 191.4.

³⁰Likewise, it is important to underline that the pattern of hubris-driven reversal did not form the blueprint for all tragic narratives, and when it did appear in Athenian tragedy, it was often to subvert some of the pattern’s expectations, not simply to repeat a well-known formula. For an overview of the diverse plot structures to be found in Athenian tragedy, see Peter Burian, “Myth into *Muthos*: The Shaping of Tragic Plot,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

short, the process of hubris-driven reversal was a central feature of how many archaic and classical Greeks understood the world that they lived in, not simply how they composed myth-based dramas for the stage.

Democracy and Tragic Explanation

The tradition of tragic explanation long predates Athenian democracy. It provides a framework for understanding Agamemnon's behavior in Homer's *Iliad* and the story of the Ithacan suitors in the *Odyssey*. It also informs Hesiod's exhortation against kingly injustice in *Works and Days* (213–66). That it survived the transition from kingly to collective political rule bears witness to its deep embeddedness in Greek culture. Whereas once tragic explanation served to warn kings against the temptations of their position, in the polis it reinforced the need for moderation and egalitarian association, offering Athenian democrats a means of asserting that autocratic hubris was both morally contemptible and practically self-defeating. The individual who unjustly rose to dominate his fellow citizens could expect not only to be shamed in the eyes of gods and men; he could expect to destroy his city and himself.³¹

The clearest evidence of this occurs in the didactic poetry attributed to Solon, which is imbued with tragic explanatory moves (esp. 1.7–25, 3.5–16, 8.3–4). The poet repeatedly invokes the relationship between excess (*koros*), the desire for material gain, and hubris-driven reversal, foregrounding the need for moderation as a means of avoiding one's self-induced yet divinely sponsored ruin (8.3–4). Solonian didacticism does not limit itself to moral exhortation, however, nor does it suggest that self-restraint is the only means of avoiding tragic reversal. It also prescribes an institutional cure, indicating that adherence to a well-ordered, balanced, and, in some limited sense, egalitarian ordering of citizens could curb the causes of tragic reversal, providing for a more stable and beneficial political existence (3.32–39).³²

In the fifth century, the pattern of hubris-driven reversal appears with even greater regularity in the historical record to problematize autocratic rule and

³¹In considering the transition from heroic ideology to that of collective rule, one must be careful not to reduce it simply to the replacement of self-interested aggrandizement by a moral concern for the community (cf. Balot, *Greed and Injustice*, chap. 3). Democratic ideology also appealed to self-interest, but it privileged the long-term stability of moderate gain over the instability of unrestrained acquisitiveness.

³²The word used to describe well-ordered, egalitarian political ordering is *eunomiē*, a vague term that might describe both a goddess and a political principle. Even in describing the latter, the term is ambiguous and does not map neatly onto later regime types. It is, however, clearly opposed to the unaccountable rule of a single individual, even if it does not specify who exactly is to rule in its place. See John Lombardini, "'Isonomia' and the Public Sphere in Democratic Athens," *History of Political Thought* 34, no. 3 (2013): 395, 396–406.

thereby reinforce the superiority of egalitarian association. One might cite, for example, Herodotus's narrative of Croesus or of Xerxes's catastrophic invasion of Greece. Long before this Persian defeat, however, Herodotus offers a more abstract account of the tragic tendencies of autocratic government and the corrective potential of egalitarian association. In the Persian Constitutional Debate, Otanes exhorts his compatriots to embrace popular, egalitarian rule (*isonomiē*) as a means of avoiding the pitfalls inherent to autocracy (3.80.3–6).³³ In a vein similar to Solon, Otanes argues that egalitarian association introduces accountability into political rule and thereby removes the structural problems that lead to autocratic hubris and transgression. He thus justifies his preference for isonomic rule by underlining how it acts as a solution to the powerful problem that tragic reversal poses for a political community.

A similar relationship between autocracy, hubris-driven reversal, and egalitarian rule can be found in the surviving works of Athenian tragedy. References to this relationship are often made in passing (e.g., Euripides, *Medea* 119–30; *Phoenician Women* 531–48) but can also act as a play's central theme. Aeschylus's *Persians*, for instance, depicts Xerxes as the exemplary hubristic autocrat who transgresses, commits great error, and is duly punished with reversal by both the gods and the Athenian navy.³⁴ Aeschylus takes one step further in the *Oresteia*, developing this relationship over the course of a trilogy. The *Oresteia* tells of an intergenerational cycle of autocratic transgression and punishment that spirals desperately out of control, finding resolution only once judgment is handed over to the Athenian law courts.³⁵

Yet the relationship between fifth-century Athenians and tyranny was in many ways more complicated than the didactic use of tragic explanation might suggest. Athenians were fascinated by autocratic brilliance even as they were terrified of tyrannical ambitions. Tragic audiences reveled in both the incredible highs and the catastrophic lows of legendary Greek royal families, and many fantasized about wielding such power themselves, even if it were to end badly. "I was willing," one Athenian opines in a Solonian

³³*Isonomiē* poses similar obstacles to precise translation as Solon's *Eunomiē*, and scholars have debated whether it is best translated as "equality before the law" (thus coming from *iso-nomos*) or something like "equal distribution" (from *iso-nemein*). See David Asheri, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella, *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*, ed. Oswyn Murray and Alfonso Moreno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 474; also Lombardini, "'Isonomia' and the Public Sphere," 406–17.

³⁴Aeschylus constructs the Athenian democracy as the antithesis of the Persians and their tragic tyrant throughout the drama. For a now classic study discussing this portrayal and its role in the construction of Athenian ideology, see Simon Goldhill, "Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus' *Persae*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108 (1988): 189–93.

³⁵This is not to say that this theme exhausts the content of the *Oresteia*, or that this content can be reduced to any one political message.

poem, “if I had gained power, taken unlimited wealth, / and ruled over Athens as a tyrant for only one day— / afterwards to be flayed as a wine-skin and my family to be annihilated” (29.5–7). Many fifth-century Athenians appear to have felt similarly.³⁶ But the tension between tyrannical ambition, tragic reversal, and democratic thinking was not only the stuff of poetic conjecture for these Athenians. It also became a pressing issue for their political policy as the Athenian-led alliance against the Persians became a tribute-paying empire, thus placing the city of Athens in a position directly comparable to their former enemy and supposed anti-type, the Persian king. It is therefore unsurprising that, despite living in a democratic polis, fifth-century Athenians took such an active interest in the fates of tyrants.

The analogy between the democracy’s rule over its empire and the rule of an autocrat was lost on neither the Athenians nor other Greeks. Thucydides’s text suggests that it may have become increasingly common to refer to Athens as a *polis turannos* in the years surrounding the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (1.122.3, 1.124.3, 2.63.2, 3.37.2). Aristophanes’s *Knights* offers corroboration (1111–14). Whatever pride the Athenians may have felt in their rule over others was thus accompanied by a certain unease about their future. The sense that the Athenians were a collective autocrat created the expectation, at least for those who gave credence to the tragic explanatory tradition, that they were paving the way towards their own destruction. The point of repeatedly recounting Xerxes’s tragic fate, it would seem, must have been as much about warning the Athenians where they were headed as it was about celebrating the Greek victory.³⁷ Such advice, however, largely fell on deaf ears. Despite their efforts to deter the ascendant power with the prospect of reversal, individuals such as Aeschylus and Herodotus predictably found themselves playing the role of the tragic warner.³⁸

Scientific Explanation, Democracy, and the Peloponnesian War

The Athenians did not ignore these voices out of simple obstinacy. The intellectual revolutions of the latter half of the fifth century fostered a new,

³⁶Cf. Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 504–10. On the complex relationship between Athenian democratic ideology and tyranny, see the discussion and bibliography of Kinch Hoekstra, “Athenian Democracy and Popular Tyranny,” in *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, ed. Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), esp. 27–28.

³⁷For a balanced analysis of the potential effect of Aeschylus’s *Persians*, see David Rosenbloom, *Aeschylus: Persians* (London: Duckworth, 2006), 139–46.

³⁸On Herodotus as a sort of tragic warner, see Kurt Raaflaub, “Herodotus, Political Thought, and the Meaning of History,” *Arethusa* 20 (1987): 221–48, and J. Moles, “Herodotus Warns the Athenians,” *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* 9 (1996): 259–84.

“scientific” manner of explanation that actively undermined the traditional pattern of tragic explanation. “Science,” though the conventional label among scholars for referring to the fifth-century tradition of natural inquiry, is as multifaceted and problematic a term as “tragedy,” and the beliefs associated with the fifth-century tradition of scientific explanation were diverse. However, a few aspects can be usefully isolated. Most important was an increased skepticism concerning the existence of supernatural causes and the traditional moral strictures that supernatural authorities were thought to uphold.³⁹ Scientific thinkers began to identify causal explanation exclusively with aspects of the world that were perceptible to human beings rather than look to the divinely ordained moral order (e.g., Protagoras DK 80[74] B1). Within this causal field, a wider variety of natural phenomena were considered, as the notion of cause (*aitia/aition*) was shorn of its exclusive association with moral and juridical responsibility (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 96a6–10). Impersonal causes such as natural phenomena and institutional arrangements increasingly became central to social and political analysis. Cognitive states were not consequently disregarded, but the normative valence that accompanied their consideration fell away. The instrumental and the moral were thus decoupled, and the most radical thinkers destigmatized the limitless pursuit of self-interest to the point of valorizing the tyrant’s life as ideal.⁴⁰

This new, scientific manner of political explanation gave commentators resources for prognosticating a very different future for the *polis turannos*. One thinker to elaborate such a future was the Old Oligarch, who bluntly criticized the moral failings of the Athenian democracy while offering a nuanced analysis of its capacity to perpetuate its rule.⁴¹ Speaking to an imagined audience of elitist critics who assume that the moral deficiency of Athenian democracy will bring about its demise, he suggests that those facets of popular rule that look most erroneous actually ensure the people’s continued governance of the city and the empire (1.1, 8). Among these are the single-minded pursuit of popular interest and the elevation of the shameful and undisciplined over the moderate and just (1.5). The Athenian democrats, in his analysis, discount traditional political virtue and “good government”

³⁹G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 163–72.

⁴⁰Plato, for instance, often gives voice to such radical idealizations of the tyrannical life in the mouths of Socrates’s interlocutors. See, e.g., *Republic* 344a–c; *Gorgias* 466b–471d; cf. [Plato] *Theages* 125e–126a; Xenophon, *On Government* 1.9; Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1169.

⁴¹The text’s compositional date has long been a matter of controversy, though there is a general consensus that it was written in the final four decades of the fifth century. For an overview of the relevant scholarship, as well as an argument for composition between 431 and 424 BCE, see J. L. Marr and P. J. Rhodes, *The “Old Oligarch”: The Constitution of the Athenians Attributed to Xenophon* (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 2008), 3–6, 31–32.

(*eunomia*) in order that the people may remain dominant over the elite (1.8–9). Such measures run directly counter to the advice of Solonian poetry, and the Old Oligarch sees these democratic practices as morally perverse. But he underscores that they will not bring about the ruin of the democracy as a result. Instead, he suggests, it will be exactly these measures that ensure the power of the regime for the indefinite future by strengthening the position of the *demos vis-à-vis* the elite.

We cannot assume that most Athenians thought along the lines of the Old Oligarch in the final decades of the fifth century, nor that they shared in his perspective on the prospects of a comprehensive pursuit of self-interest. As we see parodied in Aristophanes's *Clouds*, this was a period of intense disagreement between old and new ways of thinking in Athens, and the debate was not purely academic. The fate of tragic and scientific political analysis in Athens, we must suspect, was intimately bound up with the city's successes and failures in the Peloponnesian War. With Cleon's triumph in Pylos, confidence in the new mode of political explanation likely surged, for the *polis turannos* appeared to defeat the traditional exemplars of political virtue, the Spartans. With the disastrous expedition to Sicily, there is evidence that the Athenians took a conservative turn.⁴² But Athenian perseverance after Sicily amid ever increasing internal turmoil challenged any easy identification of the *polis turannos* with the tragic autocrat and his fate. Like most readers of Thucydides's text, fifth-century Greeks would have struggled to make sense of the successes and the failures of the Athenian democracy according to any preestablished explanatory tradition.

Thucydides's Tragic Science of Democratic Reversal

Thucydides's Eulogy of Pericles occurs early in *The Peloponnesian War*; long before the central objects of its analysis. Pericles will not die for another two and a half years, and it is much longer still before Athens will experience defeat in Sicily, fall into civil strife, and lose the war. The proleptic nature of this explanation thus parallels a narrative technique used by epic and tragic poets to foreshadow subsequent action and to foreground its underlying causes (e.g., Homer, *Odyssey* 1.44–95; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 10–50). Also paralleling the poets, Thucydides will frame his account of Athenian defeat according to the traditional tragic pattern of hubris-driven reversal. Yet, unlike his predecessors, he will not identify the gods as the unseen forces ultimately leading the democracy to its ruin. Rather, like a modern engineer retrofitting a historical structure, Thucydides will use the tools of scientific explanation to reinvent the tragic framework from the inside out, replacing the overdetermining force of the gods with that of the structural dynamics of the democracy.

⁴²For a summary of this evidence, see Mark Munn, *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 134–36.

Thucydides begins the passage by offering a summary remark on Pericles's career, asserting that he led Athens to its apex of greatness in peacetime and had correctly judged the extent of Athenian power once the war began (2.65.5). Though unparalleled in its praise, this opening line of the Eulogy is comparable to other valedictory remarks made upon the exit of significant actors from Thucydides's narrative (cf. 5.16.1, 7.86.5). Uniquely, however, Thucydides expands on this valediction by means of a complex, four-stage explanatory digression, beginning with the claim that "after [Pericles] died, greater still was the recognition of his foresight concerning the war" (2.65.6).

The tragic framework of the Eulogy has mostly escaped recognition in scholarly commentary, but the distinctive moves of the tragic explanatory tradition are evident from the first stage of the digression.⁴³ Immediately following the claim that Pericles's foresight was further recognized after his death, Thucydides explains why this was so:

For [gar] [Pericles] said that, if they remained patient, took care of the navy, and neither tried to expand the empire during the war nor put the city at risk, they would win; but they did the exact opposite on all these points, and they governed themselves and their allies badly according to personal ambition [*idias philotimias*] and private profit [*idia kerde*], concerning themselves with matters that appeared unrelated to the war and which, when they succeeded, provided honor and advantage primarily to private individuals [*tois idiôtais*], but, when they failed, harmed the city in the war. (2.65.7)

Beginning as it does with the particle *gar*, Thucydides marks this antithesis between the publicly minded policies of Pericles and the privately minded policies of his successors as an explanation for the greater appreciation of Periclean foresight after the war. It is not immediately clear, however, how it performs this role. There is no necessary link between the deterioration in public-mindedness and the wider recognition of Pericles's good judgment. Indeed, this deterioration would seem to suggest that, by blatantly disregarding his advice, the Athenians *failed* to appreciate Pericles's foresight after his death. However, the claim's explanatory force becomes apparent if we view it as a move within the tradition of tragic explanation: the Athenians' recognition of Pericles's foresight occurred after and because of their disregard for his prescient advice, which resulted in their edifying ruin. Such retrospective recognition invokes the model of unheeded tragic counsel; one thinks of Herodotus's Croesus calling out Solon's name from the pyre (1.86.3–5). In this first stage of the Eulogy's argument, Pericles is being cast a tragic advisor and the Athenian people as the wayward tyrant.

Pericles is nevertheless atypical as a tragic warner. While alive, he proved capable of steering the *polis tyrannos* away from hubris, error, and reversal,

⁴³One exception to this is Jacqueline de Romilly (*Rise and Fall*, 46–58), who reads the Eulogy's logic as a conventional, moralizing instance of hubris-driven reversal.

ensuring that it pursued a moderate and secure policy (2.65.5). Periclean counsel only becomes tragic after his death, when it was disregarded with dire effect. Thucydides thus prompts a number of interrelated questions. How was it that Pericles could lead the *polis tyrannos* stably during his lifetime when such counselors were traditionally ignored? What changed after his death? Did the *polis tyrannos* become filled with hubris when previously it had not been? Or had Pericles found a way to neutralize the hubris that was supposedly natural to tyrants and the masses alike?⁴⁴ Thucydides's digression immediately responds to this line of questioning. Beginning with the phrase, "the cause [*aition*] of this was," the second stage of the Eulogy articulates another explanatory antithesis to account for the deleterious turn in post-Periclean policy (2.65.8–10).

In pointing to the *aition* of this change, the tragically minded reader is led to expect a moralized causal story focusing on the transition of the Athenian people towards hubris. Thucydides satisfies this expectation to an extent. The antithesis that follows in fact explains how Athenian policy came to be dominated by popular hubris. However, the specific sense of *aition* that Thucydides uses here is scientific, not tragic. In this second explanatory antithesis, Thucydides accounts for Athens's transgressive turn according to an inversion in the structural dynamic of Athenian deliberation after Pericles's death, not according to the Athenians' moral failure.

While alive, according to Thucydides, Pericles was able to rule the Athenian demos because he combined three different characteristics: intelligence (*gnōmē*), the resources of elite status (*axiōmata*), and an insusceptibility to bribery (2.65.8). Pericles thus wielded a power that was grounded in his superlative prestige (*axiōsis*), and this prestige-based authority allowed him to "rul[e] the multitude freely" as the "first man" of Athens (2.65.8–9). The primary upshot of this rule by *axiōsis*, Thucydides explains, was Pericles's ability to persuade the people to follow his advice even when it was at odds with their extreme emotional states: "Whenever he perceived them to be inopportunistly bold on account of hubris, he would knock them down to a fearful state by speaking to them. Likewise, if he in turn perceived them to be unreasonably afraid, he would return them upright to a state of confidence" (2.65.9). The Athenian people were indeed prone to fits of hubris, Thucydides reveals, just as they were prone to irrational fear, but Pericles prevented these emotional states from being translated into public policy. Because his authority was based in superlative prestige, not in popular flattery (2.65.8), Pericles was in a position to speak against popular desire, tame the emotional excesses of the demos, and guide the city according to a consistent, stable policy.

The later narrative suggests that Pericles's successors were inferior to the great statesman in one or more of the constituent aspects of his prestige. Thucydides, however, does not explain the deterioration of Athenian politics

⁴⁴Cf. Herodotus 3.81.1.

in terms of the absolute decline of merit among leaders, as previous commentators have suggested.⁴⁵ Rather, in the latter half of this second explanatory antithesis, he points specifically to a change in their relative merit as the cause of this deterioration: “Those who came after [Pericles], however, because they were more equal to one another [*isoī mallon autoi pros allēlous ontes*] and each strove to become preeminent, conceded to even handing over the affairs of the city to the pleasure of the people” (2.65.10). As equals, post-Periclean leaders were incapable of inhibiting popular hubris by the unique power of their personal prestige. Regardless of whether they were morally righteous like Nicias or morally bankrupt like Alcibiades, all were impelled by their competitive posture to pander to the people’s desires, goading popular emotional states to still greater extremes and translating them directly into policy. These leaders became, in other words, exactly the sort of advisors that hybriistic tyrants prefer and that encourage them along the path towards their ruin. Without anyone to command assent, the people were thus freed to act tragically.

In its relative concision, this second stage in the digression encourages the reader to focus their attention on Pericles’s unique merits and political capacity, not on the deficiencies of the post-Periclean leaders. We ought not to conclude on these grounds, however, that the post-Pericleans are brought into the analysis merely as a foil.⁴⁶ If we attend carefully to the explanatory logic guiding this stage of the argument, we see instead that, if anyone is brought into the passage as an explanatory foil, it is Pericles. As noted above, this second stage of the Eulogy is introduced as a causal explanation for the Athenians’ departure from Pericles’s advice after his death. The explanatory demands of this stage in the argument are thus placed squarely in the post-Periclean period, even if the framing of Pericles as a tragic advisor in the first stage prompts many questions about the nature of his leadership. The question being answered is, Why this change? Answering this question gives Thucydides scope to explicate the nature of Periclean rule at length and to further develop a number of themes introduced earlier in Pericles’s speeches (cf. 2.37.1, 2.60.5–6). But this explication contributes to the logic of the digression only to the extent that it illuminates what went wrong after Pericles was replaced by a cohort of equals.

If Thucydides fails to draw out the deleterious logic of this competitive equality at length, it is perhaps because Pericles has already done so in his account of the Peloponnesian League’s deficiencies. Citing what he perceives to be the distinct advantage of the Athenians, Thucydides’s Pericles notes that the alliance opposed to them consists of diverse peoples with an equal vote (*isopsēphoi*) who lack a single council (*bouleutērion*) that might shape policy in a unitary and authoritative manner (1.141.6). The result of this equality, according to Pericles, is that

⁴⁵See above, note 3.

⁴⁶Cf. Rusten, *Thucydides: Book II*, 212–13.

some want most to exact revenge upon someone, while others want to preserve what is theirs. Though they meet for a long time, the least bit of this is spent on what is of common concern, while the majority of the time is spent attending to personal matters, and each thinks that no harm will come of their negligence, but that someone else will take care to look after [the common good] on their behalf, so that the collective destruction of what is common goes unnoticed because each individual entertains the same delusion. (1.141.6–7)

Thucydides, it seems, expects his reader to recognize a parallel logic at work in his characterization of the post-Periclean assembly and to liken Pericles to the single *bouleutērion* that the Peloponnesian League lacked. Yet, in bringing this logic forward into the Eulogy and embedding it within the larger framework of tragic reversal, Thucydides also extends its implications beyond mere inefficiency and inefficacy in the creation of policy. Now, this logic works as a central piece of a radically novel understanding of tragic overdetermination, wherein the tools of scientific explanation set the phenomenal experience of tragic reversal on a wholly naturalistic causal foundation. As in the tragic tradition, Thucydides continues to argue that lived experience is conditioned by a set of forces imperceptible to the human eye. However, the adoption of a structural understanding of overdetermination allows him to set aside the gods and to isolate the circumstances of competitive equality as the primary force driving the *dēmos turannos* towards its ruin.

The Eulogy's third stage moves the reader one step further within the tragic explanatory framework, addressing the implications of the hubristic turn in Athenian policy. "Because of this," Thucydides writes, again marking an explicit causal connection between stages of the digression, "many errors were made [*polla hēmartēthē*], as is natural for a great city and one with an empire, and most of all the voyage to Sicily" (2.65.11). Thucydides's logic and vocabulary draw overtly on the expectations of the tragic frame: hubristic policy leads the great, imperial city (i.e., the *polis turannos*) directly towards catastrophic *hamartiai*. However, Thucydides supplements this move with an unexpected explanation of Athenian failure in Sicily. He writes that Sicily "was not so much an error [*hēmartēma*] of judgment concerning those whom they were attacking, as it was [an error] on the part of those who remained at home" (2.65.11). Without denying that the judgment to attack Sicily was mistaken, he insists that the initial decision itself was not the primary cause of the voyage's failure.⁴⁷ Rather, he states that the expedition failed because of "those who remained at home, men who did not make policy according to the needs of those in the field, but who, through personal attacks [*idias diabolos*] over the leadership of the people, rather weakened the army in the field and for the first time incited the citizens in the city against one another" (2.65.11). In this move, Thucydides identifies the Athenian

⁴⁷On this point, see H. D. Westlake, "Thucydides 2.56.11," in *Essays on the Greek Historians and Greek History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).

experience in Sicily with the phenomenal experience of tragic reversal. However, his revisionary account of the true cause of this failure draws the reader's attention back to the structural dynamics at work. In particular, Thucydides's use of *idios* to describe the self-regarding ambitions of the Athenian leadership echoes the earlier use of this adjective and its related noun to describe how post-Periclean policy departed from Pericles's prescriptions (2.65.7: *idias philotimias, idia kerdē, tois idiōtais*). This echo encourages the reader to recognize the common structural cause leading to both the hubristic turn in policy and the Sicilian disaster.

In the final stage of the digression, Thucydides rounds out the logic of hubris-driven reversal, moving from the great Sicilian error to Athenian defeat. This move, however, is not introduced by a causal connection. Instead, Thucydides draws a purely verbal parallel between the defeat suffered in Sicily and the final defeat of Athens, upsetting the causal sequence leading from hubris to *hamartia*, and from *hamartia* to ruin.

Having suffered defeat [*sphalentes*] in Sicily in the greater part of the navy and in other war materials as well, and with the city already in a state of civil strife, [the Athenians] nevertheless endured against their original enemies for [eight] more years,⁴⁸ and with them the Sicilians as well, and against the still greater number of tributary allies who rebelled, and later against Cyrus, the son of the Persian king, who joined as ally against them and provided money for the Peloponnesians to build a navy, and they did not give in until they were led by personal quarrels [*idias diaphoras*] to attack themselves and were finally defeated [*esphalēsan*]. (2.65.12)

The first and last words of this belabored sentence are forms of the aorist passive of *sphallō*, a verb often used to describe tragic reversal (e.g., Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 296–97; Euripides, frag. 262.2). The verbal repetition draws attention to the relationship between the two defeats, and all that comes between them, while attenuating the causal link. Though they suffered ruin in Sicily, the Athenians were not yet ruined. Rather, they endure, demonstrating their heroic mettle, even as the odds stacked against them become increasingly overwhelming—a process paralleled in the increasingly overwhelming syntactical structure of Thucydides's sentence. With the whole known world against them, Thucydides explains, defeat still does not come until the Athenians turn on themselves. To account for this fatal turn, Thucydides again appeals to the private quarrels (*idias diaphoras*) of the leadership stemming from the competitive dynamic of the assembly. As before, the adjective *idios* underscores the continuity of underlying causes among the three stages of Athenian reversal. Like the turn to hubristic policy and the great Sicilian error, Athenian ruin is ultimately determined

⁴⁸There is a corruption in the text as this point. See Hornblower, *Commentary*, Vol. 1, 348.

by the competitive, egalitarian dynamic among post-Periclean leaders, not the will of a scornful deity.

Thucydides's identification of Athenian defeat with civil strife rather than the consequences of great error indicates that his interventions into the tragic explanatory tradition were not only methodological. From the vantage point he created for himself, Thucydides was able to recognize that the *polis tyrannos* did not strictly follow the pattern of reversal characteristic of the tragic heroes of the historical and mythological past. When the hero was a democratic collective like Athens, not an individual autocrat, it could absorb the catastrophic shocks caused by great policy errors almost indefinitely, thus proving itself to be more heroic than any individual ever could be, for it was capable of enduring far greater suffering.⁴⁹ In drawing attention to this difference, Thucydides exposes the explanatory costs incurred by those like Aeschylus and Herodotus who had relied exclusively on analogy when wishing to present the democracy as a tragic autocrat. While figurative allusion might succeed in highlighting the similar patterns framing the phenomenal experiences of individual and collective reversal, it failed to penetrate their underlying causal forces and thus overlooked the critical ways in which the two differed.

Relying on analogy, however, might not only have explanatory costs; it could also encourage political actors to behave in self-undermining ways. As we observed above, the tragic tradition of explanation routinely prescribed political equality as the antidote to the hubris-driven reversal of an unaccountable ruler. Whether Thucydides thought that this was effective in the case of an individual autocrat is not clear. What is evident, however, was his identification of the extension of equality into the sphere of democratic leadership as the structural cause of reversal in his analysis, not its cure. Those who merely analogized between tragic autocrats and the democracy were destined to misunderstand this crucial point. In their ignorance, we must imagine, they were more likely to insist on equality wherever they could and fear the ascent of another individual to Periclean-like supremacy. In the case of Alcibiades, as Thucydides will demonstrate at length in book 6, this is more or less what happened, and with devastating consequences.

And yet, while Thucydides's analysis focuses attention on the need for a quasi-autocratic leader such as Pericles, it also subtly undermines the belief that Periclean *policy* was the critical factor holding tragic reversal at bay, or indeed that Pericles fully understood the overdetermined causal dynamics

⁴⁹The Sicilian Expedition is the most dramatic example of the democracy's capacity to overcome catastrophe, but it is not without precedent in Thucydides's account. In the Pentecontaetia, Thucydides tells of the massive expedition to Egypt involving two hundred Athenian and allied ships (1.104.1–2, 109.1–110.4). As in Sicily, this expedition was almost completely annihilated (cf. 1.110.1, 7.87.6), but Thucydides's narrative makes it appear as if this loss had no effect on the continued rise of Athenian power.

of Athenian success and failure. The praise offered Pericles in Thucydides's Eulogy is effusive, but it is also double-edged. Pericles's exhortation to play it safe and look after the fleet implies that he believed that a conservative foreign policy was critical for Athenian perseverance. The Eulogy demonstrates, however, that this was not the case. The Athenians survived the great errors of the post-Pericleans, profligate though they were in lives and suffering, and Thucydides's analysis suggests that they would have continued to survive such shocks, perhaps indefinitely, if the city had remained united. What they could not abide was the fragmentation of the demos and onset of factional conflict fostered by competitive elite politics. The critical contribution of Periclean leadership to Athenian success, therefore, was not so much his expert understanding of the political system that he led, but his ability to maintain civic cohesion through his superlative prestige (*axiōsis*).⁵⁰ Thus, with one hand Thucydides lifts up Athens's first man, elevating him with superlative praise, and with the other he unmasks the limitations of his theoretical vision.

Thucydides's Tragic Science: Beyond the Eulogy

Though comprehensive in its explanatory scope, the Eulogy is just one moment in a text often thought to be at odds with itself. If the reading above demonstrates that the analysis of Athenian defeat contained in this passage is richer, more intricate, and more innovative in its theoretical ambitions than commentators have acknowledged, an adequate defense of its explanatory authority also demands an account of how this reading contributes to our understanding of Thucydides's larger project. It is clearly beyond the scope of this article to address all of the concerns that have been raised about the coherence of this account. Nevertheless, even in this short section, it can be shown that this reading of the Eulogy offers interpreters a more productive framework for approaching Thucydides's methodological orientation and substantive explanation of Athenian defeat elsewhere. What follows will give a sense of this potential by looking briefly at those sections that have appeared most immediately problematic—namely, the Archaeology and the Sicilian Expedition.

First to be addressed is Thucydides's reconstruction of Hellenic political development from the hazy dawn of precivilization to the eve of the Peloponnesian War, conventionally known as the Archaeology (1.2.1–19.1). In this extended digression, Thucydides employs the indicative language of

⁵⁰Cf. Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science," 150–53. One might read the reaction to Pericles's final speech (2.65.2–4) as an indication of Pericles's ultimate inability to keep the demos unified under the extreme stress of war and plague. I would contend, however, that it indicates exactly the opposite, acting as a limit case in which Pericles is still able to maintain unified support for his war policy even under circumstances of the utmost stress.

scientific analysis, its rationalistic and inductive mode of explanation, its naturalistic and material approach to causation, and its amoral model of self-interest to radical effect. The resultant narrative redescribes and demystifies hallowed features of Attic and Hellenic traditions such as Athenian autochthony, Minoan thalassocracy, and the Trojan War, thus offering a spirited start to what Maria Fragoulaki has called Thucydides's "antagonistic dialogue with the epic tradition, and Homer in particular."⁵¹ Clifford Orwin has characterized the Archaeology's orientation towards tradition in even stronger terms. He deems it "polemical" and a "contest" in which Thucydides rejects poetic authority outright, debunks its use of supernatural explanation, and thus gives himself a "clean slate" from which to renarrate the past according to his own radical use of rational inference.⁵²

The Archaeology would thus appear to set Thucydides's project on a decisively scientific trajectory and to assert its incompatibility with Greek poetic and mythological tradition. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Archaeology has played an important role in accounts that identify Thucydides as the harbinger of political science and scientific history.⁵³ However, a renewed look at the Archaeology in light of the methodological orientation of the Eulogy, as interpreted above, suggests that the antagonism between scientific analysis and tragic tradition has been overstated. As in the Eulogy, the Archaeology exhibits a pattern of scientific reinterpretation that largely accepts the traditional account of phenomena's observable form while seeking to naturalize their underlying causes. The project is, in other words, revisionary without being revolutionary.

Exemplary of this negotiation is Thucydides's treatment of the Trojan War. Here, we find an account that is indeed radical in its explanation of why the war took the shape that it did. According to Thucydides, it was fear of Agamemnon's superlative power that enabled the expedition (1.9.1, 3); it was a lack of money that limited the size of the expedition (1.11.1); and it was the need to divide Greek troops into fighters, farmers, and raiders that caused the war to drag on for ten years (1.11.1–2). Orwin is clearly right in noting that these rationalizing stories contest the poets' attribution of supernatural causes to the Trojan War's outbreak, duration, and eventual outcome. Nevertheless, to say that Thucydides's account begins from a

⁵¹Maria Fragoulaki, "Thucydides Homericus and the Episode of Mycalessus (7.29–30): Myth and History, Space and Collective Memory," *Histos*, supplement 11 (2020): 73.

⁵²Clifford Orwin, "Thucydides' Contest: Thucydidean 'Methodology' in Context," *Review of Politics* 51, no. 3 (1989): 345–46, building on Strauss, *City and Man*, 156–57. See also Connor, *Thucydides*, 23; cf. Tobias Joho, "Thucydides, Epic, and Tragedy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, ed. Ryan Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 587.

⁵³E.g., Cochrane, *Thucydides and the Science of History*, 37–50; Ober, "Thucydides and the Invention of Political Science," 146–47.

“clean slate” is an overstatement. The central plot points of Homer’s narrative continue to anchor his reinterpretation and to give shape to the account.⁵⁴ Thucydides accepts on the basis of poetic authority that the expedition took place, that Agamemnon led it, that Homer’s Catalogue of Ships offers a reasonably sound account of its participants, and that Greek victory took a decade; all facts that could not be independently generated through rational inference or induction. Rather, even in this, the most scientific of sections in Thucydides’s text, tradition is treated as a generally reliable guide to what happened in the past, even as it rejects the traditional account of what was behind these phenomena. As in the Eulogy, tradition thus offered an initial framework for identifying what needed to be explained, while the tools of fifth-century science were mobilized to provide such explanations.

Two further aspects of the Archaeology reinforce this pattern of interaction between science and tradition. First, we find a comparable negotiation at work in the claim that initiates the Archaeology’s justificatory digression—that the Peloponnesian war was the “greatest disturbance” (*kinēsis megistē*, 1.1.2)—comparable to what is found in its substantive arguments. Though it is often considered a polemical claim, it is one that accepts the rules of the game established by Thucydides’s poetic and logographic predecessors. For Thucydides, what constitutes greatness and therefore most merits discussion (*axiologōtatos*) is the capacity to wage war and do violence (1.1.1). Thucydides thus begins by adopting a central convention of the epic genre, but at the same time he reinterprets how exactly greatness should be measured. It is the product of two factors, he implies, both devoid of anything supernatural: military preparedness (*paraskeuē*) and the scope of collective action (1.1.1). Thucydides thus advances beyond his predecessors in his account of greatness by introducing a further degree of precision to its measurement, but he does so without cutting the thread of continuity binding his work to theirs.

At the end of the Archaeology, Thucydides returns to the subject of greatness and adds a new dimension to the equation. He writes that the Peloponnesian War was greater than prior wars, and especially the Persian War, not only in terms of military preparedness and numbers of men, but also in terms of the suffering (*pathēmata*) that it produced (1.23.1–2). Connor has argued that this final addition offers strong evidence of Thucydides’s ironic deployment of scientific analysis and his subversive departure from Herodotus and the rest of the Greek tradition.⁵⁵ This must be mistaken, however. The equation between suffering and greatness was a central feature of the tragic literary tradition, not a departure from it, ironic

⁵⁴Tim Rood, “Objectivity and Authority: Thucydides’ Historical Method,” in Rengakos and Tsakmakis, *Brill’s Companion to Thucydides*, 233, characterizes this relationship well, noting that the Archaeology is “a virtuoso display of reasoning” anchored in an “interpretation of the general Greek mythographic tradition.”

⁵⁵Connor, *Thucydides*, 31, 248.

or otherwise. Herodotus, for instance, makes a very similar claim about the Persian Wars, stating that “more evils came into being for Greece” during the conflict than in all of the generations prior to Darius’s invasion (6.98.2). Elsewhere, we find that the greatness of the Greek heroes was intimately tied to the suffering that they experienced and produced. Heracles leaves a trail of destruction wherever he goes, and his life is marked by extraordinary misfortune.⁵⁶ Achilles’s very name suggests widespread pain and grief (*achos-laos*), and the undying fame that is his fate requires his own destruction.⁵⁷ One could go on at length: “much suffering” Odysseus, Oedipus, Ajax, Agamemnon. Bernard Knox has written of the Sophoclean hero that “suffering and glory are fused in an indissoluble unity,” and this statement rings true of the entire heroic tradition.⁵⁸ It is unsurprising therefore that ancient commentators found nothing remarkable about Thucydides’s own union of greatness and suffering in his introduction.⁵⁹

Second, and more briefly, a synthetic approach between traditionally epic and scientific modes of explanation can be detected in the literary form of the Archaeology, not just in its substantive arguments. As a genealogy of the effects of technological advancement on political association, the Archaeology utilizes a novel mode of etiological explanation associated with the scientism of late fifth-century sophistic and Hippocratic analysis.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, this genealogy is structured as a masterful piece of ring-composition, a characteristic literary device of epic poetry.⁶¹ By grafting the genealogical narrative onto a ring pattern that itself contains a master ring and many smaller epicycles, Thucydides once again innovates within an epic framework and raises it to an unparalleled level of complexity and scientific sophistication. Thus, even at the level of literary form,

⁵⁶See, e.g., Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1417–23; Euripides, *Heracles*, esp. 1196–98, 1255–1310.

⁵⁷On the etymology of Achilles’s name, see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 69–93.

⁵⁸Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 6. See also Colin Macleod, “Thucydides and Tragedy,” in *Collected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 140, 157; Joho, “Thucydides, Epic, and Tragedy,” 587.

⁵⁹See, e.g., Lucian, *How to Write History* 54.1. Also, consider Pericles’s puzzling praise of the Athenians’ “memorials of good and bad deeds” at 2.41.4, where the “bad deeds” (*kaka*) in question might equally refer to the suffering of the Athenians and that which they imposed on others. On this ambiguity, see Daniel Tompkins, “The Death of Nicias: No Laughing Matter,” *Histos*, supplement 6 (2017): 101–2.

⁶⁰As in, e.g., Plato, *Protagoras* 320c3ff.; Hippocrates, *On Ancient Medicine* 3.3–6.

⁶¹For an ambitious attempt to track both the major pattern of the Archaeology’s rings and the minor rings that occur within this larger frame, see J. R. Ellis, “The Structure and Argument of Thucydides’ Archaeology,” *Classical Antiquity* 10 (1991): 344–76. Cf. Connor, *Thucydides*, 30n29, 251.

Thucydides's Archaeology evinces a consistent approach to the scientific revision of traditional explanatory modes.

If the overt scientism and apparently polemical stance towards Homeric tradition has served to distract from the synthetic orientation of the Archaeology, the inverse has been true of the Sicilian Expedition. Despite the resistance first offered to Cornford's thesis, Thucydides's emplotment of the Sicilian Expedition within a tragic frame is now widely accepted: the Melian episode reveals Athenian hubris on the eve of the expedition; Nicias acts as a tragic warner in the Sicilian Debate; Alcibiades appeals to and embodies both the Athenians' lust for self-aggrandizement and their willingness to follow immediately gratifying impulses towards great error; and the narrative of Athenian defeat outside of Syracuse, especially at its climax, reads as an artful depiction of reversal on an epic scale.⁶² An increasingly impressive body of work has furthermore revealed the dense set of thematic, topographic, and linguistic allusions to poetic and Herodotean precedents in books 6 and 7, thus providing compelling evidence that Thucydides's nods towards tragic convention were almost certainly intentional, not unconscious as Cornford had supposed.⁶³

Scholars have been somewhat less savvy, however, in their interpretations of what Thucydides was doing in alluding to these precedents. More often than not, it is taken for granted that his appeals to canonical parallels and conventional explanatory patterns served similarly conventional explanatory ends, namely, the production of a cautionary tale exposing the self-destructive effects of unrestrained self-aggrandizement.⁶⁴ Intuitive as such a reading may be, however, it is fraught with problems. Most obviously, it places the Sicilian

⁶²See, e.g., Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy," 140–46; Rood, *Thucydides*, 201; Bedford and Workman, "Tragic Reading"; Emily Greenwood, "Thucydides on the Sicilian Expedition," in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster, *Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, 172–73.

⁶³See, for instance, N. Marinatos Kopff and H. R. Rawlings, "Panoletthria and Divine Punishment," *Parola del Passato* 182 (1978): 331–37; Nanno Marinatos, "Nicias as a Wise Advisor and Tragic Warner in Thucydides," *Philologus* 124, no. 2 (1980): 305–10; Stavros Frangoulidis, "A Pattern from Homer's *Odyssey* in the Sicilian Narrative of Thucydides," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 44, no. 2 (1993): 95–102; C. J. Mackie, "Homer and Thucydides: Corcyra and Sicily," *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 103–13; June Allison, "Homeric Allusions at the Close of Thucydides' Sicilian Narrative," *American Journal of Philology* 118 (1997): 499–516; Lisa Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides: The Sicilian Expedition and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 85–120; Joho, "Thucydides, Epic, and Tragedy," 601–3; Fragoulaki, "Thucydides Homericus." See also Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy."

⁶⁴In many readings (see esp. Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy," 146; Connor, *Thucydides*, 206–9; Allison, "Homeric Allusions," 514–15), this conventional explanatory project is compounded with the conventional aesthetic ends of dramatic irony and heightened pathos.

narrative at odds with the methodological orientation of the rest of the text by attributing to it a moralizing and theologically rooted explanatory perspective. Additionally, by suggesting a pattern in which moral failure, the pursuit of great error, and final defeat are all causally linked, it contradicts the substantive analysis of the Eulogy and leaves the reader no framework for making sense of Athenian perseverance in book 8.⁶⁵ To make sense of these tensions, the reader must see Thucydides as either a more or a less sophisticated writer than he first appears to be: less if these inconsistencies are read as proof that he simply changed his mind when writing the Sicilian Expedition; more if they are read as indications of an ironic or esoteric approach to writing history.

Yet it is not just in its relationship to other sections of the text that the conventionalist reading proves inadequate. Problems arise within the account of the Sicilian Expedition as well, as its narrative and explicit analysis both chafe against the expectations of the conventional tragic pattern. Consider, for example, the presentation of Nicias. If initially depicted as a tragic warner, he quickly abandons this persona in his second contribution to the Sicilian Debate, strategically dropping the warner's frank manner of speaking in order to adopt a more indirect rhetorical approach. In so doing, he contributes significantly to the scale of the expedition, and thus also to the scale of its disaster, making the once-tragic warner a causally significant factor in producing the horrifying scope of his city's defeat.⁶⁶ Nicias also becomes partner to the expedition's failure in a more immediate way. As general of the expedition that he opposed, his questionable judgments help to seal the fate of the expedition and, again, to magnify the scale of its reversal. He advocates against withdrawal after the disaster at Epipolae out of a fear of the popular reaction in Athens (7.48.3–4), delays the army's retreat out of superstitious reverence for a lunar eclipse (7.50.4), and appears to be guided by a belief that the divine moral order will limit Athenian suffering (7.77.3–4). The result is the complete annihilation of his expeditionary force and his own ignominious death; a consequence that openly defies the moral logic of the conventional tragic pattern supposedly framing the narrative. Thucydides underlines this dissonance in commenting that Nicias "least deserved to meet such misfortune [*dustuchias*] of any Greek in my day on account of his having devoted his life to conventional virtue [*es aretēn nenomismenēn*]" (7.86.5).⁶⁷

⁶⁵Macleod ("Thucydides and Tragedy," 141), who adopts the conventionalist reading, thus states of book 8 that Thucydides "had to find a way of beginning again after so triumphantly concluding his work."

⁶⁶Virginia Hunter, *Thucydides: The Artful Reporter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1973), 187; Marinotas, "Nicias as Wise Advisor," 306; Conner, *Thucydides*, 200; Rood, *Thucydides*, 167; Tompkins, "Death of Nicias," 123.

⁶⁷This is a notoriously difficult passage to translate on account of the ambiguity surrounding the string of feminine accusatives concluding the sentence (*dia tēn pasan es aretēn nenomismenēn epitēdeusin*). Contrary to K. J. Dover, *Thucydides: Book*

Interpretations vary widely as to what exactly Thucydides may have wished to express through this obituary.⁶⁸ One thing, however, appears clear: the brutal death of righteous Nicias defies the conventional, moralized logic of hubris-driven reversal.

Equally disruptive is the causal line that Thucydides draws between popular suspicion of Alcibiades's character, his exile, and Athenian defeat. Just prior to his speech in the Sicilian Debate, Thucydides underlines the Athenians' mistrust of the self-assured young leader, noting that they interpreted his transgressive behavior and outlandish lifestyle as signs of tyrannical ambition. This mistrust, Thucydides asserts, eventually led the people to turn on Alcibiades and, in so doing, bring about the city's ruin (6.15.3–4). Inserted into the text immediately after Nicias's performance as Athens's tragic warner, the comment jars the reader out of the conventional tragic explanatory frame and brings their attention back to the Eulogy's causal framework and a focus on elite competition. The relationship between this explanatory framework and Alcibiades's personal trajectory become increasingly clear in the subsequent narrative. The reader learns that political jealousies and popular suspicion of Alcibiades, a suspicion compounded by the people's misunderstanding of the city's tyrannical past, first led to his recall from the Sicilian Expedition in order to stand trial (6.28.1–2, 29.3, 53.2, 60.1, 61.1–5). Rather than return to almost certain death, Alcibiades flees to Sparta, where he manages to convince his former enemies to send immediate help to the Sicilians, leading to Gyllipus's arrival in Sicily just as the Syracusans are about to capitulate (6.88.9–10, 91.1–4, 93.1–2, 103.3, 7.2.1–2). With the arrival of Gyllipus, however, the tide of war turns against the Athenians. So close, Thucydides intimates, did the Athenians come to succeeding in an endeavor that, according to the conventional tragic pattern, should have been doomed to failure (7.2.4). Rather, through this chain of events, the reader is encouraged to trace this failure back to the self-destructive effects of elite competition for popular favor and Alcibiades's inability to command the enduring trust of the people. Thucydides thus embeds within

VII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 70–71, Rood, *Thucydides*, 184n9, and Simon Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, vol. 3, *Books 5.25–8.109* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 741–42, but following the scholiast Aelius Aristides, I take *nenomismenēn* with *aretēn* rather than *epitēdeusin*. Grammatically, the participle might be taken with either, and it is possible that its ambiguity was calculated on Thucydides's part. However, I am sympathetic to Connor's concern (*Thucydides*, 205) that it is unclear what *nenomismenēn* adds to *epitēdeusin*. It appears far clearer what it contributes to the sentence—and Thucydides seems to be underlining a much more interesting point—if we take *nenomismenēn* with *aretēn*: it is Nicias's complete adherence to *conventional* virtue (i.e., that code of behavior which was supposed to protect one from tragic reversal) that makes Nicias's fate so unfortunate.

⁶⁸On the range of interpretations given to this obituary, see Rood, *Thucydides*, 183–84; also, Tompkins, "Death of Nicias," esp. 120–22.

the Sicilian narrative an explanatory line that consistently disrupts the conventional, moralized logic of hubris-driven reversal while reinforcing the synthetic analysis of the Eulogy.⁶⁹

If the particular trajectories of Nicias and Alcibiades within Thucydides's Sicilian narrative prove problematic for the conventionalist reading of its tragic framing, both harmonize with the synthetic explanatory perspective and substantive analysis of the Eulogy developed above. Indeed, it is by offering an effective framework for making sense of the apparent inconsistency of their stories with the conventional tragic pattern that the profound consistency of Thucydides's explanatory project becomes clearest. As we have seen, the Eulogy's analysis prepares the reader for an experience of the Sicilian catastrophe that will bear many of the hallmark features of hubris-driven reversal. Nevertheless, it also prepares them for the ways in which, as a democratic "hero," Athens will depart from the conventional pattern in a manner explicable by a logic of competitive equality among leaders. As just noted, the tragic effects of this structural dynamic are most clearly signaled to the reader through the story of Alcibiades; a man who both personifies the competitive elevation of the personal over the public and most acutely draws out this disposition in others. In the story of his ascendancy, exile, and betrayal of Athens, we find a direct illustration of how the amoral, structural logic is productive of hubris, *hamartia*, and reversal in an imperial democracy. Thucydides's account of Nicias, for its part, confirms the Eulogy's analysis in more subtle and surprising ways. Through Nicias, Thucydides illuminates how the dynamic of competitive equality, as well as a misunderstanding of the naturalistic causes of democratic reversal, might even pervert the actions of virtuous men motivated by the common good. As Nicias transitions from the frankness of the tragic warrior to the emotive appeals of a more sophisticated rhetorician, he does so out of a concern for the city. Nevertheless, we see, this competitive maneuver ultimately adds to his city's suffering. It is with similarly good intentions that Nicias dithers outside of Syracuse, warns his fellow generals of the punishment that awaits them should they retreat, and puts his trust in the gods. But good intentions are not enough in the Peloponnesian War. As Thucydides has already prepared the reader to understand, the determining forces of Athenian defeat, both in Sicily and in the war, spring from an altogether different source.

Conclusion

Connor observes that it was Thucydides's ambition "to lead his readers beyond clichés and conventionalities to a deeper understanding of the

⁶⁹On the consistency of the Eulogy's analysis of defeat in Sicily and Thucydides's account of Alcibiades in books 6 and 7, as well as a bibliography of those ancient historians who have questioned the relationship between these two sections of the text, see Rood, *Thucydides*, 159–82.

war," not to champion any preexisting ideology or explanatory frame.⁷⁰ The present study confirms this conclusion, but it suggests that Thucydides found this deeper understanding not in the ultimate rejection of these conventional explanatory perspectives, but through their careful and considered synthesis. For Thucydides's classical readers, the resultant analysis of Athenian defeat would have been as familiar in its constituent parts as it was radically novel in its ultimate effect, offering a vision of the democratic hero that appeared to follow the well-worn path of its autocratic analog while diverging from this traditional template in critical ways. For the modern reader, the synthetic nature of this explanatory perspective and the revisionary force of its conclusions are not so immediately or intuitively grasped. Yet, once recognized, they make clear the profound interpretive costs of expecting Thucydides to abide by the polarities that often preoccupy our modern sensibility. As this study has most directly shown, to insist that Thucydides be either a tragic or a scientific thinker is to occlude his most innovative and ambitious contribution to debates over the fate of the imperial democracy. Yet this reading of the Eulogy's analysis problematizes the imposition of other familiar polarities onto his political thinking as well: that of realism vs. moralism, structure vs. agency, abstract theory vs. narrative artistry. By focusing his readers' attention on the interrelationship between the virtues of leaders, the structural dynamic of deliberation, and the civic morality of the general populace, Thucydides's Eulogy challenges its reader to consider the ways in which individuals can both change and be changed by the power structures within which they live, as well as the ways in which various constellations of power might determine and be determined by the moral content of civic action, all while leaving space for contingency to play a role in determining just how these complex interactions play out.

The Eulogy reveals further that Thucydides's synthesizing tendencies are not limited to matters of method and perspective. They also extend to his basic conceptualization of the Athenian political system. It is commonplace to make sense of Thucydides's division between Periclean and post-Periclean periods as a juxtaposition between the antithetically related regime types of autocracy and democracy.⁷¹ Thucydides's comment that Periclean Athens "was a democracy in name [*logōi*], while in fact [*ergōi*] rule by the first man" (2.65.9) invites such a conclusion by seeming to imply that democracy, properly understood, could not abide a leader of the Periclean type.⁷² Yet if Thucydides is in fact highlighting this polarity here, his use of the tragic pattern to frame the larger analysis of Athenian defeat simultaneously calls it into question. The use of the tragic frame asks the

⁷⁰Connor, *Thucydides*, 230.

⁷¹E.g., Macleod, "Thucydides and Tragedy," 149; Ryan Balot, *Greek Political Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 131. Cf. Lynette Mitchell, "Thucydides and the Monarch in Democracy," *Polis* 25, no. 1 (2008): 18–21.

⁷²Cf. Perry, "Pericles as a 'Man of Athens,'" 237, 246.

reader to make sense of the Athenian democracy as a sort of collective autocrat, and it demonstrates that it was in the post-Periclean period—that is, when Athens was more truly “democratic”—that the regime behaved most characteristically so. Instead of reinforcing a clear distinction between autocracy and democracy, the Eulogy’s analysis thus demands that its reader recognize the multiple ways in which the latter might resemble the former. Rather than think that the Athenian regime was more or less of a democracy after the death of Pericles, we are asked to recognize that the locus of autocratic power within the democracy had simply changed.