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Thucydides' Tyrannicide Digression and the Castration of the Demos

The mutilation of the Herms in 415 is a critical moment in Thucydides' history of the Sicilian Expedition, with far-reaching consequences for the Athenian war effort. In the midst of this important discussion, though, Thucydides suddenly digresses to analyze the ancient legend of the murder of Hipparchus. Why at this juncture in his narrative does Thucydides turn aside to recount this story? Why does he juxtapose the mutilation of the Herms and the tyrannicide?

Sex, I argue, is the link between the two events. The tyrannicide inaugurated not only the democracy, but also a specific mode of male sexuality. Harmodius and Aristogeiton were lovers as well as tyrant-slayers, and their love is the model for a democratic eros in which every Athenian citizen is an Aristogeiton, sexually dominant and socially autonomous. The tyrannicide legend contrasts this democratic eros to the tyrannical lust of Hipparchus. Taking whomever he wants, the tyrant is the city's sole erastes, and he transforms the entire demos into potential eromenoi. It is this same logic that attributes the mutilation of the Herms to a tyrannical conspiracy: the Herms, as Winkler argued, represented the democratic citizen in his sexual and political autarchy, and so their mutilation is an unmaning, a castration of the demos. Thucydides' historical digression can be read as a defense against this contemporary attack on Athenian masculinity, for in the tyrannicide legend, the demos is not disfigured by tyrannical conspirators, but instead straps on its sword and heroically kills the tyrant.

This juxtaposition of two narratives (and two erotic modes) also helps explain the implication of Alcibiades in the mutilation, for Alcibiades seems to blur precisely the erotic boundaries that Thucydides tries to reaffirm in his catachresis. Although he was Socrates' beloved, Socrates jokes in the *Symposium* that he acted more like the erastes. A sexually precocious youth, Alcibiades was also an adult eromenos, and as such, he displays all the qualities associated with sexual passivity: foreignness, femininity, and tyranny. Transgressing the boundaries that constituted Athenian masculinity, Alcibiades represents the same erotic and political trauma we see in the mutilation of the Herms: his very life is a perversion of Athenian citizen sexuality.

But in spite of his *paranoia*, the demos loved him: "they long for him and hate him and want to have him" (Ar. *Frogs* 1425). Plutarch narrates his return from exile: the demos is so overwhelmed by his triumphant display that they "desire to be ruled by him as a tyrant" (*Alc.* 34.7). In this scene, the two narratives that Thucydides juxtaposes collapse into one another. The demos, no longer bravely withstanding the assault of the tyrant, succumbs to his seduction and longs to be dominated by him. Instead of tyrannicides, the citizens have themselves become Hermokopidai, choosing their own passivity. Thus the textual crux in Thucydides 6 is part of a broader crisis in Athenian masculinity, and while it seeks a textual cure for this crisis in the tyrannicide digression, the juxtaposition of the two narratives merely bespeaks a larger instability in the erotic economy of the democracy.