

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03916-2 - Thucydides on Politics: Back to the Present

Geoffrey Hawthorn

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 The text

Thomas Macaulay often read while he walked. ‘Walked out over Westminster Bridge’, he wrote in his journal for 24 November 1848, ‘and back by the Hungerford Bridge. Read the first book of Thucydides – excellent. I never liked him so much’; 26 November, ‘after breakfast – read Thucydides during some time. Finished the third book’; 1 December, ‘began the sixth book of Thucydides – very good’; 2 December, ‘walked home and began the seventh book’; 3 December, ‘finished the seventh book’; 4 December, ‘staid at home all day – a miserable rainy day – making corrections for the 2nd edition [of the *History of England*]. Then read the eighth book of Thucydides – not every word – but particularly the account of the Athenian revolutions.’ ‘On the whole’, Macaulay reflected later that afternoon, ‘Thucydides is the first of historians. What is good in him is better than anything that can be found elsewhere. But his dry parts are dreadfully dry; and his arrangement is bad.’

Few can have read so much difficult Greek prose so quickly; the text in a modern English translation can run to nearly 600 pages. Few certainly will have read any of it while walking through the stink and noise of London in the 1840s or, as Macaulay also had, while taking a shave.¹ But many have read the first seven of the eight books into which the text has been divided with comparable enthusiasm. They too are drawn into the story of men in what Thucydides called ‘the war of the Peloponnesians and Athenians’, ‘dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly’ as Bernard Williams put it ‘with a world that is only partly intelligible to human agency’.² But many have shared Macaulay’s dismay in reading on. They too have found the narrative in book 8, up to what he calls the ‘Athenian revolutions’ of 411, to be ‘dull and spiritless’ and lacking in drama, an aimless sequence in which he seems ‘to grope his way like a man without a clue’; ‘a series of not even well-connected outlines’; running on ‘flat and monotonous, offering no outstanding feature

¹ Macaulay 2008: II 5–11. Being shaved, Sullivan 2009: 140.

² Williams 1993: 164.

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[More information](#)

2 Thucydides on Politics

as a starting point for analysis'; 'a bald record of quarrels, back-stabbing and inconclusive struggles' which after the account of the 'revolution' in Athens (more exactly a coup) 'breaks off in mid-stream' and offers no end; a sequence that is simply stuffed with too many facts. One Marcellinus, writing probably in the seventh century AD, thought that Thucydides must have been ill when he drafted it, in a state in which 'the intellect' is in 'little sympathy' with the body, 'more unstrung'. In an otherwise fine lecture in 1981 on epic and tragedy in Thucydides, Colin Macleod declared that 'it is clear, indeed, that the whole history, or what remains of it, finds its culmination' not in book 8 but at the end of book 7.³

Yet book 8 is as absorbing as any in the text, as central to the qualities of Thucydides' political understanding as it is to the story he has to tell. It is true that there is no set piece of the kind that he presents in the earlier books and nothing to attract those concerned with what politics might ideally be. By its eighteenth year, few of those involved in what was by now an urgent war had the will or the time to make any but the most instrumental of arguments about the rules of rule. But although it has none of the drama of the debates on large questions, only those who are deaf to politics could see in it no more than quarrels, back-stabbing and inconclusive struggle. The shifting alliances, antagonisms and suspicions between those who were notionally on the same side as well as not; their assumptions, fantasies, ostensible interests, declared intentions and apparent motives; their mutual appreciations, enmities, confusions, loyalties and deceptions; the combinations and collisions of reflection, risk, caution, courage, cowardice, cunning and stupidity; not to mention the distribution of good luck and bad in what Thucydides calls the 'unaccountable contingencies of human life' (8.24.5), are the stuff of success and failure in politics and war. And he writes of them with his best dispassionate passion. His story of the political contests between the mid 430s and 416 in the first five books has shown that where fear, anger and frustration combine in allies and antagonists few of whom have a steady conception of what they can do to allay these feelings and where none can achieve a decisive advantage, each will need to respond in one opportunistic move after another; the consequence of which is to prolong a state of affairs from which all, not without ambivalence, are hoping to escape. His resumption of the story in book 8, after the Athenian campaign in Sicily in 415–413, shows the difference that having more

³ Also Ch. 14 below. Reactions to book 8, Cornford 1907: 244, Schwartz from 1919 quoted by Pouncey 1980: 175 n. 16, de Romilly 1963: 53, Crane 1996: 256, Thucydides 1972b: xv cited by Rood 1998: 251; also Ch. 14 below. Marcellinus in Mynott *TWPA*: 601–6. Book 8 as drafts to be revised, Andrewes *HCTV*: 1–4, also Ch. 2 n. 1 below, and Ch. 15 below. Connor 1984b: 213f. Macleod 1983e: 141.

practicable strategies for winning (or not losing) was to make. As I explain in Chapter 14, the conflict had become more determined, the desperation greater and the politicking more intense. Even though Thucydides writes it in a different way, it continues what David Lewis described as his ‘most remarkable achievement’: the capacity ‘to transmute even military’ – and one can add political – ‘narrative into a commentary on the human condition’; what in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche said was the wider Greek disposition to be superficial out of profundity.⁴

But this is a reaction to Thucydides now. One cannot presume that it is how he hoped or expected to be read. He announces that ‘Thucydides of Athens wrote the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, how they waged it against each other’, starting to do so at its outset ‘in the expectation that this would be a great war and more worthy of account than any previous one. He based this judgement on the grounds that both sides came into the war at the height of their powers and in a full state of military readiness; and he also saw that the rest of the Greek world had either taken sides right at the start or was now planning to do so’ (1.1.1).⁵ This is not as obvious as it seems and may not be true. His narrative goes on to explain that the war’s outset, as outsets do, predated its onset, but he would have been prescient indeed if he foresaw a ‘great war’ at the faltering start. This however is incidental.

More interesting is that whenever Thucydides did start to write or to think about doing so, his purpose was almost the opposite of that of his most prominent predecessor. Herodotus had in the middle of the fifth century written his *historie* of the war in 499–478 between the Greeks and Persians (and perhaps given readings from it in the 430s at Athens and other places) in order that ‘human events of the past do not become erased by time and that the great and wondrous achievements displayed by the Greeks and the barbarians, and especially their reasons for fighting each other, do not go unrecognised’.⁶ At the end of the first century BC,

⁴ Lewis 1992c: xiv, Nietzsche 2001: 8–9: ‘Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words – in the whole Olympus of appearance!’ On Nietzsche and Th., Ch. 11 below.

⁵ This first sentence is in effect Th.’s title page, and for this reason, though not for this reason alone, Mynott *TWPA* translates it literally. The key word is *sunegrapse*, ‘wrote’, and ‘the war’ its direct object; ‘he wrote the war’ which he thinks *axiologotatos*, especially worthy of *logos* (a discussion, description or reasoned account). Also Ch. 2 below.

⁶ *Historie* is the word in the Ionic dialect in which Herodotus chose to write, perhaps following Homer and the Ionian scientific writers; he was originally from Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum), where the dialect was Doric. In Attic, in which Th. writes and which modern dictionaries of ancient Greek take as standard, the word, not used by Th., was *historia*. Th.’s wish to distinguish himself from Herodotus, Lang 2011. Th.’s relation to Herodotus is an exception to the great German historian Felix Jacoby’s observation that

4 Thucydides on Politics

Dionysius of Halicarnassus declared that ‘the superiority of Herodotus’ judgement to that of Thucydides in his choice of subject matter is directly related to the superiority of the story of the wonderful deeds of the Greeks and barbarians to that of the pitiable and terrible sufferings of the Greeks’; this last, in Thucydides, ‘was quite inappropriate for one who was a Greek and an Athenian’.⁷ There is much of political interest in Herodotus. But Thucydides’ considerations were quite different from his and from those of Dionysius, by which time what we think of as ‘classical Athens’ was an already glorified past. He set out to write what happened with an eye, as he says, on the ‘usefulness’ of a truthful account. Unlike Herodotus, he lived through the events he describes ‘when I was of an age to appreciate what was going on and could apply my mind to an exact understanding of things’. And since ‘it so turned out’, he explains, ‘that I was banished from my own country for twenty years, [I] had the time to study matters more closely; and as consequence of my exile I had access to activities on both sides’, to those of the Peloponnesians as well as the Athenians, and perhaps also, though he does not say, to those of the Macedonians and Thracians though not probably to the Persians (5.26.5).

His identification as Thucydides son of Olorus suggests a relation to two political Athenians: Cimon, a grandee whose father-in-law was an Olorus and a Thracian king, and through his mother to a Thucydides son of Melesias, both of whom were opponents of Pericles, the ‘first man’ in Athens at the start of the war.⁸ The writer Thucydides son of Olorus appears to have been elected as one of the city’s ten generals, *strategoí*, in the spring of 424, in the war’s seventh year, and in the following winter was relieved of his command after he had failed to prevent a Spartan force taking the city of Amphipolis (4.104–7) and been forced or chose to go into exile. (We do not know why he had stayed at his station on Thasos when for the previous two months the Spartan Brasidas had been capturing Athenian cities less than 40 miles to the west. But another Athenian general was stationed at Amphipolis itself and Thasos would have been a suitable place for a second. In any event it was midwinter and even Brasidas’ own men would probably not have expected him to march them through a day and night of storm and snow to capture the city.) If Thucydides could not have been elected general before the qualifying

in Greek historiography ‘polemic usually names its object, borrowings are anonymous’, quoted by Hornblower 2006: 310.

⁷ Quoted by Mynott *TWPA*: 594–5.

⁸ Rusten 1989: 2 gives two possible family trees. The opposition of Thucydides son of Melesias is unclear, Andrewes 1978. We know nothing about the Thucydides of Pharsalus whom ‘our’ Th. mentions as the representative at the Piraeus of the *golpistas* in Athens in 411, 8.91.7.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

The text

5

age of thirty, he can have been born no later than the mid 450s and in the absence of any other evidence can be presumed to have died, as Marcellinus says, in his early fifties, soon after the end of the war in 404 to which he refers in his so-called ‘second preface’ in book 5 and another late insertion (2.65.12). Marcellinus mentions a memorial that was raised to him in Attica, but he is not known to have returned to Athens; it was said that he had been murdered on his way back there.⁹ Thucydides himself explains that he owned the right of working gold mines in Thrace, possibly at Scapte Hyle on the mainland opposite Thasos, by virtue, Marcellinus suggests, of having married a woman who owned mines at that place, and he was thought by Brasidas to have had influence with the leading men in the area. This would explain why his first posting had been in the north and how, when having been relieved of his command and gone into exile, he was able to travel through Greece and have the leisure, Marcellinus says, relaying a no doubt fanciful story, in which to sit beneath a plane tree at Scapte Hyle and write what he had learnt.¹⁰

The writing was central. His work was ‘composed to be a possession for all time’, not another competitive performance-piece for the moment (1.22.4). We receive it in the collation and still contested editing of two families of medieval manuscripts and a papyrus fragment from the third century BC. There is no reason not to believe that the text became stable quite early; few now expect to discover anything that will surprise us. The original will have been written on papyrus, in capital letters without spaces between the words and sentences or any other kind of punctuation; and the fact that it was written (or dictated to be written) would have meant that Thucydides could have made deletions, additions and other revisions, which he plainly did. Its Greek reminded Henry Wade-Gery of ‘English prose before Dryden and Addison... a language largely moulded by poets: its precision is a poet’s precision, a union of passion and candour’, and we might with Kenneth Dover believe that he thought of what he dictated more as sounds than as marks on a roll. There would have been no division into books, chapters and sections, and there are few grounds for believing that these later separations reveal much about his own conception of the text.¹¹ It seems clear that the original stopped

⁹ A suggestion that Th. lived longer and started writing later, Fornara 1993. The rumour of murder, Pausanias, 1.23.9.

¹⁰ The mines were originally Thracian; Athens may have taken ownership of them after 460, Bissa 2009: 35–6, who adds that unlike undemocratic states, Athens tended to devolve such matters to private contractors. Nicias’ father had had a share in the silver mines in Attica. Marcellinus in Mynott *TWPA*: 601–8.

¹¹ Wade-Gery 2012, from 1949. Sounds rather than marks, Dover in *HCT* IV, 408. But it is said that each book would have more or less filled a standard papyrus roll, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Thucydides on Politics

where ours does, suddenly, in the middle of an event and a sentence in the late summer of 411, and that nothing of the end of book 8 or the rest of the work (apart perhaps from notes and drafts and possible false starts) has been lost. Three writers appear to have taken up the story and it has been said that Xenophon, who did so directly, may have had a hand in editing what Thucydides had written. Yet although one of these three, the author of the so-called *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*, is thought from the fragments that have surfaced to be good, none was to imitate him.¹²

It is less clear whom Thucydides was writing for. Literacy was extending in the later fifth century and so were schools; he himself mentions an establishment for boys in a remote small town in Boeotia in 413 (7.29.5). But though a short manuscript might be had for little more than the daily wage (at least in Athens) of a manual worker, longer ones would have been expensive. Pupils may have had to memorise them, and poorer teachers may have had to do so too. Thucydides may have more often been encountered in the social settings of readings aloud. And it is possible that parts at least of the text may have been circulating before the end of the war. James Morrison wonders whether he might have hoped that it would be discussed, although as with any defeated people one can only guess at how many Athenians after the end of the war would have been able with equanimity to dwell on an account of events which they knew only too well had ended their overseas empire and brought 'sufferings unprecedented in any comparable period of time' (1.23.1).¹³

that the length of works may have been determined by how much a roll could contain, Maehler 2012. On revision, Allison 1997: 240 n. 6. On the relation between the books and Th.'s conception, Andrewes *HCT V*: 379. On the changes in the ways in which he distinguished events, Dewald 2005; Ch. 14 below. What we now have as the sections of chapters are said to have been separated in the seventeenth century.

¹² Xenophon carries on from Th. 8.109: 'After this, not many days later . . .' (*Hellenica* 1.1.1). Marcellinus mentions and dismisses the story that book 8 was put together by Th.'s daughter, a story so unlikely for the time, Hornblower remarks, that it might be true, Hornblower 1994: 136. Th.'s immediate reception, with reservations about 'imitiation', Hornblower 1995.

¹³ Morrison 2006: 172–4, following suggestions in Thomas 1992: 104. Hammond 1973: 59, presuming that Th. expected to return to Athens after the end of the war, suggested that in the atmosphere of the 'quisling junta regime' in the city then, he may have been nervous about setting out any extended reflection on the war. On one recent definition of empire, 'a hierarchial system of rule acquired and maintained by military coercion through which a core territory dominates peripheral territories, serves as an intermediary for their main interactions, and channels resources from and between the peripheries' (Mann 2012: 17), Athens' *arche* was one, although juridically the Athenians did at first distinguish between states that were subject and those that were independent, Gomme *HCT I*: 36–43. On Athens' 'empire' itself, de Ste Croix 1954 and other essays in Low 2008. But as Mann says, his definition allows all kinds and mixtures of military, political, economic and 'ideological' domination. It also fails to capture the arguable intention of some Athenians to create what might be described as a 'greater Athenian

Athens' defeat was to turn many citizens away from its immediate past to reinocations of the glories of the Persian war. Anyway, Athenians can seem to have shown little interest in what their historians told them; only military men may have been curious.¹⁴

Historia, inquiry, had on one interpretation been thought of by the Greeks as judgement on the judgements of others; thus perhaps Herodotus. On another interpretation, new in the later fifth century and evident in medical writing of the time, it may have begun to be thought of as inquiries in the pursuit of truth; thus almost certainly Thucydides, although he does not use the word, perhaps because Herodotus had.¹⁵ 'From the evidence I have presented', he says, 'one would not go wrong in supposing that events were very much as I have set them out; and no one should prefer rather to believe the songs of the poets, who exaggerate things for artistic purposes, or the writings of the chroniclers, which are composed more to make good listening than to represent the truth, being impossible to check and having most of them won a place over time in the imaginary realm of fable. My findings, however, you can regard as derived from the clearest evidence available for material of this antiquity' (1.21.1).¹⁶ So also on the near-present. 'As to the actual events of the war . . . I resolved not to rely in my writing on what I learned from chance sources or even on my own impressions, but both in the cases where I was present myself – in Athens in the later 430s and early 420s – and in those where I depended on others I investigated every detail with the utmost concern for accuracy. This was a laborious process of research,

state', Morris 2009. One thinks also of the ambiguities in this respect of China and Russia after 1935. I prefer to think more loosely of 'dominion', to be specified as and when.

¹⁴ The interest of contemporary historians, Thomas 1989: 201–3, Hornblower 1995, who at 61 mentions their increasing attention to the Persian war. On military men, Hunt 2006.

¹⁵ Darbo-Peschanski 2007. The meanings of inquiry were naturally more complex and variable than this might suggest, Lloyd 2002: 15–20. On Th. and medical writing, Ch. 15 below.

¹⁶ Mynott *TWPA* notes that this is just one sentence in the Greek, difficult enough in construction to have led to a range of different translations. Cameron 2003: 42, he adds, gives a super-literal version which shows what a tough read Th. has always been: 'From the stated evidences, nevertheless, someone would not go wrong by considering what I have recounted to be very much of that kind [i.e. reliable]; not, rather, believing as the poets have sung with decorated exaggeration concerning these matters or as the chroniclers, in a manner more attractive to hear than true, have composed things that are incapable of being disproved and things that have – many of them in time – won their way into the fabulous in a way that cannot be believed; but (one would not go wrong) considering [what I have recounted] to have been researched from the clearest evidences, given that the matters are sufficiently ancient.' Flory 1990 reads 'the imaginary realm of fable' in Th. to refer to tales of the 'chauvinistic' kind that Dionysius praised Herodotus for writing.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Thucydides on Politics

because eyewitnesses at the various events reported the same things differently, depending on which side they favoured and on their powers of memory' (1.22.2–3), though as Peter Hunt observes, Thucydides never says that witnesses were hard to find.¹⁷

Truthfulness about the present however was not the limit of his ambition. The text, he says, 'will have served its purpose well enough if it is judged useful by those who want to have a clear view of what happened in the past and what – the human condition being what it is – can be expected to happen again some time in the future in similar or much the same ways' (1.22.4). Josiah Ober takes this to mark the invention of a political science. But that says nothing about Thucydides, and, as I explain in a moment and again in Chapters 8 and 15, what he may have meant would be foreign to the 'sciences' of politics in the modern Anglo-American sense. As I argue at the end of this book, it also obscures the ways in which he was critical of politics itself.¹⁸

One aspect that he would expect to recur 'some time in the future' would be the tension between *logoi*, words, reasonings – how politicians describe events, justify their attempts to direct them and attempt to persuade others – and events themselves, *erga*, things done. Thucydides was writing at a time when written narratives were new and there was enthusiasm still for the art of oral persuasion. In the new 'democracies' in Greece (the term dates from the first part of the fifth century) men could not succeed if they did not speak well, and in the later fifth century fashionable 'sophists' as they came to be called, travelling teachers of philosophy and rhetoric, were explaining how to do that. Indeed *rhetor kai strategos*, or just *rhetor*, was coming to connote 'politician', and in the fourth century many of those whom we might now think of as intellectuals were to blame 'demagoguery' for the deceptions, divisions and self-destructions of the war. Thucydides only once lapses into suggesting anything so simple.¹⁹ For him, there are the truths of events, the truths (as well as the deceptions and outright falsehoods) of speech and the truths that are revealed in the often distant relation between the two, and

¹⁷ Hunt 2006.

¹⁸ Canfora translates, when similar things are in 'the process of occurring', Nicolai 2009: 390. Moles 1999 is an intricate and illuminating analysis of 'a possession for all time'. A political science, Ober 2006.

¹⁹ Wallace 2007 persuasively suggests that the sense of sophist purveyed by Plato and accepted until recently by many (Grote and Popper were exceptions) is excessively pejorative; but that critical thinking, of which Th. was a part, was more common in Athens in the later fifth century.

to draw attention to these differences was itself a political act in a society in which, like many since, competing rhetorics could distort and falsify.²⁰

There was nevertheless a difficulty. ‘As to what was said in speeches by the various parties either before they went to war or during the conflict itself, it was difficult for me to recall the precise details in the case of those I heard myself, just as it was for those who reported back to me on cases elsewhere. What I have set down is how I think each of them would have expressed what was most appropriate in the particular circumstances, while staying as close as possible to the overall intention (*gnome*) of what was actually said’ (1.22.1). The tension in this last sentence has been much discussed, but though Thucydides can be complex and condensed and often both at once, he is rarely obscure. On this, which plainly matters to him, he may be being quite clear. He heard only a few of the speeches himself and would rarely have had a transcript of any;²¹ he tried hard to recover the point of what was said in those he did not hear; where he could not, then – like a dramatist but working with what we know or (on the whole) believe to be real characters – he wrote what particular speakers would have wanted to say as the speakers they were at the moment in question; and although each of the speeches that he presents was given by a particular man (or set of men) at a particular moment, and although he does often do something to capture their voice, he wrote most of them up in a style that is evidently his own. In many cases, the ‘overall intention’ in what was said will have been just that. In introducing the Syracusan Hermocrates’ warning to a gathering of Siceliot (Greek Sicilians) at Gela in the summer of 424 about the dangers of presenting the Athenians with a divided island, a speech that he would not himself have heard, Thucydides writes that Hermocrates ‘spoke words *such as these*’ (4.58.1, my emphasis). In others, he may have been able to be more exact. In introducing the address that Pericles made in the winter of 431–430 on the occasion of the funeral of the first Athenians to be killed in the war, he writes that when the moment came Pericles ‘stepped forward from the tomb and mounted the platform that had been set up so that he could be heard by as many as possible in the throng, and spoke as follows’ (2.34.8), which gives the impression that he was there and would have written down something close to what Pericles ‘actually said’.

²⁰ Lloyd 2012, also Ch. 15 below. Parry 1972 and 1981 (the first an extension of the second and perhaps an indication of *The Mind of Thucydides* which Parry did not live to write) reify the contrast into Th.’s tragic vision of a civilisation of intelligence brought down by war. An excellent discussion, Greenwood 2006: 57–82.

²¹ Thomas 2003 suggests that speeches were beginning to be written down, although it is less likely that political speeches will have been; Th. does not mention transcriptions.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Thucydides on Politics

What he does not explain is how he selected the speeches he did from the many that would have been given in the years that he covers; or why, when there was a debate, as in Athens in 430 over whether to pursue the war after the second Spartan invasion of Attica and an epidemic in the city, he sometimes selected those from one side only. (In this instance, some have suspected that he did not want to give voice to one of the new arriviste politicians, Cleon, as he again may not have wished to do when Cleon scorned a Spartan proposal for peace in 425 (4.21.3).)²² But where he does present only one side, he usually conveys a sense of the other; he often makes it clear where he is picking out part of what someone had said; and when someone seems to have been responding to or otherwise reflecting what someone else had said at a different time or in a different place, there can be a plausible explanation. A reader might be surprised that an Athenian commander addressed his crews before engaging Spartan ships in terms that almost exactly mirrored those in which Spartan commanders a mile across the water were addressing theirs (2.87, 2.89), but Thucydides makes it clear that the problems facing the one were the reciprocal of those facing the other and would have been plain to both.²³ This is also one of the instances at which he writes as though several men spoke in unison. It is most charitable to suppose that he will not always have known just who did address the audience at hand, or that he ran what he took to have been similar speeches together.

Uncertainties remain. But one can say that Thucydides used the speeches he selected to convey what he took to be the political and military judgements and practical reasonings of men who were living the war, attempting to understand it, hoping to direct actions in it and trying to persuade others of why they were doing what they were. They are the repositories of reason, good and bad, in the text. As such, they serve to reveal the distances between what was thought and said and what transpired. They serve also in the first three books and the beginning of the sixth to move the story along, conveying a drama that is unavoidably absent from accounts of politics in which persuasion is more difficult to see. They may be varying mixtures of report and reconstruction and in this respect as well as their selection contain a measure of Thucydides' own sense of what mattered. But few suspect that in Coleridge's nice

²² Plutarch, *Pericles*, 33, quoting the contemporary comic dramatist Hermippos, suggests that Cleon was already active against Pericles. On the 'new politicians' in Athens, Connor 1992, Rhodes 2000.

²³ The speeches in question at 2.86.6–89; I discuss them briefly in Ch. 6 below, where see n. 10.