

EURIPIDES AND THE DEMAGOGUES¹

In a famous passage from his second book, Thucydides sums up Pericles' policy for the conduct of the Peloponnesian War and adds that after his death (2.65.7):

... ταῦτά τε πάντα ἐς τοῦναντίον ἔπραξαν καὶ ἄλλα ἔξω τοῦ πολέμου δοκοῦντα εἶναι κατὰ τὰς ἰδίας φιλοτιμίας καὶ ἴδια κέρδη κακῶς ἐς τε σφάς αὐτοὺς καὶ τοὺς συμμαχοὺς ἐπολίτευσαν, ἃ κατορθούμενα μὲν τοῖς ἰδιώταις τιμὴ καὶ ὠφελία μᾶλλον ἦν, σφαλέντα δὲ τῇ πόλει ἐς τὸν πόλεμον βλάβη καθίστατο.

... they [the Athenians] did the opposite of all these things, and did still other things which appeared irrelevant to the war. For the sake of private ambition and private profit they pursued policies which were bad for themselves and for the allies, from which the honour and advantage accrued rather to private individuals when they succeeded, but which when they failed brought damage to the city with regard to the war.
(tr. P.J. Rhodes)

Going on to say of Pericles' Athens that in what was in theory a democracy, power was in fact in the hands of the first man, Thucydides comments that 'the leaders who followed Pericles were more on a level with one another, and as each strove to become first they tended to abandon affairs to the whims of the people' (2.65.9–10).²

This remained the familiar picture of the demagogue³ until the 1960s. Yet as early as 1849 the Victorian banker-cum-historian George Grote, who referred to 'a new class of politicians – Eucratēs, the rope-seller – Kleon, the leather-seller – Lysiklēs, the sheep-seller – Hyperbolus, the lamp-maker', had mounted a strong defence of Cleon.⁴

¹ I am grateful to P.J. Rhodes for his helpful advice on the so-called demagogues.

² ἐγίνετό τε λόγῳ μὲν δημοκρατία, ἔργῳ δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πρώτου ἀνδρὸς ἀρχή. οἱ δὲ ὕστερον ἴσοι μᾶλλον αὐτοὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους ὄντες καὶ ὀρεγόμενοι τοῦ πρώτος ἕκαστος γίνεσθαι ἐτράποντο καθ' ἡδονὰς τῷ δήμῳ καὶ τὰ πράγματα ἐνδιδόναι.

³ The word is used by Thucydides only at 4.21.3 (of Cleon). He uses 'demagogy' at 8.65.2 (of Androcles). 'Demagogue' is used in what is certainly a derogatory sense by Xenophon at *Hell.* 5.2.7. Favourable uses are given by J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (Princeton, 1989), 106–7. For a short summary of the different uses of the word by different authors, see P.J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford, 1993), 323–4. Part of the problem discussed in this article is the exclusively pejorative use of 'demagogue' in English: John Milton referred to the 'affrightment of this Goblin word' in *Eikonoklastes* (vol. 3 of the Yale edition of his works [New Haven, 1962], 392–3 – quoted by W.R. Connor, *The New Politicians in Fifth-Century Athens* [Princeton, 1971], 109).

⁴ G. Grote, *History of Greece* (London, 1854), vol. 6, 334–7, 472–6, 655–68: quotation 333–4. Grote commented, 'It appears as if no historian could write down the name of Kleon without attaching to it some disparaging verb or adjective' (473). F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1981), 229, sums up Grote's view: 'Cleon's methods were those required of one whose social position could not automatically command the attention of the Assembly as could that of wealthy speakers or those from established families. Cleon, a leather seller, had to work harder, attend meetings more assiduously, and display more audacity than members of the well-organized political clubs. Although his tone may have been bitter and his invective extreme, he rigidly adhered to the forms of the constitution.' Cf. K.N. Demetriou, *George Grote on Plato and Athenian Democracy* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 128. On the subject of Cleon the leather seller, Connor (n. 3), 151 remarks, 'Although Comedy creates the impression that he was a malodorous impoverished leather-peddler from some foul tannery, in truth he was nothing of the sort. His father, Cleainetus, owned a factory in which slaves worked hides into leather.' Cleainetus was wealthy enough to be a choregus in 460/59 (*IG* ii² 2318, l.34).

However, even he remarked of Cleon that the 'general attributes set forth by Thucydides ... we may reasonably accept' (p. 335). His revisionist view fell on deaf ears. Finally, in a paper dating from 1961, Moses Finley wrote an eloquent apologia for the demagogues, suggesting that they had been grossly misrepresented amid a welter of prejudice and snobbery. He summed up the previous *communis opinio* as follows: 'The demagogue is a bad thing: to "lead the people" is to mislead – above all, to mislead by failing to lead. The demagogue is driven by self-interest, by the desire to advance himself in power, and through power, in wealth. To achieve this, he surrenders all principles, all genuine leadership, and he panders to the people in every way – in Thucydides' words, "even offering the conduct of affairs to the whims of the people".'⁵

A shortened version of Finley's paper was broadcast on the Third Programme and published in *The Listener* in the same year. This time the words fell upon more receptive ears. In Volume 1 of his great Thucydides commentary, published in 1991, Simon Hornblower was able to talk about the 'modern rehabilitation' of the demagogues.⁶ He remarked that 'in most respects it is hard to see what was so "new" or different about Pericles' successors, especially if they are compared not with Pericles the senior statesman but with Pericles the pushing politician of the 460s and 450s'.

There are other grounds for avoiding an excessive reliance on Thucydides in this matter. In 1968 H.D. Westlake weighed up the evidence that the historian was prejudiced against Cleon, the most famous of the so-called demagogues, and suggested that he was the only major contemporary figure whose character and conduct Thucydides explicitly condemns, attributing to him discreditable motives and feelings.⁷ It is tempting to feel that Thucydides' bias may have been due to resentment at Cleon's considerable military success in an area in north-east Greece where his own failure as a general had led to his exile.⁸ Cleon turned round the whole course of the

⁵ M.I. Finley, 'Athenian demagogues', in *Studies in Ancient Society* (London, 1974), 1–25: quotation p. 3. This is the revised text of paper given to the Hellenic Society in London on 25 March 1961. The article was first published in *Past & Present* 21 (1962), 3–24; last revised in Finley's *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (London, 1985), 38–75 with notes 177–9. In 1956 T.A. Dorey had defended Cleon from charges of venality and dishonesty in 'Aristophanes and Cleon', *G&R NS* 3.2 (1956), 132–9.

⁶ S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides* 1 (Oxford, 1991), 346–7. An important contributor to the rehabilitation was Connor (n. 3). In a characteristic passage, after quoting an anecdote recounted by Plutarch which tells how Cleon, when about to enter politics, brought his friends together and renounced his friendship with them (*Mor.* 806F), Connor argues (p. 93) that by 'turning his back on a coterie of influential supporters, Cleon could more easily present himself as a man of the people and thereby forge an alliance between himself and the poorer and hitherto ill-represented sections of the populace. The ambitious, dynamic and prosperous entrepreneur becomes the spokesman for the poor and disaffected.' In 1961 P.A. Brunt (*CR NS* 11, 144) had discussed the leadership provided by the demagogues: 'They required for success a comprehensive grasp of the resources and interests of their own and other cities (*Ar. Rhet.* 1.4), and their influence depended on constant readiness to advise on all manner of questions (cf. Aeschines 3.220) ... Like modern politicians, they stood to lose the public confidence (and not just at five-yearly intervals), a sufficient penalty for ambitious men.'

For a level-headed more recent assessment, see P.J. Rhodes, 'Political activity in classical Athens', *JHS* 106 (1986), 139–41.

⁷ H.D. Westlake, *Individuals in Thucydides* (Cambridge, 1968), 60–85. Westlake points to an exception to this, a passage in 5.16.1 in which the historian attributes discreditable motives to Nicias (pp. 93–6).

⁸ The statement of Marcellinus (*Vit. Thuc.* 46) that Cleon was responsible for Thucydides' exile is widely accepted.

Archidamian War by the triumph that he and Demosthenes achieved when they captured the 292 Spartans on Sphacteria. He died in flight, but in a battle in which he was fighting for his country.⁹ Furthermore, in the Mytilenean debate, his first appearance in Thucydides, he had the courage to oppose a widespread change of feeling and he failed in that opposition (3.36.6–49.1). Very decidedly, he was not pandering to the whim of the people.

Surely Finley and Hornblower are right in their assessment.¹⁰ Yet one may well wonder just how pervasive the rehabilitation of the demagogues and the challenge to the special status of Pericles have proved. It is my intention in this article to argue, through discussion of passages from Euripides' *Suppliant Women* and *Orestes*, that both the rehabilitation and the challenge have yet to make sufficient headway in the area of Euripidean scholarship, and to give reasons why this matters.

In the former play Theseus, king of Athens, is portrayed as the founder and passionate proponent of Athenian democracy, seeing off a cocky Theban herald who offers a justification of tyranny (399–456). This particular scene would clearly have had strong political resonances for a contemporary Athenian audience.¹¹ But a number of recent scholars have viewed it in what some would consider reductive terms as a reflection of the Thucydidean analysis of Pericles, central to which is, of course, the idealizing contrast between the great statesman and his contemptible successors. In 1950 J.S. Morrison described the play as 'a parable in which Theseus figures the Periclean ruler'.¹² In 1962, R. Goossens asserted, 'La démocratie de Thésée, c'est le gouvernement de Périclès ... Il n'y a aucun doute que le souvenir de Périclès plane sur toute l'aventure des *Suppliantes*'.¹³ In 1994 N.T. Croally said that the play seems 'to be making a ... comparison ... between Theseus and the Pericles whom Thucydides describes as the single leader of Athens (Thuc. 2.65.9–10)'.¹⁴ (None of these scholars discusses how Euripides may have gained access to Thucydides' thinking in this matter. The historian's obituary notice on Pericles (2.65.5–13) is believed to date from after the playwright's death.)¹⁵ The most arresting moment in the history of this identification came when A.J. Podlecki, suggesting that Theseus was 'a dramatic prototype of Pericles', posed the question, 'What was to prevent Euripides from fitting out his Theseus in *Supplikes* in a *Pericles-prosôpon*?'¹⁶

⁹ Thucydides says that 'he had never intended to stand his ground but fled at once, and was overtaken and killed by a Myrcinian peltast' (5.10.9). Hornblower (n. 6), n. ad loc. refers to this assertion about Cleon's intention as the 'most famous and extreme instance [in Thucydides] of a discreditable motive attributed on the evidence of overt action'. For a possibly different view of Cleon's death see Diod. Sic. 12.74.2.

¹⁰ See chapter 3 of J.T. Roberts, *The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton, 1994) for an account of the tradition of hostility to the demagogues. For an account of the history of the criticism of Athenian democracy see now D. Piovan, 'Criticism ancient and modern: observations on the critical tradition of Athenian democracy', *Polis* 25 (2008), 305–29.

¹¹ For the classic discussion of this kind of anachronism, see P.E. Easterling, 'Anachronism in Greek tragedy', *JHS* 105 (1985), 1–10.

¹² J.S. Morrison, 'Pericles monarchos', *JHS* 70 (1950), 76–7.

¹³ R. Goossens, *Euripide et Athènes* (Brussels, 1962), 435.

¹⁴ N.T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic* (Cambridge, 1994), 210. The brief quotation in fact does less than justice to Croally's interestingly nuanced discussion (209–13).

¹⁵ P.J. Rhodes (ed.), *Thucydides, History II* (Warminster, 1988), 15, n. at 65.12; J.S. Rusten, *The Peloponnesian War, Book II* (Cambridge, 1989), nn. at 65.11–13, 65.12. S. Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy and the Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1997), 97, n. 32 makes the point that Thucydides' appraisal was not yet known to the Athenians.

¹⁶ A.J. Podlecki, 'A Periclean prosôpon in Attic tragedy', *Euphrosyne* NS 7 (1975–6), 7–26.

The parallel between Theseus and Pericles seems less obvious to others. For one thing, Euripides' Theseus is a young man¹⁷ and *Suppliant Women* was probably performed towards the end of the 420s. As A.J. Micheline points out, 'Pericles was in his sixties when he died in the early years of the decade'.¹⁸ And sure enough, alternatives to the great man have been uncovered, apparently without too much difficulty. The play's Theseus figure has been viewed as an electioneering manifesto variously for Alcibiades¹⁹ and Nicias,²⁰ and against Cleon.²¹ Two admirable modern Euripideans have involved themselves in this simplistic game, A. Micheline lending her support to the Alcibiades theory in 1997²² and Rush Rehm to the Cleon one in 1994.²³

All these scholars are responding to the unequivocal presence of contemporary politics in this scene. It is indeed one of the Urtexts of political theory. A number of the thoughts and attitudes of Euripides' Theseus will doubtless be reflections of the thoughts and attitudes of a number of contemporary politicians. But the search for one-for-one equivalences is surely an inadequate response to a play in which Theseus *changes* so markedly, his mother persuading him, for example, to abandon his isolationist political stance for an internationalist one. Furthermore, as Peter Burian remarks of such reductive interpretations, 'the real problem is that ... these scholars assume that Euripides must be writing not about his ostensible subject but about something else that can only be ferreted out by a kind of allegorical interpretation'.²⁴

But the problem in fact goes rather deeper. In his advocacy of tyranny the Theban herald makes some criticisms of democracy. He says (410–25):

πόλις γὰρ ἥς ἐγὼ πάριμι' ἄπο
 ἐνὸς πρὸς ἀνδρὸς οὐκ ὀχλῶι κρατύνεται·
 οὐδ' ἔστιν αὐτὴν ὅστις ἐκχαυνῶν λόγοις
 πρὸς κέρδος ἴδιον ἄλλοτ' ἄλλοσε στρέφει,
 τὸ δ' αὐτίχ' ἡδὺς καὶ διδοὺς πολλὴν χάριν
 ἐσαῦθις ἐβλαψί', εἶτα διαβολαῖς νέαις
 κλέψας τὰ πρόσθε σφάλματ' ἐξέδν δίκης.
 ἄλλως τε πῶς ἂν μὴ διορθέων λόγους
 ὀρθῶς δύναιτ' ἂν δῆμος εὐθύνειν πόλιν;
 ὁ γὰρ χρόνος μάθησιν ἀντὶ τοῦ τάχους
 κρείσσω δίδωσι. γαπόνος δ' ἀνὴρ πένης,

415
420

¹⁷ Eur. *Supp.* 190, 283, 580.

¹⁸ A.J. Micheline, 'Alcibiades and Theseus in Euripides' *Suppliants*', *Colby Quarterly* 33–2 (June 1997), 177–84: quotation 181. It is possible that the audience's memories of the ageing politician will have emphasized still further the contrast with Euripides' dynamic Theseus. His war policy was so unpopular in 430 B.C. that the Athenians deposed him from the generalship and fined him (Thuc. 2.65.3, Diod. Sic. 12.45.4, Plut. *Per.* 35.3–5). They did re-elect him, however (2.65.4). His last public appearance recorded by Plutarch before he fell victim to the plague was his appeal to the people that his bastard son should be legitimized in violation of his own citizenship law of 451/50. His situation moved the Athenians to pity (ἐπέκλασε: 'he broke' (their hearts)) and they granted his request (Plut. *Per.* 37.2–5). The tenor of this anecdote is hardly in line with the confidence which Euripides' Theseus feels in his relationship with the people at *Supp.* 349–51.

¹⁹ E. Delebecque, *Euripide et la guerre du Péloponnèse* (Paris, 1951), 212–13; cf. W. Nestle, *Euripides: Der Dichter der griechischen Aufklärung* (Stuttgart, 1901), 15–16; H. Grégoire, 'Notice' to 'Les Suppliantes' in *Euripide*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1923), 90; J.S. Morrison, *CQ* 35 (1941), 15–16.

²⁰ Goossens (n. 13), 440–6.

²¹ V. di Benedetto, *Euripide: teatro e società* (Turin, 1971), 158–92.

²² Micheline (n. 18), 177–184.

²³ R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton, 1994), 118.

²⁴ P. Burian, *New Directions in Euripidean Criticism* (Durham, NC, 1985), 213.

εἰ καὶ γένοιτο μὴ ἀμαθής, ἔργων ὕπο
οὐκ ἂν δύναιτο πρὸς τὰ κοῖν' ἀποβλέπειν.
ἦ δὴ νοσῶδες τοῦτο τοῖς ἀμείνοσιν,
ὅταν πονηρὸς ἀξίωμ' ἀνὴρ ἔχῃ
γλώσσηι κατασχὼν δῆμον, οὐδὲν ὦν τὸ πρῖν.

The city I come from [i.e. Thebes] is ruled by one man, not by the rabble. There is no one who puffs up the city with his words, twists it now this way, now that for his private gain, and though pleasing and giving much gratification in the short term, later damages it, and then conceals his former blunders behind fresh slanders and evades justice. And besides how could the people direct the city on a straight course if they do not assess speeches correctly? For time, not haste, brings superior knowledge. The poor farmer, even if he *were* born no fool, would not be able to pay attention to politics because of his toil. Yes indeed, it is a plague for the better class of men whenever a man of low class has high esteem, having gained mastery over the people through his speaking, when he was a nobody before. (tr. J. Morwood)

The last lines of this passage reflect Harvey Yunis's contention that in the writing of this period the opponents of democracy speak 'with a blatant disdain for the common people who form the vast majority of the citizen population and, therefore, of the decision-making audience in the Assembly and courts'²⁵ – and, one can surely add, of the theatre audience as well. One might reasonably suspect that Euripides is here satirizing blimpish attitudes to democracy.²⁶ Good modern scholars, however, such as Collard in 1975, Macleod in 1983, Rehm in 1992 and Michelini in 1994, have tended to feel that the Theban herald scores palpable hits in his attack on Athenian democracy.²⁷ And in 2007, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, Jon Hesk stated that 'the herald's critique underlines certain vulnerabilities and imperfections in popular sovereignty'.²⁸

Of course, in its way this may be true. (It will be argued in the next paragraph that it may not be.) But it does seem to me to be seriously misleading in suggesting that anyone would expect democracy to be perfect. If there is any justice in the herald's criticisms, the response of adherents of democracy would surely be, 'OK, but so what?' All the evidence suggests that the vast majority of Athenians cherished their democracy.²⁹ Established in 508/7 B.C.³⁰ and developing along increasingly radical

²⁵ Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Cornell, 1996), 39.

²⁶ See Euripides, *Suppliant Women*, ed. J. Morwood (Oxford, 2007), n. at 409–25, on how the 'conservative clichés roll forth': cf. above all the Old Oligarch *passim*. In an email to me the *Times* journalist Philip Howard referred to the herald's 'fascistic ranting'.

²⁷ Euripides, *Suppliants*, ed. C. Collard (Groningen, 1975), 211–12, C.W. Macleod, *Collected Essays* (Oxford, 1983), 148, R. Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London, 1992), 127, A.J. Michelini, 'Political themes in Euripides' *Suppliants*', *AJPh* 115 (1994), 232.

²⁸ J. Hesk, 'The socio-political dimension of ancient tragedy', in M. McDonald and J.M. Walton (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre* (Cambridge, 2007), 72–91: quotation 80. Hesk does acknowledge that 'the Athenian who watches this debate is undoubtedly having his democratic way of life affirmed' (80).

²⁹ It may have paid for their seats in the theatre (Plut. *Per.* 9), though there is of course doubt about when the *theorika* was instituted.

³⁰ Some distinguished scholars believe that the inception of Athenian democracy should more properly be dated to Ephialtes' reforms of 462. See R. Osborne, 'When was the Athenian democratic revolution?', in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (edd.), *Rethinking Revolutions through Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 2006), 10–28, especially 20–2, and P.J. Rhodes's response in *CR* NS 58 (2008), 192, for the debate on this matter. However, it is of little relevance to my argument. People power certainly increased throughout the century and in any case Ephialtes' reforms occurred about thirty years before *Suppliant Women* was performed: democracy was firmly established by then.

lines, it was interrupted only once before the end of Peloponnesian War. This was in 411 when power was handed over by a depleted assembly to a body of 400, later expanded to 5,000. Within twelve months democracy had been restored. I would have thought that by far the greater part of an Athenian audience could have related to President Kennedy's declaration in Berlin on 26 June 1963: 'Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we never had to put up a wall to keep our people in.' And they might have seen the force of Churchill's words to the House of Commons on 11 November 1947: 'No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' *Of course* democracy is by its nature imperfect. It is surely decidedly odd that anyone should think otherwise. Theseus himself, the great advocate of this form of government in *Supplixes*, candidly acknowledges some of its problems at 232–45.³¹ I find it hard to believe that the confidence in democracy of the vast majority of Euripides' audience would have been in any way undermined by the herald's reactionary clichés.³²

Let us consider how an Athenian audience might in fact have responded to them. Their hackles would surely have risen at the outset at the herald's breathtaking impertinence as he starts to argue with the great king of Athens instead of simply doing his job by delivering his message (426–8).³³ Then they would have reacted badly to his praise of tyranny. For not only at every meeting of the assembly was a curse pronounced against whoever intended to become a tyrant or to join in restoring the tyranny,³⁴ but also, in the highly relevant context of the City Dionysia, a decree was read out annually, probably through most of the fifth century, proclaiming a reward for killing any of the tyrants.³⁵ While the curse and the decree doubtless appeared increasingly anachronistic as the century progressed, Dunbar is surely right to say that 'the threat of a return of tyrants ... continued to haunt Athens for many years'.³⁶ And then just how much justice *is* there in the herald's criticisms of democracy? The view of the demagogues he advances in 412–17, that they are self-serving politicians who

³¹ It is interesting that Theseus delivers his critique to Adrastus *before* the Theban herald, the advocate of tyranny, appears. This means that in the argument with the herald their stances are strongly polarized since Theseus has got his criticism of democracy out of the way. It is in any case distanced from Athens because it arises from his judgement on decision-making at Argos. Michael Lloyd sees this criticism as a stage in his development, suggesting that 'his fine-sounding sentiments [in 238–45] are, in fact, inadequate as a response in the present case, and he takes a very different line later' (M.A. Lloyd, *The 'Agon' in Euripides* [Oxford, 1992], 78). This is certainly a thought-provoking interpretation, but it leaves me unpersuaded. What is 'inadequate' about Theseus facing up to the problems inherent in democracy like Churchill and Kennedy?

³² The passage contains 'many of the standard charges against the demagogue' (Yunis [n. 25], 45).

³³ His impertinence is underlined by his simile: it is as if he is playing a game of draughts with the Athenian hero (408–9). The game referred to may well be one involving the isolation and capture of cities (see Collard [n. 27], n. at 409–10, Morwood [n. 26], n. at 409) and may thus evoke the world of international warfare. If this is the case, it will further heighten the impression of impudence in the herald's overstepping his brief.

³⁴ See Ar. *Thesm.* 338–9 with Sommerstein's n. at 331–51.

³⁵ See Ar. *Av.* 1074–5 with Dunbar's note ad loc., and now P Wilson, *CQ* 59 (2009), 23–6.

³⁶ For a summary of the evidence for tyranny as a live issue at Athens throughout the fifth century, see R. Seaford, 'The social function of Attic tragedy: a response to Jasper Griffin', *CQ* NS 50 (2000), 30–44: quotation 34–5. As P.J. Rhodes has pointed out to me, since Aristophanes' writing in the 420s suggests that Cleon was forever accusing his opponents of plotting (see *Eq.* 236, 257, 452, 476–9, 628, 862, *Vesp.* 345, 483, 488, 507, 953), there may well have been talk of tyranny at the time even if there was no serious likelihood of it.

curry favour with the people through flattery, is, as has been argued above, mistaken.³⁷ In his comedy *Knights* (424), probably produced about the same time as *Suppliant Women*, Aristophanes certainly echoes the view that politicians use unscrupulous flattery, but then, at 1111–50 for example, his text contradicts the herald's next point about the political ignorance of the people (*Supp.* 418–20).³⁸ As for the criticism of the farmer's lack of political expertise (420–1), in the context of the 420s it could well be an unjust charge.³⁹ For the first half of the Archidamian War the country population had usually been cooped up in the city during the summer and they would, of course, have been able to attend the assembly with no difficulty. Indeed, their presence may have been significant enough to influence the style of public speaking there, since 'war-time conditions in the 420s, above all the larger assembly attendances resulting from the evacuation of Attica, may have called for different and more strident oratorical techniques'.⁴⁰ Finally, we have already seen how in the last three lines of the speech the herald displays what Yunis refers to as 'blatant disdain for the common people who form the vast majority of the citizen population'.⁴¹ His hostile analysis may well be as unfounded – or at the least as tendentious – as it is prejudiced, and an alienated audience may have felt that his criticisms were not palpable hits but bosh shots.⁴²

This is a matter of some dramatic importance. In his response Theseus does not engage with any of the herald's specific attacks, and so, if they do indeed underline 'vulnerabilities and imperfections in popular sovereignty', his failure to answer them will lend them credence. If, on the other hand, the audience feels that they are rebarbatively or/and comically blimpish, unproven or simply wrong, the democratic king's speech in reply can ring out with the superbly resonant assertiveness which Milton clearly identified in it when he made 438–41 the epigraph of his *Areopagitica*, translating the lines:

³⁷ G.E.M. de Ste Croix, 'The character of the Athenian empire', *Historia* 3 (1954), 35, remarks that, if the so-called demagogues were really mere flatterers of the *demos*, it is strange that at least four or five of those whose names we know should have died violent deaths: 'Cleon and probably Lysicles fell in battle, Hyperbolus and Androcles were assassinated, Cleophon was judicially murdered.'

³⁸ See D.M. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy* (Exeter, 2007), 125–6. In his forthcoming 'Demagogues and *Demos* in Athens', P.J. Rhodes remarks of the assembly that 'those who attended regularly will have grown accustomed to listening to different arguments and trying to decide between them; and because of Athens' participatory administrative system a fair proportion of those present will have been members of the council or holders of some office either in the current year or in a recent year.'

³⁹ In his edition of *Suppliant Women* (n. 27), n. at 420–2, Collard comments that there is 'exactly the right tone of sarcastic condescension in this criticism of part-time politics by common farmers, one familiar to Athenian ears but actively countered in the C. 5 by Protagoras (Pl. *Prt.* 322d–323b) and Pericles especially (Thuc. 2.40.2)'. Dicaeopolis in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (425) is just such a countryman forced to stay in the city. One of the comic poet's most sympathetic characters, he is first to arrive at the assembly and understands its procedures well. His name means 'honest citizen'.

⁴⁰ Hornblower (n. 6), 346, following D.M. Lewis, *CR* NS 20 (1970), 90.

⁴¹ See n. 25.

⁴² Later in the scene, the herald observes that when the people vote on war, no one thinks about his own death (481–5). Yet, as Carter (n. 38), 126 observes, citing Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1983), 60–1, 'it could be presented as one of the *strengths* of democracy that the very people who might be risking their lives in battle chose whether or not to declare war'. I cannot agree with Rehm (n. 27), 127 that the herald's point is a particularly 'telling' one. In his discussion of the whole of the passage 476–85, Carter pronounces the arguments weak.

This is true Liberty when free born men
 Having to advise the public may speak free,
 Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
 Who neither can nor will may hold his peace;
 What can be juster in a State than this?

Far from evading the herald's critique, Theseus can trump it magnificently.

Now we turn to the messenger speech in *Orestes* in which an old man, an old family retainer of Agamemnon's (869), describes how the Argive assembly has condemned the eponymous hero and his sister to death for matricide (866–956). As Edith Hall points out in an illuminating essay on the play, 'the description of the assembly is modelled in every detail on the Athenian assembly'.⁴³ Before the messenger's scene begins, the chorus sing of Orestes' matricide in appalled horror (819–43). It is a delusion, they feel, to see so terrible an act in a good light:

τὸ καλὸν οὐ καλόν, τοκέων
 πυριγενεῖ τεμείν παλάμαι
 χροῖα, μελάνδετον δὲ φόνωι
 ξίφος ἐς αὐγὰς ἀελίοιο δεῖξαι·
 τὸ δ' εὖ κακουργεῖν ἀσέβεια ποικίλα
 κακοφρόνων τ' ἀνδρῶν παράνοι-
 α...

τίς νόσος ἢ τίνα δάκρυα καὶ
 τίς ἔλεος μείζων κατὰ γὰρ
 ἢ ματροκτόνον αἷμα χειρὶ θέσθαι;
 οἷον ἔργον τελέσας
 βεβάκχεται μανίαις,
 Εὐμενίσι θήραμα, φόβον
 δρομάσι δινεύων βλεφάροις,
 Ἀγαμεμνόνιος παῖς.

(819–26, 831–7)

The 'good' is not good, to slice
 parents' flesh with fireborn handiwork
 and to display the sword
 dark-laced with killing to the light of the sun.
 Virtuous crime is sin sophisticated,
 wrong-headed men's delusion...

What disorder, what distress,
 what tragedy is there greater in the world
 than taking the blood of matricide on one's hand?
 From doing such a deed
 he has been driven wild with madness fits,
 the Benign Ones' quarry, rolling bloodshed
 in his roving eyeballs – Agamemnon's son.

(tr. M.L. West)

The grim intensity of the chorus's song will inevitably colour the report of the Argive debate that follows and will work against the messenger's pro-Orestes stance. As well as letting us know of his long-standing devotion to Agamemnon (869–70), he

⁴³ E. Hall, 'Political and cosmic turbulence in Euripides' *Orestes*', in A.H. Sommerstein et al. (edd.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari, 1993), 263–85: quotation 266. Hall's article is an object lesson in how to deploy historical evidence in a literary/dramatic context. Angus Bowie also shows how effectively such evidence can be handled in his sensitively nuanced essay, 'Tragic filters for history: Euripides' *Suppliants* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', in C. Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), 39–62.

indicates that he does not have much time for democracy itself when he calls the crowd taking their seats at the assembly a 'rabble' (ὄχλος, 871, 884), an insulting word to apply to the people.⁴⁴ And he is understandably hostile to the two speakers who attack Orestes: Talthybius he sees as a trimmer acting under other men's influence (889, 893–7) and the second he views as a crude mob orator (903–16). However, even if the old man's account of the assembly is far from impartial, his passionate involvement certainly makes us focus on a debate in which a vote is held after a number of points of view have been articulated. Two speak for Orestes, two against. Finally he gives a speech himself (932–42). This comes across as so inadequate that the editor of the Oxford commentary suggests that it may be an interpolation.⁴⁵ To focus on just two points, Orestes omits his strongest argument, that Apollo had told him to commit the murder (28–30, etc.), and he fails to repeat his 'What *should* I have done?' of 551 and 596.⁴⁶ It seems scarcely surprising that he is condemned by a show of hands. Quite simply, this is democracy in action.

Yet in 1968 Christian Wolff asserted that Orestes is condemned 'not on grounds of justice, but for patently political reasons'.⁴⁷ And in the 2007 *Cambridge Companion* Hesk comments that this messenger speech 'represents a sovereign people deliberating and voting. But its account of the way in which factional interests and unscrupulous speakers successfully manipulate the crowd makes the process of popular decision-making seem deeply ambiguous'.⁴⁸ Quite apart from ignoring the way in which the speech is focalized through the character of its narrator,⁴⁹ Wolff and Hesk fail to take account of the fact that Orestes and Electra are guilty of an appalling act. That is certainly what Orestes himself, Tyndareus and, of course, the Furies feel. We have already seen the unmitigated horror with which the chorus have just reacted to it, and they are highly sympathetic towards the young man. The voting at Orestes' trial in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (set not in Argos but in Athens) is a close-run thing.⁵⁰ To condemn the matricides to death is a perfectly reasonable decision for the Argive assembly to take. It does not *need* to be manipulated. Furthermore, it is a simple fact of democratic assemblies that they contain factions⁵¹ – one expression for them nowadays is political parties – and individual politicians of course have their own agendas.

It may be true, however, that, through his depiction of Talthybius, whom he describes as 'giving the glad eye' (893–4: the translation is M.L. West's) to Aegisthus' supporters, Euripides is making a serious point about manipulation in the democratic assembly. He may be glancing back to 612–14 where Tyndareus said that he would go to the Argive assembly and bring the city crashing down on Orestes and Electra 'whether it will or no' (ἐκούσαν οὐχ ἐκούσαν). This very topic of aristocratic manipulation is raised by Plutarch (*Per.* 11.2) when he tells us that Thucydides, son of

⁴⁴ Ober (n. 3), 11: cf. Eur. *Hec.* 607.

⁴⁵ Euripides, *Orestes*, ed. C.W. Willink (Oxford 1986), n. at 932–42.

⁴⁶ J. Morwood, *The Plays of Euripides* (London, 2002), 65.

⁴⁷ C. Wolff, 'Orestes', in E. Segal (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1983), 340–56: quotation 341. (The chapter was first published in 1968.)

⁴⁸ Hesk (n. 28), 81. Cf. J.P. Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley, 1986), 236–7, J.R. Porter, *Studies in Euripides' Orestes* (Leiden, New York, Cologne, 1994), 73–5.

⁴⁹ Willink (n. 45), 224.

⁵⁰ For a full review of the voting here, see Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, ed. A.H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, 1989), n. at 222–6.

⁵¹ Theseus gives an interesting and by no means uncritical analysis of this at *Supp.* 232–45 (cf. p. 358 and n. 31 above).

Melesias, 'brought his upper class backers into the Assembly and seated them to form a claque',⁵² and it was to guard against such tactics that in 410, two years before the performance of *Orestes*, members of the council were required to take their seats among that body by lot.⁵³ So it may be that here we *do* encounter a valid criticism of an area in which Athenian democracy was vulnerable. However, if someone as unsophisticated as the old family retainer up from the country (866)⁵⁴ has no problem in spotting the manipulation and knows who are pulling the strings, it is hard to feel that anything particularly sinister is going on. There is no ambiguity here. And, as we have seen, the debate in the assembly, which is quite free of the angry passions envisaged by Menelaus (968–7), is remarkably even-handed.

A further problem with the interpretation of this speech arises from the search for real-life demagogues to fit the messenger's two malevolent vignettes – a search which may have proved obstructive to clear-sighted analysis. The scholiast led the way here by identifying the mob orator as Cleophon, while Talthybius is regularly associated with Theramenes.⁵⁵ It is no doubt significant that nobody has come up with a real-life equivalent for Diomedes, let alone the pious peasant: these two supporters of Orestes are both characterized as good men and thus prove impossible to typecast as Thucydidean demagogues. The latter is described as

μορφῇ μὲν οὐκ εὖωπός, ἀνδρεῖος δ' ἀνὴρ,
 ὀλιγάκις ἄστν ἀγορᾶς χραίνων κύκλον,
 αὐτουργός, ὅπερ καὶ μόνοι σώιζουσι γῆν,
 ξυνετός δέ, χωρεῖν ὁμόσε τοῖς λόγοις θέλων,
 ἀκέραιον ἀνεπίληκτον ἡσκηκὼς βίον· (918–22)

not physically good-looking, but a manly man,⁵⁶ one who rarely impinges on the town or the market circle, a working farmer (it is these alone that ensure the land's survival), but intelligent, willing to come to grips with the arguments, uncorrupted, self-disciplined to a life above reproach. (tr. M.L. West)

This ecstatic paean of praise is surely excessive. And indeed the pious peasant, here so sentimentally portrayed, is a 'cliché of this period of Athenian literature'.⁵⁷ When he suggests, only a hundred lines after the chorus's expression of appalled revulsion, that Orestes should be given a crown for killing his mother and the messenger informs us that what he said was thought of highly by good people (τοῖς χρηστοῖς)⁵⁸ (924–30),

⁵² Finley (n. 5), 19. In his forthcoming article quoted in n. 38, Rhodes remarks, 'A few texts referring to critical occasions suggest pressure on men to attend [the assembly] and to vote on a particular side (Thuc. 6.13.1, Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.8 [but contrast Diod. Sic. 13.101.6], Dem. 18. *De cor.* 143); cf. Thuc. 8.66.1, Lys. 12, *Erat.* 44, 75–6).' At Thuc. 6.13.1, the historian, as Rhodes observes, puts in Nicias' mouth the accusation that Alcibiades has packed the assembly with supporters.

⁵³ Philochorus 328F140 (in Jacoby, *FGrH*).

⁵⁴ It may be that in this detail and the description of the farmer at 918–20 the debate reflects its Argive setting. In 413 B.C., the Spartans occupied Deceleia on Attic soil and effectively put an end to the country's agricultural operation (Thuc. 7.27.4–28.1). An old man would be unlikely to be coming to the city from the Attic country in 408, the year of *Orestes*.

⁵⁵ Goossens (n. 13), 642, Wolff (n. 47), 341, E.R. Rawson, 'Aspects of Euripides' *Orestes*', *Arethusa* 5 (1972), 161.

⁵⁶ In view of the element of absurdity that I shall suggest can be found in this portrait, it is perhaps interesting that Chaucer applies the words 'A manly man' with a playful irony to his un-monkish Monk (*Canterbury Tales* A 167).

⁵⁷ Hall (n. 43), 268, G. Grossman, *Politische Schlagwörter aus der Zeit des Peloponnesischen Krieges* (Zürich, 1950), 21–30. The messenger's adulation of the politically engaged peasant farmer of line 921 is in extreme contrast to the Theban herald's critique at *Supp.* 420–2.

⁵⁸ For the elite connotations of this word, see Ober (n. 3), 13, 14, 251, 260.

we may well feel inclined to acknowledge the presence of more than a hint of absurdity. Earlier there has surely been a strong element of caricature in the portrayal of the mob orator:⁵⁹ he too is a figure of cliché;⁶⁰ and, if the portrait of Talthybius *does* invoke Theramenes, it may also have brought to the spectators' mind a dozen other political figures whose names are now lost: there may be satire of a third stereotype. When we consider that this messenger speech proved the starting-off point for a speech in a comedy by Menander,⁶¹ we may become even more alert to the possibility of shifts in tone here. If there is an instability of register which can accommodate an undertow of comedy, that would be very much in line with the way that the tragedy is soon to erupt into crazy surrealism. Even the inadequacy of Orestes' speech to the grim seriousness of his situation, and the fact that the old man actually praises it (943), would sit well with a reading of the whole messenger speech that finds space for destabilizing elements.

Whether or not such a reading would prove persuasive, I hope that what has already been said may have gone some way to indicating the possibilities of interpretation that are closed off to those who adhere to what I have argued is an insufficiently responsive historicism, and to suggesting that a certain reductiveness can hamper their approach to texts that call for more sensitively calibrated reactions. In addition, their readings can too often appear to be tinged with the Thucydidean bias that was discussed at the outset. They remain infused with the view of the Athenian demagogues that Finley set out to rebut half a century ago.

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⁵⁹ The caricature becomes positively Gillrayesque if any of 906–13 is Euripidean.

⁶⁰ 'The satire (such as it is) is generic rather than specific' – Willink (n. 45), n. at 902–16. In his edition of *Bacchae* (Oxford, 1944), E.R. Dodds draws a parallel between the figure 'who had tramped the town and had the knack of words' at 717 of that play (see n. ad loc.) and the town-bred demagogue of *Orestes*: 'this is a type', he writes, 'which Euripides elsewhere portrays with little sympathy'. Dodds misses the point that in both cases the 'type' is focalized through a rustic narrator. Cf. Euripides, *Bacchae*, ed. R. Seaford (Warminster, 1996), n. at 717–22.

⁶¹ *The Man from Sicyon* 176–271.