

Pericles' Writings

No written work by Pericles has come down to us and, except for some speeches that he may have committed to writing and measures that he sponsored in the Council and the Assembly, we have no sure knowledge that Pericles himself wrote anything.¹ This loss of his direct words is a great pity, for contemporary and near-contemporary sources—namely, Thucydides, the comic poets, and Plato—describe him as the greatest orator of his time.² Eupolis in his comedy the *Demes*, which survives

1. At least some decrees attributed to Pericles survived in Plutarch's day (*Pericles* 8.7); in the 50s B.C. the Roman politician Cicero had seen purported speeches of Pericles (*De oratore* 2.93, *Brutus* 27). They were probably not genuine and are dismissed as composed by others by the Roman authority on rhetoric, Quintilian, about 75 A.D. (3.1.12, 12.2.22, 12.10.49).

2. Thucydides describes him as "first among the Athenians at that time and the man most effective in speech" (1.139.4; see below, p. 00); Plato styles him "the most perfect of all in rhetorical skill" (*Phaedrus* 269e).

only in fragments, includes the following exchange about Pericles, a high compliment indeed (*PCG* V 102):

A) That man was the most powerful speaker of all.
Whenever he came forward, like a great sprinter
coming from ten feet behind, he bested his rivals.

B) You say he was fast . . . A) But, in addition to his speed,
persuasion somehow or other sat on his lips,
so entrancing was he. He alone of the politicians
customarily left his sting in his hearers.

Thucydides, who was perhaps in his midtwenties or older at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, had the opportunity to hear Pericles speak, one would assume, on a number of occasions. Whether he actually did or not, we have no way of knowing. He does not volunteer such information. In any case, Thucydides puts three speeches in Pericles' mouth in the first two books of his *History*.³ Magnificent though they are, these are compositions by Thucydides, not the precise words of Pericles. Indeed, Thucydides admits in his *History* that it was difficult for him and his informers to remember the exact words spoken in the speeches on each occasion (1.22.1); but he adds that he composed them "adhering as closely as possible to the overall spirit of what was actually said." He also says in this same passage that he has recounted "what he thought each speaker needed to say in a given situation."

Apart from these speeches of Pericles recorded in Thucydides, we possess nearly a dozen turns of phrase that appear to

3. 1.140–144, 2.35–46 and 60–64. These speeches are translated and discussed below.

be either actual quotes or close paraphrases of Pericles. These are isolated passages for which we do not in most cases have an adequate context. When questioned about a politically sensitive expenditure during an annual audit of his official accounts in 446, Pericles replied with firm brevity that he had spent it “for what was necessary.”⁴ The temerity of this response sufficiently captured the imagination of his fellow Athenians that Aristophanes, more than twenty years later, could have old Strepsiades quote it in an absurd context in the *Clouds* (858–859). When questioned by his son about his slippers, the old man retorts, “Like Pericles, I lost them ‘for what was necessary.’”⁵

Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* cites Pericles for his use of two striking similes and two arresting metaphors. In the funeral speech he gave probably in 439 over the dead in the Samian War, Pericles said that “the youth who had perished in the war had vanished from the city just as if someone had removed the spring from the year” (1411a2–4; cf. also 1365a31–33). Near the beginning of the Peloponnesian War he exhorted his fellow citizens “to remove Aegina, the sty in the eye of Piraeus” (1411a15–16). He likened the Samians “to kids who get bread but go on crying” and the Boeotians, “since they continuously fight with each other, to prickly holm oaks that inflict cuts on themselves” (1407a2–6).

Aristotle also recounts a famous case where Pericles tricked the seer Lampon in cross-examination by asking him about the mysteries at Eleusis. Lampon replied that one was not allowed to hear the secret rites if he had not been initiated. (In general, the ancient Athenians took this matter very seriously; the penalty for

4. Plutarch *Pericles* 23.1.

5. See above, p. 00, n. 0.

revealing the mysteries to the uninitiated was death.) Pericles then asked if he, Lampon, knew the secret rites. On hearing him aver that he did, Pericles countered, “Well, how can that be, since *you* have never been initiated?” (1419a2–5).

Plutarch, who lived more than five hundred years after Pericles, also quotes from the oration over the dead in the Samian War (*Pericles* 8.9). This speech was apparently one of Pericles’ most famous.⁶ He said that

the dead had become immortal just like the gods. Although we do not see the gods, we infer their reality by the honors that they receive and the benefits that they bestow. This likewise applies to those who have perished on behalf of their city.

Plutarch also quotes Pericles (33.5) as saying when he restrained the Athenians from going out to fight the Spartans at Acharnae in the first campaign of the Peloponnesian War that “trees cut and clipped grow back quickly, but men cut down cannot be recovered so easily.” Thucydides attributes a strikingly similar sentiment to him in his first speech at 1.143.5 where his Pericles says, “Don’t grieve for your properties and land, save your grief for the loss of men.”

Plutarch records a number of other anecdotes and what may be quotes from Pericles, but we have no means of verifying their authenticity. According to Plutarch (8.7) Pericles said that “he spied war storming forth from the Peloponnese.” We may note also his remonstrance (8.8) to the tragedian Sophocles, his fellow general at Samos, when he admired a handsome young soldier,

6. Plutarch had not, apparently, seen a copy of the speech, for he cites it from Stesimbrotus of Thasos, a contemporary of Pericles.

that “a general not only ought to have clean hands, Sophocles, but a clean mind.” When the general Tolmides was about to set off in 447 on the ill-advised expedition into Boeotia that resulted in his death, Pericles is quoted as saying (18.2) that “if he would not listen to Pericles, he would not go wrong waiting for that wisest adviser of all, namely, time.”

Plutarch's other quotations of Pericles are more suspect. At 35.2 he recounts how Pericles defused his troops' fear during an eclipse. Seeing that his helmsman was particularly frightened, he held his cloak up before his eyes and asked him if he was afraid. When he replied no, Pericles asked, “How does this differ from that, except that what has caused the darkness is bigger than my cloak?” This is clearly a story fostered in the philosophical schools to support a scientific approach to natural phenomena. Plutarch also reports that on his deathbed Pericles claimed (38.4) as his proudest accomplishment that “no citizen because of me donned mourning garb.” These are the all but obligatory last words of a famous man and can scarcely be credited, unless we assume that Pericles was delirious at the last.

The sum total of actual words that can reliably be attributed to Pericles is disappointingly small. Still, to have on good evidence the truly beautiful metaphor likening the loss of the young men of Athens to having the spring taken out of the year is no small thing. It has a piquancy, a “sting,” to quote Eupolis, that remains with us.