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Thematic commentary on (passage 1,2) Demosthenes Phillipic 1

Introduction

As Philip of Macedon's power expanded, highlighted by his victory over Onomarchus, his unsuccessful advance at Thermopylae, and his aggressive actions in Thrace and the Aegean, anxiety within Athens intensified. In response, Demosthenes delivered his First Philippic, both warning Athens and urging action. Acknowledging Philip's immediate threat over traditional Greek rivals, Demosthenes called for practical resistance based on civic unity, avoiding panic-driven rhetoric. *Bremner's 2017* argues that the Phillipics must also be understood as addressing both the external and internal decay, using the concept of *παρρησία* (frank speech) to revive civic responsibility.

This thematic commentary contends that the opening paragraphs of the speech showcase Demosthenes' rhetorical brilliance deploying techniques such as conditional reasoning, appeals to civic duty and his rhetorical modesty and inversion, as he turns Athenian failure into a potential source of strength. As *Wooten (1983, Chap 3)* observes, the opening serves as "a rhetorical pivot point," where Demosthenes positions himself as a principled outsider, challenging complacent leadership while blending ethical self-presentation with subtle political critique.

Greek Passage (para 1,2)

εἰ μὲν περὶ καινοῦ τινος πράγματος προυτίθεται, ὧς ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, λέγειν, ἐπισχὼν ἂν ἕως οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν εἰωθότων γνώμην ἀπεφώνησαντο, εἰ μὲν ἤρεσκε τί μοι τῶν ὑπὸ τούτων ῥηθέντων, ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἤγον, εἰ δὲ μή, τότε ἂν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπειρώμην ἃ γινώσκω λέγειν: ἐπειδὴ δ' ὑπὲρ ὧν πολλάκις εἰρήκασιν οὗτοι πρότερον συμβαίνει καὶ νυνὶ σκοπεῖν, ἡγοῦμαι καὶ πρῶτος ἀναστὰς εἰκότως ἂν συγγνώμης τυγχάνειν. εἰ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ παρεληλυθότος χρόνου τὰ δέονθ' οὗτοι συνεβούλευσαν, οὐδὲν ἂν ὑμᾶς νῦν ἔδει βουλευέσθαι

πρῶτον μὲν οὖν οὐκ ἄθυμητέον, ὧς ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, τοῖς παροῦσι πράγμασιν, οὐδ' εἰ πάνυ φαύλως ἔχειν δοκεῖ. ὃ γὰρ ἐστὶ χεῖριστον αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ παρεληλυθότος χρόνου, τοῦτο πρὸς τὰ μέλλοντα βέλτιστον ὑπάρχει. τί οὖν ἐστὶ τοῦτο; ὅτι οὐδέν, ὧς ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, τῶν δεόντων ποιούντων ὑμῶν κακῶς τὰ πράγματ' ἔχει: ἐπεὶ τοι, εἰ πάνθ' ἃ προσῆκε πραττόντων οὕτως εἶχεν, οὐδ' ἂν ἐλπίς ἦν αὐτὰ βελτίω γενέσθαι.

Translation

Oh men of Athens, if a new matter were being proposed for discussion, I would have waited until the majority of those who are accustomed to speak had declared their opinions; and if something that they had said pleased me, I would have remained silent. But if it did not, then I myself would have attempted to speak what I know. But since it happens that we are deliberating now on issues these same men have addressed many times before, I believe it is fitting that I, rising to speak first, should reasonably expect to be granted some indulgence. For, if these men had given the right advice in the past, it would not now be necessary for you to deliberate .

Firstly then, one must not lose heart, men of Athens, at the present circumstances, not even if things seem to be going so badly. What was worst in the past turns out to be the most hopeful advantage for the future. What is the reason? That none of the necessary actions, men of Athens, has been

carried out by you, and so our situation is dire. For indeed, if the situation were as it is now, if all that should have been done had been done, then the situation would have no hope of improvement.

Commentary

Political and Strategic Context

The introduction establishes the strategic framework of the speech, seamlessly integrating persuasive rhetoric with a call for actionable policy. The speech conveys a sense of urgency in light of Philip's expanding influence in the north, particularly in Thrace and the Chersonese. Demosthenes responds not with abstract rhetoric, but to immediate geopolitical pressures that called for stronger and more decisive Athenian engagement.

Rhetorical Structure and the Function of Hypothetical Speech

Demosthenes skilfully employs a series of conditional counterfactual (protasis-apodosis) clauses to critique the shortcomings of previous Athenian decision making and policies, thereby justifying his own intervention. He leverages hypothetical clauses to contrast ideal action with inaction, positioning himself as an outsider who holds Athens accountable for the crisis at hand, yet offers a route to recovery through direct involvement. The μέν...δέ structure in Greek rhetoric is often used to set up contrasting ideas. Here, Demosthenes contrasts the ideal with the real, forcing the audience to reflect on their failure to act while motivating them towards a more effective response.

Davies (1949, Section 1), Wooten, and Herrman (2019; p161-202) collectively emphasize that Demosthenes' use of conditional and contrary-to-fact constructions serves as a powerful rhetorical tool to critique Athenian leadership and mobilize civic action. Davies highlights how these unfulfilled conditions, underscore the Assembly's inaction and heighten the urgency of Demosthenes' message. Wooten builds on this by portraying Demosthenes as a "pragmatic patriot" who, through hypothetical scenarios, contrasts the ideal with the actual to hold everyone accountable and advocate for decisive future action. *Herrman* further underscores the function of these clauses in exposing the failures of a complacent political class, shifting blame for the present crisis while urging citizens toward renewed responsibility. Together, these analyses reveal how Demosthenes blends critique with a call to action, using linguistic form to shape political engagement.

Rhetorical Modesty and Moral Authority

Demosthenes' self-presentation through expressions like 'ἡσυχίαν ἂν ἦγον' (I would have remained silent) showcases not only rhetorical modesty but also a deliberate effort to position himself as a responsible and non-ambitious figure within the political framework of Athens, a contrast to the ineffective leadership he critiques. His appeal for συγγνώμη (forgiveness / indulgence) is more than modesty. It is arguably a rhetorical device to highlight past failings of others without direct confrontation (*Carey, 1994 pp. 26–45.*). His approach could be seen as a modern equivalent of passive-aggressive politeness, indirectly criticizing while appearing humble, thereby maintaining the moral high ground!

The phrase οἱ πλεῖστοι τῶν εἰωθότων alludes to the informal hierarchy in Athenian oratory, where senior or established speakers were traditionally heard first. Demosthenes acknowledges this custom to position himself as respectful yet willing to challenge convention. Though Solon's law granting precedence to men over fifty had lapsed, the practice endured as a mark of decorum. At thirty-three, Demosthenes justifies his early intervention—an act that balances deference with strategic assertion (*Kennedy, 1880; p25 footnote1*)

Rhetorical Encouragement and Strategic Denial of Despair

οὐκ ἄθυμητέον...οὐδὲ εἰ πάνυ φαύλως ἔχειν δοκεῖ," loosely translated as "one must not lose heart...even if things seem to be very bad," can be interpreted as a philosophical-sounding maxim—a tool commonly used by orators to convey moral teaching, unify audiences, and emphasize ethical weight. *Aristotle (2007, Chap. 21)* notes that maxims (gnōmē) enhance a speaker's credibility (ethos) and appeal to emotion (pathos), especially when they reflect shared values.

Demosthenes begins by denying the Athenians the right to despair, casting them not as victims of decline but as agents of change. This rhetorical move functions both ethically and politically thereby reviving civic responsibility, shifting blame to past inaction, and empowering listeners to shape their future. In this, Demosthenes encourages a mindset of potential rather than fatalism, aligning with *Kennedy's (1963)* view that Greek rhetoric instructs audiences in moral responsibility. By invoking this maxim, Demosthenes critiques yet also guides his audience, urging action and reminding them their fate lies in their hands. His strategic denial of despair re-engages listeners, promoting agency and hope in the face of crisis.

Rhetorical Inversion and Blame

Demosthenes employs rhetorical inversion to transform an apparent weakness into a source of strength. The phrase "ὃ γὰρ ἐστὶ χεῖριστον...βέλτιστον ὑπάρχει" ("For what is the worst aspect of these matters from the past turns out to be the best regarding the future") encapsulates a paradox in which past failure, initially a source of blame, is reframed as an opportunity for positive change. This technique shifts the narrative from guilt and stagnation to hope and transformation. While the present may seem dire, Demosthenes argues it is not beyond redemption. Inaction can be corrected; the Athenians can still rectify past mistakes and restore the city's strength.

He also subtly redirects blame from external forces, such as Philip, to the citizens' failure to act. The phrase "ὅτι οὐδέν...τῶν δεόντων ποιούντων ὑμῶν..." ("That nothing, [men of Athens], among the things that ought to be done, has been done by you") highlights internal inaction over external threat. This rhetorical move reaffirms democratic accountability by positioning citizens not as passive victims, but as responsible agents. If they are to blame for the crisis, they also possess the power to resolve it.

Challenging Fatalism: A Call for Action and Hope

Demosthenes confronts fatalism head-on, offering a powerful argument for hope through the contrary-to-fact scenario: "εἰ πάνθ' ἃ προσήκε πραττόντων οὕτως εἶχεν, οὐδ' ἂν ἐλπίς ἦν..." — If all that should have been done had been done, there would be no hope of improvement. This rhetorical device challenges his audience to reject the notion that the situation is beyond remedy. By framing the crisis because of inaction rather than inevitable failure, Demosthenes emphasizes that the current decline is not a fixed destiny, but a consequence of choices yet to be made.

Through this counterfactual argument, Demosthenes reopens the possibility for recovery. The very fact that hope persists, precisely because the necessary actions have not been taken, signals that change is still attainable. This logical structure not only counters the sense of inevitability but also presents a clear call to action: the crisis can be averted through decisive steps. As *Kennedy (1963; p125)* observes, Demosthenes skilfully uses this logical framework to rally the Athenians, asserting that the future remains within their grasp, and recovery is possible if they act without delay.

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