

Analytic review

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The Number 17 December Analytic Review The chapter examines the political concept of democracy by comparing it with eroticism and sexual matters. The political ideology of ancient Athens is explored through sexual fantasies which, as Wohl believes, underlie it. By reading the texts of the ancient historian Thucydides and comedian Aristophanes through the prism of ancient Athenians, who often spoke about politics in sexual terms, Wohl uncovers surprising ideas and supports them from the evidence in the pertinent texts. The contrast between Pericles and his follower Cleon in reality is less striking and historically dubious. Both Thucydides and Aristophanes treat Cleon with clear despise. At the same time, their texts offer sufficient evidence that the political relationship between the Athenian political leaders and the demos was erotically colored. It is eroticism that serves the background of both Pericles and Cleon's political activity as opposites. In this case, Cleon has been historically perceived as a mere parody of Pericles. He seems to have embodied all features that are not characteristic of Pericles as depicted by Aristophanes. At the same time, this vision helps to reveal much about Pericles. Dr Wohl relies on reading their politics not just through the specific features exhibited by Cleon and Pericles, but through understanding the essence of the eroticism inherent in political visions of the demos and its leaders. This leads to emergence of an elaborate political erotica. Within the limited societal model represented by Athens, the politician and the orator at once gets the support of the demos through violent eros. His open mouth epitomizes his desire to make his listeners open their orifices, too. So they gape at him. Erotically, this pederastic relationship puts the orator in a position of eromenos. This is how Cleon is viewed by Thucydides. Pericles, on his part, is believed not to descend to using the <https://assignbuster.com/analytic-review/>

violent eros with fellatio and other sexual practices due to his authority. He sublimates the sexual desire into his authority. Yet, the demos retains his sexual desire which is repressed. The difference is Cleon acknowledges the desire and builds his erotic relationship with the demos on this, while Pericles does not, although he also acts in the same paradigm. In the last section of the chapter, Cleon's political style is analyzed in terms of his rhetorical eros and then compared with that of Plutarch's Pericles. For Cleon, this rhetorical eros is the essence of democracy, when the orator pleases the demos by the effeminizing effect. While Thucydides purifies Pericles, Plutarch's representation of the latter clearly places him in the same position as that of Cleon in relation to demos: young Pericles, too, is keen on pleasing the demos before he changes through casting off these "Cleonian" things. Yet, this change was never complete. Plutarch's Pericles uses the same weapon to fascinate demos – eros, whether he wants it or not, so his oratory becomes a song of seduction. This is how he, too, acts a whore. So these two seemingly opposing figures appear to act in the same paradigm and in the same sexual role in politics.

While I basically agree with Dr Wohl's arguments and supporting evidence as to the erotic nature of the Athenian democracy, there seems to be one misused metaphor. Specifically, in saying that for Pericles the political eros becomes prostitution, Dr Wohl seems to have chosen an irrelevant term (104). While prostitution in ancient Greece was regarded a degrading practice, especially for free boys, demos willingly engages in the sexual intercourse with either of the politicians. It is free and affairs with either of the politicians do not affect its status. It is true that both: people and orators experience pleasure and sexual satisfaction, but this intercourse is done

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willingly. It looks more like age-structured pederasty, which was considered a noble practice, rather than prostitution. This idea may well be supported by the fact that in ancient Greece, pederasty was conducted in several phases, and the erastes had to woo the eromenos. So he bought gifts and expressed his affection by touching the genitals of the young boy who was to become his eromenos, which was how he made the latter his lover. This process is very much evident in political erotica of Pericles and Cleon. Yet, one can hardly call it prostitution.

Ironically,

I disagree with the very approach of the author to view the political relationship with the demos through sexual desire. Sexual desire and desire to rule do not refer to the same category, I believe. So they cannot be explored within the same paradigm. Specifically, no one knows real reasons that caused Pericles to be a leader, as no one knows what drove Cleon in his desire to rule. Let us assume they (or at least one of them) were driven by a highly moral drive to become rulers. Maybe they intended to serve their people, rather than enjoying power for the sake of power, as is shown in the essay. Thus, interpretation through the psychoanalytic theory is rather one-sided and lacks historical objectivity.

Works Cited

Wohl, V. Love among the ruins: the erotics of democracy in Athens. Princeton, 2002. Print.