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THE TYRANNICIDE CITIZEN IN FIFTH-CENTURY BCE ATHENS

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This paper argues that the Athenians' intensive cultivation of Harmodius and Aristogiton in the fifth century was not about the fear of tyrants, or even oligarchs (as important as the identification of tyranny and oligarchy was in late fifth-century Athens). It was rather a celebration and, more importantly, a practical realization of citizen equality; or, more concretely stated, when the Athenians were thinking about and celebrating the achievements of Harmodius and Aristogiton, they were putting into practice fundamental democratic concepts, chief among these, a working conception of political equality. Contemporary treatments of the fifth-century Athenian views on tyrannicide engaged primarily with Thucydides' account of Harmodius and Aristogiton,¹ their act as well as their place in fifth-century Athenian politics. Thucydides, of course, vigorously challenges the popular account of the tyrannicides; this is the context of his provocative and, as I will argue, unjustified claim that the Athenians were unsettled by the tyrannicides' story even a century after their great adventure: the disharmony between the story they told and the historical reality they knew made them act irrationally.² But rather than wrestle with Thucydides or his supporters head on, this paper aims to explore what I think the Athenians (and, in all likelihood, Thucydides too) knew the tyrannicides and their cult did for Athenian

¹ Thucydides, VI, 53, 3-60, 1.

² I have discussed this in McGlew 2012, p. 91-99. On the historical and conceptual role of tyranny in the Greek city states, see my McGlew 1993. For an overview of Greek tyranny and recent scholarship, see Lewis 2009. Among recent treatments of Thucydides' digression see Meyer 2008; Loraux 1985; Ober 2003; Wohl 2002; Wohl 1999 with bibliography. Older treatments include Podlecki 1966; Fornara 1968.

political culture: namely, craft from their narrative and imagery a significant and working concept of citizen equality for the fifth-century democracy.

Let us begin with the basics. The simple outlines of the tyrannicides' story come of course from Thucydides' digression, which reflects a determination to set the historical record straight. In his account, Harmodius and Aristogiton utterly failed in their effort to kill the sitting tyrant; tyranny, as a result, grew more oppressive and liberty only came through Sparta's intervention. In these major points, Thucydides speaks for most Greek historians.³ But there were variations. The Aristotelian *Athenaion Politeia*,⁴ for example, blames Thettalus, a third son of Peisistratus, rather than Hipparchus for provoking the attack on the Peisistratids. The insult that triggered it is relayed differently there too, as well as the actions of Harmodius and Aristogiton and Hippias' reaction.

Narrative variations do not weaken the major point, that the tyrannicides' story held a firm place in Athenian public life. And just as their story was much told, so the honor that the retellings reflect was deeply entrenched. Harmodius and Aristogiton received the distinctive honor of public statues in the agora and a public cult. The cult is difficult to date, and likely evolved gradually: among the final pieces, the honors accorded their descendants date to the time of Pericles and a prohibition on parody was later still. But the first statue group, the work of Antenor, must belong in the first years of the democracy's existence. Its significance as an object of symbolic value seems to have been recognized by Xerxes, who took it with him rather than destroying it when he left Athens, and by Alexander (or a successor) who returned it to Athens. Yet, aside from the secure (if wide) chronological range of its dedication, little is known about Antenor's tyrannicides; it is impossible to know where exactly it stood, on what scale it was composed and what it looked like, whether in particular it represented *kouroi* in the fashion of archaic dedications or was composed of action figures, anticipating the later group by Kritios and Nesiotes.

The second dedication, a bronze statue group dedicated soon after the expulsion of the Persians, is much better known. The appearance of the two on Attic pottery and coins, and the survival of Roman marble copies dating to the Hadrianic period, testify to its enduring iconic status.⁵ The group represents the younger, beardless Harmodius

³ Herodotus, V, 55 notes simply that Harmodius and Aristogiton killed Hipparchus not Hippias, the tyranny continued and become worse until Hippias himself was expelled. Cf. V, 123, 2.

⁴ Aristotle, *Athenian constitution*, 18, 2-6.

⁵ Naples, Museo Archeologico G103-4. For the coins, see Brunnsåker 1971², pl. 23. 1, 2. All of the surviving coins, with the exception of the electron stater from Cyzicus, pl. 12.1, are much later.

as he strides forward at the moment of lunging at the absent enemy. His torso is turned and tense and his sword drawn and raised, while Aristogiton has his weapon by his side and is moving toward the same object. The two figures are the same height but variations in musculature and facial hair indicate the tyrannicides' different ages and attitudes. What is not known for certain is the precise position of the two figures in the tyrannicide group, each of which stood on its own base, or the aspect they were meant to present to their viewers. We get some help, however, from two-dimensional representations, particularly the vase paintings, which give a clearer sense of Athenian conventions governing the tyrannicides' representation.⁶ The black-figure lekythos in Vienna attributed to the Emporion Painter and dating to the first decade after the dedication of the Kritios and Nesiotes group puts Aristogiton a step behind his young friend⁷; as if to heighten a sense of intimacy between the two, Harmodius' right hand is pictured within the loop created by Aristogiton's scabbard strap. The artist has repositioned the center of the scene in line with Kritios and Nesiotes: the Peisistratid object of Harmodius and Aristogiton's wrath is elided. The point is not the crime itself, but the response it elicits. The tyrannicides also sometimes appear on Athena's shield on Panathenaic amphorae. The three examples that survive all date to the very end of the fifth century; despite their small size, they capture the act of tyrannicide with a focus on the link between the two figures, which seems the rule at least since Kritios and Nesiotes. The example in the British Museum clearly renders the statue group itself on Athena's shield: we can see a statue base (there seems to be no attempt to capture two separate bases). The artist apparently intended to render the cult and public narrative as much as the tyrannicides themselves – as if Harmodius and Aristogiton, just as they are inseparable from each other, also have no existence distinct from their fifth-century Athenian political personas. Moreover, the pair (and what they signify) seems to be linked to Athena's striding pose a step behind them: everyone advances with determination and purpose toward a single (if absent) object.⁸

Kritios and Nesiotes obviously set the pattern for fifth-century representations of the pair, although we know there was some variation (as there was in the tyrannicides' narrative). The Copenhagen Painter's treatment on a red-figure stamnos in Würzburg,

⁶ Brunnsäker 1971² remains the fullest treatment of the tyrannicide motif in Athenian art. See also Fehr 1984; Taylor 1991, who offer a broader focus.

⁷ Vienna, Österreichisches Museum: 264. Haspels 1936, 264. 39, 137, 165-167, pl. 48.4A-B; Brunnsäker 1971, pl. 23, 5.

⁸ British Museum B 605. See Mannack 2012², p. 115, fig. 65C (B); Neer 2002, p. 176, fig. 87 A.

dated 480-470, very near the dedication of the second group, is an example: Hipparchos (or Thettalos) reappears and is given a central place in the painting.⁹ Whether the stamnos captures older depictions, or whether there was greater variation in the representation of the tyrannicides before Kritios and Nesiotes gained canonical status, can only be guessed. Still, even here, the postures and attitudes of the tyrannicides themselves – their connection to each other and to their joint action – are entirely consistent with the second tyrannicide group.

From the principal features of the narrative and the representation, we get a hint of the political conceptions embedded in the Athenians' celebration of the tyrannicides. The group captures Harmodius and Aristogiton moving in the same direction. Harmodius is in front; Aristogiton is a bit behind and perhaps slightly more cautious, but is nonetheless fully engaged in the mission and fully supportive of his young lover. Moreover, the two figures typically overlap in some way, their limbs, torsos or their swords or scabbards intersecting, as if the artists, in even the least sophisticated representations, aimed to make it impossible to see one without envisioning the other. Finally, we note that the bodies are near equal in size; what, in purely representational terms, distinguishes them is precise and limited – the features that distinguish age, their stances, their positions relative to the goal of their attack. It is not just that the tyrannicides are two in number; they are each an incomplete part of a pair. In fact, neither is common alone in Athenian art – or Athenian literature.¹⁰ That the younger Harmodius is generally first may reflect a difference in the nature of their common engagement, but not in the seriousness of the commitment: Harmodius leads, Aristogiton follows. Yet Harmodius is hardly represented as impetuous or rash (any more than Aristogiton appears to delay). And he is certainly no child; Harmodius bears no resemblance to the darling Lysis in the dialogue Plato named for him, or the mischievous Theodotus in Lysias III, both of whom are relatively passive objects of elite pederastic desire in late fifth- and early fourth-century Athens. Harmodius, rather, is defending his own honor and his sister's at the perilous, if deliberate and calculated, risk of his own life. Thus the second tyrannicides group initiates a fundamentally dramatic

⁹ Martin v. Wagner Museum, Würzburg 515. See Mannack 2012², p. 59, fig. 21 (B); Neer 2002, p. 174, 84, 85 (A, B).

¹⁰ So Brunnsåker 1971², p. 112: "The Tyrannicides were a pair and are almost always referred to together in ancient literature". Brunnsåker discusses a few exceptions.

representation – in the straightforward sense of Aristotle’s *Poetics*:¹¹ the artists express character through action; they are founding partners in a single act of revenge.¹²

As Kritios and Nesiotes framed them, then, Harmodius and Aristogiton together constitute a friendship (and simultaneously an interpretation of the nature of political friendship). But, as their narrative makes clear, they also belong to a network. They were consummate social creatures who responded to a social insult with others, their co-conspirators, who, though they failed the pair in their moment of action, regained an honored place in the story as the object of the tyrant’s increasingly harsh revenge. Of course, Kritios and Nesiotes do not explicitly incorporate this network in their sculpture. Yet in the fundamentally dramatic way that they rendered the tyrannicides (it is almost impossible to see the pair even now without feeling a need to imitate their heroic stance) and with the Athenians’ help (who placed the group in the most public of civic sites), the artists secured a space for this imaginary network, which is as crucial for the aesthetic and political project of the group as is the similarly elided object of their attack, the tyrants. This point should be stressed: the dramatic and heroic representation of the tyrannicides does not make them forbidding or unapproachable; indeed, they generously tolerate the Athenians who must have often crowded around them. This includes Athenians who paused to admire them, whether or not they felt impulses to imitate or touch them, and even, for that matter, Athenians when they paid the group no notice whatsoever as they nonchalantly went about their everyday lives.

The statue group of Kritios and Nestiotes could create this imaginary space of a tyrannicide network even when the tyrannicides themselves were unseen. Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, when Harmodius and Aristogiton are suddenly conjured up as heroic patrons of the male half-chorus, is a case in point. At that moment, in a dramatic flash, the half-chorus shape-shifts into fierce defenders of Athens and summons the tyrannicide pair into existence as partners who are invited to stand shoulder to shoulder with them and battle Athens’ new aspiring tyrants, the chorus’ own wives:

Ἄλλ’ ἐμοῦ μὲν οὐ τυραννεύσουσ’, ἐπεὶ φυλάξομαι
καὶ “φορήσω τὸ ξίφος” τὸ λοιπὸν “ἐν μύρτου κλαδί”,
ἀγοράσω τ’ ἐν τοῖς ὄπλοις ἐξῆς Ἀριστογείτονι,

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a28-29.

¹² On equality and the tyrannicides, see Fehr 1984, p. 44-50. Fehr understands the statue group as accommodating both late sixth-century aristocratic and fifth-century democratic conceptions of equality, which he regards as distinct. My argument is that the group and its reception illustrate (and contribute to) a seamless transition between the two.

ὠδέ θ' ἐστήξω παρ' αὐτόν.

They will not be tyrants over me, for I will be on guard
And will bear the sword forever in a bough of myrtle.
And I will stand armed in the agora next to Aristogiton,
Like this I will stand by him!

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 631-634.

When the old men, as silly as they appear, line up or cluster next to Aristogiton (however the scene was blocked) and assume a similar pose, they are demonstrating the imaginary (and conceptual) space that Kritios and Nesiotes created alongside the pair for the Athenians, who occupy it as if joining them in their famous undertaking. There was no mock up of the statue group on the stage: the chorus can stand next to Aristogiton (*agorazein*), wherever they strike the right pose and (apparently) think the right thoughts. In effect, then, the relationship of Harmodius and Aristogiton is not truly exclusive; rather, it is a pairing that others join as much as imitate. This is comic fantasy, but the chorus (I am claiming) is tapping into an important element of the Athenian political imaginary. The sculptural group is successful – indeed the fifth-century cult of Harmodius and Aristogiton becomes real – when it is productive, that is, when it generates a network of committed tyrannicides.

Similar features can be found in other elements of the fifth-century cultivation of tyrannicides. The older tyrannicide scholia to which the half-chorus of old men refer as they adopt the posture of the tyrannicides complements this productivity. In the extended version, with four stanzas preserved by Athenaeus:

ἐν μύρτου κλαδί τὸ ξίφος φορήσω,
ὥσπερ Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Ἀριστογείτων,
ὅτε τὸν τύραννον κτανέτην
ισονόμους τ' Ἀθήνας ἐποίησάτην.
φιλαθ' Ἀρμόδι', οὐ τί που τέθνηκας.
νήσσοις δ' ἐν μακάρων σέ φασιν εἶναι, ἵνα περ ποδώκης Ἀχιλεὺς,
Τυδείδην τέ φασι τὸν ἐσθλὸν [Διομήδεα].
ἐν μύρτου κλαδί τὸ ξίφος φορήσω,
ὥσπερ Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Ἀριστογείτων,
ὅτ' Ἀθηναίης ἐν θυσίαις
ἄνδρα τύραννον Ἰππαρχον ἐκαινέτην.
αἰεὶ σφῶν κλέος ἐσσεταὶ κατ' αἶαν,
φιλαθ' Ἀρμόδιε καὶ Ἀριστογείτων,
ὅτι τὸν τύραννον κτανέτην
ισονόμους τ' Ἀθήνας ἐποίησάτην.

I will carry a sword in boughs of myrtle
 Like Harmodius and Aristogiton
 When they killed the tyrant
 And gave Athens equality.
 Dearest Harmodius, you have not yet died
 Rather you live, they say, on the Islands of the Blessed,
 Just where they say swift-footed Achilles,
 and Diomedes, Tydaeus' son, live too.
 I will carry a sword in boughs of myrtle,
 Like Harmodius and Aristogiton,
 When at the festival in Athens
 They killed the tyrant Hipparchus.
 Your fame will last forever,
 Dearest Harmodius and Aristogiton,
 Because you killed the tyrant, And gave Athens equality.
 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, XV, 695a-b.

This was a drinking song; there were many variations and an inherent inducement to improvisation. There was no canonical version. What the Athenians in the fifth century called the “Song of Harmodius,”¹³ the “Harmodius” or “Harmodius, dearest!”¹⁴ was an improvisational pattern, in which Athenian citizens join with Aristogiton as admirers and followers of Harmodius. It was a centerpiece of the Athenian symposium in the fifth century, rendering the spirit of the tyrannicides and their achievement for a particular occasion and particular group of participants. In *The Wasps*¹⁵ Aristophanes hints at its significance and shows how it worked when he has Bdelycleon teach his father the “Song of Harmodius”. This is part of the young man’s futile effort to prepare his father for the symposium that is intended to launch his life of leisure. Bdelycleon pretends that he is Cleon starting the “Song of Harmodius” with the line, “there never was a man in Athens”.¹⁶ We do not know how this version was meant to go on from there; the charming reprobate Philocleon jumps in with the response: “who was such a rogue and a thief”.¹⁷ What Cleon (or, rather, Bdelycleon pretending to be Cleon) does as a singer is simple enough: he initiates and invites his successor to join with him in celebrating (and appropriating) the tyrannicides’ fame and status. When Cleon sings about Harmodius,

¹³ Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, 1225.

¹⁴ Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 980, 1093.

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, 1225.

¹⁶ Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, 1226.

¹⁷ Aristophanes, *The Wasps*, 1227.

he implicitly links himself with the democratic hero; he is pretending to embrace his cause, while in reality hoping to siphon off the tyrannicide's honor and redirect some portion to himself. Of course, this is what the "Song of Harmodius" was for (though Cleon uses it in a particularly crass way: "the man in Athens" is in his version is equally the tyrannicide and Cleon himself).¹⁸ Philocleon, brilliantly responding to the crassness of this version and general vileness of its author, explodes the imaginary link: now the man in Athens is not Harmodius at all, just Cleon, who is "a rogue and thief". "Well, let's get this straight", Philocleon answers, effectively disputing Cleon's credentials to sing the Song of Harmodius at all, "you are pond scum". This and Philocleon's other responses to the others assembled at the imaginary symposium upset his proper and rather vanilla son. But we can find something similar in *Acharnians*: there the old chorus leader of *Acharnians*, who, once Dicaeopolis has won over him and the entire chorus, promises:

οὐδέποτε' ἐγὼ Πόλεμον οἴκαδ' ὑποδέξομαι,
οὐδὲ παρ' ἐμοί ποτε τὸν Ἀρμόδιον ἄσεται
ἔργα κατακλιναίς, ὅτι παροινικὸς ἀνὴρ ἔφυ·

Never again will I invite Polemos to my house
Never again will he sing the song of Harmodius
Lying down at a banquet: he is a drunk.
Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 979-981.

Polemos, the leader will clarify, is an ill-mannered glutton; he destroys whatever of his host's he does not personally consume, wine and vineyards alike, even when begged to "drink, lie down, and accept the cup of friendship".¹⁹ Polemos is metonymy for the war's advocates, the socially-divisive pro-war wealthy that Aristophanes' early comedies relentlessly attack for their pretensions and power. This is Lamachus in *Acharnians* and Cleon virtually everywhere in Aristophanes' early plays.

We should note that Cleon in *The Wasps* sings a version of the song that makes no mention of the swords, myrtle sprigs and even tyrannicide itself. For that matter, the song, as Athenaeus recorded it, and the statue group seem similarly inconsonant: there is no hint of myrtle boughs or hidden swords in Kritios and Nesiotes. Yet this hardly matters; despite surface inconcinnities, the statue and song should be understood as receptively and ideologically complementary: in their democratic context, they provide a literal and metaphorical place to stand next to, as the chorus of old men of

¹⁸ See Vetta 1983, p. XXXIV, who emphasizes the competitive character of the Harmodius song in the context of the Athenian late sixth- and fifth-century symposium.

¹⁹ Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 982-986.

Lysistrata make clear. The text that Athenaeus offers, even if belies the improvisational quality of the “Harmodius song” and is now sometimes treated as a single work, shows this too. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this song – and, I think, the key – is the kaleidoscope of imaginary identities that Athenaeus’ songs made available to symposiasts. The singer is one moment an oath taker, pledging to adopt the tyrannicides as his model; at another he (or the successive singer) becomes a lover, addressing first Harmodius (“dearest Harmodius”), then both Harmodius and Aristogiton, as if an admirer. The singer at times seems bold, almost presumptuous (Cleon was not alone in this respect) – although nowhere do we see an attempt to question or disrupt the intimacy of the tyrannicide’s connection: the two are closely connected by grammatical duals at the close of three of the four stanzas. Through this whirl of shifting and even contradictory identities, the singer performs serious ideological work as he sings; the effect is not a fracturing of the singer’s identity as citizen. Praise for the pair, as a pair, merges with an avowal of the singer’s intimacy with them and their cause. *Eros*, *philia* and *isonomia* are tightly bound. Affirmed from the outside as a paradoxically non-exclusive intimacy, the singer, like the chorus of old men in *The Wasps*, stands beside them, making the equality of a pair into the equality of a group.

The productive pairing of Harmodius and Aristogiton suggests their distinctiveness as heroes; it also helps clarify the complicated class dimensions of Athenian *isonomia*, which, I am arguing, grounds the Athenians’ cult. The reverence paid to Harmodius and Aristogiton both underscores and controls its elitism: Athenians, in honoring the pair, reached into (and, in effect, celebrated) the cultural world of archaic aristocrats to create a special status that each Athenian joined as he imaginatively embraced their identity as his own. In a democratic context, then, this is an imaginary elitism: the act of singing the Harmodius song honors the tyrannicides with a commitment to imitate their glorious achievement. The Harmodius scholia also makes clear that the Athenians never forgot the erotic core of the tyrannicides’ relationship. Aristogiton and Harmodius were lovers; Aristogiton pursued and, as his *erastes*, won over the younger, beautiful Harmodius. In the real world, to pursue and be pursued were different activities and belonged, most often, to different individuals: the *eros* of the lover was not the same as simple friendship, but a kind of acquiring; passion dependent on imagining otherness not equality.

Of course, the erotic dimensions dominate in Thucydides’ account,²⁰ where the attempt on the Athenian tyrant, which he represents as a failure, arises “from an

²⁰ Thucydides, VI, 54-59.

erotic affliction”²¹; the emotions of Harmodius and Aristogiton – the younger man’s indignity, the older man’s exasperation – are aroused by Hipparchus, who, when spurned, gains his revenge by gravely insulting Harmodius’ sister.²² The Harmodius song, which must elaborate the popular narrative, also stresses the erotic dimension to an equal degree. Yet it is important to note that the Harmodius scholia constructs the relationship as complex, not static. Differences in status and emotion do not preclude reciprocity; as Pausanias maintains in Plato’s *Symposium*,²³ Harmodius met Aristogiton’s *eros* with *philia*, as if reciprocating his exclusive passion makes it at its very inception into something else – it opens up the relationship, making it general or somehow political. As threatened as Harmodius and Aristogiton are by Hipparchus, the pair seems perfectly comfortable allowing Athenian democratic citizens to join them in consummating their (political) passion. As the tyrannicide song and the male half-chorus of *Lysistrata* show, *eros* unfolds into a nascent political equality. “Every Athenian”, as Victoria Wohl says, “was an Aristogiton”.²⁴

But why did Thucydides put the story where he did? The question, though not primary in this context (and although it certainly deserves more attention than I can give it), may help us here. It is worth noting that Thucydides does not himself construct an explicit analogy between actors or events in 514 and 415. The connection he does make is more direct and also more limited: thinking about Harmodius and Aristogiton – what they know about them, how they know it, and what they do not know – brings the Athenian *demos* to act with unbridled suspicion in their relations with each other: “taking these things to heart and remembering all that they knew from report about them, they were difficult and suspicious of those blamed for the affair of the mysteries”.²⁵

It is the directness of the link that Thucydides constructs between the events of 514 and 415 that makes the passage so troubling. Rather than claim that the Athenians in 415 were acting like the tyrannicides, that is, without adequate information and with dire consequences, he asserts that the very thought of the pair plunges the Athenians into irrational and divisive behavior. He does not give his evidence but it is unlikely that his real purpose, despite his claims, was merely aesthetic and historiographical; it does not seem

²¹ Thucydides, VI, 59, 1: δι’ ἐρωτικὴν λύπην.

²² Thucydides, VI, 56, 2.

²³ Plato, *Symposium*, 182c.

²⁴ Wohl, p. 8.

²⁵ Thucydides, VI, 60, 1.

likely, in other words, that the *demos*' behavior simply offered him a chance to illustrate better historical methods than the *demos* employed. It is hard to dispute Thucydides on the facts: that the tyrannicides' motives were common and a bit tawdry, and that they panicked; moreover, that the act had terrible consequences for Athens (a benevolent tyranny became insure and brutal), and that the collapse of the tyranny itself was the work of the work of the Spartans and a few of the Athenian elite. Yet it is harder still to accept, I think, that thinking about the tyrannicides caused the Athenians (whatever their view of the facts) quite the anxiety that Thucydides claimed. The role of the tyrannicides' memory in Athenian political culture, and its significance for democratic equality, are perhaps most evident at the historical moment when Harmodius and Aristogiton surfaced most fully into everyday Athenian politics. This moment is the reestablishment of the democracy in 410/409, when the first Athenian oligarchy fell apart (by a process we really do not know) in the wake of the victory of Athenian fleet at Cyzicus and the assassination of Phrynichus. That year, following a proposal by a certain Demophantus, the Athenians gathered as a political body before the Dionysia and acted out a political ritual that effectively refounded the democracy. This was a collective oath sworn by the Athenians on that occasion and repeated yearly (for a time); it was a performance that recommitted the Athenians as democratic citizens in their various constitutive political formations: as demesmen, tribesmen and as a single collective body (the *demos*).

The information that we have about the oath and its establishment come from Andocides' *On the Mysteries*, the orator's defense of his actions on the eve of Sicilian campaign. Andocides quoted it from the stele on which it was inscribed in 410/409:

κτενώ καὶ λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ καὶ ψήφῳ καὶ τῇ ἑμαυτοῦ χειρὶ, ἂν δυνατὸς ᾶ, ὅς ἂν καταλύσῃ τὴν δημοκρατίαν τὴν Ἀθηνησί. καὶ ἔάν τις ἀρξῆ τιν' ἀρχὴν καταλελυμένης τῆς δημοκρατίας τὸ λοιπόν, καὶ ἔάν τις τυραννεῖν ἐπαναστῆ ἢ τὸν τύραννον συγκαταστήσῃ. Καὶ ἔάν τις ἄλλος ἀποκτείνῃ, ὅσιον αὐτὸν νομιῶ εἶναι καὶ πρὸς θεῶν καὶ δαιμόνων, ὡς πολέμιον κτείναντα τὸν Ἀθηναίων, καὶ τὰ κτήματα τοῦ ἀποθανόντος πάντα ἀποδόμενος ἀποδώσω τὰ ἡμίσεια τῷ ἀποκτείναντι, καὶ οὐκ ἀποστερήσω οὐδέν. Ἐάν δέ τις κτείνων τινὰ τούτων

ἀποθάνῃ ἢ ἐπιχειρῶν, εὐ ποιήσω αὐτὸν τε καὶ τοὺς παῖδας τοὺς ἐκείνου καθάπερ Ἀρμόδιόν τε καὶ Ἀριστογείτονα καὶ τοὺς ἀπογόνους αὐτῶν. Ὅποσοι δὲ ὅρκοι ὁμώμενοι Ἀθηνησιν ἢ ἐν τῷ στρατοπέδῳ ἢ ἄλλοθι ποῦ ἐναντίῳ τῷ δήμῳ τῷ Ἀθηναίων, λύω καὶ ἀφίημι.

I will kill with word, deed, vote and my own hand, if at all able, whoever dissolves the democracy at Athens. And if someone undertakes an office when the democracy has been dissolved in the future, and if someone should rise to establish a tyranny or conspire to establish a tyrant. And if someone else kills him, I will regard him as pure before the gods and divine forces as having killed an enemy of the Athenians. I will give half the property

of the dead, once sold, to his killer and I will leave nothing out. And if any should die in the act of killing a tyrant or in the attempt, I will honor him and his children like Harmodius and Aristogiton and their descendants. All oaths that have been sworn in Athens, in the army or elsewhere, that oppose the Athenian *demos*, I dissolve and renounce. Andocides, I, 97-98.

Among other intriguing features of the oath, including the conspicuous equation of regime change with tyranny and the convenient amnesty the oath-takers bestow on themselves with the closing line, the oath treats both tyranny and tyrannicide as elements of everyday political life. In this vein, the oath is perfectly clear about complicity; it is real and serious – indeed the unequivocal tyrant and his reluctant supporter are treated the same. Similarly, resisting tyranny, as the oath represents it, covers a wide range of activities from dangerous attempts to replicate the heroic achievements of Harmodius and Aristogiton to the far more pedestrian effort to “kill” a tyrant “by word and deed and vote”. The oath certainly means to suggest that all citizens have a role in protecting democracy and that a watchful attitude toward hubristic and potentially oligarchic actions of the powerful and arrogant is a good thing – and over themselves too: the oath-takers obligate themselves not to serve in regimes that may be perceived as tyrannical (*i. e.*, oligarchic), or act in any way that might be viewed as complicit.

But, more important than any particular acts or inactions, heroic or everyday, the oath seems intended to circumscribe citizen identity in democracy; in this sense the oath is more significant as a performance (and definition) of democratic citizenship than as a law against tyranny. The oath brings the everyday and political into proximity. So the oath uses the possible (if unlikely) extremes, of death and heroic honors to define the citizen in the broad sense. All the Athenians swore that in the likely event of tyranny (hence the future more vivid condition), each would act in some capacity to intervene on behalf of the democracy.

The citizen, the oath clarifies, is a tyrannicide. This clearly defines his behavior towards those who threaten the democracy, but just as importantly (if less obviously) towards his fellow citizens as well, those he promises to honor just as the city honors Harmodius and Aristogiton. Any citizen is capable of tyrannicide; all can earn the special honors paid to tyrannicides. The oath, in this sense, forges an equality of citizenship, at least in part, from citizens’ easy fantasies of civic salvation, but these are dreams supported by the collective nature of the performance.²⁶

²⁶ See Shear 2007, p. 155: “What is important is that [the Athenians] all participate collectively as a single body made up of citizens who are exactly equal”.

Moreover, the equality that the oath constructs, if built in part on fantasy, is sustained by the oath's collective performance and is vital and consequential. In theoretical terms we see this in the answer it gives to the fundamental question (with practical as well as epistemological implications) that tyranny by its nature poses for any legal system: when the political and legal institutions are corrupt or compromised by an internal, if illegal, power, who speaks for the city? "Every citizen", the oath answers resoundingly. Finally, in everyday political terms, the Oath of Demophantus, just as it brings the tyrannicide down from the political clouds and locates him in the center of Athenian political life, also puts the responsibility for honoring his deeds squarely on his fellow citizens and neighbors: if he is "inviolable" (*hosios*), as he apparently had been at least from Solon's time, his care is no longer left primarily to the city's institutions or the city's gods – it is now the duty of his fellow citizens.

I have argued elsewhere that the act of refounding the political cultural dimensions of democracy embedded in the oath of Demophantus is cast into relief by the specific strategy that Athens' oligarchs had adopted in their efforts to weaken it when they came to power in the events of 411 (which clearly prompted the oath).²⁷ This strategy, in brief, includes the oligarchs' selective and strategic use of political violence, their (successful) attempts to engender suspicion among citizen relations, and the distinctive and intriguing method of recruitment that the oligarchs in Thucydides adopted in creating the council of the 400. Yet the Oath of Demophantus, if a response to this strategy, extends beyond a new interpretation of tyranny and beyond an attempt to define the citizen's response to it, toward an image of citizenship itself. This is not a huge stretch. The merging of oligarchy and tyranny in the oath surely reflects the Athenians' justifiable fear of conspiracies and, possibly also, their desire to forget their own complicity in the recent demise of the democracy.

Yet the commitment is real, if to some extent convenient. The citizen genuinely commits to adopt Harmodius and Aristogiton as models for his own political behavior – most especially for his own behavior in a group, his support for his fellows and his expectations of support from them. Democratic citizenship, then, is a commitment to networks – not networks configured with immediate and extended family or old friends and drinking buddies, but, as if to reiterate the ordering principle at the imaginative core of Cleisthenes' reforms, the concentric demes and tribes, through which citizens associated with each other and formed the *demos*.

²⁷ See McGlew 2012.

Understood as a collective, popular act of refoundation, the Oath of Demophantus thus recaptures the experience of singing the tyrannicide song on a grand scale and formalizes the experience of joining the Kritios and Nesiotes group. My claim is that in the way the Athenians, in taking the oath, conceptualized and cultivated Harmodius and Aristogiton in a distinctively democratic sphere, itself drawing both on the political cultural loci of the symposium, where aristocrats sang the song of Harmodius and Athenian, and in everyday life, where Athenians rubbed shoulders with Kritios and Nesiotes' tyrannicides. The oath was taken in the theater, as Peter Wilson has convincingly argued:²⁸ the Athenians grouped themselves in their demes and tribes and recited Demophantus' oath, in the process reaffirming that *isonomia* was a hallmark of the democracy.

From this perspective, the cult of Harmodius and Aristogiton is a much bigger phenomenon, even than the Athenians' attempt to resurrect democracy from the ashes of 411. The narrative of the tyrannicides (which Thucydides disliked as much as disputed) and the statue group (which freezes that narrative in a single instant) invites imitation (whether by design or effect – it does not matter which for my purposes): they invite their viewers and listeners to line up, to join Harmodius and Aristogiton as fellow defences against tyranny. Harmodius and Aristogiton lead Athenian citizens, just as Harmodius leads Aristogiton; the difference is important but, like its target, it is relative and changeable. So the striking uniformity of the surviving literary record – the song and oath, the comic chorus of *Lysistrata* – all of these are collective first person statements, all are promises individuals make in the company of their peers, to transform themselves into tyrannicides. Harmodius and Aristogiton (especially) are hooks – dramatic, erotic and quintessentially democratic in political form and substance. This final point needs to be stressed: the conventional fifth-century representation of the tyrannicides invites a personal commitment that is collectively performed; the oath, the song, the characterizations in comedy make tyrannicide productive and public as well as entangling it seamlessly with everyday (and utterly unheroic) civic activities. Citizenship (political equality in the broadest sense) is an activity not a state – an activity carried out collectively, not in isolation. As important as the tyrannicides are for democratic political ideology, the point I think we need to make is rather different. The tyrannicide motif is less ideological than political; it is more than a collective belief statement. Participating in the cult does not simply commit citizens to stand with the *demos* and stay vigilant for conspiracies by their more powerful fellow citizens. Rather

²⁸ Wilson 2009, p. 8-24 at 24; on the basis of Andocides, I, 98.

it is a working definition of its most basic concept of democratic equality. Even in the smallest, least heroic and least expensive aspect – in serving on a jury or voting in the assembly, the citizen was striding forward resolutely, determinately and effectively killing tyrants. So I think we can infer from the fifth-century cult of the tyrannicides.

But how is this political equality? Whether or not we locate a theory of democratic equality embedded in the cult of the tyrannicides depends to a great extent on what we call theory. The idea of citizenship that I have tried to locate in the tyrannicides' cult and narrative does not seem to have much to do on the surface with the distinction Plato and Aristotle made between "arithmetical" (or "numerical") and "geometrical" (or "proportionate") equality.²⁹ This is an "asymmetrical opposition" (I am borrowing Reinhart Koselleck's term³⁰) that runs through fifth and fourth-century rhetoric and political theory: geometrical equality is good, arithmetical (which is associated with assigning political office by lot) is everything except good. Moreover it would be hard to find any idea of distributive justice in the contemporary sense, and perhaps a mistake to try. If (as I am arguing) the cult of the tyrannicides is Athenian *isonomia* defined and celebrated, nevertheless those areas in which Athenian adult males functioned interchangeably and shared equal rights, responsibilities and rewards were carefully and precisely delineated. And the relationship between political and social equality in ancient and modern political thought does not overlap. Yet the cult does offer an answer (indeed, a consummately democratic answer) to the crucial question on which any theory of equality (ancient or modern) must be based; namely, "equality of what?" The answer is, of course, that every Athenian is a citizen – his everyday political activities ward off the ever-present danger of tyranny, his standing alongside Harmodius and Aristogiton in even the least challenging and least heroic things he does, saves the city. The citizens, as distinctive as snowflakes in their various other identities and actions, are alike in this one way. Equality, understood as a practical political principle, is not a static right or condition (and therefore not conferred, insured or protected by some body or principle separate from the equals themselves), but a process or trajectory, specifically (and paradigmatically) political, in which Athenians, as citizens, understood themselves, much as they represented Harmodius and Aristogiton, moving together notwithstanding differences in appearance, age, and class status. The Athenian did not look to a definition of equality and examine his own life to decide if he could call

²⁹ On the distinction, see especially Plato, *Gorgias*, 508a; *Laws*, 757b-c; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1130a10-b15; *Politics*, 1280a8-15.

³⁰ Koselleck 1979, p. 211.

himself equal – not only because there was no such definition, but, more importantly, I think, because Athenian democratic culture resisted it as unreal. Things and people are “equal” or “unequal” in a context; like the contrasting “better” or “worse,” “equal” is a predicate claimed and affirmed in everyday political experience. Yet, just as the citizen says, “I am equal”, not because someone or some rule tells him he can, nor does he do so because his influence and power were identical to that of his poorest and richest neighbor (of course, from virtually every other vantage point, they were not equal: much separated Athenians even in the political space they shared. What made him think himself as an equal when he looked around was (I think) the sense of a standing in a metaphorical group, together with all of his fellow citizens (rich and poor, powerful and weak), striding together as peers despite differences (or possibly because of them). This latter point is particularly important: the choreography of equality that courses through the tyrannicide representations does the work of defining meaningful inequality. Differences in class status, political influence and privilege are not erased or obscured in the political process triggered by the tyrannicides’ memory and cult, but, as if the Athenians were operating with their own version of John Rawls’s “difference principle”,³¹ these are subsumed and rendered significant and necessary: differences makes sense in the context of tyrannicide’s story and representations, differences in age and class, and in temperament – the hint of impulsivity in Harmodius’ position and posture, the secure and rock-solid support of his older lover. In this sense, a theory of political equality is simultaneously a theory of political leadership.

The core aspects of the Athenians’ democratic imaginary – the heroizing of everyday political life as a foundation of democratic equality – are certainly not only evident only when Athenians were thinking of tyrannicide. Collective political activities – voting, in particular – had a certain power to sustain (as much as it depended on) an elementary notion of citizen cohesion. Participating in the *demos* was surely a transformative experience in citizens’ lives, independent of the results. It redrew the lines of the political; networks of trust and (imaginary) familiarity intertwine and entangle the economic, cultural and political spheres of the Athenians’ life. Just as the Athenians come together as tyrannicides, they famously get together to sketch the outlines of Sicily and Libya on the ground after voting as a body to send their fleet to Sicily in 415. Plutarch tells the story both in his *Nicias*³² and *Alcibiades*³³ to illustrate the

³¹ Rawls 1971. For a succinct formulation, see Rawls 2001, p. 42.

³² Plutarch, *Nicias*, 12, 1-2.

³³ Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 17, 3.

delusion of the Athenians, who had no idea of the dangers the fleet would face. Yet the way he tells it permits a very different interpretation: the Athenians, he says, gathered in groups, the young men in palaestras, the older in workplaces and circles. For an Athens deeply divided in multiple ways (including age, according to Thucydides' Nicias)³⁴, this degree of common interest (or, at least, parallel play) between generations (and, at the same time, classes), is a remarkable moment.

This does not mean that Sicily was a good decision. For critics like Thucydides, it was not only bad but reflected a faulty *politeia*: the historian would insist (if he spoke post-modern) that there was little distinction between collective imaginary of Athenian citizenship and collective delusion. Participating alongside their peers in the *demos* did not make Athenians any smarter or, for that matter, reduce or control their self-interest. It could make them reckless. The charge was familiar to the Athenians. This was the point of the mean-spirited attack that the Theban herald makes against democracy in Euripides' *Suppliants*:³⁵ the very act of collective decision-make, he insists, makes democratic citizens lose all rational sense of themselves and their interests. In his words,

ἐλπὶς γὰρ ἐστ' ἄπιστον, ἢ πολλὰς πόλεις
 συνῆψ' ἄγουσα θυμὸν εἰς ὑπερβολάς.
 ὅταν γὰρ ἔλθῃ πόλεμος ἐς ψήφον λεῶ,
 οὐδείς ἐθ' αὐτοῦ θάνατον ἐκλογίζεται,
 τὸ δυστυχὲς δὲ τοῦτ' ἐς ἄλλον ἐκτρέπει. εἰ δ' ἦν παρ' ὄμμα θάνατος ἐν ψήφου φοραί,

οὐκ ἂν ποθ' Ἑλλὰς δοριμανῆς ἀπάλλυτο.
 καίτοι δυοῖν γε πάντες ἀνθρωποὶ λόγον
 τὸν κρείσσον' ἴσμεν καὶ τὰ χρηστὰ καὶ κακὰ
 ὄσωι τε πολέμου κρείσσον εἰρήνῃ βροτοῖς.

Hopeless is the hope that seizes many cities taking anger to the excess,
 For when war comes to the vote of the people,
 No one includes his own death into his calculation,
 But everyone refers this misfortune to someone else.
 Yet if death were standing before his eyes when he voted,
 War-crazy Greece would never be destroyed.
 Indeed all men know the better of two ways: good and bad,

³⁴ See Thucydides, VI, 12, 2-13, 1. Nicias, of course, wants to generalize his own struggles with Alcibiades; and to imply that his political enemy is a particular instance of a phenomenon every mature Athenian experienced and understood. Thucydides has Alcibiades answer Nicias' emphasis of the division between young and old (VI, 18, 6).

³⁵ Euripides, *Alcibiades*, 423.

And how much better peace is for mortals than war.
Euripides, *Suppliants*, 479-488.

The Herald here describes (ungenerously) the all-too-human delusion that Thucydides notes in his account of the plague:³⁶ those Athenians, he says, who had the great fortune of surviving the plague, believed that they were immune to all disease. Democracy then, like plague survived, confers the delusion of immortality. The herald invokes an opposition between the things an individual holds before his eyes and the things a citizen body imagines and intuits about future events. On their own, individuals are capable of an accurate risk-benefit analysis; turn them into citizens, put them in a group and they lose all perspective. It is as if their souls are attacked and routed by their peers like the young oligarchic soul on the precipice of democracy in *Republic*.³⁷ Of course, Euripides means the herald's critique to rile and provoke his audience, but does not mean to give his audience more than they can handle; the passage works as a recognizable and manageable misrepresentation of democratic ideology. We do not know what the Athenians actually thought when they listened to the herald's charges, or what they would have responded if they had been in Theseus' place. Euripides himself seems rather catholic in the answer he gives: his audience was shown a rational and measured military response, proposed and led by Theseus and executed by the Athenians – the Athenians collect the bodies of the dead but do not sack Thebes itself. The funeral oration that Adrastus delivers over the bodies of the recovered warriors in front of an audience of Athenian citizens³⁸ suggests, I think, a different answer. The terms of Adrastus' praise in this short funeral oration are clear. The virtue of the fallen is measured less by the magnificence of their extraordinary accomplishments and deaths, glorious as they were, than by their lives as citizens; in turn, citizenship itself is conceived not primarily as a relationship to the city, but as a network of equals. Among the dead Adrastus praises as friends in true and just terms³⁹ are Campaneus who never exulted in his considerable good fortune despite an abundance of it and was as modest as any poor man and a loyal friend⁴⁰ and also Eteocles, who was honored although he lived as a poor man in Argos and was careful to avoid the pitfalls of wealth⁴¹ and

³⁶ Thucydides, II, 51, 6.

³⁷ Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 559.

³⁸ Euripides, *Suppliants*, 857-917.

³⁹ Euripides, *Suppliants*, 858.

⁴⁰ Euripides, *Suppliants*, 861-863.

⁴¹ Euripides, *Suppliants*, 871-880.

Hippomedon and Parthenopaeus, both, in different ways, good citizens and good to their fellow citizens.⁴² Adrastus falters only when he comes last to Tydeus, about whom he says very little, obviously because there is very little of this sort of praise that he could possibly say about such a monster.

Although there is no explicit mention here of the cult of tyrannicide, its shadow is hard to miss. Euripides seems to want to create new heroes similar to Harmodius and Aristogiton, heroes of everyday political life; by transforming dead warriors into citizens, he effectively turned citizens into heroes. The point is simple enough to state but impossible to flesh out here: the fifth-century Athenians were convinced (at least some of them sometimes) that in constructing (and reconstructing) democratic citizen identity and the networks of democratic citizenship – that is, democratic equality – the Athenians were, by that very act, simultaneously crafting an effective decision-making political entity.

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⁴² Euripides, *Suppliants*, 881-900.

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