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Citation

Rademaker, A. M. (2018). The great and the small: Thermopylae and Sphacteria. In L. W. van Gils, I. J. F. de Jong, & C. H. M. Kroon (Eds.), *Textual strategies in Ancient War Narrative Thermopylae, Cannae and beyond* (pp. 342-358). Leiden, Boston: Brill.
doi:10.1163/9789004383340_015

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3466368>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Great and the Small: Thermopylae and Sphacteria

Adriaan Rademaker

Thucydides' narrative of the battle on Sphacteria (Thuc. 4.26–4.41) consistently frames the important Athenian victory over the Spartan hoplites as an unexpected success that was greatly aided by the fact that the Athenian general Demosthenes took full advantage of the exceptional circumstances on the island.* Indeed, the narrator claims that the Athenian victory took the whole of the Greek world by surprise (Thuc. 4.40.1), and he further comments that the Spartan defeat was 'something small' compared to the legendary heroic defeat at Thermopylae (4.36.3). All this further detracts from the strategic and military achievement of—in particular—the Athenian politician and general Cleon. This paper explores the narrative techniques by means of which the narrator persuades his narratees to accept his interpretative frame; in particular, he consistently presents events from the point of view of their actual participants, in order to make his narratees see and feel what these actual participants saw and felt.

In the early summer of 425 BC, an Athenian fleet led by Demosthenes is forced by a storm to land at Pylos in the South of the Peloponnese, and fortifies the peninsula.¹ The Spartans react by sending a fleet and withdrawing their land army from Attica, in order to expel the Athenians from Pylos. The Spartans prepare to besiege Demosthenes and his men, but their preparations are interrupted by the arrival of Athenian ships from Zakynthos. The Athenians manage to isolate 420 hoplites (120 Spartiates among them) on the island of Sphacteria. The Spartans panic and start peace negotiations, but the Athenians reject these on the instigation of Cleon.²

* The author wishes to thank the organizers of the conference *Textual Strategies in Greek and Latin War Narrative*, Irene de Jong, Caroline Kroon, Suzanne Adema, Lidewij van Gils and Michel Buijs, as well as all participants for their contributions to the discussion. Needless to say, all errors and shortcomings remain mine.

1 On Thucydides' technique of creating a narrative of casual acts having immense consequences, see Stahl 2006: 321–327.

2 For a detailed reconstruction of events during the opening of the campaign, see Strassler

Towards the end of the summer, Cleon is elected general; an Athenian army led by Cleon and Demosthenes beats the Spartans on Sphacteria; most of the Spartans are brought to Athens as hostages, and will be kept by the Athenians as prisoners of war until the peace of Nicias in 421, when they are finally released thanks to Nicias' interventions.³

The Athenian victory at Sphacteria is among the greatest military successes of the Archidamian war, and indeed can be regarded as 'one of the most decisive and valuable victories in Athenian history'.⁴ This implies that it is also one of the most painful defeats suffered by Sparta in the course of the Peloponnesian War.⁵

Surprisingly, Thucydides compares the Spartan defeat at Sphacteria to the heroic defeat of the Spartans at Thermopylae as described by Herodotus:

καὶ οἱ Λακεδαιμόνιοι βαλλόμενοι τε ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἤδη καὶ γιγνόμενοι ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ ξυμπτώματι, ὡς μικρὸν μεγάλῳ εἰκάσαι, τῷ ἐν Θερμοπύλαις, ἐκείνοι τε γὰρ τῇ ἀτραπῇ περιελθόντων τῶν Περσῶν διεφθάρησαν, οὗτοι τε ἀμφίβολοι ἤδη ὄντες οὐκέτι ἀντεῖχον, ἀλλὰ πολλοὶς τε ὀλίγοι μαχόμενοι καὶ ἀσθενεῖς σωμαμάτων διὰ τὴν σιτοδείαν ὑπεχώρουν.

THUC. 4.36.3

The Lacedaemonians now found themselves attacked from both sides. They found themselves in the same dilemma as at Thermopylae, to compare something small to something big. For the men at Thermopylae had perished when the Persians had found their way around them by the well-known path; on the present occasion, the Spartans were by now surrounded from both sides and did not hold up any longer. They were few in number and fighting many; weakened by the lack of food, they were forced to retreat.⁶

1990. Heitsch 1996: 24 has some good remarks about the opportunities that Athens missed by rejecting the peace offer.

3 For a discussion of Cleon's role in the capture of Sphacteria, see Woodhead 1960: 310–315 and Spence 1995: 420–425.

4 Westlake 1968: 111.

5 Thucydides explicitly compares the Spartan defeat at Pylos to that of the Athenians at Sicily (Th. 7.71.7). Cf. on this point Rengakos 2006: 299.

6 All quotations from Thucydides follow the Oxford Classical Texts edition by H.S. Jones and J.E. Powell, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942, revised edition, reprinted 1980). All translations are my own.

Apparently, the comparison rests on the similarity between the conditions in which the Spartan hoplites found themselves: both the Three Hundred at Thermopylae and the 420 hoplites on Sphacteria found themselves surrounded by enemies and attacked from two sides; on Sphacteria, it is a small body of archers and light-armed soldiers that works its way around the Spartan stronghold and attacks from the rear. And in both cases, there is a 'traitor' who plays a decisive role in the defeat: at Thermopylae, it is Ephialtes who makes Xerxes aware of the path through the mountain (Hdt. 7.213.1); on Sphacteria, it is an unnamed Messenian general (Thuc. 4.36.1) who volunteers to attack the Spartans from the rear.

But the comparison of Sphacteria with the legendary and heroic defeat at Thermopylae raises further questions. At Thermopylae, the Spartans suffered a heroic defeat against a numerically immensely superior Persian army, and the battle is perhaps the single most heroic moment in Spartan military history. By contrast, Sphacteria is also an important defeat, but seems a great deal less heroic at first sight, in that the Spartans surrendered themselves to Athens instead of fighting themselves to the death.⁷ In fact, the narrator himself claims that he is comparing 'something small to something big' (Thuc. 4.36.3 *μικρὸν μεγάλῳ εἰκάσαι*). This raises the question how the comparison with Thermopylae reflects on the dimensions and importance of the battle on Sphacteria, and how this comparison influences the narrator's evaluation of the battle in his narrative.

The phrase *μικρὸν μεγάλῳ εἰκάσαι* in fact provides an important clue to the persuasive strategy of the narrator throughout the Sphacteria episode: indeed, the narrator consistently stresses the significance of the chance circumstances on the island and the fact that Demosthenes took full advantage of these circumstances. By contrast, he almost completely downplays Cleon's contribution to this victory. In his evaluation of the outcome of the battle, he famously calls Cleon's promise to bring the Spartan hoplites to Athens within 20 days 'insane', *μανιώδης* (Thuc. 4.39.3). And he supports this surprisingly outspoken claim by showing that the Athenian expedition was an ill-planned undertaking with a fully unexpected outcome from every possible point of view. In his narrative of the Athenian assembly preceding Cleon's expedition, he frames the whole enterprise as the result of an astonishingly irrational decision of the Athenian

7 On the unexpected surrender of the Spartans, cf. Von Fritz 1967: 696 and Rood 1998: 37: 'The comparison suggests not the heroism of the defeated, but a revealing contrast: the Three Hundred at Thermopylae resisted to the death; the men on Sphacteria surrendered. And this contrast explains why the Greeks found the surrender surprising.'

assembly,⁸ driven by fear and anger: the Athenians fear a prolonged siege that will become hard to maintain during the winter (Thuc. 4.27.1), Cleon suggests that he could fix things on Sphacteria from fear of being exposed as a liar (Thuc. 4.27.3), and Nicias is irritated by Cleon's taunts against his manliness (Thuc. 4.27.5). In his narrative of the battle itself, he presents the advantageous conditions in which the Athenians fought as greatly aided by the chance occurrence of a forest fire (Thuc. 4.29.2–4.29.3). Besides, he ascribes the success of the Athenians' strategy to Demosthenes (Thuc. 4.29.2, 4.32.3, 4.32.4) and the Messenian general (4.36.1) rather than to Cleon. Finally, when evaluating the battle, he calls the Greeks at large to witness and signals that the victory came as an immense surprise to the whole of the Greek world.

In what follows, I will discuss how the narrator manages to frame the Athenian victory as an unexpected success, and how he makes his narratees view the events through the eyes of its main participants⁹ as well as those of other Greeks from all over the Greek world, suggesting that the victory was a complete surprise from every possible point of view. Twice, the narrator comes in with evaluative remarks of his own. This occurs in 4.28.5, where he remarks that sensible Athenians welcomed the prospect of getting rid of Cleon, and in 4.39.3, where he states that Cleon's promise was fulfilled, even though it was mad (μανιώδης).¹⁰ But more often, the narrator makes sure that he does not present his narratees with his own vision of events, but with that of its actual eyewitnesses. I will focus specifically on how the narrator presents events through the eyes of a number of secondary focalizers: first the Athenian citizens and politicians in the assembly, then the Athenian and Spartan soldiers on Sphacteria, and finally the Greeks at large. In narratological terms, the narrator makes extensive use of so-called *character-bound* focalization (or embedded focalization) in order to make his narratees share the point of view of those who actually observed the narrated events, and to induce the narratee to accept the judgement of these observers.¹¹ By presenting events through the eyes of

8 On framing, seminal texts are Bateson 1972 and Goffman 1974. Johnson-Cartee 2005: 16 has good remarks on the function of framing in journalist narrative, remarks that by and large also seem to apply to historiography.

9 One may also compare the contribution by Rutger Allan in the present volume. Allan discusses character-bound focalization as a device that helps to bring about 'immersion' of the narratee in the story world.

10 Such remarks typically occur in so-called 'Evaluation' sections in narrative, for which see the Introduction to this volume. On the narrative structure of narrative episodes in Thucydides, see Allan 2007: 110–118, esp. 115.

11 On embedded focalization, see De Jong 2014: 50–56 and Bal [1985] 2009: 149–153. On the use of embedded focalization in ancient historiography, cf. the general introduction, sec-

these witnesses and participants, and by making his narratees share their surprise, the narrator suggests that the Athenian victory at Sphacteria was in fact completely unexpected and greatly aided by chance. In this context, the comparison of Sphacteria to Sparta's most heroic defeat at Thermopylae serves to suggest that Sphacteria was really comparatively insignificant. This further detracts from the importance of Cleon's victory.

1 The Athenian Assembly: Fear and Pride

Let us first consider the Athenian assembly (Thuc. 4.27–4.28). The participants in this assembly are consistently portrayed as driven by emotion and self-interest. First of all, the narrator presents the Athenian *demos* as driven by fear¹² of the Spartans, and by second thoughts about their rejection of the peace negotiations:

ἐν δὲ ταῖς Ἀθήναις πυνθανόμενοι περὶ τῆς στρατιᾶς ὅτι ταλαιπωρεῖται καὶ σίτος τοῖς ἐν τῇ νήσῳ ὅτι ἐσπλεῖ, ἠπόρουν καὶ ἐδεδοίκεσαν μὴ σφῶν χειμῶν τὴν φυλακὴν ἐπιλάβοι [...] πάντων τε ἐφοβοῦντο μάλιστα τοὺς Λακεδαιμονίους, ὅτι ἔχοντάς τι ἰσχυρὸν αὐτοὺς ἐνόμιζον οὐκέτι σφίσιν ἐπικηρυκεύεσθαι· καὶ μετεμέλοντο τὰς σπονδὰς οὐ δεξάμενοι.

THUC. 4.27.1–4.27.2

In Athens, people were informed about the army that it was in trouble, and that corn was sailed in to those on the island; accordingly, they did not know what to do and were afraid that the winter might overtake their blockade. [...] Most of all, they feared the Spartans; because they thought that these had something of a firm position and would not send envoys to them anymore; and they regretted that they had failed to accept the treaty.

In response to reports about the difficult situation of the army at Pylos, the Athenian citizens are at a loss (ἠπόρουν) and are afraid (ἐδεδοίκεσαν ... ἐφοβοῦντο): they show an impressive example of the mindlessness of a body of democratic citizens, a 'classic example of the ἀφροσύνη of democracy'.¹³

tion 1.2.2. Bakker 1997: 48–51 has good remarks on the use of character-bound focalization in Thucydides.

¹² For fear as a dominant driving force in Thucydides, see Desmond 2006: esp. 361–364.

¹³ Cf. Woodhead 1960: 314.

Here, the narrator presents the situation at Pylos through the eyes of the Athenian commons, and pretends to have full insight into their fears and motives. He similarly pretends to know about the political motives of their leader, Cleon.¹⁴ And Cleon fares no better. In the present assembly, he is presented as driven by utterly selfish motives. At first he denies the sincerity of the messengers who reported that the Athenians on Pylos needed help, evidently from fear of being held responsible for the army's plight because he had earlier rejected the peace negotiations. Then, when chosen as an examiner to inspect the situation at Pylos, he chooses the *fuite en avant* and suggests that the Athenians should send a military expedition instead:

Κλέων δὲ γνοὺς αὐτῶν τὴν ἐς αὐτὸν ὑποψίαν περὶ τῆς κωλύμενης τῆς ξυμβάσεως οὐ τάληθ' ἔφη λέγειν τοὺς ἐξαγγέλλοντας. [...] [4] καὶ γνοὺς ὅτι ἀναγκασθήσεται ἢ ταῦτ' ἀλέγειν οἷς διέβαλλεν ἢ τάναντία εἰπὼν ψευδὴς φανήσεσθαι, παρήνει τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις, ὁρῶν αὐτοὺς καὶ ὠρμημένους τι τὸ πλέον τῇ γνώμῃ στρατεύειν, ὡς χρὴ [...] πλεῖν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας.

THUC. 4.27.3–4.27.4

Cleon noticed that the Athenians bore ill will against himself for having opposed the treaty. He claimed that the informants did not speak the truth. [...] And when he realized that he would be forced to say the same things as the informants that he slandered, or to say the opposite and be exposed as a liar, he advised the Athenians, when he saw that they were somewhat more eager to send an expedition, that they should sail out against those men.

The consistently negative portrayal of Cleon has led to a debate in the scholarly literature between those who claim that Thucydides willfully misrepresents Cleon's merits, such as Woodhead (1960) and Westlake (1968), and those who, like Erbse (1989), are more inclined to accept this portrayal of Cleon as an idle boaster.¹⁵ Whatever the historical circumstances may have been, it seems clear

14 On Thucydides' manner of inferring his characters' motives from their actual behaviour, see Schneider 1974; and cf. Rengakos 2006: 282–283.

15 Westlake 1968: 72–73 draws attention to the extent to which Thucydides claims to be able to read the mind of Cleon: 'The attribution of undisclosed and almost wholly discreditable motives and feelings to Cleon is very remarkable. It is almost more remarkable that Thucydides tacitly claims to see into the mind of Cleon and to know precisely why he acted as he did at each stage of the debate. [...] There can hardly be any doubt that he has inferred the quite considerable catalogue of motives and feelings included in the passage from what he knew, or claimed to know about the character of Cleon.' Tsakmakis 2006:

that Thucydides' narrator consistently presents Cleon as driven by the desire for saving face.¹⁶ He does not at all seem to consider the situation of the Athenian army at Sphacteria; he simply does not want to be blamed for the whole affair. He has a keen grasp of the political implications of the situation (27.3: γνούς, 27.4: γνούς, ὁρών), but he fails to consider other interests than his own.

Even Nicias does not come off much better in the present assembly. Cleon taunts him for his lack of manliness; in response, he suggests that he is ready to surrender his post to Cleon and seems to underestimate the Athenian's willingness to appoint Cleon for the task.¹⁷

ὁ δὲ Νικίας τῶν τε Ἀθηναίων τι ὑποθορυβησάντων ἐς τὸν Κλέωνα, ὅτι οὐ καὶ νῦν πλεῖ, εἰ ῥᾷδιόν γε αὐτῷ φαίνεται, καὶ ἅμα ὁρῶν αὐτὸν ἐπιτιμῶντα, ἐκέλευεν ἦντινα βούλεται δύνάμιν λαβόντα τὸ ἐπὶ σφᾶς εἶναι ἐπιχειρεῖν.

THUC. 4.28.1

Nicias noticed that the Athenians were muttering at Cleon that he should sail all the same [i.e. in spite of not being a general], if he thought it was going to be easy. At the same time he saw that Cleon was insulting him. So he encouraged Cleon to take whatever force he needed and give it a try, as far as the generals were concerned.

Finally, the Athenian elite, the σώφρονες,¹⁸ are said to assent to the expedition in the hope, not so much of obtaining a military success, but of getting rid of Cleon.¹⁹

166 draws attention to the people's laughter at Cleon and argues that 'the people's derision of Cleon seems justified here.' Cf. also Hornblower 1987: 78. By contrast, Erbse 1989: 155–156 claims that Thucydides is essentially reliable in his judgment on Cleon: 'Gerade die in den Kapiteln 4,27–29 vorliegende Darstellung gibt in ihrer Eigenart [...] das Verhalten Kleons, seine Prahlerei, seine Kühnheit und sein Glück in sachgerechter Weise wieder.'

16 Cf. Tsakmakis 2006: 170: 'In the debate on Pylos, [Cleon's] image as a public figure is ruined, since it becomes obvious that he desperately tried to conceal his inadequacies.'

17 On Nicias' inability to persuade mass audiences, see Ober 2006: 152.

18 While it may be true that τοῖς σώφροσι means 'the sensible men' (not 'the conservative party': Gomme 1956: 470), the phrase τοῖς σώφροσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων still suggests that Thucydides has a more or less well-defined subset of the Athenians in mind, and this subset evidently consists of citizens who disapprove of Cleon's populist politics. See Rademaker 2005: 216–217.

19 Tsakmakis 2006: 170 stresses that the troops that were sent with Cleon included allies only; no Athenian citizens were sent along (Th. 4.28.4).

τοῖς δὲ Ἀθηναίοις ἐνέπεσε μὲν τι καὶ γέλωτος τῇ κουφολογίᾳ αὐτοῦ, ἀσμένους δ' ὅμως ἐγίγνετο τοῖς σώφροσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, λογιζόμενοι δυοῖν ἀγαθοῖν τοῦ ἑτέρου τεύξεσθαι, ἢ Κλέωνος ἀπαλλαγῆσεσθαι, ὃ μᾶλλον ἤλπιζον, ἢ σφαλῆσαι γνώμης Λακεδαιμονίου σφίσι χειρώσεσθαι.

THUC. 4.28.5

The Athenians were somewhat overcome by laughter at his boasts. But still, these were welcome to the more sensible persons, because they reckoned that they would get either of two goods. They would either get rid of Cleon, what they hoped for most, or if their expectations were going to be thwarted, the Lacedaemonians would be subjected to themselves.

Thus, the debate in the Athenian assembly is presented as an astonishingly irrational piece of decision-making.²⁰ All actors in the narrative allow themselves to be driven by emotions and selfish motives. The Athenians fear the Spartans, Cleon tries to save face, Nicias is irritated by Cleon's insult, and the Athenian elite fosters the hope of getting rid of Cleon.²¹ All this serves to suggest that the decision to send Cleon with a fleet to Sphacteria was not a well-planned decision, and that its eventual success was mainly due to sheer good luck.

2 The Situation on Sphacteria: after the Forest Fire

Good luck also plays a considerable role on the island itself.²² According to the narrator, one of Demosthenes' soldiers had accidentally set fire to the wood on the island, and this helped greatly to make an invasion less dangerous:

τῶν δὲ στρατιωτῶν ἀναγκασθέντων διὰ τὴν στενοχωρίαν τῆς νήσου τοῖς ἐσχάτοις προσίσχοντας ἀριστοποιεῖσθαι διὰ προφυλακῆς καὶ ἐμπρήσαντός τινος

20 On the Pylos debate as an example of the weaknesses of democratic decision-making, see Raafaub 2006: 201–202.

21 Woodhead 1960: 313–314, while surprisingly positive about Cleon, strongly draws out the reprehensible traits in the conduct of Nicias and the σώφρονες: 'Yet the narrative, when one thinks it over, shows that the comments of the σώφρονες are unimaginably foolish, and that Nicias' conduct is highly reprehensible. The latter is prepared to hand over an extremely important expedition in its entirety to the command of a man whom he believes to be incompetent and whom he expects and no doubt hopes will fail. The σώφρονες apparently viewed with pleasure the prospect of a disaster in which, though Cleon fell, many another brave Athenian might die beside him.'

22 On the role of τύχη in the Sphacteria episode, see Hunter 1973: 70–74.

κατὰ μικρὸν τῆς ὕλης ἄκοντος καὶ ἀπὸ τούτου πνεύματος ἐπιγενομένου τὸ πολὺ αὐτῆς ἔλαθε κατακαυθέν.

THUC. 4.30.2

Demosthenes' men had been forced by the lack of space to land on the extreme point of the island and take their meal there under the protection of guards. When someone by accident set fire to a small part of the wood, and a wind came up from that direction, the larger part of the wood was accidentally consumed by fire.

Given that Demosthenes himself had suffered a defeat at the hands of the Aetolians as the result of a forest fire (3.98.2), there has been some speculation whether or not the present fire can really have been accidental.²³ In any case, it seems evident that it is advantageous for the narrator to *present* the fire as accidental, since the unusual circumstances that the fire creates help to explain the unexpected Athenian success.²⁴

The consequences of the fire also make themselves felt on the battlefield:

γνόντες αὐτοὺς οἱ ψιλοὶ βραδυτέρους ἤδη ὄντας τῷ ἀμύνασθαι, καὶ αὐτοὶ τῇ τε ὀψει τοῦ θαρσεῖν τὸ πλεῖστον εἰληφότες πολλαπλάσιοι φαινόμενοι καὶ ξυνειθισμένοι μᾶλλον μηκέτι δεινούς αὐτοὺς ὁμοίως σφίσι φαίνεσθαι, ὅτι οὐκ εὐθὺς ἄξια τῆς προσδοκίας ἐπεπόνθησαν, ὥσπερ ὅτε πρῶτον ἀπέβαινον τῇ γνώμῃ δεδουλωμένοι ὡς ἐπὶ Λακεδαιμονίους, καταφρονήσαντες καὶ ἐμβοήσαντες ἄθροοι ὠρμήσαν ἐπ' αὐτοὺς καὶ ἔβαλλον λίθοις τε καὶ τοξεύμασι καὶ ἀκοντίοις, ὡς ἕκαστός τι πρόχειρον εἶχεν. [2] γενομένης δὲ τῆς βοῆς ἅμα τῇ ἐπιδρομῇ ἔκπληξίς τε ἐνέπεσεν ἀνθρώποις ἀγήθεσι τοιαύτης μάχης καὶ ὁ κονιορτός τῆς ὕλης νεωστὶ κεκαυμένης ἐχώρει πολὺς ἄνω, ἄπορόν τε ἦν ἰδεῖν τὸ πρὸ αὐτοῦ ὑπὸ τῶν τοξευμάτων καὶ λίθων ἀπὸ πολλῶν ἀνθρώπων μετὰ τοῦ κονιορτοῦ ἅμα φερομένων.

THUC. 4.34.1–4.34.2

The light troops became aware that the Spartans were now more hesitant in their defense, and they themselves *had taken far more courage* because of what they saw, because it turned out that they were by far in the majority, and they grew more accustomed to the circumstances. The

23 See Wilson 1979: 103: 'More surprising is the element of chance: why did not Demosthenes start a fire deliberately? Thucydides' informant here is plainly either Demosthenes himself or someone close to him: there is virtually no chance of the facts being mistaken.'

24 Wylie 1993: 22–24 argues that the campaign was in fact 'brilliantly conceived and carefully planned' (ibid. 23).

Spartans did not seem as terrifying to them as before, because they had not immediately suffered as much as they had expected, as when they first went ashore in dejected spirits, because they were attacking Spartans. They now looked down upon them; loudly screaming, they collectively ran towards the Spartans and pelted them with stones, arrows, and spears, whatever anybody had at hand.

When the shouting took place at the same time as the attack, *panic befell the Spartan men*, who were unaccustomed to this type of fighting. A large cloud of dust went up from the wood that had been recently burnt, and it was difficult to see what each man had in front of him because of the arrows and stones that were thrown by many people and flew through the air together with the ashes.

The passage offers a lively insight into the minds of the soldiers on both sides. The narrator pretends to have full access to the thoughts and feelings of the soldiers in both armies;²⁵ and this claim seems credible to the extent that Thucydides himself was of course an experienced general. The Athenians are at first 'enslaved in their minds' (Thuc. 4.34.1 τῇ γνώμῃ δεδουλωμένοι) at the prospect of having to fight with the Spartans. But when they see (ibid. γνόντες) that these fight less vigorously than usual, they become far more courageous (ibid. τοῦ θαρσεῖν τὸ πλείστον εἰληφότες). Conversely, the Spartans are struck with panic (34.2 ἔκπληξις ... ἐνέπεσεν) because they are not accustomed to the exceptional conditions on the battlefield, conditions that are utterly unfit for hoplite battle.

Thus, the forest fire and its consequences are said to have an enormous impact on the outcome of the battle. The Athenians see more than they would normally have seen, and take courage when they realize that the Spartans are not doing as well as they normally should; conversely, the Spartans see less than they normally would because of the dust, and are prevented from the kind of fighting at which they normally excel.²⁶ This implicitly helps to explain why the Spartans lost a battle that they should have won under normal conditions, or so the narrator suggests.

25 On the 'omniscience' of the primary narrator and his access to the inner thoughts of his characters, see De Jong 2014: 56.

26 Ober 2006: 149 stresses the contrast between the Athenians' ability to adapt to the circumstances and the Spartans' futile attempt to 'fight a standard hoplite battle under impossible conditions.'

3 Battlefield Tactics

However, even the exceptional conditions on the battlefield do not fully explain the Athenian victory. Battlefield tactics play a decisive role as well. And when it comes to tactics, the narrator quite consistently suppresses any contribution that Cleon may have made, giving all credit to Demosthenes and the Messenian general instead. It is Demosthenes who makes the first tactical moves that give the Athenians an advantage over their Spartan adversaries:

Δημοσθένους δὲ τάξαντος διέστησαν κατὰ διακοσίους τε καὶ πλείους, ἔστι δ' ἢ ἑλάσσους, τῶν χωρίων τὰ μετεωρότατα λαβόντες, ὅπως ὅτι πλείστη ἀπορία ἦ τοῖς πολεμίοις πανταχόθεν κεκυκλωμένοις.

THUC. 4.32.3

Demosthenes ordered them to divide themselves in groups of two hundred men or more, and in some spots less. They occupied the highest spots on the island, in order to create as much difficulty for the enemy as possible, as these would find themselves surrounded from everywhere.

Even Westlake (1968), who is quite critical of Thucydides' treatment of Cleon, seems to accept the narrator's implicit suggestion that Cleon's contribution to the military operation was minimal, and that the credits for the military success should go to Demosthenes rather than to him.²⁷ However, it is left to an anonymous Messenian commander to make the decisive proposal to attack the Spartan army from the rear:

27 Cf. Westlake 1968: 70: 'That Cleon rather than someone else was appointed to take command at Pylos does not appear to have decisively influenced the course of the military operations here, which were planned and conducted largely by Demosthenes.' But he also notes that Thucydides praises Demosthenes only *implicitly*. *ibid.* 111: 'Nowhere does Thucydides assess, or even refer to, the contribution of Demosthenes to one of the most decisive and valuable victories in Athenian history.' Similarly, Marshall 1984: 20–21 concludes: 'Demosthenes gets less credit than seems his due for the whole Pylos operation.' See also Woodcock 1928: esp. 101–102. Another of Cleon's enemies supports the idea that Demosthenes deserves the credit for the military success. In Aristophanes' *Knights* 54–57, Demosthenes is made to explain how 'recently, when I had kneaded a Spartan cake at Pylos, the rogue somehow came from my back, snatched away the cake I had kneaded and served it up himself.' (καὶ πρόωγ' ἔμοῦ | μάζαν μεμαχότος ἐν Πύλῳ Λακωνικήν, | πανουργό-
τατά πως περιδραμῶν ὑφαρπάσας | αὐτὸς παρέθηκε τὴν ὑπ' ἐμοῦ μεμαγμένην).

ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἀπέραντον ἦν, προσελθὼν ὁ τῶν Μεσσηνίων στρατηγὸς Κλέωνι καὶ Δημοσθένει ἄλλως ἔφη πονεῖν σφᾶς: εἰ δὲ βούλονται ἑαυτῷ δοῦναι τῶν τοξωτῶν μέρος τι καὶ τῶν ψιλῶν περιέναι κατὰ νώτου αὐτοῖς ὁδῶ ἢ ἂν αὐτὸς εὕρη, δοκεῖν βιάσασθαι τὴν ἔφοδον.

THUC. 4.36.1

As the battle drew on endlessly, the Messenian general approached Cleon and Demosthenes and told them that they struggled in vain. If they were prepared to give him part of the archers and the light troops to go around to the back of the enemy, by a road that he would be able to find himself, he thought he would be able to force an approach.

The Spartans now find themselves in a situation similar to that at Thermopylae. Not only do they have to fight under bad circumstances; they also have to face the enemy on two sides, because of the ‘betrayal’ of the Messenian general who acts as a latter day Ephialtes. Thus, the Athenian victory at Sphacteria is presented as a military success that came about against all odds. The campaign was the result of utterly irrational decision making in the Athenian assembly, but it turned out to be successful thanks to the unusual circumstances on the island and, more decisively, thanks to the help of a smart commander among the allies.

4 The Reception of the News of the Spartan Defeat

How then, was the news of this victory received? In wrapping up his narrative, the narrator comes in with his famous authorial comment, and makes the claim that Cleon’s promise was fulfilled in spite of its sheer madness:

οἱ μὲν δὴ Ἀθηναῖοι καὶ οἱ Πελοποννήσιοι ἀνεχώρησαν τῷ στρατῷ ἐκ τῆς Πύλου ἑκάτεροι ἐπ’ οἴκου, καὶ τοῦ Κλέωνος καίπερ μανιώδης οὕσα ἡ ὑπόσχεσις ἀπέβη: ἐντὸς γὰρ εἴκοσιν ἡμερῶν ἤγαγε τοὺς ἄνδρας, ὥσπερ ὑπέστη.

THUC. 4.39.3

The Athenians and the Peloponnesians withdrew their armies from Pylos and both returned home, and Cleon’s promise, insane as it may have been, turned out to be fulfilled: for he brought the men to Athens within 20 days, as he had promised.

In exposing the ‘sheer madness’ of Cleon’s promise, the narrator drops his usual mask of impartiality and comes in with an evaluative remark of his own in

order to minimize Cleon's military merits.²⁸ As the use of the particle *καίπερ* shows, the narrator claims that in spite of Cleon's eventual victory, the fact remains that in the earlier assembly, victory was a crazy thing to promise.²⁹ Thus he implies that Cleon's success was not based on solid military expertise, but that he made a boastful promise that happened to be fulfilled by chance. And it seems that it is on account of this unexpected success that Cleon gets carried away: he counts on further similar successes and continues to oppose all peace initiatives.³⁰

To back up his claim that Cleon's promise was insane, the narrator calls the whole of Greece to witness, claiming that all the Greeks viewed the outcome of this battle as the biggest surprise in the entire Peloponnesian war:³¹

παρὰ γνώμην τε δὴ μάλιστα τῶν κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον τοῦτο τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐγένετο· τοὺς γὰρ Λακεδαιμονίους οὔτε λιμῶ οὔτ' ἀνάγκη οὐδεμιᾶ ἤξιουν τὰ ὅπλα παραδοῦναι, ἀλλὰ ἔχοντας καὶ μαχομένους ὥς ἐδύναντο ἀποθνήσκειν.

THUC. 4.40.1

Among the things that happened in the war, this was naturally the greatest surprise to the Greeks. For they had thought that the Spartans would not let themselves be forced by hunger or anything else to hand over their weapons, but that they would hold on to them and fight as best they could until they died.

28 While I think there is no denying Thucydides' bias against Cleon (which may or may not be due to Cleon's putative role in Thucydides' banishment, cf. Rhodes 2006: 523), it is impossible to judge to what extent Thucydides' judgement was justified. Many commentators have been severely critical of Thucydides. See for instance Woodhead 1960: 314: 'Thucydides cannot avoid reporting that the *ὑπόσχεσις ἀπέβη*, but he can and does turn it sour by adding *καίπερ μανιώδης*.' Cf. Westlake 1968: 75: 'Throughout the latter part of his narrative of the Pylos episode all other considerations are subordinated to his desire to expose the unworthiness of Cleon.' Spence 1995: 424 argues that there were sound military reasons to call Cleon's promise insane, pointing to the extremely short deadline of twenty days, and the reputation of the military power of Spartan hoplite armies. Cf. Gomme 1956: 478: 'It is Kleon's *promise* that is called mad [...] and this *was* mad.'

29 For *καίπερ* in participle phrases with concessive value, see Denniston [1934] 1954: 464–467 and Bakker 1988: 120–124 and 149 n. 67.

30 Cf. Tsakmakis 2006: 177: 'The fortuitous success in Pylos makes Cleon believe that the same strategy will guarantee further military triumphs, and therefore he opposes every peace initiative; in so doing he behaves like a gambler who is carried away by his luck and keeps on playing until he has lost everything.'

31 For the Sphacteria episode as a narrative of paradox and reversal with an unexpected outcome, see Connor 1984: 108–118.

The narrator claims that *all* the Greeks regarded the Athenian victory with astonishment, and he assures his narratees that it is quite understandable that they should do so (δῆ in 4.40.1).³² The Greeks had thought that the Spartans would keep up the high heroic standards set by their forefathers and fight themselves to death.³³ However, these Spartans did not live up to the standard of their ancestors at Thermopylae; instead, they surrendered. The un-heroic, but arguably sensible, *Realpolitik* of the Spartan hoplites sets the seal on an Athenian victory that was, according to the narrator, unexpected from any point of view.

5 Conclusion: Comparing Great and Small

In the narrative of the Athenian campaign at Sphacteria, the narrator consistently downplays the significance of Cleon's contribution to the Athenian victory. He presents the Athenians' greatest military success as a complete surprise from every conceivable point of view. He does so by suggesting that the whole enterprise was the result of irresponsibly irrational decision-making in the assembly and by pointing out that the circumstances on the island after the forest fire were greatly in Athens' favour. By attributing the strategic decisions behind the victory to Demosthenes and the Messenian general, he further downplays the role of the Athenian commander Cleon in particular.

To back up his interpretation of the episode, the narrator makes us share the point of view of just about the whole of the Greek world in order to make sure that we can share his, and its, surprise. In the narrative of the assembly at Athens, we are made to share the fear of the Athenian δῆμος (Thuc. 4.27.1–4.27.2); we see how Cleon recognizes the Athenians' anger at himself and we share his fear of being exposed and his desire to save face (Thuc. 4.27.3–4.27.4), we share Nicias' irritation at Cleon's insult (4.28.1) and we share the hopes of Athens' 'decent citizens' to get rid of Cleon (4.28.5). Read as a whole, the passage seems to suggest that none of the participants in the Athenian assembly made a balanced assessment of the pros and cons of the campaign, and that

32 Cf. Sicking 1993: 52: 'it is possible to describe δῆ as a primarily 'evidential' particle which presents a statement as immediately evident to the senses or the understanding or as common knowledge. It thus implies that speaker and hearer are in the same position with respect to this statement.' Here, the narrator implies that his narratees should be able to *understand* why all the Greeks were astonished at the Spartan defeat.

33 The narrator here presents us with the embedded focalization of 'the Greeks' in general, as one can see from his use of the phrase παρὰ γνώμην and especially the verb of thinking ἤξιουν (4.40.1). Cf. De Jong 2014: 50–51.

no one really believed in a successful outcome of the expedition. Instead, they were struck with fear, trying to save face, hurt in their pride, or even secretly hoping to get rid of Cleon.

In the battle scene itself, we are similarly made to share the point of view of the soldiers in the two armies. We experience how the light troops of the Athenians unexpectedly gain confidence: at first, they are dejected by the prospect of having to fight the superior Spartans, but they take courage when these Spartans turn out to fight less vigorously than usual (4.34.1). We also share the panic of the Spartans, who were unaccustomed to the circumstances on the island (4.34.2). Like their fellow Greeks in general, the troops on Sphacteria seem to have anticipated a very different outcome of the battle, at least until the circumstances brought about a significant turn in Athens' favor, and until the commander of the Messenians came up with the tactics that decisively put Sparta at a disadvantage. After the battle, the narrator assures us that Cleon's promise to bring the Spartans to Athens within three weeks was 'insane' however successful it may have turned out to be (4.39.3). We are also made to share the point of view of the Greeks at large, and these regard the Athenian victory with complete and utter amazement (4.40.1).

In this context, the comparison of Sphacteria with Thermopylae does more than just signal the similarity between two Spartan armies that were attacked from two sides. It suggests that the Spartan hoplites at Sphacteria did not live up to the high standards of courage traditionally associated with the Spartans, and exemplified most typically by the heroic defeat of the 300 under Leonidas.³⁴ The narrative suggests that there were several factors that contributed to the Spartans' poor performance. The fact that food had been in short supply, but most of all the conditions in which the fighting took place, and the 'betrayal' by the Messenian general, all these things helped to create exceptional conditions, in which the Spartans did far worse than they would normally have done. And this in turn serves to suggest that Cleon's resounding victory was a stroke of good luck that was completely unexpected, or even totally undeserved.

34 Rood 1998: 37: 'The flashback to Thermopylai [...] relates to the disastrous position in which the Spartans found themselves: as in 480, so now, the only hope of keeping a position was destroyed when the enemy discovered a path leading to the rear. The comparison suggests not the heroism of the defeated, but a revealing contrast: the Three Hundred at Thermopylai resisted to the death; the men on Sphacteria surrendered. And this contrast explains why the Greeks found the surrender surprising.'

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