

Summary Of Pericles' Funeral Oration

The Funeral Oration is significant because the speech departs from the typical formula of Athenian funeral speeches. It has been described as "a eulogy of Athens itself..." The speech is a glorification of Athens' achievements, designed to stir the spirits of a state still at war.

Introduction

The speech begins by praising the custom of the public funeral for the war dead, but criticizes the inclusion of the speech, arguing that the "reputations of many brave men" should "not be imperiled in the mouth of a single individual". Pericles argues that the speaker of the oration has the impossible task of satisfying the associates of the dead, who would wish that their deeds be magnified, while everyone else might feel jealous and suspect exaggeration.

Praise of the Dead

Pericles begins his praise of the war dead, as the other Athenian funeral orations do, by praising the ancestors of present day Athenians, touching briefly on the acquisition of the empire.

At this point, however, Pericles departs most dramatically from the example of other Athenian funeral orations and skips over the great military achievements of Athens' past: "That part of our history which tells of the military achievements which gave us our several possessions, or of the ready valor with which either we or our fathers stemmed the tide of Hellenic or foreign aggression, is a theme too familiar to my hearers for me to dwell upon, and I shall therefore pass it by." Instead, Pericles proposes to focus on "the road by which we reached our position, the form of government under which our greatness grew, and the national habits out of which it sprang." This amounts to a focus on present day Athens; Thucydides' Pericles thus decides to praise the war dead by glorifying the city for which they died.

The Greatness of Athens

"If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences...if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There, far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes..." These lines form the roots of the famous phrase "[equal justice under law](#)." The liberality of which Pericles spoke also extended to Athens' foreign policy: "We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality..." Yet Athens' values of equality and openness do not, according to Pericles, hinder Athens' greatness, indeed, they enhance it. "...advancement in public life falls to reputations for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit...our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters...at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger."¹

Pericles rises to crescendo in his praise of Athens, "In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Greece; while I doubt if the world can produce a man, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian."

Finally, Pericles links his praise of the city to the dead Athenians for whom he is speaking, "...for the Athens that I have celebrated is only what the heroism of these and their like have made her...none of these men allowed either wealth with its prospect of future enjoyment to unnerve his spirit, or poverty with its hope of a day of freedom and riches to tempt him to shrink from danger. No, holding that vengeance upon their enemies was more to be desired than any personal blessings, and reckoning this to be the most glorious of hazards, they joyfully determined to accept the risk... Thus, choosing to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor..."- The conclusion seems inevitable: "Therefore, having judged that to be happy means to be free, and to be free means to be brave, do not shy away from the risks of war". With the linkage of Athens' greatness complete, Pericles moves to addressing his audience.

Exhortation to the living

Pericles then turns to the audience and exhorts them to live up to the standards set by the deceased, "So died these men as becomes Athenians. You, their survivors, must determine to have as unfaltering a resolution in the field, though you may pray that it may have a happier outcome."

Epilogue

Pericles ends with a short epilogue, reminding the audience of the difficulty of the task of speaking over the dead. The audience is then dismissed.

Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pericles%27_Funeral_Oration (September 24, 2011)