

“The Paradoxical Duplexity of Demaratus’ Counsel to Xerxes: Acclaim Through Treason”

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Herodotus displays his masterful ability to interweave elements of political philosophy, narrative craftsmanship, and historical analysis in his portrayal of the deposed Spartan Demaratus’ advising in Book VII. These three instances of advising give a careful reader a lot to unpack even when limited to their own context, and fully understanding the three scenes¹ within the context of the entire work requires complex and multifaceted inquiry. Demaratus’ personal history of deposition and voluntary exile out of Sparta² thoroughly complicates what otherwise might be fairly understood as straightforward and disinterested advising.³ With personal context in mind, the Spartan’s words carry a paradoxical duplexity: To the extent that Demaratus might see himself as helping the Persian King Xerxes defeat his people, his advice has a traitorous air about it. At the same time, the advice itself speaks highly of the Spartan character, resolve, and way of life. The reader finds himself doubting that the ex-king truly means to catalyze Persian conquest of Sparta, yet the tumultuous episode of deposition gives Demaratus seemingly every incentive to do just that. A hard stance on either side of this issue proves unsatisfying, and a compromise between the two positions makes sense of this seeming paradox. Demaratus’ *acts* of advising Xerxes represent his sense of frustration, alienation, and estrangement with his former homeland, and the *substance* of his advice displays his ultimate love for and alliance with

¹ VII 101-5, 209, and 235-7

² VI 61-72

³ E.g., Solon’s Advising Croesus in I 32. Such an exchange lacks the deeply personal elements and clear ramifications present in Demaratus’ advising.

Spartan mores, in particular the ideal of “nomos as king.” The hesitant nature of the advising, the advice itself, the backstory of deposition and exodus, and the parallel narratives of both Xerxes’ and Demaratus’ rise to the throne factor into this nuanced position.

Demaratus’ somewhat pointed responses to Xerxes’ prompting in each instance of advising underscore his dualistic feelings about betraying his native land by speaking highly of it. The first time the Persian king solicits the Spartan’s advice, the latter expresses his hesitancy to be perfectly candid with his prefatory question of whether Xerxes wants “a true answer... or a pleasant one?”⁴ At the very least, this question reveals that Demaratus sees different potentialities for his advice; he is not staunchly set on giving whatever response would be most damning for Sparta. Further, he reminds the Persian king at the end of his response, “This time I spoke because you forced me to speak.”⁵ At the same time that these elements of his speech suggest a sort of hesitancy to offer advice, the fact that he is “accompanying Xerxes in the march to Greece”⁶ clearly demonstrates his ultimate compliance and friendly association with the Persian king. His final remark that “I pray that all may turn out as you desire.”⁷ does the same. The next advising session, held just before the Battle of Thermopylae, gives a similar illustration. Here Demaratus indulges in an “I told you so” moment when he says, “Once before... you heard me speak of these men. I told you then how I saw this enterprise would turn out, and you laughed at me.”⁸ This indulgent comment arguably seems strikingly bold and dangerous uttered against the man who is ostensibly the most powerful king in the world, but Demaratus’ seeming daring does not last long; he quickly reframes his advice in view of helping Xerxes ensure that “no

⁴ VII 101

⁵ VII 104

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Id.

⁸ VII 209

other people in the world will dare to stand firm or lift a hand against you.”⁹ The third and final episode where Xerxes seeks Demaratus’ advice parallels the other two in regard to the Spartan’s mixed demeanor. Once again, he presents a daringly playful preface to his remarks before going on to give sound advice. His remark that he will tell Xerxes “what [he] really really want[s] to know” once again demonstrates his boldness before he goes on to tell his interlocutor about the Spartans.¹⁰ All three of Demaratus’ responses contain small rebukes before going on to give truthful and helpful advice, but the disproportionate power dynamic between a deposed king and the ruler of the world’s largest empire magnifies their apparent smallness to give them substantial significance. Demaratus advises the Persian king, but does so with a strikingly egalitarian demeanor suggestive of his remaining ties to Spartan mores.

While the rhetorical devices referenced above reveal both Demaratus’ compliance and hesitancy to act as advisor, the substance of the advice gives the strongest indication that Demaratus still harbours positive feelings towards Sparta. The first counseling session centers around the point that Spartan tenacity and resolve in battle emanates from their strongly held ideal that “They are free - yes - but not entirely free; for they have a master, and that master is Law [nomos], which they fear much more than [Xerxes’] subjects fear [him].”¹¹ This message carries particular potency given that Herodotus himself previously endorsed this belief when he stated, “Pindar, in my opinion, was right when he called [nomos] ‘king of all.’”¹² Since the likelihood that Herodotus had any legitimate source for the closed-door discussions between Xerxes and Demaratus is rather low, this previous endorsement reasonably indicates that

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ VII 234

¹¹ VII 104

¹² III 38

Herodotus is speaking vicariously through Demaratus when he reiterates this idea. However, Demaratus is careful to separate the *ideals* from the totality of the *people* themselves, and in that sense the idiosyncrasies of his personal history influence him in a way unrepresentative of Herodotus' thought. In the same speech where he gives the aforementioned positive view, the Spartan clarifies, "I now feel but little affection for my countrymen, who robbed me of my hereditary power and privileges and made me a fugitive without a home."¹³ Despite these understandably hard feelings, Demaratus still holds the values and conventions of his native land in high esteem.

In staunch contrast to Demaratus' positive feelings towards Sparta on account of its devotion to law, his personal history of deposition and humiliation gives rise to negative feelings and prompts his traitorous advising to Xerxes. Herodotus presents the Spartan's personal history in a light that makes the deposition appear particularly radical and devastating for Demaratus. The unparalleled excellence of Demaratus' rule made these events particularly damning. Herodotus notes that the deposed king "had been a man of highest distinction in Sparta, both in action and in counsel - he had, moreover, given his country a victory at Olympia in the four-horse chariot race, and was the only king of Sparta to ever achieve this honour."¹⁴ Additionally, it is important to remember that Demaratus was subsequently elected by his countrymen *after* his deposition to a magisterial position. It was Leotychides' humiliating taunts that ultimately prompted his fleeing. Demaratus gave the angry rebuke to said taunts that "this [taunting] will be the beginning of great things for Sparta - either good or evil."¹⁵ Even though

¹³ VII 104

¹⁴ VI 70

¹⁵ VI 67

the context clearly indicates he intends the latter of the two options, the remark itself foreshadows the two-sided nature of Demaratus' later advising.

To address a final point, the similarities between Xerxes' and Demaratus' respective rise to the throne elucidate the motivations behind the latter's advising the former. Both men battled through claims of familial illegitimacy on their way to securing power. Xerxes had to demonstrate that Artabazanes did not supercede his ascendancy by virtue of his older age;¹⁶ Demaratus faced opposition on the basis of his father's former claim that he was not his son.¹⁷ Herodotus blatantly draws the reader's attention to this connection by involving Demaratus in the conflict over Xerxes' reign. He claims, "[T]he story goes that when he heard about the dispute between Darius' sons, he went to see Xerxes and advised him to point out... that Darius was already on the throne of Persia when he was born."¹⁸ Clearly, Demaratus sees much of his own struggle in Xerxes' dilemma, and this provides much of his motivation to advise the Persian king. With this in mind, the particular circumstances that ultimately force Demaratus to advise Xerxes against his homeland of Sparta seem largely accidental. Demaratus is set on helping out Xerxes because he sympathizes with the pain of potentially losing power on account of rumours involving one's family. He did not necessarily foresee himself in a traitorous position from the outset of his tenure as advisor to the Persian king.

Demaratus' advising to Xerxes clearly contains many dimensions. On the one hand, he advises truthfully and fully on account of his deposition and his ability to relate to Xerxes. On the other, the substance of his advising displays a sincerely held respect and admiration for his homeland and fellow Spartans. He speaks of Sparta and its inhabitants as "the finest kingdom in

¹⁶ VII 2-4

¹⁷ VI 64-8

¹⁸ VII 3

all of Greece and the bravest men.”¹⁹ The evidence investigated above helps to unravel many elements of this seeming paradox, and surely Herodotus meant to use Demaratus as an especially challenging figure in his *Histories*, a book that elucidates episodes of the ancient world while also forcing its readers to inquire into their own contemporary reflections on alliance, advising, and treason.

¹⁹ VII 209