Herm Choppers, the Adonia, and Rhetorical Action in Ancient Greece
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Source: College English, Vol. 64, No. 5 (May, 2002), pp. 590-612
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250755

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The exchange over Aspasia recently printed in the pages of this journal (Gale; Glenn, “Truth”; Jarratt) does more than enhance and complicate our understanding of this particular historical figure; it also illustrates one central issue currently dividing historians of rhetoric, and historians generally. “Traditionalists” like Xin Liu Gale demand rigorous and monogamous fidelity to the evidentiary material of historical scholarship, while postmodernists like Cheryl Glenn and Susan Jarratt pledge themselves as well to such nondocumentary elements as subject position, narrative form, and political commitment. These and similar considerations have captured the loyalty of postmodernist scholarship as absolutely central to the process of locating sources, judging evidence, and writing history, but traditionalists continue to see such “externals” as intrusions that compromise the historian’s primary obligation to objectivity. You can’t, says Gale, have it both ways, foundational and antifoundational: using the historical evidence to champion Aspasia while at the same time “reclaiming” her from the biases of those very documents. You can, answers Jarratt, because reclamation and interpretation are always implicated in any factual reconstruction; they cohabit.

This debate, then, encapsulates the difficulties historians of rhetoric have had in moving beyond these by-now-familiar charges and countercharges. Can we ever know whether Aspasia was “really” a woman rhetor, or will she always be only a “construct of discourse” (Gale 380)? Perhaps we remain caught in this historiographic vortex because of the continuing hold of a foundationalist model for rhetorical activity in history. The debate over women’s rhetoric in ancient Greece (whether we’re speaking of Aspasia, Sappho, or Diotima) demonstrates how the discipline has been hampered by its implicit acceptance of a traditional paradigm for

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proper rhetorical activity: the single, named, public figure who composes (or is composed through) speeches and texts. This rhetorical paradigm works in ways similar to Foucault’s “author function,” where legitimacy depends upon the discursive unities that cluster around an _œuvre_ and a proper name (221–22). Aspasia participates in sophist circles, writes speeches, or gets herself written about, only she does so as a woman. Her legitimacy as a figure of women’s rhetoric, and so the viability of a project examining women’s rhetoric in ancient Greece, is made to depend upon the veracity of the claims made about her life and work—claims that center upon the unities that can be established in her name, and that can guarantee her status as a writer, speaker, and teacher—but because she was a woman, her life exists only as refracted through other writers, who seem to render her either as a courtesan, a mouthpiece for Athenian patriotism, or a joke. Aspasia is, it seems, condemned always to be only the discursive effect of written texts precisely because only the written text as authored discourse counts for us as rhetorical knowledge. If we fail to render Aspasia as a legitimate source for the production of rhetorical knowledge, if she never attains the status of rhetorical “author,” this may be only because our sources disperse and deflect the very unities that we would look to them to provide.

But she, and the women of ancient Greece in general, share this characteristic with the vast majority of ancient Greeks, only a tiny fraction of whom ever wrote or got themselves written about. About the lives (to say nothing of the rhetorical practices) of the poor, the illiterate, slaves, countryfolk, and the residents of cities other than Athens—Sparta, to name one conspicuous example—we know very little. It has become the commonest of tropes in classics scholarship to admit at the outset the scarcity of sources and the obvious biases and many gaps in the few sources available. Of Cleisthenes, for example, one of the most important of Greek reformers and in many ways the founder of its democracy (and therefore of interest to historians of rhetoric), we have surprisingly little material and nothing from his own hand. Outside that list of a dozen or so ancient Greek literate speakers and theorists whose names we learn early (from Tisias to Aristotle and Demosthenes), our knowledge of Greek persuasive artistry—of either men or women—is scanty indeed, although we can be certain that ancient Greeks in general regularly engaged in rhetorical practices and acts, as it is in the nature of all humans to do.

Unfortunately, however, the very literate and verbal medium through which the ancients have come down to us has determined the terms upon which—indeed the media through which—we are willing to assess their work and worth. A look at recent work in Greek rhetorical history suggests that the “author” and his or her discursive _œuvre_ still play a primary role in structuring and legitimating the knowledge that we feel able to profess for that period. Andrea Lunsford’s excellent collection _Reclaiming Rhetorica_ is organized around proper names and texts, and for many good reasons. Glenn, too, explains the need to write individual, named women into
the history of rhetoric (Rhetoric Retold) despite the objections of scholars such as Barbara Biesecker or, from another direction, Joan Scott. Both Glenn and many of the authors of the pieces collected in Lunsford struggle to contextualize the individual women they examine and so connect more generally to the women of the time and to contemporary constructions of gender, as Jarratt and Ong and Glenn do for Aspasia. But this contextualizing still necessarily relies on that elusive authorial name and its discourse as the lever with which to pry open this area of research and to fit discussions of women and gender into the canon. The limits imposed by the author function are difficult to see or escape when this very function determines which texts are worth preserving and what can be said of them; they are particularly injurious to fields such as ancient history, where authors are so few and corroboration so rare.

But this relative dearth of “authors” need not hamper us as much as it does, if we can rethink what might count as evidence in rhetorical history. There are other ways to talk about the rhetorical activity of women in ancient Greece, and of the ancients in general, ways that minimize the importance of the author and his or her discourse as a principle of unity, if we are willing to set aside the narrow and exclusionary tradition according to which rhetorical activity must be limited to the texts or speeches produced by individually named speakers and writers (Isocrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aspasia?). Important events, trends, places, terms, and cultural conditions can replace the author as focal points for historical investigations, and, because the legitimacy of these operators does not depend on their ability to produce or unify a discourse, they allow us to minimize all the troubles that the author function introduces, including especially its exclusive focus upon named figures as the authors of primary documents, of which we possess so few, and its diligence in ignoring evidence for nonverbal rhetorical action.

While the recovery of named figures like Aspasia as a legitimate source of rhetorical knowledge and teaching in ancient Greece is important and valuable—not only for feminists but for historians and theorists of rhetoric in general—there are other media and other venues for what we might call ancient persuasive artistry, other organizing principles for investigating it, and a wide range of historical clues to guide us in reclaiming the persuasive skills that women and other disenfranchised or nonliterate groups possessed, displayed, and taught. Persuasive artistry in ancient Greece worked its effects through, for example, poetry, sculpture, architecture, city planning, dance, collaborative symbolic actions, and everyday practices, in addition to individually authored speeches. (On the symbolic/rhetorical potential for Greek festival and dance, for example see Goldhill; Connor; Stehle, Performance.) It was initiated and carried out in private, by noncitizens and women, as well as by political leaders and orators.
These other approaches and sources do not solve what we might call "the Aspasia question," but they offer a way around it, lay out new paths on the "map," by asking different questions. Rather than asking who Aspasia really was and what she accomplished, we might ask what sorts of resources, models, spaces, and media were available to rhetorically minded women—or any ancient Greek—outside the dominant paradigm of the public speech or written treatise. We might ask what signs of rhetorical wisdom—what symbolic acts, rituals, practices, events—might help us understand the persuasive practices of a largely oral and performative people. We can, for example, follow the lead of Gorgo, wife of the Spartan general Leonidas, in trying to uncover paradigms for rhetorical cunning. When the Spartans received an apparently blank writing tablet from Demaratus (who wanted to warn them of an imminent Persian attack), it was she who suggested they scrape off the smooth wax to examine the wood underneath (Herodotus 7.239).

If we wanted, similarly, to remove the waxy palimpsest that always privileges the written text and its author, we might begin by thinking about those symbolic resources and media for expression available to potential rhetorical agents behind or beyond the verbal. We might look for the possible opportunities, moments of access, or venues for expression through which individuals or groups could carry out rhetorical acts or practices.

I would argue, for example, that one of the most important media for symbolic expression in ancient Greece was stone, a near-ubiquitous material for Greek architecture, inscription, and sculpture (Wycherly; Thomas 84–88). To understand persuasive artistry in ancient Greece, we would need to learn more about the symbolic use of various types of stone, including especially monumental inscriptions and sculpture. Similarly, one of the most accessible venues for Greek symbolic expression was the festival. For ancient Greek women in particular, symbolic or persuasive agency in the political sphere would have been most available through their participation in the many cults and festivals observed in Athens—in song, dance, and ritual—rather than through the production of speeches, texts, or philosophical treatises (Stehle, *Performance*).

I focus on one festival, one symbolic use of stone, and one historical moment during the Adonia festival of 416–15 B.C.E. to discuss a rhetorical event that was deliberate and political, but that in almost every other way stood in opposition to the accepted modes of rhetoric that would eventually be taken for granted by handbooks and theory. It was collective and anonymous rather than individual, enacted rather than spoken or written, clandestine and nocturnal rather than part of daytime political proceedings, and, perhaps most important, it worked in opposition to the rhetoric of imperialist expansion that characterized fifth-century Athenian politics. While neither Plato, Isocrates, nor Aristotle would consider it rhetoric, I suggest
that this symbolic act offers unique insight into the workings of ancient persuasive artistry outside the sanctioned place of public oratory and prior to the appearance of explicit, written rhetorical theory.

This event is known today as the mutilation of the herms. Though the perpetrators of this illegal and sacrilegious act remain a mystery, the act itself stands as one of the most important single events in the history of classical Athens, and as one of its most powerful rhetorical moments. It is this event that I want to present as a paradigm for powerful, nonverbal rhetorical action.

**The Herms of Athens**

The classical Greek herm is a partly aniconic, typically archaizing statue of Hermes consisting of a rectangular pillar topped with a stylized bust of Hermes, with a horizontal cutting at shoulder height to accommodate a cross-beam or bracket and, about midway down, an erect phallus and testicles. The herm, says Thucydides, was a ubiquitous Athenian icon. While the origin of the herm remains controversial, its widespread popularity is well attested (Goldman; Osborne 51–52; Furley 17–19). According to the pseudo-Platonic Hipparchus, the herms were initiated by the tyrant Hipparchus as distance markers halfway between Athens and each of its rural demes (228d). They included, within Athens, a three-headed herm at a crossroads in the northwest corner of the city, near what would have been the city’s principal gateway, pointing the direction of the various paths (Furley 16). These road-markers are supported by archaeological evidence, although the Hipparchan herms are probably not the origin of the herm form (Lewis 293; see Pausanias 3.1.1 and n1).

One of the Hipparchan adaptations included the inscription of verses on the sides of the herms, facing travelers. The terse moral sentiments on the Hipparchan herms included exhortations such as “Think just thoughts” and “Don’t deceive a friend” (Hipparchus 228d–29b), like early public service slogans (“Just say no”). As such, they combined the functions of the mile marker, the Hermes icon, and the gnomic saying, and were one piece of a larger Peisistratid educational and cultural program (see Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians* 18.2; [Plato], *Hipparchus* 228b–c).¹

In addition to being placed as road markers, herms were common features within the city itself. The agora or public square in Athens was littered with herms, particularly in its northwest corner, an area known simply as “the herms,” where archaeological remains of nineteen separate herms have been found (Shear; Harrison). The placement of this collection of herms at the northwest corner of the agora (like that of Hermes *tri kep halos*) puts them on line with the likely location of the archaic city gate, such that the herms here may have functioned to guard the archaic city itself. Later, when the city wall was expanded, they oversaw its civic center. Other herms
were dedicated on the Acropolis, including an often-copied Hermes Propylaios, or “Hermes of the Entrance,” at the gateway to the Acropolis. Herms were similarly dedicated at the entrances of other sacred sites and temples, including several Panhellenic sanctuaries. Private herms were also popular at the entrances of households and courtyards, guarding the place where oikos meets polis, the private meets the public, just as the gateway herms guarded the boundary between Athens and the outside world. Herms were, in this sense, typically connected to the sacred place or dwelling where they stood, guarding entrances, protecting the activities taking place inside, and overseeing rituals and sacrifices to the gods.

But herms could also be attached to important events separate from the place of their erection, especially when associated with military events. An inscription found on the Acropolis, dedicating a statue (now lost) to the general Callimachus in honor of his victory in the battle of Marathon, may have come from a private herm that memorialized Callimachus' role in the Persian war (Tod; Jacoby; Raubitschek, *Dedications*; Raubitschek, “Two Monuments,” provides an alternate viewpoint). The three so-called Eion herms in the agora served a similar function, but were erected at state expense, not private initiative. They were inscribed and dedicated to the Athenian victory at Eion in the Persian war, under the general Cimon. The three inscriptions are quoted in Plutarch's *Lives* (“Cimon”). The inscription on the middle herm illustrates their rhetorical force:

> This is a token, given by Athens to her leaders  
> In payment for their service and great favors.  
> Seeing this, men of the future will more incline  
> To go to war in their country’s cause. (7.124)

The other two inscriptions similarly praise Athenian martial valor and love of battle. They pointedly do not name the generals of the battle and thus honor Athenian virtue generally rather than the bravery of specific individuals. This public monument to the victory at Eion was particularly important in the forging of an Athenian ideology, since it memorialized a shift from defensive warfare against Persian aggression to the offensive acquisition of new land and tribute-paying colonies. The victory at Eion won the first new territory for what had been a small and relatively insignificant city-state. Eion, and its Athenian triple herm, thus marked the beginning of the Athenian Empire (see Plutarch, “Cimon” 7–8; Thucydides 1.98).

The battle at Eion stood as an origin event for a Panhellenic ideology that saw Athens as the head of a Greece united victoriously against Persia and the East. The hortatory rhetoric of the Eion herm calling young men to “incline to go to war” reinforced this imperialist and Athenocentric ideology, and it singled out aggressive territorial expansion as the practical manifestation of that belief, as was the case on Melos. From very early on, then, herms were more than statues on blocks. Their
erection in particular places, and in connection with particular events, coupled with
the inscriptions they carried, gave them a rhetorical, epideictic significance that helped
to shape Athenian public, military, and religious ideology and civic pride.

Like the Eion herms, the Hipparchan inscriptions enjoined upon readers honor-
able attitudes and character traits in relation to Athens. The herms are not re-
ported to have been erected on roads between one rural village and another, only on
roads leading to Athens. The positions, historical associations, and inscriptions of
these herms communicated a political and moral message in the context both of
Athenian identity and of the god Hermes. Like the Eion and Callimachus herms,
the Hipparchan herms functioned to reinforce an Athenocentric culture through-
out Attica. Just as the Eion herm commemorated the beginnings of an Athenian
empire that connected all subject territory to its Attic center, so the Hipparchan
herms literally demarcated Athens as the political, cultural, and financial center of
all its rural demes. In all of these early cases, the herms figure Athens as the political
and moral axis of all its outlying regions, setting it apart from rival Greek cities in
the same way that Pericles does in his epideictic funeral oration (Thucydides 2.36–
47). They do so symbolically, that is rhetorically, as mnemonic icons with textual
support, declaring Athens the political and geographic center of the world. The
prolifer placement of these herms throughout Athens produced a rhetoric of ampli-
fication, magnifying this Athenocentric ideology and assuring that their message
would never be long out of mind.

Using Hermes in this statuary form to visually represent and reinforce an
Athenocentric view of Greek political life makes sense. Hermes was the herald and
messenger of Zeus and a god of communication. This function figured Hermes as
the divine patron of male enfranchisement, eloquence, and public speaking. Hermes
also oversaw and protected other sorts of exchanges and transmissions in addition to
verbal ones: transitions, travel, escort and safe conduct, trade, entrances and exits,
boundaries. For this reason, Hermes could oversee the political and financial obli-
gations tying one city-state to all its surrounding rural regions and tribute-paying
subject-states. Hermes was also a god of youthful exuberance and competition: herms
at palaestrai and gymnasia (wrestling and exercise grounds) suggest his association
with masculine beauty, prowess, and competition. And the title Hermes Hegemonios
(or Hermes of Supremacy or Empire; see Aristophanes’ Platus 1159; Osborne 53)
similarly indicates his importance to military expeditions and the wielding of power,
particularly to the expansionist policies espoused by Alcibiades and others to extend
the empire and increase its tribute money. Because the Athenian empire relied heavily
on its navy to police its colonies, collect tribute, and protect important shipping
routes, Hermes as protector of travel and communication became especially impor-
tant.2

But Hermes was also a trickster god and thief (and, with typical Greek inconsis-
tency, the protection against thievery; see the Homeric Hymn to Hermes 13–23).
From his days as an infant stealing Apollo’s cattle to his practice of “stealing” the sacrifices meant for other gods (made possible by his role as messenger between gods and humans; see Aristophanes’ *Plutus* 1111–45), Hermes embodies deception and trickery, including the trickery of the law-court. In the *Hymn to Hermes*, he acts as *rbetor*, employing an argument from probability in his own defense: “I was born but yesterday, nor am I like a cattle-lifter, a sturdy fellow” (376–77). Hermes Strophaios (twisting or turning; see Aristophanes, *Plutus* 1153; Osborne 53) metonymically connects the Hermes of entrances and exits (of swinging doors and hinges) to the shrewd Hermes that employs all the tricks and cunning intelligence (the *metis*) of the sophist, making the worse case seem the better (Detienne and Vernant 41–42). He is thus a god of rhetoric and of the Assembly, and his popularity, like rhetoric itself, has been attributed to Athenian democracy (see Furley 20; Osborne 47–73). Hermes’ connection to rhetoric and sophistry as well as to military expeditions and trade made him central to democratic Assembly deliberations, where Athenian citizens had been formulating and supporting expansionist policy since the late days of the Persian war.

Hermes represents, then, just the attitudes that Plato levels against the Assembly and its leaders, and against democracy in general: the people support speakers and policies who promise the most glory and financial gain rather than those who could improve them (*Gorgias* 517b–c; compare also pseudo-Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Athenians* 2–8 and the character Demos in Aristophanes’ *Knights*). While men like Pericles had given Athenians walls, ships, and buildings, they had not made them better people. Even Nicias’ speeches against the Sicilian expedition backfired in their attempts to dissuade the Assembly from the desire for profit and exploit. Although Nicias attempted to exaggerate the cost, risk, and necessary size of the enterprise in order to defuse the people’s eagerness to undertake it, they only fore-saw even greater opportunities for honor and profit through adventure, travel, the sale of goods for war, payment for service, booty, and the future tribute of a wealthy island, all functions traditionally in the hands of Hermes (Thucydides 6.19, 24; Plutarch, “Nicias” 12).

Thus the associations of Hermes, and his physical features, tie him just as closely to the revenue-producing political empire as to the democratic process that protected and enhanced it. Eva Keuls makes this tangible argument explicit; she sees close connections between the Athenian culture of military, imperial androcentrism (embodied by Alcibiades) and the phallic physiognomy of the herm.3

**The Mutilation of the Herms**

In 416 B.C.E., during the Peloponnesian war, waged between the Athenian empire on one side and Sparta and its allies on the other, Athens attacked the city of Melos for refusing to join its alliance.4 Though it had few material resources and no strate-
gic value, Melos was destroyed, its men killed, and its women and children sold into slavery. This victory led to even bolder aspirations on the part of the majority of Athenian citizens during the following year. With the excuse of aiding the city of Egesta, an ally of Athens on the island of Sicily, the assembly voted to send a naval force against the prosperous and powerful city of Syracuse in Sicily, a potential Spartan ally, with the aim of conquering the island. The Assembly commissioned an Athenian naval force to be led by three leading generals: the popular and militaristic Alcibiades, the cautious Nicias (who opposed the mission), and the reckless Lamachus. It would be the largest, costliest, and best-equipped fleet ever to set sail from the city. Thucydides describes the ambitious Sicilian expedition at length (Books 6 and 7), as does Plutarch in his lives of Nicias and Alcibiades. But one morning in the summer of 415, during the final preparations for the expedition, residents of Athens awoke to widespread iconoclastic vandalism. Thucydides describes the event in some detail:

While these preparations were going on it was found that in one night nearly all the stone Hermae in the city of Athens had had their faces disfigured by being cut about. These are a national institution, the well-known square-cut figures, of which there are great numbers both in the porches of private houses and in the temples. (6.27)

This widespread vandalism had an immediate effect on the citizens of Athens. If you imagine that every portrait of Stalin throughout the Soviet Union had been defaced the night before the launching of Sputnik, or that, on the night before a holy day in Vatican City, some faction beheaded or defiled every crucifix, you can begin to approximate the effect of defacing the herms throughout the city of Athens on the eve of its Sicilian campaign.

Thucydides continues his account:

No one knew who had done this, but large rewards were offered by the state in order to find out who the criminals were, and there was also a decree passed guaranteeing immunity to anyone, citizen, alien, or slave, who knew of any other sacrilegious act that had taken place and would come forward with information about it. The whole affair was taken very seriously, as it was regarded as an omen for the expedition, and at the same time as evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy to overthrow the democracy. (6.27)

Accusations came forth not about the herms, but about the profanation of the sacred Eleusinian mysteries of the “two goddesses” Demeter and Kore; people were accused of parodying rituals whose details were supposed to be known only to initiates. The recriminations from the mutilation of the herms and the associated profanation of sacred mysteries were widespread. Tensions increased and accusations multiplied, says Thucydides, so that

[a]fter the expedition had set sail, the Athenians had been just as anxious as before to investigate the facts about the mysteries and about the Hermae. Instead of checking
up on the characters of the informers, they had regarded everything they were told as grounds for suspicion, and on the evidence of complete rogues had arrested and imprisoned some of its best citizens, thinking it better to get to the bottom of things in this way rather than to let any accused person, however good his reputation might be, escape interrogation because of the bad character of the informer. (6.53)

Among those charged was Alcibiades, one of the Athenian generals in charge of the Sicilian expedition. He and others were accused of profaning the mysteries as well as defacing the herms. Alcibiades denied the charges and demanded to be tried before setting sail for Sicily, but his political opponents succeeded in delaying the trial. Alcibiades departed as public opinion against him increased. He was later recalled to stand trial but escaped on the return trip and went into hiding. He was sentenced to death in absentia and defected to Sparta, a move that played an important role in the calamitous Athenian defeat in Sicily.

Another of those accused was the orator Andocides, who was brought to trial finally in 400. In his defense speech, he describes a similar state of unrest in the city as a result of the mutilation of the herms:

The city was in such a state that every time the herald announced a council meeting, and lowered the accordingly, this was a signal both to members of council to enter the council chamber, and simultaneously for the rest to vacate the market-place, as each one of them feared arrest. (1.36)

Whatever the intent behind the mutilators, their act was powerful, prophetic, and heavily weighted with symbolic force. The widespread public nature of the desecration ensured that it would be seen and felt by the majority of Athenian townspeople, and they responded with unanimous shock and suspicion. As a result of the mutilation, morale deteriorated. Stripped of its leading general and foremost proponent, the expedition quickly lost momentum as the caution of Nicias degenerated into inaction and, ultimately, defeat. The Athenian losses in the Sicilian expedition were, says Thucydides, “total; army, navy, everything was destroyed, and, out of many, only few returned” (7.87).

My goal is not primarily to uncover the identity of the hermokopidai (the herm-choppers), nor to describe the relation of their actions to the profanation of the mysteries (for a traditional view that an oligarchic club performed the mutilations, see MacDowell, appendices C and G in his cotranslation of Andocides; Keuls 387–95 names the women of Athens). Rather, I want to examine this event as a significant moment of and model for rhetorical action in ancient Greece which, while itself rhetorical, nevertheless opposed traditional themes and forms of public persuasion. So, while we cannot say for certain which specific individual or group committed this crime, the event itself merits the attention of historians of rhetoric as one early example of feminist and pacifist “social movement” rhetoric against imperialism and militarism. It also stands as a paradigm for the nonverbal, unwritten, performative rhetoric that scholars of ancient rhetoric often overlook.
The mutilation of the herms functioned as powerful rhetoric precisely because nonverbal rhetorical action—through the performing and visual arts and sculpture, as well as through everyday styles of self-presentation—was a well-understood and important genre of persuasive artistry in ancient Athens. What’s more, this form of rhetorical activity was available to constituencies within the city who were either not willing, not able, or not permitted to speak in public: women, noncitizens, children, and slaves, along with inarticulate or disabled men. If any of these groups wished to make their presence and their views known among the voting citizen body, they generally had to do so outside the venue of public oratory. But because nonverbal performances and practices do not project well onto texts and typically remain anonymous, rhetorical theorists, then as now, have some difficulty either crediting or accounting for them.

The Hermokopidai

Much ink has been spilled debating what exactly was mutilated that evening, to say nothing of who the culprits were. Thucydides says that each herm’s prosopon, literally the “face,” was cut up, although the term can also mean “front” more generally. Plutarch uses the equally equivocal akroteriazo, which can mean “cut off the extremities” or, simply, “mutilate” (“Nicias” 13; “Alcibiades” 18). An extant herm face with a chipped nose, dating from the early fifth century, along with evidence from Thucydides, has led some commentators to conclude that the herms’ faces (not their phalluses) were literally cut up. But other evidence suggests that, in addition or instead, it was the herms’ phalluses that were broken off.

The most obvious markers of Hermes’ masculine virtues and privileges on the herm are its beard and phallus. The phallus has been singled out as particularly symbolic. Burkert suggests that the apotropaic qualities of the herm derives from its ithyphallic form. For Burkert (who borrows from the ethological study of primates) the erect phallus signifies that a group “enjoys the full protection of masculinity” and thus wards off danger and evil (40). The phallus becomes a sign of potency, erection a sign of masculine power. Harrison notes the use of similar phallic forms as apotropaic devices in ancient Italy for the protection of city gates (114). While the cutting of a phallus thus has clear rhetorical significance and force, it would be difficult to understand what symbolic value might be attached to the nose other than as euphemistic double for the phallus.

There is literary evidence for phallus-chopping also. Plutarch mentions a man leaping upon the Altar of the Twelve Gods and castrating himself in association with the events of 415 (“Nicias” 13). And in Aristophanes’ Lysistrata, as the women are conducting a sex strike to oppose the Peloponnesian war, the chorus warns a group of men onstage to cover up their huge erections, “so that the herm-choppers won’t
catch sight of you” (1093–94). They are not recommending covering the face. Keuls further mentions a vase painting depicting a maenad (a female participant in Dionysian rites) attacking the genitals of a satyr. She likens the “enacted aggression against the genitals of satyrs in the controlled setting of cultic proceedings to the castration of the phallic stone symbols, at the prompting of fear and outrage” (391). But a conclusion that the phallices were indeed vandalized does not rule out damage to the faces of the herms as well. Vandalism against these icons constituted an attack against the potency of the city, the families, and the individuals who had erected them.

The city immediately began to look for the culprits. The dominant view quickly asserted that some antidemocratic faction, possibly in allegiance to the oligarchic Sparta, “castrated” these herms to foment unrest and prepare for the overthrow of the democracy. The fact that a herm near Andocides’ home was spared led to the suspicion and arrest of him and most of his family and then, paradoxically, to their release (Andocides argues, successfully if implausibly, that one conspirator, Euphiletus, had convinced the rest that Andocides himself would smash his own family herm, which he did not do; 61–63).

Far from weakening the democracy, the scandal heightened fears of oligarchy or tyranny and increased vigilance against it. The history of Greek tyranny suggests that individual power is won through the strategic manipulation and cunning display of power and powerlessness. No oligarchy could be won without some similar public display, and one has to wonder why the oligarchs would resort to this rather crude, if powerful, act of evening vandalism rather than public speaking and all the political machinations that it made possible. If the herms affair was intended to move Athens toward oligarchy, then it failed miserably, although it did succeed in casting doubt upon the Sicilian expedition and the public leaders, especially Alcibiades.

One might argue, rather, that those most likely to oppose the expedition were those with the least to gain and the most to lose, those who could express themselves only via symbolic action. It was the women and their children, for example, who, without the ability to participate in decision making, risked slavery, rape, and death at the hands of enemies if Athens were to lose the war. It was the slaves who held the fewest political protections and were most susceptible to torture and death. These were precisely the terrors that Athenian men had visited upon the population of Melos in the year leading up to the Sicilian expedition. And it was the women of Athens that Aristophanes would later portray, in Lysistrata, Thesmophoriazusae, and Ecclesiazusae, as the champions of peace and stability against the wartime disruptions and expansionist ethos characteristic of Athenian men. Though admittedly a writer of fantastic comedy, Aristophanes’ penchant for alluding to and lampooning contemporary political events and real personages rules out the objection that his protofeminist utopias were pure fantasy.
“I can see no other explanation,” says Keuls “for Aristophanes’ sudden preoccupation with female protest than that he, and at least a part of the audience, knew or suspected that the castration of the herms had been perpetrated by women” (395). If any group could sympathize with reluctant subject colonies forced to support foreign campaigns, it was the disenfranchised constituencies within Athens itself: slaves, foreigners, and, perhaps, women. Because constituencies least able to express their sentiments through legitimate channels might be most motivated to carry out clandestine symbolic actions, we should at least entertain the possibility that such a disenfranchised group could have done it, if they can be shown to have had access to the herms on the night in question. Regardless of their identity, the herm-choppers can demonstrate to us the importance of symbolic action in ancient Greece.

The Adonia

Normally, the confined women of Athens would have gained access to so many of the herms in the city only with great difficulty. But in this case, an important women’s festival—the Adonia—gave them significantly greater freedom of movement. For anywhere from one to eight days in late summer, women traveled from house to house where, in temporary rooftop “gardens,” they joked, sang, danced, and mourned the death of Adonis before taking to the streets with their small effigies of the dead body. The women brought potted “gardens” of lettuce and other spices to their rooftops where the festivities took place. The wailing was audible throughout the city and into the night. The rooftop chants were followed by a procession through the city where the effigies of Adonis were borne and, finally, “buried” at sea. The gardens were allowed to wither and discarded as part of or after the festival.  

Adonis—beautiful, boyish, downy-faced, and reticent—stood in opposition to rapacious, conquering, masculine gods and heroes like Zeus and Theseus, both of whom functioned as foundation figures for Athenian political identity. In the myth of Adonis, the goddess Aphrodite pursues and beds a reluctant male mortal who later dies. Structurally, the myth lies in opposition to the much more common myth of the abduction and rape of females on the part of male gods and heroes, as Marcel Detienne points out. Detienne further interprets the Adonia as a countercultural ritual that parodied and symbolically overturned more formal marriage and agricultural rites, such as the Thesmophoria. The Adonia reenacts a story of female license, female power, and female participation in male self-definition.

Adonis was, says Keuls, the model for all subsequent romantic heroes, from Romeo to Rudolph Valentino to Leonardo Di Caprio. According to one form of the myth, the youthful and downy-faced Adonis was fatally wounded during a hunt by a boar whose tusk pierced his groin and mutilated his genitals. He either hid or was hidden by Aphrodite in a bed of lettuce, and/or his corpse was laid out on such a
bed.8 The supposed dissipating effects of lettuce on male potency and its rapid withering in the shallow pots each suggest in different ways the untimely castration and death of Adonis, itself represented by the small statues. Aphrodite mourns his loss, and during the Adonia, the women of Athens did also. In doing so, they celebrated sexual relations and forms of license, potency, and independence distinctly different from the aggressive phallicism of official Athenian ideology and public policy (Keuls 57–62).

Concerning that summer of 415, Plutarch recalls the unfortunate occurrence of the Adonia during Assembly proceedings:

[...] Just when the fleet was poised and ready to set sail, a number of unfortunate things happened, including the festival of Adonis, which fell at that time. All over the city the women were preparing statuettes of the god for burial in a way which loosely resembled the treatment of human corpses, and were beating their breasts, just as they would at a funeral, and chanting dirges. (“Alcibiades” 18)

In Lysistrata, Aristophanes refers to this same festival, when a male character recalls sitting at the Assembly with “that accursed Adonis ritual on the roofs” in progress. While Demostratos argued in favor of the Sicilian campaign (arguing, in fact, to formally close the debate), “his wife danced and wailed ‘Alas Adonis . . . beat your breast for Adonis,,’” interrupting the proceedings and irritating its voting members (388). It is unlikely that Aristophanes made this juxtaposition accidental: Demostratos calls for public debate on the matter to be closed just as his wife breaks into the proceedings from a nearby roof, preventing him from being heard and, in effect, prolonging the discussion. Mourning the victim of deadly violence in a ritual that overturned the ideology of masculine potency, could the women of Athens not have been thinking as well of the masculine ethos of potency that dominated the assembly and that sent sons, brothers, and husbands off to fight in foreign wars?

Both Plutarch and Aristophanes reveal the masculine distaste for the “unfortunate” and “accursed” festival and its bad timing. The Adonia was run by the women of Athens and had no established date for its observance (Winkler 193; Reed 319). It was in this and other ways unlike official state festivals, and existed “on the periphery of the official cults and public ceremonies” (Detienne 65). The Adonia was a private affair controlled by the women who celebrated it, including citizen wives, concubines (hetairai, like Aspasia) and prostitutes, slave and free. Some of these women, Demostratos’ wife among them, could have timed their celebration of this festival to coincide with and disrupt the Sicilian debate and expedition and, perhaps, to gain the freedom to take more forceful action against it.

The Adonia, then, was one of a very few opportunities for women to socialize, celebrate, and gather under their own control. Keuls calls this festival “the only form of self-expression developed by Athenian women, in response to an emotional need of their own, and not dictated by the voice of male authority” (23–24). While
other rituals, such as the official festivals of Demeter (the Thesmophoria), included the wives of Athenian citizens (but not prostitutes) as participants, even sometimes excluding men, they were state-run festivals, controlled by priests and financed by wealthy men to further the interests of, for example, Athenian agriculture and marriage. The Adonia was not secret, but it was women-run, included all women, not only wives, and perhaps expressed a bawdy and carnivalesque inversion of official, masculinist ideology.

If women could use the Adonia to express and clarify their own political interests, then the supine and “castrated” Adonis (the very figure whose miniature effigy they bore) may have taken on rhetorical force as a figuration of masculinity, sexual relations, and political ambitions inverse to the erect phallicism of the public herms. To the degree that the herms’ physiognomy connected aggressive sexual conquest with military conquest, then Adonis may have become a figure of more peaceful and egalitarian relations in the polis as well as in the oikos. Aristophanes (in Lysistrata, Thesmophoriazusae, and Ecclesiazusae) relies heavily on women protagonists to advance his arguments for peace and social reform, even if Adonis does not appear in his plays. In the Ecclesiazusae, or Assemblywomen, the women, after dressing as men to pass their own agenda through the Assembly, initiate communitarian reforms that redistribute wealth and privilege equally among all (590–614).

Just as the women of Athens may have exploited the Adonia to interrupt the Assembly, so the youthful beardlessness of Adonis, his near-castration, and his untimely death function physiognomically to signify opposition to the masculinist aggression of Athenian policy, represented by the erect and bearded herms. If someone were to knock a herm over and render it beardless (or symbolically so, by chiseling at the face) and castrated, they would, in effect, make of him an Adonis, whose own early death might argue for the abortion of a dangerous and unnecessary expedition.

**Women’s Ephemer**

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato calls upon the ephemeral and nonserious qualities of the Adonis ritual in order to draw a contrast between what is frivolous and ephemeral and what is serious and lasting. The women’s potted gardens of Adonis (raised for the Adonia) root quickly but then wither away and are discarded, while the “sensible husbandman’s” farm requires months of labor and produces tangible results. The former, argues Plato, like writing, is pursued for the sake of short-lived amusement (a women’s festival) but produces no lasting results, while dialectic, like serious husbandry, produces new seeds “in other minds [. . .] capable of continuing the process for ever” (277A). According to this Platonic metaphor, anyone invested in not seeing military expeditions “continuing forever” might find it useful to symbolically connect the ephemeral and abortive (the gardens of lettuce, the potency of Adonis) to
the ongoing Sicilian debate via the very symbol of both military might and public debate: the herms. And perhaps they could do so through writing.

Both writing and the Adonia, suggests Plato, were ephemeral and womanly, but even Plato would have to concur that war and speechifying remained for most citizens the lasting, serious work of men. If this is the case, then upon what might women write their own political sentiments, especially peaceful or egalitarian ones? If this sentiment—that the Adonia activity was, like writing, neither serious nor lasting—was not unique to Plato, then those feminized “writers” who literally inscribed their sentiments on the bodies of the herms during a women’s festival that was, though mournful, nevertheless playful and irreverent, may have used this very sentiment against its proponents. That is, the *hermokopidai* might employ the very terms of opprobrium used against the Adonia—womanly, written, ephemeral, irreverent (not to mention nocturnal)—to declare their opposition to a manly, sanctioned, but deadly rhetorical and military action by “writing” on the serious face (beard) and phallus of herms, rendering them effeminate and Adonis-like. In doing so, they would re-inscribe the icon of Athens’s serious and lasting war lust into a ludic, irreverent, and inevitably impermanent (since defaced statues would soon be repaired or replaced), though serious, bid to abort the mission and work for peace.

Even aside from the Adonia, women’s activities provided a powerful locus for countercultural or oppositional rhetoric in the general sense that most forms of cultural capital, social prestige, and political power in Athens were held by men through masculine modes of performance: public speaking, poetry, athletic games, and battle. Women’s activities were by definition restricted to private places and nocturnal times where they would be neither seen nor heard by unrelated men. Athenian men spent a great deal of time worrying about the actions and movements of their women, or at least they are reported to have done so, primarily to ensure patrimony and to uphold the name of the family or clan (Gould). In this sense, women’s public activity and availability was seen by males to be by definition dangerous, duplicitous, and an implicit threat to the social order, even as it was essential to that order. Any outdoor activities constituted a powerful locus of symbolic disorder (an understanding the women capitalized on in the Adonia) and thus the very existence of women constituted an argument for strict social control.

The place of women as oppositional was frequently portrayed in myth, not only through figures such as Helen and Clytemnestra—whose supposed infidelities contributed to the most famous of tragedies, the Trojan war and the fall of the house of Atreus, respectively—but also through the figure of Pandora, through whom Hesiod crystallized ancient Greek animosity toward women and their skills at persuasion and deception. Pandora was given golden necklaces by Persuasion, the goddess, to aid her in her treacheries (*Works and Days* 60–83). According to most measures of cultural capital, social prestige, and political power, positive ideals including elo-
quence and martial power were defined in terms of masculine traits and practices, negative ideals defined by their opposition to all that was masculine.

If the women of Athens had wanted to express their sentiments in a way that mattered, what outlet did they possess? Speaking publicly, even in courts and in cases that involved them as primary litigants, was normally not allowed and could be dangerous. The wife of Alcibiades, Hippparete, “a well-behaved and affectionate wife,” had attempted to speak in public when she appeared in court to sue her adulterous husband for divorce. But, continues Plutarch, “when she arrived in court to see to this business as the law required, Alcibiades came up, grabbed hold of her, and took her back home with him,” where she stayed “until her death, which happened a short while later” (“Alcibiades” 8). Thucydides nowhere attempts to dissuade us from the view that Alcibiades was the cause of his wife’s untimely death.

Besides, Nicias and his followers had already pursued the path of peace in the Assembly, with disastrous results. Demostratos (whose wife may have interrupted these very proceedings) had in fact succeeded in closing the debate in favor of a large expedition. Different rhetoric would be needed. It would have to be public, to be seen and taken seriously by a majority of leading citizens. It would have to be anonymous and perhaps collaborative, since no single citizen, much less any woman, could expose himself or herself to public support for a cause that even a famous general had unsuccessfully risked his reputation upon, a cause that had been closed off from further debate.

**Peitho, Iunx, and the Rhetoric of Desire**

There was in ancient Greece an alternate image of rhetorical power distinct from the public, spoken rhetoric represented by Hermes Hegemonios, a rhetoric more frequently associated with women, magic, and love. As I have mentioned, Aphrodite herself was understood to embody another type of persuasion, not the persuasion of rational, public speech, but of embodied sound and sight both public and private, an extraverbal force signified through her attendant, Peitho, and characterized in terms of desire. Hesiod describes Peitho as accompanying Aphrodite in the adornment of Pandora. She bestows upon Pandora entrancing speech with which to control men. An image by the Meidias painter shows Aphrodite and Adonis flanked by Himeros, or Desire, who spins an *iunx* (an instrument of seduction rituals; see below), and Peitho, who carries the wryneck bird, also called the *iunx*.10

The traditional (masculine) view of this aspect of persuasion described Peitho as irrational and erotically charged. This was a persuasion that subverted rational deliberation and, when wielded by women, bewitched men through the power of sex. The daughter of Peitho (or, in some versions, of Echo) was also called Iunx, a sorceress who was turned into a bird by Hera in punishment for seducing Zeus with
her charms and spells (Hornblower and Spawforth 792). Her spells are invoked in love charms, and work to reunite a lover and a beloved. In a poem of Theocritus, “The Sorceress,” the refrain that separates each incantatory couplet runs “Iunx, draw to my dwelling this man, my lover” (8-12). Iunx was also the name of the coin-sized disk held by Desire, laced with a loop of string through two holes. When set in motion by alternately tightening and relaxing the cord, it emits an airy whirring or whistling sound. The sorceress who uses the iunx seeks to provoke the same sort of enchantment that her spells are meant to achieve. Like the necklaces and adornments of Peitho in her connection with Aphrodite or Pandora, this aspect of persuasion links it quite closely to magic and seduction. But it is also possible that erotic and magical chants and instruments, like mourning songs and dirges, could be used for purposes other than those for which they are ostensibly produced or apparently employed, just as African American spirituals and work songs could double as hortatory emancipation rhetoric.

Writing, like magic, remained largely private and anonymous, and was therefore accessible to women as public speaking was not, and at least some women knew the power of writing, which could be employed to enhance the powers of magical charms. But to the degree that magical charms and writing were “womanly” they were devalued, as Plato makes clear, as a medium for manly public deliberation. Yet for women, public writing could be powerful: but not the alphabetic public inscriptions, like those on the herms, erected by the Athenian state and dedicated to its military prowess. Public inscriptions required long planning, expertise, and the sort of centralized capital that only the state and wealthy men possessed. They represented the state-supported, strategic use of writing like those on the herms, whereas the hermokopidais had to rely on the immediate, ephemeral, nonprofessional, and clandestine “tactics” of those outside the center of power.11 Still, a symbolic “writing” of and on bodies, like the “magical” bodily persuasion of Aphrodite, Peitho, and Iunx, might be effective: a nonphonetic, nonprofessional, tactical writing, an iconographic inscribing, or the chiseling of a mark or a sign, a trace of dissent, perhaps even an erasure.

The notion of writing and then mimetically manipulating a symbolic message in order to change the hearts and minds of others was common in ancient Greek culture, and is typically studied as a form of magic or ritual, like those that employed the iunx. Curse tablets seeking the affections of a beloved or the downfall of an enemy are common, as are prayers seeking beauty, eloquence, and grace. Curse tablets were commonly written on lead and then bent, buried, nailed, or trod upon in order to mimetically reinforce the action sought within the text of the tablet. Because these texts were thought to work outside the realm of direct communication (working magically or via communication to a god), they are typically thought of as instances of magical rather than rhetorical intervention. The roughly mimetic na-
ture of the herm castrations places it in part within the context of such magical, ritual writing. Burke affirms that this sort of symbolic manipulation of objects in order to produce change in the real world is a rhetoric (mis)applied when the objects addressed do not respond to symbolic manipulation (40–42). The chiseling of the herms may have borrowed from magic the private use of secret, mimetic inscription to effect change. But it did so in a way designed to become, with the light of day, public and quite real, if scandalous, epideictic persuasion.

**Opposing Rhetorical Action**

As an Athenian institution, the herm represented an Athenocentric view of Greek political life. As a god of eloquence, the assembly, and therefore the political interests of enfranchised citizens, Hermes represented sanctioned male speech. An attack on the herms could then be read not only as an antiwar protest, but as a rhetorical action in opposition to the dominant pro-war speechifying of the day, the rhetoric of Demostratos and Alcibiades. If we think of burning the flag as a form of anti-American political “speech,” and attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as including a symbolic indictment of the institutions and activities housed there (American capitalism and militarism), then we might see the herm-chopping in part as a symbolic attack against Athenian Assembly rhetoric and its characteristic ends. At its most extensive, the herm mutilations could suggest an indictment against the aggressive, manipulative, and self-serving nature of Athenian political discourse in general, and could anticipate the very criticisms voiced by both Plato and Aristophanes (see *Gorgias* 502e–519d and the contest for Demos in Aristophanes’ *Knights*, 727ff). What I will call “Hermetic” rhetoric tended, as Plato notes in the *Gorgias*, to nurture the egos of speakers and flatter audiences (503a) and to leave cities “swollen and festering,” worse off than they had been before (518e). Herm-chopping displays an orientation toward popular Athenian rhetoric not unlike that laid out decades later by Plato, despite his belief that no good work could come of the Adonia. Women by necessity and Plato by choice alike observed the results of Athenian oratory without participating or getting caught up in it, and like Plato the herm-choppers marked out the dangers of phallic excess, of an overweening desire for pleasure and power, and of too much masculine itch-scratching (see *Gorgias* 494e).

The *hermokopidai* may have employed the images and methods of a “Peithotic” rhetoric to symbolically and ritually abort (just as the Adonia mourners had interrupted) the Hermetic rhetoric of Athenian men by defacing (that is, by castrating and, perhaps, symbolically depilating) the anatomical markers of Hermes’ masculine prerogatives and privileges (chief among which was the right to address the Assembly). An attack upon the herms by chiseling upon their markers of masculinity would amount to a denunciation of Athenian assembly proceedings and their typical
pro-war outcomes, while simultaneously slandering the deity who supported and sanctioned such proceedings. It was, in this sense, what we might call an act of anti-rhetoric.

Although we have the names and the speeches of many of the men of Athens from the period, we know virtually nothing of the rhetorical practices of the women who celebrated the Adonia, just as we know virtually nothing of the rhetorical practices of Athenian slaves, noncitizens, and nonliterate men, or the many forms of symbolic expression that were not inscribed on some durable surface or attached to some proper male name. Yet it is in the nature of oppositional or protest rhetoric and of most marginalized rhetorical activity to work toward its goals without the privileges afforded by sanctioned and durable spaces, offices, titles, and names. When no officially legitimated authority or author exists to speak for a cause that nevertheless enjoys widespread support, illegitimate groups may resort to “invalid” rhetorical means anonymously or collectively, and often at great risk, to gain a hearing.

So it is possible that some women acted vigorously, if anonymously, to oppose what they and the followers of Socrates later saw as the harmful and foolhardy character of Athenian public speaking. But even if these women were not responsible, the events of that evening during the Adonia festival silently and symbolically reenacted the oppositional roles already scripted for women (and, later, for philosophical quietism) by the dominant Athenian rhetoric and ideology. The participants became, according to the practical logic of the day, feminized by acting secretly, anonymously, and at night. More important than the identity of the culprits is the event itself as a methodological lens through which to examine forms of rhetorical artistry distinct from the ancient rhetorical tradition whose textual lineage is said to begin with the Sophists and to run in a line through all the familiar authors and texts of rhetorical history. We cannot name the culprits any more that we can know the true Aspasia, but by asking different questions about means, media, access, and ends, we can yet learn a great deal about transgressive or invalid rhetorical practices in ancient Greece. We would have to place fairly tight limits on our definition of rhetoric not to consider the herm-chopping an exemplary rhetorical event, and one that can radically challenge our understanding of ancient rhetorical artistry.

Notes

1. Hipparchus may have been responsible for either initiating or regularizing the recitation of Homer by rhapsodes and for importing celebrated poets, such as Simonides and Anakreon, to Athens.

2. On the connections among trade, empire, and artistic developments, see Raaflaub.

3. Keuls’s book has been the subject of heated controversy. Bernard Knox, for example, opines that Keuls’s “wilder flights of speculative imagination [. . .] pass belief” (98).

4. Information about the affair of the herms derives primarily from Thucydides (6.27–29) and Plutarch’s Lives, “Nicias” (13) and “Alcibiades” (18–21).
5. Dover (in Gomme et al. 288) suggests that both the phalloi and the faces of the Hermai were
damaged, but notes the view of Lullies that erect phalloi had become unfashionable in the fifth century,
leaving only faces to damage on some statues.

6. The story of Pisistratus’ three separate attempts to take control of Athens are recounted in
Herodotus 1.59–64. In each case, he employed cunning public displays before the people to win their
trust and gain power.

7. Lettuce was believed to destroy the potency of men and to be the “food of corpses” (Detienne
68). Its use in the Adonia suggests that within the context of the festival and its rituals, women wielded
the potency.

8. On the Adonis myth, its variants, and its interpretation, see Detienne 60–71 and the introduc-
tion by Vernant. Alternate views to Detienne's structuralist interpretation can be found in Winkler 188–
209; Stelle, “Sappho's Gaze”; and Reed.

9. On the beard and the phallus as indicators of masculine virtue and martial vigor, see Gleason 70
and chapter 3. Gleason draws heavily on both Quintilian (Book 11) and the pseudo-Aristotelian
Physiognomics.

10. The mottled coloring, the talon positioning (two forward and two back), and the complete neck
rotation of the iunx or wryneck give it the characteristics of a range of animals (including the octopus)
associated with metis, or cunning intelligence, a quality of verbal trickery and “sophistry.”

11. De Certeau discusses the relationship between strategy and tactics. By “strategy” he means
the activities pursued by centers of power, while “tactics” refers to the shifting and opportune use of bor-
rowed resources by the powerless.

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