

“Demosthenes and the Great man in ‘Against Conon’”
By Donald Frye

Against Conon is a forensic, prosecution speech commission by a young, upper-class Athenian named Ariston written by Demosthenes during the fourth century for Ariston’s prosecution of Conon for *aikia*- a private suit for assault. Ariston brought this charge after Conon and his sons brutally attacked and beat Ariston, nearly killing him.

One of the most striking arguments that Demosthenes uses in order to sway the jury in this case is his portrayal of the character of each man and how their character manifests itself in action. Demosthenes contrasts these two men sharply: Conon as a hubristic villain, Ariston as a self-controlled man. These descriptions all serve the purpose of persuading the jury that Conon’s testimony is a lie and that Ariston is telling the truth because, according to Demosthenes, a man’s character shows whether or not a man can be trusted, for only a man with good character speaks honestly (54.38). Therefore, Demosthenes emphasizes that Conon is dishonorable and that Ariston is honorable, so that the jury will only believe Ariston’s testimony.

In this paper, I am going to analyze different examples of Demosthenes’ attacks on Conon and praise of Ariston with the goal of understanding what cultural norms he exploits. These cultural norms can be used to define the Great Man in fourth century Athens as well as to provide a basic understanding of the fourth century concept of the relationship between character and action.

Demosthenes depicts Conon as a *ponēros*, which was a common word for a rogue or villain in Greece (54.24). Demosthenes justifies the label because of Conon’s extreme *hubris*. Throughout *Against Conon*, he describes Conon’s actions as hubristic, a word which, according to Joshua Ober, can be adequately translated as “insolent outrage.”¹ Demosthenes describes

¹ Ober, Joshua, *The Athenian Revolution*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 95.

Conon's actions as hubristic because doing so appealed to the jury's biases. According to Ober, Demosthenes had to conform his arguments to:

“The ideological context determined by an audience representing a cross-section of the mature (over thirty) citizen male population of Athens- overwhelmingly men who were not members of a social elite.”²

These nonelites would not be concerned with settling aristocratic disputes, but they would wish to settle matters concerning the hubris of the elites, because they considered the elite's hubris a threat to the security of the *polis*, and thus, their freedom.³ Demosthenes understands this bias, and so he counters Conon's arguments that the case is only a foolish brawl between young elites by placing his primary focus on Conon's hubris. Such a strategy gains the sympathies of the jury, and thus increases Demosthenes' chances of winning the case.

Yet in Demosthenes' focus upon Conon's hubris, he purposefully chooses not to focus on Ariston's aristocratic virtue in order to garner the support of the nonelites. Even though describing the speaker's liturgical services to the *polis* as an example of the man's good was a standard forensic trope, Demosthenes only employs it once in the conclusion (54.44).⁴ While this trope did appeal to the aristocratic members of the jury, it would alienate Ariston from the nonelites who were most likely jealous of Ariston's wealth which allowed him to complete liturgical services. Demosthenes therefore follows up this statement by saying:

“Even if it were indeed our lot to be by common consent regarded as more useless and more base than Conon, we are not, I suppose, to be beaten or hubridized.” (54.44)

According to Jon Hesk, Demosthenes is here arguing that Ariston deserves justice not because of his great services to the state but because of the extremity of Conon's hubris. Because the nonelites of Athens feared the hubris of the elite, they deeply sympathized with any person who

² Ibid, 92.

³ Ibid, 92.

⁴ Hesk, Jon, “Despisers of the Commonplace: Meta-Topoi and Para-Topoi in Attic Oratory,” *Rhetorica* (Vol. 25, No.4, 2007), 381.

suffered hubris from the elite, whether he was the poorest or the richest citizen in Athens. Thus, by deemphasizing Ariston's hubris, Demosthenes successfully allies Ariston with the nonelites.

Demosthenes also uses Conon's immorality to attack his character. Throughout the speech, Demosthenes describes Conon as a man who:

“Pretend[s] to play the Spartan by day, and wear short cloaks and single-soled shoes, but when [he] get[s] together [with his friends], they leave no form of wickedness or indecency untried.” (54.34)

At this time, many upper-class Athenians had begun to imitate Spartan severity in their lives in order to protest the decay of morals they saw occurring in their city.⁵ Apparently, Conon had joined this movement, consistently emulating the Spartans in both dress and morals (54.34). But in actuality, his severity was merely an act to cover up his radical lifestyle of wickedness, which is evil beyond belief. While Demosthenes never substantiates these accusations, these attacks achieve two purposes- positioning Conon as an enemy of the nonelites and demonstrating that Conon lacks any self-control.

Regardless of the exact date of the speech, it is safe to assume that the Spartans were not at all popular with the nonelites in the jury, for the Spartans had devastated Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Here Demosthenes effectively sets the nonelites against Conon, for his presentation of Conon as a sympathizer with Athens' enemies who threaten Athenian democracy means that he must also be a threat to the freedom of the nonelites, and thus their enemy.

In addition, this accusation shows that Conon lacks any self-control. While he may pretend to be a moderate man by day, he actually spends his nights participating in all sorts of “reckless malignity, villainy, impudence and hubris” that is so great that Ariston is “unable to

⁵ Demosthenes, *Demosthenes*, Trans. Witt, Norman J. D., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), notes on section 34.

find out all who have suffered from [him]” (54.37). These sorts of descriptions present Conon as lacking any self-restraint in his actions, for he does whatsoever his foolish heart desires.

This attack also provides a window into the common Athenian understanding of moderation and its relationship with morality. Here, Demosthenes is probably presenting a caricature of Conon’s lifestyle as the embodiment of immorality rather than truly describing his lifestyle. But in this caricature, the reason that he is such an awful man is because he leaves “no wickedness or indecency untried-” in other words, he never practices moderation (54.34).

In characterizing such a man as a villain, it is clear that Demosthenes is exploiting the Athenian cultural norm that immoral men always live without moderation. Even though the majority of the accusations that he levies against Conon concern actions that were not illegal, the vileness of these actions is a result of Conon living his life without restraint. The understanding of morality that this statement reflects is that an action is not counted as evil because an action itself is wrong, but because the motivation behind an action lacks self-control. That is not to say that for the Athenians some actions were considered immoral regardless of the circumstances; rather, the Athenians were not legalistic in their morality. For them, an action was usually wrong solely because of why a person performed the action.

In addition to a man’s self-control, another mark of an honorable man is his piety towards the gods. Within forensic speeches, it was common practice for a litigant to take an oath that his testimony was valid. This oath would hold validity in the eyes of the jury because the gods themselves were the enforcers of the oath. Unfortunately, this practice required that the oath-taker was pious, for an impious man would have no motivation to keep an oath.

Demosthenes thus presents Conon as impious in order to undermine his testimony. He pursues this goal by sharing a rumor about Conon- that he spent much of his adolescence with a

group of young men who called themselves “Triballi.” Together, these adolescents spent their time doing all sorts of impious acts, such as cussing and stealing the sacrifices to the goddess Hecate (54.38). Demosthenes then adds to this story that Conon plans to bring his sons before the court and swear a fearsome oath before the court because he has no fear of divine retribution (54.38). All of these actions demonstrate his extreme impiety and his “contempt...which he feels for all sacred things” (54.39). According to Demosthenes, this sort of man is not to be believed because his impiety allows him to do whatever he pleases.

Demosthenes contrasts Conon’s impiety with Ariston’s piety primarily through describing Ariston’s contempt for Conon’s impiety. Unlike Conon, Ariston does not make a scene by swearing a rash oath before the jury. Instead, he takes a prudent, reverent oath to validate his testimony (54.40). This action is the only interaction between Ariston and the gods which Demosthenes describes, for Demosthenes uses Ariston’s contempt for Conon’s impiety as the primary marker of Ariston’s piety. Most likely, Demosthenes employs this strategy to focus the attention on Conon’s impiety, for his impiety makes him both an enemy to the security of the *polis* as well as completely untrustworthy- facts which effectively demonize Conon more than Ariston’s piety does.

Demosthenes also presents Ariston as self-controlled in order to show that he is trustworthy. One of the most striking descriptions of Ariston’s self-restraint is the description of Ariston’s reaction to his first encounter with Conon’s sons. Immediately after describing Ariston’s first bout with Conon’s sons, Demosthenes states that Ariston returned home with the natural feelings of “*orgē* and *exthrē*” against Conon’s sons (54.6). These two words are commonly used within Greek literature, with *orgē* referring to a natural inclination or urge, in this case anger, and *exthrē* referring to hatred or enmity. By using these words, Demosthenes

concedes that both Ariston and Conon's sons would be feeling hatred against one another, but uses their different reactions to these emotions to differentiate Conon and his sons as immoral and Ariston as self-controlled. Despite his anger, Ariston decided to stay away from Conon and his sons, in order that further conflicts might be avoided. While this reaction is counter to his anger, it is a result of his self-restraint, for it keeps him from further danger.

Demosthenes further emphasizes Ariston's self-control through Ariston's submission to the laws of Athens. Throughout his conflict with Conon, Ariston consistently submit to the city's laws rather than being controlled by his emotions for vengeance. For example, after it is clear that he and his friends would not persuade Conon's sons to stop attacking his servants while on garrison duty, Ariston goes straight to his commanding officer, the enforcer of the laws in the military camp, in order to stop the foolishness (54.4). In the same way, after recovering from his beating at the hands of Conon and his sons in Athens, Ariston does not seek to start a blood feud with Conon, but he instead goes to the courts to get the vengeance and justice which he desires. While these actions are in search of vengeance, they are always within the means provided by the law, and are so by nature self-restrained and tempered.

Demosthenes justifies this course of action midway through his speech when he describes the role of the laws in Athenian society. After describing how the law punishes different crimes in different ways, Demosthenes concludes that the reason Athens has laws is because:

“In the law [a] penalty should be provided for each [act], and that the decision should not be left to the passion (*orgē*) or the will (*bouleis*) of the person concerned.” (54.19)

According to Gabriel Herman, Demosthenes is here stating that that the laws exist to keep untempered passion, or *orgē*, from determining people's reactions through the penalties exacted

by the laws.⁶ Such laws are necessary to enforce moderation within society, for they keep the *polis* from being torn about by people's pursuit of vengeance. Demosthenes uses this argument to justify Ariston's submission to the law because it demonstrates his character as a self-restrained person. Rather than simply being controlled by his passions, he rules himself through his moderation, and is thus a better and more trustworthy man than Conon.

Through this analysis of *Against Conon*, certain statements can be made about the Athenian definition of a Great Man. A Great Man, according to Demosthenes, is a friend of the nonelites regardless of his class. He does not embrace the reckless immorality of the elites but supports the *polis* by submitting to its laws and its gods while also honoring all men and avoiding hubris. Overall, his most important attribute which enables him to fulfill each of these other parts of his character is his moderation, which keeps him from the destruction which comes from embracing extremes.

This Great Athenian Man provides a window into the Athenian understanding of the relationship between character and action. Throughout the case, Demosthenes compares Ariston and Conon with the character of a Great Man because the Athenians believed that a man's character defines how he will act. However, Demosthenes avoids stating whether character is caused by nature or by habit, for if character was by habit, he could not use examples from Conon's childhood to argue that Conon is immoral. Therefore, one can safely conclude from this speech that fourth century Athenians considered the character of a man to define his actions and that a man's actions could be used to understand his character. Whether or not his character could change over time would require further study of different works from fourth century Athens, but it is safe to conclude that they viewed character as defining action.

⁶ Herman, Gabriel, *Morality and Behaviour in Democratic Athens*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 199.

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