



HARVARD  
Department of the Classics

The Greeks at Gettysburg: An  
Analysis of Pericles' Epitaphios Logos  
as a Model for Abraham Lincoln's  
Gettysburg Address

By Hannah Szapary, Brown University

Persephone: The Harvard Undergraduate Classics Journal  
Vol. 2, Spring 2017 p. 2-4

# The Greeks at Gettysburg: An Analysis of Pericles' Epitaphios Logos as a Model for Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

Hannah Szapary  
Brown University

Many people view the key documents in presidential history as being purely American, and while this is true in some respects, they often overlook the influence that the Western canon has had on them. The impact is not always obvious because the content of these American documents often sets a precedent, but subtle links to the Greco-Roman writing style can have a large effect on the message a president sends to his audience or reader. With its structural incorporation of remarks on *prognoi* and *arete*, that is, restraint in expression and use of antitheses, Pericles' *epitaphios logos* serves as a model for Abraham Lincoln, allowing him to utilize his *Gettysburg Address* as a means to convey the paramount importance of the Declaration of Independence and its principle of universal equality.

Though his address is shorter than that of the typical Greek genre, Lincoln manages to link his speech to Pericles' *epitaphios logos* by composing his message with a compressed but similar structure. He begins by writing a sort of *epainesis*, a praise of the dead that includes some of the same major themes found in the funeral oration of Pericles, chiefly the deceased men's descendants and their excellence. The *epainesis* of Pericles begins with a comment on *prognoi*, a tribute to the relatives of the fallen:

I make the ancestors my opening theme, since it is right, it is appropriate here, to pay them memory's tribute. They, who dwelt nowhere but here, passed this land down to us, generation by generation, kept free by their valor (Pericles, 19-20).

The choice to place these sentences before everything else does seem "right" and "appropriate," as Pericles believes it. When he depicts the ancestors of the fallen as noble and brave first, having fought for the freedom of the land, the deaths of the men seem more heroic later in the oration: they are now put in the context of a longer and greater battle to maintain the land's liberty.

Lincoln also touches on the descendants of the Civil War soldiers, with the opening "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Here, the noble ancestors are not the writers of the Constitution, but of the Declaration of Independence, and the men become soldiers having fought on behalf of this document. By following the starting structure of the *epitaphios logos*, Lincoln uses the opportunity to underscore the notion of the Declaration's supremacy.

The *epainesis* in Pericles' oration continues with a remark on *arete*, that is, the excellence of the dead in battle:

But the valor of these men and their peers gave the city her beauty... The death of these, in my judgment, revealed the courage of some at their first encounter, or conformed the others' established record (Pericles, 21).

He extolls the courage of these men, in keeping with the conventions of the *epainesis*, but also extends praise to Athens, the city of "beauty" and the reason for the soldiers' deaths. Therefore,

the words of the *epitaphios logos* shape the funeral oration into a celebration of the men who have died as well as the cause of their fight. Though his address is shorter, Lincoln includes a statement on *arete* when he describes the fallen at Gettysburg as those “who here gave their lives that that nation might live.” When he indicates the bravery of the soldiers by their willingness to give away their lives, he, in the method used by Pericles, also values their cause, as he implies that it is worth thousands of casualties. The phrase “that nation” reminds the listener or reader of the beginning of the address: this nation is the one founded on the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution, as Lincoln proposes earlier. He is therefore able to reinforce this point by following the Greek *epitaphios logos* structure to give the *arete* a dual purpose.

Pericles displays some restraint in his oration, another key component of the *epitaphios logos*, when he avoids individualizing the dead men and the citizenry of Athens, his addressee:

Such was the city these men fought for, rather than lose to others; and shall we, their survivors, not take up the labor (Pericles, 21)?

He makes no specifications about the soldiers, calling them “these men,” and uses the plural “we” when speaking to everyone else. The change from the third to the first person with the same use of generalizing pronouns is sudden and dramatic. By forming a sharp distinction between just two groups, the dead and the living, Pericles emphasizes that the surviving citizens must continue to fight for their city. In addition, the pronoun “we” is inclusive and links the audience with Pericles, adding more passion to his message.

In a similar way, Lincoln chooses to make no specifications regarding those who have died at Gettysburg and those who are mourning them:

It is for the living, rather, to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us... (Pericles, 22).

Again, a shift from the third person “they” to the first plural “us” is evident, forging a clear connection between the fallen and survivors who must still be dedicated to their cause. In this case, the “unfinished work” is described earlier in the address as the principle of equality outlined in the Declaration. Thus, the divide creates a call to action that prioritizes the Declaration as the document that must be protected in order to save the country. By bringing the listeners into his oration and connecting himself with them, Lincoln presents his opinion of the Declaration’s supremacy with greater vehemence.

A final hallmark of the *epitaphios logos* is the use of antithesis, in particular that between the mortal and immortal. Pericles refers to the way these two interact in the following sentences:

In a joint offering of their bodies [the men] won their several rewards of ageless praise... their glory is laid up imperishable, recallable at any need for remembrance or example... Strive then, with these, convinced that happiness lies in freedom (Pericles, 22).

Here, the mortal and immortal interlock on the battlefield: though the men are killed, their glory remains “imperishable”; Pericles implies that the path to immortality lies in the death of those dedicated to the protection of the city’s freedom. This statement would appeal to any audience and gain followers for his cause because by nature humans long for an everlasting legacy.

Through this connection of the two opposites, Pericles can convince his listeners that liberty is of the utmost importance to the survival of Athens and its people.

Lincoln uses the same technique in his writing, constructing a relationship between the mortal and immortal in his final exclamation:

...these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

He illustrates that through the death of soldiers, the government, rather than the men themselves, will attain immortality. This is a different message than Pericles'; Lincoln does not appeal to the human desire for glory, but nevertheless tries to accomplish the same goal. The phrase "of the people, by the people, for the people" refers to the idea that Lincoln believes the government is founded on the Declaration. By this reference, he asserts that the government's survival depends on the fight for the protection of the document's core principle of equality.

Through the addition of remarks on *prognoi* and *arete*, his restraint in expression and inclusion of antitheses, Abraham Lincoln uses Pericles' *epitaphios logos* as a model to illustrate the supremacy of the Declaration of Independence and its value of unanimous equality in his *Gettysburg Address*. Perhaps most interesting is the effect this kind of analysis has on a reader of presidential documents: after conducting one close reading of the address with the Greek *epitaphios logos* in mind, numerous links between the two become evident, as well as connections with speeches of other presidents. Recognizing that many presidents draw from the Western cannon makes Lincoln all the more special, because he did not have the education in the Classics that others in his office had. His genius is unparalleled, and a look at his work through the Greco-Roman lens can only confirm this.