

# **The Making of a Statesman: Demosthenes' *Philippics* and the Education of James Madison**

**By Madeleine Brown**

Demosthenes, Athenian statesman and orator, served both as a political statesman in fourth century BCE Athens and as a powerful figure in eighteenth-century rhetorical education. In the 350s BCE, Demosthenes became alarmed at the Athenians' lack of response to Philip of Macedon's conquests and delivered four speeches – the *Philippics* – prodding them to action against Philip. Philip had strengthened the Macedonian army and Demosthenes was concerned about the freedom of Athens. His *Philippics* have been carefully examined by students of rhetoric ever since, especially in the universities of the eighteenth century American colonies. The *Third Philippic* is particularly notable for its rhetorical strength, in contrast to the *Fourth Philippic*, which is marked by a desperate tone and stronger language. The *Third Philippic* would have had an impact – rhetorically, politically and emotionally – on a young man attending a university like Princeton in the eighteenth century.

James Madison, a Founding Father and the architect of the Constitution, was raised in Virginia and received an education at Princeton University where the classics were an integral part of his education. Madison, a student of oratory, would have learned much from the rhetorical strength and style of Demosthenes' *Third Philippic*. Demosthenes' goal in this speech is to goad the Athenians into action. He repeats the same refrain: chastising the Athenians for specific faults, and then reminding them that they can turn around the present situation for the good of the state before it is too late. A young man like Madison may have been reminded of

Odysseus' speech to Agamemnon's troops in Book Two of the *Iliad*, another work he was sure to have read. Odysseus relies on the same technique: alternating chastisement and encouragement to recall recalcitrant men back to military service and the battles involved in the long Trojan War.

Demosthenes pointedly reminds the Athenians of the values they hold dear, and explains how their lack of reaction to Philip reflects a diminishment of those values. Athenians cherish freedom of speech, even affording it to foreigners and slaves. Why, then, is the threat posed by Philip absent from political rhetoric? This silent taboo is destroying the Athenian freedom of speech and will ultimately harm the institution of democracy itself because no one has been brave enough to challenge Philip even in speech. Demosthenes also points out the Athenians' love of peace, now conflated with weakness and manifesting in inaction and indifference. If Athenians continue on this slothful path and do not fight now, they will have no choice but to fight later, destroying the peace they hold so dear. Demosthenes suggests that the Athenians channel their love of peace to fight immediately to secure a longer, more stable peace in the future. Demosthenes' emphasis on the core values of Athenian society must have stirred an eighteenth-century college student in the Colonies. Such a student at Princeton would have been surrounded by anti-British sentiment and would have understood the Colonies to have a different set of values from the British, emphasizing freedom above all else.

Another related rhetorical device used by Demosthenes is moralizing. He makes much of his hatred of bribery and avarice, a sentiment that was probably shared by an eighteenth-century student of rhetoric, and identifies and elevates the value of courage with the effect of inspiring the Athenians' – and no doubt the student's – disgust in the face of rampant corruption. Knowing that Athenian society holds piety and morality dear, Demosthenes denounces Philip not only for his political machinations, but also for his disregard

for Greek morals. Philip does not fight in the normal Greek way, preferring to operate with distrust and trickery. Even the hated Spartans, traditional enemies of Athens, fight with honor. Philip has also been marching through Greece, overtaking *poleis* and establishing tyrannies. Demosthenes carefully emphasizes this fate, which Athens is sure to share if its citizens remain inactive.

Demosthenes' *Third Philippic* would also have political influence on a young man studying at Princeton in the eighteenth century. Demosthenes highlights the inefficiencies of the Athenian government, providing James Madison – architect of the American republic – with a vivid example of the perils of pure democracy. Demosthenes expresses frustration with Athenian democracy, and hints at Philip's plans to take advantage of the inefficiencies of such a chaotic system. The Athenians' intentions seem to be in the right place at times, but the wheels of democracy have to be set in motion, and then grind slowly, before anything constructive ensues. A representative democracy instead of a direct one might have struck Madison as more effective.

An eighteenth-century student of politics might also have learned about recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of an enemy. Demosthenes maintains that the Athenians cannot fight Philip in the same way they would fight the Spartans. Philip utilizes trickery rather than raw military might. Such an approach would have struck a chord with a young revolutionary of the eighteenth century. The American colonists had already fought wars on their land and were intimately familiar with the territory and the tactics needed there. The British tendency to do the opposite – fight on American soil like they fought everywhere else – contributed to their heavy losses.

Possibly the most important political lesson derived from the *Third Philippic* is that of unity. Demosthenes recognizes that it would be impossible to implement his suggestions without a unified Athens, and even calls for a

Panhellenic alliance. He asserts, though, that an internally unified Athens is most important, a theme important to a student of politics in the Colonies at the tumultuous end of the eighteenth century. Aware that he could be part of a new national narrative after a potential break with the British, he would have been struck by this call for cohesiveness.

The *Third Philippic* would also have had an emotional impact on the young Princeton student of the eighteenth century. Demosthenes' constant references to the tyranny of Philip would have been familiar and moving to such a young man, educated in an environment hostile to the British tyranny. A young student of rhetoric and politics might also have felt uplifted by the notion of victory through hard work, and learning from and overcoming challenges, a theme reflected in Scripture (e.g. the Joseph narrative) and prevalent moral literature of the day.

Demosthenes' definition of patriotism would have especially resounded with a young man who, like Madison, was studying in a society with a high level of dissatisfaction with the government. Demosthenes maintains that love of one's country is not enough. The true patriot must understand his country, recognize its deficiencies and not be afraid to point them out for the good of all.

The young Madison might also have learned a lesson in caution and moderation. He would admire Demosthenes' passion and power of persuasion, but would have borne in mind the fact that without a strong backing, Demosthenes was on his own against the Macedonians. Although the *Third Philippic* was successful in driving the Athenians to action, Demosthenes became unpopular and later was exiled by the Athenians. Athens ultimately fell to Macedonia, and Demosthenes was forced by Antipater to commit suicide.

There is a key difference between the audience Demosthenes was addressing and the audience a young Colonial revolutionary would have addressed: Demosthenes was dealing with an undecided nation, while a young

revolutionary would have to direct pre-existing anti-British sentiment to the right course of action. There had already been violent skirmishes between colonists and the British army; the Boston Massacre, after all, occurred in 1770. The Founding Fathers and American revolutionaries might have known that there was great strength in the sort of unity Demosthenes begged from his audience but ultimately did not achieve. Perhaps this is why James Madison and the Founding Fathers, learning a lesson from Demosthenes, succeeded where Demosthenes and the Athenians failed.

**Note:** This paper was originally written for Professor J. J. Mulhern's Fall 2012 section of CLST 370: The Classics and American Government.