

A NOTE ON NARRATIVE STYLE

THE PRIMARY actors in Thucydides are not individuals but cities, and it seemed advisable for stylistic reasons to avoid unnecessary repetition of their names, whether in nominative, possessive, or adjectival form. Yet to describe a previously mentioned city as “it” and to employ “its” as its possessive form also poses problems, as the city then has to coexist with so many other matters with which it shares these pronouns that the reader cannot possibly assign each “it” to its respective referent. I have therefore availed myself of the traditional practice (inherited from Greek, Latin, and the Romance languages) of ascribing to cities the feminine gender. This permits a given city to glide neatly through a lengthy paragraph strewn with “hims” and “its,” without repetition of the city’s name and without the reader being left in doubt concerning the referent of any pronoun.

The gender of the city in the languages from which English has borrowed this usage is a matter of grammar rather than of sex (a distinction which English speakers with their overwhelmingly neuter language may not at first grasp): while spoons are of feminine gender in French, no Francophone thinks of them as female; while they are of masculine gender in German, no German speaker thinks of them as male. Similarly there is no reason to think that the Greek *polis* (etymologically akin to other Indo-European words the meaning of which is “fortress”) or the Latin *urbs* (the etymology of which is probably “bounded area”) originally expressed any sense of the femaleness of cities. It is true of course that the feminine *gender* of a sexless being suggests the possibility of the figurative or poetic ascription of feminine *characteristics* to that being. I, however, am not a poet. Readers should not suppose that in employing the same grammatical gender for both cities and women I mean to ascribe to the former any characteristics of the latter.

