

The Affair of the Mysteries: Democracy and the Drinking Group

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ALCIBIADES. Bring larger cups. This shall be our gayest revel. It is probably the last—for some of us at least.

(Macaulay, *Scenes from 'Athenian Revels'* (1824) (*Works*, xi (1898), 240))

The events of the summer of 415 BC in Athens affected the lives of many individuals for the next twenty years; and, in the larger political view, they can be held to have been ultimately responsible for the fall of the Athenian empire, in that they opened up a fatal breach of mistrust in Athenian political life, between the *demos* and its traditional aristocratic leaders. This revelation of the potential existence of a true class struggle in Athens led directly to the defensive oligarchic reaction of 411 BC, and to that *trahison des clercs* which moulded intellectual attitudes to the Athenian democracy from the end of the fifth century onwards.¹

These events are also important in that they were the only occasion on which the Athenian democracy established what became in effect an official commission of inquiry into the activities of sympotic groups; for, though the board of *zetetai* was initially set up and rewards offered for information about the mutilation of the *hermai*, 'it was also voted that anyone who knew of any other act of impiety (*ἀσέβημα*) which had been committed should come and give information without fear of consequences, whether he were citizen, alien, or slave' (Thuc. 6. 27. 2).² In this chapter I shall not be concerned with whether the truth was discovered in these investigations, but with the social and individual responses provoked, with the range of behaviour that people were prepared to admit to, or invent, or believe of others. The facts, as Thucydides says, were 'neither then nor later established for certain' (60. 2);³ but the depositions, the confessions, and the later justifications survive, to enable us to recreate a mental climate as revealing of social attitudes as the documents from Montaigne.

The fundamental potential for opposition between drinking group and democracy is clear. However much the fifth-century democracy might try to provide public dining-

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¹ Forrest (1975).

² For the *zetetai*, see Andokides 1. 14, 36, 40, with MacDowell's notes.

³ For modern attempts to establish the truth that Thucydides could not discover, see esp. MacDowell (1962); Dover (1970); Marr (1971); Aurenche (1974); Hansen (1975).

rooms and public occasions for feasting, the *symposion* remained largely a private and aristocratic preserve; but the social attitudes which it existed to promote required public display. This was provided by the *komos*, the ritual drunken riot at the end of the *symposion*, performed in public with the intention of demonstrating the power and lawlessness of the drinking group.⁴ This relationship between aristocratic social custom and public display of misbehaviour is well illustrated in the famous scene in Aristophanes' *Wasps*, when the converted man of the people, Philokleon, attempts to follow the aristocratic life-style of his sophisticated son.⁵ The first thing he must learn is how to recline at *symposia*:

BDELYKLEON. Come and lie down, and learn how to be a symposiast and a socialite.

PHILOKLEON. How do I lie then? Come on, tell me.

BDELYKLEON. Elegantly.

PHILOKLEON. You want me to lie like this?

BDELYKLEON. Oh *no*.

PHILOKLEON. How then?

BDELYKLEON. Straighten your knees and pour yourself over the cushions, limply and athletically. Then praise one of the bronzes, inspect the ceiling, admire the hangings in the hall.

(*Wasps*, 1208–15)

Philokleon ends, of course, by successfully imitating the wildest sympotic behaviour, and returns home in a traditional *komos*, completely drunk with a stolen flute-girl, pursued by outraged ordinary citizens claiming damages for assault. In this comic amalgam of typical sympotic offences we see that, to the fifth-century Athenian audience, the *symposion* is an alien world of licence and misbehaviour, far removed from the decorous religious or philosophical group envisaged by Xenophanes.⁶

The political importance of the *hetaireia* has often been discussed;⁷ and I would myself argue that we can trace a line of descent, perhaps from the Homeric poems, and certainly from the activities of the *synmotai* of Alcaeus and the aristocratic factions of sixth-century Athens, through to the late fifth-century political and aristocratic groups, which, somewhat ineffectually under normal circumstances, tried to maintain an influence in the world of mass democracy.⁸ The tolerance of the *demos* for these groups is perhaps a remarkable example of that principle 'the right to live as one pleases' (ζῆν ὡς βούλεται τις) which Athenians prided themselves upon; but, until 415 BC, they can scarcely have seemed to present a serious threat to the stability of the democracy.

Moreover, the *demos* did not perhaps regard the *hetaireiai* as necessarily hostile, and did not perhaps always identify drinking group with *hetaireia*. *Symposia* were not in themselves political; indeed they are connected with politics only in the sense that the *hetaireia* begins from the drinking group, and is based on relations formed in the *symposion*. Or to put it a different way, even the *hetaireia* or the *synmosia* spent most of its time engaged in sympotic activities, and it was out of these that its political actions 'in

law cases and contests for office' (ἐν δίκαις καὶ ἀρχαῖς, Thuc. 8. 54. 4) emerged. Plato put it best, when he described philosophers as not being interested in public life; they do not know the way to the *agora* or where the *dikasterion* or *bouleuterion* are, they are ignorant of the laws; 'the enthusiasms of *hetaireiai* for office and their meetings and their feasts and their revels with flute-girls do not enter even into their dreams' (*Theaetetus*, 173 D). The *hetaireia* is as much concerned with *deipna*, *komoi*, and *auletrides* as it is with *archai*.

To begin with the mutilation of the *hermai*, the inquiry was originally set up because 'the episode was thought to be an omen for the expedition and to have been done as part of a collaboration [*synmosia*] for revolution and the overthrow of the *demos*' (Thuc. 6. 27. 3; cf. 61. 1). On the other hand the tactics employed, of damaging religious statues late at night, were typical of the behaviour of the drinking groups: indeed the first depositions had revealed 'earlier damage to other statues committed by young men in sport and under the influence of drink' (28. 2)—the word *agalmata* implies that these statues too were religious, and it would hardly have been worth making the allegations if they had not been.

Not surprisingly, the first deposition to the *boule* that offered tangible evidence, that of Diokleides, built on and fulfilled these expectations (Andok. 1. 37 ff.). He claimed to have seen, late at night, some three hundred men in the orchestra of the theatre of Dionysos, 'standing about in groups of five or ten and some of them up to twenty'. He recognized the faces of the majority by the light of the moon.⁹ His delay in offering evidence was, he claimed, due to the fact that he had been attempting to blackmail the family of Andokides—an interesting sidelight into the accepted Athenian priorities between profit and public duty. When this attempt failed, Diokleides gave in a preliminary list of the names of forty-two individuals, thirteen among whom belonged to the *anchisteia* of Andokides (Andok. 1. 47, 68).

This account establishes the bridge from aristocratic drunken sacrilege to revolution, by alleging that the mutilation was the work of a group of *hetaireiai*, a wider *synmosia*: that is why Diokleides describes the three hundred as standing around in groups of five or ten or twenty. It has a prophetic plausibility, since it was precisely such a *synmosia* of *hetaireiai* which organised the street murders four years later, and set up the oligarchy of the Four Hundred: 'Peisandros went around the *synmosiai* already existing in the city for lawsuits and elections, urging them to come together and plan together to overthrow the *demos*' (Thuc. 8. 54. 4; cf. 48. 2). Diokleides' account contains one implausibility, however, which perhaps demonstrates his lack of understanding of the character of the *hetaireiai*. An ordinary Athenian might well assume that any group would consist in the first instance of a man's close relatives, his *anchisteis*; but our evidence from the events of 415 BC shows that this is not in fact so: the *hetaireiai* and drinking groups in general are not definable strictly in terms of kinship; age, community of interest, social status, and wealth are at least as important.¹⁰

⁴ See Pellizer, ch. 12 below; Fisher (1988b); Murray (1988).

⁵ On this scene, see esp. Vetta (1983); Cooper and Morris, ch. 4 above.

⁶ Fr. B1 W.

⁷ See especially Calhoun (1913); also Hatzfeld (1951); Sartori (1957); Connor (1971); Aurenche (1974); Hansen (1987), 79–81.

⁸ See Murray (1983a).

⁹ It was in fact a moonless night: compare Diod. Sic. 13. 2. 4, which seems to refer to the same episode, and Plut. *Alc.* 20.

¹⁰ See Calhoun (1913), 27–9; in a more diffuse sense kinship is of course important: see Aurenche (1974), part II; cf. *annexe* 1, 191–2.

So a preliminary identification of presumably three or four groups which names thirteen members of the same family is implausible, because it is based on the *anchisteia*, not the *hetaireia*. Still, the story of Diokleides is in other respects very satisfying; it is a pity that he admitted it was false, and had therefore to be executed (Andok. 1. 65–6).

This account, however false, may be characterized as an external account, a description by someone not himself a member of sympotic circles, based on a popular view of the nature of those circles and their behaviour. According to such a view, they are organized in small groups on a kinship basis, they can combine together, and their activities when serious and sober are the same as their activities when drunk. Particularly interesting is the detailed and circumstantial account of Diokleides' attempts at blackmail (Andok. 1. 39–42), which is offered, without apparent shame, as an adequate reason for the delay in denouncing the culprits; again, it gives the impression of a story composed by an outsider, envisaging the patronizing attitudes of his social betters when faced with an obstreperous informer. For this reason, rather than on the basis of Diokleides' self-admitted unreliability, we might be inclined to exonerate Alkibiades of Phegous and Amiantos of Aegina from his accusation that they put him up to the story, if by that it is implied that they invented its details. One at least of these two, whatever reason he may have had to seek the ruin of Andokides, belonged to the same social class as him, and would have invented a quite different sort of story.¹¹

Andokides' own version of the events is such a story, an internal account by one who moved in sympotic circles. It is perhaps thoroughly unsatisfactory; yet it was, ultimately, believed by the state, at least in broad outline, and he stuck to it for the next twenty years: in prison and under pressure from his relatives, he confessed to having belonged to the drinking group that had perpetrated the deed, though he himself had of course argued against it, and had in addition been incapable of taking part in it, because he was in bed with a broken collar-bone and a fractured skull: he had not laid information before because of threats from other members of the group. It was singularly fortunate that eighteen of the twenty-two men he denounced had already been named by an earlier informer, Teukros (1. 35), and were either dead or in exile (52), while the remaining four managed to escape into exile and survive (68). It is strange too that in Andokides' account we hear only of names given by Teukros, and not of Teukros' full story—what had *he* said about the mechanisms and motivations of the event? Stranger still that Teukros had missed that well-known member of the *hetaireia*, Andokides himself. It is not at all clear, in fact, how Andokides managed to convince the investigators that this was a genuine *hetaireia*, or whether they believed his implausible story that he himself had not taken part (since he had been granted immunity for turning informer, the question of his guilt was strictly immaterial). Andokides must have convinced them on two further points, how twenty-two men

could physically have done as much damage in a single night as had earlier been attributed to three hundred, and what the purpose of it all was.

The limited plausibility of Andokides' story to the modern observer is caused in fact by his representation of the event as precisely no more than a typical aristocratic evening out, an act 'committed by young men in sport and under the influence of drink'.¹² On one occasion he does indeed suggest the possibility of a more serious purpose, when he claims that Euphiletos had proposed the escapade as a pledge, a *pistis* (67); but he never explains what it was a pledge for. In 411 BC the Samian and Athenian oligarchs had murdered Hyperbolos and committed other crimes as a *pistis* for their future political collaboration (Thuc. 8. 73. 3); at first sight, the mutilation of the *hermai* would seem too well organized and too serious a *pistis* for ordinary activities: Busolt, indeed, conjectured that it too was a preparation for oligarchic revolution.¹³ But that is certainly not what Andokides said, and his account was believed. The version in the speech *On the Mysteries* is corroborated by that which Andokides gave closer to the time, in the speech *On his Return*,¹⁴ here he talks of 'my own youthfulness and folly, or the influence of others which persuaded me into such a piece of madness' (*De Red.* 7). There is nothing political in this admission.

The absence of any explanation of the purpose and the mechanics of the episode, and the curious fact that no one suffered as a result of Andokides' confession, are perhaps the reasons why Thucydides thought his story just as likely to be false as true (6. 60); what is surprising is that it was accepted by the investigators. Perhaps it was not therefore so implausible that a drinking group might commit widespread sacrilegious damage solely for the sake of an unmotivated *pistis*. Certainly the importance of the ties of loyalty in the *hetaireia* and the means of cementing them are well attested, not least in the manner in which Andokides had to defend himself at length against the accusation that he had betrayed his *hetairoi*; he talks of 'the most terrible misfortune of all' (1. 51), the choice between his *hetairoi* on the one hand, and, on the other, his family and his city. Earlier, he had defended himself by describing the choice as between 'the two greatest evils of all', betraying his friends and being responsible for his father's death (*De Red.* 7): the crime of betraying a *hetairos* was equal to parricide. The creation of such ties of loyalty might well involve sacrilege solely for the sake of a *pistis*: this possibility illuminates one aspect of the Affair of the Mysteries.

Profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries could not be excused by drunkenness; not even Dionysos would take away the wits of his devotees so as to make them commit that particular sacrilege, even if he had been intent on destroying them. The whole episode has not, I think, been taken seriously enough. We must remember three important facts.

Firstly, there was evidence that the Mysteries had been profaned more than once,

¹¹ Alkibiades of Phegous was a cousin and fellow exile of Alkibiades (Xen. *Hell.* 1. 2. 13); it is possible that this part of the story may reflect some real or imagined

conflict between 'the group of Alkibiades' and 'the group of Leogoras'; but the actual claim of Diokleides is unlikely to be true, despite Hatzfeld (1951), 194.

¹² As Dover (1970), 286, puts it, 'no more than an unusually grandiose and spectacular piece of vandalism of a kind which appeals to some people at a certain stage of drunkenness'. On the inadequacy of such an interpretation, see Osborne (1985).

¹³ Busolt (1904), 1290 n. 3.

¹⁴ Probably composed under the restored democracy in 409 or 408 BC.

and by different groups: we hear definitely in fact of five separate groups involved, and the evidence suggests that this may well not be a full tally of all the denunciations, let alone of all the occasions when such conduct may have escaped detection.¹⁵ The first of these known profanations was that revealed so dramatically in the assembly by Pythonikos, when he offered to produce the evidence of a non-initiate that Alkibiades had celebrated the Mysteries in a private house; the evidence was produced by Andromachos, slave of Archebiades, and the place was the house of the metic Poulytion: Alkibiades and nine others (excluding Poulytion) were implicated (Andok. 1. 11–14). Then another metic, Teukros, withdrew to Megara, and offered to make a denunciation in return for immunity: he provided the names of twelve men including himself, none of them identical with Andromachos' group (15). Thirdly, Agariste, wife of Alkmeonides (and clearly a member of the Alkmeonid family),¹⁶ denounced Alkibiades, Axiochos, and Adeimantos for celebrating the Mysteries in the house of Charmides (16): presumably these were the three celebrants, and others unnamed were also present—though how Agariste, as a respectable woman, had gained knowledge of what went on in the *andron* of a house not even her own, and therefore how much she actually knew, are interesting questions. Fourthly, Lydos, a slave of Pherekles of Themakos, laid information about a celebration at his master's house (17–18). Perhaps for his own reasons, Andokides does not give a full list of the participants; but his account mentions three others, one of whom was Andokides' father, 'who was asleep with his head under a cloak'. Once again, this group contains no overlap with the others. Finally, the deposition against Alkibiades preserved in chapter 22 of Plutarch's *Life* mentions a celebration in Alkibiades' own house, involving as celebrants Alkibiades, Poulytion, and Theodoros: this is clearly a different occasion from that in Poulytion's house, where the celebrants were Alkibiades, 'Nikiades' (that is, Nikides), and Meletos.¹⁷

We therefore have five separate, known occasions on which the Mysteries were performed: there appear to have been more. It is true that Andokides claims that his list of four denunciations is complete (1. 25), but his enumeration is a list only of formal denunciations, leading to full proceedings, and is not entirely above suspicion, since it is clearly designed to lead up to the occasion when his father was allegedly present, and to deny that he himself had ever made an accusation against anyone; and, for whatever reason, his list omits the most important deposition of all, that in Plutarch's *Life*.

Moreover, Alkibiades appears in three of these celebrations; otherwise (with the ambiguous exception of Poulytion, who appears once as householder and once as

participant) there is no common membership between the groups, and only slight overlap with those accused of mutilating the *hermai*: out of sixty-eight names, only four people are known to have been involved in both episodes;¹⁸ that this is not a result of chance is demonstrated by the fact that there is no overlap between Teukros' two lists of twelve profaners and eighteen mutilators (Andok. 1. 15, 35). The evidence is firm, in the sense that it is documentary. It may of course be false: the similarities in the depositions are perhaps due to their survival through the medium of the legal formula; but we can still suspect that element of repetitiveness found, for example, in the denunciation of witches. Whatever the truth, it was clearly believed (and Andokides does not dispute it) that the Mysteries had been profaned on a number of different occasions, in what were evidently symptomatic situations.

Secondly, we must consider the character of the profanation. There is no evidence whatsoever that the Mysteries were parodied: all our evidence shows that they were *performed*, that the ritual was followed accurately. Nowhere is there any suggestion, as a possible defence, that the occasions were jokes or ritually unreal in any way, that the Mysteries were not actually divulged—the performances were illegal, sacrilegious, and immoral, but not unreal. Thus, in Pythonikos' denunciation, the three chief celebrants were named as *τοὺς ποιοῦντας* (12), and the concrete evidence was that the slave informer, who was not an initiate, could describe the Mysteries to the assembly, which had previously been cleared of non-initiates. The speech in the Lysianic corpus against Andokides describes what he is alleged to have done: 'this man put on a robe, imitating the holy rites, he revealed to the uninitiated and spoke with his voice the Mysteries themselves (*τὰ ἀπόρρητα*)' (Lysias 6. 51).¹⁹ The deposition against Alkibiades is equally explicit:

Thessalos son of Kimon of the deme of Lakiadai accuses Alkibiades son of Kleinias of the deme of Skambonidai of committing an offence against the gods Demeter and Kore, by representing the Mysteries [the verb is *ἀπομιμούμενον*, 'express by imitation, copy, or represent faithfully' according to LSJ], revealing them to his *hetairoi* in his own house, wearing such a robe as the hierophant wears when he shows the holy objects, and calling himself *hierophantes*, Poulytion *dadouchos*, and Theodoros of the deme of Phegaia *keryx*, calling his own *hetairoi* *mystai*, contrary to the laws and the customs established by the Eumolpidae and the Kerykes and the priests of Eleusis. (Plut. *Alc.* 22)

On other occasions the evidence is less explicit, but the phrase is *μυστήρια ποιεῖν* or *μυστήρια γίνεσθαι*.²⁰ We may therefore reject as inadequate the view of K. J. Dover, 'parody of the mysteries at a private entertainment could no doubt be exceedingly funny; and no more need be said on the question whether, or why, the mysteries were

¹⁵ M. H. Hansen has pointed out to me that the participle *ποιοῦντα* in Andok. 1. 11 is present, not aorist, implying repeated action: Pythonikos was at least alleging that Alkibiades was guilty of profanation on more than the occasion denounced. Euphiletos is in the *poietai* accounts as condemned *περὶ ἀμφοτέρω* (IG¹ 426. 78, 430. 13), though Andok. 1. 35 mentions him only in relation to the *hermai*; he may be among those denounced by Lydos, or he may be involved in yet another occasion. Isoc. 16. 7 perhaps refers to the same second denunciation

of Alkibiades as Plut. *Alc.* 22 (n. 17 below), rather than to further denunciations, as Hansen (1975), 77 n. 12, believes.

¹⁶ Davies (1971), 382 f. ¹⁷ This decree is clearly authentic, and probably from Krateros' collection; its relation to the original accusation of Alkibiades has been convincingly explained by Hansen (1975), 75 n. 10: since the Athenians had promised to postpone a trial on the first charge till Alkibiades' return from Sicily, a new denunciation was required to reopen the case in his absence.

¹⁸ The count is based on Aurenche (1974), *annexe II*; the four certain individuals involved in both episodes are Euphiletos, Meletos, Pherekles, and Theodoros. Aurenche would add Leogoras and Panaitios: the first was accused in relation to both affairs, but exonerated from both; the second may well involve a confusion between two homonyms (see MacDowell (1962), 72, versus Aurenche (1974), 107; the question is not solved by the new

evidence published by Camp (1974), 319–21).

¹⁹ The authenticity of this speech can of course be questioned: see Dover (1968), 78 f., 194; Marr (1971), 334 n. 1. If it is a later composition, it still presupposes that the offence consisted in full performance, rather than parody.

²⁰ Andok. 1. 12, 16, 17; Isoc. 16. 6; cf. Plut. *Alc.* 19. 1: *μυστηρίων παρ' ὁδὸν ἀπομιμήσεις*.

parodied'.²¹ This was intentional and deliberate sacrilege, which involved an accurate portrayal of the Mysteries themselves, not parody: Thucydides says it was done ἐφ' ὕβρει, and that does not mean simply 'as a joke'.²²

Thirdly, we may ask, in what did the sacrilege consist? There seem to be two elements, one which would apply to any religious act performed under those circumstances, and one which is special to the Mysteries. Firstly, the ritual was performed in the wrong place and by the wrong people: it was not in accordance with 'the laws and the customs established by the Eumolpidae and the Kerykes and the priests of Eleusis'. But much more seriously, it also involved revealing the Mysteries (by which I mean the ultimate ritual words and objects which were the tangible centre of the cult) to people who were not initiates.²³ It is this which was so shocking in the accusation laid by Pythonikos and in his presentation of the evidence; and it is this which is central to the emotional appeal of the Lysianic speech *Against Andokides*. Both these aspects constituted sacrilege; for, if it had been only the second, someone might have claimed that all present were in fact initiates; but it was the second which made the offence inextinguishable. We should remember that in all the proceedings involved in the investigation, including the trial of Andokides in 399 BC, non-initiates were excluded from assembly, board of inquiry, and jury.²⁴ It was a deeply symbolic act when Alkibiades chose to seal his triumphal return to Athens by celebrating again with the whole people the Eleusinian Mysteries, delaying a necessary military campaign in order to demonstrate that he had not been guilty of the alleged offence. Even so, the ritual curse of the priests had to be revoked.²⁵ Again, the enemies of Andokides clearly relied on the religious sentiment of the Athenian people to accept that the decree of Isotimides passed in 415 BC, prohibiting all who had admitted sacrilege from entering temples or the Athenian Agora, had not been annulled by any later amnesty;²⁶ they presumably claimed to have left him alone on his return to Athens until he appeared at the *Eleusinian Mysteries*,²⁷ and they allegedly tried to strengthen their case by making him guilty, yet again, of sacrilege during the Mysteries, claiming that he had laid a

²¹ Dover (1970), 283. Cf. MacDowell (1962), app. N, which argues that three of those present at the profanations may be identical with three known comic poets: 'Of all kinds of person, who is more likely to enjoy a mock-ceremony than a comic dramatist?' But he admits that his 'arguments do not amount to proof'; and, even if comic poets were present on these occasions, the explanation may be quite different: see n. 35 below.

²² MacDowell (1976); Fisher (1976), (1979). As W. J. Slater reminds me, ὕβρις and its cognates can of course be used in contexts involving humour or laughter, but they retain an edge inconsistent with light-hearted parody: they involve insulting, scoffing, or jeering at the person or institution concerned, which can itself be seen as a sign of disrespect or disbelief: cf. Lysias fr. 6 Gernet-Bizos, καταγελώντες τῶν θεῶν; Plato, *Symp.* 175 E, ὕβριος ἐλ, ἐφη, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὁ Ἀγάθων. Similarly, psychologists would note that laughter and fear are closely connected. I do not therefore wish to deny that these occasions may have produced mockery or laughter of a certain kind, to

be analyzed below; but they were not intended primarily to be funny.

²³ The closest description of these is in the famous passage of Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 2. 18: 'I fasted, I drank the potion, I took from the chest, I performed the actions, and put into the basket, and from the basket into the chest.'

²⁴ Andok. 1. 12 (assembly), 28 (*dikasterion* for reward of informers), 29 (jurors of 399 BC).

²⁵ Lewis (1966), 177 f.; for the curse, see Plut. *Alc.* 22, 33. In the case of the *hermai*, it seems that Timanthes was pardoned about 408 BC, for *IG* i³. 106. 21-3 orders the treasurers of Athena to remove his name from the *stelai* on the Akropolis.

²⁶ Andok. 1. 71; Lysias 6. 9, 24; see the interesting discussion of MacDowell (1962), app. 1, on the legal validity of this argument.

²⁷ Andok. 1. 111; cf. Andokides' counter at 132 that he had been frequenting the Mysteries for 3 years since his return without being accused of sacrilege.

suppliant's branch on the altar in the very Eleusinion where the records of the confiscations of sixteen years earlier were on display.²⁸ For the ordinary Athenian, no amount of political amnesties could reverse the religious curses laid on those who had profaned the Mysteries.

We cannot, therefore, seek to explain these acts as part of the normal entertainment of a *symposion*. Religious ritual had its place in the *symposion*, but only the ritual appropriate to it; divine epiphanies could be represented in a light-hearted way, as in Xenophon's *Symposium*, which ends with an enactment of the meeting of Dionysos and Ariadne so realistically performed that (somewhat implausibly) all the guests hurry home to make love to their wives, or to regret their celibacy in lonely beds.²⁹ The profanations of the Mysteries involved the deliberate performance of religious ritual outside its proper context, and such acts were acts of a wholly different nature.

Some lesser examples do, however, show that sacrilege found a small place in certain types of *symposion*. A fragment of Lysias accuses Kinesias of belonging to a group who deliberately dined together on days of ill omen, 'in order to show their lack of reverence for gods and men', calling themselves *Kakodaimonistai* instead of *Noumenistai*: the name, as Calhoun saw, is a deliberate reference to religious groups who worshipped the *agathos daimon* at their *symposia*.³⁰ Sacrilege is surely implied by the choice of such occasions and such a name; if the scholia are to be believed, Aristophanes accuses Kinesias of defecating at shrines of Hekate, presumably during the *komos*.³¹ In our most revealing source for the less reputable side of sympotic behaviour, the Demosthenic speech against Konon (54) for drunken assault, it is suggested that 'there are many people in the city, sons of gentlemen, who in jest like young men have given themselves nicknames such as *Ithyphalloi* [the Erections] and *Autolekythoi* [the Wankers], and who often come to blows over *hetairai*': the plaintiff suggests that these groups practise unspeakable forms of sexual initiation (14, 16-17); the language is curiously religious. In youth, Konon is alleged to have belonged to a group called *Triballoi*, who would steal and eat the portions of victims which had been used for purifications and laid out at shrines of Hekate, and who would also collect for consumption at their private feasts the pigs' testicles from the assembly sacrifices (39). This was an aristocratic group, for Konon and his friends are described as 'having sour looks by day and practising the Spartan style, wearing short cloaks and single-soled shoes' (34): sophisticated laconizing goes together with the sacrilege of eating the portions reserved for the gods. None of these activities is as shocking to the Athenian mind as that of revealing the Mysteries; but they do suggest that the multiple profanations of the Mysteries attested were not completely isolated phenomena; like the mutilation of the *hermai*, they belong to a recognized style of aristocratic behaviour.

Political explanations can of course (if we wish) be suggested for the mutilation of the *hermai*; but the profanations of the Mysteries and these other acts cannot be regarded as directly political. They could perhaps be used for political purposes, to

²⁸ Andok. 1. 109-16; Lewis (1966), 178.

²⁹ Xen. *Symp.* 9.

³⁰ Lysias fr. 73 Thalheim = 5 Gernet-Bizos = Athen.

12. 551 D; Calhoun (1913), 32.

³¹ Schol. *Frogs*, 366; cf. *Ecl.* 330: see Maas (1921), 479-81.

reinforce an oath, a *horkion*, by means of a *pistis* of a criminal or sacrilegious nature. And in the atmosphere of 415 BC, acts that may have had quite other motives became a *pistis* through the pressure of events. The *pistis* itself requires further exploration as a social phenomenon:³² it belongs to that desire to differentiate the members of the group from the rest of the community by a proof, a test; it is a means of creating trust, based (as Pellizer says)³³ on mistrust. It is also competitive, agonistic, and therefore prone to go beyond the limits of the permissible. At that point the *pistis* becomes an act of *hybris*, a challenge to the values of the wider community.³⁴

But basically such acts are not done for a political purpose; they are done in Thucydides' words, ἐφ' ὑβρεῖ, through contempt for the gods and for the ordinary conventions of society; they demonstrate 'an undemocratic contempt for the laws', an οὐ δημοτικὴ παρανομία (Thuc. 6. 28. 2). Yet they were never intended to become public knowledge. The evidence of drinking groups such as the modern officers' mess shows how such situations are prone to result in a form of group bravado. But again sacrilege is a special case, and brings in a different dimension: it can exist only in a society which believes in God, and within a group which is not entirely sure that it does not itself believe. It is a defiant gesture directed towards God as much as man, daring Him to punish and half expecting Him to do so. Hence Andokides can prove his innocence by the fact that he has sailed the seas with impunity for many years (1. 137-9); and Kinesias can illustrate the opposite point: he is the only one left of his group, afflicted with a special disease to show how much the gods hate him (Lysias fr. 5); while, of Konon's friends, one has been executed and another has gone blind (Dem. 54. 39).

In our own age such acts cannot exist except in the existentialist sense of the free act, like the unmotivated murder on the beach at the start of Camus's *L'Étranger*. The Eighteenth century understood better the purpose of sacrilege: there too it was an intrinsic part of the life-style of certain groups of aristocrats. The exploits of the Medmenham Monks on the site of Medmenham Abbey were notorious; the same types as at Athens were attracted, young aristocrats, the sons of bishops, radicals, free-thinkers, and satirists,³⁵ relieving the boredom of the Whig Supremacy with a little Satanism. A particular episode reveals the limitations of their rationalism: panic broke out at one Black Mass when the future radical politician John Wilkes let loose a baboon dressed as the Devil.³⁶ Wilkes indeed suffered the same fate as Alkibiades; for he was driven into exile in 1763, not only as a result of his political activities but also by a denunciation for obscene libel before the House of Lords, for having printed (apparently for private circulation among his friends) a parody of Pope's *Essay on Man* entitled *Essay on Woman*, with obscene notes attributed to the famous Bishop Warburton, respected literary critic and Bishop of Gloucester: his leading denouncer was the Earl of Sandwich, himself a former member of the Medmenham Monks; and

³² These comments owe much to discussion with P. J. Warrell.

³³ p. 183 below.

³⁴ Cf. Fisher (1988b); Murray (1988).

³⁵ Is this not the context in which to place any comic poets whom we may detect at such occasions (see Mac-

Dowell (1962), app. N)? Satire and irreverence are milder forms of the disregard for social norms, whose ultimate expression is sacrilege.

³⁶ See the article on Wilkes in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 243.

we may note that the book itself was not, in fact, written by Wilkes, but by the son of a former Archbishop of Canterbury.³⁷ The House of Lords described the work as 'a most scandalous, obscene, and impious libel; a gross profanation of many parts of the Holy Scriptures; and a most wicked and blasphemous attempt to ridicule and vilify the person of our blessed Saviour'.³⁸ Here too, extremist politics and the club mentality were combined with a desire to live dangerously, and a contempt for religious conventions was engendered by rationalism;³⁹ Athenians were indeed right to see the influence of the Sophists behind the contempt for morality displayed by the *hetaireiai* of the age of Alkibiades.

The aristocratic clubs of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England offer many parallels with the dissident *hetaireiai* of Classical Athens: the combination of secret political activity, extempore poetry, sexual licence, and exhibitionism under the influence of alcohol attracted many young Cavaliers and Tories in successive generations under Commonwealth and Restoration, and into the Hanoverian age: 'good cheer, especially good liquor, is the very life and support of Jacobitism in this kingdom'.⁴⁰ Like the *hetaireia*, the club was a defence against a hostile world, an alternative way of life defined by its refusal to accept the values of conventional society. Thus political clubs of both papists and Puritans are found, and of many political persuasions; but they share the general characteristic of being organs of opposition to the prevailing government. Yet despite such political connections the clubs remained primarily social and cultural institutions: 'the great London clubs of the eighteenth century were even more an expression of an aristocratic sense of caste, and of a gambling mania, than of a desire for political organisation'.⁴¹ As at Athens, random street violence and other forms of antisocial behaviour were often a natural outcome of such varied tensions—for instance the notorious Mohocks, who terrorized London in 1712.⁴²

The final verdict on this phenomenon belongs to Alexander Pope. In the generation before Wilkes, Philip Wharton, at the age of nineteen, was the subject of 'certainly the most extraordinary creation of an English Dukedom on record'⁴³ by George I, having previously solicited a dukedom from the Old Pretender; he was a devotee of the secret society, being both Grand Master of the Freemasons and founder of the notorious Hell-Fire Club, which the king prohibited by royal edict in 1721. Yet even Wharton is described as 'subject to ague fits of superstition in the intervals of blasphemy and libertinage'.⁴⁴ His career embraced support for both the Hanoverian and the Jacobite cause, and the son of a famous Presbyterian dynasty ended as a Catholic; indicted for high treason in the House of Lords and outlawed after fighting on the Spanish side at

³⁷ Thomas Potter: see the entry in *DNB*.

³⁸ Quoted by Clark (1985), 309 f.

³⁹ For the wider significance of this style of life see Rudé (1962); Clark (1985), 309-11; and esp. Brewer (1976), ch. 9, 'Personality, Propaganda and Ritual: Wilkes and the Wilkites'; these offer many observations relevant to the political style of Alkibiades.

⁴⁰ Edward Bentham, *A Letter to a Fellow of a College* (London, 1749), 53, quoted by Clark (1985), 142.

⁴¹ Clark (1985), 108.

⁴² See Allen (1933), esp. 105-24 for clubs involved in violence and sacrilege. I thank Dr T. J. Raylor, editor of the reprint of *Musarum Deliciae* (1655) and *Wit Restored* (1658) (New York, 1985) and author of *The Achievement of Sir John Mennes and Dr. James Smith*, diss. (Oxford, 1986), for learned and lively discussion of these connections.

⁴³ In the words quoted by the *DNB* s.v., p. 1321.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 1323.

the siege of Gibraltar in 1727, his personal vices were so notorious as to be unacceptable to 'the Italian gravity'; he was driven from the Pretender's court in Rome, to die a penniless monk in a Catalonian monastery at the age of thirty-three. Implicit in Pope's description of him three years later is the parallel with Alkibiades; like Alkibiades, he was:

Wharton, the scorn and wonder of our days,
Whose ruling Passion was the Lust of Praise;
Born with whate'er could win it from the Wise,
Women and Fools must like him or he dies;
Tho' wond'ring Senates hung on all he spoke,
The club must hail him master of the joke.

Ask you why Wharton broke thro' ev'ry rule?
'Twas all for fear the Knaves should call him Fool.

(*Epistle to Cobham* (1734), 180 ff.)

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