Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue as Historical Tragedy
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The Melian Dialogue, which takes place between the Athenian generals and magistrates from the island of Melos at the end of Book V of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War, remains a pivotal, and often puzzling, section of the text. It is a pivotal passage because the dialogue elucidates themes of power, hubris, and the limitations of rational discourse. It is, however, puzzling; even after a century (and in my case, a summer) of scholarship, critics are not sure that Thucydides, who died before finishing his history, meant to leave the dialogue in the form that it remained: unvarnished speech.

However, I strongly believe, after a summer of reading Greek tragedians and modern critics, that Thucydides intended the Melian Dialogue as a passage of tragic import; once the Athenians laid out their uncompromising terms to the Melians (to surrender or be destroyed), they planted the seeds of their own destruction.

The project this summer—to learn how the Melian Dialogue reflects Thucydides’ tragic worldview and literary ambitions—involved close reading from two places. The first place, critical scholarship, provided many different outlets for ideas. Some scholars, such as W. Robert Connor, approached the book as a cohesive whole; in short, he argued that Thucydides, far from writing the austere, detached prose generally associated with him, wrote a powerfully engaging work for an intelligent audience. Others, like Simon Hornblower, focused on thematic essays, while still others focused on individual persons in the book. In fine, the question—how to approach Thucydides—has no definite answer; I hope to utilize a combination of the three.

I found a second, crucial place, too: the tragedians. The ancient Greek playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides dramatized Greek mythology in order to highlight human suffering and to discuss morality, an issue that was as complex in their time as it is in ours. They offer the literary backdrop and themes for Thucydides’ history; inevitably, influences and comparisons must be made and found.

This summer provided me the opportunity to look at the broad modes of tragedy, history, and literary criticism as it pertains to this singular author. I hope this upcoming school year to look even deeper into what makes tragedy the powerful mode of expression it was (and still is), and why Thucydides chose his history as the site for this discussion.

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