

## Historical Lessons in the Melian Episode

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Thucydides calls attention to the Melian episode (5.84–116) by its unique form: it presents the only dialogue in the *History*. In addition, we find a rhetorical dispute in which the goal of each side is to convince not a third party but the other speakers.<sup>1</sup> This paper will argue that in addition to these unusual features, a third aspect—both unusual and insufficiently noted—is that both sides' arguments offer the type of instruction that is parallel to that offered by Thucydides to his reader. By considering the experience the reader has gained from the earlier books of the *History*, we are able to uncover and appreciate the lessons of history relevant to this confrontation. The Athenians attempt to teach the Melians what the reader has already learned in the *History*: that, in spite of the usual appeals found in diplomatic discourse, cities base their decisions on expediency. For their part, in seeking to persuade Athens to allow them to remain neutral, the Melians must be able to refer to both past action and future possibility. Although the Athenians say such discussion is out of bounds, here, too, the reader appreciates the importance of what the Melians try to do, for a second lesson of the *History* is that statesmen must consider the past and speculate about the future. By setting what the Athenians and the Melians say and do in the broader context of Thucydides' *History* and applying the lessons of the first five books, the reader is in a position adequately to evaluate argument and action.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides' employment of a novel format helps to drive home the lessons that the reader is expected to have learned from considering the *History* as a whole. In essence, the Athenian-Melian exchange has become a kind of test case for the reader, asking how much the reader has learned by the end of five books.

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<sup>1</sup>In the first set of speeches, the Corinthians and Corcyreans attempt to persuade the Athenians; later the Thebans and Plataeans argue before the Spartans; individuals, such as Cleon and Diodotus, work to persuade the Athenian assembly.

<sup>2</sup>As Meiggs 345 remarks: "Thucydides' treatment of the Melian episode cannot be satisfactorily judged in isolation."

Much of scholarly opinion concerning this conflict suggests that the reader must make a choice. The Melians may be seen as victims, as de Romilly argues:

The choice is obvious, as far as sympathy is concerned. The Melians are presented as having a very vivid sense of their independence (100); they act justly (104) and courageously (113): all these features are compliments for Thucydides when he can apply them to Athens. Similarly, he takes care to secure the reader's sympathy for the Melians by frequently recalling the cruel situation in which they are placed, and the fact that they have right on their side.<sup>3</sup>

Alternatively, the Athenians, if amoral, may still be thought of as merciful in their search to avoid bloodshed. Bosworth goes so far as to label this approach of the Athenians "humanitarian." Rather than simply overpowering the small city, he contends, Athens gives the Melians the opportunity to save themselves:

Harsh as [the Athenians'] language undoubtedly is...it has a humanitarian end, to convince the Melian oligarchs of the need to capitulate and save themselves and the commons the horrors of a siege. If they acted sensibly, there would be no bloodshed, or even damage to property.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>de Romilly (1963: 290). Andrewes states (*HCT* IV: 168): "Thucydides' presentation has the effect of weighting the sympathies of most readers in favour of the Melians."

<sup>4</sup>Bosworth 33. Andrewes remarks (*HCT* IV: 185) that in contrast with other massacres (Torone 5.3, Scione 5.32), here the Athenians are giving the Melians a choice of "peaceful surrender instead of useless resistance." The Athenians' decision to talk things over first with the Melians rather than simply attack must be seen as humanitarian in a qualified sense, as Bosworth 43 acknowledges: "Humanitarian it certainly is in the limited sense that it is designed to force the Melians to accept the most advantageous terms from Athens and avoid bloodshed." Bruell 16 believes that the policy of Athens "is indeed compatible with, and to some extent conducive to, a remarkable gentleness." de Ste. Croix 14 argues: "the whole purpose of the Athenians is to persuade the Melians that they would be well advised to surrender, because resistance would be futile. It would be a bad mistake to say that Thucydides is 'on the side of the Melians' in any sense. The fact that they are being foolishly over-optimistic is made very clear by the Athenians." Connor (1984: 151) comments: "there is virtually no overt sympathy for the Melians." Cartwright 221 says that "the victims...were given the opportunity to save themselves from destruction. They rejected it, and the significance of this episode for Thucydides lies in part in the thinking behind this decision." Here Athenian action and rhetoric are consistent, as noted by *HCT* IV: 179–80: "There is almost a sincerity in this appeal to the Melians to 'behave sensibly,' to give up an opposition which can do them no good, and surrender." Stahl 165 describes the Athenians as "almost imploring" (*fast beschwörend*)

This problem of interpretation arises from the authorial reticence of Thucydides, who withholds judgment and commentary. Thucydides omits any explicit judgment about the prudence or morality of Melos or Athens. Never in his own voice does Thucydides call the Athenians evil or clever, nor does he ever label the Melians foolish or brave.<sup>5</sup> This reticence, of course, is almost universal throughout the *History*: as Westlake notes, Thucydides seldom renders an explicit judgment of individuals or their decisions.<sup>6</sup> In the end, each side fails to persuade the other; neither Athens nor Melos wins the argument. One effect of the dialogue form and the lack of rhetorical resolution is that a balance is created between the Melians and the Athenians. I endorse Wasserman's assessment from fifty years ago:

Thucydides uses the form of the dialogue to make his readers listen to the arguments from both sides. Both his Athenians and his Melians so convincingly advance their points that either side has been taken mistakenly as his mouthpiece, while in reality both parties are intended to be seen together to give the complete picture.<sup>7</sup>

The failure of either side to convince the other reflects both strengths and weaknesses in each side's arguments. Only a retrospective reading of the dialogue will allow us, as readers, accurately to assess each side's arguments and the reasons for the Melians' and Athenians' failure to persuade one another.<sup>8</sup>

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the Melians. For examples of miscalculating the likelihood of surrender in the twentieth century, see Chuter. Even de Romilly (1963: 291) acknowledges that "from a rational and political point of view, one fact stands out immediately: the Melians were wrong to resist."

<sup>5</sup>Thucydides refuses to tell the reader why Athens attacks Melos at this particular time or whether the Melians have done anything to provoke it. Amit 217 points out that Thucydides omits the "entirely Athenian debate in the Assembly" to determine the manner of punishment after the city is taken, and, we could add, he also omits the debate in the assembly which originally sent the expedition. On Thucydides' omissions, see Herter 316–19, Andrewes 2, Stahl 170, and notes 73 and 74 below.

<sup>6</sup>Westlake 5.

<sup>7</sup>Wasserman 27.

<sup>8</sup>I find myself very much in agreement with Wasserman regarding Thucydides' balanced presentation, basing this interpretation partly on Thucydides' own remarks where he says that his work will lack what is often translated as "the romantic element" or "the storytelling element" (*to muthodes*, 1.22.4). Flory 194 argues that we should understand this expression in a political sense, as referring to patriotic "stories which exaggerate and celebrate the glories of war." Thucydides is claiming that he will avoid chauvinism; he will offer no biased or exaggerated stories of patriotism, Athenian or otherwise. In the case of Melos, Thucydides does not necessarily endorse the arguments

Let us begin by juxtaposing the goals of each side with possible consequences. Early on, the Melians express their apprehension regarding war, if they are in the right and do not give in to Athens, or slavery, if the Athenians are persuasive (5.86). Much of the discourse thereafter consists of the Melians arguing to maintain their neutral status, or to evoke images of a successful resistance with help from Sparta or the gods. There are three apparent avenues for Melos: to give in and “join” Athens (i.e., become a subject ally), to remain neutral, or to resist. Clearly the third option of resistance is more open-ended and dangerous: it is all or nothing, success or destruction.<sup>9</sup> The first two possible outcomes, acquiescence or neutrality, can result only from negotiation.

On the Athenian side, there appear to be the same three options from the opposite perspective: to persuade the Melians, allow them to remain neutral, or attack. (Neutrality is dismissed, but theoretically the Melians could prove persuasive.) But before considering these choices from the Athenian point of view, we should emphasize the significant option of discourse itself. The military situation has put the Athenians in a position to attack immediately, but they choose to discuss the situation with the Melians first. If they begin an assault and Melos resists, the city could be destroyed, with its value to Athens diminished. We may conclude that the Athenians initiate the dialogue with a single goal in mind: to gain control of an intact city and rule Melos “without toil” (ἀπόνως, 5.91.2).<sup>10</sup> In light of this, we should recognize that, while the Athen-

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of either side. I conclude that the reader is encouraged to look without prejudice at the dialogue from both the Athenian and Melian points of view. For the difficulty of deriving Thucydides’ own opinions from speeches, see Hornblower (1987: 155–90), and his conclusion (185): “nothing can be straightforwardly extracted from the Melian Dialogue...about Thucydides’ own position.”

<sup>9</sup>Another possibility other than Athenian success or defeat is simply giving up (cf. 3.91); see note 70 below. Liebeschuetz 73 sees the outcome as inevitable: “In the first half of the dialogue the speakers discuss the expediency of forcing Melos into the Athenian Empire, in the second they discuss the likelihood of the Melians resisting successfully. But since the Melians are offered no alternative to becoming subjects except complete destruction, and since they are clearly not ready to choose the safe but dishonouring alternative, even though they have no chance of defending their city successfully, the inevitable destruction of Melos casts its shadow over the whole of the negotiations.” Macleod 390 remarks that “this cannot mask that what is possible for Athens is conquest whereas what is possible for Melos is surrender and that the Athenians are the real agents whereas the Melians must simply endure.”

<sup>10</sup>Cleon and Diodotus have previously pointed out the value of intact cities at 3.39.8, 3.46.3; cf. Sparta’s motivations at 2.77.2 and Stahl 162. Amit 224 asserts that the business of the Athenian troops “was to implement the decisions already taken by the

ians have the option of attacking and putting the city under siege, the very fact that they are talking at all implies that they would prefer to persuade the Melians.

Each side fails to convince the other: the Melians do not acquiesce; the Athenians reject neutrality.<sup>11</sup> Why? As we turn to a detailed analysis of the arguments within the dialogue, we note the importance of rules regarding how to proceed. The failure of each side derives partially from a rejection of exploring all possibilities in discussion. Let us examine the various restrictions placed on context and discussion. Limitations concern audience, format, and subject. First, as the dialogue is not spoken before a majority of citizens, the spokesmen—i.e., the interlocutors—for the Melians are just a few of their citizens who hold office (5.84.3).<sup>12</sup> According to the Athenians, this advances the Melians' interests in at least two ways (5.85):

ὅπως δὴ μὴ ξυνεχεῖ ῥήσει οἱ πολλοὶ ἐπαγωγὰ καὶ ἀνέλεγκτα  
ἐς ἅπαξ ἀκούσαντες ἡμῶν ἀπατηθῶσιν.

...so that a majority of citizens may not hear a set speech of ours, at the same time attractive and immune from cross-examination, and be deceived.<sup>13</sup>

The audience is restricted—the majority (*hoi polloi*) is not addressed. Without the majority of the Melians, who may favor accommodation with Athens, the small set of Melians involved concentrates its energies on the goal of neutrality.<sup>14</sup> The second and related restriction is that—in contrast to all previous speeches<sup>15</sup>—the Athenians propose a point-by-point discussion, allowing for immediate response. This is explained in part by the deceptive

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Assembly, with the minimum of casualties, expenses, and harm to Athens.” On the Athenians' willingness to negotiate, cf. 3.3–5.

<sup>11</sup>Cartwright 220 remarks: “The two sides are as far apart at the end of the debate as they were at the beginning” (see 5.112.2). We may compare the Plataean debate and how the Spartans ask the same question before and after the Plataean and Theban speeches (3.68.1). See also Wasserman 22–24.

<sup>12</sup>οἱ Μήλιοι πρὸς μὲν τὸ πλῆθος οὐκ ἤγαγον, ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἀρχαῖς καὶ τοῖς ὀλίγοις λέγειν (5.84.3). Andrewes comments (*HCT* IV: 159) that “ἀρχαί in Greek would include the council, often the most powerful organ in an oligarchy, as well as magistrates in the more familiar sense; and ὀλίγοι will be the privileged voters.”

<sup>13</sup>English translations of Thucydides are modified versions of those of Warner's in *Thucydides* (1954).

<sup>14</sup>Cartwright 222 points out that those in power fear that the Melian people may support Athens; see 5.84, 5.116.

<sup>15</sup>Although see 1.53, 3.113, 4.97–99.

power of set speeches (5.85).<sup>16</sup> From the reader's perspective, not only is the format of dialogue striking; we must also reckon with what the Athenians say about long speeches, namely, that they are deceptive because they are "attractive and immune from cross examination" (ἐπαγωγὰ καὶ ἀνέλεγκτα, 5.85). This has to cause some uneasiness for the reader, who is now forced to revisit the previous speeches within the *History* in an entirely new light.<sup>17</sup> To what extent have the speeches from the first five books been deceptive? When have they been manipulative? In what sense are they unanswerable or irrefutable? Thucydides has highlighted the choice of format for this discussion by raising the question as to whether the dialogue form is actually a better way to arrive at the truth.<sup>18</sup> By criticizing set speeches, Thucydides is able to privilege dialogue over extended speech at this point of the *History*.

Besides concerns of audience and format, the third stipulation established by the Athenians imposes severe restrictions upon what is "allowed" to be explored. The encounter between Athens and Melos, as Thucydides has structured it, is not a military contest; rather, it is rhetorical. A dialogue would appear to grant both sides equal standing, but the fact that Athens has insisted

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<sup>16</sup>This distinction between dialogue and set speech would have been familiar to Thucydides' fifth-century audience. While there were long speeches in the law courts, assembly, and dramatic productions, dialogue (or *brachyologia*) occurred in sophistic displays (prominently recreated in Plato's *Protagoras*) and the *stichomythia* of tragedy. Cartwright 220 remarks upon Thucydides' experimentation in featuring dialogue as part of his critical political history. On the dialogue form, see Hudson-Williams. Macleod 400 notes that one of the reasons for the dialogue is that it allows for "the peculiar privacy of the negotiations...[which] gave the opportunity for a dialectical treatment of some major historical themes."

<sup>17</sup>In particular, the reader may be led back to the Mytilenian debate where the value of debate is questioned by Cleon (3.37–38).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. 5.89 on the untrustworthiness of long speeches (λόγων μῆκος ἄπιστον) and the comment at *HCT* IV: 162: "the combination seems to imply that a very long speech is, as such, less credible or persuasive than a short one." Macleod 387 remarks on the "deceptiveness of the uninterrupted speech and the superior precision of dialogue" with references. Beyond this, there is a challenge to Athenian institutions as well. The basis of decision-making within the assembly (and in the law courts) is voting based on speeches: this feature of Athenian democracy itself is under attack. On Thucydides' criticism of Athenian democracy, see Ober (1998: 78) where he concludes (for the Corinthian-Corcyrean debate): "Thucydides' implicit lesson is that democratic knowledge does not provide an adequate grounding for assessing the truth value of rhetorical discourse. And thus, badly—or at best indifferently—instructed by speech, the Athenian Assembly was likely eventually to fall into error and, as a result, to make bad policy."

that the discussion follow a prescribed format reduces the advantages Melos may gain from a point-by-point discussion.<sup>19</sup> The range of subjects is not open-ended, as the Athenians continually try to eliminate certain topics from discussion. Nonetheless, the dialogue format helps the Melians tremendously, who are able to make repeated efforts to redefine and restructure the discourse in order to allow for a broader scope of exchange. If the Athenians had laid out the ground rules in a first set speech, there could have been no Melian response. The dialogue form not only permits Melos to challenge Athenian assertions but also allows them to call into question and resist the rules of discussion as stipulated by the Athenians. Purely from the Melian point of view, the first two stipulations (small audience and dialogue form) are sufficiently advantageous to allow them to neutralize the third restriction regarding admissible topics.<sup>20</sup>

Let us survey how Athens restricts the range of allowable issues. Early in the dialogue, when the Melians say that if they are in the right (περιγενομένοις μὲν τῷ δικάϊῳ, 5.86) war will come, the Athenians immediately insist that the discussion is only about the survival (σωτηρία) of the city of Melos (5.87).<sup>21</sup>

Εἰ μὲν τοίνυν ὑπονοίας τῶν μελλόντων λογιούμενοι ἢ ἄλλο τι  
ξυνήκετε ἢ ἐκ τῶν παρόντων καὶ ὧν ὁράτε περὶ σωτηρίας  
βουλευόμενοι τῇ πόλει, παυοίμεθ' ἂν εἰ δ' ἐπὶ τοῦτο, λέγοιμεν ἂν.

If you are going to spend the time in enumerating your suspicions about the future, or if you have met here for any other reason except to deliberate concerning the safety for your city on the basis of the present situation that is before you, we would stop the discussion. If, however, you will do as we suggest, then we would continue speaking.

<sup>19</sup>Macleod 389–90 argues that “while the Athenians are claiming to give the Melians the chance of a free, rational and practical decision...the Melians know what is in store for them.” Monoson and Loriaux 292 find that “language is not used for purposes of deliberation but as an instrument of siege.” Regarding the Athenian restrictions on discourse, see Gomez-Lobo 12–23.

<sup>20</sup>Wasserman 21 comments: “If Thucydides had had his Athenians refute their opponents by a speech in his usual way, we would not have had the dramatic intensity of a prizefight in which the Melians, though outmatched on the battle ground of expediency, rise again and again with new objections against the striking force of the apparently irrefutable Athenian arguments.” Orwin 98 sees “in their choice of format the [Athenian] envoys reveal sovereign confidence in the power of their arguments.” For an analysis of the Dialogue as exemplifying a “formal disputation,” consisting of “move and countermove possibilities,” see Alker.

<sup>21</sup>Macleod 387 asserts that the “stipulations” that there be no suppositions about the future and that the subject for discussion must be established are required by the methodology of practical deliberation and the principles of rhetoric.

In part, the Athenians object to “suspicions about the future” (discussed further below), but it also appears that the Melians’ mention of justice (5.86) leads the Athenians to threaten to cut off dialogue entirely: the Melians must limit discussion to the issue of survival. The Athenians themselves rephrase this restriction in a number of ways: only the issues of survival,<sup>22</sup> safety,<sup>23</sup> reasonable expectation,<sup>24</sup> and the disparity between strong and weak are relevant.<sup>25</sup> That is, the Athenians attempt to collapse a large number of potential topics for discussion into one basic idea: the continued existence of Melos.<sup>26</sup>

The Athenians consider off-limits any mention of justice, fine deeds, freedom, shame, and the past or future. Regarding justice, the Athenians openly say (5.89):

‘Ημεῖς τοίνυν οὔτε αὐτοὶ μετ’ ὀνομάτων καλῶν, ὥς ἡ δικαίως τὸν Μῆδον καταλύσαντες ἄρχομεν ἢ ἀδικούμενοι νῦν ἐπεξερχόμεθα, λόγων μῆκος ἄπιστον παρέξομεν, οὔθ’ ὑμᾶς ἀξιούμεν ἢ ὅτι Λακεδαιμονίων ἀποικοὶ ὄντες οὐ ξυνεστρατεύσατε ἢ ὥς ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ἡδίκηκατε λέγοντας οἴεσθαι πείσειν.

Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us—a great mass of words that nobody would believe. And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will persuade us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm.

Any mention of justice (δικαίως, ἀδικούμενοι, οὐδὲν ἡδίκηκατε) is rejected. The idea that justice is irrelevant to foreign policy recurs prominently

<sup>22</sup>σωτηρία: 5.87, 5.88, 5.91.2, 5.101, 5.105.4, 5.110, 5.111.2; cf. “not to be destroyed” (μὴ διαφθεῖραντες, 5.93), and the idea of avoiding danger at 5.99.

<sup>23</sup>ἀσφαλεία: 5.97, 5.98, 5.107, 5.111.4. By ruling more, the Athenians will be “safer” (5.97).

<sup>24</sup>αἱ φανεραὶ ἐλπίδες, literally, “visible expectations,” by which the Athenians evidently mean reasonable—or likely—expectations of the future, as opposed to “invisible hopes” (ἐπὶ τὰς ἀφανεῖς, 5.103.2; cf. 5.102, 5.111.2, 5.113).

<sup>25</sup>5.89, 5.101, 5.111.4.

<sup>26</sup>Allison 55 notes that “*soteria* has little to do with Athenians and Athens for the first half of the war even as a consideration of policy”; of the 37 uses of *soteria*, seven appear in the Melian Dialogue, yet here “*soteria* will only apply to Melos” (57); “as Book 6 gives way to Book 7 and the disaster in Sicily becomes palpable, *soteria* figures prominently in Athenian thought” (56).



in the *History*.<sup>27</sup> Here Athens argues that justice must yield to self-interest (5.90, 5.104); the only law (νόμος) is the law of ruling where one is strong (οὗ ἄν κρατῇ ἄρχειν, 5.105).<sup>28</sup> There are other issues that the Athenians declare out of bounds. When the Melians insist that they are “still free” (ἔτι ἐλευθέροις) and it would be “cowardly and base” (πολλὴ κακότης καὶ δειλία, 5.100) if they submitted to Athens, the Athenians respond that the issue is not goodness or shame (ἀνδραγαθίας...αἰσχύνην, 5.101), but rather survival (σωτηρία, 5.101). In fact, to be defeated, and yet survive, is “not unworthy” (οὐκ ἀπρεπές, 5.111.4).<sup>29</sup>

Remarkable throughout is the utterly frank way in which the Athenians address the Melians.<sup>30</sup> Yet a lesson lies here, for the reader—having the

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<sup>27</sup>1.73–77, 2.62–64, 3.44–47. In building on what was implied at 1.73–77, Diodotus states quite bluntly that, when it comes to international issues, Athens is simply not interested in hearing about justice (3.44, 3.46.4, 3.47.4–5). Liebeschuetz 74 remarks that “the argument of Diodotus applied to the Athenian case at Melos suggests that the Athenian determination to press home their attack on the independence of Melos to the point of destroying that city completely is based on a misguided view of Athenian interest.” The reason given for the rejection of justice’s relevance is that Athens and Melos are not equal in power: “justice (δίκαια) is judged from equal [power of] compulsion (ἅπὸ τῆς ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται)...the strong do what they are able, while the weak submit” (5.89). There may be a qualification on the prohibition against appealing to justice. The Athenians are not necessarily saying that justice is irrelevant to foreign policy or relations between cities (or at least to the discourse between cities); what they are maintaining is that when one power is much greater than another (as in this situation), discussion of justice is not applicable.

<sup>28</sup>This is, the Athenians assert, both a divine and a human law. Regarding divine aid, the Athenians believe they may count on the gods as much as the Melians (5.105.1).

<sup>29</sup>Note that when the Athenians address the idea of shame (*aischune*), it boils down to the Spartans considering “what is pleasurable as fine and what is advantageous as just” (5.105.4; cf. 5.107), thus imputing moral reductionism to the Spartans. It is noteworthy that the Melian oligarchs’ appeal to freedom and honor shows a sensitivity to popular morality and discourse, while the Athenians—a democracy—dismiss such concepts as mere words. Thucydides has already analyzed the collapse of such conventions in the plague at Athens and the civil war in Corcyra (2.52–3, 3.82–4). When Athens instructs the Melians to focus on expediency, it also plays the role of a stern teacher (βίαιος διδάσκαλος, 3.82.2). On such “schooling” metaphors, see Pouncey 3.

<sup>30</sup>Andrewes comments (*HCT* IV: 161): “In the privacy of this conference, the Athenians give up hollow pretense.” Kagan 150–51 notes the “blunt” language of the Athenians. As Coby 76 puts it: “The Athenians are honest even about the deceptiveness of rhetorical speech.... The peace that is latent in the new morality depends on forthright communication between parties, not on deception of the weak by the strong.”

advantage of the *History*—recognizes the disparity between speech and action. Previously in the *History* when one city attempted to persuade another in diplomatic discourse, the usual practice was to invoke justice, honor, and the glorious deeds of the past, in addition to the advantages to be gained.<sup>31</sup> The audiences of such speeches at the very least heard that a particular course of action had both strategic *and* moral implications. And yet, as Thucydides shows elsewhere in the *History*, cities make decisions on the basis of advantage. For example, the Athenians bring the Corcyreans into a defensive alliance because they want their navy and the route to the west is important (1.44.2–3). Although the rhetoric in the Plataean debate is laden with moral language, Sparta executes the Plataeans because the Thebans were “useful” (ὠφελίμους, 3.68.4).<sup>32</sup> By pointedly indicating after speeches what the actual motives were, Thucydides highlights the “disconnect” between the rhetoric of justice found in debates and the decisions themselves, which were based on expediency. What is so unusual about the Melian dialogue is that the Athenians have called into question a whole set of basic appeals normally used in diplomatic discourse. Andrewes comments that

Thucydides distorts his political picture by leaving out arguments which may have seemed superficial to him but played a practical part in persuading fifth-century assemblies to their decisions. The still starker exclusion of ὀνόματα καλά from the Dialogue is a still more violent distortion. The danger of stripping away the pretences, attractive as the attempt may be to a critical historian, is that with them you strip away the actual incentives which decide the ordinary man’s vote.<sup>33</sup>

Yet this is precisely what the Athenians have done. They have stripped away the elevated appeals to country, honor, and justice. How are we to explain this attempt to narrow the discussion?

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Liebeschuetz 76 goes so far as to call it “repulsive” and the Athenians as “bullying and arrogant to the weak, boundlessly self-confident, lacking humility even towards the gods.” Pouncey 92 finds “the tone of hardness is adopted prospectively, to match the final outcome of the confrontation”; see also Bruell 14. Bosworth 31, however, believes that if the Melians capitulate, that would be “a decision which minimises suffering on all sides.”

<sup>31</sup>Diodotus’ speech is an exception, but it is part of an internal discussion among Athenians, not of diplomatic discourse between cities.

<sup>32</sup>I reject the idea of de Ste. Croix 19 and Bruell 15 that appeals to justice always come from the losing side; cf. the Corcyreans at 1.32–36 and the Thebans at 3.61–67.

<sup>33</sup>Andrewes 9.

We have just referred to the way in which Thucydides frequently juxtaposes diplomatic discourse (which includes moral language) with the actual bases for decisions (which are exclusively in terms of expediency). Given this backdrop, we may view what the Athenians are doing here—arguing that the discussion must be restricted to advantage and survival—as a kind of instruction for the Melians that is analogous to what Thucydides teaches the reader of his *History*.<sup>34</sup> Of course, such lessons are introduced in a particular context and may not be applied simplistically to all other situations. Here, however, it is evident the Athenians are attempting to teach the Melians what the reader has already learned: that decisions are based on considerations of advantage, not elevated sentiments or a rosy picture of the past. If the Melians are hoping to affect the outcome of the current conflict, they need to limit their discussion to factors that will *actually* influence the Athenians. The rest is superfluous.<sup>35</sup> On this reading, even the third restriction on permissible topics may be seen as having Melian interests at heart. In the end, the Athenians fail to teach the Melians this lesson. Such a lesson, however, must be taken seriously, because by this point of the *History* the reader has already witnessed how decisions are made. What Athens says to the Melians should strike the reader as accurate. When the Melians fail to limit their argument to the topics of safety and advantage, this ultimately dooms their attempt to persuade the Athenians to allow them to remain neutral.

Before turning to the Melians' arguments, we should note the distance created between the reader and the Melians. While in one sense the reader may be fully engaged, actively trying to assess, support, and supplement the arguments of both sides, in another sense there is a marked gap between what the reader knows and what the Melians insist on doing. To the extent that by reading Thucydides' *History* the reader has "experienced" the war, he or she is now better versed in the ways of the world than the Melians, whose survival depends upon a sounder appreciation of *Realpolitik*. In this case, Melos appears to be unaware of the gulf between diplomatic discourse and actual decision-making. Thucydides' *History* not only makes this distinction clear but uses

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<sup>34</sup>In another context, Ober (1998: 77) notes "the speakers thus claim to do just what Thucydides claims that his text will do: teach about interest and power, and offer an understanding of past events and the probable course of the future."

<sup>35</sup>Bosworth 37 believes that "by the time of the Melian dialogue Thucydides has given us a surfeit of propaganda. Now it is time for realities." Coby 73 argues that "relative and temporary peace is the promise of the new morality, which is judged to be more realistic than exhortations to virtue." As Forde 378 says, "The Athenians may wish to make the Melians better realists."

Melos to illustrate the danger of failing to distinguish between moral appeals and prudent decisions. The effect is one of strong dramatic irony and pathos.<sup>36</sup>

Let us now turn to the Melians' arguments as they try to dissuade Athens from attacking. Clearly the Melians have a difficult task. They are outmatched in terms of military power; all they have are words and arguments, yet even here they face restrictions.<sup>37</sup> What the Melians do, however, is in a variety of ways to redefine or simply disregard Athenian limitations on possible discourse. We might think the Melians would do better to speak directly, as the Athenians do, and to limit their remarks to matters of expediency. To this extent, they have failed to learn the lesson of the Athenians—and of Thucydides' *History*. In one area, however, the Melians offer valuable advice—namely, in their discussion of past and future, a lesson that the Athenians fail to appreciate.

The Melians begin by trying to redefine the concept of justice, which the Athenians will not allow, in terms of advantage, which the Athenians prize (5.90):<sup>38</sup>

Ἡ μὲν δὴ νομιζομένη γε, χρησιμὸν (ἀνάγκη γὰρ, ἐπειδὴ ὑμεῖς οὕτω παρὰ τὸ δίκαιον τὸ συμφέρον λέγειν ὑπέθεσθε) μὴ καταλύειν ὑμᾶς τὸ κοινὸν ἀγαθόν, ἀλλὰ τῷ αἰεὶ ἐν κινδύνῳ

<sup>36</sup>Williams 198 states that the Melians are “quite lacking in prudence, moderation, foresight, a willingness to negotiate or even to bend at all, good planning, and the ability to consider reasonably both sides of an issue...in the unjust world of the fifth-century Greeks, the non-rational and unyielding posture of the Melians helped ensure their own destruction.” For realism in Thucydides, see Doyle, who distinguishes between three types of realism (minimalism, fundamentalism, and structuralism) and argues that Thucydides' own methods and lessons follow only the minimalist form of realism, in which choices “depend upon a prior consideration of strategic security” (170). This the Melians fail to do. Forde 373 argues that, while Thucydides is a realist in international affairs, he “tried to defend the theoretically more difficult position that international realism need not entail universal moral skepticism.” Garst also finds that “Thucydides' history directs attention to the confusion underlying neorealist debates over power in international politics” (21), for “in neorealism, this leadership [of hegemonic powers] lacks the moral dimension so heavily emphasized by Thucydides” (22); cf. Alker.

<sup>37</sup>At the very least, the Melians feel it is reasonable and understandable that they should have recourse to all kinds of arguments and points of view (εἰκὸς μὲν καὶ συγγνώμη ἐν τῷ τοιῷδε καθεστῶτας ἐπὶ πολλὰ καὶ λέγοντας καὶ δοκοῦντας τρέπεσθαι, 5.88).

<sup>38</sup>Pericles had earlier argued against the “calculation of advantage” (οὐ τοῦ συμφέροντος...λογισμῶ, 2.40.5).

γιγνομένῳ εἶναι τὰ εἰκότα καὶ δίκαια,<sup>39</sup> καὶ τι καὶ ἐντὸς τοῦ ἀκριβοῦς πείσαντά τινα ὠφελῆθῃναι.

Then—since you force us to leave justice (τὸ δίκαιον) out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest (τὸ ξυμφέρον)—in our view at any rate it is useful (χρήσιμον) that you should not destroy a general good of all men (τὸ κοινὸν ἀγαθόν)—namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing (τὰ εἰκότα καὶ δίκαια), and that such people should be allowed to use and to profit by argument that falls short of precision.

This is not so much collapsing justice and advantage as it is pointing out the advantages of justice.<sup>40</sup> Even the Athenians, the Melians suggest, might find themselves in a situation where the concept of justice is valuable. Part of the Athenians' response is a lack of concern for the empire's demise—they willingly take on this risk—but the Athenians' other point is that the Melians are speculating about the future. The Athenians wish to speak only about the present, in terms of advantage to their empire and the survival of Melos (5.91). The Melians then ask how it could be advantageous (χρήσιμον) for them to accept slavery (δουλεύσαι, 5.92). The Athenians respond that not being destroyed could be assessed as profit (κερδαίνομεν ἄν, 5.93).

The Melians attempt to equate justice with advantage and slavery with disadvantage. The Athenians reject these equations, countering that survival is an advantage and not being annihilated is profit.<sup>41</sup> At this point the Athenian restriction holds: the only accepted coin is advantage. The question for Melos is whether survival is enough of an advantage to sacrifice autonomy—perhaps an advantage in itself—yet their continued efforts at debate indicate that mere survival is not enough of an advantage for them to sacrifice their independence.

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<sup>39</sup>See Radt 35 on the reading τὰ εἰκότα καὶ δίκαια, though I do not agree with his conclusions.

<sup>40</sup>Andrewes remarks (*HCT* IV: 165): “the Melians seek to turn the Athenian position by claiming that the observance of conventional justice is in fact a general advantage, ξυμφέρον.” Amit 230 feels that “the problem is to find what is χρήσιμον to both sides...it is the Melians who conduct the debate.” Crane 239 observes that “the Melians...argue that justice, fairness, and interest are all interlinked.” Coby 77 believes that “the Melians are attempting to make common cause with the Athenians, to connect their interest as a weaker state today with Athens' interest as a weaker state tomorrow”; cf. Alker 812.

<sup>41</sup>In war, the situation and attitudes of people change, which leads to a new application of words (δικαίωσις): see esp. 3.82.4–8.

But restricting discussion to advantage is not irrelevant to the Athenians. Where does their advantage lie? The Melians, who raise this issue, argue that if safety (ἀσφάλεια) is the highest goal of the Athenians, the Athenians may be less “safe” (i.e., in a less advantageous position) by attacking Melos, for this would encourage other neutral powers to turn away from Athens, thus helping Athens’ enemies (5.98). The Athenians respond that—as for now—neutral mainlanders are not as threatening as Melos (5.99):

As a matter of fact we are not so much frightened of states on the continent (ἡπειρωταί). They have their liberty, and this means that it will be a long time (πολλήν τὴν διαμέλλησιν) before they begin to take precautions against us. We are more concerned about islanders like yourselves, who are unsubdued (νησιώτας...ἀνάρκτους), or subjects who have already (ἤδη) become embittered by the constraint that our empire imposes on them. These are the people who are most likely to act in a reckless manner (τῷ ἀλογίστῳ) and to bring themselves and us, too, into the most obvious danger.

We have already learned that the Melians are not like other islanders, because they are not willing to follow Athens (οὐκ ἤθελον ὑπακούειν ὥσπερ οἱ ἄλλοι νησιῶται, 5.84.2). Athens finds the Melians threatening, as “islanders not aligned with the empire” (νησιώτας...ἀνάρκτους, 5.99), and, as a naval power (ναυκρατόρων, 5.97 and 5.109), cannot allow Melos to remain neutral. To this extent, it is the island status of Melos that concerns Athens. Neutral islands make Athens appear weak, thus encouraging reckless attacks (5.97, 5.99). But, although the Athenians distinguish between immediate threat and what may occur at some point in the future, they imply that if neutrals on the mainland pose no immediate threat, they may be disregarded. Only the here and now is important.

The Melians have attempted to redefine justice and safety by considering the advantages of morality and neutrality; they hypothesize a potential “turning of tables” by sketching out the future consequences of Athenian action. Given the Athenian response, the Melians then begin to resist the Athenians’ rhetorical restrictions. While such resistance is ultimately unsuccessful in persuading Athens, the Melians’ arguments at 5.100ff. amount to a nullification of the original stipulations on permissible discourse. The Melians revert to appealing to moral concepts, such as shame (5.100), freedom (5.112), and justice.<sup>42</sup> For

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<sup>42</sup>Macleod 394 notes “a still more striking departure from the ‘rules’ ... in chs. 100–11; for here the Melians are constantly appealing to those moral sanctions and those

example (5.104), “Nevertheless we trust in chance from god not to be defeated, because we stand righteous against an unjust enemy (ὅσιοι πρὸς οὐ δικάϊους).” By resisting the Athenians’ “rules,” the Melians are able to raise broader issues than the Athenians are willing to address. This does not affect the short-term outcome: the Spartans do not help; Athens is victorious with its siege; Melos is destroyed. Although the Athenians win militarily, however, their prohibitions fail to constrain the Melians’ words. As “masters of the sea” the Athenians are successful; as “masters of discourse” they cannot control the Melians.<sup>43</sup> In countering and nullifying Athenian restrictions, the Melians raise an important issue: the long-term consequences of Athenian policy.<sup>44</sup> Let us now turn to the significance of pondering history and the future.

The Melians’ goal in the dialogue is to persuade the Athenians to allow their neutral status. Yet it appears that if the Melians are to be successful, they have to deal with past events and future possibilities—with what Thucydides’ *History* itself addresses. We recall that early in the dialogue the Athenians threaten to stop the discussion if the Melians speculate about the future (5.87). In her discussion of the Thebans’ speech in Book 3, Debnar remarks that “while the Spartans in effect deny the relevance of the past, in the Melian dialogue the Athenians reject the relevance of the future.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, the dialogue is more complex: we find that both Athens and Melos discuss not only the present but also the past and future, albeit in extremely restricted ways.

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speculations about the future which the Athenians had ruled out.” See also Andrewes 1 and Orwin 103.

<sup>43</sup>Amit 234 argues that in the rhetorical contest the Melians have “the upper hand.” Crane 293 observes that by their actions the Melians prove that the Athenians are wrong in their contention that the weak always yield to the strong (5.89, 5.111.4).

<sup>44</sup>Connor (1984: 153) points to the Melians’ thesis that “restraint could be in the long term interest of the more powerful.” See also Crane 240. Liebeschuetz 75 comments: “The Athenians were also perfectly right that the Melians’ own interest required that they should yield to the Athenians since they had not the strength to resist successfully. But ironically, as far as their own interest was concerned, the Athenians were wrong and deluded.” Macleod captures the conflicted essence of Athens with its “characteristic combination of forethought and folly” (398), concluding that “in attacking their puny neighbours, the Athenians are ruthless, realistic and yet also paradoxically blind” (400); cf. Forde 384. Pouncey xiii sees Athenian action as proof of “Thucydides’ essential pessimism,” which he defines: “The conviction that human nature carries within itself drives that are destructive of its own achievements, that they are in fact the same drives as those that build historical achievements in the first place.”

<sup>45</sup>Debnar (1996: 109).

The Athenians apparently assert the irrelevance of the past. They will not be introducing recollections of their victory over the Persians and their right to empire; in turn, however, they do not wish to hear about the Melians' innocence (5.89). Past actions, the Athenians here maintain, are not applicable to the current confrontation.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, however, the Athenians themselves do look to the past. At the end of the dialogue, they remind the Melians that they have never previously given up a siege out of fear of other powers (5.111.1). The Athenians' characterization of the cautious behavior of the Spartans (5.105.3–4, 5.107, 5.109) is evidently based on the past; certainly the reader has noted incidents prior to 416 that support this (e.g., the Mytilenian episode). That is, they selectively recount the past in order to persuade Melos. The Athenians' apparent rejection of discussing past and future is stated broadly; perhaps they do not want events concerning justice or innocence brought up. The past, however, is relevant for the Athenians when it concerns power and action. The Melians themselves disregard this prohibition concerning the past, basing their final rejection of Athens on history, specifically their seven hundred years of freedom (5.112).

Both Athens and Melos present extremely restricted visions of the past. This narrowness results from each side's refusal to acknowledge issues the other side introduces. Melos has no response to the Athenians' characterization of past Spartan action—which the reader knows to a large extent to be accurate. By failing to acknowledge the significance of previous caution and tentativeness on the part of the Spartans, the Melians put themselves in a poor position to determine the chances of their receiving future aid. On the other side, by refusing to allow shame, justice, or freedom into the discussion, the Athenians ignore an essential component of how the Melians define themselves in terms of their own history.

We also find each side making fine distinctions regarding the future. The Melians equate action with hope and inaction with despair (5.102):

καὶ ἡμῖν τὸ μὲν εἶξαι εὐθὺς ἀνέλπιστον, μετὰ δὲ τοῦ δρωμένου  
ἔτι καὶ στήναι ἐλπίς ὀρθῶς.

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<sup>46</sup>Andrewes speculates (*HCT* IV: 168) that past actions of Melos may have included making contributions to Alcidas in 427, resisting Nicias in 426, ignoring the assessment of 425, and perhaps some provocative action immediately before 416, but again Thucydides has told us nothing beyond the resistance in 426 (3.91). See note 68 below. On Melian contributions to the Spartan war fund, see Meiggs 314 and Loomis, esp. 65–66, 74–75, who argues that the Melians must have made the contribution to the Spartan war fund (*IG* V.1.1) in 427; Seaman 401 argues that the contribution came from those who survived the Athenian expedition in 416.



And for us to yield immediately is to give up hope, while with action there is still the hope we may succeed.

The Melians look ahead to a variety of possibilities. Aid may come from Sparta in the future (5.104, 5.106, 5.108, 5.110, 5.112.2); the Athenian empire may fall (5.90, 5.98, 5.110); the gods may intervene (5.104, 5.112.2).<sup>47</sup> In support of the likelihood of successful military resistance are chance,<sup>48</sup> hope, and the fact that the Spartans will take on the risk.<sup>49</sup> The Spartans may even, the Melians speculate, attack Athenian land (5.110).

At first the Athenians say they are dismissive of thinking about the future. Hope is expensive (ἐλπὶς...δάπανος γὰρ φύσει) and belongs to the “invisible future” (ἐπὶ τὰς ἀφανεῖς) in a category containing prophecies and oracles (5.103).<sup>50</sup> In part, this is a rhetorical move on the Athenians’ part. By cutting off objections the Melians might raise, they set the rules of the debate in such a way that their victory is guaranteed. The Athenians characterize the Melians’ speculation as “senselessness” (τὸ ἄφρον, 5.105) and denigrate their claim to foresee the future more clearly than what is actually in front of them (5.113):

τὰ μὲν μέλλοντα τῶν ὁρωμένων σαφέστατα κρίνετε, τὰ δὲ ἀφανῆ τῶν βούλεσθαι ὥς γινόμενα ἤδη θεᾶσθε.

You consider the future as something clearer than what is before your eyes, and you already see uncertainties as happening, simply because you would like them to be so.

Throughout the dialogue the Melians attempt to get the Athenians to think about the possible consequences of their action (neutrals allying themselves with Sparta, Sparta coming to help, divine intervention, the fall of the empire) not as certainties, but as plausible contingencies that should influence Athenian decision-making.<sup>51</sup> The Melians ignore Athenian limits on discussion, but the Athenians reject contemplation of these future scenarios.

<sup>47</sup>See de Ste. Croix 14 on the likelihood of divine aid or Spartan help.

<sup>48</sup>The Melians at 5.102 state: ‘Ἀλλ’ ἐπιστάμεθα τὰ τῶν πολέμων ἔστιν ὅτε κοινοτέρως τὰς τύχας λαμβάνοντα ἢ κατὰ τὸ διαφέρον ἐκατέρων πλήθος. Andrewes (*HCTIV*: 170) translates κοινοτέρως as “more impartial.” Amit 231 translates more fully: “it happens that the odds are more even than could be expected from the difference in numbers.”

<sup>49</sup>Reasons given for favoring the likelihood of Spartan aid include the proximity of Melos and Sparta’s kinship ties with Melos (5.104, 106, 108).

<sup>50</sup>Cf. Diodotus’ words on the deceptive but irresistible power of hope (3.45).

<sup>51</sup>Wasserman 29 remarks: “it is τύχη ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, a sign of divine grace and justice, of help and protection beyond human planning and expectation. The sceptical and

Two points should be made. First, the Athenians themselves fail to observe their own restriction on future speculation. In fact, the Athenians find their own vision of the future worth contemplating.<sup>52</sup> The Athenians assume that if the Melians resist the city will be destroyed (πρὸ τοῦ τὰ δεινότατα παθεῖν, 5.93);<sup>53</sup> the Melians may hope for Spartan aid but the Spartans will never arrive (5.105, 5.107).<sup>54</sup> While shutting out these alternative scenarios of the Melians, the Athenians advance a set of optimistic possibilities promoting their own interest. Just as the Athenians have failed to “teach” Melos the importance—even the necessity—of arguing in terms of advantage, so the Melians have failed to “teach” Athens the value of recollecting the past and contemplating future contingencies.<sup>55</sup>

A comparison between the Melian Dialogue and a Socratic dialogue offers instructive parallels. Any dialogue—as a means of communication, exploration, and persuasion—has the potential to raise questions that may bring the interlocutor to realize his or her own misconceptions. Yet the only side to ask

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disillusioned mind of the Athenians sees only the blindness of chance.” de Romilly (1963) 294 articulates a broader sequence: “On each occasion the Athenians admit that this danger [the fall of the empire] exists but are quite willing to accept it. On the first occasion, they only discuss how serious such a defeat might be; on the second, they mention only the people of whom they would be most afraid; and on the third and last occasion they simply reply by a threat.”

<sup>52</sup>Williams 199 criticizes Athenian efforts in subjugating the small island of Melos as “an action which suggests not only a fondness for brutality, but also a lack of moderation, self-control, and even of the foresight to consider the adverse impression such an action would cause.”

<sup>53</sup>Amit 229 observes that the Athenians “now indulge in fancy about the future and put instead of war, destruction of the city.” Connor (1984: 150) sees this as prediction: “within the speech itself the outcome is foretold: the Melians will resist; the Athenians will conquer; the city will be destroyed.” In *Thucydides*, Lattimore 295 notes that, in spite of their prohibition at 5.87, “the entire situation is the result of *Athenian* ‘suspicions about the future’.”

<sup>54</sup>We should note that in the narrative frame, while the siege is still going on, Thucydides tells us that the Spartans did not break their treaty with Athens, even though the Athenians had extensively plundered Spartan territory (5.115.2). That is, the Athenians’ prediction in the dialogue about Spartan aid to Melos is correct: the Spartans do nothing, even when provoked by further Athenian aggression. Again the reader has a superior vantage point than do the Melians. On the accuracy of Athenian predictions, see Pouncey 93.

<sup>55</sup>Regarding “this sort of misguided hopefulness,” Ober (1998: 105) remarks that “as Thucydides’ reader soon learns, the Melian oligarchs and the post-Periclean Athenian demos have much more in common than the Athenian generals supposed.”

questions is that of Melos. In part, this reflects the reluctance of the Athenians to take on the role of learner; they evidently think their only purpose is to teach.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, they fail to pay adequate attention to the issues the Melians raise.

The second and more important point has to do with the value of history and the possibility of conjecturing usefully about the future. Macleod criticizes the selective vision of Athens, commenting that the Athenians' "refusal to look into the future is far removed from the foresight (προνοία) which characterizes the Thucydidean statesman." Contemplating what may transpire is what "Diodotus conceives to be the object of political deliberation."<sup>57</sup> In both speech and narrative of the *History*, probing attention is given to the importance of the past and the ability to plan for the future.<sup>58</sup> From the reader's perspective at this point in the *History*, saying that the past is irrelevant goes against the entire spirit of Thucydides' work: history is useful, similar sorts of things may happen in the future, study of the past may lead to learning (see esp. 1.22.4).<sup>59</sup> Just as Thucydides' readers do, politicians, generals, citizens—and here, the Athenians and the Melians—must contemplate the future and consider whether the consequences of a particular action may lead to any advantage.

It is one thing to argue that a particular consequence is unlikely and give reasons for such a conclusion. At least Archidamus (1.80–85) and Pericles (1.140–44) give a rationale for their strategies and try to account for the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing side. But to make such a selective dismissal of the future as irrelevant, as Athens does here, is clearly condemned by what Thucydides himself has already emphasized in his work. The reader has learned to consider both the short and long-term effects of decisions and actions. For example, the Plataeans' actions of executing the Theban prisoners in 431 (2.5.7) and rejecting the Spartan offer of neutrality in 429 (2.72–74) are used

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<sup>56</sup>Garst 15 argues that "from beginning to end it is the Melians who put forward the ideas and proposals while it is the Athenians who reply. Because they have a response to everything, the Melians are constantly foiled and sent off to find another argument." Williams 201 notes: "The Dialogue stresses the need for compromise but neither side is willing to give in."

<sup>57</sup>Macleod 391; he continues: "a concern for the future is also characteristic of statesmanlike forethought (cf. further 1.138.3; 2.65.6), and so to concentrate on the present may be simply shortsighted." See Edmunds, esp. 7–88.

<sup>58</sup>For Themistocles' abilities, see 1.90–93, 1.136.1, 1.138.1; cf. Pericles (2.65.5, 2.65.13), and consult discussion in de Ste. Croix 28–33. Monoson and Loriaux are more critical of Pericles' foresightedness.

<sup>59</sup>On the usefulness of the *History*, see de Romilly (1956). de Ste. Croix 32 comments on the possibility of intelligent foreknowledge.

against them in 427, leading to their execution (3.66–67, 3.68.1). In the Melian episode, however, Athens is interested only in the short term. More generally then, from the first five books of Thucydides' *History* the reader is able to appreciate lessons concerning not only moral language and practical decision-making, but also the significance of the past and the necessity of anticipating the future. Thus the reader is sensitive to the Melians' "pig-headedness"<sup>60</sup> in insisting on moral sentiments as well as to Athens' misguided neglect of past and future. By contrasting how Athens and Melos argue and behave with what is taught in the preceding sections of the *History*, the retrospective reader recognizes the inflexibility of Melos and the recklessness of Athens.<sup>61</sup> Let us turn now to other significant connections the Melian episode has with the *History*.

Beyond the general lessons of Thucydides' *History*, scholars have seen a great many connections between the Melian episode and other specific situations, arguments, and themes from the *History*. While Thucydides never explicitly tells us the significance of the Melian episode, the retrospective reader is encouraged to engage in juxtaposition and comparison with the context and motives introduced there. We have already seen the relevance of Mytilene and Plataea,<sup>62</sup> but many have viewed the significance of Melos in connection with

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<sup>60</sup>Bosworth 43 calls the Melian government "pig-headed" in refusing to acquiesce.

<sup>61</sup>Melos advances the idea that Athens may be an example (*paradeigma*, 5.90) to others in the future: if they abolish any notion of the common good and their empire falls, they would be left without any recourse. The Athenians use *paradeigma* in the present tense: "hatred of power is a clear proof to the ruled" (τὸ δὲ μῖσος δυνάμεως παράδειγμα τοῖς ἀρχομένοις δηλούμενον, 5.95). Williams 200–201 comments: "Idealism by itself, without the addition of foresight, intelligence, planning, and above all power, is incapable of survival.... As the Athenians discover in Sicily, if rational planning, action at the appropriate time, sufficient resources, unity, and military strength (all of which together can give confidence) are lacking, then military action based only on hope and fear is unable to succeed.... Thucydides could not help but see some of the flaws in the Melian, as well as the Athenian, position."

<sup>62</sup>Cartwright 220 comments that, like Plataea, Melos was chosen "not because of its importance to the course of the war but for the issues raised in the accompanying negotiations." See Liebeschuetz 74; in 74 n. 12 he argues: "The Melians are a perfect illustration of Diodotus' thesis." Orwin 112 believes that "indeed the very arguments of Diodotus would seem to point to clemency in this case as well." See Macleod 391 and Connor (1984: 149–50). Connor (1984: 154) further argues that "for the reader...the Melian counterattack...changes the perspective from the narrow concentration on the events of 416 to the broader development of the war." This is the view of Kagan 149 n. 47. See Orwin 107–8 on the explicit mention of Brasidas (5.110), which looks back to Book 4.

the subsequent narrative, in particular regarding the Sicilian expedition in Books 6–7, the defection of allies (8.2ff.), and the end of the war in 404 (see X. *HG* 2.2.3). Immediately after Athens takes Melos, Thucydides turns his attention to the Sicilian expedition at 6.1. Like Melos, Sicily is an island, although much larger and more powerful.<sup>63</sup> The Athenians are successful with Melos, whereas they meet with unprecedented disaster in Sicily.<sup>64</sup> Cartwright comments on the sequence of Melos followed by Sicily:

a minor victory is followed by a major defeat, both arising from the same cause, a paradoxical aspect of Athenian power revealed by the dialogue: in some ways it limits, rather than enlarges, Athenian freedom of action.<sup>65</sup>

Connor notes that “the reader knows that another island, Sicily, will soon overcome an Athenian attack.... [Athens, like Melos, is] forced to rely on hope, chance, and speculation about the gods (esp. 7.77.4).”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Williams 199 speculates: “if the Melians had possessed some sort of military advantage—if for example, the Spartans were already present on the island in a strong force, or if the Melians had developed a great fleet such as the Syracusans do later, or if the Melians had some sort of technological advantage that would give them the edge in warfare, or if they had united with many islanders who had fleets, unlike Sparta, then the Melians perhaps would have had good grounds for their confidence in their ability to withstand a siege.”

<sup>64</sup>Wasserman 30 asserts: “The most dynamic and most dangerous example of this indulgence in wishful thinking is the Sicilian Expedition with which the Melian Dialogue is so closely connected that it has to be regarded as its prelude.” Kagan 167 believes both the Sicilian and Melian expeditions resulted from the same motive—to restore the balance of power after the Spartan victory at Mantinea and regain Athenian prestige; see also Cornford 182–85, Herter 330–32, and Amit 219–23. In linking Sicily with Melos, see Gomme 187: “The course of events may itself be dramatic, and the truthful historian will make this clear.” On the links between Melos and the circumstances in 404, see Liebeschuetz 75–76 and de Romilly (1963: 275): “the characters made to speak by Thucydides show a strange foreknowledge of the events which marked the end of the war.” Connor (1984: 155–57) compares the Melian episode with the Persian war, which forced Athens to become nautical (1.18.2, 1.93.3): the Athenians “confronted in that struggle precisely the preponderance of power and apparent hopelessness that Melos now faced.” See Crane 246–54. For the episode as a meditation on the nature of Athenian imperialism, see Andrewes 3–6 and de Romilly (1963: 274), who comments on Thucydides’ “desire to give his own treatment of the question of imperialism as a whole.”

<sup>65</sup>Cartwright 221.

<sup>66</sup>Connor (1984: 155). Allison 59 notes: “In this case greater force is given to the climax of Book 7 because the reader had not been accustomed to associating *soteria* with

Scholars who make these connections are fully engaged in a process of comparison, juxtaposition, and extrapolation (captured by the Greek word *eikazein*).<sup>67</sup> The retrospective reader is encouraged to engage in these very operations, for Thucydides' use of self-reference within his *History* stimulates such juxtapositions. I would like to focus upon one particular issue crucial to the Melian episode: neutrality.

Thucydides himself calls attention to the neutral status of Melos at 5.84.2:<sup>68</sup>

ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον οὐδετέρων ὄντες ἡσύχαζον, ἔπειτα ὥς  
αὐτοὺς ἡνάγκαζον οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι δηοῦντες τὴν γῆν, ἐς πόλεμον  
φανερὸν κατέστησαν.

But at first [the Melians] remained neutral toward both sides, but then  
when the Athenians ravaged their land they were forced to engage in  
open war.<sup>69</sup>

This passage and earlier mentions of Melos in the *History* raise several questions. First, was Melos neutral or hostile to Athens in 416? When war began in 431, Thucydides indicated that Thera and Melos were the only Cycladic islands not allied with Athens (2.9.4). In 426, Nicias took sixty ships and two thousand hoplites to Melos. Thucydides observed that the Melians did not wish to submit to Athens; after ravaging their land, the Athenians sailed away

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the Athenians. The absence from the Athenian program only becomes evident when the term recurs so often in the Melian Dialogue.”

<sup>67</sup>Hunter 27 offers a full definition for *eikazein*: “It is the ability to relate past and present experience, find their essential similarities, and then conjecture or predict what is most likely to occur under the given circumstances. It is reasoning based on probability” (see her discussion at 23–41). On the importance of *eikazein*, see Morrison, esp. 96–105. Gribble 45 believes that “Thucydides imagines them [his readers, i.e.] as motivated by the same intellectual and historical goals as the narrator-historian himself (1.22.4), like him possessed of highly developed intellects and sensibilities.”

<sup>68</sup>Garst 15 believes that “the debate at Melos is about whether the Melians can maintain their neutrality. In rejecting the neutral status of Melos, the Athenians betray a new and urgent anxiety about their control over their allies and empire.” Regarding evidence from the Athenian Tribute List (*IG* I<sup>3</sup>.71) and whether Melos actually paid tribute, see Treu, answered by Eberhardt and Kierdorf. I am in agreement with Amit 221 regarding the “‘minimalist’ view of Eberhardt, i.e., that the inclusion of Melos in the Cleon assessment of 425 (cf. ATL A9) does not prove that Melos was ever a member of the Athenian League or paid any tribute.”

<sup>69</sup>Cf. 3.91. For a comparison of those two passages, see discussion in Eberhardt 303–7 and Kierdorf 255–56.

(3.91.1–2).<sup>70</sup> In 431, Melos was neutral; five years later, it resisted an Athenian attack of short duration. Before the confrontation in 416, Melos appears to have had little involvement in the war. Yet when Thucydides says that the Melians “were forced to come to open war” (ἐς πόλεμον φανερόν κατέστησαν, 5.84.2), to what occasion is he referring? Apparently not to 416, for the Athenians had not yet begun hostilities; they send ambassadors before attacking (5.82.3).<sup>71</sup> Does the open hostility refer to the raid of 426?<sup>72</sup> If so, is Melos still hostile in 416—ten years later? How then can it claim neutrality? Could Melos possibly have resumed neutrality, perhaps in 421 with the peace of Nicias? But if so, why does Thucydides omit any indication of this?<sup>73</sup>

The salient point, I think, is that in the dialogue as presented by Thucydides in 416 the Athenians do not adduce earlier conflicts they have had with Melos. Presumably they could have used the resistance of the Melians in 426 as an excuse for their aggression, but they choose not to do so. In part, this removes the dialogue somewhat from its historical context and gives it a more universal

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<sup>70</sup>Williams 200 remarks that “it is possible that the Athenians’ lackluster earlier performance contributed to a Melian confidence that the Athenian threat was mere empty talk and may have caused them to have greater trust in the ability of their island’s defenses to deter the Athenians.”

<sup>71</sup>They are called “ambassadors” (πρόσβεις) throughout (5.84.3, 5.85, 5.114.1). For the status of these envoys, see the brief discussion in Bosworth 32 n. 12.

<sup>72</sup>This is Andrewes’ conclusion (*HCT* IV: 157). Seaman 388 argues against this interpretation: “First there is no supporting evidence which suggests that the Melians ever went to war with the Athenians (not to mention that doing so would have been quite foolish). Second, if the Melians had decided on war with the Athenians (and their allies) they would likely have concluded a treaty with the Spartans, an alliance for which there is again no evidence.” Bauslaugh 116–17 argues that there was not necessarily any action of Melos which provoked the attack in 426; rather, with Athens’ desperate search for revenue, the Melians’ “refusal to contribute to the cost of the war hindered Athenian efforts to procure revenue from every possible source.”

<sup>73</sup>In endeavoring to “discern the reasons why the Athenians found it necessary to suppress the island in 416 B.C.,” Seaman 386 maintains that “in spite of a clash of arms in 426, the Melians maintained their neutrality.” For the Athenians’ motivations, see *HCT* IV: 156–58, with the conclusion: “on balance, however, it seems likely that the attack in 416 was due solely to an Athenian whim, without any immediate antecedent quarrel...[still] if there were specific grounds for the attack in 416, we cannot now expect to discover what they were.” Pouncey 88 comments: “the narrative is deliberately cleared of all contextual information, any record of grievance or politics attending the event, so that the Athenian action is made to appear a perfectly gratuitous act of aggression.”

meaning.<sup>74</sup> But, from the reader's perspective, that knowledge of previous conflict heightens an awareness of Athens' utter disregard of past action, as Thucydides shows the forces, and the blindness, that drive Athens on. Thucydides apparently has chosen to use this conflict to show that even if Melos were completely and unambiguously neutral, Athens would still act to incorporate the island.<sup>75</sup> By this point Athens no longer needs recourse to past hostility to explain its own aggressiveness: the will to power is its own driving force and no longer needs further justification.<sup>76</sup>

This is borne out by the Melians' argument as well. In rejecting submission and yet desiring to avoid war, the Melians say they hope that Athens will allow them to remain neutral, offering a definition of neutrality (5.94):

“ὥστε ἡσυχίαν ἄγοντας ἡμᾶς φίλους μὲν εἶναι ἀντὶ  
πολεμίων, ξυμμάχους δὲ μηδετέρων, οὐκ ἂν δέξαισθε;

Wouldn't you accept us keeping the peace, being friends instead of  
enemies, and allies to neither side?

The Melians raise the spectre of possibility that, if Athens besieges them, other neutrals will join Sparta, thus strengthening Athens' enemies (5.98). That is, the Melians try to fit their goal of neutrality into the Athenian set of values, which is apparently limited to power, safety, and advantage.<sup>77</sup> The final words of the Melians, after invoking freedom, chance, and hope of Spartan aid, are an invitation to Athens (5.112.3):

προκαλούμεθα δὲ ὑμᾶς φίλοι μὲν εἶναι, πολέμιοι δὲ μηδετέροις,  
καὶ ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἡμῶν ἀναχωρῆσαι σπονδὰς ποιησαμένους  
αἵτινες δοκοῦσιν ἐπιτήδειοι εἶναι ἀμφοτέροις.

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<sup>74</sup>As Pouncey 88 points out, many facts pertinent to this specific situation are omitted by Thucydides: “we are not told how much tribute Melos would have to pay, whether they would have to give hostages, or whether an Athenian garrison would be posted there.”

<sup>75</sup>Seaman 388 concludes that “in fact Melos emerges from the Melian Dialogue as a neutral state never having injured Athens” and that Melos was “in fact both independent and neutral, just as Thucydides tells us” (409).

<sup>76</sup>Seaman 390 thinks that “as Thucydides tells the story, Athens is guilty of unprovoked aggression against a harmless neutral” and that “the motive for the expedition was in all probability Athenian imperialism, plain and simple” (414). Pouncey 97 suggests that “the notion that one must constantly expand to maintain national security seems patently false, yet Thucydides seems partly inclined to believe it.”

<sup>77</sup>In support of neutrality, the Melians assert that they have nothing to do with the Athenians, being colonists of the Spartans (τούς τε μὴ προσήκοντας...ἄποικοι ὄντες, 5.96).



We invite you to be our friends, and to be enemies to neither side.  
 Make a treaty with us which seems appropriate to both sides and  
 leave our land.

But the Athenians have already stated their objection to neutrality. Friendship, they say, is associated with weakness (ἡ φιλία μὲν ἀσθενείας) and brings harm rather than hatred (5.95).<sup>78</sup> Power alone has become its own justification.

In terms of Thucydides' *History*, the option of neutrality was first considered by the Corcyreans when they sought an Athenian alliance.<sup>79</sup> They concluded in retrospect that such a policy was a mistake (1.32) and successfully pursued an alliance with Athens. The Corcyrean episode before the war forces us to consider seriously when neutrality could be a viable option. If an island at the northwest edge of the Greek world can argue that a policy of isolation is foolish, what chance does Melos—without a navy, in the Aegean that is Athens' sphere of domination—have for disengagement? Archidamus later offered the option of neutrality to the Plataeans, which would have removed Plataea from the Athenian alliance (2.72). Yet neutrality was again rejected, as Plataea insisted on maintaining its relationship with Athens.<sup>80</sup> Athens now insists that Melos not remain neutral, for Athens controls the sea and Melos is an island. The issue is not whether neutrality is an option. As Bauslaugh shows in his work *The Concept of Neutrality in Classical Greece*, several states remained neutral during the Peloponnesian War. The question is whether neutrality is a viable option for this weak island at this time.

The situation in the Melian episode is similar to those previous situations in some respects, significantly reversed in others. Like Corcyra, Melos has had or claims a policy of neutrality; unlike Corcyra, however, Melos wishes to maintain such a status. Corcyra was independent and had a navy; Melos is

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<sup>78</sup>Regarding the Athenians' argument at 5.97, Seaman 390 believes "the clear import is that successful resistance by a *weak* island would be *especially* dangerous." See Cleon's view on the hatred and fear of subjects at 3.40 and comments by de Romilly (1963: 287–88) on fear as motivation for the Athenians; cf. Pouncey 98–101, who calls fear "the first impulse to imperialism" (99).

<sup>79</sup>The prevalence of neutral states is preemptively dismissed by Thucydides, although see Bauslaugh 109: "Thucydides' self-promoting statement that the entire Greek world was involved in the war, some joining in immediately and other intending to do so (1.1.1), should not be taken as a pronouncement of definitive fact. The truth is that Thucydides knew full well that the situation was far more complicated, and he did not hesitate to acknowledge the existence of neutrals at the outset of the war."

<sup>80</sup>Bauslaugh 132 notes that, due to their rejection of neutrality, "the Plataeans gave their enemies a perfect legal pretext for annihilating them."

virtually without defense. Corcyra came to consider neutrality a mistake; Melos considers neutrality to be its best option. Like Plataea, Melos rejects the alliance offered by a threatening power. Plataea hoped for aid from Athens, yet this was compromised by the fact that Plataea was land-locked and Athens' power lay on the sea. A situation in mirror image appears for Melos, which hopes for assistance, yet as an island cannot be confident of aid from the land power, Sparta.<sup>81</sup> In these three situations—Corcyra, Plataea, and Melos—we find that neutrality is not a viable option for one reason or another. The Melian episode has the effect of forcing the reader to ask whether neutrality can ever exist. Under what circumstances would it be possible for any city to opt out of the struggle of the Peloponnesian War?<sup>82</sup>

In a practical sense, cities are able to remain neutral. Bauslaugh gives us several examples that prove the point, such as Argos.<sup>83</sup> Thucydides even comments on the advantages Argos gained from alliances with both sides (ἀμφοτέροις δὲ μᾶλλον ἐνσπονδοὶ ὄντες ἐκκαρπώσασθαι, 5.28.2).<sup>84</sup> Yet before the war Corcyra had a navy; Argos had an army. The question is not whether neutrality can be a viable policy, but rather whether it is possible or advisable for a weak, small polis to claim neutrality.<sup>85</sup> The Melians' only hope, given that their sole resource is argument, is to argue in a way that will persuade Athens. The Athenians insist upon arguments in terms of expediency, yet, as we have seen, the Melians fail to abide by this stipulation: instead we find Melos continuing to put forth appeals to morality. Thucydides' account of the war thus far has made clear that for Melos to persuade Athens, it has to articulate clear

<sup>81</sup>The islander status of Melos is emphasized at 5.84.2, 5.97, 5.99; cf. 5.109.

<sup>82</sup>Bauslaugh 28 observes: "it seems that Thucydides considered this anomalous policy [i.e., neutrality] as a double-edged sword, simultaneously dangerous, even potentially fatal, for those who pursued it, and yet also useful, even necessary, for belligerents, whose interests, indeed whose very victory or defeat, were served by convincing uncommitted states, whose polarization might prove disastrous, that it would in fact be the best and securest policy (i.e., *sophrosyne*) to abstain from the conflict and remain at peace."

<sup>83</sup>See Bauslaugh 110–24, 146–60, 162–63 *et passim*.

<sup>84</sup>See discussion of this passage in Bauslaugh 71–72.

<sup>85</sup>Seaman 415 observes: "It is indeed ironic to consider that it was in fact her longstanding neutrality which left Melos as prey for Athens during the Peace of Nicias." Williams 306 finds a broader lesson: "The incident [of Mycalessus] also indicates that any state which has a powerful ally that can come to its aid has an important advantage. This is particularly true in the case of a small city-state that cannot defend itself well. Thucydides illustrates this point over and over in the *History*: States which act without allies, such as Plataea, Mytilene, and Melos frequently come to grief."

advantages for Athens. As Bauslaugh argues, the Melians are now confronted with a “newly evolved ethos of hegemonial, imperial Greek states that refused to accept any restraints on the pursuit of self-interest.”<sup>86</sup>

The perspective of the reader instructs us in assessing the validity and wisdom of Melian and Athenian argument and action. In fact, it turns out that we cannot evaluate what happens in the Melian episode—what goes wrong and why, the Melians’ failure to see the difference between diplomatic discourse and actual motivation, the Athenians’ selective vision of past and future—without setting this episode in the context of the rest of the *History*. Everything demonstrated in the first five books puts the reader in an epistemological position superior to that of the Melians and the Athenians. In earlier situations in the *History* (e.g., the Corcyrean episode), Thucydides guides, instructs, and makes connections for the reader.<sup>87</sup> By the end of Book 5, Thucydides has set a more challenging project for the reader. The Melian episode may have many goals, but one of these is to test the reader regarding what the *History* itself teaches.<sup>88</sup> The reader’s ultimate task is to examine lessons from the rest of the *History* and apply them in this new context. Thucydides’ world suggests not only the interconnectedness of cities, but also the relevance of conflict and argument found in one setting to new situations. While neutrality may have existed in late fifth-century Greece, in the world constructed by Thucydides only those who have learned the lessons of history have a chance of pursuing successful policy.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Bauslaugh 146.

<sup>87</sup>E.g., Thucydides explicitly links the Corcyrean conflict to the outbreak of the war (1.23.6, 1.55.2; cf. 1.146); see Morrison 101–4.

<sup>88</sup>Connor (1984: 15–19, 233–40) discusses the development of the reader’s reaction.

<sup>89</sup>Bauslaugh 117 notes that all the previously neutral states “eventually became involved in the war,” which “emphasizes how terribly difficult it was to remain uncommitted in a time of general conflict between powerful hegemonial alliances. Failure did not mean that no abstention was possible, only that it was difficult to maintain.” I would like to thank the editor of *TAPA* and several anonymous readers for their extremely valuable substantive, stylistic, and bibliographical suggestions.

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