

Classics / WAGS 23: Essay 3 (April 16, 2011)

The essays were read anonymously, by topics (hence the odd footers). Below, topic by topic, are some interesting responses. By no coincidence they all have titles that signal the author's argument and intrigue the reader.

3.1 *Disruptive Mourning (Oresteia, PW, Antigone)*

>In the *Antigone*, how does Sophocles in his portrayal of Antigone synthesize the ritual and lyrical aspects of women in the *Oresteia* with the political discourse found in Thucydides? Be as specific and concrete as you can in tracing the Aeschylean antecedents for Antigone as a performer of ritual and the Thucydidean parallels for Antigone as a debater

Antigone: The Woman Who Speaks Like A Man

In *Antigone*, Sophocles presents a young woman fulfilling a traditional obligation to bury her family's dead. Yet, Antigone has the gall to act both femininely and masculinely. Her actions are feminine, but her means are quite male. As is appropriate for a woman, she buries her brother, weeps at his grave, and kills herself with domestic cloth. These typical tasks, however, occur within atypical contexts. With her father, mother, and brothers dead, Antigone assumes the role of redeemer. She gives her life to the memory of those buried, satisfying religion and honor to end her family's wretched bloodline. She cares for the dead, thus killing herself. A female with masculine aplomb, she challenges gender norms and seems to egg on her own death. Antigone fulfills the traditional female role of the virginal mourner, yet justifies her deeds through Periclean oration, arguing for the recognizably male position of reasoned natural justice and worthy sacrifice.

As Aeschylus's *Oresteia* demonstrates, women hold a unique role in the handling of funeral rites. They provide nourishment to the deceased, quenching the corpses' thirst. Electra and the chorus of slave women offer libations for the ground to "drink" (LB 66, 95). In Sophocles's retelling, Antigone brings "thirsty dust to the body" (*Antigone* 430). These anthropomorphized gravesites seem to suckle on their female aids. Like breast milk, life energy transfers from the women to the earth. The women appeasing Agamemnon give their lives to his vengeance, and Antigone gives her life—literally—by performing her brother's ceremony. Antigone tells Ismene that "[her] life died long ago, to serve the dead," further emphasizing the sacrificing women's detachment from their life force to appease the dead (560). The libation bearers even cry out to Gaia, the earth mother goddess (LB 44). The formalized overlay of the fertile, life-giving earth and the grave keeping, deathly ground emphasizes the soil's implications as a gateway of life, birth and death in one. Ironically, these sacrificing women are virgins and have never nursed true human life. Their purity intensifies their sacrifice, their religious rites wholly untainted by man. Antigone is even described by the sentry as a mother bird robbed of her nestlings, bewailing her loss (*Antigone* 425). This maternal characterization

presents the role of mourner as increasingly uniquely female. Religiously, Antigone must appease her brother's spirit, even if, by nurturing the dead, she dies herself.

Despite her very female effort of mourning, Antigone defends her actions like a man. Echoing Pericles' funeral narration of 430/1, she attaches her actions to a grander cause; Pericles chooses statesmanship, and Antigone fights for unwritten, natural law. Antigone dies violating orders. She does not break a civic law, nor a divine ruling, but a decree from a new king. Proud, she is happy to die with her principles; according to her honor, she has done nothing worth shame. Creon's ruling requires allegiance to a specific king, not Antigone's beloved Thebes. His subjects follow him out of fear, not respect. When Pericles argues for citizenship, he places power in the individual Athenians, each citizen "lord and owner of his own person" (PW 2.41). These Athenians pledge themselves, and often die for, their city, not simply for their specific ruler: "those whom we put in positions of authority" (2.37b). The people ostensibly hold the power. Pericles, in this way, diffuses anger against the perpetrators of war, emphasizing loyalty to Athens over potential retributive rage of mourning families.

Creon controls Thebes as a lone ruler with little dramatic claim to the throne. Oedipus, while a perceived outsider, does rid Thebes of the plague of the sphinx and would likely be elected, given the opportunity. Creon, on the other hand, inherits the throne after great scandal. Antigone does not recognize Creon as king, and instead offers loyalty to Thebes and her own royal bloodline. Antigone, by argument of omission, never refers to Creon as king. She once sarcastically calls him "worthy," but never characterizes him as worthy enough of fear, as a man who could take her life away (*Antigone* 31). In fact, Antigone treats her fatal imprisonment as an entire suicide, her sacrifice hardly impacted by Creon's orders for her death. This framing, rhetorically leaving Creon impotent, places Antigone in the role of loyal Theban despite her treachery. Her attendance to the religious needs of the Theban prince, her brother, is thereby an act of true citizenship, her death a patriotic sacrifice. Her female role of religious ceremony overlaps her desired role as her family's redeemer.

Antigone does not seek respect as a woman, but as a male warrior. Her parents disgraced and her brothers dead by each other's hands, she presents the best hope of redemption at the end of the family line. In life, she acts as a rebellious female, violating Pericles' assertion that women, whether honorable or terrible, should never seek attention from men. Yet, in death, she allies herself with a military funeral. She defends herself as Pericles praises the fallen warriors. She compels the chorus of Theban elders to wait until her death, to mock her in her grave (*Antigone* 481). She hopes to defer her judgment until rosy, heroic glory is granted by death, as Pericles recalls as customary in the acclaim of the dead (PW 2.45).

Her self-identification is then quite masculine. She emphasizes the collectivity of her death, going to join "[her] people, that great number that have died" (*Antigone* 893). This alignment with ancestral heroism is typically male, a salute to the bravery of forefathers, yet Antigone considers herself in their ranks. She calls out to Thebans, crying "in the name of our fathers' gods" (839). Her appeal to male-identified gods implies her own male identification.

She considers her religious attendance to a prince of Thebes as an act, however small, of heroic patriotism. Pericles attaches greatest glory to those willing to sacrifice their lives for patriotism, an honorable whitewash of any past transgressions (PW 2.43). Antigone accordingly calls on the Thebans as fellow citizens, employing democratic language to rhetorically paint herself into the landscape of the civic and heroic male. She bewails, "My city!" and appeals to the onlookers as witnesses, a specific civic function tied to a promise of grander justice. This political vocabulary does not suit Antigone's actual gender role, but instead casts her as a male hero, rhetorically fulfilling her dream of dying an honorable, patriotic death.

Sophocles characterizes Antigone as a woman with the ambitions of a man. As expected in Greek tragedy's young virginal heroines, Antigone ritualistically gives her own life to serve the needs of the dead. Recognizing her gender limitations, she performs no male tasks, but uses very persuasive masculine rhetoric. While both Pericles and Antigone value action over words, they rely on language heavily to argue for such preferences. Their personal actions may be humble, but their intentions are grand. Antigone warns Ismene, "I do not love a friend who loves in words," yet stops her sister from committing herself to the same deadly fate (*Antigone* 543). Antigone caringly denies her sister her own martyrdom, knowing that only through careful rhetoric may a young woman's actions hold true clout. As she mourns her fallen family and dreads her impending death aloud, she weakens Creon and sculpts herself as a male hero. She never grants Creon the respect to be considered her killer, yet considers herself a faithful citizen of Thebes. Satisfied with the honorable nature of her death, she can then turn and face her tragic suicide with few delusions of injustice. She certainly does not enjoy her early death, but she is content enough to control its circumstances. Even in her final frenzied speech, she gives herself away as bride of Hades: the tragic female position of death's wife decided by a masculine Antigone, taking the paternal task of arranging marriage. A masterful twist of female and male, Sophocles creates an especially tragic protagonist: a woman who dies with the courage and cleverness of a young warrior.

3.2 *The First Citizen* (PW 2.34-65, OK)

>How does Oedipus in OK embody both the virtues and the vulnerabilities of Athenian character as they are described in Thucydides' first book and as they manifest themselves in Pericles' zenith and fall in PW 2.34-65? In comparison to the optimistic Aeschylus, how do Thucydides and Sophocles respectively see the prospects for *logos* to prevail? In making your comparison, try to work from the *logos* / *ergon* contrasts that are close to the surface in Thucydides and buried more deeply in Sophocles.

[Most frequent was that both authors show Oedipus' and Pericles' logos running up against the ergon (accident / force / irrationality) of the plagues. The following paragraph draws an interesting contrast in seeing Sophocles as the more optimistic:]

Ironically, in Sophocles' great tragedy, there is a more optimistic view of the prospects of logos prevailing. Through Oedipus, Sophocles provides many examples of logos overriding ergon. The play itself is rooted in an aspect of logos, prophecy. Despite Oedipus' attempts to avoid his fate, the prophecy still comes true. As Oedipus unravels the meaning of his past actions, other forms of logos appear such as deliberation and rationality as he does not hastily punish Creon. Even though Oedipus' life is doomed by the curse, an example of ergon, he is still able to enforce the law, showing the great strength of logos. At the end of the play, Oedipus stays true to his previous edict and punishes himself and asks to be exiled, showing his great downfall is finally carried out by the prevailing logos. While the play depicts Oedipus' downfall, it contrastingly stands as a representation of the positive prospect for logos to prevail, an ideal so deeply rooted in Athenian society.

[Other interesting angles were to suggest that the ideals exemplified by Oedipus and Pericles always bore the seeds of their own undoing: Though Oedipus the self-made man gained the kingdom by wit in answering the riddle (logos), in fact he had murdered the previous king and taken his wife (ergon). Similarly, Pericles' regime was based on force (ergon), not only on the enslaved island polis but on the Athenian slaves that allowed the leisure for politics. The rhetoric we hear from Pericles is all aimed at precipitating war, in which logos generally gives way to chance, desperation, and the irrational side of human temperament.

[Some writers ran up against the interesting perplexity that among things external to man in OK are "unwritten laws," which are part of nature but smack of logos. A resultant approach to Oedipus is to see him running up against the limits of his own, human logos and thereby apprehending a higher logos, of which he becomes the embodiment in OC.

[The following essay is not remarkable for its overall conclusions about the comparison, but the supporting analysis offers strikingly good readings of PW and OK.]

The march of Unreason:

Logos and Ergon in Thucydides and Sophocles

Sophocles' *Oedipus The King* and the first two books of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* both deal with the conflict between logos—reason, deliberation, culture—and ergos—emotions, brute nature, the physical, necessity. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Pericles leads Athens through a rollercoaster of cultural and political supremacy, chaotic plague, and finally a nominally democratic yet truly tyrannical empire. In *Oedipus the King*, the conflict comes as Oedipus demands to know the truth even as he realizes the crushing misery that the truth will bring. In both cases, friction between logos and ergon resolves only in suffering; in both cases, the interests of the polis are used to justify drastic action. An analysis of Thucydides yields a more complete understanding of both the virtues and vulnerabilities of Athenian character, and

an application of that analysis to Oedipus reveals the power of prophesy, the complexity of destiny, and the tragedy of confident ignorance.

The Athenian character, as Thucydides describes it in the first two books of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, is characterized by a constant and unquenchable thirst for supremacy. Unlike the Spartans, Athenians value innovation over consolidation (1.70). The daring skill that allows Athenian vessels to rule the Aegean Peloponnese translates into their core value set: an Athenian pushes ever outward, always sure that the farther he goes the more and better the result will be. The state does not exist as a static entity, but rather as an evolving experiment that pushes at the edge of the “modern” and expands the possibilities of freedom, empire, culture, and progress. Fortune, though acknowledged to have a substantial role in extended warfare, does not pertain for the Athenian *polis*. Chance is mentioned only as an indirect threat to the Spartan Assembly, (1.77) a hint that accidents happen to the weak while the strong and the virtuous achieve what they wish through the inexorable force of their determination. Athens bursts outwards, too brilliant for the vagaries of fate.

The foundation for that expansion, as Athens sees it, comes from the construction of the *polis* itself. Thucydides describes the careful balance that Athens sustains between the self-interested power of a burgeoning empire and an enduring respect for the laws stabilizing that empire from within (1.77). The laws that exist to protect the rights of the citizens of Athens do not necessarily protect the rights of the nations subjugated by the Athenian state. While Athens professes a trust in the rule of law, that trust has value only because it separates her from other, more tyrannical states. Athens has the power to do as she pleases—the state engages in primarily legal action by choice, not by necessity. And as a dominant power, Athens believes that the people she conquers should be grateful for the rights they are allowed, rather than protest about the injustices they must endure.

The success of the Athenian state allows Pericles to congratulate Athens on the apparent triumph of Athenian *logos*—in this case reasoned action, order through culture and laws, considered judgment, and inherent courage—over the rote militarization, disregard for reason, and despotism of her neighbors. The success of Athens, he says, traces back to an inherent superiority of character. Because of the confluence of democracy, education, and cultural values, Athenians grow naturally courageous and altruistic. Personal interest intersects with the affairs of the *polis*, and everyone naturally participates in politics because debate leads to understanding, understanding leads to proper action, and the combination of reason and action is true bravery (40). That bravery endows Athenians with the virtue most prized by Pericles: the ability to wrest destiny from the “doubtful hands of Hope” and, trusting in one’s self, accept death rather than dishonor.

The plague that sweeps through Athens in the summer following Pericles’ funeral oration upends the framework of the Athenian *polis*. People die like dogs, piling up in the streets. Dead men are abandoned and burned without proper burial. The living turn inward, thinking only of themselves without regard to the state. The plague subverts the Athenian

ability to reason even as it erodes the courage and confidence of her citizens. Fear, the quality conquered by bravery, overwhelms the population, and men heed neither laws nor piety. Chance takes precedent; pleasure seeking replaces honorable existence; and the Athenian empire that emerges, as outlined by Pericles, identifies more as a traditional tyranny than as a bastion of liberty. In times of hardship, Pericles cautions, individual interests must submit to the interests of the state, for the fate of the whole affects all constituent parts, while each individual cannot rescue a collective collapse. And once a nation begins to subjugate a proportion of her people for the good of the whole, she must continue. To step back from tyranny is to invite insurrection. So it is better for each individual to shoulder the burden of empire, however onerous, than to lose empire and the order it sustains. The Athenian ship of state survives, and Athens does not surrender to fate, but out of the plague emerges a harder, more calculating state, a tyranny disguised in the garments of democracy.

If the primary characteristics of an Athenian, as Thucydides describes them, are a voracious appetite for expansion, confidence in risk-taking, and a moderate willingness to employ tyranny to harden the legal foundation of the *polis*, then in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King* Oedipus embodies the Athenian aesthetic. The prototypic 'self-made' man, Oedipus saved the people of Thebes from the oppression of a Sphinx by solving her riddle. This ingenuity, said to be the gift of the gods, caused the Thebans to install the foreign-born Oedipus as king. Oedipus is a proactive man. Faced with the problem of an unshakeable pestilence, he seeks the infallible intelligence of Apollo in his temple at Pythos. He considers the problem rationally (OK 60), and acts as he can—the one Theban still in control of his *logos*.

Moreover, Oedipus shares with the Athenians both a commanding respect for justice and the willingness to subvert that justice to serve his own means. Laius' murder unsolved, he pledges to solve it: his mandate as "champion of [his] country and the God"(136) demands it, and his individual concern for safety parallels the necessity for an honest pursuit of the truth. Although the Gods decide whether a state will suffer or prosper (150), the motivated man uses his strength and his integrity to straighten any kinks out of the process of government. If no secrets remain, if the responsible confess to their transgressions, and if laws are properly prosecuted, then the state and its leader have done their part. Any further misfortune that comes originates from the gods—destiny.

But Oedipus diverges from the Athenian ideal in the zeal with which he prosecutes the law. Athens makes it clear (*Th.* 77) that law must rule over force in the administration of justice, whether or not the Athenians themselves uphold the highest standard of law. But Oedipus invokes the wrath of the Gods¹ to punish the regicide. Cursing a man to "wear out his life in misery to miserable doom"(248), to live barren both in crops and children for the rest of his days, exceeds any sovereign law. While Pericles rules his state by logical suggestion, Oedipus rules by curse and reward—a system of indirectly invoked and impiously summoned retribution.

¹ Or the wrath of something even more primal, as seen with Aeschylus' Furies.
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Oedipus' reaction to the news that the prophet Teiresias brings compounds this divergence. Teiresias at first refuses to speak his prophecy, prompting Oedipus to splutter in consternation at the prophet's reticence. To Oedipus, any prophecy is a "gift" because it reveals the truth. For a man who exists without a past, constantly in fear of a prophecy he cannot affect, this drive for truth makes sense. Lack of clarity denotes betrayal and subterfuge in every instance, Oedipus believes, while greater access to the truth cannot but lead to a better Thebes.

But blinded his search for truth, Oedipus confuses the value of a personal understanding of truth with the good that truth can do for the *polis*. Even when Athens undergoes the catastrophic changes wrought by the plague, Pericles manages to maintain sufficient perspective to realize that no matter what flaws the system sustained, the "imperial dignity of Athens" has to persist. In times of hardship, Pericles reasons, individual demands for justice must subordinate themselves to the tyranny of empire. So he alters the structure of Athens, but keeps the empire alive. He weathers the ill effects of *ergon*, knowing that under his hands *logos* can survive.

But no knowing spectator tells Oedipus to defer, for the good of the state, his own increasingly obsessive desire for the truth. Previously, Oedipus pursued the secret of his birth in Corinth and stumbled upon a prophecy that sent him fugitive across the land, ever fearful of the horrors foretold. Here he takes the same hounding approach—an action perhaps as noble as the Periclean admonition to know fear and face it even to death, and probably cathartic for him after a life of paranoia, but a myopic action nonetheless. For even in the face of warning after warning, from Teiresias, the messenger, Jocasta, and the shepherd, Oedipus pushes onwards towards the truth. There is beauty in the tragedy of his persistence, in the contrast between the shallow skimming existence suggested by Jocasta and the Oedipus' unquenchable desire to understand. But such need, even for the truth, edges towards *ergon*. By choosing knowledge over the temporary protection of stasis, Oedipus sets his path; his fate having been foretold, he chooses to follow the predetermined path and suffers for it. And yet, Oedipus' acquiescence to fate at the end of *Oedipus the King* evokes catharsis along with the expected tragedy. After a play of expectation, Oedipus finally knows his destiny. There are no more surprises. He trusts himself into the hands of fate, and follows as he can, as he has always done.

3.4 The Fall of Athens (PW 6 & 7, TW)

>How does the fall of the Athenian expedition to Sicily parallel and differ from the fall of Troy as depicted in TW?

Separation and Unity in Gender-Specific Realms of War

Whether in war, as in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, or its aftermath, depicted in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, severance within a group or of an individual from his or her native land always bodes of weakness and destruction. In contrast, unity and alliance brings about order and harmony, an appropriate message for Euripides, as an advocate for peace, to project to his audiences. *Trojan Women* addresses separation and unity within feminine domains, that is, within families – especially those involved in the 'marriages' of Cassandra and Agamemnon and Helen to Menelaus – and exile: separation from the maternal homeland. The events that unfold in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* demonstrate the dangers of separation in the masculine realm of war: in political dissonance between states and individuals and military disunity brought about by poor leadership. In each of these works, a leader arises and attempts to unify his or her broken people. Both inevitably fail, but for different reasons. While Hecuba takes on masculine qualities in order to rule over the fallen Trojan women, but inevitably fails because they have already given up on their city, Nicias' feminine weaknesses -- his compassion and tendency to avoid violence -- leads him to inadvertently wedge his army apart.

The opening scene of *Trojan Women* sets up the forthcoming acts of familial separation and disunity with an example of the opposite: the conciliation and reunification of familial bonds between the gods. Athena comes to Poseidon, entreating him as "my father's brother" (91), which opens him to her proposal and successfully persuades him to help her; he says, "Family love has magic power", (91), which becomes ironic when framed by the images of broken families that are to come. The gods provide an example of the ideal unification that Hecuba attempts to emulate in the following scene, but fails. She rises majestically from the ashes of Troy and calls for the women to unite under her (94). But when they gather, no real unification takes place. Instead of banding together in support of Troy – which is referred to as the familial "Mother of Cities" (132) – they are more concerned with the Grecian cities to which they will go (96-97). From the start, the situation is hopeless because the women have already mentally abandoned their "familial" ties to the land.

Aside from the women's exile from their maternal land, the familial severance between Troy and its people is also made evident in the severance of mother and child and the marriage of its women to foreigners. Astyanax, who symbolizes the last child and future of his maternal city, is killed and separated from his birth mother, Andromache, and his symbolic mother: Troy itself. The way he is executed, "thrown down from the battlements of Troy" (114), involves literally separating his body from the land. Hecuba later ironically extends this metaphor by comparing the women's exile, another literal separation from the homeland, to "a headlong plunge" in the "abyss of pain" (116) – there is no land at the end of their fall; their separation from Troy is, in itself, a cause for endless pain. Marriage, the unification of one family to another, can also be related to the women's exile and severance from Troy. Cassandra comforts

her mother by pointing out that her separation from her homeland and her family will result in a “marriage” with Agamemnon (102). Although the marriage is a mockery (not an actual act of unification), Cassandra also argues that the Trojans won ultimate victory over the Greeks by separating them from their native countries and destroying their home lives: “When a man was killed, he was not wrapped and laid to rest by his wife’s hands, He had forgotten his children’s faces; now he lies in alien earth” (103). The Trojans on the other hand, although they also perished, were lucky to be buried “in the land that bore them” (103) and return home to their families each night (103). So while the Greeks might have won in the realm of masculine warfare, Cassandra argues that the Trojans were the victors in the feminine, domestic realm. Cassandra’s argument could also explain Hecuba’s insistence for Menelaus to execute Helen in Troy (124); if Helen is returned to Sparta, her motherland and the place where she’d shared a life with Menelaus, she might regain her domestic power over Menelaus (as the wife he may return to from war), and prevent her own death. It can be argued that, if victory in this play is defined by success in the domestic realm, it was inevitable that Hecuba failed because her place of domestic power is utterly destroyed.

Although she fails to keep neither the Trojan women nor her family united, she demonstrates admirable qualities of masculine leadership in a play of demasculinized and absent males. Her first act of masculinity follows her entrance almost immediately; she picks up her husband’s scepter and declares herself queen (94). With Priam dead and Astyanax about to be killed, Hecuba, if only temporarily, fulfills the role of Troy’s king. During the “trial” of Helen, it is not Menelaus who prosecutes her (despite being well-positioned to call for her death), but Hecuba, who redeems womankind and demonstrates that she is rational and eloquent being. Her masculine superiority over Menelaus is made clear when the chorus chimes in, insisting Helen be put to death so as to “Make Greece, which calls you womanish, keep silence” (123) – ironically, it is a woman’s suggestion that he must follow in order to prove his masculinity.

Menelaus is not the only enfeebled male in the play. Talthybius, who despite being portrayed as a sympathetic, compassionate character, could be interpreted as womanish for the same reasons. His character flaws bear resemblance to those of Nicias in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, who, towards the end of the war, is femininely passive. Both men play the role of the pacifist who is reluctantly forced into violence. When Talthybius comes to deliver the news of Astyanax’s sentence, he is regretful and admits to not being heartless -- or strong-willed -- enough to perform the act himself: “A job like this is fit for a man without feeling or decency; I’m not half brutal enough” (116). Nicias is similarly oppressed by the duties of his profession (Talthybius, as a simple messenger, has no say in what is decided by the generals): Thucydides writes, “Nicias had not wanted to be chosen for the command; his view was that the city was making a mistake” (414). Nicias’ mysticism and “[overinclination] to divination and such things” (511) could also be interpreted as feminine qualities, as they tend towards emotion and spirituality, reminiscent of Helen’s self-defense (she accuses the gods of leading her on), rather than the type of logic and reason demonstrated by Hecuba.

Undoubtedly, Nicias is a tragic character, as what he warns Athens against in trying to take over Sicily – “this is the wrong time for such adventures” (415), inevitably comes true at the cost of his own life. It can be argued that his feminine, passive qualities, however, don’t apply well to the masculine realm of war, leading to the ultimate division and destruction of his army. For example, his feminine mysticism about the lunar eclipse causes him to delay moving his struggling army even longer (511), which allowed for their inevitable defeat at sea. His tactics end up separating and dividing his army – weakening it – when unification is called for. For one, Nicias’ inability to unite and cooperate with Demosthenes, who saw the weakness and ineffectiveness of Nicias’ decision not to attack Syracuse immediately instead of waiting at Catana (504), on abandoning the siege causes him to repeat the mistake he made at the beginning of the war, delaying action when it is most needed. Demosthenes possesses the decisive, battle-ready attitude the passive Nicias lacks. Their inability to see eye-to-eye ultimately ends up literally severing the army in two during their retreat towards Camarina (532). When their troops are separated due to traversing unfamiliar terrain in the dark and attacked by the Sicilians, Nicias decides to take his half of the army and retreat faster “in the belief that, as things were, their safety lay not in standing their ground and fighting” (532). Demosthenes, however, does exactly the opposite, “he formed his men up in battler order” (533). While Nicias manages to escape, the loss of more than half his army, and the weariness of the remaining half, ultimately leads to their total defeat. It’s difficult to say, but had there been more cooperation between the generals, and had the army acted as a single unit instead of two separate ones, perhaps the army would have fared better.

While Demosthenes may be interpreted as one foil to Nicias’ passive attitude, Gylippus is another example of how unity trumps separation. It’s subtle, but the difference between how Nicias and Gylippus speak to their troops before the battle in the Great Harbor lies in how they address their troops. While Nicias singles out groups of soldiers – “I am not saying this so much to sailors as to hoplites” (518) -- and distinguishes Athenian colonists as “not really Athenians” (519), Gylippus addresses his army as a unified whole: “Syracusans and allies...” (520). Nicias’ act of dividing his army by address reflects and forebodes the army’s final severance at the end of the war.

Despite their failure to effectively unify their people and bring victory in their respective gender-specific domains of war and family, Nicias and Hecuba are still sympathetic, admirable protagonists. Their final acts at the end of their respective stories round them out and equalize their extreme attributes. Hecuba’s masculine energy is subdued in the final scene during her burial of Astyanax, a feminine act she performs in place of Andromache. Thus, she goes from occupying Priam’s position as king to that of a tender, ordinary mother. Likewise, Nicias’ tendency to separate his troops and disagree with Demosthenes is evened out by his actions during the speech he delivers before entering battle on land. As he speaks, he rearranges the soldiers, closing the gaps (530) and effectively unifying them. And for once, “Demosthenes did the same” (530).

3.5 Persuasion (*Oresteia*, PW)

>Compare how each uses persuasion (peithō) to trace the rise and fall of Athens. In the world depicted in PW, why does persuasion work so much less well in creating social order?

Why Athens Needed An (Effective) U.N.

The act of persuasion is often viewed with suspicion; its synonyms (blandishment, brainwashing, inducement, inveiglement, sweet talk, and so on) invariably have a negative connotation. Yet persuasion can also be used to convince people to do the right thing, the proper thing. But even when persuasion gets someone to do the right thing, there can be grave consequences. Aeschylus presents this multifaceted nature of persuasion in the *Oresteia*. In the first two plays (*Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*), persuasion is seen as a harmful force; it is Peitho, the goddess who is the embodiment of persuasion, who takes Clytemnestra's tongue and convinces Agamemnon to walk on the red carpet to meet his death, and it is Persuasion that causes Cassandra to convince Orestes to avenge his father's death. Each of these persuasions is marked by polluting motives – personal vengeance against immediate family members is taken, regardless of the consequences. Yet in the final play of the trilogy, *The Furies*, Aeschylus offers a way for Persuasion to be used for positive ends. Athena uses Persuasion to, in effect, break the cycle of humans doling out their own personal form of vigilante justice; she creates democracy through the Areopagus (the court of Athens). The court, because it is official, neutral, and has no stake in the outcome, is able to mete out justice without the polluting motive of vengeance against family.

In Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, it appears to be the same story as the *Oresteia* but on a larger scale; city-states are trapped in a cycle of violence...with Athens itself leading the destruction. When Athens begins to use persuasion amongst other city states, and acts like a tyrant in itself, it fails to use persuasion in a positive light. Ironically, given how foundational *The Furies* was to Athens, Athens does not seem to see that it needs to persuade itself to apply the same remedy as is applied in *The Furies*! The power of persuasion, as depicted by these two works, demonstrates a need for a neutral, unpolluted arbiter, a "super-polis" or United Nations if you will, for social order to prevail.

When one uses persuasion for vengeance against one's own family, one becomes polluted. This pollution seems to set off another actor who needs to rectify the injustice, but in doing so the new actor too becomes polluted. So polluted persuasion is what sparks and continues cycles of violence in the *Oresteia*, and yet the tables are turned in *The Furies* when unpolluted persuasion stops the cycle itself. Athena sets up the trial because, unlike every character that has preceded her, she decides the matter is too grave for her alone to settle. The solution she finds, the court with the jury, decides whether Orestes' act was justifiable. The vote turns to a tie, which (as Athena previously stated) means that the male defendant is

avored. After the vote, the Furies are, well, furious. And now we see the power of unpolluted (positive) persuasion.

Initially, the Furies are obstinate in their anger. They repeat their complaints word for word, which implies that they are ignoring Athena's *logos*. In this section, Athena is truly imbued with *peithos*; she employs all sorts of persuasive techniques. She comforts the Furies by telling them that they were not actually defeated since it was a tie, and thus they should not feel disgrace. She also swears that the Furies will receive proper respect and a shrine in their honor. The Furies ignore her, and launch into another repeated passage on how great their suffering and pain is. Still, Athena is persistent (another aspect of Persuasion). Possibly most telling of all, however, is that the Furies' ears seem to perk up when Athena asks them if they have any respect for the power of persuasion (*The Furies* 885-891), and if they do, to recognize that it would be unjust to treat Athens poorly because of the decision of the court. In essence, Athena is explicitly invoking the goddess *Peitho* herself and is drawing the Furies' attention to the fact that the goddess demands respect. Only after Athena mentions persuasion in this social context do the Furies finally start to negotiate with Athena. Athena offers good terms on the place of honor for the Furies, strikes a deal regarding the Furies' blessing the fertility of the earth, and eventually the Furies are won over; Athena's persuasion prevails.

Clearly, the ending here is a joyous one – the Furies become *Eumenides* or “The Kindly Ones”, and the cycle of violence is over and justice has been served. Persuasion has been used here by Athena effectively, resourcefully, using many of the same “tricks” as previously seen in the trilogy (appeal to emotions, appeal to furthering goals, appeal to justice) but this time in a positive sense. The jury does not acquit Orestes but lets him off, and because of the creation of the court and democracy such a cycle of vengeance should never occur again; justice is now to be doled out by the disinterested, unpolluted state. Since the state is not a person, it cannot become polluted and persuasion can be used for good ends.

This logic only works, though, so long as the state does not act like a person. Unfortunately, Athens does seem to act very much like a person in Thucydides' account. Throughout the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides gives Athens anthropomorphic qualities. Athens “wants things” or “desires things” or “feels a certain way” towards certain places. Indeed, Athens' arguments are commonly made by unnamed Athenian representatives, who seem to be the very voice of Athens itself. This personification of Athens is exemplified by the Melian Dialogue section of *History of the Peloponnesian War* (5.84-116).

Right at the beginning of the dialogue, the evil aspects of persuasion are explicitly on the table, when the Athenian representative notes that the Melian Council is holding this meeting in secret for fear that the Athenians would persuade the masses if the meeting were held in public (5.85). The Athenian statement is both arrogant and crude; the Athenian representative says, in so many words “Hah! Clearly you must believe that our arguments are so self-evident and powerful that you feel a need to hide them from your people.” The Melian council, by contrast, does not have such an air of haughtiness. Athens' argument has one main takeaway point:

might makes right. They believe that if they do not dominate those who are weaker than they, their subjects will suspect that Athens is weak and rebel (5.95). The council of Melians, after launching multiple logical arguments stating that an attack by Athens will simply anger other neutral states (5.96-100), resign themselves to hoping that fate and justice will side with them in the end. The Athenians claim to be trying to persuade the Melians to see their viewpoint, but it's apparent to the reader that they're really just rationalizing. The Athenians have clearly *already* decided (persuaded themselves) to attack the Melians, and it is also clear that this persuasion is polluted; it stems from selfish, tyrannical motives. While Athens itself may be a democracy, using "might makes right" as an argument is the type of response only a tyrant can give (and the type the Furies cry out about). As the Melians point out, the Athenians are only going to hurt themselves in the long run; convincing themselves of the need to crush the (innocent) powerless will restart a string of violence that will be reciprocated.

Athens, in this situation, is in no way a neutral, judicial body. (Ironically, in fact, they are attacking the Melians because of their desire for neutrality.) Before, Pericles was able to stop Athens from trying to expand their empire in a tyrannical and unjust way. Now, without a wise leader and without a neutral arbiter like the court, Athens is willing to commit a pretty dishonorable act in attacking (unprovoked) a small, weak, and neutral city state. One could, maybe, even see this as the equivalent of a polluting act. In short, since Thucydides portrays Athens personified, we can easily see how a (possibly) polluted Athens uses persuasion to evil ends, and is unchecked in doing so.

The conclusion of the *Oresteia* was that persuasion is a powerful force that needs to be channeled by a neutral arbiter. Athena created the Areopagus to act as this neutral arbiter. In the case of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, it would seem that Athens, as a democracy and founder of the neutral arbiter of the Areopagus, should in fact embody neutral arbiter at its core. But without a strong figure like Pericles to keep Athens in check, it appears that Athens as an entity devolves into behaving like a human. In the same way that the sacrifice of Iphigenia triggers a cycle of self-persuasive, retributive violence in the *Oresteia*, Athens personified triggers a cycle of self-persuasive, retributive violence in the Peloponnesian War. But in the *Oresteia*, a greater, neutral body is established to break the cycle and remain unpolluted. Where is the greater, neutral body in the *Peloponnesian War*? The Delian League does not suffice – its charter would never allow it to mediate disputes of justice. Perhaps the city states of ancient Greece need a United Nations.