

## Classics / WAGS 23: Essay Three

### Thucydides and Tragedy

**Essay 3:** 1,250 – 1,500 words.

Due electronically by 5:00 PM on Saturday, April 16.

Office hours:

Mon., April 11: 2:00-4:00

Wed., April 13: 1:00-2:00

Thurs., April 14: 9:00-11:00

Friday, April 15: 2:30-4:00

### Thucydides and Drama

OK = *Oedipus the King*

OC = *Oedipus at Colonus*

PW = *Peloponnesian War*

TW = *Trojan Women*

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

The military funeral at which Pericles delivers his famous oration in 431/0 BCE represents the Athenian order at its zenith. By contrast, the military funerals and non-funerals of the *Antigone* launch Thebes into chaos. Gender roles play a clear role in each.

At the end of his funeral oration, Pericles honors and reinforces the silence of the grieving women at the ceremony: “The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticizing you” (PW 2.46). Antigone represents, for the man in authority (Creon), a worst-case mourner. But her declaration of principles, including “God’s ordinances, unwritten and secure” (Greene trans. v. 455), echoes Pericles’ praise of how Athens respects the laws that protect the oppressed and “those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break” (PW 2.37).

We have seen disruptive female mourners before: Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra (completing her daughter’s rites), Cassandra, Electra, and the slaves in *The Libation Bearers*, as well as Demeter from the hymn. But they were not, like Antigone, conversant with the rhetoric that Thucydides records for us.

**>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.**

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

In the *Oresteia*, we saw the triumph of *logos* – words, culture, rationality, deliberation, prophecy – over the realm of *ergon* – things, nature, emotion, force, bodies, necessity. The Furies finally submit graciously to Athena. In the world depicted in Sophocles' and Euripides' tragedies, however, it is harder to proclaim a winner. *Logos* and *ergon* are in constant and visible tension, since high ideals and eloquent words are never quite beyond the grasp of demonic powers or the cruel ironies of fate.

In Thucydides' history we see the *logos* in action, especially in the speeches, but there is no Athena to ensure its triumph. Without creating an Olympus, Thucydides shows the workings of dark forces beyond human rationality and control, as well as the tendency of words to lose their meanings so that force prevails, as in the revolution at Corcyra.

This and following topic (3.3) ask you to take PW 2.34-65 (Pericles' funeral oration, the plague, his final speech, and Thucydides' summary judgment) as a narrative equivalent to one of Sophocles' or Euripides' plays and compare it to a Sophoclean tragedy.

**>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.**

(Though he becomes an Athenian in Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus is a Theban and grew up in Corinth. However, for the sake of this project one can assume that the Athenians viewing OK would see him as an example of a great man with attributes that would remind them of their own politicians.)

### 3.3 *The Education of Greece* (PW 2.34-65, OC)

See the introduction to 3.2 (above).

**>Compare the interrupted idealization of Athens in PW 2.34-65, depicting the start of the war, to Sophocles' portrayal of ancient Athens in OC, written at the end of the war, in respect to the balancing of the forces of *logos* and *ergon*. In comparison to the optimistic Aeschylus, how do Thucydides and Sophocles respectively see the prospects for *logos* to prevail?**

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

Both Euripides and Thucydides give us definitive portraits of a fall: of Troy in *TW* and of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in *PW* 7. Euripides' drama is generally taken as a protest against Athenian treatment of other *poleis* and a warning of what the Athenians could expect for themselves in time. Though based on recent events, Thucydides' depiction of the disastrous Sicilian campaign also resonates with the heroic tradition that stems from Homer.

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

Feel free to concentrate on scenes, characters, or themes that are especially comparable and that point up the different outlooks of the two authors (or of tragedy and historiography, if you will). Some possible angles: How does Nicias resemble characters in the play? How do the Athenian men in Sicily come to resemble the Trojan women? Is there some equivalent to Alcibiades in the play? What does Thucydides present in place of Euripides' gods? What does Thucydides have in place of the Cassandra role? Some of Euripides' pre-occupations (e.g., with *eros* in the Helen-Menelaus scene) are extraneous to the comparison.

### 3.5 *Persuasion (Oresteia, PW)*

Aeschylus (458 BCE) and Thucydides (after 404 BCE) tell mirroring tales about the making and unmaking of Athens.

**>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?**

Since the theme is so pervasive in both works, this topic will need selectivity. Focus on some issue, character type, type scene, or image that provides an index to social development and decline. Be careful to cross-refer the techniques and outlook of the two writers rather than presenting a single narrative with Aeschylus telling the first part and Thucydides the second but with no comparison between the two.

## Notes on all topics:

### **Intellectual honesty:**

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me. Once you start the essay, it is probably best to work up to the topic by a process of your own rereading and rethinking.

### **Editing:**

Citation: Again cite rather than extensively quote the texts and do not summarize plot. Cite by book and line number, as in the reading notes (e.g., *PW* 2.34).

Organization: Make sure that I have a sense of plan. Ask yourself with every paragraph: What work is this paragraph doing to advance the argument? Will the reader know where I am going?

Please tell me what topic you are writing on. Offering your own title is also recommended as a way to give a clue where the essay is going.

If you find yourself relying on “fatal flaw” (usually *hybris*) as a central explanation for a character or historical figure, *stop immediately and call me*. The way that characters discover and grapple with their fates is a crucial topic in tragedy, but reducing them to a single flaw tends to be simplistic and misleading in *PW* and tragedy. See binder, p. 189.

### **Rough drafts:**

I'll contact first-year students and some others about submitting a draft and having a conference. The conferences will be on April 15 and 16, and the deadline will be extended to April 17 at 5:00 PM.