

# Intersections of war and rhetoric: a deconstruction of the melian dialogue



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In Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, the conflict between Athens and Sparta is illustrated not only with direct, fact-based wartime accounts but also with dramatized orations and debates that are interwoven into the narrative. Through the resulting interplay of speech-giving and war-making, two activities both highly and equally valued in ancient Greek society, a striking parallel arises between these two essential modes of human communication and interaction. This binary, with speech acting as a function and extension of war, is perhaps best exemplified in the Melian Dialogue. In the passage, the two opposing sides of the dialogue are cast as representatives of contrasting political ideologies: Athenian realism, driven by the forces of empire and conquest, is juxtaposed against Melian idealism, with its bulwarks of hope and honor. Beyond the content of the actual arguments themselves, Thucydides explores power dynamics and concepts of justice through the structure and framework of the dialogue as well as through its language and rhetoric. Specifically, the Athenians use their arguments as instruments of policy, metaphorical weapons in the battlefield of speech. In controlling the nature and trajectory of the dialogue, the Athenians assert intellectual and ideological dominance, which parallels their later military triumph over the Melians but foreshadows their eventual downfall.

In the opening of the Melian Dialogue, both the Athenian and Melian representatives attempt to structure the nature and flow of the debate. Efforts by the two sides to assert control and dominance over the proceedings drive subtle shifts in power dynamics: while the Melians are the ones who start off by stipulating the audience, the Athenians soon gain the

upper hand. The Melians' attempt at structuring the debate immediately backfires as the Athenians use the Melians' choice of audience against them: “ So we are not to speak before the people, no doubt in case the mass of the people should hear once and for all and without interruption an argument from us which is both persuasive and incontrovertible, and should so be led astray. This, we realize, is your motive in bringing us here to speak before the few” (5. 85-89). In this critique, the Athenians undermine the power and intellectual authority of the Melians by suggesting the Melian council's lack of popularity with the public. They do so while simultaneously bolstering their own position, generating anticipation for their forthcoming “ persuasive and incontrovertible” arguments. There is also a deliberate move on the part of the Athenians to elevate the nature of the dialogue to a level of philosophical abstraction, away from the grounded discussions that would be present in a typical negotiation:

“ 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 influence 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.” (5. 85)

In setting out the terms of negotiation for the dialogue that follows, the Athenians assert their dominance and pave the way for their own ideological arguments. Even before the actual arguments begin, the Athenians display their impressive oratorical abilities and their capacity to use speech as an

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effective instrument of policy. The subtext of power dynamics carries over from the structure of the dialogue to the actual content of the speeches. From the outset, the Melians attempt to present themselves as equals to the Athenians in both intellect and political standing. Expressing their views with clear, direct and logical rhetoric, they place themselves in the privileged position to declare that the Athenians are the ones in the wrong:

“ No one can object to each of us putting forward our own views in a calm atmosphere. That is perfectly reasonable. What is scarcely consistent with such a proposal is the present threat of your making war on us. We see that you have come prepared to judge the argument yourselves, and that the likely end of it all will be either war, if we prove that we are in the right, and so refuse to surrender, or else slavery.” (5. 86)

Rather than resort to the emotional arguments symptomatic of the lofty idealism they are accused of, the Melians remain focused throughout the dialogue on furthering their side with logical discourse. However, despite hints of Melian unease and discomfort at being “ force[d] to leave justice out of account and to confine [them]selves to self-interest,” the Melians are relegated to an inferior position by the Athenians, who declare that “ when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (5. 89). The upholding of this Athenian concept of justice is precisely why the dialogue never evolves into a full-fledged debate between two equal sides; as predicted by the Melians, the Athenians “ have come prepared to judge the argument [them]selves,” declaring that “ this is no fair fight, with <https://assignbuster.com/intersections-of-war-and-rhetoric-a-deconstruction-of-the-melian-dialogue/>

honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you” (5. 101).

Throughout the dialogue, the Athenians establish themselves as the ultimate judges of human character, condemning hope as “ by nature an expensive commodity” (103). They lecture and dispense advice, dismissing any questions or concerns posed by the Melians on the basis of their unequal status. The arguments purported by the Athenians to justify their imperialist agenda belie their hypocrisy and the point to which their ideologies have diverged and corrupted from the time of Pericles, when values like honor and courage were celebrated rather than mocked.

As a historic episode, the Melian Dialogue does not hold much significance in the wider context of the Peloponnesian war; instead, it can be interpreted and read as a treatise by Thucydides on the dynamics of power and conquest. Through the discourse of contrasting political philosophies as well as the subtext of the language and structure used to convey them, Thucydides shows how the Athenians combined both speech and war to establish hegemony in foreign nations like Melos in the building of their empire. The verbal sparring of the Melian Dialogue thus functions as both a prelude to the bloody military conflicts that follow in the course of the war and as a foreshadowing of the eventual downfall of Melos and the ultimate defeat of Athens – the final death throes of an empire at the end of its golden age.