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Greek Civilization

Thucydides: Author for the Ages

In writing his *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides set out to be an author for the ages, to create “a possession for all time” (1.22.4). To do so, he first distinguishes the Peloponnesian War as “more worthy of relation than any preceding it...the greatest movement yet known in history, not only of the Hellenes, but of a large part of the barbarian world” (1.1.1-2), designating his subject matter as the most important subject matter to date. Secondly and more subtly, Thucydides demonstrates his unparalleled artistry and skill as an author throughout the text. As noted by W.P. Wallace in his article “Thucydides”, “[h]is art conceals itself so well that the reader thinks he draws his own conclusions from the simply-told events”.¹ A crucial part of the ease with which readers accept Thucydides is the noticeable skill with which he writes. This skill is evident in multiple ways, some more obvious than others. For example, though he laments an “absence of romance” in the text, he includes things such as speeches, letters, and even dialogue to keep readers engaged.

As an Athenian intellectual in the fourth century BC, Thucydides would have had access to eight different types of writing. Most obviously Thucydides would have been familiar with the epic poetry of Homer, which was written three hundred years before his time and had been passed down through both oral and written tradition in Athenian culture for centuries.

¹ Wallace, W.P., “Thucydides”, *Phoenix*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1964), pp. 251-261.

Thucydides also would have had access to Hippocratic medical publishing, which began to circulate just before Thucydides began *The History*, circa 470 B.C. The Hippocratic approach to medicine was an empirical one, concerned with collecting as much objective information as possible, and included an extensive vocabulary of physiological, therapeutic, and technical terms. Related to Hippocratic medical writing is ethnography, which explores the concept of “climate determinism” or the ways in which different environments affect the balance of humors in individuals. Additionally, Thucydides would have been exposed to biographic work in the “vita” tradition. Also accessible to Thucydides were two types of rhetoric (antilogia, or the use of paired speeches, and dialogue, which was popularized by Plato in his writings of Socrates), Greek drama, be it the comedy of Aristophanes or tragedy of Aeschylus, and inscriptions of public documents such as treaties and legal decrees. Upon close inspection of *History*, one can find influence or emulation of each of these literary forms throughout the text itself, suggesting skill on an entirely different level than simply adding interest to historical writing. To demonstrate his unprecedented prowess as an author and thus give an inherent credibility to the text, Thucydides attempts to adopt all eight contemporary literary styles throughout *The Peloponnesian War*.

The influence of Hippocratic medical writings is seen specifically in the description of the Athenian plague of book two. At the time of Thucydides, Hippocratic work was relatively new. The empirical approach to medicine was initially rejected by the majority of Greeks (specifically, the uneducated) because of the traditional, widespread belief that plagues were a form of punishment for offending a god. *Miasma*, the concept of a sort of ritual, polis-wide bloodstain from the wrongdoing of an individual citizen to invoke the wrath of a god, was often accepted as the cause of plagues spreading through cities. Once one person was discovered to be

the perpetrator of such blood-staining activity, said person was exiled and the city was able to recover. The innovations of Hippocratic medicine marked a direct shift in Greek history between an emphasis on the divine and an emphasis on the physical, a shift also seen in Thucydides' *History* and most likely influenced by his reading of Hippocratic text. Thucydides endeavors not to discover the cause of the plague, but instead to "simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, should it ever break out again" (2.48.3), echoing the semiotic form of medical writing, which dealt with the compilation of as many details as possible about the diseased person, whether or not truly relevant, so that later doctors could better predict outcomes of illnesses or make diagnoses. Thucydides' physiological writing is considerable, using specifically Hippocratic terminology for the symptoms of the afflicted. For example, Thucydides observed that Athenians suffered from "violent heats in the head" and "discharges of bile of every kind" (2.49.2-3), referencing an imbalance to the Hippocratic ideal state and two of Hippocrates' Four Humors, respectively. E.M Craik notes: "Thucydides' account is not a mere list of symptoms. This description of experiences common to sufferers in a way that is reminiscent of, but does not replicate, Hippocratic case studies of individual patients"². Taking this one step further, P.J. Rhodes observes in his commentary of the text that Thucydides' account of the plague "is not the prose of a medical writer, but his medical writing is extensive if not arcane"³Thucydides very explicitly assures readers that he is not a doctor, and so it is obvious that he would not have followed perfectly the format of Hippocratic writing. However, his dense knowledge of the vocabulary and imprecise knowledge of medical writing structure shows remarkable scholarship considering the newness and relative public

² Craik, E.M., "Thucydides on the Plague: Physiology of Flux and Fixation", *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No.1 (2001)

³ Rhodes, P.J. (1988): *Thucydides, History II*, edited with translation and commentary by P.J.R (Warminster 1988).

dissension of Hippocratic medicine at the time. Further, he demonstrates this knowledge in such a small part of the text, as if to suggest that this knowledge may even be trivial to him if he is able to apply it so artfully to even unimportant situations. By employing his ‘mastery’ of Hippocratic medical writing in this way, Thucydides demonstrates his immense literary skill and credits his own intelligence and literacy, gaining him credit as an author.

Thucydides employs an ethnographic style of writing, also influenced by the work of Hippocrates, in the Corinthian speech in 1.70, in which the Corinthians entreat Sparta to join them in invading Attica. Ethnography, or climate determinism, is the scientific analysis of character traits based on the climate in which an individual lives. Perhaps the most famous example of ethnographic writing, and one available to Thucydides as he wrote *A History*, is Hippocrates’ *Airs, Waters, Places*, which goes into great depth about the correlation between the winds, water supply, temperature, and other characteristics of the land to the personality types of those who live there. One distinction made by Hippocrates is way in which the type government of the polis affects the citizens; in commenting on the “feebleness of the Asiatic race” and its “mental flabbiness and cowardice”, Hippocrates cites their monarchial system of government. Hippocrates writes: “[w]hen men do not govern themselves and are not their own masters, they do not worry so much about warlike exercises as not appearing warlike, for they do not run the same risks,” asserting that those who live in a monarchy will be less willing to fight wars because only their leaders and masters benefit from violent excursions, while they themselves are put in grave danger”⁴. This is remarkably similar to the Corinthians’ chastising of Sparta, a monarchy, for its previous hesitations and failures in war. While the Corinthians describe

⁴ Hippocrates. *Hippocrates*. Edited by Wesley D. Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1994.

Athenians, who are governed by a democracy, as “adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgement, and in danger...sanguine,” (1.70), they characterize the Spartans as overcautious, modest, ambivalent procrastinators. Thucydides’ description of the Spartan disinclination for war through the Corinthian speech can thus be explained by Hippocrates’ theory of fickleness and unwillingness to fight among citizens of a monarchy, again revealing Hippocratic influence and demonstrating Thucydides’ proficiency in ethnographic writing.

The use of speeches and subsequent structure of rhetoric I, or paired speeches, is the basis of *A History* itself. Though he promised to stray from a romantic approach to writing, it is clear that Thucydides used literary devices like antilogy to add interest and, essentially, make a story out of his history. There is an explicit distinction between the way Thucydides treats events themselves and the way he treats the speeches used to contextualize them. In his article “Thucydides’ Contest: Thucydidean ‘Methodology’ in Context”, Clifford Orwin notes: “in the case of the speeches...Thucydides has substituted his own opinion as to what the speakers might have said for an exactness which has eluded him”.⁵ The Athenian response to the Corinthian speech to Sparta in 1.72, for instance, was most likely fabricated entirely, as it was very unlikely that there were Athenian envoys present at such a Spartan assembly and that, even if they had been present, they would have been allowed to make such a speech; in this way, Thucydides breaks his own rule and takes clear poetic license to add context to his history. It is not just in speeches that Thucydides takes such liberty; in his article “Thucydides on Pausanias and Themistocles”, P.J. Rhodes points out the improbability that Thucydides would have had access to a letter between Xerxes and Themistocles, if such a letter were to exist (which is unlikely in

⁵ Orwin, Clifford, “Thucydides’ Contest: Thucydidean ‘Methodology’ in Context”, *Cambridge University Press*, Vol. 51 No. 3 (1989), pp. 345-364.

itself), again suggesting a complete dramatization on the part of Thucydides.⁶ This is not to discredit Thucydides' effort to obtain complete accuracy; however, the author himself admits that he "[made] the speakers say what was in [his] opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said" (1.22.1). Thus, even assuming that all speeches were both actually delivered and accessible to Thucydides in some form or another, that there is some embellishment is undeniable. But, further than simply exaggerating what was said, Thucydides pairs the speeches in such a way as to lead the reader to specific conclusions about the speakers themselves and what will happen next. One explicit instance of this is the Mytilenean Debate of book three, in which Athens must decide whether or not to kill and enslave the Mytilenean people after an attempt to revolt from the Delian League. Cleon and Diodotus, two prominent Athenian citizens, present their opposing views and, in doing so, allow readers to draw conclusions about Athens as a polis. As Winnington-Ingram notes in his article "Cleon and Diodotus", "the circumstances in which the speeches were made, and the concomitant emotions, are so clearly put before us by Thucydides himself. There is a certain situation which should determine the speech of Cleon; Cleon's speech creates a new situation which should determine the speech of Diodotus".⁷ This perfectly structured call-and-response mechanism cannot be a coincidence; thus, it is clear that Thucydides is positioning these speeches to lead readers to some sort of conclusion. While Cleon begins his speech by questioning the merits of a democratic system and campaigns for the brutal murder and rape of the Mytileneans, Diodotus more calmly and rationally suggests that, rather than choose a course of action that will best serve a thirst for revenge, the Athenians should use this

⁶ Rhodes, P.J., "Thucydides on Pausanias and Themistocles" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 19, H. 4 (Nov., 1970), pp. 387-400

⁷ Winnington-Ingram, R. "Cleon and Diodotus," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, London: King's College, 1965

situation to their advantage and do with the Mytileneans what will most benefit them. Cleon's rejection of democracy is readers' first clue not to afford Cleon credibility as a speaker. By contrasting a calm Diodotus and an irresponsible Cleon, Thucydides means to establish Diodotus' proposed solution to the Mytilinenean Debate of doing whatever will be best for Athens as a universal solution for Athens to apply in any time of stress. In this way, Thucydides clearly inserts his own opinions on the best course of action for Athens as a polis and leads readers to reach the same conclusion. This and the many other paired speeches throughout the text reveal Thucydides familiarity with antilogy as a writing style, which translates into his ability to make a reader think a certain way by his characterization of speakers and subtle contextual clues in their speeches. Thus, not only does Thucydides know how to write paired speeches, but he knows how to use them to convey his own ideas.

Another literary device used by Thucydides both to demonstrate his wealth of literary knowledge and insert his own political views on Athens is rhetoric II, or dialogue. The only true instance of dialogue in *A History* is found in book five. The Melian Dialogue is an unconventional conversation between the Athenians and the Melians, the latter of which was an island and colony of Sparta that refused to submit to Athens after a successful invasion. Rather than opening the floor to public debate, which would have sparked a familiar series of speeches given by both parties, the Athenians and Melians close the door on political debate and open a dialogue to discuss the terms of Melos's surrender. H. Alker suggests that Thucydides use of a dialogue in this context is "[c]onsistent with [Melian] oligarchic political character, initially derived from Sparta, their parent state"⁸, because of a lack of input from either Athenian or Melian citizens. Thus, Thucydides chose not to insert a dialogue randomly, but instead to

⁸ Alker, Hayward R. Jr., "The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides' Melian Dialogue", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Sep., 1988), pp. 805-820

demonstrate his knowledge of both foreign governmental systems and rhetoric II in the same chapters. Thucydides again uses this literary device to assert his own beliefs about how best to manage power and conduct an empire. In the dialogue, the Melians justify their refusal to surrender and subsequent sacrifice of any guaranteed safety by citing first their faith in the gods, the “unjust”(5.104) nature of the Athenians, and, finally, their alliance with Sparta. But, as the Athenians point out to the Melians, their “actual resources are too scanty, as compared with those arrayed against you, for you to come out victorious” (5.111.2). As if readers themselves could not understand how foolish it would be for Melians to believe that the gods, justice, and Spartans would save them from the strong and well-equipped Athenians, Thucydides through the dialogue clearly demonstrates that the Melians are making a grave mistake. While the Athenians advise the Melians to think practically and act in the best interest of their state, the Melians instead “turn to the invisible, to prophecies and oracles, and other such inventions that delude men to their destruction” (5.103.2). Thucydides then very concisely describes the withdrawal of Spartan troops from Melos, which the Athenians predicted, and the surrender and immediate execution of Melian men. The swift and sorrowful end to the Melians thus exemplifies Thucydides own beliefs about the fickleness of the Spartans and the need to serve the interests of the state before all else.

Thucydides demonstrates his affinity for biography in the long excursus on Pausanias and Themistocles of book one. In his article “Thucydides' Method in the Episodes of Pausanias and Themistocles”, Haruo Konishi cites several other scholars’ work and makes inferences of his own in attempting to determine why Thucydides chose to insert a lengthy and seemingly meaningless account of two unrelated characters. Konishi concludes that, through obvious exaggerations in the text, the excursus “is solely intended to produce the clear-cut contrast of a

stupid Spartan and a wise and respectable Athenian”. Konishi’s central criticism of these other authors, who include M. Lang, A.W. Gomme, D. Stewart, and others, is that none can account for why Thucydides chose these two individuals to make his contrast and why the excursus was put in the end of book one. Unfortunately, however, Konishi fails to provide an answer to such a central question himself, claiming that he would need a much longer paper to do so.⁹

Alternatively, A.W. Gomme offers that the excursus serves no other purpose than to satisfy Thucydides’ interest in biographical writing.¹⁰ Thucydides is widely recognized as the first historian, meaning that he had no template to use or other historians to learn from. A major part of historical writing today is editing: removing things that are not crucial to the author’s purpose, no matter how eloquently written or well-researched, so that the most important events are placed under the most emphasis. Thucydides had no editors, and thus had only himself to judge what was important to *A History*. It seems to me that Thucydides was a fan of his own work and took an interest in biography (as well as all other forms of writing), and thus would have had no reason to remove his misplaced excursus or place it anywhere else.¹¹

Thucydides more lightly delves into drama, both comedic and tragic, throughout the course of *A History*. It seems his one slight into comedy is his easily discernable hatred of Cleon, echoing the sentiments expressed by Aristophanes in several of his plays. In *Peace*, the god Hermes delivers a speech blaming “the tanner” for the entirety of the Peloponnesian War in reference to Cleon, whose father was a tanner of leather, poking fun at Cleon’s modest

⁹ Konishi, Haruo, “Thucydides’ Method in the Episode of Pausanias and Themistocles”, *The American Journal on Philology*, Vol. 91, No. 1 (1970), pp. 52-69

¹⁰ Gomme, A.W., *Commentary*, I, pp. 397-400 and 431-7

¹¹ I would like to point out to Mr. Konishi that I did not need an entire paper to reach such a conclusion.

beginnings and (possibly on this basis) ultimately rejecting him as a political leader.¹²

Thucydides similarly vilifies Cleon by failing to afford him credit for his success at Pylos in book four. Thucydides paints the Athenian excursion to Pylos as a series of happy accidents working out in favor of Cleon. First, Cleon and his colleague Demosthenes set course for the wrong island, but arrive at Pylos by chance; second, the troops ignore Demosthenes' orders to fortify their camp but do so of their own accord when they grow bored; third, a random forest fire reveals the amount of Spartan troops, allowing the Athenians to better prepare. It is not clear whether or not Thucydides portrayed these events accurately, but it very strongly reads of satire at Cleon's expense. Tragedy, on the other hand, is the theme of book six. There is a noticeable shift in the tone and style of writing, setting book six apart from the others as more of a tragic hellscape than a passive account of war. This is most evident in the case of the Athenians and their own shift in foreign policy. The Sicilian Expedition is in itself a tragedy, in more than the sense of immediate human suffering and blow to Athenian forces. The most prominent advocate for the invasion of Sicily was Alcibiades, a notorious politician who characteristically prioritized his own well-being over the needs of the state. Nicias, the central opponent to the invasion, accuses Alcibiades of doing just that in the case of Sicily, straying from the principles of serving the state before all else which Athens had only just tried to impart on the Melians in book five. However, Alcibiades is successful in persuading the Athenians to launch an attack on Sicily, poetically subjecting Athens to the same fate as the Melians. Tragedies such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* depict more than the human, physical suffering of soldiers dying, cities being plundered; characters are faced with moral dilemmas of justice and morality capable of inflicting

¹² Aristophanes. *Peace*. Translated by Alan H. Sommerstein. Chicago: Aris & Phillips, 1985.

far more and far worse suffering. The central question posed by *The Oresteia* is a question of justice, of what is the right thing to do in the impossible situation of a wife killing a husband or a son killing a mother. Book six poses a similar dilemma of a country that does not recognize its own fragility, pursues a policy of greed and self-interest rather than prioritizing the most basic, but less glamorous, needs, and embarks on a path of imminent downfall. Thucydides' ability to instill in readers this sense of Athens's impending doom shows a handle on contemporary Greek tragedy.

It seemed that, as a historian, Thucydides had a complex relationship with epic poetry. He very early on rejects the idea poetic license, preemptively noting the "absence of romance" (1.22.4) of the text and dismissing Homer for "the exaggeration which a poet would feel himself licensed to" (1.1.10). In terms of content, Thucydides does take care to avoid blatantly mythical references such as those seen in Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. More than once, Thucydides references a natural event (such as the lunar eclipse in 2.23.1 and the eruption of Mt. Etna in 3.116) in a purely objective manner, deliberately contradicting the traditional divine or otherwise mythical explanation for natural disasters. The painstaking detail with which individual battles are described also supports Thucydides' claimed empirical, objective approach to his writing. However, the poetic license with which Thucydides associates Homer is undeniably present throughout the whole of the text. The immediate comparison to Homer seems to suggest that Thucydides considers himself to be a different kind of author rather than poet, or, more likely, Thucydides would like readers to believe that he is a different kind of author to gain a higher level of credibility than was afforded Homer. Be it found in the constant pairing of speeches, the brief foray into dialogue, or the excursion into drama; it is undeniable that Thucydides employs

artistic license to convey ideas and, ultimately, move the plot along, and is thus equally as guilty of “exaggeration” as Homer.

Thucydides most obviously and least complexly demonstrates his familiarity with public documents, such as laws and treaties, throughout the text. After multiple major battles, Thucydides includes various treaties in their entirety, suggesting an intimate study of the original documents. One such treaty is found in book five, chapter 47: a hundred-year peace between Athens, Argos, Mantinea, and Argos. However, upon the discovery of the original transcript of the ancient treaty and a comparison to the text in Thucydides, D. Cohen notes: “the classical writer did not copy, or have copied, the original text as accurately as modern authors would”.¹³ Though this discrepancy could be accounted for by the fact that Thucydides was a very early historian whose practices could not have perfectly aligned with those of modern, more practiced and better-versed historians, another explanation could be my proposed quest of Thucydides to master all contemporary literary forms. Through study of the structure of the treaty and knowledge of its content, it is conceivable that Thucydides could have tried his hand at writing his own treaty. Regardless of the treaty’s author, its inclusion in *A History* shows Thucydides’ commitment to the study of, if not writing of, all eight forms of literature available to him.

It is no secret that Thucydides intended to go down in history. Rather than writing “an essay which is to win the applause of the moment” (1.22.4), Thucydides sought to influence generations of readers. Though Thucydides claimed that the war itself was the most important event in his contemporary history, it is the way in which he described it that has truly stood the

¹³ Cohen, D., “I.G. I² 86 and Thucydides V 47 (Treaty of Athens, Argos, Mantinea, and Elis, 420/19 B.C.)”, *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, Vol. 9, Fasc. 4 (1956), pp. 289-295

test of time. Through his implementation of the styles of Hippocratic medical writing, ethnography, both forms of rhetoric, biography, drama, epic poetry, and public documents, Thucydides demonstrated his aptitude for literature and his extensive education, affording him exceptional credibility as an author and thus establishing his work as one of the most remarkable pieces of writing the world had ever seen. Thucydides did not use only eight styles of writing to achieve *A History*; his ninth is historical writing, which he himself literally invented as he wrote. It is no wonder, then, that Thucydides has squeezed its way through the technology bottleneck of literature, being passed from papyrus scrolls to pugillares to velum to the printing press and finding its way to Amazon.com, where I bought my copy.

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