

CULTURAL EVENT

“...the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must...”

During the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), contested between the Athenian and the Peloponnesian League, and despite the fragile Peace of Nicias, the Athenians attacked Melos in 416 BCE. Melos was a small Lacedaemonian colony, and the assault aimed to force its integration into the Athenian alliance. Although the Melians appealed for their neutrality to be respected, the Athenians—exploiting their overwhelming military superiority—captured the island, executed all adult males, and sold the women and children into slavery, subsequently establishing an Athenian colony on the site.

Thucydides, an Athenian general and participant in the war who was later exiled by political rivals, dedicated his life to researching and documenting the conflict. His work established the foundations of scientific historiography. By introducing the principle of historical causality, he identifies the root cause of the war as the Athenians' refusal to employ reason in their foreign relations and their relentless pursuit of hegemony through military and economic might—a dynamic the Spartans, as a countervailing force, could not tolerate.

In the following excerpt, known as the "**Melian Dialogue**," written in a style evocative of tragedy or a Platonic dialogue, the confrontation between justice and power is vividly portrayed. While Thucydides refrains from explicit personal commentary, he implies that Athens' stance is defined by brutality, cynicism, and hubris.

Athenians: *"...You know as well as we do that, when we are talking on the human plane, questions of justice only arise when there is equal power to compel: in terms of practicality, the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must..."*

Melians: *"...there is advantage in your preserving the principle of the common good: that is, that anyone who finds himself in danger should receive fair and equitable treatment, and be able to improve his position if he can make a strong case for something less than the full rigour of what could happen to him..."*

This dialogue constitutes a "war of words."

In March 415 BCE, only months after the massacre at Melos and shortly before the Sicilian Expedition, Euripides' "**The Trojan Women**" was performed at the Theatre of Dionysus during the Great Dionysia. By transmuting lived historical experience into art, the tragic poets exerted a profound influence on the Athenian public: their goal was not merely to inform, but to elicit participation through profound emotional resonance (catharsis).

Euripides, one of the three great tragedians, lived through the Golden Age of Pericles but aged during the grim years of the Peloponnesian War, even suffering the loss of a son. The play centers on the women of defeated Troy—mothers and widows: the former queen Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache with the young Astyanax, and Helen, facing judgment before Menelaus.

The play ends with the departure of the Greek fleet: the victorious generals distribute the Trojan women as concubines and set the city ablaze. Euripides exposes the moral void of the victor and the futility of war through Andromache's harrowing lament for her child and Hecuba's enduring dignity—a tragic irony, as these virtues are utterly absent in the conquerors.

Hecuba: *"...And what shall the poet write upon your grave? That the Argives, once out of fear, killed this child..." ... "Foolish is he who rejoices, thinking happiness everlasting. Fortune is like a fickle person—it leaps here and there; no one remains happy until the end."*

Perhaps these words still resonate today. We invite you to a dialogue on authority and authoritarianism—both on the stage of history and in our contemporary reality.

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