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**Power and Shame in Thucydides' Melian Dialogue**

In 416 B.C., the Athenians demanded that the Melians, hitherto resolutely neutral in the great war between Athens and Sparta, join their alliance. The ensuing discussions between the Melians and the Athenians are captured in one of Thucydides' most vivid passages, the well-known Melian dialogue, and its framing narrative (Thuc. 5.84-116).

Literary studies of this passage have traditionally maintained that in the dialogue Thucydides paints a picture of Athenian cruelty and oppression of a small, defenceless island community, unshaken almost to the last in the hope it has placed in divine justice, and in its faith in the Spartans and its rejection of Athenian imperial ambition. Recent scholarship, however, has moved away from expressing sympathy with the Melians and condemnation of Athenian imperial cruelty, towards the view that Thucydides blames the Melians for their stubborn inhumanity in refusing to submit to Athens and spare the lives and freedom of themselves, their women, and their children. This paper integrates the terms of this scholarly argument by demonstrating that what it has actually achieved amounts only to a re-performance of the arguments presented in Thucydides' dialogue.

Thucydides has shaped the debate around two harsh and irreconcilable imperatives: power and shame. The Melians represent themselves as unable to acquiesce to Athenian power because of the moral imperative of shame; the Athenian rhetorical strategy in the dialogue is to represent themselves as compelled to subdue Melos by their own imperial power. Both sides appear to have a choice, and both attribute freedom to choose to the other, but concerning their own positions they offer only a rhetoric of necessity. Their dialogue is fruitless because their evaluative justifications of their actions, political and moral, are entirely incommensurate. Previous scholarly treatments of the dialogue have not been absolutely wrong to condemn Athenian brutality in moral terms, or to reprove Melian folly in political terms, but, by not interrogating reasons for the debate's failure, they have mistaken one side of the debate or the other for Thucydides' 'judgement'. In the Melian dialogue Thucydides asks not simply, 'Who was right?', but the deeper, tragic question, 'How can things such as this happen?'. This paper outlines an approach towards answering that question.