

# Mimesis in Historiography

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## Introduction

The common usage of the word "history" generally precludes a consistent and uniform understanding of its core meaning. Nowadays the term is used in two ways: 1) history is a series of events that has occurred in the past, and 2) history is a recounting of the events having occurred in the past, and thus has embedded a reflection of our knowledge and understanding of these events. I call the first usage "facts" and the second "historiography." I take my understanding of the term "facts" from the Latin *factum*, the neuter past participle of *facere* 'do.' The facts are facts; they are things which have been done, and therefore their validity cannot be disputed. Historiography, however, is composed as a subjective interpretation of the facts by any person who records such events. Thus, the events themselves (history) and our representation of the events (historiography) are two different things. Facts do not occur with any inaccuracy. Historiography, however, and any form of representation, presents a selective and therefore necessarily skewed narrative about the facts.

It is the goal of this essay to investigate the degree to which historiography, and any other mimetic production, can accurately represent the facts. By examining the final book of Plato's *Republic* in conjunction with Aristotle's *Poetics*, I hope to make clear how the use of representation, or *mimesis*,<sup>1</sup> misleads the audience about the facts. Nowadays, the accepted notion is that historiographical narrative is the most accurate *mimesis* of the facts. Therefore it will be one of the focal points of this investigation. However, imitation/representation/*mimesis* is not limited to the subject of history. The use of representation ranges from poetry, tragedy, music, dance, the news, and to any imitative art. A broad application of the term *representation*

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<sup>1</sup> For some context on the word *mimesis*, see appendix, note 1.

or *mimesis* will be paramount for the purpose of my essay. Therefore I will not limit my investigation of the ancient concept of *mimesis* to historiography, but I will rather expand my investigation to various forms of *mimesis*.

This expansion of scope rests on the premise that all forms of imitation are quite imperfect, and that historiography is another form of imitation. I will first make clear my understanding of the word "imitation" by examining its core meaning in ancient Greek and by looking at imitative uses in various spheres: mathematics, language, poetry. Next, I will make clear my understanding of the word "historiography" by probing its core meaning in ancient Greek, and by scrutinizing different works of historiography. As the general features of imitation become clear, I hope to show that they also apply to historiography.

The works of Plato and Aristotle include brief discussions on the effects of imitation and how we are to understand its insufficiency. In doing so, I will provide examples of language, mathematics, and poetry to illustrate my point. I will then examine the ancient concept of history, using Aristotle's distinction in the *Poetics* between the historian and the poet. Aristotle says that "the one [historian] describes things that have been, and the other [poet] a kind of thing that might be. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious than history,<sup>2</sup> because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b). Armed with Aristotle's distinction as a preliminary basis for my investigation, I will take Thucydides as my historian and Euripides as my poet. I doubt that the separation between history and poetry is as definite as Aristotle presents it. As I will show, Thucydides and

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<sup>2</sup>Scholars often translate the word *ἱστορία* as "history". This translation is only appropriate as its corresponding cognate. The contemporary meaning of the word "history," however, does not aptly convey the same meaning as *ἱστορία*. I will elaborate on this distinction and its significance later in the essay.

Euripides both compose narratives of the same event - the brutal way in which the Athenians dealt with the inhabitants of Melos - but through different mediums: Thucydides, through the Melian dialogue, and Euripides, through his *The Trojan Women*. It is difficult, if not impossible, to decide which rendition more accurately represents the facts, i.e. *history*. Any method of retelling the facts bears a degree of separation from the truth of what occurs. By examining various texts produced in Ancient Greece between the 5th and 4th Century B.C., I will compare and explore whether any method of representation gives us better access to the facts as they occur.

That history is elusive to the human mind will become clear when I delve into an examination on causality. Tolstoy's position on the matter is most relevant. In *War and Peace*, he makes a striking claim. He says that "nothing is the cause" (Tolstoy, Book 9). The elusive nature of causality has a strikingly important relationship to history, and therefore historiography.

It is equally important to consider the extent to which language can accurately account for the facts, for language in general is yet another attempt to represent the facts. I will show that this ubiquitous mode of representation also skews the truth about the facts. This point is a poignant element of the essay, especially because this investigation is confined to texts that have been translated from another language, Ancient Greek. If the intended meanings presented by the Greek authors are already obscured in their native language, they must become even further lost in translation. With these thoughts in mind, my scrutiny will be on whether we can rely on any representation to discern the truth concerning the facts.

## Part I - Imitation

Aristotle commences *Poetics* by stating that he intends to present an exposition of poetry. He claims that "epic poetry and tragedy, as also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of *imitation*" (1447a14). However, he argues later on in *Poetics* that historiography is inherently distinct from poetry, and not a form of imitation. Before I unpack this distinction, it's important that I first formulate my understanding of the concept *mimesis*, imitation, or representation, and its effects as such.

Aristotle notes that poetry owes its genesis to the mankind's natural inclination towards imitative arts. He says that "imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in the works of imitation" (*Poetics* 1448b8). Imitation then is an advantageous tool used by humans to understand the world. Humans constantly try to convey various features of existence to themselves and to others for the sake of understanding. Whether this is done with language, paintings, or mathematical representations on paper and a board, the imitative method by which we understand the world is quite insufficient. In order to see why this is the case, I will explore the use of the term by looking at the nature of all imitative arts. First I will look at Plato's discussion of language as an imitative art.

## Imitation and Language

In the beginning of Plato's *Cratylus*, Hermogenes brings to Socrates an inquiry pertaining to the origin of names.<sup>3</sup> While Hermogenes argues that names are the simple manifestation of conventional speech and agreement of words, Cratylus insists on the inherent correctness in names rooted in some greater ontological reality. Hearing the arguments as such, Socrates sets out on a dialectical journey with his fellow interlocutors. In the course of their investigation, the three men encounter various problems with names and language in general, realizing that speech relies on images or imitation. Socrates asks, "Do you not perceive how far images are from possessing the same qualities as the originals which they imitate" (*Cratylus*, 432d)? Such limits of language must therefore hinder any serious inquiry conducted with names or speech. I will examine Socrates' discussion of names as imitations in an effort to discover the extent to which language can helpfully carry out an investigation.

Socrates and Cratylus examine the effects of imitation manifesting in two different ways, through names and paintings. Socrates asks Cratylus if he believes that, "The name is an imitation of the thing named" (*Cratylus*, 430b)? Cratylus concedes, yet the inquiry still pushes on to a further example to illustrate the point. Socrates draws an analogous comparison of names as imitations by saying that paintings are also a type of imitation. Painters, when producing any sort of painting, intend to reproduce some object through the medium of painting. However, when the object is then transposed onto the canvas, the painter does not perfectly reproduce that which he aims to produce. He lacks the necessary skills to perfectly replicate the object from his mind onto

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<sup>3</sup> I'm aware that this essay does not include an exhaustive investigation of words. For example, I make no mention of the origin of definitions.

to canvas. For example, the most skilled artist painting Cratylus would necessarily be unable to reduplicate all the qualities that embody Cratylus. Should a painter produce a painting of Cratylus, there would then be a few different Cratyluses - one would be "the original Cratylus in flesh and blood," and the painting would be "the imitation of Cratylus." These two cannot be considered identical, for the painting of Cratylus would lack the same qualities of flesh and blood that "the original Cratylus" possesses. The imitation via painting is therefore imperfect when compared to "the original Cratylus." Socrates cultivates this specific example into a general axiom concerning the nature of imitation. He states that "the image must not by any means reproduce all the qualities of that which it imitates, if it is to be an image" (Cratylus, 432b). Any sort of imitation bears a degree of separation from that which it imitates, thus bringing the imitator further away from what he seeks to imitate.

This same general axiom applies to names as well. Humans use names<sup>4</sup> to describe the nature of things. They evoke an image in the mind, yet are deficient when compared to that which it imitates. To perfectly imitate anything with names would require names for all qualities to embody that which is being imitated. However, this is an impossible task. Socrates points out that even if one were capable of perfectly imitating as such, "... everything would be duplicated, and no one could tell in any case which was the real thing and which the name" (432d). Any perfect sort of imitation would strip all things of their individuality; no diversity would be present among the conglomeration of things to exist, and everything would be identical to each other. Anyone's experience with the world in all its complexities clearly shows that the

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<sup>4</sup> I take the meaning of "names" to be identical with "words." I chose to adopt the general translation from the word ὄνομα because ὄνομα is the word that Plato consistently uses in *Cratylus* to discuss imitation in relation to names. Name does not specifically mean the word with which people refer to others, such as the names Socrates, Cratylus, or Athens.

manifestation of existence is riddled with diversification. Only some higher power which causes all things is capable of knowing that which is imitated, and that power does not rely on imitations to describe any of these things. Socrates makes this clear by saying, "...he who gave the first names also knew the things which he named...the power which gave the first names to things is more than human..." (438 a-c). No one can consider a human being to be the power which causes all things, for no human possesses superhuman, metaphysical omniscience. They lack a perfect understanding of the first names, and therefore are left with the task of interpreting names based on their experience with the world. Such is the case with respect to names as well, for the names are the linguistic tool humans use to describe reality. Names imitate what they intend to describe, and so necessarily bear a degree of separation from what they imitate. Therefore, no person is capable of perfectly describing anything with names and language.

The resulting conclusion regarding language as imitation thus poses a major issue. If language is just another imperfect way of describing our reality, why not just cast it aside altogether? It may first appear that any endeavor involving language is useless, for mankind lacks the requisite capacity to perfectly convey the meaning of anything. In the final book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates even goes so far as to make the claim that poets must be cast away from their city as mere imitators of the truth. Socrates rightfully acknowledges that imitators have a great power in their craft, for their audiences will be receptive to, and necessarily influenced by, such imitations. Yet Socrates seems to envision a rather simple and unsophisticated audience, one that would not question imitative poets, taking them instead quite literally. His argument is rooted in the apprehension of a certain disconnect between *mimesis* and truth, and a fear that *mimesis* may be dangerously deceiving to the audience. He again reiterates

his sentiments about imitation, namely that the imitator is an agent of control. The danger is that the imitator has control over the soul. He says, "Like a painter, he [imitative poet] produces work that is inferior with respect to truth and that appeals to a part of the soul that is similarly inferior rather than to the best part...we'll say that an imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and gratifying the irrational part..." (Book X, 605b-c). Once again, according to Plato, *mimesis* is inherently dangerous to people because it inhibits a connection to Plato's idea of truth. His conception of 'truth' is contingent upon the notion that the soul lives on after death, and that the body's kinship with sensory perception hinders its ultimate goal to arrive at true reality.

I'm not dealing with Plato's ontological theory of the soul's connection to a perfect reality after death. I rather confine my understanding of imitation to the human's experiences of the world. Imitation, though imperfect, still allows humans to progress in their reasoning. It still informs our understanding of how we create meaning. As Aristotle says to begin the *Metaphysics*, "all men by nature yearn for knowing" (Book I, 980a). This craving for knowing of the world is answered with imitations. People imitate to learn about the world, as Aristotle notes when he remarks in *Poetics*, "imitation is natural to man from childhood... and learns at first by imitation" (*Poetics* 1448b8); keeping in mind the axiomatic principle of imitation: all imitations bear a degree of separation from that which they imitate.

Thus far I have shown that imitation is a byproduct of language in general. It still remains for me to say how imitation manifests in other aspects. I now turn to the use of imitation in mathematics<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Selecting mathematics for a discussion of imitation is not entirely off-based. The Greek word *techne* refers both to the modern notion of an art and also of the craft. Representations are surely present in it, and therefore it deserves a place among the survey of mimetic productions.

## Imitation and Mathematics

The relationship of mathematics to human activity is based on imitation as well. In all cases, imitation bears a degree of separation from that which it imitates, and such is the case for the mathematician representing mathematical concepts. Formulating a conception in the mind is an imitation as well. A mathematician will express some concept or understanding of a concept through the language of mathematics, i.e., through diagrams of propositions, demonstrations and the like. Similar to the potential effect of language as imitation, limits of mathematical imitations may invite the audience to make erroneous conclusions regarding mathematics. However, these erroneous conclusions are not to be feared as Socrates fears imitation in Plato's *Republic*. I am still not arguing for the Platonic conception of an ontological disconnect between truth and *mimesis*.

The following example regarding the construction of an equilateral triangle will make this clear. Euclid, having already established a set of definitions, common notions, and postulates, begins his first proposition by delineating the certain steps that will necessarily construct an equilateral triangle on a given finite line. In order to construct this, Euclid says to "describe the circle  $BCD$  with center  $A$  and radius  $AB$ . Again describe the circle  $ACE$  with center  $B$  and radius  $BA$ . Join the straight lines  $CA$  and  $CB$  from the point  $C$  at which the circles cut one another to the points  $A$  and  $B$ " (*Elements*, 1.1). The figure described will always manifest with properties that necessarily construct an equilateral triangle. The axioms and definitions render the construction of the figure as true. However, the same cannot be said when human activity is involved. The disconnect between imitation and that which is imitated occurs subtly with

concepts in the mind. A mathematical concept not will perfectly align in the mind of the mathematician with the axioms and definitions. Consider a point or a line. Can anyone really say that their mind perfectly comprehends that which has no part or a breadthless length? In comparison with concepts, the disconnect occurs more overtly with physical representations on paper, white board, etc. Consider once again Euclid's first proposition. Anyone who adheres to the steps of Euclid's first proposition will produce something *like* or *similar to* an equilateral triangle, either in the mind or on a piece of paper. The representation will be slightly distinct from the concept in the mind, and even more distinct from the definitions and axioms necessary for the construction of an equilateral triangle. An equilateral triangle that exists without any human representation exists as the most complete form of itself; that is to say, the definition of an equilateral triangle sustains its identical nature when compared with itself. However, when some person tries to represent a triangle in the mind, the representation will not carry the same exact characteristics of what was reproduced. Moreover, a triangle constructed on paper or the board will always be deficient when compared to the mathematical concept in the mind, and especially to the actual properties of a real triangle. First one will start by making points or drawing lines with a pen or marker. However, the point is represented with a part and the line is represented with breadth and length. The imitative effects contradict the respective definitions of a point and a line.<sup>6</sup> Therefore an imitation of an equilateral triangle will always bear a degree of separation from that which is imitated, either a concept of an equilateral triangle or the equilateral triangle itself.

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps there are those gifted mathematicians who can conceive of that which has no part without misleading themselves in the concepts. Those of us who are less sufficient require imitations.

Such limits of the human mind then pose an obvious problem for anyone seeking to represent mathematical truth. It is no easy task to organize mathematical concepts internally or in the mind alone. To progress in one's understanding of mathematical principles and systems of logic, humans often use some sort of representation as a way to assist in the organizational process. If it were not for the process of representing Euclid's *Elements* with diagrams on paper or on a whiteboard, most people would struggle endlessly in an attempt to understand mathematical concepts. This realization alone opens up many doors for the philosopher and geometer alike, for acknowledging our inferiority in this endeavor is both a humbling and empowering experience. One can then learn how to properly employ imitation as a tool for understanding concepts.

From the previous examples, it is clear that imitation affects a necessary insufficiency in all of its forms, and that the forms of imitation are not solely confined to poetry and painting. I take it to be a general axiom of imitation that it always bears a degree of separation from that which it imitates. This axiom applies to all *techne* that require a reproduction of a concept via language, and since language is a ubiquitous mode of representation, it becomes almost impossible to shy away from imitation. Individuals use language to communicate descriptions and instructions in mathematics, i.e., definitions of terms and constructions that are necessary for certain propositions. Language permeates throughout the human experience, utilizing imitation and taking imitation alongside it. Yet readers must remember that it is challenging to decipher which imitation belongs in what category. Aristotle makes such claims in the beginning of the *Poetics*, when he says there is "... an art which imitates by language alone, and one which imitates by meter, either one or a plurality of metres. These forms of imitation are still nameless

today. We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic conversation; and we should still be without one even if the imitations in the two instances were in trimeters or elegiacs or some other kind of verse" (1447b7-15). The effect of such confusion chiefly stems from the fact that some people cannot categorize certain mimetic productions even with the characterization that would usually put the representation in one category or another. Can not one consider "Socratic conversations" as philosophy? Does one consider works written in meter, whether iambic or elegiac or dactylic hexameter, as poetry, simply based on the manner of their composition? Evidently, it is difficult to classify mimetic works. Such is the case with all works of imitation, for the general axiom stated above applies to all forms of imitation. The confusion of categorizing different forms of imitation equally applies to poetry and historiography.

## Part II - Causality

Before I delve into the similarities that align historiography and poetry, an interlude on the nature of causality is of paramount importance for my argument. History, understood as the series of events of events that have occurred in the past, is inextricably related to the manifestation of causality. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the author makes a persuasive argument for the nature of causality and its implications for historiography. First, I will look at Tolstoy's examination of causal relationships within the context of natural occurrences. I'll then apply this principle of causality to history and historiography.

His stance becomes clear with an illustration of a falling apple. He asks, "When an apple has ripened and falls, why does it fall" (Tolstoy, Book 9.1)? As it is thenceforth described by

Tolstoy, a myriad of causes can be assigned to the effect of an apple ripening and falling. The wind has blown the apple from the tree, or an earthquake has shaken it from the trees branch, or enough time has passed since the apple has grown from a young, supple seed, or the chemical composition of an apple is such that it renders the apple ready to fall. Yet, it would not make sense to ascribe one cause alone. Tolstoy rightly points out that innumerable variables factor into each effect over time. Identifying a plurality of causes to a single effect poses a contradiction with the cause-effect relationship. Various causes cannot yield the same effect simultaneously. If multiple causes produced one effect, the different causes would then be the same cause. When a cause is assigned to any effect, that cause vanishes with the assignment of another cause, and the new cause vanishes with the assignment of another cause. Tolstoy demonstrates how the desire to assign causes manifests in the contradictory manner that I have just described. This then leads Tolstoy to conclude that, "nothing is the cause. All this is only the coincidence of condition in which all vital organic and elemental events occur. And the botanist who finds that the apple falls because the cellular tissue decays and so forth is equally right with the child who stands under the tree and says the apple fell because he wanted to eat it and prayed for it" (Tolstoy, Book 9).

Surely, Tolstoy does not mean to imply that there is no cause of anything whatsoever. Indeed, if there were no cause, then nothing could actualize, for existence presupposes the relationship of cause and effect. I rather take Tolstoy to mean that every cause and effect is woven together with the totality of existence in a tangled (though connected) web. To try and pinpoint some cause of an effect would be an absurdly arrogant endeavor. Reasoning of cause-and-effect allows humankind to process experience; without it, the mind cannot maneuver

precisely. And yet, reasoning about what occurred in the past and how is, to a certain degree, guesswork.

Tolstoy's position on cause-effect relationships applies to the necessarily imperfect endeavor of historiography. Again, I take the parameters for poetry and historiography from Aristotle's *Poetics*, namely that "the one [historiographer] describes things that have been, and the other [poet] a kind of thing that might be. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b). However, this dichotomous way of thinking is simply too limiting. There must be some gradation within the spectrum of historiography and poetry. Somewhere between the two categories lies a happy medium that adopts the best characteristics from the two - therein lies the the answer to this problems. I suggest that historiography is already the perfect mean between the two qualities that Aristotle describes. Any historiographical endeavor to describe the things that have been with particular facts will simultaneously describe things that might happen with general truths. There is no way that anyone could perfectly describe things that have occurred in the past, regardless of how many particular facts they include in their presentation. Tolstoy's understanding of causality shows that there are too many causes to reason about particular facts in the past. Yet *War and Peace* consists of narrative about particular facts that occurred in the past. He writes of various fictional characters and how they were affected by the Napoleonic wars. Amongst the functional portions of his novel, I have shown that he gives general truths about causality. He then applies this to historiography. He says, "Equally right or wrong is he who says that Napoleon went to Moscow because he wanted to, and perished because Alexander desired his destruction, and he who says

that an undermined hill weighing a million tons fell because the last navy struck it for the last time with a mattock. In historic events, the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but a the smallest connection with the events themselves" (Tolstoy, Book 9). Tolstoy is right in asserting that it is reasonable for historiographers to want to assign various causes to a single event or a series of events. Yet this defeats the purpose of assigning cause to an effect. The manifestation of existence is weaved together by innumerable causes that effectively produce other causes. A cyclical nature of causality ensues. Pinpointing one cause is superfluous, for each cause maintains an elusive relationship with the facts. According to Tolstoy, "The more we try to explain such events in history reasonably, the more unreasonable and incomprehensible do they become to us" (Tolstoy, Book 9). The all-too-frequent error occurs when people mistakenly identify one specific cause. When humans try to posit reasons for the manifestation of history, they unknowingly slip further into the degree of uncertainty by adding layers amid the separation that is already situated between historiography and history; they confuse imitations of history with history itself.

Therefore readers must take caution when they read historiography, knowing that all recording of history consists in interpretation of facts and recording of their interpretations. Anyone who claims to have presented perfectly all past events of any time period will reek of fallacious premises, and an odor of arrogance and ignorance surely accompanies this stench. Lest you ever convince yourself that you perfectly know anything and thereby doom yourself to an inquiry based on faulty premises, take care to always maintain steadfast awareness that imitation plants its roots so deeply into existence that history and historiography cannot escape it.

### Part III: Historiography and Poetry

As I stated before, I am not creating my own definitions for the respective terms poetry and historiography. I am rather analyzing those which Aristotle has already laid out for us in his *Poetics*. Aristotle says that "the one [historian] describes things that have been, and the other [poet] a kind of thing that might be. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b). He seems to suggest that his definition of history includes a linear catalogue of the facts. Nonetheless, as I just showed, this sort of historiography is impossible. By no means is anyone able to devise a discipline that gives us a complete understanding of all causal relationships and the events that necessarily transpire. All forms of historiography actually fall into the category of mimetic productions. Layers upon layers of interpretive filtration manifest in the process of recording and reporting history. Every case of historiography is therefore a representation of certain events that actually occur.

The requisites for the imitator are so broad that one can reasonably see how the historiographer is contained in this category. Aristotle states that "even supposing [the poet] represents what has actually happened [like the historiographer], he is nonetheless a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen, and it is virtue of this that he is their maker" (*Poetics* 1451b). With these parameters, one can then assume that the poet can also be a historiographer, or vice-versa: poets frequently represent the same facts as historiographers, e.g. Thucydides or Herodotus. Both poets

and historiographers interpret the facts selectively and according to their own perspective, and both can create stylized representations, as I shall demonstrate next.

### Thucydides and Euripides

In the beginning of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes his method of fact reporting. He says his evidence "is better evidence than that of poets, who exaggerate the importance of their themes, or of the prose chroniclers, who are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of the public, whose authorities cannot be checked, and whose subject-matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology" (Thucydides, 1.21). Yet immediately thereafter, Thucydides acknowledges the inevitable limitations of his own narrative, especially when it comes to reporting speeches:

In this history I have made use of set speeches some of which were delivered just before and others during the war. I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced with the same difficulty; so ***my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for by each situation*** (Thucydides, 1.22)

Thucydides explicitly states that he was not present for many of the events he writes about, i.e., he does not report as an eyewitness. In some cases, he relies on the memory of an informant.<sup>7</sup> Thucydides can only report the events as he decides is the best way to represent them. Layers upon layers separate his historiography from the history. Therefore he resorts to writing the speeches according to his own idea of what could have been said in every situation. Hence a troubling inquiry arises for readers of historiography: how accurately does Thucydides represent

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<sup>7</sup> My take on the unreliability of memory is not only rooted in an argument on imitation in history, but also on the recent studies on the false memories. See appendix, note 2.

the facts? How distinct is his historiographical method of writing speeches from that of the literary speeches in poetry or tragedy?

An interesting possibility then arises: perhaps Thucydides' strategy of representation is similar to the *mimesis* in Greek tragedy. Demonstrating this requires me to look at the Melian Dialogue in conjunction with Greek tragedy. First I will note the identical structure of both works, and then I will speak of how the works are both responses to the same event.

In Greek tragedy, characters often debate with one another. Euripides has a unique term for it: in *Medea*, he names it *hamilla*<sup>8</sup> (546), "competition,"<sup>9</sup> a term I will adopt in the following discussion. As Medea and Jason argue about the ethical implications from Jason's decision to marry Creon's daughter, Jason says: "Indeed, you have set forth a *hamilla* of words. As to the things which you reproach me with respect to the royal marriage, in this way I will show, first, that I have become wise, then that I am self-controlled, and then that I am a great friend to you and our children" (Euripides, *Medea*, 546-550). Like a lawyer in the courtroom, Jason outlines his argument before he actually argues his case; indeed, the *hamilla* of arguments between him and Medea closely resembles a courtroom showdown.

Thucydides uses the same *hamilla* of arguments in his Melian dialogue. The Melian colony had been neutral island during the confrontations between the Athenians and the Spartans, but now the Athenians saw Melos' neutrality as a threat to their empire. So they travelled to Melos to discuss a potential alliance. As the negotiations begin, the Melians are clearly aware of the Athenians' superior military force. Athens had aggregated imperialistic power during the 5th century BC, with many city-states pledging allegiance to them and

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<sup>8</sup> ἀμίλλα

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that the currently accepted terminology for this structure is *agon*. See appendix, note 3.

submitting monetary or military donations.<sup>10</sup> Still, the Melians refuse to submit to the Athenians, and a *hamilla* ensues. The Melians appeal both to the ethical nature of the situation and to the hope that the Spartans would come to their aid. The Athenians recommend that the Melians reconsider their idea of justice, arguing that "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" (Thucydides, 5.89). Thus the Athenians argue for political control, knowing well their military power will crush the Melians. The Melians plead that the Athenians accept their neutral stance: "... we trust that the gods will give us fortune as good as yours, because we are standing for what is right against what is wrong; and as for what we lack in power, we trust that it will be made up for by our alliance with the Spartans, who are bound, if for no other reason, then for honour's sake, and because we are kinsmen, to come to our help" (Thucydides, 5.104). The Athenians retort that hope is unrelated to the practical implications of the situation, stating that "...it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made... We are merely acting in accordance with it..." (Thucydides, 5.105). When the *hamilla* ends in an impasse, the Athenians decide to besiege and sack Melos. At that point, Thucydides abruptly abandons the *hamilla* structure and reports, briefly and matter-of-factly, that "... the Melians surrendered unconditionally to the Athenians, who put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves" (Thucydides, 5.116).

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<sup>10</sup> Thucydides reports that the Athenians assumed hegemonic supremacy in the Peloponnese with their control over the Delian League. The arrangements were such that "they [Athenians] appointed which of the cities needed to hand over money and which needed to hand over ships." (Thuc. I.96) When strife or revolt broke out between the Athenians and their allies, Athens responded harshly. This was one of the leading factors in the development of the Peloponnesian War.

The *hamilla* structure of the Melian Dialogue is of great importance in my discussion. Indeed, this portion of Thucydides' historiographical account is set out like an ancient tragedy: not only are the Athenians and the Melians given typically tragic abbreviations - Ath. and Mel. - but the Dialogue as a whole strikingly resembles a tragic *hamilla*. Thucydides does not simply record the logistics pertaining to the negotiation or subsequent siege of the colony; he also includes a rigorous debate, an *hamilla* regarding power politics and justice. His historiography is not merely a record of the facts, but an open discussion of ethical concepts. In this way, Thucydides overtly aligns himself with ancient Greek tragedy.<sup>11</sup>

Euripides also responds to the sack of Melos with his tragedy *The Trojan Women*. Whereas Thucydides presents a sparse account of the horrible consequences of that sack, Euripides' *Trojan Women* offers a detailed depiction thereof. The play commences with a ghastly scene taking place two days after the Trojan War. The Achaeans have sacked Troy and killed the men. It is the women who suffer the most. They have to endure both the plight of widowhood, and the tragic reversal in their fortunes: queens and princesses before, they are now slaves. There are also the horrid memories of the merciless slaughter at the hands of the Achaeans, recounted by the Chorus:

I was at home that night... when - over the streets of the eternal city a shrief of death rose like a grip at the throat; and trembling children clutched at their mothers' skirts; and war went forth from his secret lair... Men sank in blood while their dead hands clasped the altar; the head half-raised from the pillow defenceless rolled from the severed neck; and beside the dead the victor's lust planted the seed of a son for Hellas, watered with tears of Troy's despair.  
(Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 550)

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<sup>11</sup> I focus on a specific portion of Thucydides' historiography, though the entirety of *The Peloponnesian War* is structured like a Greek tragedy as well. The protagonist in it are the Athenians, and the Melian Dialogue is their last display of over-confidence before the reversal of their fortune, which begins with the Sicilian expedition.

Powerful are the images that Euripides presents on the effect of the Trojan War. When his play was presented to the Athenian audience, Athens had been fighting against the Spartans for a considerable time, and what is more, it had recently subjugated and slaughtered the Melians in a similar ghastly demonstration of imperialism. Euripides uses the mythical account of the Trojan War to create a powerful parallel to contemporary events.

Near the beginning of *The Trojan Women*, former queen Hecuba laments the loss of her city, her husband, her family, her livelihood, and her dignity. Hers would not be unlike the dismal sentiments felt by Melian women after Athens subjugated Melos. Euripides' representation of her plight elicits a powerful emotional response and stirs a reflection on the effects of war. The Athenian audience, whose leading politicians were so focused on sustaining Athens' status as a political powerhouse, must have been similarly affected. Historiographical accounts such as Thucydides' Melian Dialogue effectively rouse such questions as well, albeit only through a theoretical lense; the impact however is not the raw empathy<sup>12</sup> provoked by *The Trojan Women*. Horror oozes from Hecuba's account, as she describes in detail how her whole family was killed, and especially how the child Astyanax was thrown off of the walls of Troy. The parallel with the recent news from Melos must have been vivid for the Athenian audience. The medium of tragedy allows Euripides to stir the emotions of pity and fear by fully depicting the plight of the conquered - while Thucydides provides only a sketch. Euripides knew how to craftily employ imitations of Melian slaughter for the functional purpose of social commentary.

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle identifies this emotion and calls it pity in *Rhetoric*. He says, "Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain at an apparent evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon... And, generally, we feel pity whenever we are in the condition of remembering that singular misfortunes have happened to us or ours, or expecting them to happy in the future" (Book II. Ch. VIII. 2-7).

The Greek theatre in 5th century Athens was the medium through which tragedians could stimulate provocative reflections on critical sociopolitical issues. He knew that imitations cannot be cast aside, for their worth lies in the fact that they can be used to learn about the probable nature of humanity's constitution.

The *hamilla* in *Medea* and in the Melian Dialogue occurs also in *The Trojan Women*: there, Hecuba and Helen set forth their positions on whether Menelaus should kill Helen. Helen pleads with Menelaus that she is innocent, while Hecuba, deeply in the throes of grief, tries to convince Menelaus to kill Helen, whom she blames for the Trojan War. A courtroom-like debate ensues. Helen asks Menelaus: "Have I permission to reply to that sentence and plead that it would be unjust to take my life?" (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 930) The Spartan king at first rejects her plea altogether, steadfast in his resolution to condemn her to death. However, Hecuba says to him: "Let her speak, Menelaus; she must not die without a hearing. And let me undertake in turn to speak against her. Of the mischief that she made in Troy you know nothing. The whole indictment, once complete, will ensure her death; there can be no chance of escape" (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 940). Thus Euripides sets the stage for a dramatic *hamilla* between the two women: Helen will defend herself by minimizing her influence in the Trojan War, while Hecuba will try to rest the blame of the Trojan War solely on Helen.<sup>13</sup> Helen's position is that, as a victim of the gods and of Paris, she is not responsible for the havoc of the Trojan war. The Chorus, clearly hostile to her, reaffirms the *hamilla* setup by encouraging Hecuba to "demolish this persuasiveness. Plausible speech combined with such immorality is sinister" (Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 966). Hecuba in turn argues that the gods aren't capable of folly, and that rather than

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<sup>13</sup> This is not unlike the *hamilla* in the Melian Dialogue. Melos wanted to minimize their impact on the war, while the Athenians insisted that their impact was severe.

trying to pass the blame onto the gods, Helen should take full responsibility for the war. She also dissects Helen's claim that she had been victimized by Paris, for Helen, she says, was seduced not only by Paris' good looks, but also the power associated with the prince of Troy. Hecuba also notes that Helen's support during the Trojan war oscillated in accordance with the winning army during the war: sometimes she would root for the Trojans, sometimes for the Achaeans, her support always suiting her personal desire for power. Finally, Hecuba urged Helen to escape Troy, but Helen rejected such a proposal. Menelaus, as the judge of these two arguments, sides with Hecuba and decides to bring Helen back with him to Sparta. He claims that he will kill her in some grandiose fashion, though he never actually does.<sup>14</sup> It is evident that in Euripidean tragedy and Thucydidean historiography alike, the *hamilla* is an important tool for two parties to present rational arguments against each other.

To sum up, the Melian Dialogue resembles Greek tragedy in that it is structured as a tragic *hamilla*. Both it and *The Trojan Women* represent facets of the same event: the Melian Dialogue focuses on the fruitless negotiations resulting in the sack of Melos, and *The Trojan Women* on the grisly aftermath. Thucydides thus develops a cross-pollinated genre, eager to stir up his audience and aware that he could do so more effectively through the established and pattern-recognizable discourse of tragedy.

Indeed, Aristotle's delineation of poetry may be taken to apply to Thucydides' piece as well. In Aristotle's words, "the poet must be more the poet of his plots than of his verses, inasmuch as he is poet by virtue of the imitative elements in his work, and it is actions that he

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<sup>14</sup> In Book IV of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus visits Sparta, where he encounters Helen and Menelaus living together as a couple. (Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.100)

imitates" (*Poetics* 1451b). The implication is that inasmuch a writer employs imitation, his product is a work of poetry.<sup>15</sup> Since Thucydides' historiography employs imitation, he should consider it to be poetry.

I doubt that any historiographer is capable of recording and reporting objectively any series of events. Frankly, this is not an attainable standard. All historiographers record and report events with a necessarily skewed perspective, since each of them comes from a specific background and has a specific perspective on what is good and what bad. Historiography is an imitation of facts, produced by means of language, which, as I argue, is a specific form of imitation. Aristotle seems to believe something of this sort as well when he remarks of a poet that "If he [the poet] should come to take a subject from actual history, he is nonetheless a poet for that; since some historic occurrences may very well be in the probable order of things; and it is in that aspect of them that he is their poet" (1451b27-32). This is true for Thucydides' rendition of speeches, and especially for his stylized representation of the Melian Dialogue.

Representations naturally rouse questions about the events themselves. People will always experience the tension of power politics, and will therefore forever wrestle with the question of whether the strongman's desire to maintain his power is in accordance with the laws of human nature. The same applies to men's hope for justice and its place in power politics. Realizing the ubiquity of these questions, Thucydides and Euripides blur Aristotle's distinctions between historiography and tragedy, creating two magnificent *mimeseis* of lasting impact.

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the Greek word *poiesis* refers to any creation or production, not just poetry.

## Conclusion

I believe that my line of inquiry is extraordinarily valuable not just for the study of historiography and tragedy, but also for our digestion of news nowadays. Readers should notice that my definition of historiography equally applies to contemporary mediums such as the news, newspapers, or magazines. The era of "fake news" has brought humanity to question the validity of reports. This realization leaves us in a rather perplexing predicament: shall people simply disregard all historiographical accounts simply because they are mimetic pieces? No, that solution is erroneous, churlish, and shortsighted. We cannot halt our curiosity, thrust our hands in the air, and be done with the pursuit of understanding, and *mimesis* helps us do so. I only intend to make known its parameters, for representation is ubiquitous, as I hope to have made clear with my discussion of imitation in mathematics and language in general. Historiography, much like ancient Greek tragedy, can be incredibly useful for the audience. I urge us all to still look to these mimetic productions as ways in which we can educate ourselves about the various facets of the human condition. Historiographers and journalists today do not usually borrow patterns from literary texts, as Thucydides did, and their representations of facts are seemingly objective; but no historiographer or journalist can produce an account devoid of *mimesis*, or preclude inquires on the human condition in a historiographical account. Because their accounts are necessarily skewed, biases unavoidably abound - although these biases can bring an audience to inquire further into fundamental aspects of life and the human condition.

## Appendix

1. A significant chunk of this essay will include an investigation concerning the manner in which certain authors of Ancient Greece used the terms μίμησις and μιμέομαι. It is worth noting that the implied meaning of μίμησις and μίμημα slightly alter throughout the course of time, depending on the context in which it was used. Plato and Aristotle were not the only authors of Greek antiquity who employed the terms. For example, Lycurgus, who is credited with giving laws to Sparta approximately 400 years before Plato and Aristotle, used various forms of the verb μιμέομαι in his speech *Against Leocrates*.<sup>16</sup> An additional example is seen in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. Homeric Hymns, while not ascribing a particular author for all of the hymns, certainly were produced and circulated before Plato and Aristotle began producing their works. However many instances in which μίμησις and μίμημα were used before the time of Plato and Aristotle, the common denominator of these terms will be clear by my choice of translation. I will consistently translate the noun, μίμησις, as *representation* or *imitation*, and the various forms of the verb, μιμέομαι, as *represent* or *imitate*.

2. Elizabeth F. Loftus, recently conducted a study on the formation of false memories titled *Creating False Memories*. She remarks, "Research is beginning to give us an understanding of how false memories of complete, emotional and self-participatory experiences are created in adults. First, there are social demands on individuals to remember; for instance, researchers exert some pressure on participants in a study to come up with memories. Second, memory

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<sup>16</sup> The following use μιμέομαι took place in Speech 1 of Lycurgus' *Against Leocrates*: In section 20, he used μιμῆσθαι; in section 80, he used μιμησάμενοι, in section 102, he used μιμούμενοι, in section 110 and 123, he used μιμῆσθαι.

construction by imagining events can be explicitly encouraged when people are having trouble remembering. And, finally, individuals can be encouraged not to think about whether their constructions are real or not." For our purposes, Thucydides would be the "researcher" and the witnesses are the "participants." According to Loftus, Thucydides' interrogation would likely implant false memories in the minds of those who witnessed the happenings of the Peloponnesian War. He would then only be recording and reporting his own creation of false memories, thereby bringing his historiography even further away from the history.

3. I choose in this essay not to refer to the contemporary term, *agon*, which refers to the competitive-style debate in Ancient Greek theatre. Humphreys, in *The Agon of the Old Comedy*, delineates scholars' identification of the feature in the 19th through 20th century. Euripides, however, did not refer to it as such. The feature is present in Euripides' *Medea* and is noticed when Jason says that he and Medea are engaging in a *hamilla*. It is likewise present in *The Trojan Women*, and numerous other Ancient Greek tragedies and comedies. However, since Euripides specifically uses the word to describe the literary features that scholars now refer to as *agon*, it is entirely appropriate for me to adopt Euripides' own term.

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