Second Paper:

21L001 FOUNDATIONS I PROFESSOR KIBEL
SECOND PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Papers will be due on March 29th, at the outset of class and should be six pages in length, double-spaced, or the equivalent. (Figure 350 words/page.) The topics listed are meant *only* to be suggestive. If, after reading them, you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so, but the object of the discussion should be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term and should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text and to the subject-matter of our discussions in class.

Please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. A literary essay addresses itself to readers who have read the book and who do *not* require a rehearsal of its contents. What an essay does supply is some reminder of the contents in the context of an argument about those contents; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret those contents. Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write the essay if you have in mind some point that you are trying to make. Such a point should not be self-evident; you should be able to state an opposing point (the one that you are denying) which is not so obviously silly that no one would be able to argue for it.

You may write on any subject that occurs to you concerning the *Antigone* or *Oedipus* or Thucydides's history, or any combination thereof if the fancy strikes you) Some questions allow a comparison with the *Oresteia*; you may write on the *Oresteia* but only the context of a comparison with some other text drawn from later readings. The following list is offered by way of sample topics; you may choose one of them but need not do so.

For the sake of easy reference in my comments, please NUMBER THE PAGES OF YOUR ESSAY.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

1. Defend or attack one of the following (or gather arguments on both sides):
(a) *Oedipus Rex* is not a drama of fate, although unavoidable (therefore "fated") events lie in the background of the play--the past of the action that we witness. In a sense, the past is always "fated", which only means that we cannot change what has happened. But the action of *Oedipus Rex* is the spectacle of a man freely choosing, from the highest motives, a series of actions which lead to his own ruin. He need not have exposed the truth, although that would have meant ruin for the city. He chose to know, to inquire, to make public. That is his heroism and the source of his destruction. Or:
(b) *Oedipus Rex* proves that man has no free will but is a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo) who pull the strings that make him dance.

2. Oedipus deserves his fate, insofar as he is headstrong, quick to judge, filled with hubris or overweening pride. Debate the two sides of the issue involved here

3. Here's a possible way to address the previous question: Admittedly, the fulfillment of the prophecy has already occurred before the action of the play begins, and some critics have argued that the play does not endorse the viewpoint that man has no free will but is a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo) who pull the strings that make him dance, because what we witness is someone freely choosing to know the truth about himself whatever it may turn out to be. (This is the point of the speech in which Oedipus calls himself "the child of chance"--*Tyche* in the original Greek). At the same time, we have to be

mindful that what happened, happened because Apollo intervened in the past and gave Oedipus a prophecy that he wasn't asking for--a "self-fulfilling prophecy" because it drove him straight to disaster. (Imagine the gods knowing who will win the World Series--nothing wrong with that, so long as they keep their mouths shut, because arguably what happens will still depend on everyone striving to do their best. But suppose that they tell the teams who will win and who will lose. Surely, that will have an effect on the action.) In this connection, compare the "fatalism" of *Oedipus Rex*, with the "fatalism" of Jesus's prophecy to Peter that he will deny Jesus three times before sunrise.

4. The chorus is not essential to Sophocles's dramas. Of course, given the convention that there must be a chorus, Sophocles had to give it things to do and say, but one could reconceive the story slightly so as to tell the same tale essentially, while at the same time writing the chorus out of the action. (And, indeed, modern versions of these plays have done so.)

5. Guilty or innocent, Oedipus's punishment is hugely out of proportion to his crime. Indeed, in a sense his crime *is* his punishment. In this connection we may say that the play draws upon the terrors of pollution and magical beliefs in blood-guilt that the earlier work of Aeschylus, the *Oresteia*, has treated in a more civilized manner.

6. Creon and Antigone articulate different views of the authority that they invoke to justify their positions. One of these concerns allegiance, another human nature, a third the nature of the gods. What is Creon's view of these things? What is Antigone's? Does the outcome of the play reinforce one of these views or the other, or does it suggest that both parties to the quarrel are wrong?

7. What is Creon's position at the outset of the play? What ideals does he stand for or come to stand for during the course of the play? What is Antigone's position at the outset of the play? Granted that the ritual burial of kin is a sacred obligation, but only a ritual (it need only be a token sprinkling, which is all that Antigone can supply), why is it so important to her? Is Ismene (caught-in-the-middle Ismene) an ethical weakling, a mere fence-sitter, or does she represent a reasonable position? Is it ever a good idea to say about someone that they are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem?

8. Argue for one of the following four views: (a) *Antigone* is a play without a hero (or heroine). (b) *Antigone* is a play where one sort of right collides with another. It has two central characters, two tragic figures. (c) Creon is the tragic center of the play. (d) Antigone is the tragic center of the play. [N.B. In your answers, offer arguments but make no mention whatsoever of "how the dictionary defines tragic heroes" or "how Aristotle defines tragic heroes".]

9. Contrast the presence of the gods in the foreground of action in Aeschylus with their withdrawal into the background of action in Sophocles.

10. Discuss the role of women in any two plays (including the *Oresteia*), contrasting what the feminine stands for in each.

11. The speeches are a flaw in Thucydides's history. They are not accurate, they are repetitive, they slow down the narrative, and the text would be both more interesting and better history without them.

12. Thucydides's notion that his work will last forever has much in common with Pericles's praise for Athens both in his funeral oration and in his last speech (in which he claims that the power of Athens will be remembered forever, even though it cannot last forever). Elucidate the idea of "greatness" that underlies these two conceptions. In touching this subject, you might consider the discontent that Thucydides's work inspired in subsequent ancient historians, since the war did not have arguably any grand motive (like the earlier defense of Greek freedom against Persian tyranny), dragged on for many years, had no grand climax (despite the fact that Athens eventually had to sue for peace), generally was the scene of much base or despicable activity (which Thucydides records in painstaking detail), and left the civilized world devastated in its aftermath. Thucydides selected the wrong subject to write about--this was the opinion of many pre-modern historians.

13. Compare Pericles's praise for political activity (in the funeral oration, and in his last speech, with its account of Athen's greatness) with the notions of Cleon, the demogogue, the hero of Pylos, as they are expressed in his speech urging the Athenians to show the Mytelineans no mercy.

14. The initial debate at Sparta, which describes the Athenian and Spartan characters, are confirmed by the ensuing narrative. The Athenian character is show to be superior to the Spartan and one can clearly see that Thucydides admired it far more than he did the Spartan.

15. Alternatively: Discuss the partiality or impartiality of Thucydides's view of the two sides in the war. Does either behave better or worse than the other during the course of the war?

16. In his introduction to the Penguin edition of Thucydides, M.I. Finley writes: "He had a pessimistic view of human nature and therefore of politics." Would you agree or disagree? Discuss.

17. Compare Antigone's defense of the "unwritten laws" or "traditions" that nobody made and that have always existed with the claim of the Furies in the *Oresteia* to represent "the mind of the past." Pericles, too (in the funeral oration), speaks of Athens respect for "the unwritten laws." Compare Antigone's defense of the "unwritten laws" or "traditions" (as one translation has it) in her speech of defiance to Creon with Thucydides remarks about the "simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature" (p. 244.).

18. "Such was the effect on the Athenians of their present good fortune that they thought that nothing could go wrong with them; that the possible and the difficult were alike attainable, whether the forces employed were large or wholly inadequate. It was their surprising success in most directions which caused this state of mind and suggested to them that their strength was equal with their hopes." (Thucydides, Penguin edition, p. 303.) Is this *hybris*? Is it possible to read Thucydides as a tragedy, with Athens as the hero?

19. A successor to Thucydides in the ancient world was Dionysus of Halicarnasus, who argued that Thucydides chose an unsuitable subject for his history, for the subject matter was not glorious but a shameful

episode, the memory of which ought not to be memorialized. Was Dionysus right in his judgment?

20. What does Thucydides mean (at the conclusion of his introductory remarks) by "the real reasons" or the "actual cause" of the war, as opposed to the reasons given by the participants at the time? What is the value of debate in life? Compare the meaningless of life produced by the plague with the insubordination to authority produced by the Corcyran revolution, in point of similarity and difference. Is "insubordination" a common feature of the meaninglessness of life?