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To What Extent Does Aristophanes' *Knights* Reflect Greek Opinion of Cleon and the Peloponnesian War?

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Keldorf

Western Civilization

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EQ: To what extent does Aristophanes' *Knights* reflect Greek opinion of Cleon and the Peloponnesian War?

Aristophanes' early comedies were highly critical of the Peloponnesian War. In *Babylonia* and *Knights*, he critiques all aspects of the war, but is particular in his condemnation of Cleon, an Athenian General who many scholars regard as the first demagogue. Aristophanes satirizes Cleon by portraying him as the manipulative slave of the frail, temperamental Demos—the embodiment of the Athenian assembly—in *The Knights*. Aristophanes satirizes him again in *Peace*, which follows Cleon's demise, staged days before the Peace of Nicias was ratified. Aristophanes' early comedies offer many critiques of Cleon, but it is *Knights* that provides the clearest representation of Cleon's leadership over the corrupted Athenian Assembly. Aristophanes' satires of the Peloponnesian War were extremely popular among the Athenian elite; however, *Knights* particularly corroborates the opinions of Greek intellectuals like Thucydides, Socrates, and Plutarch. Despite his status among Athen's intellectual elite, they collectively failed to dissuade the Athenian Assembly from ushering the downfall of Greek power. While Aristophanes' *Knights* was largely ineffective in swaying support for Cleon and the conflict against Sparta—it is notable in its ability to illuminate a clear and accurate reflection of the irrational nature of Athen's volatile democracy under Cleon.

Knights is Aristophanes' most direct attack on Cleon. Though, his disregard for him was previously expressed in his work *The Acharnians*. In it, the comedy's protagonist threatens to,

"cut up Cleon the Tanner into shoe-leather"(Aristophanes 121). *Acharnians* was a broader satirization of the fickle nature of Athenian Democracy– in *Knights*, he turns upon Cleon personally, as payback for the stream of attacks from the demagogue presented to the Athenian Assembly, which resulted in legal ramifications for Aristophanes.

Aristophanes produced *The Babylonians* in 426 BCE for the Festival of the Great Dionysia—in it, he slanders Cleon and the Polis, and accuses Athens of enslaving their allies. In retaliation, Cleon prosecuted Aristophanes and banished him from the Great Dionysia. *Knights* was Aristophanes' fourth comedy. It won first prize at the Lenaia festival in 324 BCE. *Knights* has five characters— manifestations of Athen's different civilian stratifications. The first is Demos, also meaning 'The People,' - a rich, self-indulgent, superstitious, weak creature—the representation of the Athenian Democracy. The Demos' slave—who heeds his every desire—is represented as 'the Paphlagonian,' or sometimes 'the Tanner,' a reference to how Cleon earned his fortune. Aristophanes portrays Cleon as an unprincipled, lying, cheating, and pilfering thief, fawning the Demos while cheating his subordinates out of power. Aristophanes assumed even more risk by portraying Cleon himself onstage—the demagogue invoked so much terror that no other actor would play him. Cleon's subordinates in the play are Nicias and Demosthenes. Nicias was High Admiral of the Athenian Navy, and Demosthenes was a Vice-Admiral. They led military expeditions throughout the entirety of the Peloponnesian War— Aristophanes features them in *Knights* as both were duped by Cleon during his reign over the Athenian Assembly. The final character, the Sausage-Seller— the protagonist of *Knights*—is used by Nicias and Demosthenes to oust 'the Paphlagonian' from power by helping him win the Demos' favour. Using Cleon's strategy of flattery and political subterfuge, the sausage-seller bests Cleon and

drives him out of Athens.

A comprehensive understanding of Aristophanes' critiques presented in *Knights* is dependant upon a context of Athenian Democracy and the Peloponnesian War. By the end of Pericles' reign over Athens c. 429 BCE, the city had entered an artistic and intellectual golden age. Democracy empowered the entire population of Athens, regardless of class or merit. With no qualifications required, Athenian politics proved to be ineffective under the strain of war. Information about the Peloponnesian War primarily comes from Aristophanes' contemporary Thucydides - from his work *History*. Thucydides was previously an Athenian General during the Peloponnesian War, but after leading a disastrous defense in the colony of Amphipolis, was punished into exile. Thucydides is regarded by modern scholars as the father of scientific history— who attempted to provide an objective interpretation of the war. Despite his efforts, he shares Aristophanes' sympathies for Nicias and Demosthenes— the Athenian Generals who both fell victim to Cleon's subterfuge.

Diodorus of Sicily was a Greek historian born in 90 BC in Agira, Italy. He is famous for his global history *Bibliotheca Historica*, a collection of world history tracing the origins of civilization to the beginning of Caesar's Gallic Wars c. 60 BCE. In his collection, Diodorus writes that the Peloponnesian War was instigated when Athens concluded an alliance with the city-state Corcyra in 433 BCE— beginning a besiegement of Potidaea, which in turn threatened the position of Corinth. Sparta feared that the Athenian Empire was becoming too powerful, but it still attempted to solve the conflict through arbitration. Pericles, the most powerful Athenian General at the time, denounced the Spartan's attempts for peace, equating arbitration with surrender to the Spartans. With no other options, Sparta declared war against Athens

(Diodorus, *World History* 12.41.1.)

Pericles' wartime strategy saw the abandonment of Athens' countryside to concentrate Athenian power in the city itself. He decided that Athens' "Long Walls" provided ample protection to connect the city with its port. As long as Athens controlled the sea, its freedom from Sparta was secure; however, by 429 BCE, it became apparent that Pericles' strategy was too expensive. A horrific plague killed about a third of Athens' citizens, along with Pericles. In 425 BCE, Athens' Assembly urged the Generals to pursue a more aggressive policy against Sparta. In response, Athenian general Demosthenes led a band of light infantry onto the island of Sphacteria, where he captured 292 Spartans. The statesman, Cleon, who was previously credited with tripling Athenian citizen's income, delivered troops to Demosthenes and went on to assume credit for the victory at Sphacteria, cementing his power over the Athenian Assembly.

The Assembly's agenda was dictated by the Council of Five Hundred, and legal cases were settled by the Jury Courts, composed of six thousand citizens formed into ten juries. Gilbert Murray, former Regius of Greek at University of Oxford, writes that while the system was nearly impossible to corrupt, it had no way to: "Ensure competency, nor to check the dangers of popular prejudice and passion"(Murray 2). Elections were only held for generals and executive magistrates. Athens was a "pure" democracy, in the sense that it was, as Murray writes, "Governed by the feelings of the Assembly at the moment and the personal influence of the leaders of public opinion"(Murray 3). The fickle nature of emotions led to a divided and irrational governing body, which soon resulted in the defeat of Athens at the hands of Sparta.

The main political parties in Athens were the Moderates and the extreme Democrats.

Moderates, like Nicias, were wholly opposed to conflict against Sparta. Many Athenians proudly remembered the cooperation between Sparta and Athens during the Greco-Persian War.

Moderates hoped this partnership could be maintained, and the intellectual classes generally agreed that it was necessary to secure the livelihood of Hellas. In 432 BCE, the Spartans demanded that “Athens should ‘set the Hellenes free,’ i.e. dissolve her Empire. Pericles saw that to obey such an order was to accept a position of ‘slavery,’ or definite subjection, to Sparta”(Murray). Following Pericles rule, Cleon became the leader of the war party in Athens.

Timothy Burns, professor of Political Science at Baylor University, notes that there were no speeches between Pericles and Cleon’s rule in Athens, writing:

Between the eulogy of Pericles (2.65) and Cleon’s first speech (3.36.6ff.) we hear no speeches at Athens. He is the first Athenian leader to appear after Thucydides has warned us of the decline in leadership at Athens that followed the death of the manifestly public-spirited and intelligent Pericles, a decline marked by more self-interested and pandering attempts to lead the demos, that is, by its more democratic, less de facto monarchic character. (Burns 230)

Cleon was widely regarded as an offensive, corrupting force over the Athenian Assembly. He rose to power using his wealth; like the Athenian General Nicias, he had no noble background. Unlike Nicias, Cleon was reviled by his contemporary intellectuals for his radical policies and erratic behavior. Aristotle writes in his *Constitution of the Athenians* about Cleon, stating that: “With his attacks, he corrupted the Athenians more than anyone else. Although other speakers behaved decently, Cleon was the first to shout during a speech in the Assembly, use abusive language while addressing the people”(Aristotle 28.3). This marked the end of an era of orderly

and rational governance in Athens.

In 426 BCE, Aristophanes presented his play *Babylonia* at the Festival of Dionysia. The play satirized Athens involvement in the war. It was because of this play that Cleon attempted to prosecute Aristophanes. While the verdict of this trial is unknown, Cleon had revoked from Aristophanes the privilege of performing at the Festival of Dionysus after he claimed Aristophanes to have besmirched Athenian reputation among its foreign allies. Aristophanes was relegated to performing his works at the Festival of Lenaea, where only Athenian citizens were permitted to attend. This sparked Aristophanes' hatred for Cleon, and from here his comedies begin to offer useful information about the statesman's policy. Following Cleon and Demosthenes' victory at Sphacteria, the Spartans offered Athens a truce. Cleon immediately dismissed their peace treaty, convinced that Athens had secured a victory over Sparta. Cleon convinced the Assembly, and the war resumed.

Cleon and his democratic supporters continued to perpetuate the conflict, and they would not stop until Sparta was part of the Athenian Empire. The Moderates, who only sought Athenian independence, had their success in 421 BC when the Peace of Nicias was signed, and it seemed as if cooperation between the two states was guaranteed. Aristophanes' *Peace* was both a celebration of the anticipated war's end, and a cautionary, bitter reflection of the war. Aristophanes warned that war was deeply rooted in Greek culture, and he foreshadowed the next generation of leadership to fall back to the ways of Cleon and his extreme Democrats. Aristophanes was accurate in his predictions, as the hostilities resumed months later.

Cleon reigned over a markedly trying time in Athenian history. At the start of the Peloponnesian War, Athens suffered a plague which likely killed off a third of its population

(Thucydides VII 20). The majority of Athenian citizenry were farmers who were unemployable within the city. Pericles set up a system to pay those on the Assembly, and Cleon notably increased their fees during his own rule. A majority of public funds were confiscated from criminals put on trial by the Demos' various juries. According to Aristophanes, put on trial for, "No offence except wealth and lack of political influence"(Murray 6). Cleon was particular in his treatment of Athens' citizens, soldiers and sailors; often neglecting their income, and treating them with disdain. They had no way of voicing their resentment in the daily voting. The voters of the Demos determined public policy, and Aristophanes notes that Cleon cared little for the populace as long as he was satisfying the Demos (Aristophanes 776). During this time, food and supplies were terribly scarce, and the city was brimming with refugees displaced by the war. Cleon and the Demos' insatiable appetite added insult to injury. While Athens lost leagues of territory, "twenty thousand slaves"(Thucydides VII, 27), and much of its trade network, Cleon placated the Demos through bribery and theft.

Like Thucydides, Plato, Isocrates, and other witnesses of the time, Aristophanes was highly critical of extreme Democracy. However, his courage in attacking the great demagogue from a position of no regard was unprecedentedly remarkable. Before he'd secured his status in the public sphere, "Aristophanes had already championed the subject allies against Athenian oppression in the *Babylonians*, and had even stated a good case for the Spartans against the fury of popular war fever in the *Acharnians*"(Murray 7). With *Babylonians*, Aristophanes invoked Cleon's wrath, who attempted to have the playwright exiled. But it was *Knights* that not only incriminated the corrupt statesmen, but offers the clearest insight into the tribulations of Athens' Demos during this period.

Knights is Aristophanes' most direct and accurate critique of Cleon—Written in 425 BCE, a year after the *Acharnians* and the same year Cleon was elected General over the Peloponnesian War. The title of the play derives from the Chorus, like most of Aristophanes' plays. The knights of Classical Athens were wealthy, politicized and educated, they saw through Cleon's populism, and were important allies in Aristophanes' comic crusade against him. Aristophanes makes a tirade of accusations against Cleon, questioning his use of the Assembly for personal and political gain, his repeated attempts at political censorship, (including Aristophanes and Thucydides, who Cleon banished from Athens)his ill use of state funds, and his manipulation of criminal trials in order to steal his victims' assets.

Many historians refer to *Knights* for its detailed portrayal of Cleon's ascension over the Demos. In the beginning lines of *Knights*, Demosthenes complains about Cleon's strategy to delegitimize the other Athenian leaders—effectively turning himself into a tyrant. Demosthenes states that Cleon, “Drives us off and lets no other man Wait table; stands there with a cowhide fan To flap any competitor away”(Aristophanes 53). Aristophanes accuses Cleon of supplanting the Demos' greed to secure his power, while preventing his peers from influencing the Democracy.

Professor Burns claims that Aristophanes represents Cleon “in the same manner as Thucydides did in *History*”(Burns 249). The similarities between their representation of Cleon is notable. Cleon is portrayed as brash and violent in both of their works, and both men accuse Cleon of stealing credit for the victory at Pylos from Demosthenes. Dr. Foster, Professor of History at Ashland University, claims in her work, *Thucydides and Herodotus*, that Thucydides represented the same characterization of a greedy Athenian assembly as Aristophanes did in

Knights. She writes that his, “Important and repeated image of the assembly ‘stretching out for more’, reconfigures the greed that was a main characteristic of the corrupt demos of *Knights*”(Foster 147). These similarities in their condemnation of Cleon have led many historians to believe that the authors shared a common resentment for Cleon, though most observe that the connection between Aristophanes’ contemporary representation and Thucydides’ recount twenty years later provides legitimacy to interpretations of Cleon as a war-mongering, and ultimately disastrous leader.

Aristophanes and his contemporaries were strongly opposed to the greed of the Demos. Cleon and the Sausage-Seller, the protagonist of *Knights*, prey on his susceptibility to bribery to gain control over him. The Chorus lambasts Cleon, claiming him to be a, “Tax-extortor, bribe-extractor, pit and whirlpool of blackmail!”(Aristophanes 251). Cleon employed many amoral and illegal strategies to increase his stream of bribes into the Assembly. Dr. Foster notes that the Sausage Seller and Cleon share the same tactics as they compete for the Demos’ favor, writing, “The aim of both the Sausage Seller and the Paphlagonian had been to instill greater and greater appetite into Demos in order to control him through satisfying his desires”(Foster 136). Cleon and the lowly sausage seller’s cheap tactics are merely reflections of Cleon’s ignoble strategies for securing the popular opinion of the Athenian jury.

Thucydides regards this as one of Cleon’s few personal strengths, writing that “The demagogue at that time was most persuasive to the People” (Thucydides 4.21.3, cf. 3.36.6). Unlike Thucydides, Aristophanes refused to acknowledge Cleon’s success as a populist, though he inadvertently credits Cleon’s influence in his later play *Wasps*, which critiques the corrupted

jury members Cleon derived his power from.

Aristophanes' distaste of the Demos is evident in *Knights*; he likens the Demos as ill-tempered, selfish citizens, motivated by greed rather than a desire to help the city. The Peloponnesian War displaced thousands of Ionians, yet the Assembly continued to ignore their sufferings (Burns 216). In the beginning of *Knights*, Demosthenes gripes that the Demos is a "perfect glutton for beans, and most bad-tempered; it's Demos of the Pnyx, an intolerable old man and half deaf"(Aristophanes 43-44). The Demos, as Dr. Foster noted, was only influenced through bribery. Despite representing Athen's people, they were 'deaf' to the pleas of Athen's poor and rural citizens. It's clear to see why Cleon cajoled the Assembly while ignoring the well-being of his state. His predecessor, Nicias, was regarded by both Aristotle and Plutarch as one of the "three good citizens eminent above the rest for their hereditary affection and love to the people"(Plutarch 1). Nicias, who lacked the political acumen of Pericles, used his abundant wealth to gain popularity. Plutarch writes, "He courted them with dramatic exhibitions, gymnastic games, and other public shows, more sumptuous and more splendid than had been ever known in his or in former ages"(Plutarch 6). Cleon undoubtedly appreciated his political opponent's success in purchasing the Assembly's favor, and adopted this practice during his own leadership.

Despite Nicias and Cleon's similar populist approach to their roles as Demagogue, Aristophanes only references Cleon's corruption of the assembly as treacherous. He claims that Cleon corrupted the Assembly on a platform, as Professor Burns writes, "Based on demagogic flattery, calumny, bribery"(Burns 250). Cleon created incentives for the poorer, and subsequently more impressionable citizens to partake in the juries. He increased their payment for trying cases

to three obols a day. The Chorus in *Knights* proclaims Cleon to, “Play the fawning cur, flatters, cajoles, wheedles, and dupes him at will with little scraps of leavings. ‘Dear Demos,’ he will say, ‘try a single case and you will have done enough; then take your bath, eat, swallow and devour; here are three obols” (Aristophanes 44). Regius Murray notes that by 425 BCE—the year Cleon was appointed General of Athens—he had bought the poorer Athenian’s support by increasing jury wages to “three obols, and later more” (Murray 5). This gave Cleon considerable control over the voting procedures, Thucydides confirms that Cleon used this advantage to steal funds and territory from dissenting citizens, effectively turning his leadership into a Tyranny (Thucydides VII, 25).

Aristophanes was notable in his support of Nicias and Demosthenes in the play; he uses the two Generals as exposition for the storyline by having them relay their grievances to one another about Cleon. Aristophanes references Demosthenes and Cleon’s victory at Pylos in a spoof of the conflict; the protagonist steals a meal prepared for the Demos by Cleon. He tricks Cleon into running after envoys supposedly carrying money bags, and then offers the meal to the Demos, stating: “See, Demos, dear; I bring you sumptuous fare” (Aristophanes 1195). This was in reference to Demosthenes’ victory at the island of Sphacteria over the Spartans, for which Cleon famously stole credit. Professor Brock writes that this was a “well-known reference to Cleon's claim to credit for the victory at Pylos” (Brock 19). As Thucydides elaborates in *History*, Cleon’s self-acclaimed victory at the Battle of Pylos was enabled by, as Professor Burns writes, “The specific troops requested by Demosthenes, whom Cleon has chosen as his colleague and who has careful and detailed plans for their use” (Burns 232). Thucydides and Aristophanes share the opinion that the victory was entirely due to Demosthenes leadership, yet he receives none of

the credit(Thucydides 4.32.3, 4; 4.33.2). This ploy by Cleon cemented his favorability among the Athenian citizens, allowing him to platform a campaign of military expansion into inland Attica, thereby ending any potential peace between Athens and Sparta.

With an overwhelming support from the Assembly, Cleon was emboldened in his quest for political dominance. He lambasted the Athenian Generals' leadership in the Peloponnesian War, going as far as accusing his allies of conspiracy with the Lacedaemonians. When Cleon failed to reach a peace agreement with Spartan ambassadors, the delegated representatives attempted peace discussions with Cleon's Athenian allies, knowing that Athenian moderates were still eager for peace. Thucydides writes that Cleon attacked his allies, stating that he, "Laid into them hard, saying that he had known even beforehand that they [the Spartans] had nothing right in mind, and that now it was clear, since they were refusing to speak to the many and wished to be representatives to a few men. And if they were thinking anything honest, he told them to speak to all"(Thucydides XIX 2). Cleon denounces the Spartans for attempting to hold private peace discussions with Athens; in doing so, he scuttles any hope of a peace agreement.

Knights' protagonist reverses these accusations upon Cleon, decrying him of plotting, stating: "Under pretense of forming an alliance with Argives, he is hatching a plot with the Lacedaemonians there"(Aristophanes 215). Cleon repeatedly accused his own allies of plotting with the Spartans, decrying them for their attempts at peace arbitrations with the Spartans. R.W. Brock, former Professor at Ohio State University, notes that Aristophanes ruthlessly critiques Cleon's cheap political tactics, by having the sausage-seller achieve, "Victory with Cleonian accusations of conspiracy"(Brock 19). Aristophanes emphasizes the effectiveness of these baseless accusations, by paralleling them to the success of Cleon's denunciations in real life. The

aftermath of Cleon's efforts to end the peace negotiations and perpetuate the conflict were unfavorable for Athens. Winter storms enabled the Spartan warriors besieged by Demosthenes at Pylos to escape, prompting many Athenians to express remorse after refusing Sparta's peace offering (Thucydides XIIV 1). Following this loss, Cleon's popularity with the Demos dwindled; his affect over Athens was finally lost with his death, when in 321 BCE Sparta and Athens signed the Peace of Nicias, ending the first phase of the Peloponnesian War.

Aristophanes' early plays centered around contemporary politics, specifically critiquing military leadership during the early Peloponnesian War. However, his primary motive in producing these comedies was to address the irrational nature of Athens' Democracy. Through this play, he paints a picture of a dysfunctional, fickle Demos, that supported policies in the Assembly that increased their personal wealth, while completely jeopardizing the sanctity of the Athenian state. Along with the likes of Thucydides *History*, Aristophanes' *Knights* helps form modern understanding of Cleon's responsibility in the conflict and the downfall of classical Athens, as well as informing modern interpretation of the highly turbulent state of Athens during this period.

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