

## Clio and Thalia: Reconsidering the relation of Attic Old Comedy and Historiography

Starting from recent significant studies of the themes and language of Old Comedy and ancient Greek historiography and the publication of the fragments of Attic Comedy in *The Birth of Comedy* (2011, Jeffrey Rusten, ed.), this panel examines from fresh perspectives the interrelationships of Comedy and historiography in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Century Athens.<sup>1</sup>

### Panel Organization:

Introduction (5 minutes)

Paper #1 (15 minutes): “Death, Condensation, and Paradox: Comic Language in Thucydides” argues that Thucydides’ condensed and sometimes incongruous language shares an important commonality with comic language, which can sometimes create distance between the spectator and the personalities or events on stage. Looking particularly at Thucydides’ assessment of the death of Nicias, it examines Thucydidean language for the same sense of incongruity we might feel in viewing Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, where the language is comic, but the basic situation is hardly funny.

Paper #2 (15 minutes): “Food, Appetite, Spartans, and Athenians in Aristophanes’ *Knights* and Thucydides’ Pylos Narrative” looks at the possibility that Thucydides responded to

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<sup>1</sup> Other recent and forthcoming bibliography includes, e.g.: Christopher Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London: Routledge, 2000), 123-245; J. S. Rusten, “Thucydides and Comedy”, in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed. Antonios Rengakos (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 547-58; Jeffrey Henderson, “Old Comedy and Popular History”, in *History without Historians: Greeks and their Pasts in the Archaic and Classical Eras*, ed. J. Marincola, L. Llewellyn-Jones, and C. Maciver (Edinburgh 2012), and *La commedia greca e la storia*, eds. Franca Perusino and Maria Colantonio (Pisa 2012).

Aristophanes' memorable use of food symbolism to portray greed and materialism in *Knights*.

Aristophanes' *Knights* was produced in 424, the year after Athens' campaign to Pylos.

Thucydides wrote his account of the events at Pylos perhaps 10 or 20 years later. He includes a more detailed and central role for food in this account than in any other battle or siege narrative in the *History*. The paper asks whether it is possible that Thucydides was able to build on the meanings Aristophanes had established with the audience shared by the two authors.

Paper #3 (15 minutes): "Thucydides and the Late Plays of Aristophanes" looks at the connection between Aristophanes and Thucydides from precisely the opposite direction, positing that Aristophanes might well have read Thucydides before he wrote his plays of the late 390's and early 380's. The paper argues that Aristophanes responds to Thucydidean treatments of civil strife and constitutional evolution with a "systematic interest in an Athenian constitution under which inequalities and inequities will be banished from society." Taking Xenophon's responses into consideration as well, the paper reconstructs a moment in Athenian intellectual history.

Paper #4 (15 minutes): "A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To This Fragment: Greek Authors' Use Of Comedy As Historical Evidence" moves further into the fourth century, and looks at 4<sup>th</sup> century historians and their treatment of Comedy as evidence for historical events. Source criticism is especially difficult for this period, since the historians and their sources are often extant only in Athenaeus. However, fragments of Duris and Timaeus, for example, allow us to observe how the historians treated comedy, and what status they allowed it as evidence. Finally, the paper takes a glance at Plutarch's use of Comedy as evidence. This allows for some comparative reflections on the use of Comedy in the fourth century historians, whose practices show that they respected Comedy as a source of knowledge about specific past events.

Summation:

The papers for this panel reveal unexpected affinities between the two genres in language, approach, themes, and political thought. Their investigations confound settled assumptions about the character of each genre, as well as shedding light on their respective narrative and dramatic strategies. Along the way, we are offered a glimpse of serious historiographical engagement on the part of Old Comedy, and of deft use of comic techniques by one of historiography's most stern practitioners (Thucydides). As a group they therefore display the importance of Comedy for historiography, and of historiography for Comedy, in the late fifth and early fourth centuries and help to shed new light on Athenian intellectual life and thought during this period.

## Death, Condensation, and Paradox: Comic Language in Thucydides

Few things are sadder than the deaths of helpless adolescents, and few literary adolescents more helpless than Joseph Conrad's Stevie, blown to pieces in a terrorist plot in *The Secret Agent*. But, as often in Conrad, the sadness is qualified: an autopiano unexpectedly explodes into "Blue Bells of Scotland," disrupting a conference between terrorists; the stupid, self-centered protagonist, agent of Stevie's death, tries to calm Stevie's bereaved sister (who is also his wife) by saying, "Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you had lost *me!*" Figurative language—the "rainlike fall of [Stevie's] mangled limbs," and Stevie's decapitated head "fading out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display"—confounds traditional notions about tragedy.

In Thucydides, it is the death of Nicias that confounds:

καὶ ὁ μὲν τοιαύτη ἢ ὅτι ἐγγύτατα τούτων αἰτία ἐτεθνήκει, ἥκιστα δὲ ἄξιος ὢν τῶν  
γε ἐπ' ἐμοῦ Ἑλλήνων ἐς τοῦτο δυστυχίας ἀφικέσθαι διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐς ἀρετὴν  
νενομισμένην ἐπιτήδευσιν. 7.86.5

Nicias died in this manner or close to it, least deserving of the Greeks of my time  
less to meet this misfortune, since he had completely devoted himself to what is  
considered virtue.

Interpretation hinges in part on three words: ἄξιος, δυστυχία, and ἀρετὴν. ἄξιος occurred eight times in Nicias' speeches. At first Nicias emphasizes the need to do one's duty, to live up to a reputation (e.g. ἄξιον τῆς διανοίας δρᾶν, 6.21.1; cf. 6.12.1, 6.68.4, 7.61.3); this is ἄξιος in its active sense. Then, as danger looms, Nicias speaks passively not of doing what one should but "getting what one deserves."

As regards ἀρετή, some scholars have narrowed the range of meaning, e.g. to "religiosity." But ἀρετή can refer to the whole complex of values associated with Greek heroism. The man who possesses ἀρετή is ἀγαθός; his chief aim is to avoid τὸ αἰσχρόν. On the other hand, Thucydides never tells us what he thinks it means. Before the expedition, Nicias had already based an argument on τὸ αἰσχρόν; later, more tellingly, he refused to return home on an αἰσχρὰ αἰτία, a position that arguably damages the entire expedition, since all may die (7.48.4).

Finally, Nicias' fate was a δυστυχία. Nicias' Doric, conservative policy of shunning danger and fortune had been clear from the start of his career:

βουλόμενος, ἐν ᾧ ἀπαθῆς ἦν καὶ ἠξιούτο, διασώσασθαι τὴν εὐτυχίαν ...5.16.1

Nicias wished, while he was safe and esteemed, to keep his good fortune, considering ...

Nicias paradoxically believed that his good fortune arose from the avoidance of fortune

(τύχη):

... νομίζων ἐκ τοῦ ἀκινδύνου τοῦτο συμβαίνειν καὶ ὅστις ἐλάχιστα τύχη αὐτὸν παραδίδωσι,.... 5.16.1

He repeats this opinion in direct speech at 6.23. The tension between Nicias' effort to avoid τύχη, and his recognition of the primacy of τύχη in warfare, lasts throughout his career (7.61.3, 7.77.2, 7.77.4).

Thucydides' necrology for Nicias, then, is full of tension: the man who so strongly believed in merit, strove for "virtue," and avoided fortune, has the bad fortune to meet an unmerited and unheroic death. And Thucydides keeps his distance. Far from "admiring" Nicias (Hornblower ad 7.86.5), the historian simply says that Nicias followed "what was considered

ἀρετή”: but he has shown the destructive side of Nicias’ notion of ἀρετή at 7.48.4.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides is almost cruelly analytical, probing his characters’ thinking and showing where it leads. This necrology not only withholds praise but suggests criticism.

Both narratives use incongruity – a staple of comedy – and both use some tools of comic writing: in Conrad, figuration – comparisons with rain and fireworks; in Thucydides, “condensation,” exploitation of the multiple valences of words, made famous in Freud’s study of jokes. Once we notice these, we realize that irony, multiple valences and striking conjunctures that make us think twice about a word, are not uncommon in Thucydides.

Thucydides’ “joking” turn can therefore be deadly serious, as this death-scene reminds us. So, more surprisingly, can Aristophanes’: in *Acharnians*, which offers drinkable dramas (499) and potable truces (1020), porcine privates (739, 772, 781), phallic sausages (1119), and foreplay confused with circumcision (592), N.R.E. Fisher concludes that the moral ambiguity of the play’s hero, and the mixed nature of the festivals the hero attends, are less than ludic: far from re-integrating Dicaeopolis into the city, the playwright leaves him “isolated and independent.” Both history and comedy used “jokes,” then, but laugh riots are not the only outcome.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The full presentation of this paper will include my reasons for differing with Rood and Hornblower on Nicias’ behavior in 7.48.

<sup>3</sup> N. R. E. Fisher, “Multiple Personalities and Dionysiac Festivals: Dicaeopolis in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*,” *Greece & Rome* 40 (1993), 31-47.

Food, Appetite, Spartans, and Athenians in Aristophanes' *Knights* and Thucydides' Pylos  
Narrative

Because of the victory at Pylos in 425 BCE, Athens gained a useful position on the coast of Laconia and brought home 292 Spartan prisoners. These gains were important advantages in the Peloponnesian War, and might have led to peace, since the Spartans were desperate to retrieve their men and repeatedly sued for a treaty. However, the Athenians refused to end the war. In the very next year, 424 BCE, Aristophanes produced his *Knights*. Perhaps 10 to 20 years later, Thucydides wrote up the story of this campaign in his *History* (4.1-41).

*Knights* pillories the general Cleon and the Athenian People for their corruption and for not accepting the Spartan peace offers. In *Knights*, Cleon is figured as an aggressive and greedy slave of "Demos," the Athenian People. Nicias and Demosthenes, the other two main generals involved in the Pylos expedition, are also slaves of Demos. The close agreement between *Knights* and Thucydides' account has often been noted. Thucydides shows, for instance, that the Demos voted Cleon the generalship at Pylos on a whim, that Demosthenes did all of the thinking for the campaign, but that Cleon could claim the credit, and that Spartan peace offers were persistent and genuine. (Cf. Henderson 1998, 220-223.)

These connections between Aristophanes and Thucydides are not the main subject of this paper, which asks instead about the thematic emphases of *Knights* and the Pylos narrative. My underlying thesis is that Thucydides shared an audience with Aristophanes, and was able to communicate with this audience on lines established by Aristophanes.

Food, for instance, plays an important role both in *Knights* and also in Thucydides' account of the Pylos campaign, which gives the topic of food and hunger a prominence unique among Thucydides' battle and siege narratives. In *Knights*, food comes to represent the profits

and privileges of empire, as well as the empire itself (cf. Balot 2001, 197-198, Davidson 1998, 293-294), and takes a central role in the plot. All parties compete over food, so that *Knights* is partly about what Thucydides calls “the desire for more” (*pleonexia*): the council, Demos, and generals are suborned through appealing to and inflating their appetites for sardines, salads, stews, and other goodies (cf. Brock 1986, Scholtz 2004). Throughout the play, food magically appears in ridiculous types and abundance order to support this theme. As in *Acharnians*, the inhumanity of eating others for Athenian profit is hinted at; for instance, the Spartan prisoners from Pylos are described as food three times (55-58, 390-393, 1160).

Thucydides’ focus on food in the Pylos narrative seems at first glance entirely unrelated. From the beginning to the end of his narrative, both parties at Pylos are pressed by hunger. In a one particularly vivid and detailed passage, Thucydides shows how the two parties compete to make hunger the decisive factor of the campaign, as the Athenian besiegers, hungry and thirsty themselves, struggle to cut off the supply of food to the 420 men they have trapped on Sphacteria. At the same time, the Spartans contrive to supply these men at any price and by any possible means. In the end, the Spartans are defeated partly by hunger, partly by Athenian attack. Thucydides makes two further comments on this: first, he shows that the Spartans on the island ate less food than they had, i.e. that they showed astonishing discipline in controlling their appetites (4.39. 1-2). Second, he notes that public opinion condemned the Spartans for surrendering due to hunger (4.40.1).

Thus, appetite is central in Aristophanes, hunger in Thucydides. Are these presentations connected? At the least, I think we could say that they emphasize a similar attitude through contrasting means: Aristophanes mocks Athenian appetite, Thucydides emphasizes Spartan self-control. Both narratives call upon traditional Greek contempt for men who are subject to their

appetites, and respect for those who are not (cf. Davidson 1998, 313). However, perhaps Thucydides also supplements Aristophanes' portrayal of fantastic appetite and delusional ease of supply in *Knights* with a detailed account of the dangers and difficulties of supply at Pylos. Hunger and death at Pylos were the result of Cleon's appetite for war and prominence, so that there was more to say about food once Thucydides came to tell the story.

Balot, R. (2001), *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*: Princeton University Press.

Brock, R.W. (1986), "The Double Plot in Aristophanes' *Knights*": *GRBS* 27, 15-27.

Davidson, J. (1998), *Courtesans and Fishcakes*: St. Martin's Press.

Henderson, J. (1998), *Aristophanes: Acharnians, Knights*: Harvard University Press.

Scholtz, A. (2004), "Friends, Lovers, Flatterers: Demophilic Courtship in Aristophanes' *Knights*": *TAPA* 134, 263-293.

## Thucydides and the late plays of Aristophanes

This paper offers a reconstruction of an aspect of Athenian intellectual history in the early years of the fourth century BC, situating the late works of Aristophanes in the context of the early reception of Thucydides' *History*. While the relative chronology of different strata of the *History* remains elusive (esp. de Romilly 1963: 3-10), Thucydides certainly saw the end of the Peloponnesian War (2.65, 6.15) and may have had the text *in manibus* in the early 390s (2.100.2 reads best as an obituary of Archelaus, d. 399), perhaps even as late as 395 (1.10.2 makes best sense on the eve of the Corinthian War). It is as chronologically plausible that Aristophanes had read Thucydides before writing *Ecclesiazusae* (between 393 and 389) and *Wealth* (388), as it is unsurprising, in view of the performance contexts of the comic genre, that the plays make no explicit reference to Thucydidean historiography. The points of contact emerge in Aristophanes' systematic interest in an Athenian constitution under which inequalities and iniquities will be banished from society and, by implication, division of the body politic will never again threaten the polis. Painting with the broadest brush strokes, we might say that in answer to Thucydides' pessimistic presentation of the fallibility of human judgement, wrestling with imperfect knowledge, the emotions of *pleonexia* and *philotimia*, and the blind vicissitudes of fortune, Aristophanes (though not necessarily any less pessimistic) offers an exploration of the potential malleability of social formations: how would women run a polis; or could there be an ethical economics rewarding virtue and penalizing vice?

It is often held that Aristophanes' late plays are less 'political' than their forerunners because of the paucity of reference to contemporary events and the diminuendo of *ad hominem* invective (e.g. Dillon 1987: 155, 174-6). But such views mistake absence of topicality for

absence of political thought. The late plays are engaged in perhaps the most significant issue of their day: the continuing constitutional evolution of Athenian democracy from the oligarchic revolution of 411 on, especially the aftershocks of the terror and civil war of 404-403.

Exploration of the late plays, contrary to the general view that there is relatively little to be gained by comparing Thucydides VI-VIII and comic drama (cf. Rusten 2006: 555), shows that in 390s Athens Aristophanes was wrestling with many of the questions that confronted Thucydides in his unfinished work.

Among discrete moments of historical echo of revolution are these: in *Ecclesiazusae* (455-7) the democracy votes itself out of existence as it did in 412 (Thuc. 8.54); the donation of private property in the agora (*Eccl.* 711-876) reflects the expropriations of the Thirty (Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.21), and the disarming of the citizenry in that place (ibid. 2.3.20); the prominence of legal documents (*Eccl.* 1012-22) reflects the rising importance of inscribed law after the falls of the Four Hundred (Lys. 30.2; Thuc. 8.97.2) and the Thirty (Andoc. 1.82-4); *Wealth*'s thematic interest in the term *poneros* evokes the very terms in which the Thirty characterized their victims (Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.13-14); the violent treatment of the sycophant (*Wealth* 907-50) reflects their extermination in 403 and, more widely, political murders in 411 (Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.12; cf. Thuc. 8.70); the reference to Phyle (*Wealth* 1146) and the closing procession up the acropolis evoke memories of Thrasybulus' sacrifices and his speech about virtue there after the victorious return of the democrats (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.39-42). Running through all these passages is the thread of an allusive history of ideological struggle shaped, in part, by the account of revolution in Thucydides' eighth book, which showed so clearly how conflict began over what Athens' ancestral law was (esp. 8.76.6; discussion: Munn 2000; Ostwald 1986). When Praxagora extols female conservatism by haranguing her conspirators with the refrain *hosper kai pro tou* (*Eccl.*

221-8), more is at stake than making fun of comic women's traditional predilections: the past, like utopia, is a profoundly ideological place.

Dillon, M. (1987), "Topicality in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*": *ClAnt* 6, 155-183.

Munn, M. (2000), *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates*: University of California Press.

Ostwald, M. (1986), *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law. Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens*: University of California Press.

Romilly, J. de. (1963), *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism*, transl. by P. Thody: New York.

Rusten, J.S. (2006), "Thucydides and Comedy", in *Brill's Companion to Thucydides*, ed.

Antonios Rengakos: Leiden and Boston, 547-58.

A Funny Thing Happened on the way to this Fragment:  
Comedy as Historical evidence after 400 BC

The question I wish to pose is this: how did Greek historians after 400 BC use comedy as evidence? Of course, this task is made difficult by the fragmentary nature of the historical tradition itself, but we do find a number of historians who were willing to cite comedy, or poetry more generally, to support their arguments. Thus, for example, the third-century historian Duris of Samos referred to lines from Aristophanes' *Babylonians* (now lost) in connection with a discussion of Athenian-Samian relations in the fifth century (*BNJ* 76 F 66). In fact, the historical fragments of Duris reveal a fair number of poetic citations, from Homer to contemporary hymns. I will examine these and other instances in order to investigate whether we can determine the attitude of Greek historians toward comedy as evidence.

At the same time, we cannot avoid the role of the “cover-text” – the author who preserves the fragment, whether comic or historical. One illustrative example is a passage of Athenaeus (12.532d–f) in which he cites, in quick succession, the fourth-century historian Theopompus, the fourth-century comic poet Heraclides, and then Duris, in a manner which leaves unclear what material derives from each of these authors (*BNJ* 76 F 35). Recent work on the delineation of fragments in Athenaeus (Lenfant 2007, Baron 2011) has suggested some possible patterns in his usage, but each case must still be judged in its individual context. Although most scholars believe that, in this particular instance, Athenaeus added the lines of the comic poet to his citation of the historians, the number of poetic passages preserved in the fragments of Duris leads me to question that reconstruction; it also warrants a more careful consideration of Theopompus' practice in this regard (*FGrHist* 115 F 249).

Nesselrath (1990) concluded that Athenaeus gathered much of his comic material from previously compiled handbooks rather than original texts. This raises questions about the nature of those handbooks, and how Athenaeus utilized them. If he found the lines of Heraclides in a previous compilation, was the combination “Theopompus–Heraclides–Duris” also there, or is this his own creation? Either way, we gain a glimpse of a complex cluster of knowledge, in which comedic verses and prose passages originally independent from one another become linked in connection with an historical event or person. Pelling (2000) and others have remarked on the symposiastic nature of these clusters in Athenaeus’ work. I would like to suggest that there is an historical aspect to them as well, beyond the display of erudition: the ability to cite Athenian comedy could represent not just knowledge for its own sake, but knowledge of a specific past. For comparative purposes, I will end by introducing some examples from Plutarch’s *Lives*. We will see that he is able to cite prior historians as well as Athenian comic poets as historical evidence, demonstrating comedy’s continued relevance for the historical memory of Greek authors.

Baron, C. (2011), “The Delimitation of Fragments in Jacoby’s *FGrHist*: Some Examples from Duris of Samos”: *GRBS* 51, 86–110.

Lenfant, D., ed. (2007), *Athénée et les fragments d’historiens. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg (16–18 juin 2005)*: Paris.

Nesselrath, H.-G. (1990), *Die attische mittlere Komödie: Ihre Stellung in der antiken Literaturkritik und Literaturgeschichte*: Berlin.

Rusten, J., ed. (2011), *The Birth of Comedy: Texts, Documents, and Art from Athenian Comic Competitions, 486–280*: Baltimore.

Pelling, C.B.R. (2000), "Fun with Fragments: Athenaeus and the Historians," in *Athenaeus and His World*, eds. D. Braund and J. Wilkins: Exeter, 171–90.

Zecchini, G. (1989), *La cultura storica di Ateneo*: Milan.