

## **Aristophanes and Thucydides on Pericles: Whom to believe?\***

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Oscillating continuously between the historical narrative discourse of Thucydides, on one hand, and the theatrical mimetic discourse of Aristophanes, on the other, the aim of this essay is first to pinpoint and then to pose questions –and to leave them unanswered and pending– about the divergences and convergences between the information given by these two writers, which experienced Peloponnesian War and testified about it, in a different but complementary manner, not only from a literary but also from a historical point of view.

### ***Thucydides and Aristophanes, two Athenians, witnesses of the War***

Thucydides was born c. 460 BC, approximately twenty five years earlier than Aristophanes. Both of them were Athenian citizens: Thucydides was son of Olorus from the urban deme of Halimous (tribe of Leontis), while Aristophanes was son of Philippus, from the urban deme of Cydathenaeum (tribe of Pandionis). Thirty-five and fifty years younger than Pericles respectively, Thucydides and Aristophanes alike were born and grew more or less in the wake of his early and middle dynamic political career. Among Pericles' numerous public interventions and political actions –since 472, when he assumed the sponsorship (*choregia*) of *The Persians* of Aeschylus– we point out here and keep in mind the introduction in 451 BC of a law limiting Athenian citizenship to those of Athenian parentage on both sides; a reform which reduced the power of the Athenian aristocracy –since Aristocratic men in particular had tended to marry rich foreign women– and, at the same time, enhanced the status of Athenian mothers and made Athenian citizenship a more exclusive category, setting Athenians off from all others.

Both Thucydides and Aristophanes, lived the radicalization of democracy, the incubation and the outbreak of the War in 431, the evacuation of the entire population

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\* The following paper is a condensed version of the seminar lecture that was given in the frame of the program “Thucydides dramaticus: The Theatre of War”. It is also a primary draft of a broader work on that specific topic, which is in progress.

of the attic region to within the walls of Athens; they attended (in winter of 431–430 BC) Pericles' emotional funeral Oration (*epitaphios*), honoring the Athenians who died for their city; in the summer of the same year, they survived the epidemic disease that broke out and devastated the Athenians; they witnessed the re-election of Pericles as general (*strategos*) in 429; the death of both Pericles' legitimate sons from his first wife, Paralus and Xanthippos, in the epidemic; the death of Pericles himself of the plague in the autumn of 429 BC.; Athens' sinking into the abyss of political turmoil and demagogy, since Pericles' successors proved to be inferior to him and well below the complicated and exigent circumstances of the time (Thuc. 2.65)

The high military officer and afterwards history writer and the *ab initio* comic playwright lived alike the Peloponnesian War until its end in 404 BC (Thucydides died c. 400-397 BC, Aristophanes died c. 386 -380 BC). Aristophanes' extant work of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (nine comedies ending with the *Frogs* of 405 BC) reflects the war between Sparta and Athens to the year 405. On the other hand, Thucydides, who starts writing his *History* c. 420, recounts the 5th century BC war –retrospectively as far as it concerns its first decade– to the year 411 BC, since his *History* breaks off near the end of the 21st year of the war and does not include its final conflicts, most probably due to the unexpected death of its writer. Aristophanes lives and transcribes the war facts into his comedies in the heat of the moment, from the point of view of an engaged citizen, who, nevertheless, had never been actively and officially involved in politics and who seems to have never left Athens for military or other reasons. In contrast, Thucydides lived most of Athens' suffering at a long temporal and spatial distance, since he was sent as a general to Thasos in northern Greece in 424 BC, and shortly afterwards, because of his failure to save the allied Greek city of Amphipolis from the Spartan control, he was sentenced to exile (Thuc. 5.26.5), where he started recording the ongoing war from its beginning henceforth. It is historically unverifiable whether, when and how Thucydides returned from his exile to Athens, presumably sometime shortly after the city's surrender and the end of the war.

On one side, one of the first historians, who places a high value on one-eye-witness testimony, consults documented sources and writes about events in most or some of which he himself took probably part. On the other side, a full-time Athenian comic playwright, who lives the facts always on the side and at the site of Athens, and who registers the war facts through the inevitably exaggerating and distorting prism of

comic satire. Which of them gives us a more convincing view on life and politics in classical Athens? How much freely subjective may be the sight of the comic playwright Aristophanes and how much strictly objective may be the sight of the history writer Thucydides? Whom of them to believe when they refer, in particular, to Pericles and his political and personal involvement in the events that led to the long-lasting and devastating civil War?

***Thucydides' History on the causes of the Peloponnesian War***

Most of our knowledge of the causes and the events of the war between the Delian and the Peloponnesian League depends mostly on Thucydides' *History*. To sum it all up in two paragraphs: The more immediate events that led to war involved at first Athens, Corinth, Corcyra and Epidamnos, an ancient Greek city, founded in 627 BC in Illyria by a group of colonists from both Corinth and Corcyra. When an internal conflict procured a more democratic government against the dominant theretofore tight oligarchy, the exiled oligarchs addressed to Corcyra while the democrats appealed to Corinth, thus initiating a struggle between the two mother cities of Epidamnos. Corcyra, a sea power that at first was not allied to either Sparta or Athens, sought –successfully– an alliance with Athens (Thuc. 1.24-55; 1.68). Athens not only participated decisively in the battle of Sybota between Corcyra and Corinth, but also instructed, inter alia, Potidaea –a strategically located city-state in northern Greece, one of Athens' tributary allies but a colony of Corinth, with which Potidaea retained ties– to dismiss the Corinthian magistrates from office and refuse the magistrates that the city of Corinth would send in the future. The Corinthians, already outraged with the Athenians for having supported the city-state of Corcyra, encouraged Potidaea to revolt from Athens, whose reaction, in turn, was Potidaea' s blockade (Thuc. 1.13.5; 1.71.4; 1.139-140).

Another bone of contention was the Saronic island of Aegina, which c. 456 BC was forced to surrender to Athens after a siege and to accept the position of a subject-ally. By the terms of the Thirty Years' Peace (445 BC) Athens promised to restore to Aegina her autonomy, but the clause remained henceforth ineffective. Last but not least, c. 432 BC Athens –for various allegations– imposed the Megarian Decree which banned Megara, a Spartan ally that lay just west of Athenian territory, from harbors and marketplaces throughout the large Athenian Empire (Thuc. 1.139-

140; 1.144). The outbreak of the war came when the Spartans issued ultimatums, which promised attack unless Athens stopped its military blockage of Potidaea, let Aegina be independent and, especially, lifted its economic sanctions against the city-state of Megara. All those appeals were, alas, denied.

***Aristophanes' Acharnians: The comic point of view***

Let's now move from the field of factual History (not at all lacking in literariness and fictionality to a certain degree) to the field of fictive comic Drama (not at all lacking in political referentiality and engagement to a great degree). When Aristophanes' first play (now lost) *The Banqueters (Daitaleis)* was produced in 427 BC and won second prize, the Peloponnesian War was in its fourth year. The eighteen-year comic playwright, would win possibly first prize at the City Dionysia with his next purely political play, *The Babylonians* (also now lost), which depicted –in the presence of foreign visitors– the cities of the Delian League as slaves grinding at a mill, a metaphor revealing the deception of the *demos* by foreign ambassadors and the degradation of the democracy in allied cities. Aristophanes' political satire infuriated the demagogue Cleon, successor of Pericles on the political Athenian scene, who probably took legal action against the comic playwright, charging him primarily with slandering the *polis* and its public officials before foreigners. The *Acharnians* is the third play by Aristophanes and the earliest of his eleven extant plays, which was produced for Aristophanes by its associate director (*didaskalos*), won first place at the Lenaea festival in 425 BC and combined the anti-war plot with a personal attack against Cleon.

In the *Acharnians*, the comic hero, a middle-aged peasant named Dikaiopolis (the honest citizen, he who speaks justice on political question), until the end of the first half of the play, marked by the Chorus' *parabasis*, manages not only to obtain miraculously a private peace treaty with the Spartans, but also to reverse the pro-war attitude of his main dramatic opponent –i.e. the Chorus of the Acharnians. In the second half of the play, after the end of the *parabasis*, Dikaiopolis enjoys the benefits of his private peace in public, refusing or permitting at will his fellow citizens to have access to it.

Aristophanes' choice of Acharnians to staff the Chorus of his play (as well as to identify the main adversary of his pacifist protagonist) was partly due to the fact that

Acharnae, some eight miles north of Athens, was the largest deme of population in Attica outside the city; partly also due to the Acharnians' supposed inflexibility of temper (according, at least, to their aristophanic representation); last but not least, to the Acharnians' intense hostility to Sparta and to peace, which had originated in the opening weeks of the war, when—as Thucydides informs us again—their had been among the first Attic territory ravaged by the Peloponnesian allies and, hence, the Acharnians had been foremost in demanding that their army should battle the enemy and take revenge (Thuc. 2.19.2, 20.5., 21.3.). For all the reasons aforementioned, if Dikaiopolis succeeded in changing his co-citizens' mind, the importance of his political and moral achievement would become much more striking and convincing, not only for the inhabitants of the internal dramatic milieu but also for the external real public of the Athenian spectators.

By the end of the *Acharnians'* long and quite episodic introductory part, which takes place in Pnyx, Dikaiopolis—with the support of Amphitheus, a man who claims to be immortal—manages to fulfill his initial plan, i.e. bring back peace, even though that peace will be, quite paradoxically, a private one. Just after the Parodos of the outraged Chorus of Acharnians, who are hunting for the one who dared to sign peace with the Spartans, Dikaiopolis starts to hallow his private peace with a familial celebration of the Rural Dionysia, beginning with a small parade outside his own house. He and his household however are immediately attacked by the horde of aged farmers and charcoal burners from Acharnae, who have at last found their awful pacifist prey.

The Acharnians are not susceptible to rational argument, so Dikaiopolis must have recourse to the (parody of) blackmail: he grabs a basket of Acharnian charcoal as a hostage and demands the old men spare his life and hear him out. After gaining the Chorus's tolerance for an anti-war speech and in order to get some special assistance with it, Dikaiopolis visits Euripides, renowned for his extra-pathetic and pitiful heroes. Indeed, among many vestimentary options offered to him by the tragic poet, Dikaiopolis finally chooses to borrow a costume from one of Euripides' most pathetic tragedies, *Telephus* in which the homonymous hero disguises himself as a beggar. Empowered by the tragic force, Dikaiopolis comes back to the Chorus, who were waiting at the orchestra, and exposes the trivial events and reactions from both Athenian and Spartan side, that led to the outbreak of the War (*Ach.* v. 497-556):

μή μοι φθονήσητ', ἄνδρες οἱ θεώμενοι, / εἰ πτωχὸς ὢν ἔπειτ' ἐν Ἀθηναίοις λέγειν /  
 μέλλω περὶ τῆς πόλεως, τρυγωδίαν ποιῶν. / τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τρυγωδία. / ἐγὼ  
 δὲ λέξω δεινὰ μὲν, δίκαια δέ. / οὐ γὰρ με νῦν γε διαβαλεῖ Κλέων ὅτι / ξένων  
 παρόντων τὴν πόλιν κακῶς λέγω. / αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἔσμεν οὐπὶ Ληναίῳ τ' ἀγῶν, / κοῦπω  
 ξένοι πάρεισιν· οὔτε γὰρ φόροι / ἤκουσιν οὔτ' ἐκ τῶν πόλεων οἱ ξύμμαχοι / ἀλλ'  
 ἔσμεν αὐτοὶ νῦν γε περιεπισμένοι· / τοὺς γὰρ μετοίκους ἄχυρα τῶν ἀστῶν λέγω. /  
 ἐγὼ δὲ μισῶ μὲν Λακεδαιμονίους σφόδρα, / καὐτοῖς ὁ Ποσειδῶν, οὐπὶ Ταινάρῳ  
 θεός, / σεισας ἅπασιν ἐμβάλοι τὰς οἰκίας· / κάμοι γὰρ ἐστὶ τὰμπέλια κεκομμένα. /  
 ἀτάρ, φίλοι γὰρ οἱ παρόντες ἐν λόγῳ, / τί ταῦτα τοὺς Λάκωνας αἰτιώμεθα; / ἡμῶν  
 γὰρ ἄνδρες, —οὐχὶ τὴν πόλιν λέγω· / μέμνησθε τοῦθ', ὅτι οὐχὶ τὴν πόλιν λέγω,— /  
 ἀλλ' ἀνδράρια μοχθηρά, παρακεκομμένα, / ἄτιμα καὶ παράσημα καὶ παράξενα, /  
 ἐσυκοφάντει «Μεγαρέων τὰ γλάνισκια.» κεῖ που σίκυον ἴδοιεν ἢ λαγῶδιον / ἢ  
 χοιρίδιον ἢ σκόροδον ἢ χόνδρους ἄλας, / ταῦτ' ἦν Μεγαρικὰ κάπέπρατ' αὐθημερόν.  
 / καὶ ταῦτα μὲν δὴ σμικρὰ κάπιχώρια, / πόρνην δὲ Σιμαίθαν ἰόντες Μεγαράδε /  
 νεανία ἔκκλεπτοῦσι μεθυσκοτόταβοι· / κᾶθ' οἱ Μεγαρῆς ὀδύνας πεφυσιγγωμένοι /  
 ἀντεξέκλεψαν Ἀσπασίας πόρνα δύο· / κάντεῦθεν ἀρχὴ τοῦ πολέμου κατερράγη /  
 Ἐλλησι πᾶσιν ἐκ τριῶν λαικαστριῶν. / ἐντεῦθεν ὀργῇ Περικλέης οὐλύμπιος /  
 ἦστραπτ', ἐβρόντα, ξυνεκύκα τὴν Ἑλλάδα, / ἐτίθει νόμους ὥσπερ σκόλια  
 γεγραμμένους, / ὡς χρὴ Μεγαρέας μῆτε γῆ μῆτ' ἐν ἀγορᾷ / μῆτ' ἐν θαλάττῃ μῆτ' ἐν  
 ἡπείρῳ μένειν. / ἐντεῦθεν οἱ Μεγαρῆς, ὅτε δὴ ἰπείνων βάδην, / Λακεδαιμονίον  
 ἐδέοντο τὸ ψήφισμ' ὅπως / μεταστραφείη τὸ διὰ τὰς λαικαστρίας· / οὐκ ἠθέλομεν δ'  
 ἡμεῖς δεομένων πολλακίς, / κάντεῦθεν ἤδη πάταγος ἦν τῶν ἀσπίδων. / ἐρεῖ τις. «οὐ  
 χρῆν» ἀλλὰ τί ἐχρῆν, εἶπατε. / φέρ', εἰ Λακεδαιμονίων τις ἐκπλεύσας σκάφει /  
 ἀπέδοτο φήνας κυνίδιον Σεριφίων, / καθῆσθ' ἂν ἐν δόμοισιν; ἢ πολλοῦ γε δεῖ· / καὶ  
 κάρτα μέντ' ἐν εὐθέως καθεῖκετε τριακοσίας ναῦς, / ἦν δ' ἂν ἡ πόλις πλέα / θορύβου  
 στρατιωτῶν, περὶ τριηράρχου βοῆς, / μισθοῦ διδομένου, παλλαδίων χρυσομένων, /  
 στοᾶς στεναχούσης, σιτίων μετρομένων, / ἀσκῶν, τροπωτήρων, κάδους  
 ὠνουμένων, / σκορόδων, ἐλαῶν, κρομμύων ἐν δικτύοις, / στεφάνων, τριχίδων,  
 αὐλητρίδων, ὑπωπίων· / τὸ νεώριον δ' αὖ κωπέων πλατουμένων, / τύλων  
 ψοφούντων, θαλαμῶν τροπουμένων, / αὐλῶν, κελουστῶν, νιγλάρων, συριγμάτων. /  
 ταῦτ' οἶδ' ὅτι ἂν ἐδρᾶτε· τὸν δὲ Τήλεφον / οὐκ οἰόμεσθα; νοῦς ἄρ' ἡμῖν οὐκ ἔνι.

*Be not indignant with me, members of the audience, if, though a beggar, I speak before the Athenians about public affairs in a comedy. Even comedy is acquainted with justice; and what I have to say will be shocking, but it will be right. This time Cleon will not allege that I am slandering the city in the presence of foreigners; for we are by ourselves and it's the Lenaean*

*competition, and there are no foreigners here yet; neither tribute money nor troops have arrived from the allied cities. This time we are alone, ready hulled; for I reckon the immigrants, as the civic bran. Now I hate the Spartans intensely, and I hope the god of Taenarum sends them another earthquake and brings all their houses down on them. I too have had vines cut down. Look – for there are only friends here listening – who do we blame it all on the Laconians? For it was men of ours – I do not say the city, remember that, I do not say the city – but some bent, ill-struck pieces of humanity, worthless counterfeit foreign stuff, who began denouncing the Megarians’ little woolen cloaks, and if they saw anywhere a cucumber or a young hare, or a piglet, or some garlic or lump-salt, it was declared Megarian and sold up the same day. Now that, to be sure, was trivial and purely local; but then some cottabus-playing young rakes went to Megara and stole a whore called Simaetha. After that, the Megarians, garlic-stung but the smart, stole two whores of Aspasia’s in retaliation. And from that broke forth the origin of the war upon all the Greeks: from three prostitutes. Then in his wrath, Olympian Pericles lightened and thundered and threw Greece into turmoil, making laws worded like drinking songs, “that no Megarian should remain on land or in Agora, on sea or on shore». After that, when they were starving by inches, the Megarians asked the Spartans to procure a reversal of the decree caused by the prostitute affair; but we refused, though they asked repeatedly. And after that it was clashing of the shields. Says one: “They ought not”. But you tell me, what ought they to have done! Come, supposing one of the Spartans had sailed forth in his bark and denounced and sold a puppy-dog belonging to the Seriphians. “Would you within your walls have sat? Far from it!” Why, on the very instant you’d have been launching three hundred ships, and the city would have been full of the hubbub of soldiers, noisy crowds surrounding ships’ captains, pay being handed out, Pallas emblems being gilded, the Colonnade groaning, rations being measured out, leathers and oarloops and people buying jars, garlic and olives and onions in nets, crowns and anchovies and flute-girls and black-eyes; and the dockyard full of the planning of oar-spars, the hammering of dowel-pins, the boring of oarports, full of flutes and boatswains, of warbling*

*and piping. I know that is what you would have done: “and do we think that Telephus would not?”. Then we really have no brains.*

### ***The “seriousness” of the comic scene***

Despite its far-fetched and exaggerating account, there are more than one reasons for which we should take seriously what Aristophanes-Dikaiopolis-Telephus say at this specific scene and passage.

First of all, the dramatic action reaches here to a peak, inasmuch as it will determine either the endurance or the evanescence of the hero’s utopian comic idea: bring back piece, even a private one, since collective peace seems for the time being impossible. More specifically, the speech of Dikaiopolis in that passage constitutes the first long speaking part (*epirrhema*) of the comic *agon*, i.e. that formal debate between two characters or between a character and the Chorus –as in *Acharnians*– that decides the outcome of the play. Actually, after Dikaiopolis’ heated reasoning finished, half the Chorus is won over. A short interfering episodic scene with the Athenian vainglorious general Lamachus, who is questioned and ridiculed by Dikaiopolis, is enough for the other half of the Chorus to be also won over by Dikaiopolis’ pro-peace argumentation. After this major confrontation (*agon*) between the “good” and “bad” characters has been resolved decisively in favor of the former, in the following *parabasis* the whole Chorus renders unanimously exaggerated praise to the author, while the rest of the play deals with various farcical consequences of the new *status quo*, in a succession of loosely connected scenes until the *exodus*, where everyone and most of all Dikaiopolis celebrates peace, drinking and love (except Lamachus who has been, in the meanwhile, wounded and exits in pain).

Secondly, Dikaiopolis, in order to face the Chorus of the *Acharnians* and to argue in favor of peace, and at the same time Aristophanes, in order to face the Athenian audience for the same reason, felt obliged to have recourse to tragedy, so as to seem more pathetic, more dramatic, more serious and, consequently, to expose the arguments more convincingly. According to reports about Euripides’ lost play *Telephus*, the homonymous hero (Greek king of Mysia, wounded by Achilles in an early Greek military expedition to the East) pretending to be a beggar, managed to enter the Greek camp in Aulis (where the Greeks assembled for the Trojan War); there he kidnapped the infant Orestes and threatened to kill him if Achilles would not



heal his wound, because, according to a Delphian oracle “he that wounded shall heal”. Thanks to ingenious Ulysses –who perceived that it was the spear that had inflicted the wound and that should be able to heal it– particles of Achilles’ spear were removed and spread onto the wound, Telephus healed and guided the Achaeans to Troy. As modern scholars remark, Dikaiopolis’ long speech is a parody of the great speech in which the disguised king and tragic hero Telephus argued before the Argive commanders that the Mysians and their king, by aggressively counterattacking invaders, had done nothing more than the Greeks themselves would have in the face of a similar –or even less substantial– provocation. In the comic transcription of that scene, the intended audience is not the assembled leaders of the Greek expedition against Troy or even the Chorus of Acharnians but the whole contemporary audience in the Theatre of Dionysus in 425, which should take account of all the latent and obvious analogies between the real and the “(para)tragic” situation.

Furthermore, Dikaiopolis, at the very beginning of his long speech in favor of peace, he uses twice the word “tragedy” (...λέγειν / μέλλω περὶ τῆς πόλεως, τρυγῳδίαν ποιῶν. / τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τρυγῳδία., v. 499-500), a very peculiar and rare word, which essentially means “comedy” and which is most often translated (in modern Greek or in other languages) as “comedy”. The word “tragedy” is a composite word which comes either from the verb < τρυγάω (harvest) plus the word ᾠδή (ode, song) or from the noun τρυξ (new wine, but also lees) plus the word again ᾠδή (ode, song) and which alludes either to the participants in the Dionysian rituals who eventually applied lees onto their faces, or to the new wine that was probably offered as a prize in the Dionysiac feasts and drinking competitions, or to the songs that were sung during the harvest and from which gradually derived comedy. Scholars cannot even be sure if the word “tragedy” is a much older, archaic (but obsolete) word than the word “comedy” which had prevailed in 5<sup>th</sup> century or if it is a pure invention, a pertinent neologism, most probably introduced by Aristophanes himself. What is certain, is that the word “tragedy” is used almost exclusively by Aristophanes, at least in the extant dramatic corpus, that it releases a play on the similar sense or sound of the different words “tragedy” and “tragedy” and that it is generally used when some contrast or convergence with tragedy is intended. Under these terms, Dikaiopolis’ insistence that “even comedy is acquainted with justice” implies not only that contemporary tragedy had a serious and self-conscious ethical agenda, but also that

contemporary comedy could equally provide guidance (and not just outrageous entertainment) to the city. Tragic hero, comic hero, and comic playwright are thus collapsed into a single complex figure, which assumes the crucial political-intellectual role of instructing (*didaskhein*) the Athenian citizens, either the fictional or –and foremost– the real ones.

***Causes of the Peloponnesian War: The convergences between the two narratives***

In Aristophanes' passage we don't hear anything clear and explicit about the struggle between Corcyra and Corinth around their colony, Epidamnos, or about the alliance between Athens and Corcyra against Corinth, or about the military blockage of Potidaea by the Athenian forces, after Potidaea's revolt at the instigation and with the help of Corinth, or about Aegina's claim for her autonomy by the Delian League. All the above facts, that are more or less scrupulously recorded by Thucydides in his *History* and that were very well known by the Athenian audience of the *Acharnians* in 425 BC are probably implied and summarized by Dikaiopolis/Aristophanes when he refers to the supposed abduction of a Seriphian puppy-dog by the Spartans and to the immediate and excessive mobilization of the Athenians in order to take their allied puppy-dog back. All the aforementioned city-states and military facts are kept aside, so that the audience's attention focuses on the most important cause of the War, the Megarian Decree, which is most prominently put forward by Dikaiopolis: A set of economic sanctions levied upon Megara c. 432 BC, allegedly strangling the Megarian economy but also straining the fragile peace between Athens and Sparta, which was allied with the strategically located city-state of Megara.

The enforcement of the Decree, the following reactions from the Megarians and the Spartans, their pleas for the withdrawal of the Decree and the refusal of Athens, all these facts are transmitted quite clearly and explicitly through the –inevitably distorting to a certain degree– prism of comic language. The importance accorded by Aristophanes to the Megarian affair is further confirmed by the fact that just after the *parabasis* of the *Acharnians*, the Megarian embargo comes again in the foreground, in an episodic comic-tragic scene (v. 729-835), where a starving Megarian farmer, defying the Athenian embargo against Megarian trade, comes at Dikaiopolis' private market in Athens, to exchange his famished daughters, disguised as piglets, for garlic and salt (products in which Megara had abounded in pre-war days). The bargain has

just snapped up, when a sycophant tries to confiscate the piglets as enemy contraband, before he is literally kicked out by the comic protagonist.

Thucydides portrays Pericles as making the following arguments in a speech to convince his fellow male citizens to reject the Spartan demands even if that means war:

καὶ παριόντες ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ ἔλεγον ἐπ’ ἀμφοτέρα γιγνόμενοι ταῖς γνώμαις καὶ ὡς χρῆ πολεμεῖν καὶ ὡς μὴ ἐμπόδιον εἶναι τὸ ψήφισμα εἰρήνης, ἀλλὰ καθελεῖν, καὶ παρελθὼν Περικλῆς ὁ Ξανθίππου, ἀνὴρ κατ’ ἐκεῖνον τὸν χρόνον πρῶτος Ἀθηναίων, λέγειν τε καὶ πράσσειν δυνατώτατος, παρήγει τοιάδε (Thuc: 1.139.4).

*And many others came forward and spoke, in support of both sides of the question, some urging that war was necessary, others that the decree should not stand in the way of peace, but should be rescinded; and finally Pericles, son of Xanthippus, the foremost man of the Athenians at that time, wielding greatest influence both in speech and in action, came forward and advised them as follows.*

ὕμῶν δὲ μηδεὶς νομίσηε περὶ βραχέος ἂν πολεμεῖν, εἰ τὸ Μεγαρέων ψήφισμα μὴ καθέλοιμεν, ὅπερ μάλιστα προύχονται, εἰ καθαιρεθείη, μὴ ἂν γίνεσθαι τὸν πόλεμον, μηδὲ ἐν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς αἰτίαν ὑπολίπησθε ὡς διὰ μικρὸν ἐπολεμήσατε. τὸ γὰρ βραχὺ τι τοῦτο πᾶσαν ὑμῶν ἔχει τὴν βεβαίωσιν καὶ πείραν τῆς γνώμης. οἷς εἰ ξυγχωρήσετε, καὶ ἄλλο τι μεῖζον εὐθὺς ἐπιταχθήσεσθε ὡς φόβῳ καὶ τοῦτο ὑπακούσαντες: ἀπισχυρισάμενοι δὲ σαφὲς ἂν καταστήσασθε αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἴσου ὑμῖν μᾶλλον προσφέρεσθαι (Thuc : 1.40. 4-5).

*If we should refuse to rescind the Megarian decree –the thing they especially insist upon, saying that there will be no war if it is rescinded— do not let there remain in your minds any self-reproach that it was a small matter for which you went to war. For this trifling thing involves nothing less than the vindication and proof of your political conviction. If you yield this point to them you will immediately be ordered to yield another and greater one, as having conceded this first point through fear; whereas by a downright refusal you will give them clearly to understand that they must be more disposed to deal with you on terms of equality.*

Just as Thucydides presents Pericles as aggressively defending the Decree against repeal and treats it as another example of uncompromising attitude toward the Peloponnesian state, Aristophanes as well assigns explicitly responsibility for the Megarian Decree to Pericles (*Ach.* v. 530-4), and he returns to this charging four years later, in his *Peace* of 421 (v. 606-611). Here Hermes, in the course of explaining to the comic hero Trygaios how and why the goddess Peace vanished from the Greek world, stresses the Decree's extraordinary importance by calling it the "spark" that set off the Peloponnesian war, since Pericles: ἐξέφλεξε τὴν πόλιν. / ἐμβάλων σπινθῆρα μικρὸν Μεγαρικοῦ ψηφίσματος, / ἐξεφύσησεν τοσοῦτον πόλεμον ὥστε τῷ καπνῷ / πάντας Ἑλληνας δακρῦσαι, τούς τ' ἐκεῖ τούς τ' ἐνθάδε – [Pericles] *with his own hand set the city in a flame, having thrown in a slight spark of a Megarian decree, and blew up so great a war that all the Greeks, both here and there, shed tears by reason of the smoke.*

Till now, Aristophanes and Thucydides seem more or less to converge as far as it concerns not only the importance of the Megarian Decree for the final outbreak of the Peloponnesian War but also the decisive role that Pericles himself played during the dramatic negotiations with Sparta for or against the repeal of the Decree, which finally wasn't repealed.

***Who is (not) mentioned the two narratives? Or, The comic focus on Aspasia***

Unlike Thucydides, Aristophanes through Dikaiopolis' argumentation refers to some supplementary triggering events that led to the enforcement of the Megarian Decree and, consequently, to the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. That is the successive abductions of three whores: at first, the abduction of one whore (called Simaetha) in Megara by some Athenian "cottabus-playing young rakes" (v. 525), and, afterwards, the vengeful abduction of Aspasia's two whores by some Megarians in Athens (v. 524-527). Even if this outrageous information is considered to be "utterly lacking in specifics and cannot be taken seriously as a political argument"; and even if this information can be understood as a *par excellence* intertextual, parodic reference to the *Histories* of Herodotus –who probably had been a recent visitor to Athens in the 430s (where he perhaps gave readings of his history) and who begins his *historie* of the war between the Greeks and the Persians in 499-478 by explaining the cause of the long escalating hostilities between Greeks and Asiatics as originating in a series of

kidnapped brides (Io, Europa, Medea and Helen)— nonetheless, this information introduces in the historic frame a new factor: i.e. the role of women in the political affairs and more, specifically, the role of Aspasia, who was an undoubtedly real (although enigmatic and obscured) person involved in the personal life of Pericles, if not in the public and political life of whole Athens.

As far as it concerns the whore Simaetha, the only source about her is a statement in the *scholia*, according to which Simaitha was loved by Alcibiades, the last famous member of his mother's aristocratic family, the Alcmaeonidae (to which belonged also Pericles), who was nearly 25 years old at the time of the *Acharnians*' performance and would play a major role in the second half of the Peloponnesian conflict. If about Simaitha nothing is known except from that aforementioned parsimonious statement, Aspasia's figure is much more rich and complex in facts and information.

Aspasia (c. 470 BC– c. 400 BC) was a free Milesian woman, an influential immigrant to Classical-era Athens, who began to live with Pericles sometime in the 440s, after he and his first wife divorced. The couple had a son, Pericles the Younger, who must have been born by 440 BC. Nevertheless, although Aspasia spent most of her adult life in Greece, few details of her life are fully known and the couple's marital status remains disputed. According to the contradictory ancient statements and modern assumptions, in Athens Aspasia may have been: either a *hetaera*, that is a –probably educated and free– courtesan, who, unlike prostitutes, engaged in long-term relationships with individual clients and provided companionship as well as sex; either a keeper of a brothel and a trainer of courtesans or simple prostitutes (that is Aristophanes' opinion); either a procuress, making assignations especially for Pericles with free-born women and, thus, accused of corrupting the women of Athens and put on trial for impiety; or just a legally married wife. In the first paragraph of this presentation it was mentioned that Pericles in 451 BC –long before meeting and falling in love with Aspasia– had introduced a law, limiting Athenian citizenship to those of Athenian parentage on both sides. It was also said that this reform was considered to reduce the power of the Athenian aristocracy, since Aristocratic men in particular had tended to marry rich foreign women. Circa two decades later, when Pericles had already been living for a long time with Aspasia from whom he had a son

(apart from his two legitimate sons from his first wife), the Athenians, before Pericles' death in 429, allowed a change in the citizenship law of 451 BC, stipulating that the offspring of Athenian men who marry non-Athenian women is granted citizenship. This new change made Pericles' half-Athenian son with Aspasia, Pericles the Younger, a citizen and legitimate heir of his father, which could happen only if the parents did have –at least from a certain time henceforth– a kind of marital status officially recognized?

In one way or another, Aspasia's name has been closely connected not only with Pericles' personal life but also with Athens' political life. Some indicative references to her: The Greek historian, biographer, and essayist Plutarch (c. AD 46 – AD 120) accepts her as a significant figure both politically and intellectually and expresses his admiration for a woman who “afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms and at great length” (Plut *Per.* XXIV). *Suda*, the 10th-century Byzantine encyclopedia, presents Aspasia as to have been “clever with regards to words” and to have taught rhetoric. The rhetorician and satirist Lucian of Samosata (c. AD 125 – after AD 180) is even more laudatory in his *Portrait Study* (XVII): “*Next I have to depict Wisdom; and here I shall have occasion for many models, most of them ancient; one comes, like the lady herself, from Ionia. [...] We could choose no better model of wisdom than Milesian Aspasia, the admired of the admirable 'Olympian'; her political knowledge and insight, her shrewdness and penetration, shall all be transferred to our canvas in their perfect measure. Aspasia, however, is only preserved to us in miniature: our proportions must be those of a colossus*”.

But what Aspasia's direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional role in the political affairs and in the political decisions of Pericles at the time of Athens' conflict with the Peloponnesian League? Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle in the Peripatetic School, and Duris of Samos, a historian and possibly a pupil of Theophrastus at Athens, followed by Plutarchus (*Per.* 24.2; 25.1) report explicitly that Aspasia was responsible for the Samian War in 440: Pericles had decided against and attacked Samos to gratify her, inasmuch Samos was at war with Miletus –Aspasia's birthplace– over the ancient Ionian city of Priene and the Samians refused the Athenian arbitration when the Milesians came to Athens to plead their case. The comic poets called Aspasia “Helen”, implying that a war was fought for her sake, as well as “Hera”, “Omphale” and “Deianeira” casting Pericles (= bellicose Heracles) as

her victim. Dikaiopolis' preposterous allusion to the abduction of Aspasia's two whores and to the following exaggerated reactions of Pericles against the Megarian abductors, could it be a twisted memory and a leveling projection of that earlier episode with Samos and Miletus, in which Aspasia involved in one way or another? Or Dikaiopolis' allusion could reveal a –let it be exaggerated– new real influence of Aspasia in the specific case of the Peloponnesian War –her continuing to intervene in the public affairs by the time of the Samian War henceforward?

### *Aspasia's exemption in Aristophanes' Peace*

Aristophanes himself doesn't help us to verify Dikaiopolis' (sub)(con)notations. In his *Peace*, of 421 BC, just four years after his *Acharnians*, he puts forward a slightly different account of the causes of the Peloponnesian war, also tracking it to a decision of Pericles taken for personal reasons and also giving prominence to the importance of the Megarian Decree. We read again the same extract from *Peace* (supra, v. 606-611), this time adding six more preceding verses (Hermes speaking):

ὦ σοφώτατοι γεωργοί, τὰμὰ δὴ ξυνίετε ῥήματ', / εἰ βούλεσθ' ἀκοῦσαι τήνδ' [Εἰρήνη]  
ὅπως ἀπώλετο. / πρῶτα μὲν γὰρ “αὐτῆς ἤρξεν” Φειδίας πράξας κακῶς / εἶτα Περικλέης  
φοβηθεὶς μὴ μετάσχοι τῆς τύχης, / τὰς φύσεις ὑμῶν δεδοικῶς καὶ τὸν αὐτοδὰξ τρόπον, /  
πρὶν παθεῖν τι δεινὸν αὐτός, ἐξέφλεξε τὴν πόλιν. / ἐμβαλὼν σπινθῆρα μικρὸν Μεγαρικοῦ  
ψηφίσματος, / ἐξεφύσησεν τοσοῦτον πόλεμον ὥστε τῷ καπνῷ / πάντας Ἕλληνας  
δακρῦσαι, τοὺς τ' ἐκεῖ τοὺς τ' ἐνθάδε.

*Most sapient husbandmen, now hear my words, if you wish to hear how she was lost.  
Pheidias first began the calamity, having been unfortunate; and then Pericles, fearing  
lest he should share his fortune, dreading your disposition and right stubborn temper,  
before he suffered any calamity, with his own hand set the city in a flame, having  
thrown in a slight spark of a Megarian decree, and blew up so great a war that all the  
Greeks, both here and there, shed tears by reason of the smoke.*

According to some later accounts, before the eruption of the Peloponnesian, some of Pericles' closest associates (including Aspasia, Anaxagoras and Phidias) faced a series of personal and legal attacks. Regarding Phidias in particular, Plutarch (*Per.* 31) records that enemies of Pericles tried to attack him through his friend and famous sculptor, who was accused of stealing gold intended for the Parthenon's statue of Athena, and of impiously portraying himself and Pericles on the shield of the statue. Although the historical value of this account is debatable, Aristophanes in his *Peace*,

five centuries earlier than Plutarch, mentions also an “infortunate” event involving Phidias and connected with Pericles’ willingness to lead Athens to war so as to distract public attention from that “mishap”. (...Φειδίας πράξας κακῶς, εἶτα Περικλέης φοβηθεὶς μὴ μετὰσχοι τῆς τύχης...). On the other hand, Aristophanes omits completely Aspasia this time and thus complicates even more the scope of the war’s (personal) possible causes.

Plutarch (*Per.* XXIV) cites Aeschines Socraticus, who wrote a dialogue on Aspasia (now lost), to the effect that after Pericles’ death, Aspasia lived with Lysicles, an Athenian general and leader of the democratic faction, whose political success seems to have owed a lot to Aspasia and with whom she had another son, c. 428 BC. With Lysicles’ death in 428 BC during an expedition to levy subsidies from allies, the contemporaneous record about Aspasia ends. Even though the time of her death that most historians give is c. 401 BC-400 BC, it can’t be nevertheless testified if she was alive when her son, Pericles the Younger, was elected general or when he was executed after the Battle of Arginusae in 405 BC. So, why doesn’t Aristophanes refer to –still alive and blooming– Aspasia in his *Peace* of 421, just four years after having pointed at her responsibility for the Peloponnesian War in the *Acharnians*? Because all that was just an outrageous joke, which may have fulfilled its satirical needs in 425 BC, but needn’t have to be repeated later? Because Aristophanes’ opinion and information about Aspasia’s personal and political influence had changed in 421, since new data came up concerning Phidias? Or because the danger that Aspasia was representing in the pre-War era and even in the first years of the War, had diminished, if not vanished in 421, after her two husbands’ death (Pericles’ and Lysicles), so that Aristophanes didn’t need to include her anymore among the dangerous persons that led (and kept pushing) Athenians to destructive military solutions? Let’s come back and have recourse to Thucydides now, hoping that the historian will be more revealing about her.

### ***Thucydides on Aspasia and on women: The Funeral Oration***

Enigmatic Aspasia is not at all mentioned by Thucydides, neither as a major source of influence on Pericles nor as a minor responsible for the Peloponnesian War, and Pericles’ turbulent relations to the feminine sex have left no trace in his Thucydidean lengthy formal speeches, either these were actual quotations of what was said either they were literary reconstructions by the history writer. Thucydides does not mention



Aspasia at all, either because she didn't actually play no role in the political affairs or because Thucydides doesn't want to include in his *History* any personal motives, that he considered frivolous, extraneous and irrelevant to the sphere of public action.

So, instead of answers, we shall now add new questions, trying to detect Aspasia's faint traces into the masculine, political/historical discourse. We shall focus our attention on one of Pericles/Thucydides long formal speeches, and the only one that is addressed to a mixed, male and feminine, audience: that is Pericles' monumental Funeral Oration (*epitaphios logos*), delivered in winter of 431–430 BC, honoring the Athenians who died in war for their city in the summer of the same year. The Oration is included in the second Book of Thucydides *History* and it is extended from chapter 35 (XXXV) to chapter 46.

After 11 chapters, in which Pericles himself or Thucydidean Pericles emphasized the values and glory of Periclean Athens at its height, Pericles comes to the formulaic consolation to the living, which extends to two chapters (44, XLIV and 45 XLV). In comforting the survivors, Pericles consoles individuals for their loss and then relates their loss to the city as a whole. Young parents have the hope of new children, an aid to them in forgetting the old and the means for keeping the city strong and allowing the fathers of the new children to maintain a share in its decisions (2.44.3). Older parents have past happiness and, for the short time left them, honor among citizens conferred by their dead sons (2.44.4). Sons and brothers of the dead have a contest with the dead over excellence, a contest that the citizens will not let them win (2.45.1). And finally, in the middle of chapter 45, his funeral Oration nearly complete, Pericles addresses the widows of the men killed during the first year of the war with the Peloponnesians and their allies: three sentences dedicated to the widows, compared with the total length of Pericles' –circa “8 printed pages”– Funeral Oration and compared with the total –two-chapter– consolation of the male survivors.

The widows and their kinswomen had followed the funeral procession as it wended its way toward the Dipylon Gate and the cemetery of Kerameikos. As they proceeded, they sang laments and mourned their dead “Anyone who wishes, citizen or stranger, may take part in the funeral procession, and the women who are related to the deceased, are present at the burial and make lamentations”, as Thucydides himself informs us (2.34.4). Arriving at the cemetery, men and women silenced themselves to listen to Pericles' eulogy of the city's dead. In the audience, there weren't only the

parents of the dead, but the whole city, citizens or strangers, as well as any man or woman “related to the deceased”; the kind of relation is not specified by Thucydides, so we can suppose a large female presence and –why not?– Pericles’ companion, Aspasia herself.

εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικείας τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχεία παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἡ δόξα καὶ ἥς ἂν ἐπ’ ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ ψόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ᾗ.

*If I am to speak also of womanly virtues, referring to those of you who will henceforth be in widowhood, I will sum up all in a brief admonition: Great is your glory if you fall not below the standard which nature has set for your sex, and great also is hers of whom there is least talk among men, whether in praise or in blame.*

(Thuc. 2.45.2)

Among the numerous questions that this short passage –“one of the most disturbing (to many contemporary readers”– arises, in its turn, concerning especially the political force of Aspasia, let’s choose and list here only a few: Does Pericles’ reference imply that widows alone or women in general should restrain themselves in public life and be silent (and invisible) among men? What is exactly meant by the “standard which nature has set for women’s sex”? Does the speech actually represent the beliefs of the Athenian leader Pericles? Or does the voice of Pericles in this passage represent the bias and personal view of the historian Thucydides, who tended to largely ignore women (and the familial ties in general) in his narrative (the term *gynê* = woman or wife appearing only 34 times, in comparison with 468 and 264 in the complete plays of Euripides and Aristophanes, respectively)? If the passage concerning Athenian widows and women is “original”, had Aspasia been the only woman in classical Greece to have distinguished herself in the public sphere? If the passage concerning Athenian widows and women is “original”, does Pericles implicitly include or exclude Aspasia to the feminine audience that he addresses and intends to alert, and why? If the passage concerning Athenian widows and women is “original”, how could women in his audience –and across Attica perhaps– perceive this reference and receive Pericles’ advice? Would they try to follow Pericles’ or Thucydides’ advice and abstain from the world of male power and male conflict or would they adapt to the herodotian representation of women, “where the substantial majority of women

mentioned by Herodotus (212 out of 375, 56 per cent) are actors who determine the outcome of events”? If the passage is “original”, how could Aspasia in particular perceive this reference? If the passage is just an interpolation invented by Thucydides, when he writes later his *History*, does Thucydides include or exclude Aspasia to the feminine audience that his Pericles addresses, and why? In other words, does Pericles himself advise his immigrant companion to reduce herself to silence or does Thucydides himself want to reduce to silence Aspasia, who is herself also a double widow (from Pericles and Lysicles) when the historian records the facts during his exile after c. 422 BC? To what extent did Pericles’ or Thucydides’ advice reflect the attitude of all Hellenes of the classic era toward women, about whose position very little is known? Conversely, if Athenian women were in general excluded from public life and if Thucydides himself tended to largely ignore them in his *History*, how common or completely uncommon was Pericles’ oratory initiative (and Thucydides recording obligation) to recognize the presence of women in the audience and to address them in this setting, the first public funeral of his war against the Peloponnesians? Last but not least, how could Aristophanes himself react when he listened to Pericles’ funeral Oration or when he read his transcription by Thucydides? Thucydides, the “father of scientific history”, and Aristophanes, the “father of political comedy”, both of them recount, each one using his own specific literary tools, the causes of the Peloponnesian War: the one omitting completely Aspasia, the other blaming her as determinatively responsible for Pericles’ (re)actions. Whom to believe as far as it concerns the historical causes of the war, the historical role of Aspasia and perhaps the role of women in the classical era?

\*

In Plato’s *Menexenus* (probably from the philosopher’s *Early* period of work) Socrates not only praises Aspasia as his formidable rhetoric teacher and Pericles, “the one exceptional orator among the Greeks,” as her best student (235e 6–7), but also credits Pericles’ *epitaphios* to her: she recited it “in part extemporaneously, in part by cobbling together some remnants from when she was composing the funeral oration Pericles delivered” (236b 3–6). If there is any hint of truth in this deeply ironic (pseudo?) platonic dialogue which aimed, in general, to parody both rhetoric and funeral oratory and which targeted, in particular, the Periclean funeral oration as Thucydides presented it, then we may meet with another alternative: Aspasia not only

did have a dynamic role in Pericles' personal and political life (as Aristophanes let us suggest), but also she had the power to forge at her will the masculine discourse, pronounced by a male politician (Pericles) and registered by a male historian (Thucydides), to omit or project what she wished to appear and to be considered as "real". And in that case, Aristophanes would be perhaps more reliable concerning Aspasia and her husband's attachment to her.

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