

The First Demagogue of the western world as represented in Old Comedy: Portrayal of Cleon in Aristophanes

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Abstract

Attic Old Comedy which alluded to contemporary socio-political events generated humour through caricature, parody, derision and exaggeration of the leading personalities and institutions of the society. Aristophanes' plays, which are the only intact Attic Old comedies, contain caricature and ridicule of most of the leading public figures in Athens. Cleon, an Athenian politician from 465-422 BCE is subjected to severe contempt and ridicule in most of Aristophanes' plays. Cleon was the earliest known Athenian politician to be recognized as a demagogue: 'the leader of the people', who came into prominence in the 5th century BCE. Attic Old Comedy plays of Aristophanes provide contemporary literary evidence on the demagogue. Cleon is portrayed by the dramatist, in the caricatures and the allusions, as a corrupt and a manipulative politician with self-serving and pro-war policies. Aristophanes' depiction of Cleon indicates prejudice and distortion of the politician in certain spheres. Biographical details suggest Cleon to be less deprave and more attentive in securing Athenian democratic and imperial interests than he is depicted in Aristophanes. This article examines the nature of Attic Old Comedy to identify the influence of the genre of Comedy in Aristophanes' caricature of Cleon. It will also discuss the extent to which the personal and the class prejudice of Aristophanes and the different political ideologies of the poet and the politician had resulted in the distortions of Cleon in the plays of Aristophanes.

Keywords: Attic Old Comedy, Aristophanes, Cleon, Demagogue

Introduction

The nature of Attic Old Comedy

Athenian Comedy is categorized in scholarship as Old and New Comedy. The beginning of Old Comedy is dated to early 5th century BCE and lasted to the end of 400 BCE. As mentioned in Aristotle (*Poetics*: 1449a) Attic Old Comedy had originated from the Phallic songs in the Dionysiac festivals. The acts of mimicking, dancing and obscene jokes associated with fertility and religious rites of Phallic songs in the Dionysiac festival as well as the license, drunkenness and merrymaking exercised in this festival are identified as the characteristic roots from which Attic Old Comedy had emerged (Cornford, 1914:35-7). Attic Old Comedy followed the general structure of 'prologue' which is the entry of the chorus and 'agon' in which the conflict or the debate of the themes and the actions of the play are acted out. 'Agon' is followed by 'parabasis' in which the action of the play is suspended and the chorus directly addressed the audience with praise of the poet, with attacks on the fellow competitors and with flattery of the judges and the audience (Cornford, 1914:2-3, 8-15). The end of the Attic Old Comedy: 'exode' is marked by revelry and triumph. As Greek tragedy, Old Comedy was also written and enacted as part of the drama competitions. City Dionysia and Lenaia were the two most popular drama competitions of the 5th century BCE Athens (Ehrenberg, 1962:17). The judges of the drama competitions were a few elected citizens. The Athenian citizens, 'demos', the sovereign body of the democracy of Athens, constituted the majority of the audience with the presence of a limited number of 'metics'¹ and foreigners². It was essential for the Comedy

¹ The resident aliens of Athens were known as 'metics'.

² Only Athenian citizens were allowed in the festival of Lenaia.

dramatists to evoke humour and laughter in the audience to win the drama competition. The subject matter and the themes of Old Comedy were drawn from the contemporary social and political events and persons in Athens. The dramatists evoked humour in language, action and costume by the use of caricature, parody, exaggeration, obscenity and derision which alluded to contemporary socio-political events and individuals connected with them. The caricature and derision of the current events and personalities had resulted Old Comedy to be identified as a 'representation of socio-political realities blended with absurdity' (Ehrenberg, 1962:27-8). The freedom of speech in the direct democracy of Athens provided the dramatists with a great amount of liberty in presenting socio-political satire. However, Old Comedy was subjected to censorship. Pericles³ established the censorship law applicable to dramas in 440 BCE by which a poet who had offended public interest of Athens could be prosecuted and brought to trial (Scholion, *Acharnians* line 67 as cited in Ehrenberg, 1962:19). Cleon's prosecution of Aristophanes in 424 BCE is an inference on the limits of liberty of Old Comedy⁴. It can be observed that the Old Comedy writers considered their role as the 'teachers' or the 'critics' of society. The Old Comedy writers brought the reality before the audience and attempted to educate the citizens through their socio-political satire.

Kratanis (455-423 BCE), Eupolis (430-431 BCE) and Aristophanes (427-386 BCE) were three leading Attic Old Comedy writers who were victorious in the drama competitions (Ehrenberg, 1962:19). The plays of Aristophanes are the only fully surviving Attic Old comedies. The works of the other Old Comedy writers are either lost or survive

³Pericles was an Athenian politician from 460-429BCE

⁴ Cleon's prosecution of Aristophanes will be discussed in the article

only in fragments. Eleven of Aristophanes' plays survive in manuscript form. It can be observed in the plays of Aristophanes that the dramatist had dealt with a variety of socio-political themes, such as war, law-courts, the teachings of the Sophists, the position of drama and women, in his plays. Aristophanes' parody and derision of Athenian democracy, the Peloponnesian War, public institutions and the caricature of the men of all classes provide instances for the laughter evoked through current events. Aristophanes' use of his plays as the vehicle to express his consciousness on contemporary social and political events had led the dramatist to be identified in scholarship as a socio-political critic. Aristophanes makes reference to the instances in which he had saved his audience from the deceptive oratory of the politicians (*Acharnians*, lines 628) and emphasizes the need to stand for what is accepted as just (*Acharnians*, lines, 658, 644). Aristophanes' consciousness of the role of the comic poet as a socio-political critic who brings the reality before the audience is suggested by the above instances. Moreover, Aristophanes' plays *Acharnians*, *Knights* and *Frogs* which won the first prize, *Birds* and *Wasps* which won the second prize are evidence of the broad appeal for socio-political Comedy in the Athenian audience. The leading public figures were often mocked and ridiculed in the comedies of Aristophanes. The dramatists such as Aeschylus (*Frogs*), Euripides (*Frogs*, *Thesmophoria*), philosophers such as Socrates (*Clouds*) and politicians such as Pericles (*Acharnians*) are subjected to derision and parody in Aristophanes' plays. It can be observed that Cleon, an Athenian politician from 465-422 BCE, is the target of ridicule in most of the surviving plays of Aristophanes. Relentless attacks on Cleon can be identified specially in *Babylonians* presented in 426 BCE, *Acharnians* presented in 425 BCE, *Knights* presented in 424 BCE, *Clouds* presented in 423 BCE, *Wasps* presented in 422 BCE and

Peace presented in 421 BCE. Cleon is considered in scholarship as a pioneer of the 'new group of politicians' known as demagogues⁵ who came into prominence in late 5th century Athens. Reference to Cleon in the plays of Aristophanes provides contemporary literary evidence on the 'new group of politicians' in the Classical period. Apart from Aristophanes, the Comedy writers such as Eupolis and Plato, the comic poet, make reference to Cleon. However Aristophanes' plays are the only intact comedies in which denunciation of Cleon can be found as the plays of Eupolis and Plato survive only in fragments. Hence this article on the portrayal of Cleon in Attic Old Comedy will be limited to the plays of Aristophanes.

Cleon's genealogy, his education and culture, character, his oratory, associates, his feud with the Knights as well as Cleon's political and military career are ridiculed by Aristophanes. This article will evaluate Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon within the context of Attic Old Comedy as a genre which highlighted socio-political satire and exercised liberty in caricature and derision. Aristophanes' representation of Cleon will be assessed with the existing historical sources on the latter's biographical details which will facilitate in identifying distortions resulting from prejudice against the demagogue. The extent to which the personal feud of the dramatist with the politician had influenced the distortions of Cleon, which can be identified in Aristophanes' caricature and allusions, will be discussed. It will be observed that the 'new model of politics' established by Cleon and the hostility against the popular leaders among aristocratic writers had contributed to derision and contempt of the demagogues in Attic Old Comedy.

⁵ Demagogues is a Greek term used to define the 'leaders of the people' in the 5th century BCE Athens

Methodology

Information for this qualitative study is collected by the critical analysis of the plays of Aristophanes and by the examination of the existing epigraphic and other literary evidence on Cleon. The contradictory views in scholarship are evaluated to gain an impartial understanding of the portrayal of the politician in the plays of Aristophanes.

Results

Ancestry of Cleon

Aristophanes often portrays Cleon as a descendent of an impoverished non-Athenian family who was engaged in leather tannery (*Knights* lines 44/45, 208, *Wasps* line 30, *Acharnians* line 38, and *Peace* line 752). 'Paphlagonian' in the *Knights* (line 44/45) is identified as the caricature of Cleon;

"Well last New Moon's day he went and
brought a new slave, a tanner from
Paphlagonea, and a greater swine of
A stool-pigeon never walked this earth."
(tr. Sommerstein, 1978).

The above lines which refer to 'Paphlagonian' as a slave from 'Paphlagonea' who was once a leather-tanner is one distinguished instance of representing Cleon as an impoverished non-Athenian. However the epigraphic and other literary sources suggest contradictory evidence. An Attic inscription (IG II², 2318, line 34) refers to a person known as Cleainetus who owned a leather factory and was a 'choregus' in 460/59 BCE, a person who finances a chorus

at a public festival. Thucydides (III.36) in the account on the Mytilenean debate introduces Cleon as the son of Cleainetus. It is generally recognized in scholarship (Connor, 1992: 151³⁰) that Cleainetus mentioned in the inscription is the same Cleainetus mentioned by Thucydides as the father of Cleon. Thus Cleon's father was a wealthy Athenian. The scholion on Aristophanes' *Knights* line 44 which indicates Cleainetus as an Athenian refutes the non-Attic origin of Cleon. The above historical and literary evidence which indicate Cleon to be an Athenian who was accustomed to wealth refute the portrayal of him as an impoverished non-Athenian in Old Comedy.

Moreover 'Paphlagonian' in the *Knights* (lines 445-446) is insulted by the 'Sausage-Seller' who accused 'Paphlagonian's' grandfather as having been a bodyguard of the wife of Hippias⁶. Though the above reference implies Cleon to be a descendent of the bodyguards of Hippias' wife, the scholion refutes it. According to the scholion, Aristophanes had replaced the name "Myrrhina", the wife of Peisistratus and the mother of Hippias and Hipparchus as "Brysina" in the *Knights*. "Brysa" being the Greek word for hind, Aristophanes' use of "Brysina" was to strike Cleon as a leather-seller (Fornara, 1977:32-33). Aristophanes' representation of Cleon as base-born and of foreign origin is identified by Connor (1992:170) as an attempt of the dramatist to imply that Cleon was disqualified to be a politician in Athens. The people's leaders of Athens from Cleisthenes⁷ to Pericles were from the traditional aristocracy. Cleon and his successors, though they were Athenians, were non-aristocrats from the class of

⁶ Hippias and Hipparchus were Athenian tyrants in the 6th century BCE who succeeded their father Peisistratus, the first tyrant of Athens.

⁷ Cleisthenes was an Athenian statesman (570-508 BCE)

manufactures and tradesmen.⁸ Aristophanes' (*Knights* lines 180, 38,294) reference to Cleon and other demagogues as men of the 'Market Square' was an attack on them being from the class of 'agorario'. 'Agorario' referred to the men of 'agora', market place, were a segment of the Athenian society who had acquired wealth from manufacturing/trading activity rather than from traditional agriculture. But it can be observed that 'agorario' had not produced many distinguished politicians before Cleon. It is apparent that wealth was a necessity for politics in the Athenian democracy as it provided leisure to indulge in political activity.⁹ It is reasonable to argue that these demagogues would not have been successful in their careers if they were impoverished as Attic Old Comedy represented them to be. Therefore, by representing Cleon as an impoverished leather-tanner, Aristophanes would be able to place Cleon with the level of leather-sellers, lamp-makers, sausage-sellers of the market place. Thus Aristophanes' attributing an inferior social position to the caricatures of Cleon was to imply that the latter was not qualified to be an Athenian politician who was always from the respectable classes before Cleon. The prejudice against the newly rich and the 'new group of politicians' among aristocratic writers in the 5th century BCE would have also intensified Aristophanes' base-born depiction of Cleon in the caricatures. It is undoubted that the audience was aware of the affluent social position of Cleon. However, the attribution of inferior social status to the caricatures of Cleon by Aristophanes would have contributed to evoke humour in the audience.

⁸ Demagogues were from the class of manufacturers and tradesmen known as 'agoraroi'.

⁹ The payments for jury in the 5th century BCE and the payments for attending the assembly in the 4th century BCE were measures used in Athenian democracy to increase the citizen participation in politics.

Education and culture

Cleon is depicted as ignorant and uncultured by Aristophanes. 'Sausage Seller' in the *Knights* (lines 188-192) was amazed when he was told that he would be the greatest man though he knew only the alphabet. These lines are an implication of ignorance and lack of culture of Cleon and the 'new group of politicians'. Lack of cultural and intellectual refinement and the distrust of the intellect were common among most of the politicians of the late fifth century BCE. As Connor (1992:167-168) argues, most of those politicians, being newly rich and non-aristocrats, intellectual and cultural refinement was seen as superfluous attributes of the aristocracy. The lack of education and culture of Cleon is further suggested by the comment of 'Demosthenes' in the *Knights* (line 192) who mentions that "politics is for the uneducated, illiterate scum". Cleon's oratory and his common sense suggest him to be more intelligent and knowledgeable than he is given credit for by Aristophanes (Connor, 1992:168). However the speeches of Cleon recorded in Thucydides asserts his brilliant oratory. His oratorical skills had made Cleon the most effective and persuasive speaker in the public assembly in the 5th century Athens which was accustomed to the oratory of Pericles (Thucydides, III.36). Representation of Cleon as utterly ignorant and uncultured would have provided the opportunity for the dramatist to further reduce the social position of Cleon while distinguishing the difference between Cleon and his predecessors. Aristophanes' (*Knights* line 1325, *Wasps* line 1060, *Frogs* lines 1013-1017) appreciation of the aristocratic leaders of the democracy and his wish for reviving the glory of the past provide implication on his partiality to the aristocracy.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Frogs* lines 1013-1017 are appreciations of the well-born heroes of Aeschylus' drama in contrast to the men from the market place.

Character

Aristophanes represents Cleon as a violent, vicious, impudent as well as a dishonest person. In the *Knights* (lines 132,303) 'Paphlagonian' is referred to as a 'robber', 'villain' and 'monster'. The image of Cleon as a 'monster' reappears in *Wasps* and *Peace* (lines 752-759):

"Chorus- took on the greatest monster in the land.
Jag-toothed it was, and from its staring eyes shot
rays more terrible than those of Cynna."
(*Wasps* lines 1030-1035) (tr. Barrett, 1964)

The violent and fierce character of Cleon is brought out through the metaphor which refers to Cleon as the 'greatest monster in the land'. 'Jag-toothed' and 'staring eyes' which are the attributes of 'Cerberus' enhance the brutality and the ferocity of Cleon.¹¹ 'Cynna' being the Dog-star, its harmful radiation is an implication of Cleon's viciousness on the 'demos'. Moreover, Cleon is called a 'rapacious looking creature' (*Wasps* line 35), for his greed for power and money whereas his dishonesty and corruption are implied by the terms 'twister' and 'liar' (*Knights* line 250).¹² Greek literature (Thucydides, II. 36, Plutarch, *Nicias* 2.3) and modern scholarship (Grote, 1907:394-395) generally recognize Cleon as having been violent and brutal. Thus it is reasonable to assume that Aristophanes' characterization of Cleon, in the caricatures and allusions, is in keeping with Cleon's generally accepted character to a greater extent. However, certain exaggeration in relation to Cleon's corruption in politics can also be detected.

¹¹Cerberus is the three-headed mythical dog guarding Hades who was captured by Heracles

¹² Cleon's corruptions will be discussed in relation to his political career.

Oratory

The powerful invective and gestures introduced by Cleon into Athenian public oratory was subjected to ridicule by Aristophanes. The terms such as 'shrieker' (*Knights* line 136) and the comparison of Cleon's voice to an 'overloaded sewer' (*Knights* line 137), 'a roar of mighty flood descending from hills' (*Wasps* line 1035, *Peace* line 758) and 'the voice of a scalded sow' (*Wasps* line 35) can be identified as Aristophanes' exaggerated criticism of Cleon's crude and boisterous manner of public speaking. Though there is no mention of Cleon as the most effective speaker in the Athenian assembly in Aristophanes, abundant references to Cleon's persuasive oratory can be found. For instance, 'Sausage Seller' in the *Knights* provides a description of the 'demos' completely won over by 'Paphlagonian's' oratory:

"Sausage Seller- I fahn'dim 'urling great big
thunderbolts o' words and
crushing them... And there was swallowing it all,
listening all intently...
And when I saw 'ow they was being all taken in by 'is
lies and trickery."
(*Knights* lines 630-635) (tr. Sommerstein, 1978)

The above lines refer to the flattering language of Cleon and his false promises appealing to the interest of the 'demos' in order to gain their loyalty. The people, won over by the speeches of Cleon mentioned by 'Anti-Cleon' in *Wasps* (line 668), provide further reference to Cleon's persuasive oratory. Thus Aristophanes portrays Cleon as a 'liar' who influences the opinions of the 'demos' by his flattering words.

However, fifth century Athens being a direct democracy in which every citizen had a vote and privilege to speak in the assembly, only a persuasive and a manipulative speaker could secure his leadership by molding the opinions of the 'demos'. Therefore, the demagogues in the 5th century BCE Athens were necessarily rhetoricians as they could only attain the highest offices in the democracy by winning the partiality of the majority of the 'demos' by their persuasive speech. The fact which distinguished the oratory of the demagogues from the traditional politicians was their style accompanied by persuasive gestures. It is believed that Cleon introduced persuasive gestures into the oratory of the period (Aristotle, *Ath.Pol.*, 28.3, Plutarch, *Nicias*, 8.3). Though Aristophanes is critical of Cleon's oratory, like many of the ancient writers (Thucydides, III, 36, Aristotle, *Ath.Pol.* 28.3, Plutarch, *Nicias* 8.3) he had given more weight to Cleon's style of public speaking which was a distinctive attribute of the man.

Cleon's associates

Plutarch (*Moralia* 807,a) mentions that Cleon's repudiating of his influential friends 'hetaeroi' and affiliating with the 'demos' led Cleon to be surrounded by obnoxious associates. Reference to Cleon's associates in politics can be found in Aristophanes. 'Servile flatterers' around the head of the 'jag- toothed monster' in the *Peace* (line 756) and the 'battalion of young tanners', 'honey and cheese merchants' of 'Paphlagonian' in the *Knights* (lines 852-857) are the followers and friends of Cleon according to Aristophanes. It can be noted in Aristophanes' representation of Cleon's associates that they were depicted as having been inferior in social positions and being corrupt personalities. Moreover, Theorus, Aeschines, Phanos and Acester are named as allies of Cleon in the *Wasps* (lines 1220-1221). The historical evidence on these men is rare and fragmentary. However, Theorus who is condemned in Comedy as a 'flatterer', 'a profligate'

and a 'man of no principle' is identified as an ambassador from Thrace and a commander of a fleet (Connor, 1992:130⁷⁶).¹³ Aeschines is mocked for his boasting of wealth which he did not possess (*Wasps* line 1244). Phanos is mentioned as Cleon's singer of accusations (*Knights* line 1256) while Acester is slandered as a non-Athenian (Scholion on *Wasps* line 1221). It is reasonable to agree with Connor's assumption (1992:130⁸⁰) that Aristophanes' mention of the above four men as Cleon's allies was to denounce Cleon by associating him with such men with corrupt personalities. Moreover, Theoudippus who proposed the increase of the tribute in 425 BCE (IG I² 63-65) and Theophanes who was an undersecretary of a project (*Knights* line 1103, IG I² 344) are also recognized as friends of Cleon. Thus Theophanes, Theoudippus and Theorus being friends of Cleon can be regarded as inference on Cleon's associates being important persons in politics (Connor, 1992:131) though they are represented as being immoral by Aristophanes.

Cleon's feud with the Knights

In the *Knights* Aristophanes represents the Knights as the enemies of Cleon who composed the chorus in this anti-Cleon play;

"But there are the Knights, a thousand brave men,
who hate him and who will come to your aid."
(*Knights* line 225)(tr. Sommerstein, 1978)

¹³Connor highlights that a Theorus listed as a commander of a fleet on a casualty inscription about 409 BCE could possibly be the same Theorus mentioned in Comedy.

These lines which imply the hostility of the *hippeis*¹⁴ to Cleon provide reference to the feud between Cleon and the Knights. In the *Acharnians* (line 6), Cleon vomits five talents. The scholion on the *Acharnians* line 6 provides a historical account on Cleon's antagonism towards the Knights. According to the scholion (Rutherford, 1896:258) Cleon had received five talents from the allies to persuade the Athenians to relieve them of their tribute. The Knights, who discovered the transaction, opposed it and required Cleon to return the money. As affirmed by the scholion (Fornara, 1977:147-148), according to Theopompus in either the 10th or the 11th book of *Philippica*, Cleon was fined five talents for insulting the Knights. Moreover the scholion on the *Knights* line 425 mentions that the hostility between the Knights and Cleon had grown into a rage which led Cleon to attack the 'constitution' of the *hippeis*. As suggested by Fornara (1977:147-148), Cleon had actually attacked the payments for the equipment of the Knights;

"Since the word for cavalry equipment-money (*katastasis*) also means 'constitution', the scholiast had understood the word in latter sense and replaced it with its synonym 'politeia'."
(Fornara, 1977:147-148)

Thus it is apparent that Aristophanes had parodied the hostility between the Knights and Cleon in the *Knights*. By portraying this existence of an anti-Cleon faction in the society, the Knights as the chorus, Aristophanes (*Knights* lines 260-265,300-310,330-335) exposed the corruption of Cleon. Moreover, the animosity shared by

¹⁴ 'Hippeis' was the second highest property class in ancient Athens who were considered as Knights. The cavalry of the Athenian army were from this class.

the aristocracy and the middle class against each other in politics is highlighted in the feud between the Knights and Cleon (*Knights* lines 280,336, Ehrenberg, 1943:74-75).

Political and military career

Cleon's military achievements and his political activities are subjected to the severe criticism of Aristophanes. The *Knights* (lines 54-57, 75, 355, 796, 1058, 1167, 702, 742, 844, 1201) which was performed just after Cleon's victory at Pylos¹⁵ is abundant with mockery on his military achievements. 'Demosthenes' in the *Knights* grumbles over 'Paphlagonian's' claiming of the victory at Pylos;

"Demosthenes- I'd baked a lovely Spartan cake down in Pylos and round he sneaks and grabs it and serves up my cake as if it was all his work!"
(*Knights* line 56)(tr. Sommerstein, 1978)

These lines are a reference to Demosthenes being the associate in command with Cleon at Pylos. Though Cleon was able to defeat the Spartans within twenty days (Thucydides, IV, 27, Plutarch, *Nicias*, 7.3), there was a feeling among the Athenians that it was the military ability of Demosthenes which brought the Athenians victory. Thus it can be noted that Aristophanes reflects this feeling of the Athenian people and denies Cleon of his success at Pylos. Aristophanes further implies that Cleon was using the above success as a means for gaining popularity with the 'demos' which he could not actually claim.

¹⁵ The battle of Pylos in 425 BCE between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War

'Sausage Seller's (*Knights* lines 572-574) reporting of 'Paphlagonian's' activity in the council chamber carries reference to the latter's pro-war policy. According to the 'Sausage Seller' in the *Knights* (lines 572-574), 'Paphlagonian' rejected the peace proposal brought by the 'Spartan Ambassador'. This is an allusion to the Athenian rejection of the Spartan peace proposal due to the persuasions of Cleon¹⁶. 'Sausage Seller's' (*Knights* lines 794-796) accusations on the 'demos' for chasing the Spartan envoys who came begging for peace is another instance of reference to Cleon's pro-war policy. Thus it is apparent that Aristophanes also shared the judgment of Thucydides (IV, 21) of Cleon being wrong in opposing the Spartan offer of peace.

'Paphlagonian's' "licking clean every island" (*Knights*, line 1040), "his filling of the treasury full" (*Knights*, line 780) and "spying on the approach of the tribute" (*Knights*, line 310) in the *Knights* can be identified as Aristophanes' ridicule on Cleon's increase of tribute payment in 425 BCE¹⁷. Extortion of tribute from the subject allies by Cleon using threats and intimidation is indicated in 'Anti-Cleon's' mention of demagogues threatening to ruin the allies which had provoked the subjects to bribe the politicians (*Wasps* lines 670). Thus Aristophanes considers Cleon's increase in tribute payment as an act of imperialism which had aggravated the grievances of the allies. Cleon's increase of jury payment into three *obols*¹⁸ and his dominance over the jury courts are also mocked at by the dramatist (*Knights* lines

¹⁶ Athenian rejection of the Spartan peace proposal in 425 BCE

¹⁷ The increase of the tribute of the allies in 425 BCE following the victory at the battle of Pylos is attributed to Cleon (IG I² 63 (I³ 71))

¹⁸ Cleon increased the jury pay in 425 BCE by one *obol* and made it three instead of two *obols*.

50,255,797, *Wasps* lines 300, 525, 661, 682, 90, 100, *Birds* lines 1541, 1694). 'Pro-Cleon's' obsession to attend jury duty and the chorus of *Wasps* (line 230) composed exclusively of old men who represented the jurors are implications of the attraction of the old men to jury courts due to the dicastic pay. Aristophanes (*Wasps* lines 570,580,610, *Knights* line 255) is critical of the absence of accountability and the corruptions in the jury courts as the verdicts of the jurors were influenced by their personal grudges and pressing poverty. It is indicated that Cleon had used the increase of the jury pay as a bid for popularity;

"Sausage Seller- ...then you'll realize just 'ow much e's been Cheatingyouah' of while 'e's been fobbing you off with that threeobols of jury pay".

(*Knights* lines 705)(tr. Sommerstein, 1978)

The above lines suggest that Cleon had used the three *obols* as a bribe to make the people blind towards his corruptions. As seen by Aristophanes, Cleon ensured the loyalty of the 'demos' by increasing the jury pay. Moreover, Cleon is represented as a prosecutor and a dishonest politician. Cleon's asking of the jurors to attend the case of Laches¹⁹ and cast the vote against him in the *Wasps* (line 240) is an implication of Cleon's manipulating of the verdicts of the jurors and bringing accusations on his enemies. The accusations brought against the dog Labes of Aexone for embezzlement in Sicily by dog Cyon of Cydatheneum in the *Wasps* (lines 890-990) is identified as an allusion to Cleon's bringing charges against the general Laches in 425

¹⁹ Cleon is held responsible for accusing general Laches (425 BCE) for embezzlement during the latter's missions in Sicily two years earlier. The general was acquitted.

BCE. Aristophanes' implication of Cleon as a prosecutor is further evident in 'Paphlagonian's' (*Knights* line 480) threats to strike 'Sausage Seller' as an anti-Athenian conspirator. 'People's watchdog' which is attributed to Cleon in Old Comedy is an instance of Aristophanes (*Knights* lines 425, 1066) being critical of Cleon as the representative of the 'demos'. As portrayed by the dramatist, instead of furthering the interests of the 'demos', Cleon manipulates the people for his own advancement. Thus for Aristophanes (*Knights* lines 61,679,728,733), the people who make the assembly, the sovereign office in the democracy is reduced to the level of a tool in the hands of Cleon. The dramatist makes constant references to Cleon's taking bribes (*Knights* lines 65,448, *Acharnians* line 6) and his illegal use of state revenues (*Knights* lines 71,259). Therefore, according to Aristophanes, Cleon is neither a good politician nor a competent general nor a good leader of the people. Cleon is depicted in the caricatures and allusions as an incompetent general with the attributes of a tyrant such as a prosecutor, a manipulator etc.

Discussion

The assessment of Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon with the latter's biographical details indicates distortions and contradictions in certain spheres. Cleon is denied of being wealthy and of Athenian origin in Aristophanes' caricatures and allusions. The oratorical skill of Cleon is depreciated and his style of delivery is severely ridiculed. The military achievements of Cleon are undermined even though his capture of Pylos was a decisive victory for Athens and it was the battle of Amphipolis which brought death to Athens' most formidable enemy, Brasidas. There is no sense of appreciation of Cleon in the comedies of Aristophanes either as a politician, a general or as a person. It could be interpreted that the depiction of Cleon as being utterly brutal, corrupt, ignorant and uncultured in the plays of

Aristophanes was a result of Comedy being a genre which takes pleasure in exaggeration, ridicule and satire of the contemporary political personalities. Thus it can be assumed that Aristophanes' caricature of Cleon, the leading politician of contemporary Athens, evoked humour in the audience who was accustomed to political satire in Comedy. However modern scholarship (Connor, 1992: 168-169; Grote, 1907:398-400; Henderson, 2003: 160; St. Croix, 1972: 363) identifies the distortion in Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon and views it as due to a personal grudge between the dramatist and the politician. The scholion on *Acharnians* line 378 provides evidence on the feud between Cleon and Aristophanes. According to the scholion (Rutherford, 1896: 305-306), Aristophanes had ridiculed and abused the magistrates and Cleon in the play *Babylonians*. *Babylonians* was enacted at the City Dionysia, where subject allies and outsiders were present. The scholion further mentions that Cleon, who was provoked, indicted Aristophanes as a public offender for slandering the magistrates in the presence of strangers.²⁰ Aristophanes was forced to face a trial for usurping the rights of an Athenian citizen. Aristophanes' (*Knights* lines 514-517, *Wasps* lines 1285-1290) reference to poets being charged by Cleon in the chorus of his plays can be regarded as inference on Cleon's prosecution of the Comedy writer. 'Dieacopolis' in *Acharnians* (lines 502-505) mentions that the poet is safe from the attack of Cleon this time as the play is enacted at the festival of Lenaia where no strangers were present. The above reference as well as Aristophanes' plays *Wasps* and *Knights* being performed at the Lenaia instead of the Dionysia suggests that Aristophanes had felt the justice of Cleon's warning (Grote, 1907:399).

²⁰ Cleon prosecuted Aristophanes in 426 BCE

It is assumed by scholars such as Grote, St. Croix, Henderson and Starkie that Aristophanes' personal enmity with Cleon and his prejudice against the 'new group of politicians' were responsible for his distortion of the image of Cleon. Grote (1907: 393) regards the assumption of Cleon as a brutal, corrupt and impudent politician based on Aristophanes' portrayal in the *Knights* as unfair and unjust. The scholar supports his view by referring to Aristophanes' representation of Socrates in the *Clouds*. The portrayal of Socrates by Aristophanes is generally accepted as a distorted picture of the philosopher. Therefore, judging Cleon on Aristophanes' depiction is argued by Grote as unreasonable. Thus the scholar asserts that Aristophanes' partiality to the leaders from the traditional aristocracy and his personal feud with Cleon had intensified his exaggeration of Cleon's corruption and the attribution of inferior character and social position to the latter.

St. Croix (1972: 357) identifies Aristophanes' satire on Cleon as a part of contempt of the dramatist for the politicians who were not from the traditional aristocracy (*Knights* lines 181, 186, 336, 387, 193, 218). MacDowell (1995: 356), Edmunds (1987: p66), Starkie (1909: XIII, VI) as well as Henderson (1998: 11) share St. Croix's view on Aristophanes' partiality to the leaders from the traditional aristocracy. Both Starkie and St. Croix assume Aristophanes as a supporter of peace. According to St. Croix Aristophanes was against war as he upheld a Pan-Hellenism or the joint hegemony of Athens and Sparta. Therefore, Aristophanes' severe criticism on Cleon's opposing of the Spartan peace proposal, his war policies and condemnation of his military achievements are recognized by St. Croix (1972: 363) as resulting from the anti-war attitudes of the dramatist. As pointed out by Henderson, Aristophanes regards the demagogues, specially Cleon, as responsible for the mistakes of the people who were ridiculed by the dramatist for their foolishness, voracity and misgovern.

(Henderson, 2003: 161). Hence the Comedy writer implies that the people's choice of leaders had led to the degradation of Athenian politics (Henderson, 2003: 165). Thus the above arguments in scholarship suggest that Aristophanes' distortion of Cleon in the caricatures would have been influenced by the resentment towards the 'new group of politicians' among aristocratic writers for their breaking of the political monopoly of the aristocracy.

However, Connor refutes the view that Aristophanes' attack on Cleon was resulted from the personal grudge between the dramatist and the politician. As stated by Connor (1992: 161), most of the demagogues were subjected to the ridicule of the Comedy writers. Hyperbolus is slandered as a foreigner and a lamp-maker (Plato *Comicus* fr.166, Eupolis fr.190, Polyzelus fr.5, as cited in Connor: 133) whereas Cleophon whose mother is condemned in Old Comedy is called a non-Athenian and a lyre-maker (Plato, Cleophon fr.60, *Frogs* lines 681, as cited in Connor: 133). Similar criticism on Cleon can be detected in the fragments of the poets such as Eupolis (fr.308, 456, as cited in Connor, 133) and Plato the comic poet (*Comicus* fr.107, as cited in Connor: 133). Thus Connor argues that it is irrational to assume the attack of demagogues in Old Comedy as resulted from a personal feud between Cleon and Aristophanes. Moreover, Connor refutes the argument that the class prejudice in Aristophanes had led to his resentment of Cleon. As pointed out by Connor (1992: 171), if it was the dislike of the newly rich, Aristophanes would have portrayed Cleon as a wealthy, haughty and a vulgar politician. On the other hand Nicias who gained wealth from mining instead of traditional agriculture would not be spared from Aristophanes' ridicule (Connor, 1992: 172).²¹ Thus Connor (1992: 173-175)

²¹ Nicias' wealth was from slaves in the mines and there is no evidence on Nicias' genealogy before his father. Plutarch, *Nicias*, 4

identifies the 'new model of politics' established with Cleon as the factor which had led to the ridicule and attack on Cleon and the other demagogues in the plays of Aristophanes and in Old Comedy. Cleon created a political re-direction by going against the long established system of Athenian politics. Cleon came to political prominence with no distinguished genealogy. He was without any prior military achievements. Thus Cleon was first a politician and later became a general. He relied on the alliance of the people by repudiating the influential friendship groups and introduced a new style and gestures to public oratory. With all the above novelty in politics that Cleon was a popular politician in the 5th century BCE Athens is indisputable as suggested in the historical and literary evidence.²² That Cleon was the pioneer of this 'new model of politics' is evident from the followers of his style who came to be known as demagogues. Thus Cleon's style of politics would have been considered by many traditional Athenians as a threat to the established order (Connor, 1992: 174). Therefore Connor mentions that the portrayal of Cleon in Old Comedy is the image of Cleon which is literally suggested by the latter's own words. For instance, as Cleon emphasized him being a politician not from the traditional aristocracy and without any influential friends of the 'hetairio', he is caricatured in Comedy as a base-born, illiterate man with obnoxious associates (Connor, 1992: 175). Thus according to Connor, it was neither the feud with Cleon nor the class prejudice against non-aristocrats that had influenced Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon, but the 'new model of politics' established with Cleon. Connor's view is supported by Murray who denies Aristophanes as a conservative aristocrat or an oligarch. For Murray (1919: 7-8, 18, 38, 28), Aristophanes was a moderate poet who is critical of Cleon's policies and the demagogic practices.

²² Cleon was elected general in 425, 424 & 422 BCE

The arguments of Connor and Murray, which can be supported with Aristophanes' treatment of other leading public figures in his plays, appear to be convincing and reasonable. The evidence from the fragments of the other Old Comedy writers establishes that not only Cleon but the demagogues in general were a target of derision in Attic Old Comedy. Therefore the contempt for Cleon implied in Aristophanes' plays cannot be identified as arisen from a personal antagonism. It is also unreasonable to accept the ridicule of the demagogues in Old Comedy as resulted from prejudice against the leaders who were not from the traditional aristocracy. It is evident from the above discussion that Nicias who was not from the traditional aristocracy was spared from criticism in the plays of Aristophanes. However, Pericles who was a traditional aristocrat and is considered as the ideal statesman in Thucydides (II. 65) is subjected to severe satire in the comedies of Aristophanes. Pericles is criticized in the *Acharnians* (lines, 515, 522) as responsible for bringing the Peloponnesian War by the Megarian decree²³. Therefore, it can be argued that more than the class disparity, Aristophanes' anti-war attitudes had led him to be critical of the war-policies of the statesmen irrespective of their class.

Euripides, a tragedy writer who was a contemporary of Aristophanes, was a frequent target of derision in the comedies of the latter. Euripides is ridiculed, in the caricatures and allusions, for his depiction of amoral characters with over-indulged emotions, invention

²³ Megarian decree was a law passed in 432/3 BCE by the Athenian assembly which excluded the people of Megara from the Attic market and the harbours of the Athenian empire. It is believed that Pericles proposed the decree (Plutarch, *Pericles* 29-3). It is an accepted view that the Megarian decree was a significant event which led to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War.

of new deities and for his use of rhetorical and sophisticated style of language (*Wasps*, lines 58, 1400, *Frogs*, lines 560, 820, 830, 850, 940, *Thesmophoria*, lines 330, 400-430, 540). Thus Aristophanes is satirical of the novelties in the tragedies of Euripides in contrast to the depiction of traditional, patriotic and heroic characters and plots in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' dramas. Moreover, the caricature of Socrates in the *Clouds* is another striking instance of Aristophanes' satire on the philosophers of his era. Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates as a Sophist is generally accepted in scholarship as a distorted image of the philosopher. However the close examination of Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates suggests that the dramatist is critical of Socrates not as an individual but as a philosopher who embodies the traits of the Sophists. It is the methods of Socrates, such as his use of dialect form, questioning of the traditional and conventional views and his criticizing of the old religion, that are ridiculed by the Comedy writer. Thus it can be argued that Aristophanes' satire was directed at the novelty in Socrates' methods of unraveling the truth which were in close affinity to the methods of the Sophists. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Aristophanes' anti-war attitudes and his contempt for the new direction of politics and demagoguery established with Cleon had led to the distortions of the politician in the caricatures and allusions of the comedies.

However, it is interesting to observe that *Knights* which includes the severest ridicule and contempt for Cleon won the first prize for Aristophanes at the Lenaia (424 BCE). 'Paphlagonian's' claiming of his victory at Pylos from the front seats of the theatre (*Knights*, line 702) can be considered as an implication of the presence of Cleon among the audience when *Knights* was enacted. The awarding of the first prize to *Knights* provides inference on the wide appeal for Aristophanes' plays and the liberal and humorous spirit in which the Athenians accepted socio-political satire in Old Comedy. Thus it can

be assumed that the broad appeal in the Athenian audience for laughter evoked by political satire would also have encouraged Aristophanes' selection of Cleon, the most popular politician of that era, as the target of ridicule and derision in Old Comedy.

Conclusion

It is apparent that there are distortions in Aristophanes' caricatures and allusions to Cleon. Certain scholars identify the distortions as resulted either from a personal feud between the dramatist and the politician or due to class prejudice. Other scholars assume that ridicule of the demagogues, especially Cleon in Attic Old Comedy is directed at the 'new model of politics' established by him. However, it can be argued that more than the personal feud, the resentment of Cleon was due to his policies and the ideals he established in Athenian politics. However, Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon cannot be denied entirely as falsification. The above discussion and the nature of Old Comedy suggest the possibility of Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon as a result of exaggeration and parody of the generally accepted character of the politician to evoke humour and derision. However, it is unreasonable and unhistorical to judge Cleon entirely based on Aristophanes' depiction in his comedies. The historical truth in Old Comedy lies in the socio-political events and personalities that provided the ground for allusion in the plots and the characters of the comedies. Hence it is irrational to accept dramatic accounts, especially in Comedy, as history without cross checking the facts with other historical evidence, though drama is a historical source. Thus it is reasonable to mention that Cleon and the Athenian demagogues were ridiculed in Attic Old Comedy as corrupt, vulgar and manipulative while their policies were despised as self-serving and covetous.

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