

The clouds and the history of peloponnesian war

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Breaking down traditions: The “ Clouds” and the “ History of Peloponnesian War” Undeniably, the ancient Greek society places a heavy emphasis on values and traditions. The two texts of the “ Clouds” by Aristophanes and “ History of the Peloponnesian war” by Thucydides, although contextually divergent, are actually conceptually convergent. Both texts are built around the central theme of the collapse of conventional values. While the breakdown of traditional values in the “ History of the Peloponnesian war” is presented in a more metaphorical and symbolical manner, the downfall of conventional values in the “ Clouds” is on a more direct basis.

Although both texts essentially convey across the same solemn message that the relinquishment of traditional values leads to dire consequences, Aristophanes also implicitly challenges the authority of old values, and hopes to improve upon these traditions. The “ Clouds” by Aristophanes is a satirical play primarily concerned with the idea of new and old education. A satire is a composition or prose used to lampoon individuals or society. They usually make use of ridicules and irony for the ostensible purpose of exposing and discouraging vice or folly.

In the “ Clouds”, viewers are presented with a breakdown of traditionally accepted moral and ethical values, especially those that are related to education. Aristophanes is a staunch defender of old values. Through the comedy, he wishes to show his support for logical reasoning that is well rounded and grounded in practical experience. Simultaneously, Aristophanes also wants to deliver a message to the theater audiences of fifth century that certain philosophers, particularly the sophists, undermine traditional values and thus pose as a threat to Greek society.

However, by deliberately satirizing the traditional model of education with the new model throughout the comedy, Aristophanes subtly suggests his belief that if a traditional system were to be left unexamined, it might lose sight of the convictions and values upon which it was founded. This also shows that Aristophanes believes the importance of criticism in the Athenian society, and that with criticism, a society can be improved upon. In comparison to “ The History of the Peloponnesian War,” there are distinctions between the ways in which traditional values are broken down.

In the latter, the Mytilenian debate and the Melian dialogues are based on the war between Athens and its empire against the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta. It is more concerned with the ethics of war and punishments rather than education in “ The Clouds”. Warring sparks are ignited in the light of self-interest, as the Spartans fear the growth of the Athenian power. Many moral judgments, as dire consequences of the wars, are debated upon. There are increasing political and ethical confusions in Athens as a result of the revolt of the Mytilenians and the neutral position take up by the Melians.

In the 2nd Mytilenian debate, the Athenians argue over the unprecedented brutality of their actions and some become hesitant about the hurried decision to kill and enslave the citizens of Mytileans. Democracy is an important concept for the Greeks. In Cleon’s speech, however, he begins by questioning the worth of democracy and this instigates a breakdown in the traditional values. “ Personally I have had occasions often enough already to observe that a democracy is incapable of governing others, and I am all the more convinced of this when I see how you are now changing your minds about the Mytilenians. (Thuy 3. 37) Cleon believes that it is part of human

nature to revere the strong and take advantage of the weak, and hence he pushes for the punishment of the Mytilenians. In his speech, Cleon also employs the art of rhetoric. He stresses that the Mytilenian are more than guilty and consequently deserve the punishment since they are “calculated aggressors” (Thuy 36. 13). Hence, Cleon suggests that the Mytilenians are not worthy of the Athenian’s sympathy votes. Such a way of argument is a sure fire case of guilt or innocence.

Making use of rhetoric devices and compromising the ideals of democracy breach the ideals of traditions in the Greek society. Unlike that in the “Clouds”, Thucydides does not show any sign of flaws of the traditional values. Although based on different circumstances, the breakdown of traditional values in “The History of the Peloponnesian war” parallels to that in the “Clouds”. The “Clouds” also utilizes extensive use of rhetoric devices. Strepsiades decides to submit to the sophist’s way of education, so that he would be able to defend himself against his creditors.

The first sign of erosion of traditional value is exposed when Strepsiades decides to enroll himself in the Thinkery under the guidance of Socrates. The ability to manipulate language and turn everything into relativism erodes the principles of traditional Athenian beliefs. Indisputably, the new philosophy wins. Sophistry is the type of linguistic device that, in the face of the weakness of traditional beliefs, undermines the value of anything. Strepsiades opines, “Holy Earth, what a voice! How divine, how awesome, how fantastic!” (363) In which Socrates responds, “Yes, you know, these are the only real divinities, all the rest is bunkum. (365) In the new system of beliefs as advocated by the sophists, there is a rejection of the traditional

religion and a belief in the new “ gods”. The comical way through which ideas are portrayed may be witty, but the core issue lies at the heart of the play's moral indignation at what is happening in Athens. There are possibilities for that life is being systematically corrupted by the seductive power of words, of language itself. Language is now a tool of human beings, modified to accommodate human beings' desires, rather than directing those desires.

The underlying basis here in the “ Clouds” is a direct correspondence to the ideas as presented in the Mytilenian debate, that traditionally held values are now being gradually eroded in the light of self interest. As we progress on to the rest of the texts, the tension in breaking traditional Greek values further intensifies. This is evident in the “ History of the Peloponnesian War” as we advance to the Melian dialogue. The true colors of human nature are exposed under desperate conditions. The Athenians have now completed the transition from democracy and are fully embracing the epitomes of imperialism.

The Athenians, in a frank and matter-of-fact manner, offer the Melians an ultimatum: to surrender and pay tribute to Athens, or be destroyed. The Melian dialogue also opens up morality issues based on destruction of the Melos. Traditional democratic ideas are fragmented as imperialistic ideas are introduced. “ Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. ” (Thuy 5. 105). Abuses of traditional values are reflected throughout the dialogue as both parties act in the light of their own self-interests.

The Athenians make extensive use of rhetorical speeches in an attempt to exert their points and subjugate the Melians. I quote the Athenians, " You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you" (Thuy 5. 93). The use of rhetoric embodies the concept of ethical and moral relativism. It follows the core belief of the sophists that nothing is absolute and men are the measure of everything. The breakdown of traditional values is also intensified and heightened in the " Clouds", as presented in the fiery debate between the Right and the Wrong Arguments.

The debate is a direct, head on clash of traditional values versus the new ideas. Right's arguments are centered around traditional values such as respect, justice and diligence. On the opposing end, wrong proposes the idea of moral and ethical relativism. This also symbolizes a debate between nomos and physis. Justice is now no longer an inborn characteristic of humanity (physis), but rather a convention invented by the weaker party as a defense against the stronger (nomos) counterpart. Right and wrong are now merely matters of convention. Right: " Simply by presenting the case for justice"

Wrong: " It'll crumble as soon as I open my mouth. My position is that there isn't any such thing as justice" Right: " No such thing?! " Wrong: " Well, if there is, where is it to be found? " (901) In the debate, even the Right argument, who is supposed to follow the ideals of tradition, makes use of rhetoric devices. The fundamentals of the traditional Greek society are disintegrated. Also, Pheidippides' final decision to choose the Wrong

argument also represents the younger Athenian generation's inclination to modernity and discard of tradition.

Although both Aristophanes and Thucydides suggest the idea of the breakdown of traditional values, Aristophanes takes it to a higher level in the "Clouds". He acknowledges the faults with traditional values while simultaneously criticizing the use of sophistry. He depicts the Right argument and an embarrassment that utters vacuous statements such as "Be ashamed when you ought to be ashamed," (1013). This shows that Aristophanes feels that satire and criticism are no less important than traditions, as they allow the society to morph and flourish.

This is different from the "History of the Peloponnesian War" as Thucydides simply portrays the breakdown of traditional values in a negative light. Nonetheless, both texts end on a similar note. The two writers present to the viewers/readers the dire consequences as results of breaching traditional values. In the context of the "History of the Peloponnesian War", the Melians are destroyed. Also, the very next line is history begins with the decline of the Athens and the justifications of the Melos. About the same time the Argives invaded Phliasia and were ambushed by the Phliasiens and the exiles from Argos, losing about eighty men." (Thuy 5. 115) Thucydides presumably wants to show the calamitous consequences of the actions of the Athenians, as a result of going against the traditions. The Athenians are also completely defeated with the Syracusan victory. On the other hand, in the "Clouds", we are presented with the protagonists' (Strepsiades) frustration that leads to destruction at the end of the play. Both texts do not move us beyond their final, unsettling acts.

In the case of “ Clouds”, such a paradoxical ending to a comedy can be interpreted as an ominous warning. Divergence away from the traditional values may seem ridiculously silly, especially when it is presented in the form of a comedy. However, the consequences are far from amusing. The very fact that there is no choral closure after the burning of the Thinkery suggests that this ending is ironically serious. Despite the genre differences of the texts, they are dissimilar presentations and interpretations of the same theme—the breakdown of traditional Greek values.

Both texts show the dire consequences as a result of breaking off from the tradition, and hence suggest the writers’ sense of disapproval. However, as Woody Allen once alleged, “ Tradition is the illusion of permanence” As a society progresses, old traditions are bound to be challenged. Unlike in the “ History of Peloponnesian war”, Aristophanes recognizes the limits of traditional values in the “ Clouds”. While both texts show the grim effects of the breakdown, Aristophanes brings it to a whole new level. Works Cited Aristophanes, and Alan Sommerstein. “ The Clouds” *Lysistrata And Other Plays*. Penguin Classics, 2002. Print. * Thucydides, and Rex Warner. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. London, England: Penguin Group, 1972. Print. * Schironi, Francesca. “ Thucydides’ Social Theory (Athenian Plague ; Corcyra); The Melian Dialogue. ” *Classical Civilization 101 Lecture*. Ann Arbor, Michigan. November 8, 2011 * Schironi, Francesca. “ Philosophy, Scientific Enquiry and the Greek Artistic Canon” *Classical Civilization 101 Lecture*. Ann Arbor, Michigan. November 29, 2011