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Cleon before Pericles: Thucydides on the "turn" in Athenian politics

In his summation of Pericles' achievements, Thucydides draws a strong distinction between Pericles and his successors (2.65). In his intelligence, integrity, and near monarchical authority, Pericles represented a perfection in Athenian history never to be matched. By comparison, his successors were mere parodies of his greatness, poor imitations of the original. Cleon in particular is presented in Thucydides' narrative as a failed or parodic Pericles. This paper questions not only the relation between Cleon and Pericles, but also the historiographic impulse (ancient and modern) to conceive of history in terms of perfect originals and failed copies. What does it mean to view Cleon as a purely derivative figure, a parodic Pericles? What is at stake for Thucydides in this contrast? What is at stake for Pericles and "Periclean" Athens?

Thucydides' contrast turns on the issue of democratic pleasure. Pericles leads the demos because of his refusal to "speak to please" (2.65.8); his successors "turned to pleasing the people and relinquished affairs to them" (2.65.10). Aristophanes reaffirms this historiographical schism: his *Knights* literalizes this "turn to pleasure," and its vile economy of oral gratification exposes the vital concerns behind Thucydides' insistence that Pericles, unlike his successors, did not speak to please. But while Thucydides represents Cleon as a failed Pericles, Plutarch shows us Pericles as a barely sublimated Cleon. In his *Life of Pericles*, the statesman's early career is characterized by precisely the sort of pleasing politics associated with Cleon. Plutarch's Pericles turns away from Cleontic pleasures, but the turn is never complete and the line between Pericles and Cleon is not as clear as Thucydides, for one, would like. Plutarch's account thus reaffirms Cleon's proposition in his Mytilinean speech (Thuc. 3.37-40) that pleasure always inheres in the relationship between demos and demagogue. Thucydides may segregate Pericles and Cleon (and hence deny the pleasure of his own *logos* as well as Pericles'), but Cleon suggests that "Periclean" Athens is always also "Cleontic."