

Aristophanes and Athens

Sheet 5:

Aristophanes' *Knights*

Relevant syllabuses: AQA Classical Civilisation AS CIV1c, Advanced Higher Classical Studies Section 4.

1. Key Questions

Recent exam questions have included:

- “‘In *The Acharnians* and *The Knights*, Aristophanes’ main aim is to expose those who cheat and defraud the Athenian people.’ To what extent do you agree? Give the reasons for your views and support them with details from *The Acharnians* and *The Knights*.” (AQA June 2013)
- “‘Aristophanes really loathed Cleon.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement? Give the reasons for your views and support them with details from the three comedies you have read.” (AQA January 2013)
- “‘How seriously do you think Aristophanes mocks both individual politicians and Athenian citizens as a whole? Give the reasons for your views and support them with details from the passage.’ (AQA June 2012)
- “‘In what ways does Aristophanes use conversations in the scenes involving the Paphlagonian and the Sausage-seller to attack Cleon?’ (AH 2014)

All of these questions seem to focus on *The Knights* as an ‘anti-Cleon’ satire or as a satirical critique of Athenian democratic politics. It seems important, therefore, for students to come to grips with the historical context of the play, to understand how and why Cleon is mocked, and to engage with the play’s difficult characterizations of Demos and the Sausage-Seller.

2. The Historical Context

The Knights, performed at the Lenaea festival in early 424 BC, responds directly and indirectly to events at Pylos the previous summer, where an Athenian force led by Demosthenes had trapped some Spartans on the island of Sphacteria. Below are extracts from Thucydides which provide a wider historical perspective:

“Meanwhile at Pylos the Athenians were still besieging the Spartans on the island, and the Peloponnesian army remained in its positions on the mainland. Lack of food and water made the blockade a difficult operation for the Athenians... But it was the unexpectedly long time taken over the operation which caused the greatest discouragement, since they had imagined that a few days would be enough to subdue these men besieged on a desert island and with only brackish water to drink. The fact was that the Spartans had called for volunteers to bring into the island ground corn, wine, cheese, and any other form of food useful in a siege.” (4.26; all translations from Warner 1972)

“As for Cleon, he realised he was becoming unpopular because of the part he had played in preventing [a truce with Sparta], and he declared those who brought news from Pylos were not telling the truth. The messengers then suggested that, if the Athenians did not

believe them, they should send out inspectors to see for themselves, and Cleon himself was chosen together with Theagenes for this post. He now realized that he would be compelled either to come back with the same report as that of the men whom he had just been attacking or else, if he said the opposite, be shown up as a liar; but he saw that the general feeling among the Athenians was not averse from sending out another expeditionary force, and so he told them that they ought not to be sending out inspectors and wasting time and letting their opportunities slip away from them; instead, if they believed in the truth of what had been reported, they should sail out against the men. He then pointed at Nicias... putting the blame on him, he said that, if only the generals were real men, it would be easy to take out a force and capture the Spartans on the island; certainly he himself would have done so, if he had been in command.” (4.27)

“Nicias... finding himself attacked by Cleon, told him that, so far as the generals were concerned, he could take out whatever force he liked and see what he could do himself. Cleon’s first impression was that this offer was only made as a debating point, and so he was ready enough to accept it; but when he realized that the command was being handed over to him quite genuinely, he began to back out of it... [The Athenians] shouted at Cleon, telling him that he ought to sail. The result was that Cleon... undertook to go on the voyage... He claimed that within twenty days he would either bring the Spartans back to Athens alive or would kill them on the spot.” (4.28)

“[Cleon] chose Demosthenes as his colleague because he heard that he was already planning to make a landing on the island.” (4.29)

“Cleon had kept his promise, however mad he may have been to have made it. For, just as he had undertaken to do, he brought the men back within twenty days.” (4.39)

Here, and elsewhere in his *History*, Thucydides is decidedly negative about Cleon and his motives. Because of Aristophanes’ and Thucydides’ pictures of him as a manipulative, rabble-rousing demagogue, it is easy to forget that Cleon was clearly very popular with the Athenian masses. And the fact that even Thucydides admits that he was successful in bringing back the Spartans from Sphacteria should make us wary of believing everything that Aristophanes and Thucydides say about him.

3. Paphlagon

Paphlagon is a thinly-veiled parody of Cleon, as his characterisation, position and association with leather make clear. The conceit of the play (although not always consistently upheld) is that Cleon’s contemporary political authority, boosted by the events surrounding Pylos, is “imagined... as his status as Demos’ favourite household slave.”¹

Cleon, Aristophanes’ victim in many plays, stood out as a new sort of politician. “Earlier politicians had generally come from prominent Athenian families, affluent enough to give them a gentlemanly education and then sufficient leisure to devote to public affairs. Cleon did not come from a leading family, but was associated with the making and selling of leather.”² His oratory was probably marked by the vehemence and violence of its delivery.³

¹ Hesk (2007) 141.

² MacDowell (1995) 81.

³ Ibid. 82. Thucydides says that Cleon was ‘remarkable among the Athenians for the violence of his character, at this time he exercised the greatest influence over the people’ (3.36). In the fourth century Aristotle wrote that Cleon was ‘the ‘cause of the corruption of the democracy by his wild undertakings; and he was the first to

These aspects of Cleon's character are picked up by Aristophanes and exaggerated into the character of Paphlagon. Cleon may have not been a nobleman, but he was a wealthy citizen. But by making Paphlagon into a slave, Aristophanes stresses that Cleon's wealth is derived from 'new money' - trade and low-status manufacturing. Even "the name Paphlagon should refer to a slave brought from Paphlagonia, in the north of Asia Minor. It was common for Athenian masters to name their slaves after their countries of origin."⁴ Aristophanes' Paphlagon-Cleon, then, is far lower in status than his real-world counterpart; he is a barbarian slave.

Dover suggests that Paphlagon's mask, as it does not represent Cleon, may have been "an exceptionally hideous mask, which expressed visually what [Aristophanes] felt about Kleon".⁵ For MacDowell, Cleon is the only real target of *The Knights* – "the play is not an attack on politicians in general"⁶ but "is part of an ongoing vendetta" against one man.⁷ On the other hand, it is fairly clear that *all* fifth-century comic poets had a favourite real-life target who would take centre stage in more than play. Although we only have play titles and fragments from his comedies, Cratinus' equivalent to the Aristophanic Cleon seems to have been the famous politician and leader Pericles. For Eupolis – again, only fragments and titles survive – it was the politician Hyperbolus.

4. The Two Slaves

It is typical to see in the two slaves who open *The Knights* a representation of the real-life generals Demosthenes and Nicias, and indeed Sommerstein believes that "it is probable that the actors playing the two slaves wore portrait-masks, since Aristophanes thinks it necessary to apologize (230-4) for not bringing on Cleon [Paphlagon] in such a mask."⁸ Whilst noting that the issue is "problematical", MacDowell also accepts the slaves represent Demosthenes and Nicias.⁹ However, Dover, who argues portrait-masks were not widely utilised in comedy, is content that "the humour of the scene can stand without identification of the slaves as real people."¹⁰ Halliwell is likewise sceptical about the use of portrait masks.¹¹

use unseemly shouting and coarse abuse on the speaker's platform, and to harangue the people with his cloak girt up short about him, whereas all his predecessors had spoken decently and in order' (*Constitution of the Athenians* 28). However, this picture of Cleon may be exaggerated and unfair. Thucydides and Aristotle were no fans of radical democracy and the sort of populist politicians who thrived under it.

⁴ Ibid. 86.

⁵ Dover (1987) 273.

⁶ MacDowell (1995) 107.

⁷ Ibid. 111.

⁸ Sommerstein (1981) 3.

⁹ MacDowell (1995) 87f.

¹⁰ Dover (1987) 274.

¹¹ Halliwell (1984) 9.

5. The Sausage-Seller

As Hesk points out, “the comic premise of the play is that Cleon can only be defeated by a man who can beat him at his own game”¹² – and it is the Sausage-Seller who fulfills this role. “At every stage of the contest [between Agoracritus the Sausage-seller and Paphlagon] it is the Sausage-seller who emerges victorious,” notes MacDowell.¹³ “His low-status trading and self-prostitution are what make him a worthy challenger to Cleon-Paphlagon’s political control of the assembly and the courts.”¹⁴

Hesk shows that this contest between Paphlagon and the Sausage-Seller takes the form of what he calls “combative capping” marked by “lexical repetition, structural mirroring and quasi-improvised responson.”¹⁵ It would be tempting to draw a parallel between their fast-paced, competitive dialogue and modern rap battles. Hesk also argues that the *Knights’* compabtive capping may be a stylized reflection of the sort of banter which may really have taken place between among hawkers, prostitutes, market-traders and their customers in the Athenian *agora* and its environs. Aristophanes seems to be suggesting that the oratory of politicians like Cleon is analogous to, and has its roots in, this low-status competitive banter.

MacDowell sees redemption for the Sausage-Seller in the final scene of the play. “The basis of the final verdict is quite different from the original basis of the contest: the Sausage-seller has won not by impudence, but by being a self-sacrificing servant of Democracy.”¹⁶

6. Demos

Demos, which might be translated as ‘ThePeople’ or perhaps ‘Democracy’, metaphorically represents the citizens of Athens within Aristophanes’ conceit of the household-state. “For most of the play the old man Demos is presented as gullible; he is easily deceived, defrauded, and flattered by his Paphlagonian slave”, notes Hesk.¹⁷ And reading this metaphor would seem to reveal the ‘message’ of the play; this is a “satirical allegory of Athenian political affairs: as Aristophanic choruses and characters claim elsewhere, the Demos is vulnerable to the deception, flattery and corruption of its élite advisers.”¹⁸ However, there is a complication; when the chorus accuse Demos of being easily manipulated, he reveals that in fact, “he is shrewd enough deliberately to fatten up politicians until he needs some meat for a sacrifice and dinner”¹⁹ – if we are to believe him (Hesk notes that many critics do not),²⁰ then it is all an act.

¹² Hesk (2000a) 256.

¹³ MacDowell (1995) 97.

¹⁴ Hesk (2007) 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 103.

¹⁷ Hesk (2000b) 250.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 250.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 251.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 252.

MacDowell interprets Demos' transformation at the end of the play as utopian; for him, "Aristophanes means that, without Kleon, Athenian politics will revert to an older and better style... Democracy has gone back half a century not only in appearance but also in mental attitude." For the first time, "Democracy has his own ideas", some of which are "remedies for genuine grievances." The Sausage-seller "has become something like a *deus ex machina* organizing human affairs but himself remaining outside them."²¹

However, Hesk argues that the play's conclusion is purposefully uncertain; "Agoracritus' motives for offering peace and Demos' unconsidered and hedonistic response allow for a suspicious interpretation of the 'transformation' of democratic politics which has supposedly occurred. The conclusion of *Knights* is not, or need not be, a *clear-cut* utopian fantasy of a democratic politics freed of flattery, deceit and the damaging short-term desire... for immediate gratification. I am not arguing that the 'utopian' interpretation was not entertained by Aristophanes' audience. Rather, the play's action and its conclusion raises disturbing and unsettling possibilities which encroach on the utopian reading."²² Moreover, he notes that Demos' previous revelation of his cunning, if it is to be believed, creates "a possible case of intratextual irony" because the new Demos "cannot remember anything about his former life and shamefully accepts that he was manipulated" without recourse to such a justification.²³ Ultimately, however, his conclusion is that *Knights* "can admit of a series of competing interpretations – interpretations which can compete in the mind of an individual spectator or else form the basis of disagreement between citizens long after the comedy has ended."²⁴

7. Final Thoughts and Questions

It seems wise for students to familiarise themselves with Thucydides' account of the Pylos affair, as this will provide the necessary historical context to understand and discuss *The Knights*. They should understand that Paphlagon is a thinly-veiled caricature of Cleon, whilst the two slaves are typically taken as Demosthenes and Nicias. They may wish to discuss the possibility of portrait-masks, and the mask assigned to Cleon. The character of the Sausage-Seller, who for the most part acts as a worse version of Cleon (and therefore can best him), becomes more ambiguous at the end of the play; there are ambiguities too in the characterization of Demos. Students should be prepared to discuss these internal conflicts in the exam.

Finally, it may be worth stressing that, as Hesk says, there could be multiple interpretations of the play working simultaneously, and that individual audience members may understand *Knights* differently, just as different academics and students do today.

²¹ MacDowell (1995) 104f.

²² Hesk (2000a) 257.

²³ Hesk (2000b) 251f.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 260.

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