

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Knights. 424 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story. *The Knights* was Aristophanes' fourth play—the *Acharnians*, his second, was first performed in 425—and it blasts ahead with the topical, scorchingly satirical, politically engaged ardor we have become familiar with. The target of the present play is the Athenian general and politician Cleon, with whom Aristophanes appears to have been settling a score. (In his first play, *The Babylonians*, Aristophanes had excoriated the running of the *polis* of Athens, for which Cleon had prosecuted the playwright, on the grounds that he was slandering his own city, in the presence of foreigners' (which was true.) For this insult, Aristophanes, still in his early twenties, had vowed revenge on Cleon. The fruit of that revenge was *The Knights*, which we might consider an allegory, in a sense, of the mismanagement of human affairs, although the camouflaged figures of real persons—Demosthenes, Cleon, and Nicias—are transparently themselves. The attack is harsh and personal.

Levels. One might say that very little happens in this play, which is governed by the generally angry voice of the sausage seller (Aristophanes; the playwright) who is constantly on the attack against the for the time being head servant of the polis, Paphlagonia—our friend Cleon. We might say that the meat of contention, between these two enemies, is the meaning of certain state-secret oracles, which prophecy the upcoming sequence of new head servants of the polis, and which the sausage seller, Aristophanes, feels point to his own eventual replacement of his arch enemy Paphlagonia.

Combat. Around this central theme, of the disclosure of the oracles, swirl the attacks and counterattacks of Cleon and Aristophanes themselves, with a number of dramatic cruxes that give substance to the interplay of choral and choreographic actions, so rich themselves that we might feel ourselves participating at an hilarious musical comedy. Cleon and the sausage seller compete for the verdict of the city, the polis, that *he* is the best servant of the public good: the knights of the city—middle class citizens wealthy enough to own a horse—are called into the theater itself, to give Cleon a roughing up; Cleon and Aristophanes exchange long sequences of scurrilous verbal assaults in which they appeal to the polis for favor, address the Council on their own behalf. By general agreement, Cleon is consigned to the loser's punishment, and condemned to sell sausages at the city gate, leaving the perks of government to Aristophanes.

Characters

Nicias	servant of Demos, the city-state (Athenian general)
Demosthenes,	servant of Demos, the city-state (Athenian general)
Sausageman,	seller of sausages (Aristophanes)
Paphlagon,	steward of Demos, the city-state (Cleon)
Demos,	Attic householder (People of Athens)
Chorus,	knights of Athens

Themes

Self-interest. Aristophanes' recurrent charge against Cleon is that he puts himself first, ignoring the polis; exactly the charge, ironically, which Cleon had levelled against Aristophanes' play, the *Babylonians*, in the prosecution which had fired up the hatred between the two men. In typical cases, claimed Aristophanes, Cleon chose his victims carefully, from among the rich and vulnerable, and squeezed the life out of them.

War Cleon had made his reputation in the military death struggle of Athens with Sparta. In fact Cleon was, at the moment of this play, something of a hero for a rather daring and successful capture of a group

of stranded Spartan soldiers, in the western Peloponnesus. It was at this time that Aristophanes, with characteristic bravado, was out to slaughter the reputation of his home grown enemy. Of course the overarching theme, of the present play, is War itself, as it had been in the *Achamians*; in both plays war had been the absolute corroder of morals and morale.

Allegory. The present play makes no use of the real names of its characters, who are in fact audience-identifiable—remember that Athens was an overgrown small town of 40,000 in 430 B.C.E.—but presents its figures with allegorical (or symbolical) names; Cleon (not named) is called the Paphlagonian, while Aristophanes apparently calls himself the sausage seller. The playwright thus reserves room for fanciful and extravagant freedoms in characterization.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Main character. Aristophanes is a genius at positioning, his own voice within the tales he tells: in the present play embodying himself inside a voice which so fully talks through and about an alter ego (the sausage seller) that we could say the main character is a split or double voice. Its tone is unflinchingly pugnacious and critical, and at the same time it embodies itself in all the attitudes of the sausage seller, as well as in the most far flung fantasies of the poet's own argumentation against Cleon.

Wheedling. In competition with the Paphlagonian, for the favor of the Citizen of the Polis, the sausage seller wheedles favors from Mr. Citizen. 'Father Demos, o do come out...'

Remonstrating. 'Bullshit! You don't give a damn
But only about blackmail and bribery...' Sausage seller to Paphlagonian.

Combative. 'Line us up at the post, that jerk and me
And see which reaches you first to serve you.' Sausage seller to Father Citizen.

Sassy. 'What I see with my own eyes, Demos,
Is the goddess showing her care for you
By holding a pot of beef tea over your head!' Sausage seller to Father Citizen.

Parallels. The dramatist is a writer in a unique situation. He or she can at the same time appear as a character whom he is describing, or as the voice that is doing the describing. Because he is of inwardly double voice, the dramatist is a pliable, and audience responsive, voice. What is the 'dominant voice in *Hamlet*? Is it not first of all an overarching single communicator, 'Shakespeare,' then is it not 'Shakespeare's as clad in the voice of Hamlet,' then 'Shakespeare as the molder and shaper in language.' I think the answer is yes to all these questions. The dramatist's voice is multilayered. In sterner centuries than ours, the dramatist, like the actor, found himself barred from burial in 'Christian ground,' thanks to the belief that the actor, and the voice behind the actor, have no moral actuality or stability.

Discussion questions

What is the playwright trying to accomplish in this play? Does he want specific actions? Does he want to change the mindset of such as Cleon? Or is Aristophanes simply speaking out for 'moral values' in this play? Or, finally, is he just pissed off out of his mind, in this play, and aiming at nothing less than real change in his society?

Imagine yourself a contemporary academic historian of ancient Athens. What would you think of Aristophanes' view of Cleon, the military undertakings of this general, and Aristophanes' view of those undertakings?

Masks, artificial phalli, choral effects: to what extent do you see the present play as 'spectacle,' the 'amusing to see,' and to what extent is this drama dead serious'?