

# The Divination Contest of Calchas and Mopsus and Aristophanes' *Knights*

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THIS ARTICLE attempts to settle the longstanding question about the prevalence of oracles in *Knights* (424 B.C.E.), a key motif that pervades and arguably frames the entire play. Opinion is divided into three camps: the first draws a connection between the narrative pattern of *Knights* and those of certain tragedies that turn on oracles (e.g. Soph. *OT* 1121–1185 and Eur. *Bacch.* 1271–1289), suggesting that the revelation of Sausage Seller's identity as Agoracritus parodies the *anagnorisis* motif of tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Others trace the succession of disreputable politicians in *Knights* to the intergenerational conflicts that lead to the domination of Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*.<sup>2</sup> Both views, focused primarily on intertextual matters, are suggestive and have their own merits given Aristophanes' tendency to engage *topoi* of the epic and tragic genres. The third line of interpretation, more sociological and historically contextualized, argues that the apparently unfavorable portrayal of divination in the play attests either to Aristophanes' personal

<sup>1</sup> B. M. W. Knox, "The Date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles," *AJP* 77 (1956) 133–147; P. Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (Munich 1967) 168–173; A. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Knights* (Warminster 1981) 208; R. Harriott, *Aristophanes: Poet and Dramatist* (London 1986) 105–106; R. Bushnell, *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays* (Ithaca 1988) 19; F. Muecke, "Oracles in Aristophanes," *Seminari Romani* 1 (1998) 260.

<sup>2</sup> A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual, and Comedy* (Cambridge 1993) 58–66, detects the Gigantomachy theme; also L. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago 1966) 83.

skepticism of oracles or to the general waning of belief in certain religious practices in the late fifth and early fourth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

None of these positions in my view satisfactorily resolves why Aristophanes uses oracles so conspicuously in the play. This paper offers alternative reasons for the importance of oracles in *Knights*, responding directly to these socio-historical and inter-textual approaches. I contend that the ‘dueling-oracles’ motif in *Knights* is premised on the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus from the Troy story, parts of which are preserved by Apollodorus, Strabo, and others.

My argument proceeds in two interconnected stages. First I attend to contemporary historical allusions to divination in the comedy that have been less noticed in recent scholarship but which show how divination plays into the thematic concerns of *Knights* and its criticism of Cleon. Then I propose that Aristophanes deploys, for politically salient reasons, a specific set of myths about legendary seers to develop the eristic elements in *Knights*. Aristophanes’ engagement with the divinatory *agôn* motif from an archaic myth reflects the enormous importance

<sup>3</sup> Aristophanes as skeptical of divination: V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (New York 1962) 261–263.; W. K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War III* (Berkeley 1979) 49–50; J. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill 1983) 41; N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes. Birds* (Oxford 1998) 364–365. R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford 2005) 147–152, offers a corrective, asserting that Aristophanes is not entirely irreligious, while N. Smith, “Diviners and Divination in Aristophanic Comedy,” *CA* 8 (1989) 140–158, argues that Aristophanes’ critique is directed only at the fraudulent deployment of oracles. Cf. H. Bowden, “Oracles for Sale,” in P. Derow and R. Parker (eds.), *Herodotus and his World: Essays from a Conference in Memory of George Forrest* (Oxford 2003) 256–274, on the popularity of oracles in the late Classical. S. Scullion, “Religion and the Gods in Greek Comedy,” in M. Fontaine and A. Scafuro (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy* (Oxford 2014) 344, suggests that Aristophanes mocks only “low-grade oracles.” Muecke, *Seminari Romani* 1 (1998) 257–274, explores oracles in several of Aristophanes’ plays but does not explain why divination structures *Knights*.

of mythological materials even in his early political plays.

It would be prudent to consider *Knights* in relation to an inherently open-ended mythological repertoire in which numerous genres and media shared interests in select Trojan myths and personages, rather than link the *agôn* in the play to a particular intertext or performance of the Calchas and Mopsus myth.<sup>4</sup> Yet our evidence—which stresses the role of the oracular *technê* in the maintenance of political authority—suggests that spectators were attuned to the structural and thematic similarities between Paphlagon and Sausage Seller and Calchas and Mopsus. My reading illustrates the value of attending not only to specific intertextual references but also to broader structural patterns and motifs in myth for the interpretation of ancient comedy.

*Oracles and politics: some historical considerations*

Before comparing *Knights* to the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus, I review the historical circumstances of the comedy and Aristophanes' strategy of appealing to the motif of oracles to link Cleon to dubious Athenian political figures. These remarks will position us to discuss the pivotal *agôn* scene near the end of the play.

*Knights* begins with a dialogue scene in which two slaves lament their master Dêmos' maltreatment of them since the arrival of Paphlagon, whom scholars unanimously take to represent Cleon, a leading political opponent of Pericles and a leather tanner by trade.<sup>5</sup> The slaves complain that Paphlagon

<sup>4</sup> On intertextuality in Greek comedy see E. Bakola, *Cratinus and the Art of Comedy* (Oxford 2010); Z. Biles, *Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition* (Cambridge 2011); C. W. Marshall and G. Kovacs (eds.), *No Laughing Matter: Studies in Athenian Comedy* (London 2012); M. Wright, "Comedy and the Trojan War," *CQ* 57 (2007) 412–431, *The Comedian as Critic* (London 2012), and "Poets and Poetry in Later Greek Comedy," *CQ* 63 (2013) 603–622; E. Bakola et al. (eds.), *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge 2013); M. C. Farmer, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* (Oxford 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Cleon is identified at 976. For the identification of the slaves see J. Henderson, "When an Identity Was Expected: The Slaves in Aristophanes'

flatters their master endlessly (46–52), takes all the credit for baked goods they themselves have procured (53–57), and can get them flogged (63–66). The slaves inform the audience that Paphlagon hoards a trove of written oracles that he deploys to spellbind and subdue the gullible Dêmos: ἄδει δὲ χρησμούς· ὁ δὲ γέρων σιβυλλίῳ (“he chants oracles, and the old man goes Sibyl-crazy,” 61).<sup>6</sup>

While Paphlagon lies in a drunken stupor, Nicias succeeds in snatching the “sacred oracle” (τὸν ἱερόν χρησμόν, 115) that evinces how Paphlagon will perish: following in a line of succession that begins with an oakum-seller (στυππειοπώλης: Eucrates of Melite), then a sheep-seller (προβατοπώλης: Lysicles), he himself in turn (βυρσοπώλης) will be replaced by the infamous Sausage Seller (ἄλλαντοπώλης, 125–144). The prophecy traces a line of contemptible characters, reflecting the increasingly incompetent political leaders of Athens after the death of Pericles in 429.

The slaves persuade Sausage Seller, who arrives on stage serendipitously, to act on their behalf in deposing Paphlagon, assuring him of his imminent victory with an auspicious oracle in hexameters, whose animal metaphors and conditional structure signaled by ἀλλ’ ὀπότεν ... δὴ τότε follow the conventions of the genre (197–201):<sup>7</sup>

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*Knights*,” in G. W. Bakewell and J. P. Sickingler (eds.), *Gestures: Essays in Ancient History, Literature, and Philosophy presented to Alan L. Boegehold* (Oxford 2003) 63–73. M. Vickers, *Pericles on Stage: Political Comedy in Aristophanes’ Early Plays* (Austin 1997) 98–106, identifies Sausage Seller as Alcibiades and the chorus of knights as Pericles.

<sup>6</sup> I give the text of N. Wilson, *Aristophanis Fabulae I* (Oxford 2007), although I do not follow his attribution of names to the slaves. Translations are adapted from J. Henderson, *Aristophanes I* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley 1978) 11–57; N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes. Birds* (Oxford 1995) 542–550; L. Maurizio “Delphic Oracles as Oral Performance: Authenticity and Historical Evidence,” *CA* 16 (1997)

ἀλλ' ὅπῳταν μάρψῃ βυρσαίετος ἀγκυλοχῆλης  
 γαμφηλῆσι δράκοντα κοάλεμον αἵματοπώτην,  
 δὴ τότε Παφλαγόνων μὲν ἀπόλλυται ἡ σκοροδάλμη,  
 κοιλιопώλησιν δὲ θεὸς μέγα κῦδος ὀπάζει,  
 αἴ κεν μὴ πωλεῖν ἀλλᾶντας μᾶλλον ἔλωνται.

Yea, when the crook-taloned rawhide eagle shall snatch  
 in its beak the dimwitted blood-guzzling serpent,  
 even then shall perish the garlic breath of the Paphlagon,  
 while to tripe sellers the god grants great glory,  
 unless they choose rather to sell sausages.

What deserves emphasis is how Aristophanes casts politicians and rogues as *chresmologoi*—and notably in contradistinction to the more reputable *manteis*—to highlight their unsanctioned method of bolstering political authority.<sup>8</sup> The caricature of the slaves and Paphlagon as oracle interpreters becomes particularly salient when contrasted with historical instances in which public leaders would request the assistance of specialists to divine in the assembly.<sup>9</sup> The few nonspecialists in our sources who are shown to interpret oracles received either training or encouragement from authorized seers, consulted only for private matters, or welcomed fellow citizens to inspect their operations (thus Xenophon, *An.* 6.4.14).<sup>10</sup> That the characters in the play disclose oracles selectively according to self-interest undermines the proper protocol of the oracular system. In other words, Aristophanes is hardly derogatory of oracles as

308–334.

<sup>8</sup> For the distinctions between seers and oracle-chanters see M. Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley 2008) 58–65. Ar. *Peace* 1052–1119 seems to distinguish between *mantis* and *chresmologos*.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 54.6. For illustrious mantic families such as the Clytiadae, Melampodidae, Iamidae, and Telliadae see Flower, *The Seer* 37–50; E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford 2007) 27–29; K. Beerden, *Worlds Full of Signs* (Leiden 2013) 75–81.

<sup>10</sup> See Bowden, in *Herodotus and his World* 266–270 and Beerden, *Worlds Full of Signs* 60. Even Oedipus, who outsmarts the Sphinx, enlists the aid of Teiresias and the Delphic oracle; Eur. *Rhes.* 63–69 portrays Hector yielding to the seer's command; cf. *Il.* 1.69–72, Achilles' reliance on Calchas.

such; he directs his mockery at those who found oracles an efficient means to acquire undue political authority.<sup>11</sup>

In a later episode we find the two antagonists on the Pnyx competing with hexameter oracles. Aristophanes remarks that those of Paphlagon belong to the prophet Bacis (οὔμοι μὲν εἶσι Βάκιδος, 1003), which mobilizes an array of significant historical comparanda.<sup>12</sup> For instance, schol. Ar. *Peace* 1071 reports that Bacis was an epithet ascribed to the tyrant Peisistratus. This legendary prophet, who appears repeatedly in Herodotus (8.20.2, 77.1–2, 96.2, 9.43.2), was credited with predictions about the outcome of wars and the destiny of cities. The claim that the Peisistratids maintained a keen interest in oracles goes back to Herodotus, who mentions the family's circumspect use of divination as well as their oracle books, which were discovered by Cleomenes of Sparta when he seized the Acropolis around 510 (5.90.2).<sup>13</sup>

It would seem that Aristophanes further associates the combatants in *Knights* with anti-democratic figures when he depicts Sausage Seller and Paphlagon deciphering their own dream oracles.<sup>14</sup> The linking of oracles to tyrants was far-reaching and

<sup>11</sup> See K. Trampedach, *Politische Mantik: Die Kommunikation über Götterzeichen und Orakel im klassischen Griechenland* (Heidelberg 2015) 438, esp. n.153 for other instances in which Aristophanes derides the political manipulation of oracles.

<sup>12</sup> On Bacis and Bacid oracle collections see further Ar. *Peace* 1070–1072, *Birds* 962–980, Paus. 10.12.11, Cic. *Div.* 1.34; cf. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* 158–165; L. Prandi “Considerazioni su Bacide e le raccolte oracolari greche,” in M. Sordi (ed.), *La profezia nel mondo antico* (Milan 1993) 51–62; Bowden, in *Herodotus and his World* 265, and *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy* (Cambridge 2005) 34–36.

<sup>13</sup> For Herodotus' view of Bacis see D. Asheri, “Erodoto e Bacide: Considerazioni sulla fede di Erodoto negli oracoli,” in *La profezia* 63–76. On the Onomacritus episode (Hdt. 7.6) see H. A. Shapiro, “Oracle-mongers in Peisistratid Athens,” *Kernos* 3 (1990) 335–345. Cf. Lys. 30.17–19 on tampering with religious laws.

<sup>14</sup> Hipparchus consults interpreters (*oneiropoloi*) about an ominous dream (Hdt. 5.56.2), but does not obey them, resulting in his death during the

not exclusive to the Peisistratids, for (to remain with Herodotus) politically inflected dreams were also attributed to Cambyses and Xerxes. Conceivably, Aristophanes intended these historical episodes of the propagandistic use of divination to resonate with the Athenians when they witnessed a leather tanner and meat manufacturer expounding oracles.<sup>15</sup>

Tyrants and oracles, one can say without exaggeration, were entwined concepts in the Athenian imagination, but it would be a mistake to assume that political leaders were categorically incapable of proper oracle interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Themistocles, who famously deciphered the ‘wall’ oracle, is a case in point,<sup>17</sup> and Aristophanes in fact has Paphlagon compare himself to the illustrious Athenian general (810–813):

- ΠΑ. οὐκ οὖν δεινὸν ταυτί σε λέγειν δῆτ’ ἔστ’ ἐμὲ καὶ διαβάλλειν  
πρὸς Ἀθηναίους καὶ τὸν δῆμον, πεπονηκότα πλείονα χρηστὰ  
νῆ τὴν Δήμητρα Θεμιστοκλέους πολλῶ περι τὴν πόλιν ἦδη;  
ΑΛ. ὦ πόλις Ἄργους, κλύεθ’ οἷα λέγει. σὺ Θεμιστοκλεῖ ἀντιπερίζεις;  
ΠΑ. Isn’t it terrible that you say such things and slander me before the  
Athenians and Dêmos, despite my many useful services—more, by  
Demeter, than Themistocles ever did for the city?  
Σ.Σ. “City of Argos, listen to the things he says!” Are you comparing  
yourself to Themistocles?

In reproaching Paphlagon for comparing himself to Themisto-

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Panathenaia of 514. Alternatively, Hippias interprets his own dreams and at times fails to understand them (e.g. 6.107), on which see J. Dillery, “Chresmologues and *Manteis*: Independent Diviners and the Problems of Authority,” in S. I. Johnston and P. T. Struck (eds.), *Mantike: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden 2005) 167–231, at 188–189.

<sup>15</sup> This is made clear at 447–448 when Sausage Seller claims that Paphlagon descends from the bodyguard of Hippias’ wife.

<sup>16</sup> On tyrants and divination: C. Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles* (Cambridge 1990) 178–182. Politics and oracles: Trampedach, *Politische Mantik* 258–294.

<sup>17</sup> Hdt. 7.6.4; Arist. *Rh.* 1376a. See C. A. Anderson, “Themistocles and Cleon in Aristophanes’ *Knights*, 763ff,” *AJP* 110 (1989) 10–16; N. Robertson, “The True Meaning of the ‘Wooden Wall,’” *CP* 82 (1987) 1–20; Bowden, in *Herodotus and his World* 272–274.

cles,<sup>18</sup> it is all the more striking that Sausage Seller formulates his critique through the very issue of divination, for he indeed attributes the ruin of Athenian civic life to Paphlagon's exploitation of oracles (818–820): “But *you* have tried to destroy the greatness of the Athenians' city by raising barriers between them and chanting oracles (χρησιμωδῶν)—you who set yourself up against Themistocles!” The juxtaposition of Themistocles and the demagogue Cleon elicits a narrative of decline in Athenian politics (as Thuc. 2.65.10–11 elaborates so nostalgically).

Moreover, the passage furnishes evidence against the common (and anachronistic) view that, given the purported ‘embedded’ nature of Greek religion, it is impossible to distinguish religious institutions like oracles from political or bureaucratic authority in the Greek city-state.<sup>19</sup> Leaving religious and non-religious power undifferentiated overlooks one of Aristophanes' fundamental points: politicians in conflict drew on various sorts of religious arguments to advance their position, and did so with unequal resources and skill at their disposal. Paphlagon's handling of oracles to boost his political career in the play reflects the rise of self-promoting demagogues during the last quarter of the fifth century, “the golden age of chresmologues” (to borrow a phrase of Flacelière).<sup>20</sup> *Knights* can, in a sense, be understood as a meditation on the function of religious power

<sup>18</sup> In fact Paphlagon later gives an oracle that explicitly alludes to wooden walls (1040 ff.).

<sup>19</sup> R. Garland, “Priests and Power in Classical Athens,” in M. Beard and J. North (eds.), *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (London 1990) 75: “there never was, nor could there have been, any clash between religious and non-religious power since power was not recognized as dividing along these lines.”

<sup>20</sup> R. Flacelière, *Devins et oracles grecs* (Paris 1961) 92. L. Radermacher, “Euripides und die Mantik,” *RhM* 53 (1898) 504–509; Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Knights* 148; and Dillery, in *Mantike* 184, agree. See Thucydides' remarks about the politics of oracles during the Peloponnesian War at 2.8.2 and 2.21.3.



in the period of the Peloponnesian War.

At the climax of the play, Paphlagon has recourse to the revered Pythian oracle, which gives a detailed account of his nemesis and successor. Rather than engaging in alternating rejoinders, Paphlagon now interrogates Sausage Seller with a series of rapid-fire questions. After confirming his rival's identity, Paphlagon admits defeat and relinquishes his crown (1249–1252). Thus deposed, Paphlagon's fate effectively authenticates the original oracle disclosed at the beginning of the play, completing a coherent narrative whose structural design can be understood as a ring composition.

*Knights and the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus*

The political climate of late fifth-century Athens only partly explains why Aristophanes deploys the theme of divination in his portrait of Cleon, one that likely corroborates the perception some Athenians had of the demagogue and his ambitions. In what follows, I attempt to identify the reasons why Aristophanes appeals to the well-known Contest of Calchas and Mopsus for the divinatory contests in *Knights*.

Poetic contests<sup>21</sup> like those between Hesiod and Homer or between Euripides and Aeschylus in *Frogs* lie at the heart of the economy of *kleos* in Athenian culture. Heroic figures challenge rivals in the category of *sophia*, and the inevitable death of one participant distinguishes victor from vanquished.<sup>22</sup> Myths

<sup>21</sup> E.g. the contest between Oedipus and the Sphinx, the Muses and Sirens, the *Contest of Helicon and Cithaeron* (PMG 654.19–22), the reference to Hesiod's own competition at Chalcis on the occasion of King Amphidamas' funeral celebration (*Erg.* 650–659), and the contest for the Tripod of Miletus (Plut. *Solon* 4). See D. Collins, *Master of the Game: Competition and Performance in Greek Poetry* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2004); M. Griffith, "Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry," in M. Griffith and D. Mastronarde (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer* (Atlanta 1990) 185–207, and *Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford 2013) 80–114; R. Rosen, "Aristophanes' *Frogs* and the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*," *TAPA* 134 (2004) 295–322.

<sup>22</sup> M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 2007) 72–74.

related to the Trojan War were often material for such contests, as for instance that between the cyclic poets Lesches and Arctinus mentioned by Phaenias (fr.33 Wehrli). What is more, the *agōnes* of Calchas and Mopsus, Homer and Hesiod, and Lesches and Arctinus bear important similarities: an audience that adjudicates or witnesses the contest; an emphasis on riddles and intellectual debate in hexameter verse; a zero-sum logic to the contest; and a characterization of competitors as wandering poets. Indeed, Matthew Wright insists that many Athenian comedies “based their whole plot on the theme of literary rivalry.”<sup>23</sup> My argument pursues contests that turn specifically on divinatory (or mantic) knowledge.

Before we introduce the comparanda, it is worth reading the final contest in *Knights* to get a sense of its argumentative structure. It comes at the crucial juncture when Paphlagon turns to the Pythian oracle alluded to at the beginning of the play (1229–1248):

- ΠΑ. οὐ δῆτ', ἐπεὶ μοι χρησμός ἐστι Πυθικὸς  
φράζων ὑφ' οὗ δεῖ μ' ἀνδρὸς ἠττάσθαι μόνου.  
ΑΛ. τοῦμόν γε φράζων ὄνομα καὶ λίαν σαφῶς.  
ΠΑ. καὶ μὴν σ' ἐλέγξει βούλομαι τεκμηρίῳ,  
εἴ τι ξυνοίσεις τοῦ θεοῦ τοῖς θεσφάτοις.  
καὶ σου τοσοῦτο πρῶτον ἐκπειράσομαι·  
παῖς ὢν ἐφοίτας εἰς τίνος διδασκάλου;  
ΑΛ. ἐν ταῖσιν εὔστραις κονδύλοις ἡρμοττόμην.  
ΠΑ. πῶς εἶπας; ὡς μοῦ χρησμός ἄπτεται φρενῶν.  
εἶέν.  
ἐν παιδοτρίβου δὲ τίνα πάλην ἐμάνθανες;  
ΑΛ. κλέπτων ἐπιорκεῖν καὶ βλέπειν ἐναντία·  
ΠΑ. ὦ Φοῖβ' Ἄπολλον Λύκιε, τί ποτέ μ' ἐργάσει;  
τέχνην δὲ τίνα ποτ' εἶχες ἐξανδρούμενος;  
ΑΛ. ἡλλαντοπώλουν καὶ τι καὶ βινεσκόμην.  
ΠΑ. οἴμοι κακοδαίμων· οὐκέτ' οὐδέν εἰμ' ἐγώ.  
λεπτὴ τις ἐλπὶς ἐστ' ἐφ' ἧς ὀχοῦμεθα.

<sup>23</sup> M. Wright, *The Comedian as Critic* (London 2012), esp. 31–69 (quotation at 32).

- καί μοι τοσοῦτον εἶπέ· πότερον ἐν ἀγορᾷ  
ἤλλαντοπόλεις ἔτεδον ἢ 'πὶ ταῖς πύλαις;
- ΑΑ. ἐπὶ ταῖς πύλαισιν, οὐ τὸ τάριχος ὄνιον.  
ΠΑ. οἴμοι, πέπρακται τοῦ θεοῦ τὸ θέσφατον.
- Pa. No! I've got a Pythian oracle specifying the only one  
destined to defeat me.
- S.S. Specifying my name, and with perfect clarity.
- Pa. Well then, I'd like to question you to see whether you match  
up with the god's prophetic utterances. First, let me ask you  
this: when you were a boy, whose school did you attend?
- S.S. The school of hard knocks, in the slaughterhouse district.
- Pa. What's that you say? How the oracle bites me to the quick!  
Now then: at the wrestling school, what technique did you  
learn?
- S.S. When stealing, to look them in the eye and swear I didn't do  
it.
- Pa. "Phoebus Apollo of Lycia, what do you mean to do to me?"  
And when you were becoming a man, what sort of trade did  
you follow?
- S.S. I sold sausages, and now and then I also sold my arse.
- Pa. Oh, I'm damned! This is the absolute end of me! There's still  
a splinter of hope keeping me afloat. And it's this: tell me,  
did you sell sausages in the marketplace or at the city gates?
- S.S. At the gates, where they sell cheap fish.
- Pa. Ah me, the god's own fateful prophecy has come to pass!

My interest in the passage lies not in the specific contents of the oracles, however intriguing the symbolism and imagery, but in the peculiar form that the contest takes. Paphlagon sets the decisive episode in motion by reminding the audience of the initial framing oracle, whose veracity then unfolds by means of an elaborate divination contest; questions are posed and accumulate rapidly until the rival's identity is revealed, all of which is reminiscent, we shall see, of the mode of interrogation in the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus.

We may note parenthetically that, in contrast to the overwhelming moralizing content of the contests in *Frogs*, Cratinus' *Archilochoi*, and the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, the oracular duel in *Knights* is rather frivolous in spirit. In this respect it more closely resembles the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus. For

while aesthetic and moral considerations largely determine the outcome of the other celebrated poetic contests, the winner of the final oracular scene in *Knights*, as in the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus, is decided on the basis of empirical proof (1233 τεκμηρίῳ), independent of any ideology or criteria based on traditional values.

The Contest of Calchas and Mopsus belongs to the early Greek myth tradition probably contemporaneous with the Homeric epics. Though the contest featured in a Sophoclean play, our main sources on the oracular duel are detailed plot summaries in Strabo and Apollodorus.<sup>24</sup> According to the epic tradition, the Achaeans returned to their respective homes after the sack of Troy—journeys known collectively in the Epic Cycle as *nostoi*.<sup>25</sup> Herodotus relates that the diviners Calchas and Amphilocheus ventured east in Asia Minor, where they eventually founded the Pamphylian clan (7.91: οἱ δὲ Πάμφυλοι οὗτοι εἰσὶ τῶν ἐκ Τροίης ἀποσκεδασθέντων ἅμα Ἀμφιλόχῳ καὶ Κάλχαντι). The Pamphylians settled on the coast between Cilicia and Lycia, and John Boardman, inter alios, has shown that the legend of Calchas leading the Achaeans to Pamphylian cities can be found in the material record from the early Classical age to as late as C.E. 120, some in the form of dedications to him and Mopsus in Perge.<sup>26</sup> This Mopsus, born to Apollo

<sup>24</sup> T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1993) 702–703, and I. Weiler, *Der Agon im Mythos: zur Einstellung der Griechen zum Wettkampf* (Darmstadt 1974) 114–116, collect the variants. Proclus *Chrest.* 11 also records Calchas' *nostos*: A. Severyns, *Recherches sur la Chrestomathie de Proclus IV* (Paris 1963) 94–95.

<sup>25</sup> On the Epic Cycle tradition see J. Griffin, "The Epic Cycle and the Uniqueness of Homer," *JHS* 97 (1977) 39–53; A. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore 2001); M. Fantuzzi and C. Tsagalis (eds.), *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Receptions: A Companion* (Cambridge 2015). On the *nostos* see A. Bonifazi, "Inquiring into *Nostos* and its Cognates," *AJP* 130 (2009) 481–510.

<sup>26</sup> *I. Perge* 101, 106; J. Boardman, *CAH IV* (1988) 226; J. M. Cook, "Greek Archaeology in Western Asia Minor," *Archaeological Reports* 6 (1959) 56; M. Finkelberg, *Greeks and Pre-Greeks: Aegean Prehistory and Greek Heroic Tradition*

and grandchild of Teiresias, was a diviner at Claros and is not to be confused with the Mopsus who accompanied Jason and the Argonauts.<sup>27</sup> Mopsus cannot be a late creation, for early writers such as Callinus of Ephesus in the seventh century and the author of the Pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis* knew of him.<sup>28</sup>

Ample evidence testifies to the popularity of the Calchas and Mopsus myth.<sup>29</sup> Herodotus mentions Mopsus' migration with Theban populations into Pamphylia and Cilicia, and to Syria and Phoenicia after their defeat by the Epigoni (7.91). Strabo attests to the legend's antiquity and integral position in the literary tradition, even adopted by Sophocles in the lost *Helen Claimed*. It is also evident from Servius that Gallus' account of the contest followed that of the third-century B.C.E. poet and antiquarian Euphorion, who, in turn, probably depended on the sixth-century Hesiodic *Melampodia* (Hes. fr.278).<sup>30</sup> This intricate genealogy illustrates that the *nostos* story of Calchas and his oracular contest with Mopsus enjoyed a degree of

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(Cambridge 2005) 151–153. W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1992) 52, compares the Greek and Lydian versions of Mopsus, the latter dating to the eighth century B.C.E. Also useful is V. Saladino, “Kalchas,” *LIMC* V (1990), esp. 934.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 4.191 and schol.

<sup>28</sup> Callinus: fr.8 West; R. D. Barnett, J. Leveen, and C. Moss, “A Phoenician Inscription from Eastern Cilicia,” *Iraq* 10 (1948) 60. Mopsus: Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* 43; Finkelberg, *Greeks and Pre-Greeks* 151–153; Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* 52–53, and *Greek Religion* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985) 115–119; T. S. Scheer, *Mythische Vorväter. Zur Bedeutung griechischer Heroenmythen im Selbstverständnis kleinasiatischer Städte* (Munich 1993) 168–173; E. Simon, “Mopsos II,” *LIMC* VI (1992) 652–654.

<sup>29</sup> See A. D. Nock, “Alexander of Abonuteichos,” *CQ* 22 (1928) 160–162; Collins, *Master of the Game* 7, posits seventh century B.C.E. for the Calchas and Mopsus narrative.

<sup>30</sup> Euphorion fr.98 Powell. Serv. on *Ecl.* 6.72: *in quo <luco> aliquando Calchas et Mopsus dicuntur de peritia divinandi inter se habuisse certamen: et cum de pomorum arboris cuiusdam contenderent numero, stetit gloria Mopso: cuius rei dolore Calchas interiit.* Note that he locates this legendary poetic contest in Ionia, in western Anatolia—consistent in detail with the other accounts of this myth.

cultural prestige in the Pan-Hellenic tradition already by the Classical period; it is thus probable that Aristophanes and his audience were well acquainted with the trope of dueling seers and with this divinatory contest in particular.

With this in mind, then, we turn to the relevant passages.<sup>31</sup> Apollodorus (6.2–4) records that a group of diviners—Amphilochus, Calchas, Leonteus, Podalirius, and Polypoetes—travelled on foot to Colophon after the Trojan War. Calchas had been delivered “an oracle (λόγιον) that he would die if he met a better diviner than himself (ἐὰν αὐτοῦ σοφωτέρῳ περιτύχη μάντει).” The diviner Mopsus received the seers at Colophon and subsequently “challenged Calchas to a contest in the art of divination”:

There was a wild fig tree growing there, and when Calchas asked, “How many figs is it carrying?,” Mopsus replied, “Ten thousand, or a bushel with one fig left over,” which was discovered to be the case. Mopsus then questioned Calchas about a pregnant sow, asking, “How many piglets is she carrying in her womb?” When Calchas replied, “Eight,” Mopsus smiled and said, “The divination of Calchas is anything but exact, but I, who am a son of Apollo and Manto, am richly provided with the clarity of vision that arises from exact divination, and I maintain that there are not eight piglets, as Calchas says, but nine piglets in her womb; and I can say furthermore, that all of them are males and will be born tomorrow at the sixth hour without a doubt.” When this all turned out to be true, Calchas was so dejected that he died (ἄθυμῆσας ἀπέθανε). (transl. R. Hard, adapted)

The peculiar manner in which Calchas dies is echoed in Strabo’s testimony (14.1.27), which offers a similar account despite minor differences in matters of detail. Calchas came with Amphilochus to Colophon and the grove of Apollo Clarius where he was defeated by Mopsus in a divination contest and died of vexation (διὰ λύπην ἀποθανεῖν). Strabo then

<sup>31</sup> See also Lycophr. 978–981, for a brief mention of Calchas’ contest and death. K. Lange, *Euripides und Homer* (Stuttgart 2002) 112 n.318, records most of the traditions.

relates the Hesiodic version of the contest (Ἡσίοδος μὲν οὖν οὕτω πως διασκευάζει τὸν μῦθον):

Calchas propounds to Mopsus something of this kind: I am surprised to see how large a quantity of figs there is on this small tree; can you tell the number? Mopsus answered: There are ten thousand; they will measure a medimnus, and there is one over, which you cannot comprehend. Thus he spoke; the number and measure were exact. Then Calchas closed his eyes in the sleep of death. (transl. W. Falconer)

Strabo also preserves the variant of Pherecydes (*FGrHist* 3 F 142), who reports that Calchas posed a question about a pregnant sow, asking how many young she had. When Mopsus answered correctly, “Calchas died of vexation (ἀποθανεῖν ὑπὸ λύπης).” Strabo offers another version without citing the authority, but it curiously ends in the same way, indeed verbatim: Calchas “died of vexation (ἀποθανεῖν δὲ ὑπὸ λύπης), according to an oracular prophecy (κατὰ τι λόγιον).” Most interesting, however, Strabo informs us that Sophocles composed a play based on the contest:

Sophocles, in his *Helen Claimed*, says that he was destined by fate to die when he should meet with a prophet superior to himself (ὅταν κρείττονι ἑαυτοῦ μάντει περιτύχη). But this writer transfers the scene of the rivalry, and of the death of Calchas, to Cilicia. Such are the ancient traditions (τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ τοιαῦτα).

We can easily reconstruct the general plot of the homecoming of Calchas. All variants of the myth include an overarching oracle, operating beyond the control of the seers, that presages the demise of Calchas. The diviners compete with riddles until one participant responds incorrectly and betrays his fallibility in the art of divination. The internal oracular competition thus serves to make manifest the framing oracle that encapsulates the entire narrative and ultimately identifies the superior combatant. In other words, the relationship between these two sets of oracles (the framing oracle and the oracular *agôn*) is one of confirmation, as the riddles that each seer poses verify the accuracy of the framing oracle. In a sense, both protagonists and the audience know well how the plot will

transpire; unlike more conventional *agônes*, the quarrels between Paphlagon and Sausage Seller and between Calchas and Mopsus are rigged from the very start. Most remarkably, neither Paphlagon nor Calchas capitulates in advance despite knowledge of their impending downfall.

Strabo adds several significant details to Apollodorus, attributing distinct components of the *agôn* to different ancient authors. As we saw, he traces the question concerning the count of figs to Hesiod; and the fifth-century Athenian mythographer Pherecydes allegedly introduced the question of the sow and her piglets, the number of which Calchas miscalculates. Others, Strabo reports, combined the two variants (as in Apollodorus). We learn from Photius a variant in which Mopsus emerges victorious, but which includes a detail not reproduced elsewhere, that a judge, king Amphimachus of Lycia, resolves the conflict between Calchas and Mopsus by having them predict his success in war.<sup>32</sup> In spite of these inconsistencies about which riddle ultimately settles the contest, all versions agree on two points: that Mopsus defeats Calchas in divination, and that upon confirming the veracity of the overarching oracle, Calchas dies in shame—whether on his own initiative or in some miraculous way in fulfillment of the oracle.<sup>33</sup>

The final contest in *Knights* verifies the framing oracle issued at the beginning of the play, reflecting the structure of the Contest of Calchas and Mopsus. More specifically, both nar-

<sup>32</sup> *Bibl. cod.* 186, 132a: ὡς Μόψος ὁ Μάντης καὶ Απόλλωνος τῆς μητρὸς τελευτησάσης ἐκδέχεται κλῆρον τὸ ἐν Κλάρω Απόλλωνος μαντεῖον· κατ' ἐκεῖνο δὲ καιροῦ ἀφικνεῖται Κάλχας εἰς Κολοφῶνα, ἐν ᾧ Μόψος ἔχων ἔχρα τὸ μαντεῖον, μετὰ Τροίας πλανώμενος ἄλωσιν. ἤριζον οὖν ἐπὶ πολὺ ἀλλήλοισι, καὶ Ἀμφίμαχος ὁ Λυκίων βασιλεὺς λύει τὴν ἔριν· ἐπὶ πόλεμον γὰρ ἐξιόντα Μόψος μὲν ἐκάλυεν ἦτταν προαγγέλλων, Κάλχας δ' ἐπέτρεπε νίκην σημαίνων, καὶ ἠττᾶται, καὶ Μόψος μὲν ἐπὶ μάλλον ἐτιμήθη, Κάλχας δ' ἑαυτὸν διεχρήσατο.

<sup>33</sup> For Calchas' death as a result of pain: Hes. fr.278, Lycophr. 426–430; as suicide: Conon *FGrHist* 26 F 1.6.



ratives yield a logic of succession by which a character pre-eminent in a given skill is challenged and surpassed by a less-known opponent. Calchas, whom Homer describes as the most powerful diviner of all (*Il.* 1.69–71) is replaced by Mopsus, not unlike Paphlagon, who—until Sausage Seller’s arrival—represents the demagogue par excellence in the eyes of Dêmos and is “to reign until another man viler than he appears (κρατεῖν, ἕως ἕτερος ἀνὴρ βδελυρότερος αὐτοῦ γένοιτο, 134–135).” Upon overthrowing Paphlagon, Sausage Seller shall become “the greatest man” (ἀνὴρ μέγιστος, 177–178; also the hyperbolic ὑπέρμεγας, 158, and μεγάλως, 172). In fact, Dêmos later praises Sausage Seller—presumably mockingly—as “victor” (καλλίνικε, 1254), “the monarch of Greece and of this land” (τὸν τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἡμῖν καὶ τῆς γῆς τῆσδε μόναρχον, 1330), and “sovereign (βασιλεῦ) of the Greeks” (1333). In other words, Aristophanes is at pains to highlight the political consequences of the divinatory duel between Paphlagon and Sausage Seller.

The affinity becomes more apparent still when Paphlagon utters his last words after the resolution of the *agôn*: “Roll me inside, utterly ill-starred! Begone and farewell, my crown; against my will do I abandon you” (1249–1251). We can assume that he lies prostrate on stage until removed from the agora to take up Sausage Seller’s trade. Paphlagon’s proclamation—marked by especial humiliation and chagrin—mirrors a detail in the various narratives about Calchas’ death, namely that he dies either of dejection (Strabo ἀποθανεῖν δὲ ὑπὸ λύπης, Strabo διὰ λύπην ἀποθανεῖν) or of despondence (Apollodorus ἀθυμήσας ἀπέθανε). The lives of the seers end in remarkably similar ways after the *agôn*.<sup>34</sup> Although Paphlagon does not literally die, he is rendered socially and politically impotent after Dêmos banishes him from the city as a φάρμακος (1405).

<sup>34</sup> See the comparable ending of the vanquished in Corinna’s contest of Cithaeron and Helicon, *PMG* 654.

Synoptic Table: Plot Structures of the *Certamina*

	Ar. <i>Eq.</i>	Strab. 14.1.27	Apollod. 6.2–4
Framing oracle revealed	“To hold power, until another champion arises who’s more disgusting than he, whereupon he perishes” (134–135).	“He was destined by fate to die when he should meet with a prophet superior to himself.”	“He had been told in an oracle that he would die if he met a better diviner than himself.”
Internal oracular <i>agôn</i>	Contest of hexametric oracles at 970 etc.	Divination contest concerning figs and sows.	“Mopsus challenged Calchas to a contest in the art of divination.”
Framing oracle resolved	Pythian oracle confirms identity of Paphlagon’s successor to fulfill oracle (1229–1247).	“Mopsus returned the true answer, and Calchas was mistaken, who died of vexation, according to some oracular prophecy.”	
Fate of vanquished	“Roll me inside, utterly ill-starred! Begone and farewell, my crown; against my will do I abandon you”(1249–1251).	“Calchas closed his eyes in the sleep of death ... he died of vexation.”	“Calchas was so dejected that he died.”

It is difficult to determine exactly how Calchas figured in the plot of the Sophoclean play or how Aristophanes may have reworked the tragic Calchas, but spectators were probably familiar with the story of the seer, who had a notable presence in the dramatic repertoire. Besides *Helen Claimed*, scholars have speculated that he may have appeared in other Sophoclean productions.<sup>35</sup> And even if he is not directly present on stage, the lengthy prophecies of Calchas are reported in Sophocles’ *Ajax* (750 ff.); the same occurs in the *parodos* of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (122–159), attesting to his pivotal role in the *Oresteia*

<sup>35</sup> In *Aias Lokros* and *Aichmalotides*. The evidence is admittedly thin; see A. Lardinois, “Broken Wisdom: Traces of the Adviser Figure in Sophocles’ Fragments,” in A. Sommerstein (ed.), *Shards from Kolonos: Studies in Sophoclean Fragments* (Bari 2003), esp. 27–28; H. Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles: Fragments* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1996) 25; W. M. Calder III, “A Reconstruction of Sophocles’ *Polyxena*,” *GRBS* 7 (1966) 31–56, at 35.

trilogy. Equally revealing is the passage from *Iphigenia in Tauris* in which Iphigenia inquires if Calchas has returned home (531–533, transl. D. Kovacs):

IΦ. Κάλχας τις ἦλθε μάντις ἐκ Τροίας πάλιν;

ΟΡ. ὄλωλεν, ὡς ἦν ἐν Μυκηναίοις λόγος.

IΦ. ὦ πότνι', ὡς εὖ. τί γὰρ ὁ Λαέρτου γόνος;

Iph. Did a prophet called Calchas return from Troy?

Or. He's dead, was the report in Mycenae.

Iph. Goodness, my thanks! What of Laertes' son?

The allusion to Calchas' death is curiously abbreviated, implying that Euripides assumed that some in his audience knew the details of the Calchas and Mopsus story. This is no surprise in light of Strabo's remark that myths about the contest were revered for their age (τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ τοιαῦτα). In short, Calchas was an essential figure in the Trojan cycle, and the myth about his *nostos* and demise had cultural currency contemporaneous with and shortly after the production of *Knights*.<sup>36</sup>

There is, however, more to the Calchas and Mopsus narrative to substantiate my interpretation. Apollodorus recounts another divinatory combat, one between the Argive seer Amphilocheus, who accompanied Calchas to Colophon, and Mopsus, with whom he founded the oracle at Mallus in Cilicia.<sup>37</sup> This Amphilocheus may have been Mopsus' half brother (Apollod. 3.94). Apollodorus links the contest of Amphilocheus and Mopsus to their struggle for political power: "As some say, they fought in individual combat over the kingdom (ὑπὲρ τῆς βασιλείας μονομαχοῦντες) and killed each other" (6.19). Strabo elaborates on this mythical divinatory contest (14.5.16):

Nearby, also, is Mallus, situated on a height, founded by Amphilocheus and Mopsus, the latter the son of Apollo and Manto, concerning whom many myths are told (πολλὰ μυθολογεῖται).

<sup>36</sup> On Cyclic material in drama see A. Sommerstein, "Tragedy and the Epic Cycle," in *The Greek Epic Cycle* 461–486.

<sup>37</sup> Herodotus tells us that he also founded Posideion (3.91.1).

And indeed I too have mentioned them in my account of Calchas and of the quarrel between Calchas and Mopsus about their powers of divination ... But according to the myth, the contest concerned, not only the power of divination (τῆς μαντικῆς), but also the sovereignty (τῆς ἀρχῆς); for they say that Mopsus and Amphilocheus went from Troy and founded Mallus, and that Amphilocheus then went away to Argos, and, being dissatisfied with affairs there, returned to Mallus, but that, being excluded from a share in the government (ἀποκλειόμενον δὲ τῆς κοινωνίας) there, he fought a duel (μονομαχίαν) with Mopsus, and that both fell in the duel and were buried in places that were not in sight of one another.

What we may clearly discern here is a correlation between political power and oracular skill. Strabo, who is possibly expanding upon Lycophron (*Alex.* 439–446), tells us that Amphilocheus, after a sojourn in Argos, wandered back to Mallus and was dissatisfied with his share of the kingship. He consequently challenged Mopsus to an oracular contest, which resulted in the death of both seers. Strabo states that many stories circulated (πολλὰ μυθολογεῖται) about Mopsus, and we have very early evidence from Asia Minor of Mopsus' twinned political and prophetic ambitions.<sup>38</sup> There is little reason to doubt that the duel between Calchas and Mopsus was similarly tied to contestation over political rule. After all, politics and seercraft were intrinsically bound up in the Greek imagination, and the myth of the diviners in this passage, with its stress on the inseparability of *archê* and *mantikê technê*, is hardly coy in intimating that political disputes can be resolved through divination.<sup>39</sup> *Knights* underscores the politics of divination, for it

<sup>38</sup> Scholars have identified Mopsus with the Lydian monarch Mukšuš in the Madduwattāš text: see J. Houwink ten Cate, *The Luwian Population Groups of Lycia and Cilicia Aspera* (Leiden 1961) 44–46, and Finkelberg, *Greeks and Pre-Greeks* 152, on the historical background of the Greek Mopsus.

<sup>39</sup> Legendary seers associated with political rule: Melampus in Pylos and Argos, Amphiaraus at Argos, Anius (king of Delos and priest of Apollo), and Munichus (king of the Molossians), among others. For foundation stories of Manto, the mother of Mopsus, see R. Mairs, “The Founder’s Shrine and

is precisely the outcome of an oracle contest that settles the quarrel between Paphlagon and Sausage Seller. To be sure, Paphlagon and Sausage Seller are not identical with Calchas and Mopsus (e.g., they do not actually produce oracles themselves), but the morphology of their oracle contest bears resemblance to the motif of feuding diviners.

*Concluding remarks*

The Calchas and Mopsus myth elucidates why Aristophanes structures *Knights* with oracle contests.<sup>40</sup> The final oracular episode between Paphlagon and Sausage Seller is not simply a parody of tragic recognition scenes, nor is it patterned solely on the establishment of divine order on Olympus. Aristophanes had strong political motives to have his antagonists compete with oracles: first, the topos of the selective interpretation of oracles conveniently summoned up Cleon's vicious and contemptible forms of politics. Second, the presumed abuse of divination by politicians to engineer political power at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war was of paramount concern in Aristophanes' day.<sup>41</sup> Last, anecdotes about historical and mythical diviners who reaped the benefits of public and military authority,<sup>42</sup> or who aided in the making of tyrants, would have magnified these suspicions.<sup>43</sup> Aristophanes thus found the

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the Foundation of Ai Khanoum," in N. Mac Sweeney (ed.), *Foundation Myths and Politics in Ancient Ionia* (Cambridge 2013) 104–118.

<sup>40</sup> K. Sidwell, *Aristophanes the Democrat* (Cambridge 2009) 155–165, argues that *Knights* is indebted to features of Eupolis' *Noumeniai*, but this fails to explain the divinatory dimension of the play.

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle* 26–28, 56, 96, for oracles quoted in political speeches: Dem. 19.297, 43.66, 21.52–54; also Dinarch. 1.78, 98.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Lampon, the friend of Pericles who led Athenians to colonize Thurii (Diod. 12.10.3–4, schol. *Clouds* 332) and was an oath-swearer for the Peace of Nicias (Thuc. 5.19.2, 5.24.1).

<sup>43</sup> See Dillery, in *Mantike* 196; Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle* 127; K. Riggsby, "Teiresias as Magus in *Oedipus Rex*," *GRBS* 17 (1976) 109–114. See also Bowden 194 on the Trygaeus and Hierocles scene in *Peace*

popular myth of Calchas and Mopsus suitable to address acute contemporary anxieties about the intentions of politicians and diviners alike in his most virulently satirical of plays.

The doyens of political allegories and mythological burlesque in Old Comedy were arguably Cratinus and Hermippus, who often cast political figures as mythic heroes. Aristophanes was no less fond of employing the strategy to lampoon contemporary political advisors. But whereas Cratinus irreverently features a divine figure to satirize a contemporary politician—for instance, Pericles underlying the character of Dionysus in *Dionysalexandros* or molding Zeus to Pericles in *Nemesis*—Aristophanes in *Knights* repurposes this theme, assimilating miscreants like Sausage Seller and Paphlagon to epic prophets. That is, he alters the hexameter epic *certamen* by casting crooks and demagogues in roles traditionally reserved for kings, poets, and prophets. He makes the antagonists speak the “language of heroes”—a marked discourse comprising the mantic and oracular—in order to foreground their moral baseness.<sup>44</sup>

The tendency to emphasize foreign birth or ancestry of the lower orders was a comic staple, and this mode of *ad hominem* attack is no less operative in *Knights*. Calchas and Mopsus were born to noble families, the latter, according to one tradition, sired by Apollo and Manto (the daughter of Teiresias), while other myths insisted that he was a scion of Ares himself (Hes. [Sc.] 181). Amphilochus was the son of Amphiaraus, the king of Argos to whom Zeus granted oracular talent. In contrast, Sausage Seller proclaims that he is of bad stock (178–179, 185–187), and Aristophanes devotes some lines (447–449) to remind that Cleon belongs to a new and undistinguished breed of

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(1063–1100) for public oracle competitions in classical Athens.

<sup>44</sup> R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca 1989); G. Nagy, “The Language of Heroes as Mantic Poetry: Hypokrisis in Homer,” in M. Reichel and A. Rengakos (eds.), *Epea Pteroenta* (Stuttgart 2002) 141–150. Collins, *Master of the Game* 3, opines that participants in poetic contests were “notably those of the most educated circles.”

politicians (unlike his predecessor Pericles).<sup>45</sup> To represent the upstarts Paphlagon and Sausage Seller as purveyors of oracle books thus amplifies their undistinguished parentage.

*Quellenforschung* in Aristophanes is problematic, and a single play could simultaneously allude to several motifs from different older texts, narratives, and performances; far from being incompatible, their combined force impugned politicians in particularly effective ways. Thus, my aim in connecting *Knights* to Calchas and Mopsus is not to foreclose the possibility of a Hesiodic or tragic source-text behind the *agôn* motif. To search for a single line of influence is fraught where no explicit citation, emphatic allusions, or unequivocal lexical similarities to another text can be discerned. Tragic *anagnorisis*, the Hesiodic succession of the gods, and the divination contest of Calchas and Mopsus comprise only some formative sources on which Aristophanes drew, most of which crossed generic boundaries and ultimately derived from a much older matrix of myth. Aristophanes' engagement with both tragedy and epic was subtle and fluid, in keeping with the intellectual and aesthetic sophistication of his comedies and those of rival dramatists.

It is true that the critique of the demagogue does not depend entirely on recognizing the equivalencies of *Knights* and the legendary divinatory contest. But the cognoscenti who detected the parallels could make the most of Aristophanes' bold and layered caricature of Paphlagon as slave, demagogue, and diviner, a complex characterization that brings out the dangers that politicians of this sort posed to the political order.<sup>46</sup> The

<sup>45</sup> Note that the knights are called ἄνδρες ἀγαθοί (225) and καλοὶ καγαθοί (735, 738). On social status in Attic comedy: J. Henderson, "The *Demos* and Comic Competition," in J. J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?* (Princeton 1990) 279–284. For a comparison of Cleon and Pericles see V. Wohl, *Love among the Ruins: The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens* (Princeton 2002) 73–123.

<sup>46</sup> For the issues see M. Revermann, "The Competence of Theatre Audiences in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Athens," *JHS* 126 (2006) 99–124; Farmer, *Tragedy on the Comic Stage* 67–113.

range of aesthetic and interpretive possibilities offered by such diverse subtexts—including the historical, which was highlighted in the first part of this article—delighted the more demanding theatergoers who expected innovation of myth but also the reworking of more conventional plots and stock-scenes from previous performances.

I began by considering oracles in the play's historical context to show that Aristophanes based his comic fantasy and unsympathetic portrayal of Cleon upon realities that spectators would have recognized. I then argued that the dueling diviners motif is front and center for the literary and political agenda of *Knights*. Beyond the obvious poetological allusions to tragedy in the play (e.g. the parody of Eur. *Alc.* 177 at 1250–1252 and his repeated quotation of the *Telephus*), Aristophanes clings to oracles and to the contest of Calchas and Mopsus to structure entire scenes and to articulate the final *agôn* episode. Although not quite a play that derives its plot strictly or entirely from myth, *Knights* is noteworthy in its reshaping of tragic and epic formulations of myth and mythological themes to underscore Cleon's illegitimacy. *Knights* is neither strictly a 'political' nor a 'mythological' play, but indeed both, for Aristophanes exploits the myth of Calchas and Mopsus to impugn political leaders.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Scholars traditionally distinguish Aristophanes' political and mythological plays, with 415 B.C.E. often considered a pivotal moment in the transition: e.g. Henderson, *Aristophanes* I 8, and "Comedy in the Fourth Century: Politics and Domesticity," in *Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy* 183. H.-G. Nesselrath, "Myth, Parody, and Comic Plots: The Birth of Gods and Middle Comedy," in G. W. Dobrov (ed.), *Beyond Aristophanes* (Atlanta 1995) 1–27, at 2–3, and A. M. Bowie, "Myth and Ritual in the Rivals of Aristophanes," in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London 2000) 317–340, at 321–322, argue that myth took on a significant role for comic productions only in Old Comedy's final years. E. Csapo, "From Aristophanes to Menander? Genre Transformation in Greek Comedy," in M. Depew and D. Obbink (eds.), *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2000) 115–133, at 116, observes that this evolutionary narrative represents the (tendentious) byproduct of Aristotelian and late Hellenistic theorization of



To be sure, the political aspects of the play are central, for even in antiquity *Knights* was perceived as the demagogue-comedy par excellence, imitated, for instance, by Eupolis in his lampoon of Hyperbolus in *Marikas* (421).<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that greater sensitivity to Aristophanes' engagement with his rich mythological heritage nuances our understanding of one of his principal means to denounce the politics of post-Periclean Athens.<sup>49</sup>

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ancient comedy. The uneven survival of Aristophanes' plays over the longue durée (we possess five of ten plays from 427 to 421, but only one of ten or twelve from 409 to 400) should argue against such schematic claims.

<sup>48</sup> Much to the annoyance of Aristophanes (*Clouds* 549–59). See A. Sommerstein, "Platon, Eupolis and the 'Demagogue-comedy,'" in *The Rivals of Aristophanes* 437–451, for *Knights* and its emulators.

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