

Warfare and Society in Ancient Greece

Seminar 3 Aristophanes' *Knights*

Aristophanes composed *Knights* for the Lenaia festival of 424, obtaining the first prize. The comedy satirizes the radicalization of Athenian politics in the post-plague period.

Two slaves, Nicias and Demosthenes, named after two of the leading generals of the time, run from the house of Demos, their master, cursing their fellow slave, Cleon, as the cause of their troubles. They inform the audience that Cleon has wheedled his way into Demos confidence and they accuse him of misusing his privileged position for the purpose of extortion and corruption.

Having no idea how to solve their problems, they pinch some wine from the house, the taste of which inspires them to an even bolder theft - a set of oracles that Cleon has always refused to let anyone else see. On reading these stolen oracles, they learn that Cleon is one of a number of scoundrels destined to rule the city and that it is his fate to be replaced by a sausage seller. By the most extraordinary of coincidences, a sausage seller passes by at that very moment, and Demosthenes informs him of his destiny. The sausage seller is not convinced at first but Demosthenes points out the myriads of people in the theatre and he assures him that his skills with sausages are all that is needed to govern them. Cleon's suspicions meanwhile rushes from the house and immediately finds an empty wine bowl and he loudly accuses the others of treason. Demosthenes calls upon the knights of Athens for assistance and a Chorus of them charges into the theatre. They converge on Cleon in military formation under instructions from their leader:

Hit him, hit him, hit the villain hateful to the cavalry,
Tax-collecting, all-devouring monster of a lurking thief!
Villain, villain! I repeat it, I repeat it constantly,
With good reason since this thief reiterates his villainy!

Cleon is given rough handling and the Chorus leader accuses him of manipulating the political and legal system for personal gain. Cleon bellows to the audience for help and the Chorus urges the sausage-seller to shout him. There follows a shouting match between Cleon and the sausage seller with vulgar boasts and vainglorious threats on both sides as each man strives to demonstrate that he is a more shameless and unscrupulous orator than the other. The knights proclaim the sausage-seller the winner of the argument and Cleon then rushes off to the Boule to denounce them all on a charge of treason. The sausage seller sets off in pursuit and the action pauses for a parabasis, during which the Chorus steps forward to address the audience on behalf of the author. The knights then deliver a speech in praise of the older generation, the men who made Athens great, and this is followed by a speech in praise of horses that performed heroically in a recent amphibious assault on Corinth, whither they are imagined to have rowed in gallant style.

Returning to the stage, the sausage seller reports to the knights on his battle with Cleon for control of the Council - he has outbid Cleon for the support of the councillors with offers of meals at the state's expense. Indignant at his defeat, Cleon rushes onto the stage and challenges the sausage-seller to submit their differences to Demos. The sausage seller accepts the challenge. They call Demos outdoors and compete with each other in flattering him like rivals for the affections of a lover. He agrees to hear them debating their differences and he takes up his position on the Pnyx (here represented possibly as a bench). The sausage-seller makes some serious accusations in the first half of the debate: Cleon is indifferent to the war-time sufferings of ordinary people, he has used the war as an opportunity for corruption and he prolongs the war out of fear that he will be prosecuted when peace returns. Demos is won over by these arguments and he spurns Cleon's wheedling appeals for sympathy. Thereafter the sausage seller's accusations become increasingly absurd: Cleon is accused of waging a campaign against buggery in order to stifle opposition (because all the best orators are buggers) and he is said to have brought down the price of silphium so that jurors who bought it would suffocate each other with their flatulence. Cleon loses the debate but he doesn't lose hope and there are two further contests in which he competes with the sausage seller for Demos favour - a) the reading of oracles flattering to the people; b) a race to see which of them can best serve pampered Demos' every need. The sausage seller wins each contest by outdoing Cleon in shamelessness. Cleon makes one last effort to retain his privileged position in the household - he possesses an oracle that describes his successor and he questions the sausage seller to see if he matches the description in all its vulgar details. The sausage seller does match the description. In tragic dismay,

Cleon at last accepts his fate and he surrenders his authority to the sausage-seller. Demos asks the sausage seller for his name and we learn that it is Agoracritus, confirming his lowly origin. The actors depart and the Chorus treats us to another parabasis.

The knights step forward and they advise us that it is honourable to mock dishonourable people. They proceed to mock Aripkrades, an Athenian with a perverse appetite for female secretions. Next they recount an imaginary conversation between some respectable ships that have refused to carry the war to Carthage because the voyage was proposed by Hyperbolus, a man they despise. Then Agoracritus returns to the stage, calling for respectful silence and announcing a new development - he has rejuvenated Demos with a good boiling (just as if he were a piece of meat). The doors of Demos house open to reveal impressive changes in Demos appearance - he is now the very image of glorious 'violet-crowned' Athens, as once commemorated in a song by Pindar. Agoracritus presents his transformed master with the *Peacetreaties* - beautiful girls that Cleon had been keeping locked up in order to prolong the war. Demos invites Agoracritus to a banquet at the town hall and the entire cast exits in good cheer - all except Cleon, who is required to sell sausages at the city gate as punishment for his crimes.

Knights is one of the most telling documents of the plights caused by the Peloponnesian War on the population of Athens and of its deep social and political consequences. Read the following passages then try to address these questions which will be discussed in the course of the seminar:

1. How will the sausage-seller become rich? What do Demosthenes and Nicias promise him?
2. Why does the sausage-seller mention Cleon's tricks at Argos?
3. What are the main themes of the parabasis [item vi]?
4. How does the sausage-seller describe the foreign policies of Cleon?



i. Aristophanes, *Knights* 40-72

Demosthenes

[40] I will begin then. We have a very brutal master, a perfect glutton for beans, and most bad-tempered; it's Demos of the Pnyx, an intolerable old man and half deaf. The beginning of last month he bought a slave, a Paphlagonian tanner, [45] an arrant rogue, the incarnation of calumny. This man of leather knows his old master thoroughly; he plays the fawning cur, flatters, cajoles, wheedles, and dupes him at will with little scraps of leavings, which he allows him to get. [50] "Dear Demos," he will say, "try a single case and you will have done enough; then take your bath, eat, swallow and devour; here are three obols." Then the Paphlagonian filches from one of us what we have prepared and makes a present of it to our old man. The other day I [55] had just kneaded a Spartan cake at Pylos, the cunning rogue came behind my back, sneaked it and offered the cake, which was my invention, in his own name. He keeps us at a distance and suffers none but himself to wait upon the master; [60] when Demos is dining, he keeps close to his side with a thong in his hand and puts the orators to flight. He keeps singing oracles to him, so that the old man now thinks of nothing but the Sibyl. Then, when he sees him thoroughly obfuscated, he uses all his cunning and piles up lies and calumnies against the household; then [65] we are scourged and the Paphlagonian runs about among the slaves to demand contributions with threats and gathers them in with both hands. He will say, "You see how I have had Hylas beaten! Either content me or die at once!" We are forced to give, for otherwise [70] the old man tramples on us and makes us crap forth all our body contains. *To Nicias* There must be an end to it, friend. Let us see! what can be done? Who will get us out of this mess?

ii. Aristophanes, *Knights* 131-174

Demosthenes

[155] First put down all your gear, then worship the earth and the gods.

Sausage-Seller

Done. What is the matter?

Demosthenes

Happiness, riches, power; to-day you have nothing, to-morrow you will have all, oh! chief of happy Athens.

Sausage-Seller

[160] Why not leave me to wash my tripe and to sell my sausages instead of making game of me?

Demosthenes

Oh! the fool! Your tripe! Do you see these tiers of people?

Sausage-Seller

Yes.

Demosthenes

You shall be master to them all, governor [165] of the market, of the harbors, of the Pnyx; you shall trample the Senate under foot, be able to cashier the generals, load them with fetters, throw them into gaol, and you will fornicate in the Prytaneum.

Sausage-Seller

What! I?

Demosthenes

You, without a doubt. But you do not yet see all the glory awaiting you. Stand on your basket [170] and look at all the islands that surround Athens.

Sausage-Seller

I see them. What then?

Demosthenes

Look at the storehouses and the shipping.

Sausage-Seller

Yes, I am looking.

Demosthenes

Exists there a mortal more blest than you? Furthermore, turn your right eye towards Caria and your left toward Carthage!

iii. Aristophanes, Knights 247-265

Leader of the Chorus

Strike, strike the villain, who has spread confusion amongst the ranks of the Knights, this public robber, this yawning gulf of plunder, this devouring Charybdis, this villain, this villain, this villain! I cannot say the word too often, [250] for he is a villain a thousand times a day. Come, strike, drive, hurl him over and crush him to pieces; hate him as we hate him; stun him with your blows and your shouts. And beware lest he escape you; he knows the way Eucrates took straight to a bran sack for concealment.

Cleon

[255] Oh! veteran Heliasts, brotherhood of the three obols, whom I fostered by bawling at random, help me; I am being beaten to death by rebels.

Leader of the Chorus

And justly too; you devour the public funds that all should share in; you treat the treasury officials like the fruit of the fig tree, squeezing them to find [260] which are still green or more or less ripe; and, when you find a simple and timid one, you force him to come from the Chersonese, then you seize him by the middle, throttle him by the neck, while you twist his shoulder back; he falls and you devour him. Besides, you know very well how to select from among the citizens those who are as meek as lambs, [265] rich, without guile and loathers of lawsuits.

iv. Aristophanes, Knights 323-332

Chorus

singing

Have you not always shown that blatant [325] impudence, which is the sole strength of our orators? You push it so far, that you, the head of the State, dare to milk the purses of the opulent aliens and, at sight of you, the son of Hippodamus melts into tears. But here is another man who gives me pleasure, for he is a much greater rascal than you; [330] he will overthrow you; 'tis easy to see, that he will beat you in roguery, in brazenness and in clever turns.

v. Aristophanes, Knights 450-481

Cleon

[450] You are an impostor.

Sausage-Seller

And you are a rogue.

He strikes Cleon with a sausage.

Chorus

Hit him hard.

Cleon

Alas! The conspirators are murdering me!

Chorus

to the Sausage-Seller

Hit him! Hit him with all your might! Bruise his belly and lash him with your guts [455] and your tripe! Punish him with both hands! *Cleon sinks beneath the blows.*

Chorus

Oh! vigorous assailant and intrepid heart! See how you have totally routed him in this duel of abuse, so that to us and to the citizens you seem the saviour of the city. [460] How shall I give tongue to my joy and praise you sufficiently?

Cleon

Recovering his wits

Ah! by Demeter! I was not ignorant of this plot and these machinations that were being forged and nailed and put together against me.

Chorus

to the Sausage-Seller

Look out, look out! Come, outfence him with some wheelwright slang.

Sausage-Seller

[465] His tricks at Argos do not escape me. Under pretence of forming an alliance with the Argives, he is hatching a plot with the Lacedaemonians there; and I know why the bellows are blowing and the metal that is on the anvil; it's the question of the prisoners.

Chorus

[470] Well done! Forge on, if he be a wheelwright.

Sausage-Seller

And there are men at Sparta who are hammering the iron with you; but neither gold nor silver nor prayers nor anything else shall impede my denouncing your trickery to the Athenians.

Cleon

[475] As for me, I hasten to the Senate to reveal your plotting, your nightly gatherings in the city, your trafficking with the Medes and with the Great King, and all you are foraging for in Boeotia.

Sausage-Seller

[480] What price then is paid for forage by Boeotians?

Cleon

Oh! by Heracles! I will tan your hide.

VI. Aristophanes, *Knights* 551-614

First Semi-Chorus

singing

Poseidon, god of the racing steeds, I salute you, you who delight in their neighing and in the resounding clatter of their brass-shod hoofs, god of the swift [555] galleys, which, loaded with mercenaries, cleave the seas with their azure beaks, god of the equestrian contests, in which young rivals, eager for glory, ruin themselves for the sake of distinction with their chariots in the arena, come and direct our chorus; Poseidon with the trident of gold, you, [560] who reign over the dolphins, who are worshipped at Sunium and at Geraestus beloved of Phormio, and dear to the whole city above all the immortals, I salute you!

Leader of First Semi-Chorus

[565] Let us sing the glory of our forefathers; ever victors, both on land and sea, they merit that Athens, rendered famous by these, her worthy sons, should write their deeds upon the sacred peplus. As soon as they saw the enemy, they at once sprang at him without ever [570] counting his strength. Should one of them fall in the conflict he would shake off the dust, deny his mishap and begin the struggle anew. Not one of these generals of old time would have asked Cleaenetus to be fed at the cost of the State; [575] but our present men refuse to fight, unless they get the honors of the Prytaneum and precedence in their seats. As for us, we place our valor gratuitously at the service of Athens and of her gods; our only hope is that, should peace ever put a term to our toils, [580] you will not grudge us our long, scented hair nor our delicate care for our toilet.

Second Semi-Chorus

singing

Oh! Pallas, guardian of Athens, you, who reign over the most pious city, the most powerful, the [585] richest in warriors and in poets, hasten to my call, bringing in your train our faithful ally in all our expeditions and combats, Victory, who smiles on our choruses [590] and fights with us against our rivals. Oh! goddess! manifest yourself to our sight; this day more than ever we deserve that you should ensure our triumph.

Leader of Second Semi-Chorus

[595] We will sing likewise the exploits of our steeds! they are worthy of our praises; in what invasions, what fights have I not seen them helping us! But especially admirable were they, when they bravely leapt upon the galleys, [600] taking nothing with them but a coarse wine, some cloves of garlic and onions; despite this, they nevertheless seized the sweeps just like men, curved their backs over the thwarts and shouted, "Hippapai! Give way! Come, all pull together! Come, come! How! Samphoras! Are you not rowing?" They rushed down upon the coast of Corinth, and the youngest [605] hollowed out beds in the sand with their hoofs or went to fetch coverings; instead of luzern, they had no food but crabs, which they caught on the strand and even in the sea; so that Theorus causes a Corinthian crab to say, "'Tis a cruel fate, oh Poseidon neither my deep hiding-places, [610] whether on land or at sea, can help me to escape the Knights."

Leader of the Chorus

Welcome, oh, dearest and bravest of men! How distracted I have been during your absence! But here you are back, safe and sound. Tell us about the fight you have had.

vii. Aristophanes, *Knights* 777-823

Sausage-Seller

There is nothing so wonderful in all that, Demos; I will do as much; I will thief the bread of others to serve up to you. No, he has neither love for you nor kindly feeling; [780] his only care is to warm himself with your wood, and I will prove it. You, who, sword in hand, saved Attica from the Median yoke at Marathon; you, whose glorious triumphs we love to extol unceasingly, look, he cares little whether he sees you seated uncomfortably upon a stone; whereas I, I bring you this cushion, which I have sewn with my own hands. [785] Rise and try this nice soft seat. Did you not put enough strain on your bottom at Salamis?

He gives Demos the cushion; Demos sits on it.

Demos

Who are you then? Can you be of the race of Harmodius? Upon my faith, that is nobly done and like a true friend of Demos.

Cleon

Petty flattery to prove him your goodwill!

Sausage-Seller

But you have caught him with even smaller baits!

Cleon

[790] > Never had Demos a defender or a friend more devoted than myself; on my head, on my life, I swear it!

Sausage-Seller

You pretend to love him and for eight years you have seen him housed in casks, in crevices and dovecots, where he is blinded with the smoke, and you lock him in without pity; [795] Archeptolemus brought peace and you tore it to ribbons; the envoys who come to propose a truce you drive from the city with kicks in their arses.

Cleon

The purpose of this is that Demos may rule over all the Greeks; for the oracles predict that, if he is patient, he must one day sit as judge in Arcadia at five obols per day. Meanwhile, I will nourish him, [800] look after him and, above all, I will ensure to him his three obols.

Sausage-Seller

No, little you care for his reigning in Arcadia, it's to pillage and impose on the allies at will that you reckon; you wish the war to conceal your rogueries as in a mist, that Demos may see nothing of them, and harassed by cares, may only depend on yourself for his bread. [805] But if ever peace is restored to him, if ever he returns to his lands to comfort himself once more with good cakes, to greet his cherished olives, he will know the blessings you have kept him out of, even though paying him a salary; and, filled with hatred and rage, he will rise, burning with desire to vote against you. You know this only too well; it is for this you rock him to sleep with your lies.

Cleon

[810] Is it not shameful, that you should dare thus to calumniate me before Demos, me, to whom Athens, I swear it by Demeter, already owes more than it ever did to Themistocles?

Sausage-Seller

declaiming

Oh! citizens of Argos, do you hear what he says?

to Cleon

You dare to compare yourself to Themistocles, who found our city half empty and left it full to overflowing, [815] who one day gave us the Piraeus for dinner, and added fresh fish to all our usual meals. You, on the contrary, you, who compare yourself with Themistocles, have only sought to reduce our city in size, to shut it within its walls, to chant oracles to us. And Themistocles goes into exile, while you gorge yourself on the most excellent fare

Cleon

[820] Oh! Demos! Am I compelled to hear myself thus abused, and merely because I love you?

Demos

Silence! stop your abuse! All too long have I been your dupe.

Sausage-Seller

Ah! my dear little Demos, he is a rogue who has played you many a scurvy trick;