

The purpose of this paper will be to show that Aristophanes persistently stages stichomythic verbal duels of a pseudo-improvised quality which correspond to what literary critics, socio-linguists and anthropologists have termed 'flyting' and/or 'capping'. By approaching these sequences as if they were forms of improvised 'flyting' or 'capping' contests we can recover a poetics of witty repartee and creative self-assertion which we would otherwise miss. However, at the same time as these sequences speak to and celebrate an oral culture of improvised duelling in Athens' streets, festivals and symposia, I also aim to show that Aristophanes 'thematizes' flyting and capping as querulous preludes to violence, as disfigurements of 'proper' democratic public discourse and as displacements of measured debate and cross-examination. Thus Aristophanes is more of a champion of serious rational discourse than critics would often allow.

By arguing that Aristophanes exploits an existing tradition of poetic duelling, I am building on recent work aimed at recovering 'capping' as a feature of sympotic poetry and drinking songs (Stehle 1997; Collins 2004), not to mention work which sets out to analyse the cultural meaning of duelling genres in contexts as diverse as Homeric epic, American inner cities, rural Crete and post-colonial Sumatra (Martin 1989; Parks 1990; Kochman 1983; Herzfeld 1985; Bowen 1989). My reading of Aristophanes as finding spaces for both aesthetic celebration and social critique of 'tit-for-tat' verbal duelling draws on, and yet diverges from, recent work on the nature and role of Aristophanic Comedy in Athens (e.g. Hubbard 1991; O' Regan 1992; Rosen and Marks 1999; Silk 2000; Halliwell 2004).

In Aristophanes' *Knights* we will see that the witty and metaphorically sophisticated flyting and capping duels between Paphlagon and Sausage-seller are nevertheless used to characterize the oratory and politics of these *agorai* as disfigured versions of democracy's forensic and deliberative idioms (see 284-302, 351-381, 441-481). In *Clouds*, the Chorus intervene to prevent the flyting and capping stichomythia between Better and Worse Arguments from descending into violence and to force them to engage in a more deliberative idiom (907-38). This sequence and its affects forge a kinship between sophistic discourse and anti-social verbal duelling. But this close relationship is presented in such a way that the audience are able to see it as breakable rather than inevitable: if only Pheidippides had witnessed the *agōn* proper and not its wrangling prelude; if only sophistic disputation could loosen its anchorage in the (anti-)ethics of 'victory-at-all-costs' whose formal embodiment is, of course, capping and flyting. In conclusion, I will briefly present two more Aristophanic duelling sequences which are headed for violence, are interrupted and are then juxtaposed with more legalistic and deliberative forms of debate and cross-examination (*Frogs* 830-59 and *Thesmo.* 551-73).

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