

Scholarly *communis opinio* on the inclusion of divination and oracles in Aristophanes' *Knights* (424 BCE) generally tends toward an explanation that highlights either the playwright's personal distrust of diviners (Mikalson 1983) or the possible increasing mainstream skepticism of chresmological practices in the late fifth-century (Flower 2008). While such analyses might yield interesting results as to the diachronic transformations of religious authority vis-à-vis the ancient Greek popular imagination, I proceed *without* the assumption that Aristophanes and his audience challenged (and therefore parodied) the validity of oracles and the oracular system as it was normatively used in the decision making process of classical Athens. I suggest, rather, that the fundamental question concerns *who* can speak on behalf of religious authority, especially when the *demos* and its livelihood are implicated.

This paper proceeds along two avenues. First, I situate the play in its historical and topical context, paying close attention to the way in which the employment of divinatory and religious practices depicted in the drama diverge from their normative functions in fifth-century Athens. When Paphlagon (Cleon) gains popularity and later defends himself with Bacis' oracles, he poses a threat to the appropriate and recognized distribution of religious and political authority among different members in the polis. Cleon's abuse of religious institutions to boost his political career reflects the rise of self-regarding demagogues who employ divination to acquire and maintain personal power during the last quarter of the 5th century, "the golden age of chresmologues" (to borrow a phrase by Flaceliere).

The second part of the paper embarks on a literary discussion, building upon Ralph Rosen's recent *TAPA* article on *Frogs* (2005), in which he argues for an affinity of the *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* to the debate between Euripides and Aeschylus. I suggest a striking structural resemblance between *Knights* and the so-called "Contest of Calchas and Mopsos," a myth of the *nostoi* tradition derived from the Cyclic Epics and preserved for us in Apollodoros' *Bibliotheka* and Strabo's *Geographica*. In particular, I examine how Apollo's oracle (which predicts Cleon's impending demise) forms a ring composition that encapsulates the entire play (117-210, 1229-1252), and how the oracular contest between Paphlagon and Sausage-Seller plays out and verifies this overarching oracle (997-1089). It is, in fact, a *certamen* scene (a trope otherwise reserved for wise men, diviners, and poets) much like the mythical oracular contest between Calchas and Mopsos, which confirms the macro-oracle that frames the plot and which prophesies the defeat and death of the renowned Argive seer. Having established this link, I suggest that a fuller understanding of Aristophanes' interplay of contemporary historical events and mythological material from the Cyclic Epics helps explain why he structures *Knights* with oracles.