

COMBATIVE CAPPING IN ARISTOPHANIC COMEDY¹

Vla. Moron!

Est. That's the idea, let's abuse each other.

They turn, increase the space between them, turn again and face each other.

Vla. Moron!

Est. Vermin!

Vla. Abortion!

Est. Morpion!

Vla. Sewer-rat!

Est. Curate!

Vla. Cretin!

Est. (*with finality*) Crritic!

Vla. Oh!

He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.

(Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)

1. Introduction and summary of the argument

Beckett's verbal duel is reminiscent of Aristophanic routines between two characters in which the name of the game seems to be to cap the boast, threat or insult hurled by the opposing character. Several recent studies have pointed to the importance of capping to the character and meaning of Aristophanic comedy. Ian Ruffell shows that verbal routines in which a joke is elaborated and capped by another are integral to Aristophanes' comic mode.² He has also argued that Old Comedy is partly constituted through a generic requirement that each play deploy an intertextual rhetoric of innovation in which the playwright parades the way in which he has ingeniously capped the plots, routines and conceits of a rival's previous offering.³ Derek Collins has demonstrated that some of the social and stylistic dynamics of Aristophanic stichomythic and antilabic capping routines have been misunderstood due to a lack of awareness that

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² See Ruffell (1999) 167–259. See also Palmer (1987) 97–113 on 'topping' in silent cinema.

³ Ruffell (2002).

such routines are part-and-parcel of a wider, cross-generic tradition of performed verse capping.⁴ He also shows that this central mode of poetic competition in archaic, classical, Hellenistic and Roman imperial Greece can be usefully illuminated by ethnographic and anthropological comparisons.⁵ Several scholars have used *Wasps* 1222–49 as crucial evidence for appreciating the prominence and sociological significance of improvised verse-capping games of *skolia* (drinking-songs) in late fifth-century Athens.⁶ Ralph Rosen argues that the various poetry duels which take place between Euripides and Aeschylus in *Frogs* are shaped by, and yet invert, the song-contest tradition embodied by Alcidamas' *Certamen*: again, the dynamics of verse capping are central to his important reading.⁷

In this essay, I want to build on this recent work in the following ways. First, I will argue that the Cretan *mandinadhes* tradition analysed by the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld offers us an instructive example of the need for care when using ethnographic comparison in the analysis of Aristophanic capping duels. Second, I will show that Aristophanes' interest in combative capping is not just influenced by regularised *verse* forms of capping contest. He is also influenced by the largely sympotic and prosaic game of *eikasmoi* ('likenesses'). This game's capping elements as evidenced by prose texts and their use in Aristophanes' *Wasps* and *Birds* have not yet been fully appreciated: I will document them here. Furthermore, there are non-verse speech-acts of combative capping banter which Greek literature associates with the contexts of the symposium (drinking-party), *deipnon* (dinner-party) and agora (market-place).⁸ These prosaic and non-regularised examples are not normally linked to capping exchanges in Aristophanes but it is profitable to do so. It emerges from this material and passages from Aristophanic comedy itself that the playwright is ambiguous about the social and moral connotations of combative capping discourses, whether they be poetic or prosaic. I will then show that the close association of combative capping repartee with the agora, symposia and *deipna* is an important influence upon, and thematic concern in, Aristophanes' *Knights*. This play's ambiguous use of combative capping need not, as some have claimed, prevent the play from having something serious to say about Cleonic politics and its rhetoric. I will then argue for an association between agoraic-cum-sympotic capping and sophistic discourse in *Clouds* which has implications for the way we read the play's overall moral tenor. Finally, I will briefly show that a fragment of Aristophanes' *Banqueters* also illustrates the way in which Aristophanes uses the creative poetics of real-life capping as a means of satirising sophistic and rhetorical discourse.

⁴ Collins (2004) 3–60.

⁵ Collins (2004) 63–134 and 231–5.

⁶ See West (1974) 14–18; Vetta (1983) 119–31; Stehle (1997) 6–7, 221; Collins (2004) 84–134.

⁷ Rosen (2004). I have not been able to take much account of Rosen (2007) because it was only published in the final stages of revising this article for publication.

⁸ I say 'non-verse' because they are clearly examples of conversational banter. But in some cases, they are presented in the verse format of comedy or Machon's *Chreiae*.

2. Aristophanic capping and an ethnographic comparison

At the level of poetic form, some verbal duels in Aristophanes display features of stylistic balance, parallel structures of vocabulary and syntax and a requirement for capping which are also found in many diverse improvised oral genres of verse contest and antagonistic speechifying that have been witnessed throughout the world.⁹ To illustrate this form of capping – and with no apologies for drawing on Michael Silk’s fine translation of the first pair of lines – here is a brief segment of the line-for-line verbal duel which takes place between Better Argument and Worse Argument in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (908–13):¹⁰

Ητ. τυφογέρων εἰ κἀνάρμοστος.
 Κρ. καταπύγων εἰ κἀναίσχυντος.
 Ητ. ῥόδα μ’ εἴρηκας.
 Κρ. καὶ βωμολόχος.
 Ητ. κρίνεσι στεφανοῖς.
 Κρ. καὶ πατραλοίας.
 Ητ. χρυσῶ πάττων μ’ οὐ γιγνώσκεις.
 Κρ. οὐ δῆτα πρὸ τοῦ γ’, ἀλλὰ μολύβδω.

Worse: You old twit, something’s gone inside your brain.
 Better: You crude git, someone’s cock’s inside your bum.
 Worse: You shower me with roses ...
 Better: *And* you’re a clown !
 Worse: ... and garland me with lilies!
 Better: *And* you’re a parricide!
 Worse: Don’t you know those names are gold?
 Better: They were lead in days of old.

One can compare this with an improvised verse confrontation – in the traditional poetic form of the *mandinadhes* – between two men as recorded and interpreted in Michael Herzfeld’s seminal account of the performance of masculinity in Cretan mountain communities:

⁹ For the Cretan capping duels based on the form of the *mandinadhes* see Herzfeld (1985a) 141–7, (1985b). On rap contests and their parent street-genres of ‘sounding’ and ‘playing the dozens’ see Abrahams (1970); Labov (1972a) and (1972b); Mitchell-Kernan (1972); Kochman (1983); Halama (1996); Page (1996). For fascinating and accessible footage of real freestyle rap contests see the special feature on the DVD edition of Eminem’s movie *8 Mile*. For Welsh poetry contests based around the unique Celtic concept of the *cynghanedd* (a tightly-specified structural requirement involving rhyme and alliteration) see Lloyd (1985). For comparison between Gangsta rap and ancient Greek poetry see Rosen and Marks (1999). On a variety of duelling genres of speech, drama and performance in Caribbean cultures see Abrahams (1983). For the Turkish adolescent distich duelling see Dundes, Leach and Ozkok (1972); Dundes (1987) 82–117. On the fascinating impact of colonial and post-colonial centralisation on the nature of Sumatran poetic duelling see Collins (2004) 233–4 (referencing Bowen 1989).

¹⁰ See Silk (2000) 127.

Often a clever verse riposte serves to restrain physical violence ... [I]n the following example, an enamoured young man exclaims:

Akhi ke na iksera ekni pou mou meli,
 Ah! if-only-I-knew her who is-in-my-future,
Na tin daizo zakhari, karidhia me to meli.
 I'd feed her sugar, [and] walnuts with honey.

The youthful outburst provoked a sardonic retort:

Ma to Theo katekho tine, ekini pou sou meli:
 By God, I know her – the one who's-in-your-future:
Stou Skoufadhonikou tin avli tin ekhoune dhemeni!
 In Skoufadonikos' yard they have her tied up!¹¹

The Aristophanic passage and the Cretan example share the implication of a game where each participant in the duel must provide ripostes. The ripostes must linguistically and stylistically parallel the previous line(s) and yet go one better than the preceding effort. This process of capping entails the hope that one's opponent will run out of creative steam. In the Cretan example, as Herzfeld explains, the riposte is extremely clever because it combines the devastating insinuation that the young man's beloved must be a donkey with a creative reconfiguring of traditional formulae from the *mandinadha* tradition.¹²

In the Aristophanic example we are not dealing with a real, improvised verbal duel. Better and Worse's lines were fully-scripted by Aristophanes.¹³ But the comparison with Herzfeld's Cretans brings out the strong likelihood that Worse and Better in *Clouds* are speaking to an Athenian audience who *value* a combative capping poetics involving improvised oral performance following certain loose rules of responson. At the same time, the comparison also throws up instructive differences and further questions.

First, we have no direct evidence that Worse and Better Arguments are conforming to a particular verse tradition from outside Old Comedy. Second, there are differences

¹¹ Herzfeld (1985a) 143.

¹² Herzfeld (1985a) 144–5.

¹³ We cannot rule out the possibility that the actors playing Better and Worse improvised over the top of these lines (at least in the performance of the first version of *Clouds*) or that similar sequences in other plays were subject to the kind of on-the-spot 'oral' versifying which is exemplified in Herzfeld's example. Of course, in the *Clouds* we have the added complication that our extant text is a second version which was never performed, but I would be surprised if the first version did not contain a comparable duelling sequence. For the issues, evidence and an attempt to work out what is new about the second version see Dover (1968) lxxx–xcviii. The existence of actors' interpolations in Greek drama speaks in favour of actorial improvisation to some extent – although interpolations are more demonstrable for tragedy than for comedy: see (e.g.) Page (1934), Reeve (1973) and Mastronarde (1994) 40–9. On the other hand, Aristophanes is self-consciously concerned to project his ownership of his plays as texts which are very much the product of *his* writing and crafting. For differing views on this see Rosen (1997) and Silk (2000) 3–13.

of context and social meaning. The *mandinadha* exchange is just one moment in an ongoing and serious business of performing and contesting manhood in rural Crete: to respond to one of these clever ripostes with a knife or a fist, Herzfeld tells us, 'would demean the assailant by suggesting that he was incapable of responding with some witty line of his own'.¹⁴ In a community where manhood requires constant exhibition of performative skill, the clever *mandinadha* can reduce an opponent symbolically without giving him the chance to respond in any other domain. And the donkey riposte gains meaning (*simasia*) through its wider dissemination in anecdotal recollections after the event. An individual singer's *etimolyia* ('readiness with words') thus contributes to his individual status as a man and at the same time restates the competitive ideals of masculine performance. It would be wrong to claim that the Aristophanic duel presupposes the same social poetics. For one thing, Aristophanic capping duels sometimes mark a move *towards* physical violence rather than a Herzfeldian displacement of it. The *Clouds* exchange is a case in point: Better and Worse come close to exchanging blows before the Cloud-chorus intervene (932–8).

But the Cretan capping riposte involves an allusively cruel and humiliating *sexual* put-down ('your future lover will be a donkey') and this does parallel certain attested features of capping discourse in Athens generally and Aristophanes' plays in particular. In the *Clouds* passage, Better Argument immediately resorts to the accusation that Worse is a sexual pathic (909). The joke here, though, is that Worse is not silenced or humiliated. He is happy to admit and cap that charge with $\rho\acute{o}\delta\alpha\ \mu'\ \epsilon\lambda\eta\theta\eta\kappa\alpha\varsigma$ (910). Thus Aristophanes' use of combative capping *plays with*, rather than simply reproduces, the idea that capping performs masculinity at the expense of one's rivals. So comparative ethnographic evidence can be useful when used alongside due attention to Aristophanic playfulness and the possibility that Athenian capping discourses had some culturally specific functions and associations which ethnography cannot reach. In the search for more of the specific connotations and resonances which Aristophanic capping exchanges might have had for Athenian audiences, let us now turn to the evidence for combative capping as a non- or sub-literary practice which was real and embedded in Athenian social life. This will have to include Aristophanic material itself and other texts which have some claim to be 'literary' developments of sub-literary or oral genres of discourse. We will see that Aristophanes not only provides us with 'evidence' for real capping but also displays a particular thematic interest in it.

3. Capping in Aristophanes and Athens

Capping as a mode of performance would have been familiar to Aristophanes' audience from their exposure to performed poetry. Homeric heroes' ability to better each other's speech is a sophisticated index of thematic focus and characterisation in the *Iliad*. Some exchanges between heroes exhibit the hallmarks of capping in terms of style and/or

¹⁴ Herzfeld (1985a) 143.

content.¹⁵ And there is some evidence to suggest that archaic, classical and post-classical literary representations of on-the-spot poetic contests between famous poets have their roots in real competitions where rhapsodes or other performers did battle by trying to cap each other's verse.¹⁶ Several Theocritean *Idylls*, especially the fifth, contain sophisticated *mimêseis* of quasi-improvised 'singing matches' between pastoral workers. These matches display capping features consistent with the lines of Aristophanes and the modern Cretan exchanges which I discussed in the previous section. It seems likely that they had pre- and sub-literary analogues.¹⁷ Aeschylean heroes and heroines engage in exchanges which show traces of a capping mode and there is some stichomythic and short-speech capping in Sophocles and Euripides.¹⁸ The presence of ritualised mutual abuse between participants at festivals to Demeter and Dionysus in classical Greece is attested.¹⁹ And the triangulation between these festivals, ritualised joking and iambic poetry's penchant for naming, shaming and obscenity has featured frequently in interpretations of Old Comedy as a festive dramatic genre.²⁰ However, the evidence that this ritual abuse was mutual is very limited and there is no positive evidence to suggest that such abuse had a capping dynamic to it, whether 'regularised' or informal.²¹

The most obvious and well-attested social contexts for improvised exchanges of capping discourse in classical Athens were the symposium and the *deipnon*. A less obvious, and hitherto-overlooked, social context for capping was the agora and its related environs. I will now present the evidence for capping in these contexts, drawing particular attention to material which illustrates one or more of the following points to my argument: 1) a type of capping or a context for capping which scholars have

¹⁵ See Martin (1989) and Parks (1990) on the more general phenomenon of 'flying' in Homer. 'Flying' can contain capping dynamics in terms of style and structure: Aeneas is capped by Meriones and then Meriones is capped by Patroclus at *Hom. Il.* 16.616–31. See also *Hom. Il.* 20.178–258.

¹⁶ Collins (2004) 167–222.

¹⁷ See Hunter (1999) 6–7 and Collins (2004) 54–8. Collins compares *Idyll 5* to distich rhyming duels between Turkish boys where the object of the capping contest is to successfully cast your opponent in the role of a passive homosexual.

¹⁸ For Aeschylus and Euripides see the fine analysis of *stichomythia* and *antilabē* in Collins (2004) 3–29 and 30–53 with further bibliography cited by him. On capping *stichomythia* in Sophocles see Pfeiffer-Petersen (1996) and Hesk (2003) 113–18.

¹⁹ For the possibility that the *gephurismos* ritual in the Eleusinian procession involved *mutual* abuse see the scholion on *Ar. Plut.* 1014 which reports that the women on wagons abused *each other*. For mutual abuse at the Thesmophoria see the scholion on Lucian, *Dialogues of courtesans* 7.4.13–20, p. 230 Rabe.

²⁰ For early Greek iambic abuse see Archil. frs. 194, 215, 251 and 322 with West (1974) 25. See also Burnett (1983) and Nagy (1999) 243–5. There is a connection between iambic verse abuse and rituals of Demeter implied by the name of Demeter's servant Iambe, who uses mockery to stop the goddess from mourning her lost daughter (*Homeric hymn to Demeter* (2) 195–205). For the connection between festivals of Demeter and the iambographic tradition see Richardson (1974) 213–17; Graf (1974); Brumfeld (1996); Collins (2004) 225–30. On the evidence for ritual invective at festivals such as the Halao, the Stenia and the Thesmophoria see Fluck (1931). For the importance of ritual abuse, *aischrologia* and laughter and the traditional poetic dimension of iambic abuse for understanding Old Comedy see Rosen (1988) and (2007); Halliwell (1991) and (2004).

²¹ This is shown by Collins (2004) 225–30.

overlooked; 2) an Aristophanic deployment of capping which illustrates his ambiguous engagement with it; 3) a type of capping or a context for capping which is relevant to my subsequent readings of combative capping in *Knights*, *Clouds* and *Banqueters*.

3.1 The symposium and deipnon

a) *Skolia and elegy*

On the poetic side of things, there were games where fellow guests aimed to cap each others' sung drinking-verses (the *skolia*) or else tried to top each other's deployment of lines of *skolia* and elegy in creative and witty ways. There were different forms of competitive verse-gaming at symposia and dinners. But improvised *amoebean* capping contests of *skolia* and elegies between two participants were clearly one important way of playing the game.²² Quick-witted improvisation and adaptation was clearly important to successful performance in such competitions.²³ Certain distichs in the Theognidean corpus, alongside Attic *skolia* which parallel each other in terms of structure and conceit show that the cleverness of such contests lay in a facility with the adoption of *personae*, (often sexual) punning, riddling and *double entendre*.²⁴ Some *skolia* which survive take the form of animal fables (*ainoi*) or riddles (*ainigmata*). These could clearly be countered and capped by other fables or undermining punch-lines.²⁵ There is good evidence to suggest that prose and poetic capping via the improvised construction of *ainoi* and *ainigmata* could be used by competing symposiasts to make *ad hominem* comments in a mode which is not dissimilar from the Cretan exchange which I discussed above.²⁶

Aristophanes' *Wasps* 1222–49 offers a valuable, if partial, insight into how capping *skolia* games might have worked in a sympotic context. In these lines, Bdelycleon tries

²² On *skolia* and elegies in the context of competitive capping in archaic and classical symposia see Bowra (1961) 373–403; West (1974) 16–18; Van der Valk (1974); Vetta (1983) and (1984); Nagy (1985); Lambin (1992) 266–307 and (1993); E. Bowie (1993); Liapis (1996); Pellizer (1990); Stehle (1997) 6–7, 218–19, 221–5; Collins (2004) 61–134. Collins has admirable discussion of the various definitions of *skolion* which existed even in the ancient material and also treats the word's problematic etymology and the issue of how *skolion* games worked. The Attic *skolia* and their testimonia are collected in Reitzenstein (1893) and *PMG* 884–917.

²³ Vetta (1983) 119–30; Collins (2004) 63–134; Stehle (1997) 221–2.

²⁴ See (e.g.) *PMG* 892, 893.1, 895, 900, 901, 904, 905; Theognis 579–82. For discussion see Lambin (1992) 266–307; Liapis (1996); Collins (2004) 111–34.

²⁵ See *PMG* 892, 903 and 750 with the discussion of Collins (2004) 127–9.

²⁶ The telling of Aesopic animal fables (*ainoi*) and riddles (*ainigmata*) has long been recognised as an important element of fifth- and fourth- century sympotic and deipnotic conversation and poetry. See E. Bowie (1993) 365–70 for the evidence, although Rothwell (1995) sees fables as a low-class and slavish form of discourse. We certainly cannot argue that animal fables had an exclusively sympotic context of performance in classical Athens: our earliest attestation of the fable of the Hawk and the Nightingale is found in the didactic hexameter of Hesiod (*Op.* 202–12). Ar. *Vesp.* 1256–61 and 1427–40 also provide evidence that 'Sybaritic' fables about human behaviour were fashionable at fifth-century symposia although quite what these were is obscure. Soph. *Aj* 1142–58 suggests that fables and riddles could be improvised in the context of a capping duel.

to prepare his father for having to continue the *skolia* started up by the fellow symposiasts of Cleon's circle whom he is about to join. The artful game here is to improvise verses which beautifully continue, and yet also cap, those sung to him (1222). This competitive but non-abusive form of 'capping' was clearly very popular. But Philocleon is not interested in *that* version of the game. He assures his son that 'no Diacrian' will cap better than he (1223): this is probably a reference to a localised tradition of capping among the Diacrarians and is hence an assertion of capping prowess.²⁷ Bdelycleon is sceptical and decides to role-play as 'Cleon'. He sings the first line of a group of popular Attic *skolia* in praise of the tyrannicide Harmodius (1224–6; *PMG* 893–6). Philocleon caps the line with a verse which is clearly designed to insult Cleon (1227). Bdelycleon thinks that Cleon will know that the insult is directed at him and will set about driving Philocleon into exile (1228–30). Philocleon replies that if Cleon threatens him in this way, he will come out with another *skolion* and proceeds to recite adapted or improvised lines from Alcaeus which warn against tyranny. Again, they attack Cleon by analogy and implication (1234–5). Philocleon's improvisatory ability throughout this scene proves to the audience that he is much more skilled at the *skolion* game than his son initially assumed.²⁸ The aim of this kind of combative form of *skolion* might have been to test Cleon's character: 'Cleon' (Bdelycelon) does not react to Philocleon's Alcaean verses at all. This is because he knows that the real Cleon would also not respond: only by keeping quiet can he determine that the verses do not apply to him and ensure that he is in line with, rather than being the target of, the verses' implicitly pro-democratic sentiments.²⁹

Thus *Wasps* 1222–49 supports a view of poetic capping games in symposia containing the potential for improvising witty combative exchanges of *ad hominem* attacks and insults. These games allowed individual symposiasts to stage and bandy self-representations and to test each other's prowess, character and identity while ultimately reinforcing the solidarity of the group. But there was a risk that the games' group-reinforcement function could go into reverse if the capping became too offensive. To infer this wider social-historical dynamic from the *Wasps* passage and other evidence for sympotic capping is nothing new.³⁰ But for my purposes the passage is significant for showing us that Aristophanes clearly *understood* the ambiguous limits and danger surrounding combative capping and wanted to exploit such ambiguity as a theme in his comedies.

b) *The game of eikasmoi*

On the non-poetic side, symposiasts could try to cap each other in the game of 'likenesses' or 'comparisons': the sources refer to this game as that of the *eikones* or *eikasmoi*. The most structured version of this game involved 'a combative witticism which reconfigures its subject as another object based on the speaker's observation

²⁷ Collins (2004) 101 and *pace* Bowra (1961) 378.

²⁸ Collins (2004) 99–110.

²⁹ This is the ethnographically-informed interpretation of Collins (2004) 102–4.

³⁰ See Stehle (1997) 221–61; Collins (2004) 63–73.

regarding that subject's actions, appearance or status'.³¹ Thus one symposiast compares another to (for example) an animal or a statue or a mythological figure in a way which is somehow apt and appropriate. The object of the comparison can respond in kind and in a way which at least matches, and preferably caps, the *eikōn* directed at him.

Although scholars have noticed that the *eikasmoi* game is combative and relies on skills of improvisatory wit, the game's capping dynamic has gone largely unremarked. In Plato's *Symposium*, for example, Alcibiades' speech about Socrates famously compares the philosopher to a statuette of Silenus and then to the satyr Marsyas (215a4–b4, 221c2–222b7). He rather disingenuously claims that he resorts to *eikones* 'for the sake of truth, not to get a laugh' (215a6). At first sight, Socrates does not seem to respond to Alcibiades' speech of praise and blame with a countering *eikōn*, preferring instead to insist that Alcibiades' speech is motivated by jealousy and merely designed to drive a wedge between himself and the lovely Agathon. But in fact, Socrates does deploy a countering *eikōn* by way of riposte when he says to Alcibiades 'now you are detected: your Satyric or Silenic drama is all shown up', before ensuring that Agathon once again gets to sit beside him (222d–e). Socrates is here wittily and playfully capping Alcibiades' comparison of him by comparing *it* to satyr drama and, by implication, he compares *Alcibiades* to a playwright.³²

In Xenophon's *Symposium*, the potential for capping *eikasmoi* in a sympotic context to turn from light and witty banter to hurtful abuse comes to the fore. The Syracusan has been continuing to mock Socrates with jokes inspired by the *Clouds* on the nature of his enquiries. Socrates starts to show signs of annoyance (6.7). Antisthenes steps in to suggest that the Syracusan be subjected to an *eikasmos* by the party's entertainment-figure, Philip (6.8): 'You are clever at hitting off a person's likeness, Philip. Wouldn't you say that our friend here resembles one with a penchant for abuse?' (Σὺ μέντοι δεινὸς εἶ, ὦ Φίλιππε, εἰκάζειν· οὐ δοκεῖ σοι ὁ ἀνὴρ οὗτος λοιδορεῖσθαι βουλομένῳ εὐκέναι;). Philip agrees but Socrates interrupts and urges Philip not to perform such an *eikasmos* lest *he* also takes on the likeness of one stooping to abuse (6.9). Philip protests that he might be about to compare the Syracusan to 'all who are noble and most excellent'. Socrates retorts that if Philip were to offer an *eikasmos* of the Syracusan along those lines he *would* adopt the likeness of an abuser because to say that the Syracusan only *resembles* the noble and virtuous is to imply that everyone is better than he. Philip and his companions pester Socrates a little more but the philosopher is firm that the *eikasmoi* must stop and suggests a bout of singing to distract

³¹ Hobden (2004) 130. Hobden offers analysis and further bibliography on the subtle use of *eikasmoi* at Xen. *Smp.* 2.15–23. Alongside the examples I discuss below, see the comparison format in a wedding context at Sappho 115.

³² Thus, Socrates compares Alcibiades' effort to that of a tragedian's satyric offering and hence compares Alcibiades to a tragedian. This is a clever move because Agathon himself *is* a tragedian and we are told at the beginning of the *Symposium* that the dialogue took place the day after Agathon celebrated his first ever tragic victory (173a). Socrates' subtle *eikōn* underscores Alcibiades' true motives and rivalrous emotions. It also invites a comparison between Alcibiades' speech and the light-hearted and less prestigious component of a tragedian's output.

them (6.9–10). ‘Thus’, Xenophon tells us, ‘this bit of *paroinia* was quenched.’ And so, a wine-fuelled game of capping *eikasmoi* which could get dangerously abusive and violent is itself capped and forestalled by Socrates’ more sophisticated use of an *eikasmos* on Philip.

The *eikasmoi* idiom is also deployed in a sympotic context in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, and to great comic effect (1308–25). And the potential for its capping dynamic to become socially problematic is also highlighted. Here, a slave called Xanthias reports Philocleon’s outrageous conduct at a symposium. We are told that Philocleon stuffed himself with food and drunkenly pranced around deriding people, farting like a donkey and beating up Xanthias himself. This provoked a capping exchange of *eikasmoi* between himself and a certain guest, a prominent politician, called Lysistratus. Lysistratus compared Philocleon to ‘one of the scum assuming the airs of a rich man or a stupid ass that has broken loose from its stable’ (1309–10). Philocleon replied at the top of his voice: ‘You are like a grasshopper, whose cloak is worn to the thread, or like Sthenelus after his clothes had been sold.’ This capping riposte drew applause from all the other guests except Thuphrastus (1309–14). (Thuphrastus is then himself rather childishly insulted by Philocleon: 1316–18.) Philocleon’s manipulation of the game of *eikasmoi* into an opportunity for the scandalous abuse of social superiors at the party is clearly something to be celebrated and enjoyed by the audience. However, Xanthias reports that Philocleon then went round insulting the guests one after the other in the same manner as the childish insult levelled at Thuphrastus (1319). He adds that Philocleon’s ‘rustic joking’ and story-telling was ‘most uneducated’ and ‘nothing to do with the situation’ (1321–2). Philocleon’s ‘expertise’ in the capping game of *eikasmoi* is part-and-parcel of Xanthias’ picture of Philocleon as even more hubristic and abusive than the other élite figures at the party whom the slave assumes to be inveterate drunken hooligans (1300–3). In the light of this, one wonders whether the obvious potential for eikasmic capping to exceed the boundaries of appropriateness by giving offence lies somewhere behind the comment of the Chorus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* that Aeschylus and Euripides must now contend via ‘proper sophisticated stuff, and no party-game comparisons, nor any of the sort of thing that any fool could produce’ (ἀστέια καὶ μήτ’ εἰκόνας μήθ’ οἷ’ ἄν ἄλλος εἴποι, 906).

Aristophanes’ *Birds* deploys a gentler, more self-conscious version of eikasmic capping when Pisthetaerus and Euelpides get used to their newly-grown wings (802–8):

Ευ.	ἐπὶ τῷ γελαῖς;
Πι.	ἐπὶ τοῖσι σοῖς ὠκυπτέροις. οἷσθ’ ᾧ μάλιστ’ ἔοικας ἐπτερωμένος; εἰς εὐτέλειαν χηνὶ συγγεγραμμένω.
Ευ.	σὺ δὲ κοψίχῳ γε σκάφιον ἀποτετιλμένω.
Πι.	ταυτὶ μὲν ἠκάσμεσθα κατὰ τὸν Λισχύλου ‘τάδ’ οὐχ ὑπ’ ἄλλων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς αὐτῶν πτεροῖς.’

- Eu: What's making you laugh?
 Pi: The plumage on your arms! You know just what an impression those feathers make? You look like a painted goose, and a cheap one too.
 Eu: And *you* resemble a blackbird whose scalp's been cropped!
 Pi: Our comparisons are somewhat Aeschylean: 'shot not by others, but by our very own feathers.'³³

Aristophanes is having some quite sophisticated fun with the game of *eikones* here. With the verb ἠκάζομεσθα and an apposite quote from Aeschylus, Pisthetaerus' summing-up can be glossed as 'the fact that we look like comic birds is entirely our own doing'.³⁴ But these words also draw attention to the fact that an improvised game of comparisons in which two men with real wings mock each other's likeness to comically defective birds is logically (and therefore comically) confusing: they speak as men comparing each other to birds but Pisthetaerus realises that they are more than merely *like* birds because their wings are real. His sophisticated and ironic detachment from the game of comparisons maintains a tone of playful moderation.

The key points that emerge from this discussion of *eikasmoi* are as follows: first, that they were often used as a *capping* idiom of contest. Secondly, that such contests could easily be represented by Greek writers as prone to slippage from a 'playful' exchange to one which was symptomatic of drunkenness and had the potential for the giving of offence or the exchange of blows. Thirdly, that the deployment of eikasmic capping in Aristophanes offers us further evidence that he was interested in the ambiguity and uncertain limits surrounding capping games. In the *Birds* example, the game is gentle and it is deployed with a sophisticated detachment which not only adds to its humour, but also stresses that the game has rules and boundaries. In *Wasps*, however, the report of eikasmic capping emphasises the hurtful and disruptive potential of the game at the same time as it celebrates Philocleon's ability to improvise an abusive and funny *eikasmos* which caps the one offered to him.

c) *Conversational caps, put-downs and competitive story-telling*

The use of *skolia*, elegy and the *eikasmos* in capping games was structured and regularised. But there is also evidence that witty and sometimes abusive *ad hominem* capping was an important part of more informal conversation at classical Athenian drinking-parties and dinners. Much of the evidence for this capping 'banter' is to be found in the *Chreiae* (collections of anecdotes and sayings by prostitutes, parasites, *kolakes*, *gelōtopoioi* and associated personalities) which are deployed in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*. In some of these anecdotes, the symposiast's offhand commands or

³³ The text printed here is the one ably defended by Dunbar (1995). The translation draws on the comments of Dunbar (1995) *ad loc.* and Halliwell (1997) 45.

³⁴ Dunbar (1995) 489.

witty remarks at a prostitute's expense are capped via a riposte which displays word-play, verbal coinage, *double entendre* and/or literary-cum-mythical allusion. Often the riposte exposes the recipient to abuse, shame and ridicule.³⁵ I will postpone discussion of the methodological problems which attend the use of this late material as evidence for 'real' classical-era discourse to my next section on capping banter in the agora. But it should be noted here that some of the anecdotes about witty ripostes which survive were clearly set down in written form as early as the late fifth and fourth centuries BC.³⁶

3.2 The agora

We can only speculate as to how far capping games of *skolia* and *eikasmoi* found their way into the *kapēlia* (taverns) of the agora and its adjacent environs. But when we leave these two fairly regularised formats to one side, we find strong evidence that other, more fluid forms of capping repartee and raillery were an important part of life in the Athenian marketplace and its immediate environs. For the texts and fragments of Old and Middle Comedy and the *Chreiae* preserved in Athenaeus furnish us with a number of examples which suggest that that the *kapēlia*, shops, market-stalls, bath-houses and brothels of the Greek polis were key venues for the impressive performance of witty and insulting come-backs.

I will now lay out the evidence for 'agoraic' capping banter in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. As I do so, I will be sensitive to the fact that the fourth-century, Hellenistic and second-sophistic *Chreiae* can hardly be regarded as straightforward data for oral discourse as performed in any classical Greek venue. Much of this material is clearly shaped by the cultural and literary game of having, for example, low-life prostitutes and toadies using dazzling classical *paideia* or philosophical language to turn (mainly sympotic or banqueting) tables on their supposed social and intellectual superiors alongside, or within, their (often obscene) punning and devastating put-downs.³⁷ Machon's *Chreiae* about prostitutes may well be a parody of recollections of the sayings and behaviour of philosophers and sophists which became a recognisable genre of writing from the fourth century BC onwards. His and other *Chreiae* have a fairly standard narrative structure.³⁸ They are also influenced and shaped by the humour and character-types of Old, Middle and New Comedy. The comic-dramatic material itself

³⁵ See, for example, Machon 231–46, 258–61 and 281–4 (= Athen. *Deipn.* 13.579b, 579e and 580a). For discussion and further examples see McClure (2003) 79–105.

³⁶ Hock and O'Neil (1986) 1–5. Plato *Resp.* 1.329b–c offers a *chreia* about Sophocles which was often repeated in the later collections and which suggests that good rejoinders were being repeated and circulated as early as the fifth century. Athenaeus *Deipn.* 8.352c tells us that the fourth-century writer Ephorus claims that the lyre-player Stratoniceus' witty ripostes were an attempt to emulate the *eutrapeloi logoi* (witty words) of Simonides of Ceos. This might mean that there was an earlier fifth-century tradition of collecting oral caps and ripostes or producing written versions of them.

³⁷ As shown by McClure (2003) 79–105 and Whitmarsh (2000).

³⁸ For the details see Hock and O'Neil (1986) 22–5; Hawley (1993) 76; Gilula (2000) 429.

is no less problematic as ‘evidence’ of non- or sub-literary discourse given comedy’s obvious tendency towards exaggeration and distortion.

Despite these problems, the following examples bear the traces of a real culture of conversational, eristic speech-acts in the fifth- and fourth-century agora. The fact that such ripostes were recollected, embroidered and doubtless *invented* as anecdotes shows us that on-the-spot capping quips were valued. There is some similarity here to the way in which Herzfeld’s Cretans like to recall instances of *etimolyia* so that they can be invested with *simasia*. These exchanges also evince a hitherto under-appreciated aspect of a persistent connection which classical and post-classical texts forge between verbal abuse or mockery and the ‘unofficial’ spaces of the agora. As Stephen Halliwell puts it, ‘the social fluidity and “promiscuity” of the agora, real or imagined, was one way of symbolising the threat of foul, offensive speech in the very midst of Athenian democracy.’³⁹ I would add that *capping* modes of conversation which are antagonistic and *amoebean* are part-and-parcel of that symbolism.

a) Abusive capping banter between traders involving word-play

In Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Dionysus offers this telling intervention into the exchange of insults and name-calling which marks Aeschylus’ and Euripides’ entrance (856–9):

Δι. Σὺ δὲ μὴ πρὸς ὀργήν, Αἰσχύλ’, ἀλλὰ πραόνως
 ἐλέγχ’, ἐλέγχου· λοιδορεῖσθαι δ’ οὐ πρόπει
 ἄνδρας ποητᾶς ὥσπερ ἄρτοπώλιδας·
 σὺ δ’ εὐθὺς ὥσπερ πρῖνος ἐμπρησθεῖς βοᾶς.

Dion: And, Aeschylus, not so angry please; just argue and be argued with in a gentle way. It’s not right for poets to abuse each other as if they were bread-selling women, and yet you just start roaring on the instant, like a holm-oak when it’s set on fire.

The underlined words show that it was usual for market-sellers in the agora to engage in insulting banter with each other. Female traders based in the agora are also noted for their facility with verbal abuse at *Lysistrata* 456–61, although that reference does not allow us to infer a mutual capping exchange. A more general connection between abusive *loidoria* and mockery and the unofficial, ‘vulgar’ side of life in the agora is a commonplace across several genres of Athenian writing.⁴⁰ But it is the sense of a *mutual* and *ongoing* exchange of creative verbal one-upmanship that interests me here. In this scene, Aeschylus has certainly been determined to outdo Euripides’ name-calling

³⁹ Halliwell (forthcoming), chapter 5.

⁴⁰ See Halliwell (1991), (2004) and (forthcoming) for discussion and a comprehensive set of references. Here are just a few: Ar. *Ach.* 854–5, *Pax* 1015; Phrynichus fr. 3 K–A (where the setting is likely to be the agora); Pl. *Leg.* 11.935a–c; Theophr. *Char.* 6.7 (where the agora and its environs is likely again).

against him with a volley of very funny, if typically multi-compound or periphrastic insults in reply (834–50). Dionysus' comparison of this to the behaviour of bread-selling women may be comically inaccurate in some respects: would market-traders really use such *long* words in their verbal duels? But, and as my next set of examples will show, the fact that Euripides and Aeschylus indulge in word-play by *coining* insulting terms for each other such as κομποφακερρήμονα ('a spouter of bundles of empty brag', 839) and στωμυλιοσυλλεκτάδη ('scraper-together of idle chatter', 841) may be a large part of what makes their exchange akin to the combative capping of tradeswomen.

b) Abusive or sarcastic capping banter involving word-play or mythical allusion between low-status traders or craftsmen and customers/passers-by

Coining a new word for the specific purpose of capping an opponent's remark, especially if both the remark and/or its rejoinder are abusive in some way, is something which Greek writers represent as happening around the shops and workshops of any Greek city. For example, here is one of many witty come-backs attributed to the fifth-century lyre-player Stratonicus which we find in the eighth book of the *Deipnosophistae* (352b):⁴¹

ἐν Σικυῶνι δὲ πρὸς νακοδέψην γεγενημένον, ἐπεὶ ἐλοιδορεῖτό τι αὐτῷ «καὶ ἑκατόδαιμον» ἔφη, ἑκατόδαιμον ἔφη.

In Sicyon he replied to a currier (*nako-depsēs* – literally 'hide-worker') who had insulted him and called him '*kako-daimon*' ('wretch') by calling him '*nako-daimon*'.

The punning coinage which constitutes Stratonicus' capping rejoinder is clever because it refers to his low-class opponent's occupation and mirrors the sound and sense of his opening insult. This is just one of many examples of what the *deipnosophist* Cynulcus dubs the *eustochia* of Stratonicus' replies (8.348d). It is *eustochos* in the obvious sense of being 'well-aimed' at its target. But this sort of witty come-back also has the attributes of *eustochia* as described by Aristotle: it exhibits a form of sagacity which is rapid and not the product of conscious calculation (*Nic. Eth.* 1142b1–5). And its deployment of an apt, and yet not-too-obvious pun comes close to Aristotle's point that the production of apt and yet not-too-obvious metaphors requires the sort of *eustochia* which philosophy uses to identify similarities between very different things

⁴¹ We are told by a scholiast to Athen. *Deipn.* 8.350d–52c that Stratonicus' sayings were initially collected soon after his death by Aristotle's nephew Callisthenes (i.e. around 350 BC). Clearly the rejoinders attributed to Stratonicus are shaped by a tradition which has a life of its own and are not necessarily an accurate reflection of what *he* said or where he said it. On this see Gilula (2000). But that tradition clearly attests to a pre-existing oral culture of the fifth and fourth centuries where the witty riposte or put-down is valued and recalled.

(*Rhet.* 1412a10–15). Stratonicus’ capping pun is very similar to the ‘improvised’ abusive repartee which we saw Aristophanes writing for his Better and Worse Arguments in *Clouds* 908–13. The only difference is that Aristophanes extends the capping into a duel by making both Arguments as skilled as each other.

If it seems something of a ‘cheat’ to use a lyre-player’s renowned verbal wit as an example of ‘agoraic’ capping, here is an example of a fishmonger doing something similar (Antiphanes, fr. 204 K–A):

ἡμῖν δὲ τοῖς θνητοῖς ἐπριάμην κωβιούς.
 ὡς προσβαλεῖν δ’ ἐκέλευσα τὸν τοιχωρύχον,
 τὸν ἰχθυοπώλην, ‘προστίθημι’, φησί, ‘σοί
 τὸν δῆμον αὐτῶν· εἰσι γὰρ Φαληρικοί.
 ἄλλοι δ’ ἐπώλουν, ὡς ἔοικ’, Ὀτρυνικούς.’

But for us mortals I have bought some gudgeon. And when I told that burglar, the fishmonger, to throw in an extra gudgeon for free, he replied, ‘I’ll throw in its deme; those fish come from Phalerum! Others would certainly try to sell you gudgeon from Otryne.’

This passage, from Antiphanes’ fourth-century Middle Comedy called *Timon*, shows us that bantering and bartering went hand-in-hand in the classical Athenian agora.⁴² But what I want to stress is that the fishmonger puts a stop to the speaker’s haggling with a clever put-down based on a pun: by adding the fishes’ deme-name he speaks as if he is adding the deme-name of a citizen. But he is also designating the provenance of the fish as a justification of his meanness – gudgeon from Phaleron are of superior quality to those of, say, Otryne. But the word δῆμος (‘deme’) is a pun on the word δημός (‘fat’): the justification for *not* throwing in a free fish is also a declaration that he’ll throw in some worthless fat. To be sure, this particular pun is present in earlier comedy and must not be taken to be a straightforward example of ‘folk’ discourse.⁴³ However, when placed alongside the other evidence I am presenting, this example suggests that clever conversational capping involving word-play between traders (or between trader and customer) was recognisable as an ‘agoraic’ eristic speech-act. Antiphanes’ fishmonger is conforming to a stereotype in which witty caps and put-downs are what a classical Athenian audience associates with the low-class discourse of the agora.

My next example shows that agoraic capping repartee between customer and vendor could be represented as developing into a lengthier duel. In Antiphanes’ *Boeotian woman* the seller explains the quality of his apples thus: ‘the seed of this fruit has only just arrived in Athens from the great king’ (Antiphanes, fr. 59 K–A). In other words,

⁴² Millett (1990) 193–4 makes the point that this material evinces the quasi-theatrical quality of bartering in the Athenian agora with customer and trader cast in the role of protagonists before an audience of bystanders.

⁴³ See *Ar. Vesp.* 40–1; *Eq.* 215 and 954.

the apples are costly because they are rare eastern luxury food. The unnamed customer replies thus: ‘I thought, by the Goddess of Light, you were going to say that these golden apples came from the Hesperides, since there only three of them!’ Here, the customer caps the seller’s claimed provenance for the apples with a mythical garden set in the far west. The apple-tree guarded by the Hesperides furnished the golden apples given by earth to Hera and the apples used by Melanion in his race against Atalanta. The customer’s implicit charge is that the apples are so expensive and few that they must come from this divine tree! But the anonymous grocer is not silenced by this clever and allusive rejoinder. He replies: ὀλίγον τὸ καλὸν ἐστὶ πανταχοῦ καὶ τίμιον (‘The fair is everywhere rare and dear’). This come-back, with its homoiopoton and euphony *sounds* like a popular saying. It is hard to tell whether the seller has parried his haggler’s wit by inventing an apt and sonorous proverb or else has fallen back on a cliché whose hackneyed quality makes it a poor rejoinder.⁴⁴

c) Abusive, sarcastic and sexual capping banter involving trader and prostitute

So far, all of our examples have been combative but only some have involved outright *loidoria* as opposed to sarcasm. My last example combines abuse, wit, sarcasm, and sexual obscenity. This is a bantering exchange between Gnathaena, an old and haggard prostitute, and a butcher’s boy. It is taken from Machon’s verse collection of anecdotes and sayings concerning prostitutes (Machon 304–10 = Athen. *Deipn.* 13.580c–d):

εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν λέγουσιν αὐτὴν ἐξίναί
καὶ τοῦψον ἐφορᾶν καὶ πολυπραγμονεῖν πόσου
πωλεῖθ’ ἕκαστον, εἴτ’ ἰδοῦσα κατὰ τύχην
ἰστώντα κρεοπῶλην τιν’ ἀστεῖον πάνυ
τῆθ’ ἡλικία σφόδρα νέον, ἴΩ πρὸς τῶν θεῶν
μειράκιον ὁ καλός’, φησι, ‘πῶς ἴστης φράσον.’
ὁ δὲ μειδιάσας, ‘Κύβδ’, ἔφη, τριωβόλου.’
‘Τίς δ’ οὐπιτρέψων ἐστὶ σοί’, φησιν, ‘τάλαν,
ὄντα γ’ ἐν Ἀθήναις Καρικοῖς χρῆσθαι σταθομοῖς;’

They say she went out into the agora and as she gazed at the delicacies she kept asking how much each cost. Upon seeing by chance a butcher’s boy standing at the scales, very pretty (*asteion*) and young in age, she said. ‘By the gods, boy, the good looking one, tell me, how do you do your weighing [what price is your meat per unit of weight]?’ The boy smiled and said, ‘From behind, for three obols.’ And she replied ‘But who will allow you, poor fool, to use Carian measures in Athens?’

⁴⁴ Athenaeus tells us that another comic playwright called Eriphus lifted this entire routine in his play *Meliboea* (3.84b–c = Eriphus fr. 2 K–A) In *that* play, the ‘proverb’ is offered and then the customer declines to take the banter further, stating merely that he or she will pay no more than an obol for the apples. The seller opens up a new offer of some pomegranates.

The old prostitute opens her chat with a *double entendre* which appraises the boy sexually. He caps her *double entendre*, it seems, by implying that he will bend her over and fuck her, but only if she pays three obols for it. This is presumably a nasty comment on her age. But Gnathaena has a capping riposte: *σταθμοί* seems to involve a punning play between ‘measuring weights’ and ‘positions’ so that the boy’s proposal is associated with the perverse sexual customs of barbarian Carians. Gnathaena’s obscene and loidoric wit here is part-and-parcel of a comic discourse where masculinised courtesans cap or put down the riddling, punning or allusive jibes of their (often sympotic) male companions. Her language can even be compared to Iambe in the *Homeric hymn to Demeter* or the sexual *double entendres* and legalese of the three old women at Aristophanes *Eccleziastusae* 976ff.⁴⁵ However, the fact that Machon’s coarsest example of a prostitute’s witty come-back takes place in an exchange with another low-class figure amidst the retail areas of the agora is significant. For it shows that sophisticated word-play, allusion (in this case to barbarian customs rather than Greek mythology) and ‘low’ abuse combine to form a capping mode of ‘agoraic’ banter.

The involvement of prostitutes in such banter might give us a sense of what is envisaged in a speech at the end of Aristophanes’ *Knights*. This exchange takes place when Agoracritus, the victorious Sausage-seller who is himself an archetypally low-life *agoraios*, usurps the formerly-ascendant but equally ‘agoraic’ Paphlagonian slave – a cipher for the politician Cleon – from his position of influence with his master Demos (an old man who represents the Athenian masses: the *dēmos*). Agoracritus tells Demos that Paphlagon–Cleon’s punishment will be as follows (1395–1408):

Αλ. Οὐδὲν μέγ’ ἄλλ’ ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν ἔξει τέχνην·
ἐπὶ ταῖς πύλαις ἀλλαντοπωλήσει μόνος,
τὰ κύνεια μειγνύς τοῖς ὄνειοις πράγμασιν,
μεθύων τε ταῖς πόρναισι λoidορήσεται,
κακ τῶν βαλανείων πίεται τὸ λούτριον.

SS: Nothing very much; he shall simply ply my old trade. He shall sell sausages all by himself at the city gates, hashing up asses’ and dogs’ meat in them as he used to hash up the city’s affairs; when he is drunk he shall exchange abuse with the prostitutes, and he shall drink used water from the public baths.

Sommerstein’s translation (underlined) is surely right.⁴⁶ Aristophanes’ Dionysus and his chorus of Thesmophoric women both clearly use the middle form *loidoreisthai* to refer to quick-fire exchanges which they have just witnessed and which both contain some element of abusive capping (*Ran.* 857 and *Thesm.* 571). A combination of verbal

⁴⁵ This is noticed by McClure (2003) 100.

⁴⁶ Sommerstein (1981) 141.

sophistication and sexual crudeness mark the often abusive and threatening capping exchanges which Agoracritus and Paphlagon engage in. It may well be that the exchange of *loidoria* which is here envisaged is a (perhaps more raucous and less sophisticated) version of the capping banter at which Machon's Gnathaena excels. In the light of the evidence presented so far, the fact that capping exchanges dominate the dramatic confrontation between the two 'agoraic' protagonists of *Knights* is surely significant. I will now examine that significance in detail.

4. *Combative capping in Knights*

More than any other extant comedy, *Knights* is 'saturated with conflict'.⁴⁷ Its antagonistic texture derives from the comic conceit that Paphlagon–Cleon can only be defeated by an *agoraios* who is even more vulgar than he. Sausage-seller is proud that his *ponēria* matches Paphlagon's (336). He sells *himself* as well as his sausages by the gates of the Cerameicus (184–6, 1242–7, 1398). His low-status trading and self-prostitution are what make him a worthy challenger to Cleon–Paphlagon's political control of the assembly and the courts. This control is imaged in the play as his status as Demos' favourite household slave. Cleon–Paphlagon himself is represented as a tanner of barbarian origins (44–9, 137). Like all politicians in Aristophanes he is also assumed to be an inveterate pathic: this is a strong hint that he has had a prior career in prostitution (76–9, 381, 880).⁴⁸ Cleon–Paphlagon's 'agoraic' penchant for loud shouting, thievery, fraud and low cunning is also highlighted by the comedy's implication that the only way to neutralise this demagogue is to confront him with a low-life who can shout more loudly, steal more effectively and lie more convincingly than he.

The contours of this contest in *ponēria* and 'agoraic' behaviour have been well-mapped in recent scholarship.⁴⁹ But less critical attention has been paid to the fact that Cleon–Paphlagon and Sausage-seller compete throughout the play via several capping duels which deploy various forms of lexical repetition, structural mirroring

⁴⁷ McGlew (2002) 100.

⁴⁸ See *Eq.* 180–1, 186, 336 for admissions or ascriptions of *ponēria* to Sausage-seller or emphasis on him being an *agoraios*. For analyses of the play's thesis that the only way to defeat Cleon is to challenge him with even more polluted and loathsome creature see Brock (1986); Bennett and Tyrrell (1990); A. Bowie (1993) 45–77; MacDowell (1995) 97–112; McGlew (2002) 97–111. It was illegal to address the assembly if you had been a prostitute and a successful prosecution for so doing was punishable with *atimia*. See Aeschines I.13–17, 37–116 with Dover (1978) 19ff.; Davidson (1997) *passim*; Fisher (2001) 36–53.

⁴⁹ There has been a recent emphasis on the way in which Paphlagon–Cleon's and Sausage-seller's competitiveness is imaged in terms of transgressive drinking and dining, male prostitution and anal intercourse in and around the *agora*. See Wilkins (2000) 164–201 and Wohl (2002) 73–123. See also Scholtz (2004) on Demos as a virtual *pornos*. On the importance of the play and the Cleon–Agoracritus rivalry for understanding the role of the *ponēros-chrēstos* dichotomy in Athenian political discourse and its imaginary projections see Rosenbloom (2002), (2004a), (2004b).

and quasi-improvised responson.⁵⁰ A notable exception is Michael Silk. Silk does not explore the ‘quasi-improvised’ quality of these exchanges but he does acknowledge the range of sophistication *and* obscenity in what he calls the ‘parallel-structures’ of contest in *Knights*: ‘This extravagant exercise in competitive odiousness takes up most of the play (273–1252).’ He argues that this ‘sublimely appalling ... game of abusive and unctuous verbalizing’ has a ‘modal exuberance’ which undermines any moral–political points or arguments which we might want to extrapolate from the play as a whole. Silk believes that the fact that the capping sequences make Sausage-seller the triumphant ‘parallel’ to Paphlagon makes it hard to see this play as enacting a genuine attack on Cleon’s hegemony rather than being ‘an exhilarating projection of a Punch-and-Judy confrontation’.⁵¹ The extensive capping routines of *Knights* have also been seen as a facet of its unusual structure.⁵² *Knights* can certainly be said to have a formal epirrhematic *agōn* in which Cleon–Paphlagon and Agoracritus compete for Demos’ favour through promises and counter-accusations (761–940). And the formal *agōnes* of *Clouds* and *Frogs* have close affinities with its metrical scheme. But this *agōn* is, as Alan Sommerstein remarks, ‘so unruly that neither speaker ever succeeds in producing a structured argument and neither can be said to dominate either half of the contest.’⁵³

In this section I will show that the capping duels of *Knights* are not just comic ‘routines’ determined by the dramatic genre in which they are located. Rather, they also draw their dramatic and comic impact from the fact that capping genres of discourse were, as I showed in the previous section, a very pervasive and important part of Athenian life. The fact that the play’s *agōn* is so unstructured and unruly is very closely linked to the fact that ‘sublimely appalling’ capping exchanges dominate the play. However, the ‘modal exuberance’ of these exchanges and the fact that they lock Agoracritus into a parallel verbal relationship with Paphlagon actually *allow* a reading of *Knights* in which Aristophanes has serious things to say about Cleonic politics rather than, as Silk argues, *precluding* such a reading.

Let us begin with the first capping sequence which takes place between the Paphlagonian slave and the Sausage-seller (284–302):⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See *Eq.* 284–303, 351–81 and 441–81 with my discussion below. Cleon and Sausage-seller attack each other in a looser quasi-improvised capping mode which mixes stichomythia, distich duelling and the splitting of single lines (694–726). Their flying embraces a capping mode as these rivals in *ponēria* compete with ever more extravagant and flattering claims on Demos’ affection (904–11, 1162–1206). They even attempt to cap each other with oracles and their interpretations thereof (1000–97).

⁵¹ Silk (2000) 336–7 and 342.

⁵² Ruffell (1999) 200–71 offers good remarks on the way in which *Knights*’ structure challenges the usefulness of the structural classifications (especially *parabasis* and *agōn*) which are routinely applied to Aristophanic comedy.

⁵³ Sommerstein (1996) 235. As Sommerstein points out, the metrical affinities between the formal ‘debates’ in *Knights*, *Clouds* and *Frogs* are that in each play the ‘more dignified’ character gets to initiate his case in anapaests while the less dignified gets iambic tetrameters.

⁵⁴ The translation of this sequence is a mix-and-match of Sommerstein (1981), Silk (2000) 127 and my own efforts.

Πα. ἀποθανεῖσθον αὐτίκα μάλα.	Cl: Die, the pair of you, this minute!
Αλ. τριπλάσιον κεκράξομαι σου.	SS: I'll bawl three times as loud as you.
Πα. <u>καταβολήσομαι βοῶν σε.</u>	Cl: <u>I'll shout you down with my shouts.</u>
Αλ. <u>κατακεκράξομαι σε κράζων.</u>	SS: <u>I'll bawl you down with my bawls.</u>
Πα. διαβαλῶ σ', ἐὰν στρατηγῆς.	Cl: I'll smear you if you become a general.
Αλ. κυνοκοπήσω σου τὸ νῶτον.	SS: I'll flay your back like a dog's.
Πα. <u>περιελῶ σ' ἀλαζονεῖαις.</u>	Cl: <u>I'll encircle you with claptrap (alazoneiai).</u>
Αλ. <u>ὑποτεμοῦμαι τὰς ὁδοὺς σου.</u>	SS: <u>I'll cut off your lines of retreat.</u>
Πα. βλέψον εἰς μ' ἀσκαρδάμυκτος.	Cl: Look me in the eye without blinking.
Αλ. ἐν ἀγορᾷ κἀγὼ τέθραμμαι.	SS: I too was bred in the agora
Πα. <u>διαφορήσω σ', εἴ τι γρύξεις.</u>	Cl: <u>Make a sound and I'll tear you to bits.</u>
Αλ. <u>κοπροφορήσω σ', εἴ λαλήσεις.</u>	SS: <u>Say a word, and you'll be in the shits.</u>
Πα. ὁμολογῶ κλέπτειν· σὺ δ' οὐχι.	Cl: I avow myself a thief; you aren't one.
Αλ. νῆ τὸν Ἑρμῆν τὸν Ἀγοραίων. κάπιρκῶ γε βλεπόντων.	SS: Yes, I am by Hermes of the Agora; and I can steal before witnesses and deny it on oath.
Πα. ἀλλότρια τοίνυν σοφίζει. καὶ φανῶ σε τοῖς πρυτάνεσιν ἀδεκατεύτους τῶν θεῶν ἱεράς ἔχοντα κοιλίας.	Cl: That's plagiarism! ⁵⁵ And I expose you to the Prytaneis as being in possession of sacred tripe belonging to the gods on which no tithe has been paid!

I have underlined some of the more obvious lexical and stylistic aspects of the parallel structures which constitute the capping in this exchange.⁵⁶ However, the poetics of Cleon's and the Sausage-seller's pseudo-improvised exchange become more complex when we go beyond a purely formal analysis. These two comic heroes 'perform' with an acute awareness of their internal audience (the Knights) and they parade a *self-awareness* as to the nature and connotations of their verbal duel. When Cleon promises to 'encircle' his opponent with *alazoneia*, for example, he signals the fact that he is engaging in a *parody* of capping. For, as we have seen, the social poetics of classical Athenian capping in the symposium or agora is all about outdoing and testing one's interlocutor in order to display one's superiority. But *this* exchange is a contest in inferiority.

Cleon's choice of verb (περιελώνω) enacts a metaphor drawn from cavalry tactics.⁵⁷ This is a ploy to please his internal audience of Knights. In the lines immediately preceding this exchange, we have already seen Cleon defending himself against the conspiracy of Nicias and Demosthenes by attempting to enlist the support of the Knights (266–8). The Chorus are immediately wise to this as a flagrant attempt to flatter them and they join Sausage-seller in criticising Paphlagon–Cleon's characteristic

⁵⁵ Literally, 'you are being ingenious with the ingenuities of another'.

⁵⁶ See also Silk (2000) 126–31.

⁵⁷ See the tactics of the Philasian cavalry (περιελάσαντες) at Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.14 and the marauding Scythian horsemen (περιελάσνοντες) at Hdt. 1.106.1. See also Xen. *Cyr.* 4.2.32, 5.2.4, 7.5.1; *Hipparch.* 3.2. The verb is used as a metaphor of political harassment at Hdt. 1.60.2. Cleon uses the verb again at *Eq.* 887: οἴμοι τάλας, οἷος πιθηκισμοῖς με περιελώνεις. This time, then, Cleon is acknowledging his weakness and the Sausage-seller's knavish skills.

methods of shouting and dubious legal denunciation (269–83). So Paphlagon's adoption of cavalry-talk in his capping duel is marked as having an eye on that duel's internal audience.

Sausage-seller comes back at Paphlagon–Cleon with another cavalry metaphor. And this riposte may well trump Cleon's line. First, the Sausage-seller's cavalry metaphor is complete: 'I'll cut off your lines of retreat' seems a fuller and cleverer transposition of cavalry-talk to the capping contest than 'I'll encircle you with my *alazoneiai*' because it remains entirely within the metaphorical field. Secondly, the Sausage-seller's metaphor is metadiscursive and self-conscious because it describes the very manoeuvre which it also enacts: Cleon threatens to encircle with his line of stichomythia but Sausage-seller has not been trapped into silence and now lays down a countering ploy with a more complete image of cavalry-entrapment.

Paphlagon–Cleon continues in a self-conscious vein with an image of his own capping skill which lies *within* his next cap. By challenging the Sausage-seller to look at him without blinking he resorts to the language of a staring match. This describes the nature of their verbal contest – the first person to offer a weak riposte (or no riposte at all) loses the exchange. Cleon tries a sophisticated new tack here and it is tempting to read the Sausage-seller's response as a parry rather than a countering cap. But the attempt to turn the capping match into a staring match also signals desperation on Cleon's part: is he so anxious lest he be the first to falter that he wants to try a different 'idiom' of contest? A staring match has the same logic as a capping match. Victory in both is contingent upon who will falter first. Where verbal capping involves creative and performative action, however, staring is all about studied *inaction*. Furthermore, Cleon, the great bawler and shouter, is suggesting a contest which is not even dependent on the voice! Cleon is panicking and it is little wonder that Sausage-seller is unfazed: he simply replies that he is a creature of the *agora* too. This rejoinder and the comic force of the whole sequence have a greater impact when we acknowledge that improvised and combative *ad hominem* caps were associated with the market-place as well as the symposium.

At one point, the 'slave' Demosthenes draws very explicit attention to the 'poetics' of capping discourse. A capping exchange of abusive name-calling between Cleon and Agoracritus descends into violence as Demosthenes and his sausage-selling saviour start hitting the slave–demagogue (452–6). Paphlagon–Cleon quickly recovers with an accusation of conspiracy against his foe which uses metaphors from wood-working (461–3): 'By Demeter, I was well aware how this plot was being carpentered; I knew all along that it was being bolted and glued together.' Agoracritus replies with a counter-accusation of a Cleonic plot against Athens which parallels Cleon's subject-matter but which does not use any metaphors at all (465–7). This alarms Demosthenes and he interrupts Agoracritus to upbraid him: 'For god's sake, aren't *you* saying anything out of the wagon works?' (οἱμοι, σὺ δ' οὐδὲν ἐξ ἀμαξουργοῦ λέγεις; 468).⁵⁸ Demosthenes

⁵⁸ Here I follow Hermann's transposition of line 464 as discussed by Sommerstein (1981) 168.

thinks that Agoracritus must match Cleon with his own wood-working metaphors. The Sausage-seller then continues with a pair of lines which deploy metaphors of *metal*-working: ‘... and I know on what terms that plot’s welded together (συμφυσώμενα): it’s forged (χαλκεύεται) on the prisoners’ (469–70). Demosthenes is now pleased (471): ‘Well done! Well done: answer his bolts and glue with phrases from the foundry’ (εὖ γ’, εὖ γε· χάλκευ’ ἀντὶ τῶν κολλωμένων).

It is clear from this exchange that Agoracritus can only defeat Cleon via a specific poetics of capping in which he must match and surpass Cleon’s imagery and word-play as well as his content. Indeed, the trumping of wood with metal allows Agoracritus to become explicit with his accusations of bribery (472–4). But at the same time as the poetics of *ad hominem* capping in *Knights* specifies a need to duel with metaphors, there is room for a witty and clever riposte which trumps the metaphorical with the literal. Thus, when Cleon threatens to go to the Boulē and to accuse Agoracritus of a pro-Persian plot which is being ‘cheesed up’ with the Boeotians, Agoracritus deflates the charge by pretending not to understand the accusation or the metaphor at all: ‘Oh, what price is cheese in Boeotia?’ (480). As Sommerstein puts it, he speaks as if Cleon was ‘intending to report to the Council on Boeotian cheese production’.⁵⁹ It turns out that Demosthenes is right that the game at hand requires metaphorical prowess. But Agoracritus shows that he is more aware than Demosthenes of how to translate that prowess into the capping of his opponent: wood will be capped by metal, not more wood. And cheese is just too cheesy to be anything other than cheese. One can win a capping exchange with a witty *refusal* to meet a metaphor with another one if, by doing so, one exposes one’s opponent’s metaphors as weak or hackneyed.

If we do not notice that Cleon and Agoracritus are represented as capping according to a dynamic poetics where ‘improvised’ metaphors are (con)tested and teased for their (in)appropriateness, we miss a very intricate and entertaining dimension to these confrontations. The pleasure and enjoyment of these ‘quasi-improvised’ exchanges spoke to a real oral culture of capping banter amidst the market stalls, shops, brothels and bathhouses of classical Athens’ agora and Cerameicus. As we saw in the previous section, this quick-fire banter is reliant on a facility with metaphor, allusiveness and rug-pulling put-downs. And while we saw that regularised capping discourse was a feature of the symposium which must have influenced Aristophanes’ own use and representation of combative capping, the ‘agoraic’ connotations are especially exploited by Aristophanes in this play.

But the affinity between the duels in *Knights* and real Athenian capping also marks Aristophanes’ interest in characterising the quality and nature of political and legal discourse in Cleon’s Athens. This interest is partly signalled in the Sausage-seller’s true name: Agoracritus. The name literally means ‘chosen from the *agora*’. But the character himself offers a different etymology to the admiring Demos, ‘because I was reared a disputant in the agora’ (ἐν τᾷ ἀγορᾷ γὰρ κρινόμενος ἐβουκόμην, 1258).

⁵⁹ Sommerstein (1981) 168.

This name-play emphasises the point that Cleon can only be beaten *in* argument by someone who argues better than he and that someone could only be another *agoraios*. However, the capping exchanges between Agoracritus and Cleon–Paphlagon are not really ‘arguments’ in the ‘forensic’ or ‘deliberative’ mould. And although the play makes hay with key *topoi* found in Thucydides’ speeches and the orators by realising them on stage, there is no parody of oratory in the form of an orderly long-speech *agōn*.⁶⁰ Nor is there an extended *apologia* which parodies oratory. At first sight this is rather odd when one thinks of Aristophanes’ fondness for such parodies in other plays. But part of the point of Aristophanes’ decision to structure his play around capping duels rather than long speeches is, in my view, precisely to posit a kinship between Cleon’s political and forensic style and the capping discourses associated with the symposium and the agora. While combative capping is hugely entertaining and crowd-pleasing, it is also an idiom of contest which is completely antithetical to the Athenian democracy’s *ideals* of legal argument or political debate.⁶¹ By having Cleon and his newly emergent nemesis engage in stichomythic capping involving threats, boasts and promises of food, Aristophanes is able to satirise Cleon’s use of legal and political rhetoric by rendering it in a completely different, but eminently recognisable, idiom whose goal is short-term victory, the silencing of a rival and the immediate gratification of, and ingratiation with, Demos. In other words, he re-configures Cleon’s engagement in the agonistic rhetoric which served the Athenian democracy as (merely) a form of sympotic and agoraic verbal one-upmanship.

This re-configuring of political exchange is well exemplified by a very comic displacement of political and forensic oratory in the early stages of the Sausage-seller’s challenge to Paphlagon’s influence over Demos. Paphlagon–Cleon boasts of his natural oratorical abilities and scoffs at Agoracritus’ claim to be as capable as he is ‘at speaking and stirring things up’ (343–355). Paphlagon–Cleon imagines that Agoracritus has only once won a trivial court case having stayed up all night rehearsing his speech and drinking water for his voice. Agoracritus sarcastically (and lewdly) wonders what sort of drink allows Paphlagon–Cleon to render the city

⁶⁰ For the *topoi* see Yunis (1996) 92–101; Heath (1997); Wohl (2002) 73–123. It is true that we get Agoracritus’ own account of his oratorical victory against Cleon–Paphlagon in the Athenian Boulē (624–82). But this is really a messenger speech which contains parody of demagoguery and democratic process rather than a piece of parodic oratory in itself. Indeed, Agoracritus’ account of his and Cleon’s confrontation before the Boulē is itself inscribed with the *logic* of capping.

⁶¹ Of course, there is no direct statement in Athenian texts to this effect. But the Thucydidean Cleon himself draws a contrast between mere ‘contest’ via the display of novelty and good decision-making (Thuc. 3.38.5–7). Pericles’ and Diodotus’ stress on the importance of deliberation and *euboulia* (‘deliberative virtue’) in the democracy clearly presupposes rational debate via long speeches rather than capping (Thuc. 2.40.2–3, 3.42.1–2). See also the forensic orators’ frequent attacks on their opponents, use of entertaining *loidoria* as the opposite of proper proof and argument (e.g. Is. 6.5; Dem. 18.122–3 and 138, 22.22). This is not to say that combative capping does not find its way into real Athenian political and forensic oratory. It could be argued, for example, that elements of Demosthenes’ rhetoric in the defence speech *On the crown* are capping ripostes to elements of Aeschines’ prosecution speech, *Against Ctesiphon*.

such that he alone ‘can now master her with your tongue and reduce her to silence’ (351–2).⁶² Paphlagon–Cleon retorts that he can eat hot slices of tunny fish washed down with a whole jug of neat wine and then immediately ‘screw the generals at Pylos’ (353–5). He, unlike Agoracritus, has such natural rhetorical ability that he can produce devastating political oratory even when drunk. But this wrangling *about* rhetorical prowess does not lead – as we might expect – to a long-speech *agōn* in which their relative speech-making abilities are put to the test. Rather, Paphlagon–Cleon’s and Agoracritus’ countering claims to oratorical excellence descend very quickly into a boastful capping exchange (361–3):

- Πα. ἀλλ’ οὐ λάβρακας καταφαγὼν Μιλησίους κλονήσεις.
 Αλ. ἀλλὰ σχελίδας ἐδηδοκῶς ὠνήσομαι μέταλλα.
 Πα. ἐγὼ δ’ ἐπεισπηδῶν γε τὴν βουλὴν βία κικήσω.
- Cl: *You won’t devour the Milesians’ bass and then fall on them like a hurricane.*
 SS: *But I’ll eat sides of beef and then buy mining leases.*
 Cl: *I’ll leap upon the Council and give it a violent shaking.*

And then, just as quickly, the capping boasts mutate into capping threats involving sex and/or violence (364–75):

- Αλ. ἐγὼ δὲ βυνήσω γέ σου τὸν πρωκτὸν ἀντὶ φύσκης.
 Πα. ἐγὼ δὲ γ’ ἐξέλω σε τῆς πυγῆς θύραζε κύβδα.
 Δη. νῆ τὸν Ποσειδῶ κάμὲ τᾶρ’, ἤνπερ γε τοῦτον ἔλκης.
 Πα. οἶόν σε δῆσω <’ν> τῷ ξύλῳ.
 Αλ. διώξομαί σε δειλίας.
 Πα. ἢ βύρσα σου θρανεύσεται.
 Αλ. δερῶ σε θύλακον κλοπῆς.
 Πα. διαπατταλευθήσει χαμαί.
 Αλ. περικόμματ’ ἐκ σου σκευάσω.
 Πα. τὰς βλεφαρίδας σου παρατιλῶ.
 Αλ. τὸν πρηγορεῶνά σου ἴκτεμῶ.

⁶² The suggestion that Cleon masters the *dēmos* with his tongue and reduces her to silence is not, I would suggest, simply a statement which sexualises Cleon’s rhetorical and political relationship with the people (although the depiction of Cleon and Agoracritus as rival lovers of Demos is important: see Wohl (2002) 73–123 for cogent analysis). Agoracritus uses the verb καταγλωττίζω which can mean ‘talk down’ or ‘talk against’ as well as ‘kiss with the tongue’. The *dēmos* are here imagined as sexually seduced by Cleon’s oratory but the reduction to silence suggests that they are unable to *reply* to Cleon’s expert capping and haranguing. His oratory is like the performance of oral sex but its propinquity to combative capping makes the recipient silent, passive and defeated.

- SS: And I'll stuff your arse like a sausage-skin.
 Cl: And I'll drag you *by* the arse out of doors and head-first.
 Dem: By Poseidon, if you drag him, you'll have to drag me too.
 Cl: How I'll clap you in the stocks!
 SS: I'll indict you for cowardice.
 Cl: Your hide will be stretched on the tanning bench.
 SS: I'll flay you into a thief's hold-all.
 Cl: You'll be spread out and pegged to the ground.
 SS: I'll make mincemeat out of you.
 Cl: I'll pluck out your eyelashes.
 SS: I'll cut out your crop.

Paphlagon–Cleon and Sausage-seller combine a pseudo-improvised capping format with subject-matter covering gastronomic, alcoholic, rhetorical, sexual and politically corrupt excess. This imagery is partly 'sympotic' and 'deipnotic'. But the movement from discussion about oratorical prowess to ribald capping – via the 'agoraic' language of sausage-selling and tanning mixed with litigiousness and the threat of sexual violence – also implies that Paphlagon–Cleon's demagoguery and his misuse of Athenian law and politics have their roots in the competitive and vulgar banter of street-traders and common prostitutes. Only a man with the same background as Paphlagon–Cleon is able to engage him successfully in this debased version of 'public speaking'. In response to the above exchange, the Chorus marvel that 'there really are things hotter than fire and speeches more shameless than the shameless speeches uttered in the city' (384–5).

We are thus offered a sustained conceit in which the selfishness of aggressive capping is used to characterise the true nature of Cleon and his kind. Herzfeld's Cretan men use a capping idiom of contest in order to perform their manhood and extend their reputation in their community at the expense of rivals. Aristophanes represents Cleonic demagoguery as doing the same thing in the sphere of politics, but with the important, *mocking* difference that Paphlagon–Cleon is more than happy to adopt the role of a homosexual rapist in his zeal to cap the threats of his opponent. As Aristophanes sees it, the discourse of Cleonic politics is reducible to an exercise in combative capping designed to secure the favour and pleasure of an audience at the expense of one's political rival. This is why the allegorical layer of the play where mass–élite politics is figured in terms of slaves and *ponēroi* competing for the favour of their old master Demos is delivered via a series of capping exchanges rather than long speeches. These and other examples from the play suggest that combative capping is 'thematized' as Cleon's displacement of good discursive practice in the Council, assembly and lawcourts.

Now, such a 'thematization' of capping ought to cast Agoracritus in a rather negative light precisely because he is such a successful Cleonic duellist himself. But, for most of the play, we are just not encouraged to *feel* that negative about Paphlagon–Cleon's new rival. Demosthenes and the Chorus delight in, and celebrate, Agoracritus' verbal

dexterity and creativity in his duels with Cleon (457–60, 470, 617, 837). It is not easy to reconcile such celebrations with the more negative thematisation of capping running alongside them. It is precisely the fact that Agoracritus and Paphlagon exhibit this contradiction between ‘entertaining’ and ‘odious’ in parallel to each other which leads Silk to argue that serious moral or political points cannot be extrapolated from *Knights*.

The parallelism between the play’s protagonists certainly makes it hard to resolve some more general critical problems which are generated by the ‘double’ ending of *Knights*. Paphlagon–Cleon is defeated and removed from power but then we have a second ‘resolution’ whereby Agoracritus ‘boils down’ Demos so that he becomes a supposedly wiser man who will accept and implement supposedly better proposals (1331–1408). Is Agoracritus an improvement on Cleon or an even worse version of him? When Agoracritus banishes Paphlagon–Cleon back to the margins of agoraic life and transforms Demos into a new man who is ashamed of his former self, is this a positive, utopian ending in which we imagine the *dēmos* and its élite advisers will learn to engage in a better form of politics? Or is the ending an ironic one which makes the serious point that the *dēmos* will always find itself manipulated by the next eye-catching, and yet foul, demagogue who succeeds in hoodwinking it?⁶³

The play’s thematisation of combative capping cannot help us to resolve these questions about the way the comedy ends and its implications for wider debates about Aristophanic ‘seriousness’. This is because Aristophanes dispenses with the combative capping mode once Paphlagon–Cleon has been defeated and banished. Perhaps Agoracritus’ comment at 1397–1401 that the banished Paphlagon–Cleon will ply his ‘old trade’ and ‘exchange abuse’ with prostitutes by the city-gates is a veiled promise that politics will no longer be debased by the Cleonic rhetoric which is imaged as combative capping in this play. But even if that reading is admissible we have to assume that Agoracritus is being genuine.

Regardless of how we read the play’s ending, and despite the parallelism between its protagonists, Aristophanes’ ambiguous engagement with capping discourse in this play *does* nevertheless offer its audience some serious food for thought. For it invites them to see an analogy between enjoyable, and yet trivial, capping discourses and the contemporary rhetoric of the assembly and lawcourts. The latter is supposed to constitute an exchange of rational arguments and proofs but, Aristophanes implies, under the influence of Cleon these spaces for democratic argumentation now host competitive displays of verbal one-upmanship which are more appropriate at a party,

⁶³ When Demos agrees to policies which apparently exemplify his eschewal of self-gratification in favour of a new-found good sense, Agoracritus rewards him with a well-hung boy to have sex with. Then he brings out two or three women who personify a thirty years’ peace treaty with Sparta, claiming that Cleon has been hiding them away. Demos checks that he will be able to *κατατριάκοντούσιαι* them. This is a coined word which means ‘to thirty yearise up them’ but can be etymologised as ‘to pierce them three times with a long pole from below’ (1391). For ironic readings of this ending, its relationship with Paphlagon’s defeat and Demos’ earlier claim that he only *pretends* to be gullible (1121–50) see Dover (1972) 99; Brock (1986); Hesk (2000a) 255–8 and (2000b) 248–61; Wohl (2002) 109–23; Scholtz (2004). For ‘straight’ utopian readings see Sommerstein (1981) 203; MacDowell (1995) 104–7.

in a brothel or around a market stall. The *fun* attached to witnessing the capping duels of *Knights* implicates the audience (the *dēmos*) in a *serious* way: they are forced to consider the way in which they might be excessively pleased by one-on-one rivalries and competitive displays of verbal dexterity at the expense of good policy or justice when they sit in the assembly or on mass-juries. By representing political rivals as sympotic and agoraic duellists Aristophanes thus has his cake and eats it. For the audience are given an entertaining Aristophanic version of the combative capping which they enjoy in other social contexts. And yet, the implied movement of such duels into the political and legal spheres is itself serious and unsettling.

5. *Combative capping in Clouds and Banqueters*

In the *Clouds* a sequence of capping abuse with parallel structures takes place between Better and Worse Arguments before they settle down to their formal *agōn* of longer speeches (907–33, 961–1082). Their longer speeches are then followed by some cross-questioning dialogue in which the Worse Argument seals his victory.

These two personifications of Protogorean Logoi have been brought out in order to debate the merits of the educational philosophy which they each represent. The idea is that Strepsiades' son Pheidippides can choose between the old-fashioned education of Better and the new-fangled sophistic approach of Worse.

In my second section, I cited a part of the quasi-improvised capping sequence between the Logoi which is particularly striking for its parallel structures and abuse (908–13). This sequence of *ad hominem* abusive capping banter clearly draws on the sexual word-play and a facility with metaphor which we found to be a feature of capping banter in a number of other texts. But it is the Chorus' intervention in the sequence which is especially significant for me here. The abusive capping is descending into threats of violence as the Chorus step in (932–38):

Ητ. δεῦρ' ἴθι, τοῦτον δ' ἕα μαίνεσθαι.
 Κρ. κλαύσει, τὴν χεῖρ' ἦν ἐπιβάλλης.
 Χο. παύσασθε μάχης καὶ λοιδορίας.
 ἀλλ' ἐπίδειξαι σύ τε τοὺς προτέρους
 ἄττ' ἐδίδασκες, σύ τε τὴν καινὴν
 παιδευσιν, ὅπως ἂν ἀκούσας σφῶν
 ἀντιλεγόντων κρίνας φοιτᾷ.

Worse: Come here, and leave him to his raving.

Better: I'll make you cry, if you lay a hand on him!

Chorus: Stop your fighting and abuse! Rather give an exposition of how you used to educate the men of old, and you, of the new education, so that he may hear both your opposing arguments, make his judgement, and join the appropriate school.

Pheidippides must be allowed to make a judgement on the basis of an *epideixis* of opposing arguments, rather than the exchange of insults. The Chorus clearly mark a contrast between *ad hominem* exchanges of abuse and ‘proper’ argument here and they find the former inadequate for the task at hand. Here we have an association between violence and abuse (*loidoria*) which is common in later Athenian oratory.⁶⁴ We also have a contrast between abuse and more reasoned or forensic forms of argument. This contrast is also a topos of Attic legal speeches and an argumentative gambit in Platonic dialogue.⁶⁵ The transition to the *agōn* is represented as a move towards peaceable, measured debate which will be a better basis for decision-making.

Of course, the subsequent *agōn* between the two Arguments is not completely free of *ad hominem* abuse and capping.⁶⁶ And it would be absurd to suggest that this travesty of fifth-century epideictics, debate and cross-questioning results in civic, social or moral improvement. After all, it is Worse Argument’s victory in this *agōn* which allows him to teach Pheidippides to become a ‘skilled sophist’ (1111). This ‘sophistic training’ emboldens his father, Strepsiades, to cheat (and threaten violence against) his creditors (1145–1302). More significantly, Worse Argument’s training provokes a downward spiral of abusive wrangling and comic violence between father and son. Straight after the Clouds’ warning that he will quickly regret his son’s new-found ability to ‘argue for opinions opposed to justice’, Strepsiades emerges from his house complaining that his son is beating him around the head (1321–4). We are then treated to a quick-fire exchange between the boy and his father in which Pheidippides happily absorbs his father’s insults (1326–31):

Στ.	ὄραθ' ὁμολογοῦνθ' ὅτι με τύπτει;
Φε.	καὶ μάλα.
Στ.	ὦ μιὰρὲ καὶ πατραλοῖα καὶ τοιχωρύχε.
Φε.	αἰθῆς με ταῦτὰ ταῦτα καὶ πλείω λέγε. ἄρ' οἶσθ' ὅτι χαίρω πόλλ' ἀκούων καὶ κακά;
Στ.	ὦ λακκόπρωκτε -
Φε.	πάττε πολλοῖς τοῖς ῥόδοις.
Στ.	τὸν πατέρα τύπτεις
Φε.	κάποφανῶ γε νῆ Δία ὡς ἐν δίκῃ σ' ἔτυπτον.

St: Do you see? He admits he’s beating me.

Ph: Just so.

⁶⁴ Lys. 1.45, 3.43; Ant. 2.1.4; Dem. 40.32, 54.18–19. Arist. *Met.* 1013a7–10 describes *loidoria* as a natural cause of *machē*.

⁶⁵ See above note 61 and Pl. *Gorg.* 457d–e, *Euthyd.* 284c1–d6, *Theaet.* 174c5–10.

⁶⁶ E.g. 984 and 1000 where Worse Argument interrupts Better Argument’s speech with insulting language. See also 1022 where Better Argument warns that Worse Argument will infect Pheidippides with ‘the faggotry (*katapugosunē*) of Antimachus’.

- St: You villain, you father-beater, you felon!
 Ph: Do call me the same things again, and more. Do you know I enjoy being called many foul names?
 St: You tank-arsed scoundrel ...
 Ph: Shower me with more of these roses.
 St: Do you strike you father?
 St: Yes, and what's more, by Zeus, I'll prove that I was right to strike you.

In addition to learning how to make the worse argument more persuasive than the better argument, Pheidippides has internalised Worse Argument's own repertoire of quips and capping ripostes for occasions of abusive wrangling. Both Worse Argument and Pheidippides provoke their respective opponents by delighting in being called *patraloias* (911, 1328). And Pheidippides' language directly echoes responses from Worse Argument in his earlier exchange with Better Argument. Thus, 'πάττε πολλοῖς τοῖς ῥόδοις' picks up Worse's 'ῥόδα μ' εἴρηκας' and his 'χρῦσω πάττων μ' οὐ γιγνώσκεις' (910, 912). Despite the similarities between this altercation and the earlier one, however, there are also differences. This exchange has been preceded by violence whereas the *Logoi* do not quite come to blows. And, perhaps because it is a continuation of outright *loidoria* and violence, the exchange here is much less 'regularised' than the one which took place between the two *Logoi*. Finally, where the Chorus have to persuade Better and Worse to move to the *agōn* proper, the sophisticatedly-brainwashed Pheidippides needs no such prompting.⁶⁷

The second *agōn* is unique for its elaborateness and scale in extant Aristophanes.⁶⁸ It begins with the Chorus demanding to know what prompted the fighting (*machē*, 1351). Strepsiades agrees to give an account of 'what first caused us to begin to exchange abuse' (καὶ μὴν ὄθεν γε πρῶτον ἠρξάμεσθα λοιδορεῖσθαι ἐγὼ φράσω, 1353–4). Again, we have the verb *loidoreisthai* being used of mutual abuse, possibly (but by no means certainly) of a capping nature. Strepsiades goes on to explain that the quarrel began at dinner when he asked Pheidippides to sing a song by Simonides. Pheidippides refused on the grounds that singing while drinking after dinner was antiquated. Strepsiades then asked him to recite something from Aeschylus instead. But his son insulted Aeschylus as incoherent and bombastic. Strepsiades bit back his rage and allowed Pheidippides to recite some Euripides instead. But the incestuous content of the Euripidean speech was the last straw for the old man and he admits that he could take it no longer. His description of what happened next is important (1373–6):

⁶⁷ These differences are noted by Dover (1968) 248.

⁶⁸ See Gelzer (1960) 17ff. and 90f.; Dover (1968) 247–8.

ἀλλ' εὐθέως ἀράττω
πολλοῖς κακοῖς καίσχροῖσι. κᾶτ' ἐντεῦθεν, οἶον εἰκός,
ἔπος πρὸς ἔπος ἠρειδόμεσθ'· εἶθ' οὗτος ἐπαναπηδᾷ,
κᾶπειτ' ἔφλα με κάσπόδει κᾶπιγέ κᾶπέτριβεν.

I immediately hit him with many hard and foul reproaches. And after that, as you might expect, we attacked each other word for word.⁶⁹ Then he jumps up; and he knocked me and banged me and choked me and pulverised me.

Strepsiades is telling the Chorus that some form of tit-for-tat exchange of abuse and reproach between himself and his son descended into physical violence. But that violence is all directed against Strepsiades by Pheidippides. The second *agōn* will turn on whether or not the boy can argue successfully that it can be right to beat up your father. The small distance between verbal altercation and physical blows is emphasised in Strepsiades' vocabulary: ἀράττω is also used of verbal assault in Sophocles but its primary connotations are of landing blows and clattering objects such as doors or shields.⁷⁰

Thus the capping exchange at 1326–31 not only echoes the earlier capping sequence between the two Logoi but is also meant to be the on-stage continuation of the 'word for word' quarrel which started off-stage and which is described by Strepsiades at 1373–6. Dramatically and significantly, however, the exchange at 1326–31 has been occasioned by violence: the quarrel over dinner has led to blows and now the duelling resumes as Strepsiades flees his son's fists. Even more significantly, Pheidippides will use his sophistic skills to justify such antisocial and transgressive behaviour.

Aristophanes wants us to see that there is a kinship between sophistic discourse, capping exchanges and the sort of abusive quarrelling which leads to antisocial violence. That is why he has presented his two Logoi as having the capping idiom as their default mode and has then depicted Pheidippides trying to rehearse the same idiom.⁷¹ And that is why, despite the initial indication that combative capping and violence will be displaced and superseded by the more reasoned and peaceful *epideixis* of sophistic debate between the two Logoi, it transpires that the sophisticatedly-trained young man is all too willing to cap *and* fight his father. Admittedly, the second *agōn* is a more civilised process of elenctic debate than the exchanges which preceded it. But the debate forces Strepsiades to agree that fathers deserve blows from their sons (1437–9). Pheidippides then wishes to show that mothers deserve to be beaten by their

⁶⁹ It is actually quite difficult to translate ἔπος πρὸς ἔπος ἠρειδόμεσθ' with precision. It could mean 'we hurled word upon word' or 'we hurled word *against* word (i.e. at each other)' or 'we contended word for word'.

⁷⁰ See Soph. *Aj.* 725; *Phil.* 374. For the primary connotations see ἀράττεσθαί at *Nub.* 1359 and LSJ s. v. ἀράττω.

⁷¹ O'Regan (1992) is absolutely right to see that *Clouds* is a comic exploration of the relationship between *logos* and violence.

offspring too (1444–5). There is a sense that every sacred law and norm of Athenian civic and family life will be overturned by Pheidippides' training and that the boy has an insatiable appetite for winning with ever more extravagant and socially destructive claims. When the *Clouds* reveal that Strepsiades has brought this whole situation upon himself by enlisting the forces of sophistic argument to aid and abet his fraudulent scheme to outwit his creditors, he himself resorts to violence. Strepsiades expresses a desire to destroy Socrates and his pupils and sets fire to his school (1466, 1490–1510).

The dramatic burning-down of the *phrontistērion* is the ironic culmination of sophistry's complicity with the forces of criminality and violence. And there is also the point that the quasi-violent power of *logos* is in fact powerless against real brute force.⁷² But Aristophanes does not simply want to end with the conceit that an intellectual operation which helps its students to evade or rewrite the law itself falls victim to lawless behaviour. Rather, he hints that rational debate (albeit *sophistic* rational debate) *could* offer an improvement to capping and fighting. But *then* he shows that Pheidippides has learned capping and fighting *as well as* more deliberative and peaceable debating skills. By the time the *Clouds* intervene in the capping exchange between the two *Logoi* to prevent a fight and to call for an *epideixis* of proper debate, Pheidippides *has already had* an *epideixis* of capping invective and tit-for-tat threats of violence. Thus, in *Clouds*, combative capping and its tendency to degrade into violence are thematised as having a close relationship with sophistic idioms of disputation. 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 the combative capping which formed its prelude; if only sophistic disputation could loosen its anchorage in the (anti-)ethics of 'victory-at-all-costs' whose most witty and temptingly entertaining *comic* embodiment is, of course, combative capping.

The parabasis of *Clouds* alludes to the close thematic relationship between this play and Aristophanes' first comedy of 427 BC, *Banqueters* (528–33). Although we only have a few fragments of *Banqueters* it is clear that the play concerned a farmer who sent his two sons to a teacher in the city. It seems likely that the 'good son' returned home, perhaps having rejected the education he was getting (fr. 206 K–A). The 'bad son' stayed and absorbed the language and tricks of sophists, rhetoricians and the lawcourts (frs. 205 and 233 K–A). In fragment 225 the father is distressed to discover that one son, presumably the bad one, has learned the wrong 'lessons', namely drinking, bad singing, and an effete diet of Syracusan food, Sybaritic feastings and Chian wine from Spartan goblets. The longest surviving fragment contains a stichomythic exchange in which speaker A seems to be the 'bad son' and speaker B is the old father (fr. 205 K–A):⁷³

⁷² An irony which is brought out well by O'Regan (1992) 114–39.

⁷³ My translation borrows heavily from MacDowell (1995) 28 and the insights of Tammaro (1980). MacDowell also uses K–A as opposed to Cassio (1977) 43–9. Cassio makes fewer emendations and has excellent discussion. I can see no points of difference between K–A and Cassio which affect my particular argument. The attribution of this conversation to a 'profligate son' and the 'old man' comes from Gal. *Hipp.* 19.66.7–67.7.

- A. ἀλλ' εἰ σορέλλη καὶ μύρον καὶ ταινίαι.
 B. ἰδοὺ σορέλλη: τοῦτο παρά Λυσιστράτου.
 A. ἦ μὴν ἴσως σὺ καταπλιγήσῃ τῷ χρόνῳ.
 B. τὸ καταπλιγήσῃ τοῦτο παρά τῶν ῥητόρων.
 A. ἀποβήσεται σοι ταῦτά ποι τὰ ῥήματα.
 B. παρ' Ἀλκιβιάδου τοῦτο ἀποβήσεται.
 A. τί δ' ὑποτεκμαίρη καὶ κακῶς ἄνδρας λέγεις
 καλοκάγαθειν ἀσκοῦντας;
 B. οἴμ', ὦ Θρασύμαχε,
 τίς τοῦτο τῶν ξυνηγόρων τερατεύεται;
- A. You're just a coffinette and funeral perfume and mourning bands!
 B. Listen to his 'coffinette'! This is lifted from Lysistratus.
 A. You'll be tripped up by time, I have little doubt!
 B. That 'tripped up' is lifted from the orators.
 A. Some consequence will follow from your words.⁷⁴
 B. That's lifted from Alcibiades, that 'consequence'.
 A. Why do you suspicate and bad-mouth men who are training to gentlemanise (lit. 'to be *kalos* and *agathos*')?
 B. God help us, Thrasymachus! Which advocate's monstrosity is that?

Galen quotes this passage as an example of the way in which 'every man concerned with *logoi*' thought it right to coin new words (*kaina onomata*). And he sets it alongside a claim that Antiphon specifically taught neologism as an art. (Gal. *Lex. Hipp.* 19.66.7–9). The joke here is that the son's insults and threats contain affected and unfamiliar vocabulary which his father sources to specific named popular orators and the tribe of *rhētores* as a whole.

I would argue, however, that this scene is more piquant if we read the son's attempts to coin new words or usages as strategies which the audience would associate with improvised capping banter *as well as* rhetorical training. Given that banqueting seems to have been an important theme of the play it might be the deipnotic associations of such banter which are to the fore here. The bad son attempts to couple the belittling banter that he has learned at his luxurious feasts in the city with the neologisms which form a part of his education in oratory and disputation. We saw in my third section how important word-play and coinage are in ancient Greek representations of such banter. And so, as in *Clouds*, Aristophanes forges a connection between sophistic discourse and combative capping. However, in *this* passage at least, we see that the boy's father is no Strepsiades. He is able to cap his son's lines of attack (via the repeated τοῦτο παρά formula) by showing that he is not coining apt and novel threats and insults at

⁷⁴ My translation of this line assumes ποι as emended by K–A. However, Cassio (1977) 47 sees no reason to emend the transmitted interrogative ποι into the corresponding enclitic. The line would then be in the form of a question: 'Where will your words take you?/ What will be the consequence of your words?'.

all. He is actually ventriloquising the rhetorical types whom he has been listening to in the city. And thus a boy who has supposedly learned the art of public discourse is capped by the extemporised utterances of his aged father.

We cannot know what the overall plot movement of *Banqueters* was and so should not even conjecture as to the wider connotations and consequences of this reading of one fragment for the play as a whole. But we can see once again how Aristophanes' use of, and response to, the phenomenon of combative capping is ambiguous. It is a good resource for imaging the *superficiality* of sophistic eristic. And yet, the rug-pulling imperative of combative capping also allows the old father to cap his son by exposing his 'improvisations' as unoriginal and derivative.⁷⁵

6. Conclusion

Aristophanes' plays evince an interest in portraying and pursuing the ambiguity of improvised capping games and non-regularised capping banter through sympotic, deipnotic and agoraic associations which his audience would have recognised. I have documented some hitherto under-appreciated aspects of such capping. I have also shown that certain ethnographic parallels can help us to read Aristophanic capping sequences so long as they are used with attention to the differences between the two as well as the similarities. In *Knights*, combative capping is used to characterise the disfigured and superficial quality of Cleon-era politics and its oratory. My reading of this play suggested that Aristophanes wanted his audience to enjoy its inscription of capping as a mixture of quasi-improvised sophistication *and* crudeness. But this very process of enjoyment invites the audience to consider whether it is complicit in a re-configuring of democratic debate and procedure into a superficial spectacle of competitive one-upmanship. To that extent *Knights* encourages a serious response beyond its wit and humour. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes links combative capping with sophistic discourse. Far from being the proper training in civic argument and refutation which it *should* be and (he hints) *could* be, sophistic education encourages aggressive 'victory-at-all costs' capping which in turn proliferates *loidoria*, violence and their rhetorical justifications. Here we see a link between the thematisations of combative capping which I have traced in *Knights* and *Clouds*. In both plays, the ambiguity of combative capping is used as a means of highlighting discursive threats to the social, moral and political well-being of Athens. *Banqueters* fragment 205 also does this work and, as with other examples of Aristophanic capping, it does so by playing upon combative capping's dynamics of word-play, neologism and rug-pulling.

⁷⁵ A very similar strategy is deployed in an apparently improvised rap battle between Eminem and an opponent which is depicted on the *8 Mile* DVD Special Edition. Eminem ripostes that one opponent's rhymed insults were 'written' (i.e. pre-prepared) and 'too generic'.

Aristophanes was not merely interested in refashioning the registers and structures of live, improvised idioms of combative capping because they were entertaining and funny – although the point that Aristophanes was speaking to an audience who appreciated the creative ‘poetics’ of these idioms has been crucial to my argument. Capping was also a good idiom through which to raise serious questions about the quality, depth and consequences of contemporary political and legal discourse and the more fashionable forms of rhetorical and philosophical education which had emerged in the second half of the fifth century.

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