

Political comedy in aristophanes

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The Wasps was written in 422BC by the above Greek Playwrite Aristophenes. It involves a father Procleon and a son Anticleon, the latter of which has a sole aim to keep his father locked up away from jury duty as he see's it as an injustice and a waste of the later stages of his life. The characters names relate to the Athenian politician Cleon, a contraversial but popular character at the time during the Peloponnesian War.

Procleon is translated into Ancient Greek as " friend of Cleon" and Anticleon is translated as " hater of Cleon". Cleon, when he was in power, trebled the wages of the Jurymen to give him a hold on the poorer classes, a move frowned upon by Aristophenes as he demonstrates in The Wasps by conducting a full arguement on how corrupt the courts are and how Jurymen have such little influence on the final outcome, that they are nothing more than state pawns. Aristophenes' dislike for Cleon was something of a class-based one as well.

Rumours spread that Cleon was decended from a lower class background, and because of the amount of power and influence he held within Athenian politics, Aristophenes, being something of a rich snob at the time, didn't like this at all and had somewhat of a personal vendetta against him.

Aristophenes wrote the play The Wasps for The Lenaia, an annual drama festival in honour of the Greek god, Dionysus. The Lenaia took place in Athens in the month of Gamelion which is roughly January.

During the festival in Aristophenes' time, three plays were performed, most of them comedy as people would probably have been drinking wine at the time in honour of Dionysus. Ancient Greek Old Comedy was mainly based on

current issues like politics, morals, philosophy and literature. From the surviving plays, historians have pointed out that many local people or politicians are involved as characters in Old Comedy and are impersonated and often mocked. Also, from the little evidence we have, Old Comedies seem to have a fixed structure consisting of an agon and two parabases.

The Chorus had a very important role in Old Greek Comedy as well, as they established a strong link between the actors and the audience. Aristophanes was an Old Greek Comedy artist. We have eleven of his plays that are still readable and it is worth noting that a year before *The Wasps* was released, Aristophanes entered a play called *Clouds* which challenged many set ideas at the time, thus it being snubbed by the audience for being too political during the time of The Peloponnesian War.

So the stage was set for Aristophanes to write a comeback comedy for The Lenaia whilst having a dig at Cleon, the question I will attempt to answer, is was Aristophanes's main aim to entertain the audience and bounce back from his earlier failure, or did Aristophanes actually have a personal vendetta, setting out an attack on Cleon to promote political change? The first thing I will examine is *Clouds*.

The play was written a year before *The Wasps*, and shed a new light on Socrates's teachings. We do not know the exact reason why, but Aristophanes displayed Socrates in a very controversial way, that he was poisoning the minds of the youth at the time with his teachings. This play was clearly written to promote political change, and although it was used as

a key piece of evidence in his trial before Socrates was sentenced to death, it was unsuccessful when it was released.

I believe that in this play, Aristophanes' main aim, was to kick up a fuss over nothing as he was jealous of the position of power that Socrates was in, because to cause less much less controversy, Aristophanes could have easily wrote the play about someone less famous at the time. A year later, Aristophanes had made himself another enemy in a position of power as I mentioned earlier, Cleon. Like *Clouds*, he tried to write a play to start new controversial ideas, but this time he had to emphasise the comedy rather than the political change, otherwise the audience wouldn't favour the play once more.

Whether you look at Aristophanes as a coward or simply clever, he understood the concept which evolved around his time that, to quote Euripides "The tongue is mightier than the blade." To bring down his foes and the people he disliked, rather than have them assassinated or start some kind of rebellion, putting his own neck on the line, he chose the much wiser option of insulting them in his plays in front of a mass audience. When in *The Wasps*, Procleon gets defeated in the argument by Anticleon this is the clearest example that Aristophanes wants the audience to hate Cleon and to challenge his ideas.

The chorus of the play are great fans of Cleon who they call "The Great Protector" after he trebled their pay, they show much loyalty to him, which is destroyed later on as they believe Anticleon's argument is much stronger than Procleon's. Procleon's arguments were that Jurors are pampered and

feared individuals that defendants in legal cases are always trying to flatter them and soften them up. Also that Jurors have various perks of the job, they get to see theatrical or musical performances by famous litigants. He uses a quote " The power of Zeus upon his throne is scarcely greater than my own", as many politicians " suck up" to them.

Aristophanes displayed a flawed argument here and left many holes for Anticleon to expose when he made his speech. Anticleon's arguments were that the Jurors annual pay doesn't even amount to 10% of the annual income from the Athenian Empire. That even though it had been tripled, many powerful people were still earning a lot more as the Demagogues creamed off the rest, not to mention the bribes they had received. He also makes a good point that the jurors have fought for Athens in the Persian Wars and deserve a lot more than what they get from jury service, which is easily affordable by the Athenian government.

The Chorus, against expectations, decided that Anticleon had won the argument and Procleon conceded that his son was right so the " hater of Cleon" triumphed over the " friend of Cleon". At the start of the play Xanthias tells us that Aristophanes isn't going to resort to standard jokes just to get a cheap laugh, and at the same time, contrary to any expectation we may have formed at this stage, we are told that the play won't be " making mincemeat" of Cleon either which shows that Aristophanes had learnt his lesson over using a gung-ho approach against someone he disliked like he did in " Knights".

But he does say " Some people have been saying that since Cleon tanned my hide, I've made a cowards peace with him and let my wrath subside". This is to say that even though he is watering the play down he still hasn't let it effect what his plans are against Cleon, that he intends to come back at him with a vengeance. There is a lot of slapstick comedy in the play that the audience can relate to such as Procleon making mischief whilst drunk and trying to sneak away from Anticleon underneath a donkey (like Oddeyseus and the cyclops).

But despite us having many laughs at the plays expense, it still has a moral behind it, the kind of moral that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. In relevance to Procleon, Anticleon changed him only for the worse as he caused a lot more menace once he started to disrespect the law after Anticleons speech. In conclusion I believe that Aristophenes wrote this play to promote political change but watered it down so the audience would favour it.

He knew that the audience expected a play to entirely go all gung-ho on insulting Cleon and making many cheap jokes at his expense. Aristophenes has clearly learnt from his past mistake with Clouds and this time concentrated on the formation of the play but nevertheless as I mentioned earlier, " The tongue is mightier than the blade" and Aristophenes still uses the play against Cleon no matter how indirectly he does it.

But he does make a valid point near the end, summing up his own views that taking into account the play contains views of his own, that even though politics is corrupt and unfair, if you disrespect it, you get into trouble, the

very way that Procleon does in the end, similar to the way Aristophenes did when he was taken to court after his production of " Knights" for defamation. If I had more time I could have expanded on the question and answered why does Aristophenes have a vendetta against Cleon and Soccretes, is it because they hold more power than he does, or does he genuinly disagree with their points of view and teachings.