

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Wasps 422 B.C.E.

Aristophanes

Story.

The Wasps was the fourth in chronological order of the eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes, preceded thus by *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, and *The Clouds*. Those three plays are all scathing satires of life in the early years of the Peloponnesian War, at a time when tyranny, mismanagement, plague, and an unwieldy judicial system had converged on Athens, to render the city virtually dysfunctional—at least as Aristophanes saw it. It is no surprise that the voice addressing us, throughout these plays, is preoccupied with the society before it, and with individual abusers of the rights and privileges of that society. The great annual festivals (Lenaia, City Dionysia), at which the leading dramatists competed, were bankrolled by successful businessmen and impresarios, whose important social/communal role dictated their interest in just the societal issues that Aristophanes put at the center of his own work.

The story before us targets the Athenian legal system. The play opens onto the private residence of Lovecleon, who is a prosperous business guy, retired, whose standard occupation, like that of many of his upright fellow citizens, is attending the law court of Athens, voting there as a juror, and picking up three obols a day for helping to provide this service. Trials were held, judgments were passed, but there were no presiding judges, legal representation, or system of witnesses: the Athenian law court was a citizen court, passing judgment on Athenian citizens. Aristophanes wanted both to mock this system as such, and to criticize the time wasting that made addiction to this system so debilitating to the Athenian polis.

In the end, the edginess of Aristophanes' view, of the material of the play, comes down to his treatment of the father figure, Lovecleon, whose addictiveness, high spirits, at the end joviality, spring him loose as an independent figure, at ease in the law court routine, but up for high living and fun. Unlike the earlier parodies we have read, the present play also narrates and plays with, as well as mocks.

Characters

Socias,	servant of Hatecleon
Xanthias,	servant of Hatecleon
Hatecleon ,	rich young man
Lovecleon,	his father
Youth,	son of Chorus leader
Cleonacur,	dog of Cydathen
Victim	of Lovecleon; flutegirl
Myrtia,	bread girl
Accuser,	of Lovecleon
Chorus of Jurymen,	dressed as Wasps

Themes

Addiction. Lovecleon is the star character of the play, for sure, and is in his way addicted—to the law courts, and to his citizen role as a paid juror. He shares this role with many seniors in the Athenian community, for whom passing their time as paid jurors—three obols a day—is a decent small job, and an endless chance to get together and gab. This puts it mildly. The congregate activity in question is so compulsive that it addicts its victims to their everyday get togethers. Lovecleon and his buddies, the wasp brethren who swarm around him and his house, and demand he join them, are so close that they cannot

be separated. We see from the extravagant behavior of Lovecleon, during the party at the play's end, that compulsive and extravagant behavior dominate the elderly master of the house.

Law. Addiction, in the present case, is not to liquor or sex but to the camaraderie of the law courts, where the senior males can gossip and earn their three obols to keep the family in fish and soup. It is their responsibility to follow cases closely, and to pass the deciding verdicts, as paid jurors, in a system where the citizenry monitors its own legal affairs. (One need think back only a century, to the time of Solon, whose attention to legal affairs triggered the formation of the semi-modern polis in Athens.

Old age The seniors who give so much pazz to this play—their stingers ready, their buzzing sounded aggressive and 'legalistic'—have Lovecleon's back at all times, and refuse to lose one of their buddies. It is as though their need for their age mates far surpasses their sense of duty to the laws of their polis.

Cleon. Cleon has been the chosen whipping boy for Aristophanes' early surviving plays, and all, apparently, because Cleon found *The Banqueters*, Aristophanes' second play, shockingly offensive and indeed treasonous. It was for this play that Cleon first sued Aristophanes, and for that legal act our playwright never tired of striking back. *The Acharnians* and *The Knights* attack Cleon remorselessly, for moral turpitude, vengeance, petty competition. Now, for no good reason, Cleon is dragged into the *Wasps*, as Mr. Generically Bad Guy; the main players—the rich young man, Xanthias, and the over the top dad are perfect fits to their working names, Lovecleon and Hatecleon. Cleon has become a kind of arbitrary benchmark for badness, though hardly for goodness.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lovecleon Lovecleon is the addict, along with his senior buddies and paid jurors, but he is far more than that, and seems quite above being consigned to the single trait of hating Cleon. In fact his relation to Cleon has no *raison d'être* except for the service he provides the state through his jury duty. The character of Lovecleon is for sure abundant and rich. By mid play, when it has become evident that no one can successfully imprison this old gent, we find Lovecleon temporarily diverted onto an interest in the domestic trial in his own house, of two dogs; while the end of the play has once more immersed us in the goofy and ardent senior culture that joins the paid jurors and their life loving gang.

Hush hush. Lovecleon gradually lets the news out that he is a prisoner in his own house, and m all sides his supporters demand his release.

Pride. Lovecleon's favorite moment is returning home at the end of the day, three obols in hand, and being greeted by his eager family members, begging for their treats.

Stern. Lovecleon promises a harsh judgment on the household dog accused of stealing a Sicilian cheese. He takes his job seriously.

Cuts-up. Dinner with sophisticated gentlemen promises to demand an impossible degree of decorum from Lovecleon, who ends up pissing drunk, dancing away from the dinner party with a naked flute girl.

Parallels. That the formulation of laws is central to society-building, and to the development of productive relations among humans, is widely understood. One can cast a wide historical net over this social genetic. In the Ancient Near East (cf. Hammurabi, reigned 1792-1750 B.C.E.) the culture of Mesopotamia, with its rich influences over the whole region of the Tigris Euphrates valley, proliferated law and writing as part of the same civilizational move. Solon's disciplined action to formulate a law code—with, for instance, provisions for mortgage control and local government oversight—was a major move toward unity and self-consciousness among the fifth century Athenians. In the realm of literature we can reflect on Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852), a study in Victorian cultural psychology, as it revolves around the issue of legal wills, and of the principled way they should be handled; conscientiously and with minute safeguards to individual intentions.

Discussion Questions

Aristophanes hates Cleon. Does he hate Lovecleon? Does he love Hatecleon?

Why does the family of Lovecleon feel so strongly that he should be kept away from his juror occupation? Are they ashamed of him? Is his juror job ignoble?

What do you think of the structure of this play? How does the festive dinner party fit with the earlier part of the play, which is chiefly involved with the value or disvalue of the paid juror world? Is attitude toward Cleon a central factor in the shaping of this play?