

## Politics and Poetry in Aristophanes' *Wasps*\*

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In an important recent article, David Konstan has attempted to make sense of the political ideology implicit in Aristophanes' *Wasps* by arguing that the play turns on an elaborate dramatic and intellectual sleight of hand.<sup>1</sup> The old hero Philokleon is wealthy, Konstan suggests, and engages in jury-service only because he is obsessed with it. The Chorus, on the other hand, are desperately impoverished and need the miserable three obols they make each day as jurors in order to survive. The fact that Philokleon is presented as the Chorus' peer when he consents to having his son support him in a happy, easy retirement from the law-courts (esp. *V.* 869–73) thus reveals the drama's ideological machinery at work: although *Wasps* poses as a simple "little story with a moral" (*V.* 64) about how the life of the Athenian δῆμος could be improved, it valorizes a view of the world which is fundamentally aristocratic, for only the rich can afford to retire from public life into their houses. In this paper, I will argue that the political ideology implicit in *Wasps* is far less "anti-democratic" and the play as a whole far more coherent and dramatically sophisticated than either Konstan's analysis or those of earlier critics have suggested.<sup>2</sup>

### Section I. Konstan's Hypothesis

Konstan's analysis of *Wasps* begins with a study of the behavior of Philokleon, whose desire to serve on juries is, he argues, so overwhelming that it can best be described as an obsession or (somewhat anachronistically) a humor.<sup>3</sup> The old man is driven by a passion which is equally well described as a sickness or a

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<sup>1</sup>Konstan 1985: 27–46, modestly revised and reprinted in Konstan 1995: 15–28. Much of the literary background to Konstan's essay can be traced in Whitman 143–66. For the text of *Wasps*, I refer throughout to MacDowell 1971.

<sup>2</sup>For the much-debated problem of the structure of *Wasps* and in particular the connection between 1122–1537 and the rest of the action, see Whitman 156–62; Vaio, esp. 335 n. 2; Lenz 31–40; Hubbard 126–39; MacDowell 1995: 178.

<sup>3</sup>Konstan 1985: 27–28.

form of insanity: he *will* go to court, regardless of how irrational his behavior appears to his son and servants and thus, presumably, to the audience (esp. *V.* 87–130). In addition, Philokleon is a sort of social dinosaur, for he, along with the Chorus, represents an outdated style of personal behavior, which once allegedly allowed the individual far more freedom from collective control than anyone had in late fifth-century Athens. Philokleon's time has passed, Konstan suggests, and he has therefore quite appropriately surrendered control over his household to his son Bdelykleon (e.g., *V.* 67–70, 442, 612–13). What he has failed to do is to give up his corresponding authority in the city, i.e., his position as a juror, and it is that status which Bdelykleon is determined to wrest away from him.<sup>4</sup>

The Chorus too are old jurymen, and while they admit at one point that Philokleon is the harshest among them all (*V.* 278–80), they initially seem to be his peers in most other respects. Like him, they have a sharp and uncompromising temper (e.g., *V.* 223–24, 251–58), a nostalgic fondness for the essentially anti-social freedom of their youth in the time of the Persian Wars (*V.* 236–38), and a fierce devotion to service in the courts (e.g., *V.* 215–18, 240–45, 286–89).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Konstan insists, the conversation which the Chorus have with the boys who guide them onstage when they first enter makes it clear that they are different from Philokleon in one important way. The old man's family owns numerous servants (e.g., *V.* 433), a donkey (*V.* 169–96), and land in the country (*V.* 449–50), and his son has offered to support him at home in luxury if he will only consent to change his way of life (e.g., *V.* 341, 506). Philokleon therefore goes off to court every day for no other reason than that he likes to do so, and the fact that he has a better alternative available means that his desire to be a juror is not rationally motivated, a point made in a different fashion in the prologue in the repeated characterization of the old man as sick or insane. Almost the first words the Chorus speak when they appear onstage, on the other hand, reveal that they serve in the courts because they need money to buy food and fuel for their families (*V.* 300–16), and neither they nor their counterparts in the real contemporary city have any hope of escaping this

<sup>4</sup>Konstan 1985: 30–31.

<sup>5</sup>Konstan 1985: 32–35. Although Philokleon reminisces at one point about his lost youthful freedom to run away from battle whenever he wished (*V.* 359), the Chorus for their part are considerably more disciplined than Konstan suggests and in fact fight in hoplite ranks in a highly organized manner (*V.* 422–24, 431–32) and recall standing together in the same way against the Persians when they were younger (*V.* 1181–83). For Philokleon as a mixture of ephebe and hoplite, see Bowie 78–101.

desperate hand-to-mouth existence by means of the generosity of a wealthy son.<sup>6</sup> Nor would real democrats necessarily want to be free of jury-service altogether, although they might wish to see the wages for it improved or the possibility of daily employment ensured, Konstan points out, for to the Athenian δῆμος in the late fifth century B.C.E. the courts were a source of considerable political power.<sup>7</sup> The Chorus nonetheless eventually speak glowingly of Philokleon's adoption of a life of apolitical ease and, even more to the point, seem to regard it as carrying them along as well (esp. *V.* 872–73, 887–90),<sup>8</sup> although no-one has suggested that the same sort of easy retirement is actually open to every citizen. The fact that this seeming peculiarity is ignored in the text, Konstan argues, marks the intellectual fissure which reveals its ideological burden: *Wasps* "raises the issue of class only to conjure it away" by misleadingly recommending to average people the sort of life which only the rich could afford or would even want.<sup>9</sup>

Konstan's work on *Wasps* is, as always, exciting and provocative. There are nonetheless at least three significant problems with his reading of the play. First, Konstan's analysis of the character and motivations of Philokleon and Bdelykleon, upon which much of the rest of his argument depends, is at several crucial points inadequate. Although Philokleon is indeed presented as an essentially obsessional character in the opening scenes of the play, he later explains his behavior in lucid and detailed terms which completely alter the way in which he is understood. Bdelykleon, meanwhile, nowhere says anything about wanting to strip his father of his remaining political and social authority, as Konstan suggests, and I will argue in Section II that the old man in fact has very little, if any, power to take away and Bdelykleon has other, much more benevolent reasons for the project he has undertaken. Second, Konstan offers very little comment on some of the most patently political sections of *Wasps*, including the slaves' dreams about the current democratic leadership with which the action begins and which effectively set its tone (*V.* 15–51); the Dog-Trial with its thinly veiled portrait of what may well have been a real legal confrontation between the city's leading demagogue, Kleon, and another

<sup>6</sup>Thus also Long 21; MacDowell 1995: 155.

<sup>7</sup>For the role of the courts in Athenian society, see Ober, who concentrates on the fourth century.

<sup>8</sup>The case for seeing this sort of retirement from public life as a real contemporary style of social behavior has been made at greatest length by Carter, most of whose evidence is rather dubious. Konstan 1985: 39 cites earlier work, and in particular Lateiner. For *V.* 860–90 as a crucial turning-point in the action, see Sidwell 1989 and 1990.

<sup>9</sup>Konstan 1985: 37–40.

prominent politician and general, Laches (*V.* 891–1002); and the Chorus' complaint in the second half of the parabasis about the way in which contemporary Athens is governed (*V.* 1071–1121).<sup>10</sup> Clearly some account must be taken of all these passages in any comprehensive study of *Wasps*'s ideological intentions, and I will argue in Section III that their message is actually quite different from what Konstan believes the drama as a whole is saying. Third, and in some ways most important, Konstan's reading of *Wasps* requires that the play's ideological machinery be extremely subtle, as his use of the term "sleight of hand" and others like it implicitly makes clear.<sup>11</sup> In particular, for Konstan's interpretation of the political effect of the drama to be correct, the audience ought not to notice that Philokleon is different from the Chorus in socio-economic terms, but should be carried along by the apparent logic (i.e., illogic) of the plot and thoughtlessly assume that an easy retirement really is available for average members of the δῆμος, if they will only use their heads. The fact of the matter, however, is that the Chorus' extreme poverty and lack of any means of support beyond their jury-pay are described in a song (*V.* 300–316) which does not advance the larger action of the play at all and whose details could therefore easily have been altered, had the poet wished to do so. Either the poet has made a serious miscalculation in raising the issue at all—since he could simply have presented the Chorus as democrats and left it at that—or the play's political ideology is more complex than Konstan suggests. In the remainder of this paper, I offer an alternative interpretation of *Wasps*, designed to address the difficulties in Konstan's hypothesis noted above and make more complete sense of the intellectual and dramatic structure of the drama as a whole.

## Section II. Philokleon and Bdelykleon

As Konstan very acutely points out, at the beginning of *Wasps* Philokleon is presented as an essentially irrational creature: he is sick (*V.* 71) or insane (*V.* 111), driven by a morbid desire for jury-service (*V.* 87–90), with which he is obsessed (*V.* 91–110). Nor can he apparently be cured or reasoned with (*V.*

<sup>10</sup>Konstan 1985: 41–42 argues briefly that the Dog-Trial is to be read as evidence of the triumph of Bdelykleon, who finally has his father where he wants him, shut up in the house and reduced to a harmless domestic exercise of his jury-mania. He offers no comment on the dreams or on the Chorus's comments in the parabasis.

<sup>11</sup>Konstan 1985: 37. Cf. Konstan 1985: 36: "Aristophanes thereby genially *finesses* the fact that the dicasts, as poor people, see the courts as a bulwark of their democracy" [*italics mine*], and note the talk of "conjuring" on 39.

111–24), and Bdelykleon has accordingly resorted at last to locking him up in the house (V. 125), a strategy which has proven exhausting and only very moderately successful. Were this the end of the matter, Konstan might be right to identify Philokleon as little more than the embodiment of a single overriding passion. In the agon in V. 548–727, however, the old man offers a strikingly rational account of his behavior: there is no creature on earth more blessed (esp. V. 550–51) or more powerful (esp. V. 619–30) than a juror, he insists, and he is accordingly determined to be one. Philokleon's catalogue of pleasures is an extended one: the tall and mighty bow and scrape in front of him before their trials begin (V. 552–58); he is entertained, flattered, and titillated all day long in court (V. 560–75, 578–82); he ultimately does exactly what he pleases about the cases he hears, regardless of legal niceties (V. 583–87); and the greatest authority in the city is, by seemingly universal consent, his alone (V. 590–600). Best of all, he gets three obols for his trouble and is thus freed from relying on his son, in whose benevolence he seems to have no great confidence, and able to enjoy what he at least takes to be an easy, independent life (V. 605–18). Konstan dismisses the joy Philokleon takes in the deference with which he is everywhere treated as evidence of “a childish desire for flattery...that transparently betrays the pathetic self-importance of the weak and powerless,”<sup>12</sup> and in the second half of the scene Bdelykleon manages to convince his father that his sense of his place in the world is in fact seriously mistaken (cf. below). Despite the impression created in the slapstick scenes at the beginning of the play, however, Philokleon is obviously more than the embodiment of a simple obsession and indeed presents himself in the agon as a distinctly rational creature: he participates in the court-system not because he is fixated on jury-service *per se* but because he sees this as a means to an extraordinary, almost unrivalled degree of power and pleasure. Indeed, he believes that the authority he enjoys is no less than that of Zeus himself (esp. V. 619; cf. V. 548–49) and goes on to insist that he fears absolutely no-one (V. 625–30). It therefore comes as no surprise that he wants desperately to be a jurymen, for this is the best and most pampered thing that anyone in the world could be (esp. V. 550–51; cf. V. 508–9).

Bdelykleon's motivations are also more complex than Konstan makes them out to be and are likewise revealed only gradually over the course of the first several hundred lines of the play. In the opening scene, when Philokleon is

<sup>12</sup>Konstan 1985: 31. Cf. Whitman 150–51, as well as Reckford 294, who characterizes Philokleon's remarks as evidence of his “childish infatuation and megalomania.”

being presented as a purely obsessional character, all we are told about his son is that he is deeply troubled by his father's sickness and desperate to do something about it (esp. *V.* 114–25). The nature of Philokleon's mania is that it requires him to go off constantly to court, and after having tried unsuccessfully to convince him not to do so (*V.* 114–17) and having failed after that to get him “purified” or cured (*V.* 118–24), Bdelykleon has settled on attempting to keep the old man at home by main force (*V.* 69–70, 112–13, 125). At *V.* 340–41, however, after the Chorus have entered and begun plotting their friend's escape, Philokleon abruptly supplies a positive reason for Bdelykleon's eagerness to keep him at home as well: not only is his son concerned to stop him from doing anything bad, the old man says, but he wants to feast him instead. Bdelykleon's motivations are thus radically expanded here, and he himself repeatedly says the same thing about what he is doing later on: he wants his father to abandon his old way of life and live in luxury (*V.* 504–6, 722–24, 736–40). How this might be possible is a separate question, to which I will return below. What must be stressed at this point is that nowhere in the text does Bdelykleon say anything about what Konstan claims is his general guiding intent to break his father's atavistic hold on social power via jury-service. Indeed, all anyone anywhere in the play (except the Chorus, whose suspicious insistence at *V.* 344–45 that this odd young man must be a conspirator aiming at a tyranny I discuss at the end of Section III) ever says about what drives Bdelykleon's behavior is that he regrets the way his father is acting and wants to see him happier.

Konstan's analysis of the behavior of Philokleon and Bdelykleon, therefore, while it makes sense of the opening scene of the play, does far less justice to the increased complexity of the characters and their motivations later on and in particular as the moment for the great debate between father and son at *V.* 548–724 draws near. As noted above, Philokleon defends his way of life in the first half of the agon by arguing that he is virtually all-powerful as well as extraordinarily well-compensated (three whole obols a day!) for his service in the lawcourts (esp. *V.* 619–30). Bdelykleon's response (*V.* 650–704) amounts to a direct challenge on both counts. In fact, he argues, the “democratic” courts are a sham, not only because the δῆμος allows itself to be ordered about like a servant by the arrogant young men who serve as prosecutors (*V.* 686–91) but also because much of what goes on is a show, since the outcome has been arranged in advance through bribery (*V.* 692–95). Philokleon and his peers are thus little more than the slaves of the men whom they have foolishly adopted as their leaders and by whose flattery and claims of everlasting support they

continue to be taken in (*V.* 665–68; cf. *V.* 592–93), blinded by their attention to the miserable wages they get for their work (esp. *V.* 682–84, 695, 712).

The Empire and all its resources, Bdelykleon declares, were won by Philokleon and others like him by means of their hard fighting on land and sea (cf. *V.* 235–37, 354–55, 1092–1101, 1188–89) and therefore belong to the people by right (*V.* 684–85, 700–701, 707–11). A quick calculation of Athens' revenues, however, shows that very little of the money produced by the tribute, harbor-fees, mines, etc., goes to the jurors, here identified with the δῆμος generally (*V.* 656–65). Instead, the city's demagogues and their lackeys grow rich, Bdelykleon claims, not only because they are constantly on the public payroll (*V.* 665–67, 682–83, 691) but because they receive enormous bribes from defendants in the courts (*V.* 693–95), to say nothing of the allies, who are wise enough to see how Athenian politics work, which is to say, how marginal the position of the δῆμος in the city really is (*V.* 669–79).<sup>13</sup> The fact of the matter, therefore, is that Philokleon is being treated as a fool by a group of political swindlers, who claim to be his protectors but are in fact manipulating the city's affairs almost exclusively for their own benefit and who accordingly laugh at him behind his back (*V.* 515–16).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Bdelykleon goes so far as to insist that the jurors' general state of impoverishment, made explicit for the audience in the pitiful song the Chorus and their boys sing as they enter at *V.* 291–316, reflects a deliberate policy-decision on the part of their leaders, who see this as a way of keeping the people dependent and thus at their own eternal beck-and-call, reinforcing their ability to terrorize their enemies and thereby, presumably, extract more bribes (*V.* 701–5; cf. *V.* 669–79). The result of all this malfeasance is that the leaders of Athens' so-called democracy are showered with “jars (of pickled fish), wine, carpets, cheese, honey, sesame seeds, pillows, libation-bowls, fine cloaks, garlands, necklaces, goblets, health-and-wealth” (*V.* 676–77), i.e., with goods which represent the high-life generally and a very luxurious banquet and symposium in particular. The Athenian people, on the other hand, although they nominally possess the entire Empire, get not even a miserable head of garlic (*V.* 688–89; cf. *V.* 672, 674), except when their leaders are momentarily frightened of them and make them promises on which, of course, they never deliver (*V.* 715–18).

<sup>13</sup>For the alleged domination of public appointments by a small class of political insiders who use this as a means to live the high-life, cf. *Ach.* 65–90, 136–37, 597–619. For the charge of bribery, e.g., *Eq.* 326–27, 402–3, 438–39, 801–2, 832–35; *Pax* 639–47.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Ach.* 124–27; *Eq.* 713–21, 802–7.

If the demagogues wished, Bdelykleon insists, they could arrange for the entire population to be supported by the allies in the same sort of luxury that they themselves already enjoy (cf. *V.* 676–77, quoted above), “surrounded by rabbit meat and garlands of every sort and beestings and cream cheese” (*V.* 706–10), a style of life which would befit the glorious history and power of the Athenian δῆμος (*V.* 711). Instead, the politicians keep the people hungry and use them as their hired help (*V.* 712). That Philokleon thinks he has the best of everything (*V.* 508–11, 550–51) is thus only a measure of the extent to which he has been deceived, for he has in fact been bought off cheap and then grown accustomed to the nasty fare he has been given (*V.* 512–14). This, Bdelykleon ultimately insists, is the reason he attempted to lock his father up in their house away from the lawcourts: he wants to stop him from being so constantly exploited (*V.* 719–21).<sup>15</sup>

Bdelykleon’s speech in the second half of the agon thus amounts to an extraordinarily dark analysis of the “real workings” of contemporary Athenian democracy which, he argues, is no democracy at all. Despite their absolute assurance earlier that their own arguments and view of the world would prevail (e.g., *V.* 519–25, 631–41), as well as their deep and long-standing commitment to service in the courts, Philokleon and the Chorus offer no objection to any of this. One might have expected them to claim that Bdelykleon’s figures are bogus (as some slightly more sophisticated calculation makes it clear they are) or that the scam he imagines is too elaborate to have escaped their notice for so long (as it clearly is). Instead, Philokleon acts as if a veil has been torn from his eyes (*V.* 696–97, 713–14), and the Chorus for their part admit that their assessment of the situation was wrong (*V.* 725–27) and urge their old friend to abandon the courts and accept his son’s generous offer (*V.* 728–35). They also claim to see their own good fortune in the pleasures being offered him (*V.* 872–73, 887–90), and it is here that Konstan detects the play’s ideological concerns coming momentarily to the surface. The details of Bdelykleon’s arguments in the agon suggest a rather different interpretation.

As Konstan observes, there is clearly some connection between Philokleon’s position in the city and his status in his own household, control over which he has at some point in the apparently not too distant past surrendered to his son.<sup>16</sup> Konstan’s thesis is that by persisting in jury-service

<sup>15</sup>Cf. MacDowell 1995: 160–65.

<sup>16</sup>Konstan 1985: 30–31.



Philokleon has attempted to retain a degree of social authority in the city which is inappropriate for a man who is no longer κύριος over his own οἶκος, and that Bdelykleon responds to this problem by attempting to drive the old man out of the public sphere. As should by now be clear, however, the most basic point of the arguments Bdelykleon puts forward in the agon is that, although Philokleon believes he is all-powerful (esp. *V.* 548–49, 587, 619–30), he actually enjoys very little if any real authority in Athens (esp. *V.* 673–75, 692–95). Unless Bdelykleon is deliberately deceiving his father about his own convictions on this count (a hypothesis Konstan does not put forward), therefore, there can be no question of his attempting to wrest political power—which, on this analysis, the old man quite emphatically does not have—away from him.

Instead, the key to making sense of both Bdelykleon's behavior and the larger dramatic structure of *Wasps* lies in the recognition that there is *no effective difference* between Philokleon's status in the city, understood in the way his son (seconded by numerous other characters in the play; cf. below) insists it must be, and his position in his house. In each case, the old man has effectively ceded authority over his affairs to someone else, who makes his decisions for him and supports him as he will (esp. *V.* 612–17); what distinguishes the two situations is simply that up to this time Philokleon has mistakenly *thought* himself the omnipotent master of Athens. The abrupt revelation that the old man's public status is no different from his private thus allows two apparently separate aspects of the drama to be collapsed neatly in upon one another: the cantankerous but dependent Philokleon in his house, like Demos Puknites in his house in *Knights* two years earlier, can function throughout the rest of the play as an image of the Athenian δῆμος in the city. Up to this point, Philokleon has refused for some unspecified but obviously perverse reason to allow his son to feast him (*V.* 341), just as he has failed to insist on receiving anything from the state beyond his wretched three obols a day for jury-service. Once the connection between the old man's public and private situations is accepted, however, Bdelykleon's offer to support his father in all luxury can be seen to illustrate the lifestyle which, he insists, could easily be extended to every Athenian citizen, if the city's politicians only wished (*V.* 706–11).

The Chorus' conviction that Philokleon's retirement has important implications for themselves, which is the wedge Konstan uses to split what he takes to be the ideological structure of the comedy apart, is thus not a serious dramatic problem rather crudely disguised by a none-too-effective literary sleight of hand, but a more or less straightforward articulation of the basic structure of the plot. The fundamental point of Bdelykleon's argument in the

agon, after all, is that the Athenian δῆμος does have a ready means of support available, if it will only insist on (or consent to) claiming it, in the wealth which flows into the imperial coffers, and it is this fantasy which Philokleon is now allowed to live out. At the end of the play, Bdelykleon's promise is made concrete, as his father is first prepared for and then taken off to a great party reminiscent of the one that could be arranged, the old man was told earlier, for all Athenian citizens (*V.* 709–11). For the moment, however, he is given a somewhat cruder if still apparently quite enjoyable set of physical pleasures, including a convenient piss-pot and a bowl of soup (esp. *V.* 805–14), and allowed to participate in a domestic trial which serves as a thinly disguised metaphor for what was probably a real contemporary legal dispute and which explores in detail the question of what the δῆμος ought to be able to expect from those who claim to be its benefactors and protectors (*V.* 891–1002).<sup>17</sup>

### Section III. The Dog-Trial and Its Implications

Laches son of Melanopos of the deme Aixone (*PA* 9019) was general in 427/6 and 426/5 B.C.E., when he served with the Athenian forces in Sicily (Th. 3.86.1, 3.115.5–6). He fought at Delion in 424 (Pl. *La.* 181b; *Smp.* 221a) and died in 418 at Mantinea, where he was again general (Th. 5.61.1, 5.74.3).<sup>18</sup> Laches was sufficiently prominent politically to have been the man who moved acceptance of the one-year's truce with Sparta in the Assembly in 423 (Th. 4.118.11) and was known as a political ally of Nikias and as one of the architects of the peace of 421 (Th. 5.43.2). He must have undergone an audit of his personal and financial affairs after leaving office in 425, which makes it difficult to understand how Kleon could have brought charges connected with his generalship in Sicily against him in 422 (cf. *V.* 240–44); most likely Aristophanes is simply replaying a famous event from the relatively recent past onstage.<sup>19</sup> What matters more for the purposes of this paper is the use the poet

<sup>17</sup>Thus at *V.* 675 Bdelykleon uses σε (i.e., Philokleon) to mean “the Athenian δῆμος,” while at *V.* 975–76 he describes his father's actions as a juror with plural verbs. If *V.* 916 is assigned to Philokleon (thus MacDowell 1971, following Tyrwhitt) rather than to the servant (probably not onstage at this point) (thus manuscripts ΓJ), the old man actually refers to himself explicitly as “the state” (ὁ κοινός) there. Cf. Whitman 155.

<sup>18</sup>For Laches and his career, see MacDowell 1971 on *V.* 240.

<sup>19</sup>Thus Ostwald 212 n. 59. MacDowell 1995: 167–68 hypothesizes that in 422 Kleon was making speeches criticizing Laches' behavior in Sicily three years earlier and threatening to prosecute him “on some charge not yet clearly defined,” and suggests that Aristophanes' ridicule of the idea in *Wasps* may have prevented any such trial from actually taking place. For 5th c. trials of Athenian generals, see Pritchett 4–33; Ostwald 64 n. 248. For εὔθυναί, see Arist. *Ath.* 48.iv–v with Rhodes ad loc.

makes of the confrontation between the very different styles of political leadership which the two men at least allegedly represent and thus the way in which the arguments Bdelykleon puts forward in the Dog-Trial fit in with his attack on the contemporary democracy in the agon.

At *V.* 907–11, the Kydathenaion Dog (i.e., Kleon) denounces Labes (i.e., Laches) for having committed the most terrible wrongs against himself and the poorest citizens in the state (literally “the sailors in the fleet”) by running off into a corner and “Sicilizing-down” a great hunk of cheese (cf. *V.* 835–38, 894–97, 922–25). Sicily was famous for its cheese<sup>20</sup> and the real-world point of the charge must be that Laches had, according to Kleon, embezzled money while on campaign there. The Kydathenaion Dog presents Labes’ alleged failure to share his prize as an attack on the Athenian people, whose guardian he claims to be (*V.* 915–16; cf. *V.* 927–30) and from whom he accordingly threatens to withdraw his protection, should his enemy be acquitted (*V.* 927–30). It is nonetheless clear that what really bothers the Kydathenaion Dog is that he got none of the stolen goods himself (esp. *V.* 914) and that his interest in seeing Labes convicted reflects not an abstract interest in justice but a calculation that this will make clear to others the folly of trying to cut him out of a share of any other ill-gotten gains in the future (cf. *V.* 970–72). Not surprisingly (cf. *V.* 106), Philokleon, “the one who loves Kleon,” accepts the Kydathenaion Dog’s accusations at face value and is ready to condemn Labes on the spot (*V.* 933–34). Bdelykleon, “the one who loathes Kleon,” insists that his father listen to a defense (*V.* 942–44), however, and the arguments he offers in this speech mesh neatly with the unflattering portrait of the current democracy which he paints in the agon earlier.

Bdelykleon’s defense turns on three main points, all designed to prove that Labes rather than his accuser is the real friend of the Athenian people. The first is that this is in fact an excellent dog, who chases wolves (*V.* 952), i.e., thievish politicians (cf. *Nu.* 351–52), protects sheep (*V.* 955), i.e., average Athenian citizens (cf. *V.* 31–32), and generally “fights on your behalf and guards the door” (*V.* 957).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Labes is supposedly more steadfast in the defense of

<sup>20</sup>Hermipp. fr. 63.9 K.-A.; Antiph. fr. 233.4 K.-A.; Philem. fr. 79.1–3 K.-A.; Anon. ap. Ath. 14.658a; cf. *Pax* 250–51.

<sup>21</sup>The image of the politician as a hard-working guard-dog was a commonplace in the classical period (D. 25.40; Thphr. *Char.* 29.4; Plut. *Dem.* 23.5; cf. *Pax* 313; X. *Mem.* 2.7.13–14), and was most likely used by Kleon to describe himself (*Eq.* 1015–24; cf. MacDowell 1995: 169).

Philokleon than any other contemporary dog and the Kydathenaion Dog in particular (*V.* 954). What is more, he has taken on the hardest chores and had the worst of everything, subsisting on neckbones and the like and never sleeping in the same place twice (*V.* 968–69), whereas the Kydathenaion Dog stays at home and waits for someone else to bring in food, at which point he asks for a share and barks if he does not get it (*V.* 970–72).<sup>22</sup> Labes is thus Philokleon’s good servant and deserves at least a limited amount of pity and forgiveness if he has committed a crime (*V.* 967). This initial argument is closely connected with Bdelykleon’s second point, which is that, even if Labes has taken something, he ought to be excused on the ground that “he does not know how to play the κιθάρα” (*V.* 958–59), which is to say that he is not an upper-class sophisticate with refined upper-class manners.<sup>23</sup> Instead, he is an average dog (or man) and thus almost by definition a thief. As Vaio (followed by Konstan) has pointed out, thievery is an important theme in *Wasps*, for virtually everyone except Bdelykleon is said to have engaged in it (e.g., *V.* 449, 1200–1201, 1345–46, 1446–47) and at the beginning of the play Philokleon (*V.* 354–57) and the Chorus (*V.* 236–38) in particular are explicitly said to have stolen things in their youth in the course of the military adventures which created the Empire.<sup>24</sup> Bdelykleon’s second point, buttressed by information scattered discreetly elsewhere in the text, is thus that every average man—and above all else, every average soldier—steals, and if Labes has done the same, there is no need to make too great a fuss.<sup>25</sup> Had Labes been attempting to enrich himself, the obvious response would be that he is still no different from any other politician, including the Kydathenaion Dog (esp. *V.* 927–28; cf. *V.* 758–59, 1224–27), in that he is enriching himself while the people starve (cf. *V.* 665–79, 914–16), and he ought therefore to be condemned along with the rest of them. Bdelykleon’s third and in some ways most decisive point is accordingly to show that the stolen goods were not eaten selfishly in a corner, as Labes’ accusers claim (*V.* 836–38, 910–11, 922–25). The only

<sup>22</sup>The contrast between working-dogs and house-dogs (to the distinct disadvantage of the latter) is at least as old as Hom. *Od.* 17.306–10. For a similar charge against Kleon, cf. *Eq.* 54–57, 1200–1201.

<sup>23</sup>For the social significance of training on the κιθάρα, cf. MacDowell 1971 on *V.* 959; Dover on *Ra.* 729. Contrast *Nu.* 637–56, where the old farmer Strepsiades knows nothing of music and has no interest in learning about it, since it has no practical value for a man like him.

<sup>24</sup>Vaio 343; Konstan 1985: 33 n. 21.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. *V.* 556–57, where Philokleon describes how a defendant in the courts takes a very similar tack, even calling him “father” as he does so: οἰκτιρόν μ’, ὦ πάτερ...εἰ καὶ τὸς πῶποθ’ ὑφείλου / ἀρχὴν ἄρξας ἢ πὶ στρατιᾶς τοῖς ξυσσίτοις ἀγοράζων.

witness for the defense is the τυρόκνηστις, who testifies that the cheese in question was actually grated out for the troops (V. 963–66), which is to say that Labes/Laches distributed whatever he got hold of in the course of his campaign to the common foot-soldiers who fought with him, precisely as, Bdelykleon argues earlier, would happen in the state at large, were Athens' affairs only organized better (V. 706–11; cf. V. 684–85).

In the end, and even after being reduced to tears by the whining of Labes' puppies, which Bdelykleon brings in as part of a last, desperate plea for mercy (V. 976–84), Philokleon must still be tricked into voting for acquittal (V. 985–1002), a problem to which I return in Section IV. Bdelykleon's arguments in the Dog-Trial are nonetheless clearly intended to offer a model of political leadership which stands in sharp and generally appealing contrast to the vision of the actual functioning of the contemporary democracy which he offers in the agon. Bdelykleon's basic thesis there is that the Athenian people have earned the right to enjoy the fruits of the Empire by means of their hard work and valor in battle,<sup>26</sup> but that the state as it currently exists amounts to a vast criminal conspiracy directed by a few well-placed individuals, who claim to fight on behalf of the δῆμος (V. 666–67) but in fact stay home and grow rich. Thus also in the second half of the parabasis, the Chorus explain how their waspish valor in battle once helped drive the Persians away and won the Empire (V. 1075–1101), but complain that other, younger citizens now stay at home and “gobble down” the tribute which they did not fight to secure (V. 1101, 1114–19). In the future, therefore, the Chorus insist, it ought to be the rule that “whoever has no sting” also draw no pay from the state (V. 1120–21; cf. V. 682–85). So too, in the pair of political dream-fables with which the play begins, Kleonymos (PA I.580, where for “8880” read “8680”) throws down his hoplite gear and runs away from battle at every opportunity (V. 15–23),<sup>27</sup> and Theoros (PA 7223) is an insincere flatterer who will, with any luck, go off “to the ravens,” i.e., to a disgraceful destruction (V. 42–46; cf. V. 418–19, 599–600, 1236–42). In his portrait of Labes/Laches, on the other hand, Bdelykleon depicts a man (or dog) who passes up the easy life of luxury, puts himself in the front-lines in defense of the people and, most remarkable of all, passes on whatever good things he manages to secure to the ordinary foot-soldiers who accompany him and have fought for them.

<sup>26</sup>Note also the assimilation of Bdelykleon and his supporters to this model via the image of a siege-army at V. 209–10, 359–64.

<sup>27</sup>For the historical significance of this (obviously wildly distorted) charge, see Storey 1989.

Bdelykleon's arguments in defense of Labes in the Dog-Trial are thus tightly integrated with the critique of the late fifth-century democracy and especially the courts offered by a variety of other characters elsewhere in *Wasps*. The most outspoken partisans of the democracy in the play, on the other hand, are the Chorus, who denounce Bdelykleon as a conspirator the moment they learn he is attempting to keep Philokleon away from jury-service (V. 344a–45) and later accuse him to his face of making an attempt at a tyranny (V. 417, 470, 473–77; cf. V. 482–83) and secretly trying to undermine the city's laws (V. 463–70). Bdelykleon's politics are thus problematized early on and repeatedly in *Wasps*, and he responds in the agon by mocking the charges against him, insisting that, despite its widespread currency in Athens, fear of an oligarchic conspiracy is thoroughly out-of-date (V. 488–99, esp. 490; cf. V. 500–502), and arguing that his interest in seeing his father live the most luxurious life possible means that he can scarcely be called an enemy of the people (V. 503–7). There is an exquisite irony to Bdelykleon's analysis of the nature of contemporary Athenian politics, in that he turns the Chorus' charges neatly on their head, insisting that there is indeed a conspiracy afoot in the city against the people, but one run by some of their own favorite leaders rather than by himself (e.g., V. 693–95). At the same time, the Chorus' instinctive initial reading of the political implications of Bdelykleon's behavior contains a significant element of truth, for although he claims to love the δῆμος, his sense of what it means to be a democrat is rather different from theirs, a point I take up in detail in Section V. Despite all that, the Chorus abruptly drop their talk of conspiracies and tyranny once Bdelykleon is finished talking and enthusiastically endorse his proposals (V. 725–35). If ideological machinery is to be detected more or less openly at work anywhere in *Wasps*, therefore, it is certainly here, in the abrupt and seemingly whole-hearted assent to arguably anti-democratic views by characters who have positioned themselves from the first as vigorous defenders of the rights of the people. Bdelykleon's triumph nonetheless proves short-lived, and that fact has substantial implications for any interpretation of the drama as well as of Aristophanes' politics generally.

#### **Section IV. Bdelykleon and the Poet**

With Philokleon's surrender to his son's arguments at the end of the agon, Bdelykleon would seem to have finally got his way and is clearly ready to attempt to alter his father's way of life completely (esp. V. 736–40). That reforming the old man's behavior will not be an easy proposition, however, becomes immediately apparent in the Dog-Trial, where Philokleon is ready to

condemn Labes even before hearing the charges against him (*V.* 892) and then, despite having been momentarily “softened” by the puppies’ pleas (*V.* 973–74, 982–84), reverts to his habitual harshness (cf. *V.* 106, 277b–80) and must be tricked into voting for acquittal (*V.* 985–1002). The obvious implication is that the old man is a very difficult character and to some significant extent perhaps beyond reasoning with or even persuading (cf. *V.* 111–12, 115–17). Just as the slaves say in the opening scenes of the play and Bdelykleon acknowledges a little later on, in other words, Philokleon may be sick rather than merely misguided (*V.* 71, 87–88), and the sickness is so deep-rooted that it may well prove impossible to root it out (*V.* 650–51). This problem comes into considerably sharper focus in the final section of the play (*V.* 1122–1537).

Konstan interprets the scenes in which Philokleon is prepared for and participates in a great dinner and drinking-party as a satirical exposure of the social pretensions of Kleon and his set, who are prominent in one of the two guest-lists given in the play—a point to which I return below—and a spoof on upper-class arrogance weakly balancing the critique of the democratic courts earlier.<sup>28</sup> There is certainly an element of truth in this, for the old man plays the aristocrat in a clumsy, mocking fashion patently designed to appeal to the average man in the street (e.g., *V.* 1136–56, 1174–89). Implicit in Konstan’s reading, however, is the notion that the final sections of *Wasps* are only very loosely connected to the rest of the play, which seems a less than compelling interpretation, given the immense subtlety with which Konstan himself has argued the opening scenes of the drama are constructed. In fact, as I have already suggested in Section II, the real point of the symposium scenes is to allow Philokleon to enjoy all the goods which the Empire represents and from which he has been unjustly excluded for so long, and the other guests at the anticipated party are accordingly a group of contemporary Athenian politicians closely associated with Kleon (*V.* 1219–21),<sup>29</sup> who have lived in precisely this sort of luxury all along without ever bothering to invite the δῆμος to join them (cf. *V.* 675–77).

Once again, however, things do not turn out the way Bdelykleon expects. The problem is not just that, once Philokleon is full of food and wine, he quickly proves to be the most hybriatic of the guests (*V.* 1303), dancing wildly,

<sup>28</sup>Konstan 1985: 43–44.

<sup>29</sup>The second, retrospective guest-list provided at *V.* 1301–2 is rather more obscure, but apparently consists of wealthy *bon-vivants* rather than of politicians *per se*; cf. Storey 1985; MacDowell 1995: 173.

insulting everyone, telling stupid stories (*V.* 1304–21), and ultimately stealing the flute-girl (esp. *V.* 1368–69). All this might be interpreted as merely getting back at the sort of men who have abused him behind his back for so many years. The real difficulty is that on his way home the old man mocks and beats other common citizens, none of whom are looking for any trouble (*V.* 1388–1441), and then turns on and strikes his own son and benefactor (*V.* 1381–87). It seems impossible to escape the impression that Bdelykleon's plan has somehow backfired: Philokleon is now completely out of control or, better put, remains, as from the first, uncontrollable and dangerous to everyone around him and perhaps to himself as well.<sup>30</sup> Toothless or not (cf. *V.* 164–65), he remains predisposed to bite anyone who gets in his way, and by the end of the play one begins to understand why Kleon and his cronies have managed him as they have: the safest course is to keep him hungry, make sure he knows his master's voice, and then sic him on one's enemies (*V.* 703–5). Accordingly, to the extent that the old man stands in for the Athenian people (and there can be little doubt that this is one important structuring element in the play), *Wasps* expresses considerable reservations about the ability of the δῆμος to handle good fortune wisely and to treat anyone—especially their benefactors—well. It is only because Bdelykleon makes extraordinary and in fact illegal efforts that the good dog Labes is not destroyed (*V.* 991–92), after all, and similar problems are apparent in the poet's own relationship with his audience.

At *V.* 529–31, as the agon is about to begin, Bdelykleon calls for his personal storage-chest (κίστην), from which he produces a stylus and a waxed tablet, on which he ostentatiously writes down the main points of his father's speech (*V.* 538, 569, 576). As Konstan suggests, one effect of all this stage-business may be to mark Bdelykleon out as a man well-suited to the increasingly bureaucratic Athenian state of the late 420s B.C.E.<sup>31</sup> The more obvious result is to distinguish him as a writer and thus a figure easily assimilated to the poet, and as he begins his own speech in the second half of the agon Bdelykleon explicitly refers to comedy's ability to cure long-standing problems in the city and despairs of it (*V.* 650–51).<sup>32</sup> So too the first half of the parabasis is a message from the poet to the Athenian people, by whom he

<sup>30</sup>Vaio 351. Whitman 144–48, 156–60 offers a much more positive assessment of Philokleon's seemingly ineradicable waspishness.

<sup>31</sup>Konstan 1985: 38; cf. Reckford 295.

<sup>32</sup>For the connections between Aristophanes and Bdelykleon, cf. Reckford 298–302; Hubbard 114, 120–21, 132–33.



claims to have been wronged and with whom he is accordingly quite angry (V. 1016–17). He has done them a great deal of good (esp. V. 1017), he insists: running every sort of risk on their behalf (V. 1021); refusing to be corrupted even after being elevated to a position of public greatness (V. 1023–28, 1036); battling their enemies and in particular the horrid Kleon-monster (V. 1029–37); taking a stand against political conspiracies formed against “fathers and grandfathers” by leading democratic politicians (V. 1037–42); and generally “waging war on your behalf” (V. 1037). Because they have failed to recognize his intentions, however, they have betrayed and rejected him (V. 1045, cf. 1017) and allowed him to fall into disaster (V. 1050), and the *pnigos* accordingly consists of a plea for better behavior in the future which amounts to a request that *Wasps* be awarded first place, as *Clouds* in particular was not (V. 1051–59). The poet who emerges from these verses thus bears a striking resemblance to both Bdelykleon and Labes/Laches: he too has bravely attempted to do the Athenian people good, and their response has been to turn upon and abuse him.<sup>33</sup> He claims to retain some hope for them, or at least for those among them who are σοφοί (V. 1048–50), and apparently regards it as worth his time to offer them advice and encourage them to choose more wisely in the future (esp. V. 1009–14, 1051–59). One might very well argue that he has no alternative, since he has no other audience available (cf. V. 1358–59), however, and the picture of the Athenian people which emerges here is in any case not a particularly happy or encouraging one. At best, they can be protected from their enemies by those who see the nature of things more clearly than they do; at worst, they alternate between being exploited by those whom they foolishly adopt as their leaders and lashing out against those who make a conscientious effort to help them.

### Section V. The Politics of *Wasps*

As I have argued in detail in Sections II–IV of this paper, *Wasps* hangs much more tightly together in intellectual and dramatic terms than has generally been recognized, and Bdelykleon and the poet articulate a strikingly consistent vision of the nature of the contemporary city and its failings. The question which remains is how that vision works to appeal to and manipulate Aristophanes' audience and thus what the larger political and social intentions of the drama are. *Wasps* presents itself as profoundly democratic, in the sense that

<sup>33</sup>Long 18–20 notes also the Chorus' harsh treatment of the boys who lead them onstage and who—despite their threats—do not abandon them when they are hit (V. 248–58).

Bdelykleon and the poet both insist that they are devoted above all else to the good of the Athenian people, and even the stridently partisan Chorus ultimately support that claim. At the same time, the play has very little good to say about much of the city's current leadership, and Kleon in particular is presented as having an entirely negative effect on the state, which he is said to be dividing (V. 39–41) or destabilizing (V. 1232–35) and thus threatening with ruin. So too the law-courts are repeatedly made out to have almost nothing to do with either the administration of justice or the exercise of popular political power: the jurors in general do whatever the demagogues (especially Kleon) tell them (V. 240–44); Philokleon votes to convict everyone whose case he hears, regardless of the evidence (esp. V. 106; cf. V. 893, 900–901, 912–14, 920–21, etc.), and ignores the letter of the law when it suits him (V. 583–86); and the outcome of many trials is decided in advance by means of bribery (V. 692–94).<sup>34</sup> Instead, jury-service is merely a means to being flattered and entertained (esp. V. 552–73) and, most important of all, to earning a wage, preferably for doing as little work as possible (esp. V. 594–95; cf. *Eq.* 50–51). As for democracy, *Wasps* as a whole explicitly denies that anything which could reasonably be called “rule by the δῆμος” exists in contemporary Athens and implicitly questions whether an arrangement under which the people administer the city's affairs on a day-to-day basis benefits them in any case, given how consistently they have in the past, it claims, been taken in by smooth-talking political opportunists who played to all their worst instincts.

Konstan explains the contrast between the superficially democratic stance of *Wasps* and its poet and the attitudes noted above by arguing that at the time the play was performed Athenian society was marked by class-conflict between the democratic masses, conceived as a single social and political bloc, and the traditional landed upper-class, whose politics were oligarchic and who were therefore estranged from the state and largely withdrawn from it. It is the outlook of the latter group, Konstan suggests, which *Wasps* valorizes while at the same time affirming the essential solidarity of Athenian civic identity by repeatedly pointing to the different (and much lower) social status of slaves and foreigners; the play thus represents an attempt by a social elite to impose a political false consciousness on the state's lower classes.<sup>35</sup> As David Lewis has pointed out, however, there is little solid evidence to support the claim that

<sup>34</sup>Even at V. 1112–13, which is at least moderately positive about the courts, the point is that the jurors sting *everyone* without discrimination.

<sup>35</sup>Konstan 1985: 45–46.

Athens was seriously polarized between upper-class oligarchs and average democrats in the late 420s B.C.E., although it may have become more so a decade later, during and after the short-lived coup of 411, and again at the end of the century, when the Thirty Tyrants took power and had to be driven out of the city in a nasty civil war.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the most significant stress within Athenian political society in 422 B.C.E. appears to have been between different sorts of democrats, i.e., between radicals like Kleon, who had long identified themselves with the Peloponnesian War, and men like Nikias, who wanted peace, as Aristophanes himself clearly did. The often unfavorable view of the contemporary city and its institutions apparent in *Wasps*, moreover, is in fact well within the late fifth-century democratic mainstream<sup>37</sup> and, as G. E. M. de Ste. Croix argued in detail a generation ago, Aristophanes' political opinions seem generally to coincide with what might be called the traditional Kimonian democratic program: peaceful coexistence with Sparta, hopes for a shared hegemony over the rest of the Greek world, and a distinctly paternalistic attitude toward the δῆμος, whose duty on this view of things is to fill the hoplite ranks and the rowers' benches, leave the details of government to others, and enjoy the fruits of empire.<sup>38</sup>

Although the social and political outlook of *Wasps* might therefore conceivably be called "anti-democratic," in that the play questions whether the city's affairs are best directed by the δῆμος itself rather than by an elite which has the δῆμος' best interests in mind, it is probably better characterized simply as "conservative" and interpreted as a response by a representative of one set of democrats to the arguments and ideology put forward by another. That Athens in the late 420s was a kleptocracy of the sort Bdelykleon describes in the agon in *Wasps* is exceedingly unlikely, as the vast majority of the original audience was certainly aware. The more significant thrust of the overall argument of the play, however, is to attack the political integrity of Kleon and other leading

<sup>36</sup>Lewis 383–84.

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Henderson 1990: 307–13.

<sup>38</sup>de Ste. Croix 355–71, esp. 357. Other important work on Aristophanes' politics includes Croiset; Huggill; Gomme 1938, reprinted in Gomme 1962: 70–91; Forrest; Dover 69–76. For a critique of Gomme and Forrest, see de Ste. Croix 356 and 369–70, respectively. Heath 29–43 offers numerous detailed criticisms of specific points made by de Ste. Croix, but fails to take adequate account of the systematically conservative political bias in Aristophanes' plays and concludes that "Aristophanes told his audience what they wanted to hear" (43), which begs the question of how the poet handled his public's expectations for his own purposes; cf. the remarks of Henderson 1990, esp. 272–74, 284.

radical democrats by beginning with a seemingly innocuous insistence that the ultimate goal of Athens' system of government ought to be the good of the δῆμος and then—rather more daringly—defining that good as the right to enjoy a happy, easy life. A “true democracy,” *Wasps* insists, is one in which all common goods flow directly to the average citizen-soldiers whose efforts have produced them, and the fact that Philokleon (standing in for the Athenian people) is not already “surrounded by rabbit meat and beestings and cream cheese” (*V.* 709–11), despite Athens' obviously enormous revenues, can thus be treated as evidence that there is something terribly wrong with the city's current leadership. Despite their talk of “devoted public service” and eternal vigilance in defense of the interests of the δῆμος (esp. *V.* 666–67), Kleon and his allies have assiduously avoided service in the hoplite-ranks (or, even worse, have run away when they were posted there) and so have no right to share in any of the good things produced by the city's military successes. Indeed, the claim can be made that they are not real democrats at all, for they have not pampered the populace as aggressively as they might have, but have instead attempted to reduce it to a condition very closely resembling slavery. Whether the radical democratic leaders have actually stolen all the allegedly missing public funds is thus largely beside the point, although the charge is worth articulating, if only because Kleon in particular was probably quite well-to-do<sup>39</sup> and the idea that much of what he has was stolen out of the mouths of average citizens makes deliciously nasty comic slander (cf. *Eq.* 716–18). What matters more for the political argument of *Wasps* is the repeated claim that the Athenian δῆμος has been taken in by a vision of democracy which has in fact stripped it of all real power in the city as well as of the wealth and luxury which ought to accompany the effective exercise of that power. That Philokleon ought to respond by asserting his independence, of course, is not at all the point. Instead, what he needs is merely to recognize that he can easily find himself much better stewards, who will not only force him to do right (*V.* 990–94) but make him happier into the bargain.<sup>40</sup>

Precisely as Konstan has argued (and MacDowell for his part has flatly denied),<sup>41</sup> therefore, *Wasps* is an intensely political comedy. All the same, the

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Davies 318–20.

<sup>40</sup>So too in *Knights* two years earlier, “the People” are encouraged not to give up having an ἐπίτροπος (lit. “household manager”) run their affairs but only to get rid of the Paphlagonian (i.e., Kleon) and find someone who will coddle them more.

<sup>41</sup>MacDowell 1995: 177–79 (without specific reference to Konstan 1985).

play's central concern is not to mount a subtle attack on the Athenian democracy in favor of a fundamentally aristocratic ideal of apolitical detachment from public life but to argue for one positive vision of democracy over another. *Wasps* itself makes it clear that Kleon and others of his ideological stripe were in this period quite ready to accuse anyone who opposed their understanding of the meaning of "rule by the δῆμος," and thus of the proper conduct of Athens' internal and external affairs, of being secretly determined to undermine the city's laws and institute a pro-Spartan oligarchical tyranny.<sup>42</sup> There is no good reason to accept that charge at face value, however, or to argue that Aristophanes' comedy actually promotes the social and political agenda of an oligarchically-inclined upper-class at the expense of "genuine democrats." In fact, *Wasps* is decidedly and quite self-consciously democratic, although it simultaneously argues for a rather less direct form of rule by the people than that in which Kleon and his political allies at least claimed to believe. To speak in public in Athens in the late 420s B.C.E. in favor of the sort of government which *Wasps* advocates was nonetheless to risk devastating personal and political attack, and as a result a conservative democrat had the choice of keeping quiet about his convictions—as a comic poet by definition could not do—or of trying to present himself as even more loyal to the people than his opponents were. If he decided to pursue the second option, he would have to defend his vision of democracy by showing that it served the interests of the δῆμος better than that of his opponents did. An effective exercise of that strategy is the most significant feature of the politics of Aristophanes' *Wasps*.

<sup>42</sup>V. 417, 463–70, 473–77, 482–83 (discussed in Section III above, as well as by MacDowell 1995: 158–60); cf. Eup. fr. 193 K.-A. (from Μαρικᾶς, probably Lenaia 421), and note the extraordinarily suspicious tone of *IG* I<sup>3</sup> 71.36–38 (425 B.C.E.). For a more detailed treatment of the question, see Henderson 1987 on *Lys.* 616–35.

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