

## The Structures of Aristophanes's *Wasps*

The structure of an Aristophanic comedy is almost exclusively considered in formal Aristotelian terms, such that when modern commentaries discuss a play's structure, they take this to mean splitting the comedy into a prologue, a *parodos*, various episodes and songs, a *parabasis*, an *exodos* and the like (e.g., Biles and Olson 2015). I suggest that overly relying on this sort of formal structure impedes our understanding of the myriad ways a comedy can be structured to create meaning for the audience. Taking Aristophanes's *Wasps* as a case study, I outline four alternate structures (narrative, thematic, agonistic, and comedic) and show how audience understanding is shaped accordingly. I argue that these are just as significant as the formal structure, and that much is lost if we prioritize one structure at the expense of the others.

The narrative structure emphasizes the plot, often analyzed through the Great Idea (Sommerstein 1980), wherein a main character experiences some significant dissatisfaction and the plot progresses in several resulting stages: its conception, struggle against opposition to the idea, its realization, and its consequences.

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| 1–135     | Conception—Bdelycleon is troubled by Philocleon's obsession with jury duty and wants to keep him at home |
| 136–724   | Struggle—Bdelycleon and Philocleon clash, at first physically and then through debate                    |
| 725–1008  | Realization—Bdelycleon persuades Philocleon to be a juror at home  |
| 1009–1537 | Consequences—Philocleon abandons being a juror at home and becomes transformed into a roguish scoundrel  |

The thematic structure emphasizes a key theme, and in *Wasps* a predominant theme is *polis* ‘city’ vs. *oikos* ‘house’ (cf. Hutchinson 2011). This structural theme emerges from the Great Idea, which involves one character who wants to participate actively in civic life (Philocleon) and one character who wants the other to remain in the house (Bdelycleon).

1–462	Philocleon, desiring to spend his time in the <i>polis</i> , is trapped in the <i>oikos</i>
463–724	Debate between Philocleon and Bdelycleon about the merits of the <i>polis</i>
725–1008	Dog trial: <i>polis</i> and <i>oikos</i> are superimposed upon one other
1009–1121	<i>Parabasis</i> : the chorus and Aristophanes have fought on behalf of the <i>polis</i>
1122–1448	Philocleon, desiring to spend his time in the <i>polis</i> , finally leaves the <i>oikos</i>
1449–1537	Philocleon cannot be constrained by either <i>oikos</i> or <i>polis</i>

The agonistic structure emerges from conceptualizing *Wasps* through a series of contests between characters onstage (cf. Rothwell 2019).

1–462	Philocleon vs Bdelycleon—Philocleon wants to escape; Bdelycleon wins by successfully keeping Philocleon at home
463–724	Philocleon vs Bdelycleon—Philocleon debates with Bdelycleon about the value of jury service; Bdelycleon wins by persuading the chorus over to his side
725–1008	Philocleon vs Bdelycleon—Philocleon judges the domestic dog trial; Bdelycleon wins by tricking Philocleon into dropping his guilty vote into the acquittal urn
1009–1473	Philocleon vs Bdelycleon—Bdelycleon tries to re-educate Philocleon into high society; Philocleon wins by resisting these attempts to change his identity

1474–1537 Philocleon vs the Sons of Carcinus—Philocleon proposes a dance competition, and the play concludes with everyone dancing offstage

Finally, there is the comedic structure, which conceives of the play in terms of units of humor called comic bits (Jendza forthcoming). Bits are units of humor where the material is based on some central premise, where the humor revolving around that central premise develops and escalates over the course of the bit, often through a series of interconnected jokes.

1–53	Two slaves discuss their dreams
54–135	Philocleon is addicted to jury duty
136–210	Philocleon tries to escape the house
211–462	The jurors are like wasps and try to rescue Philocleon
463–760	The merits of jury duty
761–804	Philocleon can judge cases at home
805–1008	Dog trial
1009–1070	The merits of Aristophanes compared to his competitors
1071–1121	The jurors are like wasps
1122–1263	Preparations for the symposium
1264–1291	Politics
1292–1325	Philocleon at the symposium
1326–1387	Philocleon and Dardanis
1388–1473	Philocleon verbally assaults people
1474–1537	Philocleon’s dance competition

These structures certainly offer different perspectives about the play, but the interplay between the different structures also can shed interpretive insights. For example, certain scenes are only significant within a single structure (e.g., the Philocleon and Dardanis scene) and others appear in more than one (e.g., the Dog Trial), suggesting that they serve a more central structural role. This paper asserts that the Aristotelian formal structure should not have sole prestige status; rather, a multiplicity of structures is worth investigation.

### Bibliography

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