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.

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

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; Bdelyleon 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


Jendza, C. Forthcoming. “*Para Prosodokian* and the Comic Bit in Aristophanes.” *CQ*.
