

Philokleon Goes Viral:

Re-reading Aristophanes' *Wasps* Through a COVID-19 Lens

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new scrutiny of ancient plagues. In the past year and a half, scholars of the ancient world, and others, have produced numerous articles and blogs, in both academic and public venues, about how the current worldwide disease outbreak can give us new perspectives on the writings of the past, and *vice versa*. These recent assessments have been insightful, personal, clever, cathartic, and enlightening; they examine COVID-19 and its ancient parallels in light of modern ideas of religion, race, politics, and personal relationships.

This paper differs from this trend of nosography (“plague writing”), in that it shows that we may re-tell the play from a contemporary perspective, thus showing how our experiences during the COVID-19 crisis can use new terms to describe and appreciate an old story.

COVID-19 has given us new terms to describe the actions and experiences of Philokleon, the main character of Aristophanes' *Wasps*, who suffers from a novel disease that does not respond to traditional cures. He must undergo quarantine while working from home, where he receives a stimulus check. He cannot maintain social distance or use personal protective equipment, and expresses his belief in a conspiracy theory to explain the restrictions imposed upon him: quarantine and working from home, albeit with a stimulus payment. He consequently is responsible for a second wave of affliction, more virulent than the initial disease, and after a second sequestration, re-appears with a third mutation, more comically outrageous than the first two. The social and political context of the story may remind Americans of some contemporary Trump-era issues such as demagoguery, conspiracy theory, social security, “Make America Great Again,” and Supreme Court nominations. In the end, Philokleon refuses vaccination.

The play portrays Philokleon's addiction to jury duty as a disease, *nosos*, the same word Thucydides uses for the plague at Athens. The point of both the dramatic and historical accounts of these (comic and real) diseases is that they are harmful, troublesome, insusceptible to therapy, and that they pose a danger to society... as does COVID-19.

The Trump campaign slogan "Make American Great Again" finds parallels in several passages in *Wasps* in which supporters of Kleon express a nostalgic longing for the "good old days" of the Athenian past, and decry the morality, politics, and tastes of the younger generation, which they consider to be taking society in the wrong direction. Philokleon would like to "Make Athens Great Again."

Like the first modern social distancing anti-COVID-19 measures, Bdelykleon's solution to his father Philokleon's pathological addiction to jury service is to keep him out of public life by imposing a home quarantine, allowing him to work from home, and thus keep himself and his community safe.

Numerous opponents of vaccination, social distancing and mask mandates have recourse to unfounded ideas that such measures are simply machinations meant to undermine freedom and to exercise control over the populace, under the guise of helping improve public health. It is of interest that the Chorus of *Wasps* in this play, in condemning Bdelykleon for keeping his father in quarantine, repeatedly accuses him of being part of a conspiracy against the state, when he is in fact looking out for his father's own good.

Instead of modern personal protection equipment like facemasks, the son has his own ideas about PPE to protect his irascible father. Bdelykleon thinks that if his father is well dressed, he can leave quarantine and safely interact with his peers, so he takes away the old man's ratty jacket and replaces it with a fine new cloak. He tries to teach his father how to behave properly.

Such strategies are meant to shield the old man from embarrassment arising from his ignorance when he goes out. Of course, Philokleon objects to these restrictions on his freedom. He refuses to use the PPE his son suggests, and misuses his son's advice, resulting in a second wave of disaster, with more casualties.

The suggestion of hellebore as a cure for Philokleon's madness (1489) is as close to a mention of vaccination as there could be, but the context makes it clear that he would refuse such an inoculation. He would probably say, like contemporary anti-vaxxers, that such solutions infringe on his personal freedom, or are part of a conspiracy.

It is unfortunate that Philokleon's selfish attitude is prevalent among the vaccine hesitant today. Our world is not a comic stage; the consequences of irresponsible actions during the pandemic are more severe than those which any character in a Greek comedy ever faced. Unlike Philokleon, we are obliged to care.