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Persuasion and Purification in Aristophanes' Wasps

Modern scholars of Athenian democracy, like its ancient critics, give considerable attention to political speech and its representation in Athenian political culture, the practices and images that made peitho paramount for Athenian citizenship. But democracy's modern friends and ancient enemies pay less attention to the fact that Athenians also listened and could be convinced, and that being persuaded was also crucial for Athenian citizenship. It is no secret that few actually did (or could) speak at the Athenian assembly, and that speaking entailed political risks - as Cleon discovered on a famous occasion (Th. 4.28). For a broader view of parrhesia as persuading and being persuaded, we must locate the ideas and images that engaged the Athenians when their participation was responsive: what parts of a citizen's life, what thoughts and hopes are integrated into political processes and decisions, and, most importantly, who the citizen is and becomes when persuaded, when he listens, obeys or changes his mind.

This paper focuses on Wasps (422), Aristophanes' most explicit treatment of Athenians persuaded. In Wasps, the legal metaphors of Aristophanes' other plays become literal, as Aristophanes transforms his stage into a court, importing the Athenian citizen's identity as juror into the play's dramatic core. This paper argues that Wasps participates in the democratic discourse on citizen identity by subjecting the citizen - who he is and what he becomes when persuaded - to a close, politically-charged scrutiny.

Aristophanes' examination of the citizen persuaded begins at the start of Wasps' agon. Philocleon's slavish devotion to Athens' unscrupulous leaders brings his son, Bdelycleon, to prosecute him for pretending to be a citizen. Philocleon's defense in this comic graphe xenias seems successful at first. Yet Bdelycleon's images of Philocleon's political and domestic dependence and the privilege of Athens' leaders win the jury's support. Philocleon is forced to limit himself to domestic jury duty; worse still, he is tricked into his first vote of acquittal, which ends his loyal service to his masters. Forced into an identity crisis, Philocleon sheds the old cloak, slippers and chilblains that marked the seamless interconnection between his private life and public identity, and puts on the unfamiliar dress of the symposium (1150-67). Philocleon joins Athenian polite society to indulge his son, but his manners do not improve. Philocleon's self-control goes the way of his old clothes: he gets drunk, insults his fellow guests, steals a flute girl and bashes anyone who comes near him. This annoys Bdelycleon: his father's ways, he complains, remain unchanged (1433).

Philocleon also bothers modern commentators; his incorrigible behavior is often taken as a measure of the failings of democratic institutions and practices, particularly Athens' courts and political appropriations of them (Ste Croix, Konstan, Bowie). I argue that Wasps' parabasis encourages a more sympathetic view. The parabasis gives Aristophanes' audience a thematic and rhetorical link between persuasion and purification. When the audience hears "purely" (1015) the "purifier poet" (1043, 1045), they distinguish genuine wasp-Athenians (with the majority of Athenian citizens: 1076-94) from the sting-less drones who feed on their labors. Faults and all, Philocleon is, I argue, Aristophanes'

model of the purified Athenian. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of this celebration of Athenian waspishness and the interpretation of Athenian citizenship imbedded in it.