

How sympathetic a character do you find Procleon in *Wasps*?

Upon reading Aristophanes' *Wasps* for the first time, Procleon, the antihero of the play, evokes a strange sort of sympathy. The part of us that wants to rebel against the system identifies with his character, and admires the way in which, in the second half of the play, he "does what the man in the street would really like to do" (*K Dover*) and generally places himself above authority. Aristophanes loads Procleon's character with vulgarity and nastiness, but does it in such a way that an audience seeing the play for the first time will focus on sympathizing with him as the 'heroic' character more than his deep-seated and twisted darker side.

For instance, in the first scene we see Procleon trapped inside his own home, treated not like a villain or monster, but a mentally ill obsessive, or *trialophile*. "...The more you warn him, the more he goes to court. That's why we've had to bolt him in and guard the house for fear he gets out." The way the two slaves describe Procleon's personality is quite comic. They describe him as a sad old man. He then tries to escape later on by holding on to the bottom of a donkey as it comes out of the house, in a parody of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. On one hand, we find his wit amusing, and he tries to mirror the cunning of Odysseus, and on the other hand we laughingly pity him for trying such an idea, especially onstage as it looks absurd.

Aristophanes is poking fun at the latest trend in Athenian society in the ridiculous person of Procleon. However, Athenian litigiousness and trial mania are not his only target. In his conversion from his former jurymen's life, Procleon becomes a caricature of an upper-class snob engaging in one of the well-heeled set's favourite addictions: dressing up in your finery, attending drinking parties and meetings of secret societies and going on drunken rampages through the streets, beating up passers by, knocking over statues, mauling slaves and women, etc. By the end of the play, it's hard to tell whether Procleon is any better off for having traded a poor man's pastime for a rich man's. In the first half of the play, we see Procleon as a bloodthirsty bastard, a sadistic slave to Cleon whose only friends are the similarly savage, vespine jurymen. Just seeing this feeble army of nasty old men, we find immediate comedy. On the surface, nothing about Procleon seems too bad, just a rather crazed old man with a strange obsession.

"He enjoys voting defendants down: he is comical ly sadistic." – D. MacDowell

However, when we look deeper into the play and Procleon's character, we see that there is a far darker and more sinister side to him. First of all, there is the fact that the only reason he enjoys sitting on the jury so much is so that he can wreak pain and suffering upon innocent people. *"I long to come to court with you, some solid, lasting harm to do."* There is also the way in which he treats his daughter, in a rather incestuous manner. *"she leans over to give me a kiss – and fish out those three obols with her tongue!"*

"spends his days in the infliction of pain on others and his evenings in running his hand up his daughter's skirt." – K Dover