Questions Sheet

Purpose: to understand the plot of Wasps better & to gather examples to use in your exam

Resources: Wasps, photocopied handouts of ESA Study Guide (pages 17-39)

1. Read the speech by Xanthias, the slave. What points does he make about the jury system?
2. Cleon (‘the Tanner’) is addressed in the play (the Prologue) as mean and ruthless. Find two quotes about him.
3. Find two indications from the Prologue that Athens at war is a ‘sick’ society.
4. In the Agon, what are two arguments made by Philocleon to prove that jurymen have supreme power?
5. In the Agon, Bdelycleon proves his father is a slave to the jury system. What are two of his arguments?
6. Copy in your notes (and read it aloud….you retain more information when you say it):

Wasps contains criticism of the Athenian jury system as well as slapstick parody of trials. All citizens (men over 30) were eligible to be selected. Jury service was not compulsory – volunteers placed their names on a list every year. Each year, 6000 were chosen by lot. Jurors were chosen again by lot from those who turned up each morning. Major court cases had a jury of 501; each side had equal time to speak and were timed by a water clock.

Bdelycleon feels his father should be sitting on the jury because it reflects badly on the son to have a father lining up with the poor for just a few obols. This suggests that the family is not well off and in an era where perception, honour and status were important for a citizen male, it shames him to have his father there.

There is also the idea presented that he wants his father to stay home, safe, warm and comfortable without his total obsession with the courts.

Bdelycleon’s main objection is that his father and other jury members show an irresponsible misuse of power. They enjoy having distinguished men begging for mercy and being flattered by Cleon. While Bdelycleon understands the importance of the aristocracy, he is angry to see that the new generation of aristocracy like Cleon is pocketing the money of the state while his father, being a servant of the state, gets paid a ‘mere’ three obols a day.

1. In the Parabasis, what is Aristophanes complaining about?
2. Copy in your notes (and read it aloud):

The Parabasis shows two very different elements of Aristophanes’ writing. One is the crudeness of his humour as seen in the vulgar abuse of Cleon. The other is about the author’s sense of self-worth; he is out to amuse and entertain people but he also has a clear message: do not be taken in by Cleon and his followers. The Parabasis also illustrates the direct attack by the chorus to the audience. The poet has signalled that perhaps the old wasps are not so wrong and that fashionable youth are not always right. Notice how Aristophanes switches his themes from an attack on Cleon to the young.

We are aware of the class gap and the generation gap in the sick city. We see the tough, stubborn old Marathon Men who do not ‘want to be given a good time’ but who have allowed themselves to the duped by Cleon. On the other hand there are those Bdelycleon’s generation. They have not been duped, as shown when Bdelycleon opened his father’s political eyes. But with their mania for the latest fashions, partying and luxury, they have not provided any positive leadership to counter Cleon either. Both sides are at fault.