

The semiotics and metapragmatics of humour in contemporary theatre: Lena Kitsopoulou's adaptation of Aristophanes' *Wasps*

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Abstract

This study explores the semiotic boundaries of humour in theatre by examining Lena Kitsopoulou's postmodern free adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy Wasps. It discusses the interplay between theatrical aesthetics, the ethical dimensions of humour, artistic intent, and audience reception. In view of the multimodality of theatre, it applies a semiotic approach to the analysis of verbal and performance signs to demonstrate the Greek artist's controversial and provocative humour. Considering humour to be a floating signifier as it "results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses" (Laclau, 2000, p. 305), I show that the plurality of theatrical humorous mechanisms and comedic forms employed in the playscript and on the stage resulted in the ambiguity of humour of Wasps. Furthermore, I demonstrate the fluidity of Kitsopoulou's humour in view of the heated reception of the production, which divided critics and audiences alike. In view of the discussion of the reception of Kitsopoulou's satire in the context of contemporary Greek society, the study views the role of online criticism and social media in the reception of contemporary theatre. Specifically, I focus on the metapragmatics of Wasps' humour observing its polarised reception as evidenced in reviews, press articles and posts on social media. In this respect, I draw on research on the limits of humour and the metapragmatics of humorous discourse (Kramer, 2011; Tsakona, 2017), comic amusement and comic im/moralism (Carroll, 2014), as well as the ensuing negotiation between offensiveness and discriminatory humour in comedy (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005) to explore how humour is received in postmodern theatre..

Keywords: adaptation, Aristophanes, (Greek) theatre, humour, satire.

1. Introduction. Some theoretical considerations and key concepts concerning the discussion of humour in Kitsopoulou's *Wasps*

The study discusses one of the most hotly debated classical Greek drama adaptations in contemporary Greek theatre, namely a spin-off of Aristophanes' political allegory *Σφήκες*

(‘Wasps’).¹ Firstly, a summary of the plot of Aristophanes’ *Wasps* and its modern adaptation is provided (section 2). Then, the study addresses the complexity of humour production in this postmodern adaptation of a classical Greek comedy. I focus on extracts from the *Wasps*’ playscript and some performance sketches to show how verbal humour contradicts the aesthetics of comedic gags on stage (section 3). Specifically, the analysis demonstrates the tension between text and performance in terms of linguistic violence and verbal cruelty, on the one hand, and funny disguises, comic representation and parodic allusions, on the other. I contend that the plurality of signifiers unable to unite in chains of equivalence leads to semiotic ambiguity of *Wasps*’ multimodal humour, thus affecting the potential of Kitsopoulou’s satire. In this view, *Wasps*’ humour is regarded as a *floating signifier* since it manifests “results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses interrupting each other” (Laclau, 2000, p. 305).

Section 4 builds on the discussion of *Wasps*’ humour as a *floating signifier*, addressing the heated reception of the performance and the excessive negative reactions inside the theatre (e.g. booing) and on social media. I examine humor-related commentary in a self-compiled dataset consisting of performance reviews, online articles, X comments and other social media material debating *Wasps*’ humour and satire. In this respect, the study applies contemporary research on humor, which seems to be socio-politically and culturally aware, to theatre/performance studies. Therefore, it focuses on topics such as the limits of humour in specific contexts, its sociopolitical impact and effects on social relations, and aspects of offensive humour (see among others Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Morreall, 2009; Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

Discussion in sections 3 and 4 essentially addresses the issue of unfunny aspects of derogatory humour in theatrical performances and the ensuing spectators’ responses. In this context, it follows Carroll’s (2014) argument that much humour in modern comedy is transgressive, inclined to taunt political correctness (Carroll, 2014, pp. 87-88). The study aims at showing that Kitsopoulou’s humour is indeed of this sort, provoking laughter by flouting moral rules while also poking fun at characters who become satirical reflections easily recognised by the audience. Besides, it explores the audience’s spontaneous reactions resulting in a social media debate straight after the first performance in Epidaurus. Two opposing communities seemingly emerged, largely debating the quality and limits of Kitsopoulou’s humour, and the impact of *Wasps*’ satire. These communities of fervent supporters versus offended spectators resemble, in Kuipers’ (2008) terms, *normative communities of humour* (Kuipers, 2008 in Tsakona, 2017, p. 182), exhibiting contrasting internalised ideologies on humour and different levels of consensus on what can be laughed about in a performance. Such different assumptions on humour, its limits and semiotic significance as well as metapragmatic beliefs about laughter constitute *metapragmatic stereotypes on humour* (see the relevant discussion in Kramer, 2011 and Tsakona, 2017).

In a broader sense, thus, the study considers the idea of comic amusement and funniness, specifically in theatre. Reflecting on the argument that funniness is far too complex, particularly that “it is often very difficult to pinpoint exactly what engenders comic laughter in a humorous exchange” (Carroll, 2014, p. 84), I attempt to demonstrate (sections 3 and 4) that

¹ Headlines from (printed or online) articles demonstrate the extent of the polemic debate. “Kitsopoulou, the sinner” (Alexandris, 2023); “Debate on the ‘Wasps’: Between the sting and the bite” (Zois, 2023); “Lena Kitsopoulou: Six things you don’t know about the woman who caused division in Epidaurus” (Papaioannou, 2023); “The insulting Lena Kitsopoulou in the ancient theater of Epidaurus. With the approval of the National Theater, the STNG and the Athens Epidaurus Festival” (Gavrilis, 2023); “The imposed jeering” (Liakos, 2023); “Why Kitsopoulou is a bomb of our theater” (Ioannidis, 2023); “The ‘Wasps’ that stung and split” (Liaka, 2023); “‘Wasps’ chased people away and caused tension in the ancient theater of Epidaurus” (*Argoliki Anaptiksi*, 2023); “Epidaurian war” (Patsalidis, 2023).

this truth becomes even more challenging in the context of a theatrical performance, for humour in theatre is activated by a plethora of different signs and codes. In other words, whilst audience laughter potentially attributed to experiencing emotions of superiority may have signaled a cognitive appreciation of the performance's inappropriate humour, booing, exiting from the theatre as well as fervent lampooning posted on social media were negative reactions by the audiences showing disapproval of the *Wasps*' distorted humour. Besides, such responses may also hint to spectators' annoyance or disappointment to the aesthetics of the performance in general.

2. Lena Kitsopoulou's postmodern spinoff of Aristophanes' *Wasps*

The "heretical" (Sakellaridou, 2020, p. 279) Greek artist Lena Kitsopoulou rewrote and directed Aristophanes' 422 BC satire of Athenian demagogue Cleon and the Athenians' litigiousness as an aggressive debunking of Greek identities and a caricature of modern Greek society's obsession with social media and online negative commentary. Kitsopoulou's *Wasps* was a co-production of the two prominent Greek state theatre organizations, the National Theatre of Greece (NTG) and the State Theatre of Northern Greece (STNG). It premiered on July 14, 2023 at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus and after a second performance night it toured around Greece in packed open-air venues.

A plot summary of Aristophanes' *Wasps* is provided. This should suffice for appreciating the humour of the source text and pinpointing some of the main comic shifts in the modern text, such as the idea of one object looking like another, originally found in the source text.

Aristophanes' comedy is a satire of the conduct of legal affairs, the jury system and the opportunities for corruption within Athenian democracy. The protagonist Philocleon is obsessed with serving as a jury. His son Bdelycleon is opposed to his father's indulgence, so he locks him into their home with two slaves on watch. The slaves avoid falling asleep by telling the audience what the play is about. There are episodes in which the old man tries to escape and then he is caught, always denouncing his identity. Every time he is caught, he claims to be something else. First, he claims to be a puff of smoke appearing from the chimney. Then he tries the front door of the house, next he is about to escape hanging under a donkey, claiming that he is Nobody, just like Ulysses said to the Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey*. The Chorus arrive; they are old men dressed like wasps in jurymen's clothes. They invite Philocleon to join them. Bdelycleon wakes up and catches his father making his way down the window on a rope. A fight between Chorus and slaves is on. Bdelycleon proposes a debate about the process of law in Athens, in which Philocleon claims the importance and the joy of jury service, while Bdelycleon argues against the corruption of the whole system. In the end, the Chorus are convinced that they are manipulated. Philocleon is defeated and locked inside the home once again. His obsession can now be satisfied only in a mock courtroom which takes place at home, his salary is paid by his son and the cases he now tries are such as those of a dog stealing cheese. The Chorus perform the *parabasis*, a self-referential metatheatrical part of Old Comedy, commenting on their duo-fold role, as wasps and jurymen. In the last scenes Philocleon is taking lessons about good manners and social graces from Bdelycleon. He then takes fanatically to party-going. In a drunken stupor, he takes a slave girl, whom he passes off as a torch to escape punishment. His son must deal with a whole lot of complaints from citizens intending to sue his father for unsavory behavior. The old man is unrepentant. He is locked back at home, leaving his son distraught. The play ends with Philocleon's extraordinary final dance and (perhaps) the crab dance performed by the Chorus to compete against him.

It appears that there is much physical comedy in *Wasps* but this “should not detract from the more serious level of the play” (Walton, 1987, p.191). Kitsopoulou freely adapts the commissioned translation by Professor of Ancient Greek literature Stelios Chronopoulos. She transcribes the Athenians’ obsession with jury service with the obsession of modern digital citizens with using social media for libel and slander. The new text also updates the satire against Athenian democracy, placing it into contemporary Greek society. Additionally, Kitsopoulou adapts the original idea of corruption to a broader context, that of the pathogenies of Greek society, attacking long-standing stereotypes (e.g. the Greek mother, the macho man, Greek *philoxenia* ‘hospitality’) and emerging dystopias (e.g. police violence, homophobia, femicides, ultra-right rhetoric). Concerning the humorous techniques and comedic mechanisms of Aristophanes’ hypertext, she exploits the idea of one object looking like another, parody, the Chorus and the *parabasis*, stretching satire to the most extreme limit.

3. The semiotics of Kitsopoulou’s *Wasps* (playscript and performance)

Section 3 applies a semiotic approach to the analysis of the kinesics (i.e. movement signals, conventions governing gesture and expression of the actors) and other theatrical codes, for example vestimentary (i.e. costumes, masks), cosmetic (i.e. make-up conventions) and musical ones, to explore how they function together to create a complex humorous effect. The analysis of humour mechanisms such as taboo language, sexist and racist humour, stereotypes and comic gags provides insights into how Kitsopoulou’s satire functions not only as an aesthetic tool but also as a social commentary on the pathogenies of modern Greek society.

3.1. Comic gags and sexist jokes as floating signifiers. Ridiculing marginalised groups

Discussion in the section builds on the argument of *Wasps*’ humour as a floating signifier, focusing on examples of discriminatory humor to explore ridiculing in theatre. Specifically, I look into racist humour and sexist jokes in the playscript as well as comedic gags producing comic amusement on stage. A semiotic approach is applied to the analysis of comic gags, such as kinesic, vestimentary, cosmetic and musical codes producing comic amusement on the performance level. Basically, I intend to show two things: one, how the inscribed humour of the text contradicts the general tenor of the performance; two, that the aesthetics of comedic gags producing comic amusement on stage exhibit discriminatory humour.

To begin with, the comic idea of characters’ disguises is employed in the sketch of the Guards who make their stage appearance in sleeping bags. The two Guards who have been assigned by the Son with the task of watching the Father so that he does not break his house arrest, go to sleep in their sleeping bags but soon realise that they get stuck inside them as they cannot unzip them. The same comic disguise holds true for Son while in the same sketch Father hilariously appears as a shapeless covered object firmly tied with straps and tightly confined into a box. At some point another character in an incongruous costume enters the stage. This is a bare-breasted young woman in high heels running up and down the stage asking for help. The audience cannot see her face as her dress is wedged on her head and resists coming off. These funny disguises on the level of performance suggesting entrapment, helplessness and seclusion create comic amusement among the audience. Nevertheless, the playful tenor of the performance contradicts the urgent message of repetitive orders shouted by the characters (“Get me out of here”; “Do something pal. Get us out of here”; “Help me. I can’t take this anymore”; “Don’t go away! Untie me!”; “Help”. “I’m out of breath”).²

² The translation of all the Greek texts discussed here (i.e. playscript’s extracts, performance reviews, media commentary) was made by the author for the purposes of the present study.

The misogynist discourse becomes even more provocative, pregnant with sexist jokes, as in the following examples in which Woman (Nefeli) is repeatedly referred to as “titless”:

- (1) FATHER. Hush. Hey, hot woman.
WOMAN. Aaa! You freak, whoever you are, don't come near me, I'll call the police!

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 11)
- (2) NEFELI. I'm going crazy, this thing won't come off. Christ, I can't take it anymore!
FATHER. Do you know you have small tits, don't you? Do you wear a bra?
SON. Father, just shut up!
FATHER. They're small, why shouldn't I say so. This is the truth, that's what I'm telling...
NEFELI. Stop commenting, you freak, I'll sue you for sexual harassment!

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 12)
- (3) NEFELI. Come on madam, please, come, come, pull this way, come!
MOTHER. What are you talking about? You titless, titless!
FATHER. Now you're talking. That's what I said too!

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 14)

At the end of the sketch, Nefeli is given instructions on how to exit the stage. At that moment she is arrested and subsequently raped by two Policemen. The enactment of the rape scene is naturalistic and takes place amidst a soundscape of drilling police sirens, an appalling remark by Father (“This serves you right”), a police car parked in the background, a Policeman in queer costume and the blocking of other characters on stage as apathetic onlookers. The enactment of absurd violence and brutal dark humour contradicts the aesthetics of incongruous disguises and funny gags performed in the sketches discussed. Besides, the cynical satire of police brutality and women's abuse is manifest not only on the performance level but also in the text. For example, the characters are prompted by Father neither to acknowledge nor to report the event as a rape incident. The woman/Nefeli is further victimised as she is incriminated for having asked for this. Thus, the playscript can be read as an acerbic satire targeting misogyny, people's apathy to discrimination as well as their distrust of the rule of law. The following extracts are indicative of a nihilistic view verging on cynicism:

- (4) NEFELI. Ooooooh
FATHER. It serves you right!
NEFELI. No, no! Help!
POLICE. Shut up, you dumb bitch! Sit down!
NEFELI. Ooooooh
MOTHER (to SON). Why don't you do something. Do something!
FATHER. Your big ass has asked for this! Been walking around with your tits out all this time.

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 18)
- (5) NEFELI. That was rape!
SON. This girl has been raped.
FATHER. Why won't she go and sue the rapist?
SON. How would she find her right?

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 19)

Such sketches in Kitsopoulou's play are largely based on malicious humour and become pivotal in critically appreciating the comic amusement they spread among the audience. Following Carroll's (2014, pp. 78-79) discussion of humour and (comic) moralism, it could be suggested that despite any comic amusement, such instances of humour, notwithstanding that they are part of the fictitious dramatic world of a play, contribute to the disparagement of a vulnerable group (women/physically assaulted women). They may also encourage a casual approach to serious social issues and plights in modern societies (sexism, violence against women, questioning the efficiency of the police/justice system), leading to various audience responses ranging from cynicism and desensitisation to violence, to discomfort, resistance and laughter. The former implies that the playscript's sexist jokes may be accountable for being, in Carroll's (2014, p. 79) words, "morally suspect" and "potentially harmful". In the latter case, we should acknowledge humour's power to ridicule, regarding its cruelty and aggression not as "peripheral features"³(Billig, 2005, p. 28) but "central to the social and psychological functions of humour."⁴

3.2. Racist humour or ridiculing stereotypes

This section explores the ambiguity of *Wasps*' humour in relation to ethnic/cultural stereotypes and identities. Kitsopoulou's oeuvre is characteristically pregnant with stereotypes about ethnic and cultural homogeneity as well as clear-cut identities, aiming at "the debunking of Greek and European narratives of ethnic and cultural homogeneity and their destabilising effect on individual lives in search of new hybrid identities" (Sakellaridou, 2020, p. 283).

The following are just a few comic mechanisms specifically targeting the identities of contemporary Greeks: humorous representation, comic imagery, linguistic violence and the splatter aesthetic. Above all, sarcastic irony and parody meant to challenge audience expectations, making the audience reflect on their role as agents in today's wrongdoings. In an interview following the premiere, the artist replied to the negative reception and strong criticisms against the performance, explaining her rewriting of Aristophanes' comedy:

In my opinion, man has had zero development in history, but for few exceptions. In our country, I think the couch potato reigns at this moment. This is a man holding a cell phone in their hand and feeling like at least the president of the Supreme Court. Our life is full of Wasps. They are all those who hate and condemn on social media, they are the ones who have an opinion on everything, who hate and disapprove, while being themselves the worst fascists. [...] Wasp is the envy that does not let a person sleep at night because it is you to blame even if they don't even know you. Wasps are people who think they gain value looking for something bad in others; they are people without light, without existence; the whole system is a wasp, it's the intermingling of interests, the corruption, it's the bribes, it's the person who becomes anyone's puppet in order to climb to the top; human nature is a huge Wasp.

(Kitsopoulou, 2023b)

³ The concept of 'semiosphere' coined by Juri Lotman and first introduced in 1984 is helpful here. Semiosphere is taken as "the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist" (Lotman & Clark, 2005, p.205). On the one hand, it helps us to acknowledge the opposition of center/periphery and appreciate the diversity of dialogic systems, for example, between the center and periphery of cultures. On the other hand, it hints at the "existence of boundary" (Lotman & Clark, 2005, p. 208) in semiotic space and its function in the semiosphere as an "area of accelerated semiotic processes" (Lotman & Clark, 2005, p. 212).

⁴ Superiority and relief theories of humor would deepen the discussion of humour involving discriminatory content, a task which due to space limitations cannot be undertaken here.

The artist vehemently argued for the representation of Father in her work as “a manic litigious father [...] a critic, a judge, a lawyer, [who] tells his opinion, imposes his opinion, abuses, blames, breaks laws” and the representation of “a society of contemporary people, which gives birth to an abusive father, an abusive politician, a male chauvinist, a fascist, a nationalist.” (Kitsopoulou, 2023b). The role was performed as an excessively obnoxious character (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Thodoris Skiftoulis, the protagonist (Father) in Kitsopoulou’s *Wasps*. © National Theatre of Greece Archive. Σφήκες 2023. Photograph by Christos Symeonides.

The actor (Thodoris Skiftoulis) used excessive gestures and spread a torrent of obscenities and hate speech in high-pitched roars, targeting against an array of matters, personalities and social groups (popular TV shows, widely publicised trials and court decisions, the government’s new bill for same sex couples, gay people, overweight people, women, ethnic groups, celebrities). Obviously, the portrayal of Father as a grotesque figure debunks the narrative of the Greeks’ superiority, holding a mirror against the spectators whose laughter may signify, among other reactions, acknowledgement of a toxic reality they are aware of, and complicity. Through the specific enactment social issues and Greek pathogenies, such as police brutality, femicides, the rise of the far right and racism, are satirised.

Next, I discuss the semiotics of debunking and racist humour in another sketch to delve further into how *Wasps*’ comedic mechanisms influence the effectiveness of satire. Specifically, towards the end of the performance a non-speaking character dressed up as a basketball player wearing a full-head gigantic mask enters a run-down stage. The representation is reminiscent of those dummies which are popular in modern Greek carnival

festivities. The actor walks around a huge basketball hoop (see Figure 2),⁵ while an instrumental version of a well-known, early twentieth-century traditional Greek song of Asia Minor fills the air (*Τα παιδιά της γειτονιάς σου* “The children of your neighborhood”). Before the mute character exits the stage, Father roars:

- (6) FATHER. You polluted Kypséli. All black people. Kypséli used to be an aristocratic neighborhood! (*Exits*).

(Kitsopoulou, 2023a, p. 40)



Figure 2. Basketball hoop. A hotly debated huge stage prop featuring prominently in Epidaurus theatre. © National Theatre of Greece Archive. Σφήκες 2023. Photograph by Christos Symeonides.

The basketball player’s silent presence is a comic allusion to the world-famous iconic basketball player Giannis Antetokounmpo, producing comic amusement and spreading roars of laughter among the audience. This portrait of a Greek citizen born of migrant parents of Nigerian origin sharply contradicts the portrait of another Greek in the play (i.e. Father). Drawn in excessive characterization as a deeply conservative, ultra-right, ethnic Greek, Father is fed on stereotypes about ethnic and cultural homogeneity and superiority. Thus, at least two contrasting identities of Greeks emerge in the play portrayed via different comic mechanisms. On the one hand, the identity of a prestigious Greek is constructed via comic impersonation

⁵ The “bizarre” stage prop by stage designer Magdalene Avgerinou was variously received by critics. Presumably, the seven-meter basketball hoop dominating over Epidaurus orchestra symbolized “people’s unattainable goals” (Zois, 2023). It was also regarded as an eloquent sign for modern Greeks’ selective acceptance of foreigners (Karaoglou, 2023), implicitly targeting a well-known hypocritical attitude looking up to successful immigrants who have made it as legends of the sport community, while spilling xenophobic venom to disadvantaged anonymous immigrants. The following headline was quite disapproving of the artist’s work: “Whoa! Hang on a second! A basketball hoop in Epidaurus?” (*Espresso*, 2023).

(i.e. humorous imitation of real character) and parody (i.e. huge full-head mask like those used in carnival processions) adding an absurdist layer to the performance and fostering a lighthearted approach from the audience. On the other hand, the identity construction of an obnoxious Greek is realised on stage by excessive acting codes and taboo language producing ridicule and satire.

I purport that the ensuing plurality of comic mechanisms regarding the representation of ethnic stereotypes reduced the impact of Kitsopoulou's satire problematising its discourse. Most importantly, this plurality created nuanced, unfixed comic representations constantly negotiated. The signifiers of humor interrupted each other unable to unite together in sequences of equivalence, thus contradicting each other and producing varied audience reception. This way Kitsopoulou's humour in *Wasps* may be considered to be a floating signifier. Specifically, the depiction of Father as a caricature may have dismantled nationalist rhetoric, but it also subverted substantive critique. Besides, the absurd humour in Antetokounmpo's sketch was rather unclear whether it enhanced or undercut the broader critique of racial stereotypes and the narrative on modern Greeks' multiculturalism. Lastly, the plurality of the play's comedic mechanisms confounded the audience, producing mixed emotions among them. I will expand on this argument in the next section, while further investigating offensive humour.

3.3. Ethnic humour and racism. Parodying tourists, debunking Greek philoxenia

Aspects of the Greek identity have been steadily parodied in Kitsopoulou's oeuvre. For example, xenophobia is a target of "her relentless attack against the Greek fantasy of national superiority and difference" (Sakellaridou, 2020, p. 282). Particularly in *Wasps*, *philoxenia* ('hospitality') as a most pertinent value of the Greek identity is satirised.

The representation of a foreign tourist visiting Athens signifies an interesting example of placing a social group within a comic frame (see Figure 3). According to the playscript, the Tourist has been mugged. He reports that he was robbed of his sleeping bag but receives no help. Moreover, he is absurdly made fun of for his shoes and is criticized for his dining habits around Athens. Finally, he is given the most incongruous order, namely to dance. Apparently, the sketch exploits the comic mechanics of the Theatre of the Absurd, pregnant as it is with surrealistic humour predicating that the character is victimised and suffers the most humiliating ridicule. The sketch culminates in splatter aesthetic as the Tourist is brutally stabbed with a pair of scissors among a by-standing chorus of inhuman aides and abettors. Thus, the grave context of the dramatic idea is set against a variety of signs and codes activating humour and rendering the performance a parodic effect which defeats the dark humour of the dramaturgy.⁶ Specifically, the following active sources of humour co-occur in the sketch to create a complex albeit floating effect: vestimentary signs, such as the Tourist's dressing code; the acting code, specifically the enactment of the role by the actor (Alexandros Zouridakis); code-switching from Greek into English; intertextual and intersemiotic references, such as a Greek song's lyrics and an allusion to a popular American film noir; finally, parody exploiting musical codes, such as the score of a Eurovision contest winner song.

⁶ I have discussed elsewhere the foregrounding of incongruity in postmodern theatre performances due to the co-occurrence of various humorous mechanisms (Manteli, 2011), suggesting that "the interaction of different active sources of humour on the performance level may be seen as an extension to Attardo's theoretical framework of *hyperdetermined humour*" (Manteli, 2011, p. 246 and references therein).



Figure 3. The Tourist (Alexandros Zouridakis) is surrounded by a menacing crowd of local Athenians in Kitsopoulou's *Wasps*. © National Theatre of Greece Archive. Σφήκες 2023. Photograph by Christos Symeonides.

From the discussion above it follows that Kitsopoulou's theatre is based on the humorous construction of superiority, otherness and inferiority of social groups. Particularly, in *Wasps* the artist trades on well-known ethnic stereotypes (with reference to Greeks) and uses unflattering social stereotypes (with reference to non-Greeks). The humour of *Wasps*, like any comedy, is seemingly predicated on the handling of complex socially embedded and publicly shared meanings as well as individualised artistic motivations. Consequently, section three raised a strong argument about the ambiguity of humour as regards Kitsopoulou's trading on stereotypes and, thus, highlighted the discussion of stereotypes in *Wasps* as floating signifiers. Nevertheless, we should be reminded that stereotypes are ideologically loaded, carrying "a legacy of meanings and associations" which extends from a contemporary context "back into the past" (Pickering & Lockyer 2005, p. 8). Practically this means that stereotypes rely more on fluidity rather than fixities, potentially rendering them floating signifiers. I argue that this condition becomes quite significant in theatre where, on the one hand, the comic discourse of the stereotypes is traded by the artists (playwright, director, performers, etc.) while, on the other hand, the target recipients of humour are varied audiences of different backgrounds whose tastes are not expected to be aligned as regards comic amusement as well as offensiveness. Notwithstanding the ensuing ambiguity of comic stereotypes, Billig's (2005, p. 30) argumentation about the power of ethnic jokes settling stereotypes "in the public mind, thereby perpetuating prejudice and racism" adds a caveat quite applicable in the discussion of humour of a theatrical performance, such as here.

In what follows, Carroll's arguments (2014, pp. 77-96) with reference to humour and amusement *vis-à-vis* comic ethicism and comic im/moralism will inform the discussion about audience response and the ambivalent audience's reception of humour in *Wasps*. For example,

regarding the concept of “wicked laughter”, which may account for an “ethically dubious anesthesia of the heart” (Carroll, 2014, pp. 78-79), can help us appreciate its implications for shaping the (ethical/moral) reading of humour in a play. Moreover, audience reception in a theatrical comedy should be taken as a nexus between amusement (and thus positive audience response) and irritation (and thus negative audience response). I will elaborate on the issue of *Wasps*’ ambiguity in the next section (4) as I proceed with the analysis of performance reviews and audience reactions after the Epidaurus shows.

4. The metapragmatics of Lena Kitsopoulou’s humour: critical reception of the performance and online audience reactions about *Wasps*

The section attempts a nuanced discussion of the reception of *Wasps*, mapping the tensions between the artist’s ideologies, humour ideologies and assumingly ideologies about theatre. It discusses the polarised reception of the performance aiming to map the range of audience reactions. Consequently, humour is taken to be framed “as a highly context-dependent phenomenon” (Kramer, 2011, p. 138) whereby context includes, among other things, “interdiscursive links to [...] ideologies that implicitly guide speakers in their production and consumption of humour” in a structured mode. The analysis is based on a self-compiled dataset (dating from July 16 to July 31, 2023) of thirty-eight printed and online articles and reviews, as well as comments from websites, blogs and social media.⁷ Specifically, I examine polemic reviews and press articles featuring in the debate among theatre experts after the performance’s opening night. I also examine negative comments by audience members originally posted on their personal social media and then featuring among the dataset. Public answers of defense by civilians who were the targets of the *Wasps*’ lampoon are also examined. The reaction of the director as expressed in interviews following the media frenzy after the performances in Epidaurus is also considered. As already stated, the discussion to be undertaken explores “humour ideologies” (see Kramer, 2011, pp. 138-139) as well as broader ideologies about theatre (institutions) and comedy, immanent in varied public responses to this controversial performance.

Before I embark on the analysis of humour-related comments from the dataset, I wish to underline that the contested topics were not just humour-related. In contrast, they also focused on the faithfulness of the adaptation to the source text and the quality of the rewriting of Aristophanes’ comedy;⁸ the appropriation of Aristophanes’ comedies in contemporary Greek theatre;⁹ personal attacks on playwright/director/actress Lena Kitsopoulou; criticism against theatre/cultural institutions;¹⁰ and, lastly, censorship debates about bad performances. As is often the case in today’s postmodern societies of information and media (Roig, 2022, p. 51), ridicule, slander and bad language were heavily employed in this commentary. Specifically, derision ranged from spreading mocking characterizations about the artist, such

⁷ I would like to thank Georgia Polychronidou at the Library/Archive of the National Theater of Greece (NTG) who assisted my research at this point.

⁸ Overall, criticism debated against the adaptation’s lack of substantial attack on major issues, in contrast to the classical text. Some theater critics implied that Kitsopoulou’s rewriting of the text exploited Aristophanes’ comedic legacy to make her debut to Epidaurus. A comment posted on X purports: “Fake- bad show- mockery, #Wasps by #Kitsopoulou. Nothing to do with Aristophanes and theater in general. No place in Epidaurus. The actors apparently affected by the audience, who left by the dozens, could not believe what they were presenting” (Kalavri, 2023).

⁹ “Aristophanes [...] is rolling over in his grave” (Soldatou, 2023). “Aristophanes...snapped by the hangman’s noose” (Soldatou, 2023).

¹⁰ The administrations of the Athens/Epidaurus Festival, the NTG and the STNG were severely criticized for selecting Kitsopoulou’s “insulting and antitheatrical” *Wasps* (Gavrilis, 2023).

as “blasphemous”, “provocative”, “under the procedure of delusional extreme creativity” (Gavrilis, 2023), “heretic and quaint” (Soldatou, 2023), to lampooning her surname through wordplay.

As already stated, *Wasps* was broadly and ‘hotly’ received inside the theatre with many spectators reportedly leaving the auditorium hissing and jeering on the premiere night. Immediately after the Epidaurus performances, a hot debate, which divided public opinion,¹¹ took place outside the theatre on social media and among critics, while a torrent of negative comments reported on the dozens of disgruntled audience members booing as they exited the theatre. Other articles, however, reported on the production’s positive reception. Characteristically, Agiannidis (2024) reports: “The audience of Epidaurus responded to all this by heckling and leaving the theatre en masse, but also by applauding.”¹²

In what follows (4.1 and 4.2), I discuss examples from the dataset of humour-related commentary about *Wasps*, found in newspaper and website reviews. The analysis aims at illustrating the varied reactions to the humor and satire of *Wasps*, on the one hand, and exploring the metapragmatic stereotypes considering Kitsopoulou’s/*Wasps*’ humour, on the other hand. Ultimately, the discussion aims at showing the realisation (reception) of humour in postmodern comedy as a floating signifier.

The analysis of the data demonstrates some clear points of divergence among the critics, social media users, and spectators regarding the humorous/satirical quality of the performance (mainly the text); the functions of humour, particularly its effect on the audience, the appropriateness and efficacy of Kitsopoulou’s satire, and the limits of humour.

4.1 The humorous/satirical quality of the playscript

One of the most controversial topics among critics was the text itself. The humorous/satirical quality of the text is broadly considered in regard to Kitsopoulou’s adaptation of Aristophanes’ comedy (examples 7, 9). It is also considered intertextually, in view of the artist’s previous works (example 8) which compared to *Wasps* are seen in a positive light, or theatrical comedy scripts (example 12). Kitsopoulou’s satire is contested for being either too embarrassing and cringeworthy (examples 7, 9), or sharp and bold, confronting the audience with truths they may not like to hear (examples 11-13). It is also framed as malicious and relentless (example 10).

- (7) [Kitsopoulou] attempted to update the basic message of the Aristophanic comedy in order to, as she [the artist] notes, highlight through caustic humor and in satirical mode the rotten system, the sleeping defenses, racism, fanaticism, the rigid political correctness of our time [...] the fact that the text of the work is written in a language and tenor completely different than that of the original, the cruelty of satire, verbal acrobatics, Marinella’s song and principally Lena Kitsopoulou’s explosive monologue on stage caused boos.

(Kouka, 2023)

- (8) The most considerable liability item, however, was the quality of the text [...]. Where was all this [i.e. an inspiring, poetic, bitter and witty subtext identified in other works by Kitsopoulou] in the uninspiring text of ‘Wasps’? [...] Was it in the

¹¹ This headline is characteristic: “‘Wasps’ that stung and split” (Liaka, 2023). For more headlines see footnote 1.

¹² Nevertheless, no considerably negative reactions of the audiences were reported in other performance venues except for a few spectators leaving the theater before curtain (Deska, 2023).

satire of Greece's brand name and the tasting reality shows, or the implementation of stupid jokes about cheese croquettes?

(Karaoglou, 2023)

- (9) In his comedies Aristophanes condemned through his stories his political enemies, politics and politicians. Lena Kitsopoulou did the same, leaving no one... unsatisfied. Right? She sets out with the Minister of Culture and 'the cementing of Acropolis' and goes on with the artistic director of Athens/Epidaurus Festival who slips into designer clothes at the theatre stands for the purpose of fashion magazines' photo shooting.

(Agiannidis, 2023)

The above example suggests that Kitsopoulou's satire, like Aristophanes', targets politicians and other public figures, albeit not in an equally biting ironic manner. Specifically, it refers to an episode of *Wasps* targeting Greece's culture minister Lina Mendoni for the installation in 2021 post-Covid Greece of a new pathway paved in reinforced cement across the hill of the country's most visited site Acropolis and a new lift on the rocks northern flank facilitating people with disabilities. The measures have been criticised; opposition has been fierce with more than 3500 signatories endorsing an online open letter calling for the pathways to be removed. Additionally, the example refers to the jokes at the expense of director and artistic director of Athens/Epidaurus Festival Katerina Evangelatos who was targeted for her usual appearances at premiere festival nights, always very elegant and modern dressed.

- (10) Everything is permitted in art, and no one can curb the opinions of creators, no matter how much they provoke public sentiment. We had the same discussion when the Christian Taliban¹³ were screaming outside theatres which, in their opinion, offended their sacrosanct. If you don't like the show, you just leave and you have the right to criticize. Cannibalism is not a sign of civilised people, and this also applies to Lena's supporters who cannibalize those who oppose her. She cannibalizes too in unorthodox ways because that's how she expresses herself

(Bibilas, quoted in *News* 24/7, 2023).

Although the above example advocates freedom of speech and unrestrained artistic creativity, it also points to Kitsopoulou's irreverent, wicked humour and, importantly, to respective reactions by Kitsopoulou's devotees.

- (11) Raw, cruel, with a sting stinging hard, a mirror showing our own reality

(Daskalos, 2023).

¹³ The neologism 'Christian Taliban', coined during the economic crisis of the 2010s, points to minorities of Greek religious fanatics ardently inspired by ultra-conservative hyper-Orthodox Christian doctrines. Driven by conspiracy theories these bigots have vehemently protested and denounced supposedly liberal measures and modernist social changes proposed by the Greek state (e.g. the issuing of new identity cards for Greek citizens, mandatory vaccination against the Covid-19 virus). Besides, they have challenged the freedom of artistic expression and avant-garde art. In demonstrations they embrace frustrating, if not absurd, modes of objection. For example, they usually jab small crucifixes, hold Greek flags, chant religious hymns, sing the national anthem, and hurl yogurts against their targets.

- (12) Sometimes these venomous voices of hers [i.e. Kitsopoulou's] work to the detriment of quality. But there are also times when the poison of her writing makes bigshot success, stripping bare and baring knuckles, spotting the cankers of society, the malaises, and presenting them head-on without twists and turns. In general, I consider her to be an intelligent, talented and outgoing artist who has a very good sense of rhythm, stage language and theatrical punch line. Many of her monologues are poetic even if they are obscene jesting. She knows the techniques of satire, self-mockery, social commentary, the techniques and narrative aggression of stand-up comedy

(Patsalidis, 2023).

- (13) In fact, she does nothing more than transfer on the stage materials of the surrounding reality: the same unmanageable, immoderate and violent discourse we are exposed to every day, she would tell you, which originates indeed from various centers of power and prominent control systems. Her satire aims at rubbing in our faces that self which we have accepted in our remaining lives, outside 'art'

(Ioannidis, 2023).

Examples 7-10 contemplate the quality of the *Wasps* satire, discussing the tenor and the content of the text and covering several aspects. Specifically, example 7 criticises Kitsopoulou's adaptation of Aristophanes and comments on negative audience reactions. Examples 8 and 9 evaluate the playscript's humor, rather in an ironic tone. Most importantly, all the above critical discourse maps tensions between artistic freedom, humor ideologies, censorship and genre debates, thus pointing to the larger theoretical argument about *Wasps*' humour as a floating signifier.

4.2 The functions and limits of *Wasps*' humor

As shown above, the satire of *Wasps* is considered sarcastic, malevolent and provocative. Consequently, one imminent ideological stance voices the argument that satire need not be cruel or dull or target trivial issues to be successful. By contrast, effective satire should be witty and acerbic as well as substantial. Additionally, an immanent metapragmatic stereotype on Kitsopoulou's humor addresses the inappropriateness of her satire. Specifically, it argues against its 'cannibalistic' nature and attributes the same attitude (cannibalism) to Kitsopoulou's fervent fans (10). Apparently, at least two divergent communities are formed, each one embracing a different standpoint as regards the functions and limits of humor; on the one hand, the community of those who feel offended as audience and/or feature as the butt of the joke (roles scripted on public figures, politicians etc.); on the other hand, the community of Kitsopoulou's devoted fan club who confront aggressively and offensively Lena's 'conservative' non-devotees.

Other posts and reviews argued for the success of *Wasps*, praising the performance as true satire holding a mirror to the audience's wrongdoings and pertinently targeting social ills. Kitsopoulou's satire is shown (in examples 11-13) to be successful for being bold enough and sharp, her vulgar extravagant diction being precisely a sign of present society and its people, and by extension the potential audiences of her performance(s).

In a different vein, theatre critics (examples 14-15) implicitly defended the production in general terms, pronouncing that theatre, as an independent living art, fosters conflict and heterogeneity and should not be subject to censorship. This metatheatrical critical discourse argues indirectly for Kitsopoulou's satire claiming that it is so lively, free and contrarious as it

should be. In a different vein, the following examples obviously contradict argumentation favouring censorship.

- (14) Let me also say something willfully absolute, which I nevertheless consider to be relevant to the conversation going on these days. Theatre that does not spark disagreements is a dead theatre. Theatre's 'wild' beauty stems precisely from the fact that no one can define it nor evaluate it in absolute terms. Theatre by its nature loves heteromorphism. It is an unruly genre. It has rules but deep down it loves the conflict that overturns and unsettles them. Conflict is its fuel. This is how it progresses and renews itself. Theatre is a living organism and like all living organisms, it develops ulcers and wrinkles and stiffness and osteoarthritis along the way, but it does not falter, it continues and always finds its way and the medicine for its treatment.

(Patsalidis, 2023)

While example 14 makes a thorough claim for a 'living' theatre embracing conflict, the following example (15) suggests broader ideological tensions and attitudes among the Greek society.

- (15) In a society that tends towards extreme liberalism while at the same time falling into extreme conservatism yet having no time to change so that it 'digests' any conquests and changes already gained, we would not withstand in my opinion the depreciation of any 'acquis' (earned with effort), such as the freedom of expression. [...] I save for last an online admonition posted by song writer Gerasimos Evangelatos: "We do not need Sacred Art, we need Living Art: successful, unsuccessful, indifferent, irritating, healing, infuriating, exciting - anything goes - so long as it asks questions by dipping its hands wherever Life occurs and does not pretend to offer answers bequeathed from the beyond. Guardians of artistic ethics, wait a minute! We artists and the public alike are passing ignorant five-year-olds in the face of the Unknown. Let's just figure this out as if we relax a bit."

(Agiannidis, 2023)

Therefore, the metapragmatic stereotypes and the ideologies expressed in examples (7) to (15) implicitly construct two "normative communities of humour," to put it in Kuipers' (2008) terms (Kuipers, 2008 in Tsakona, 2017, p. 182; see section 1). These communities broadly disagree about the effectiveness/quality of satire, offering two contrasting perspectives on satire's limits and its impact on the audience. The discussion reveals further ideological stances about the role of *Wasps* and by extension of postmodern comedy, namely that the performance can educate the audiences and help them towards self-awareness (examples 12-14).

5. Conclusions

Addressing the semiotics and metapragmatics of humour production and reception in theatre, the present study has focused on Lena Kitsopoulou's controversial postmodern free adaptation of Aristophanes' *Wasps*. The analysis of extracts from the playscript and a series of performance sketches shows that the director employs a whole range of humorous devices – comic gags, sexist jokes, taboo language, stereotypes, parody and ridicule – in order to satirise contemporary Greek media-saturated society and target modern Greeks. While Kitsopoulou's

humour is mostly considered controversial and discriminatory, problematizing comic amusement and laughter as a positive sign of audience reception on the one hand, and ideologies about the limits of humour in theatre and the moral valence of comedy on the other, the problematic reception should not serve to justify calls for (the placement of) limits to humour in theatrical performances in the form of (self-)censorship. In this sense, the paper makes a point about the complexity of humour production and humour reception in theatre in general and in postmodern comedy in particular. It also points out that humor in postmodern theatre and satire in particular may be extremely aggressive, contentious and derogatory.

By the same token, the study has demonstrated that theatre critics in their commentary and audience members in social media may heavily debunk and lampoon a theatrical performance. In my opinion this is a frustrating application of our modern neoliberal media-saturated societies, prone to favour the mechanisms of ridicule, to the reception of a theatrical performance and the interpretation of its humour. As Roig (2022, p. 51) suggests, such mechanisms are so much exploited by postmodern media enthusiasts who are exposed to backbiting, a phenomenon related to ridicule and prone to exercise some sort of social control.

The study also concludes that, despite its aggressiveness and offensiveness, the humour of *Wasps* was not eventually perceived by everybody as challenging stereotypes and taboo issues. Similarly, satire was not perceived as consistently targeting major issues. These concluding remarks are viewed in relation to the plethora of humorous resources which contributed to the ambiguity of humour, thus rendering it a floating signifier and engendering a less biting satire as probably intended. This is particularly true when exploring the performance of absurd violence and dark humour *vis-à-vis* the incongruous disguises and funny gags. Moreover, the analysis has shown that discriminatory humour on stage realised as sexist and racist jokes contradicts the grave implicatures and ideological impact of the playscript's humour. While the research contemplates that ridiculing marginalised groups (e.g. women, victims of assault) and stereotyping may be "morally suspect" and "potentially harmful," to repeat Carroll's (2014, p.79) terms, the study does nonetheless acknowledge the power of humor in theatrical performances in addressing ideologies, identities and stereotypes.

Kitsopoulou's humour engendered mostly by humorous representation, comic imagery, obscene language and the splatter aesthetic targeted the identities of contemporary Greeks and modern Greek pathogenies, aiming to debunk narratives of national superiority. Specifically, the discussion of the semiotics of debunking and ridicule in *Wasps* demonstrated that marginalised social groups as well as Greek identities were rather portrayed in a one-dimensional and conventional light. Therefore, I contend that humorous representations in *Wasps* did not address serious social issues in an impactful way, thus ethnic stereotypes and identities were not sufficiently challenged. As demonstrated, the plurality of comic mechanisms reduced the impact of Kitsopoulou's satire of ethnic stereotypes and prompted a mixed reception by theatre critics and audience members alike. Further examination of examples of offensive humour activated through the interaction of various mechanisms maintains that the dark humour of the dramaturgy was overridden by the parody on the stage. Considering the argumentation by Pickering and Lockyer (2005) about the fluidity of stereotypes, I, thus, propose that comic stereotypes in theatre may be construed as floating signifiers, since their construction and interpretation pertain to the artists' motivations, intentions and aesthetics, on the one hand, and the backgrounds, tastes and ideologies of the performance's varied audiences, on the other hand.

Finally, the analysis of the metapragmatic stereotypes of theatre critics and audience members as shown in the data reveals a polarised reception of Lena Kitsopoulou's *Wasps*. To investigate the metapragmatics of *Wasps*' reception, my research considered not only humour-related critical discourse, but also media discourse commenting on *Wasps* both as a comedy and a theatrical production. The discussion explains that two "normative communities," to

repeat Kuipers' (2008) term, emerge, one favouring and the other disclaiming the performance. The former community is construed in a rather conservative/normative frame and maintains a negative stance towards the performance. The latter normative community, including fervent fans of Kitsopoulou's postmodern theatre, considers *Wasps* as true and sharp satire targeting contemporary Greek society's ills and reflecting on the audience's wrongdoings. It seems that this community advocates freedom of the arts and theatre, in particular. It also argues for the relevance of controversial art in modern societies. Situated on either end of the continuum, both communities contemplate the ethical/moral aspects of a comedy performance, arguing from opposing standpoints that satire should be witty and acerbic to be evaluated as substantial and appropriate. Additionally, the public debate on Kitsopoulou's *Wasps* as illustrated in newspaper reviews, X comments, and online opinion articles revealed further metapragmatic stereotypes on humour and comedy, for example that humour in theatre should (not) be experienced as a raw and cannibalistic sign; it should (not) prompt uncultured behaviors by artists and audiences alike; that comic amusement should (not) be on a par with the limits of satire. Therefore, in view of its varied reception and critical evaluation, once again the humour of *Wasps* constitutes a floating signifier.

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