

Menander and War Trauma

The portrayals of combat veterans struggling to cope with the effects of war trauma found in epic and tragedy have received considerable attention (Shay 1994, 2002; Tritle 2000), but Menander's veterans have not generated the same interest, even though soldiers are prominent in four plays (*Aspis*, *Misoumenos*, *Perikeiromene*, and *Sikyonioidi*). Scholarship on the Menandrian soldier tends to be more interested in identifying character traits – prone to boasting, “potentially violent” (MacCary 1972: 297) – than connecting the behavior of the soldiers to their experiences as combat veterans. I argue that these four plays demonstrate a genuine concern for the effects of war trauma on veterans and the Athenian *polis*, and promote the civic and social importance of healing the community in the aftermath of war. I conclude by considering the way that public performance of these plays could have offered a therapeutic experience for veterans, their families, and the entire Athenian community.

While scholars have occasionally discussed war trauma in Menander, the scope of such discussions tends to be very narrow. W.G. Arnott (1970) and Lloyd-Jones (1971) debate the impact of one passage in *Aspis*, in which a combat survivor describes the aftermath of a battle: bloated bodies and a crushed shield; this scene is Menander's only “Horroreffekt” (Gaiser 1973: 132). Lamagna (2014) reads the same scene as evidence for Menander's familiarity with veterans' wartime experiences and ability to incorporate these experiences into his plays in a realistic manner. The approach of these scholars is typical: they provide valuable observations applicable to one scene or play, but rarely make connections between the plays. I look at the four soldier plays and demonstrate that they are consistent in providing a blueprint for restoring a *polis* ravaged by war.

Each play explores different aspects of war trauma. *Aspis* stages the emotional trauma of

a household devastated by the loss of a family member, Kleostratos, who is reported to have died while on campaign. The grief of his family and their coping attempts reflect reality for many Athenian viewers, who had experienced firsthand the loss of a loved one in war (James 2014). *Sikyonioi* shows a community coming together to help the soldier Stratophanes, and emphasizes the importance of the community's involvement in reintegrating veterans. *Perikeiromene* features the soldier Polemon, who has assaulted his free concubine, Glykera. The play explores the potential violence of a veteran who exhibits symptoms suggestive of PTSD, and provides a model for the therapeutic process leading to reintegration of veterans. *Misoumenos* makes humane treatment of veterans a part of Greek identity, and offers a glimpse into the life of a soldier, Thrasonides, who feels abandoned by the community. I focus on *Perikeiromene* and *Misoumenos*, as these plays are interested specifically in the character of the traumatized veteran.

The possible cathartic function of tragedy has long been acknowledged (Shay 1995; Meineck 2012). I argue that Menander's comedy could also have provided the viewers a cathartic experience and functioned as a communal space promoting healing. The symptoms of PTSD exhibited by the soldiers and the grief of private households ravaged by war, as staged in the plays, reflected reality for many Athenians. Gathered as a community in the theater, Menander's viewers were treated to a sympathetic staging of the experiences of trauma survivors. The plays encouraged viewers to engage with the very serious issues played out onstage, but also to laugh and enjoy themselves. The consistent emphasis on the reintegration of soldiers and households at the conclusion of each play promotes an inclusive policy focused on attending to the needs of traumatized veterans and grieving households. The plays urge the viewers to sympathize with the suffering of their fellow citizens, and to come together in an effort to make their community whole.

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