

Making Sense of Metatheater in Menander

This paper explores possible reasons, political, theatrical, and literary, for Menander's frequent divergence from a pattern of subversive metatheater that seems to have been called for by the comic genres, given its widespread appearance in both Attic and Roman comedy across the centuries. Indeed, Menander's use of metatheater shows some continuity with comic tradition and some intriguing divergence from it. (Metatheater is self-awareness or self-referentiality that draws attention to the play as a performance enacted for an audience—see Slater.) Metatheater in ancient comedy (Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, and Terence) tends to come from the characters of the lowest status, i.e., from slaves, parasites, and prostitutes (citation redacted). Furthermore, the metatheatrical moments engineered by these low-status comic characters are indirectly subversive, as they reveal the artificiality of the stage world that generates the characters' low status, thus calling into question the dominant structures of the society depicted within the play and, by extension, the dominant structures of the society within which the play is performed (see Scott and Janeway on the ways in which subordinate groups—including peasants, slaves, and women—indirectly rebel against the dominant elite).

Two recent articles have demonstrated how Menander's *Epitrepontes* subverts the dominant culture by exploding stereotypes about the slave and hetaera characters (Proffitt) and by emphasizing citizen identity and status as unstable, merely “shaped by cultural forces” rather than fixed within and inherent to a person (Vester 227). Such subversion in the *Epitrepontes* is reinforced by the subversive use of metatheater in the play according to the pattern discussed above: the play's only overtly metatheatrical characters are the slaves Syr(isk)os at 325-33 and Onesimos at 886-7 and 1123-6. (Metatheater does take many forms—see Hornby—and can exist at varying levels of intensity from the overt to the merely implicit—see Wilson and Taplin.)

Similarly, Menander's use of metatheater in the *Aspis* follows the common pattern, with overtly metatheatrical language from the slave Daos at 245-9, 329, 410-4, 417-8, and 425-8 counterbalancing a single metatheatrical speech from the old man Smikrines at 415. Indeed, several slaves and a hetaera in the *Epitrepontes* and *Aspis* seem to foreshadow the clever slave character, later appearing in Plautine comedy, who controls the comic plot by means of deceptions and short 'play-within-a-play' performances. Furthermore, that the *Epitrepontes*' first and most extensive metatheatrical passage comes from the character Syr(isk)os, who never appears on stage after this scene, also demonstrates Menander's continuity with Aristophanic comedy, where Slaves A and B of the *Peace* likewise engage in metatheatrical dialogue before the entrance of the protagonist, but never reappear after their exit.

On the other hand, upper-class men, young and old, seem (based on the surviving evidence) to dominate the overtly metatheatrical language in Menander's *Samia* and—to some extent—the *Dyskolus*, *Perikeiromene*, and *Sikyonius*. These characters are often metatheatrical only in their explicit address of the audience members (ἄνδρες) during their monologues, although Demeas (589-91) and Nikeratos (495-500) in the *Samia* and Moschion in the *Sikyonius* (262) also reveal some knowledge of the tragic genre. Plautus and Terence will largely reject such upper-class characters as a model for comic metatheater, and Terence's *Andria* even shows how Simo's attempts to use his metatheatrical knowledge of the comic genre all end in failure. This paper will consider the subversive nature of these four unusual Menandrian comedies and test several theories for Menander's repeated use of primarily high-status metatheatrical characters in these plays. Theories to be tested include the political (to create explicit connections between characters and their putative peers among the audience in the very undemocratic world of Menander's Athens), the theatrical (to cater to audiences in cities other

than Athens), and the literary (revealing the influence of high-status metatheatrical characters in Euripidean tragedy, such as Pentheus).

Bibliography

Hornby, Richard. *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1986.

Gutzwiller, Kathryn. "The Tragic Mask of Comedy: Metatheatricality in Menander." *Classical Antiquity* 19.1 (2000): 102-37.

Janeway, Elizabeth. *Powers of the Weak*. New York: Knopf, 1980.

Proffitt, Laura. "Family, slavery and subversion in Menander's *Epitrepontes*." In Hall, Proffitt, and Alston, eds. *Reading ancient slavery*. Bristol Classical Press, 2011. 152-74.

Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1985.

---. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1990.

Slater, Niall. *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985.

-----. *Spectator Politics: Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes*. Philadelphia, PA: UPenn Press, 2002.

Vester, Christina. "Tokens of identity in Menander's *Epitrepontes*: slaves, citizens and in-betweens." In Akrigg and Tordoff, eds. *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greek Comic Drama*. Cambridge, 2013. 209-27.

Wilson, Peter, and Oliver Taplin. 'The 'Aetiology' of Tragedy in the *Oresteia*.' *PCPhS* 39 (1993): 169-80.