

Athens and Warfare in Menander

The plays of Menander are a critical resource for studying social beliefs and anxieties in the Hellenistic period. To date, scholarship has used these comedies to discuss conceptions of equality, fears about the fate of democracy, and the tension between civic ideology and the realities of the Hellenistic world (Lape 2004; Blanchard 2007). This paper investigates an aspect overlooked by previous scholars. I argue that Menander portrays warfare and mercenary service as an integral part of Athenian civic life.

Many of Menander's comedies have relevant references to warfare and Athenians campaigning abroad. In the *Aspis* a brother is presumed to be killed-in-action after taking up mercenary service to provide a dowry for his sister. In the *Misoumenos*, a soldier tries to win the love of his slave, whose entire family has suffered from a recent war. The *Perikeiromene* focuses on the troubled relationship between the soldier Polemon and his lover, while at the end of the *Samia*, a young man threatens to leave Athens to go serve as a mercenary. Finally, in the *Sikyonioidi* a mercenary returns from fighting in Caria to win over the slave he loves. The limited size of Menander's extant corpus makes the centrality of war and soldiers in these five plays striking and suggestive.

While discussions of warfare and the presence of soldiers on stage have dramatic functions -the uncertainties of war allow for miscommunication and misunderstandings, while the soldiers' temperament helps create comic situations-, I argue the use of these specific elements reflects a clear choice by the author on how to portray Athens. I share Lape's view of these texts not merely reflecting an existing ideology, but having agency in shaping contemporary ideas and producing ideology. Following this interpretation, I examine discussions

of warfare and soldiers in Menander's plays not as evidence for Athenian ideology, but as producers of a specific view of the *polis* in which war had a significant role.

I argue that one way in which Menander shapes his portrayal of war is through technical terminology, which matches well what we know from historiographers and tactical treatises. In the *Aspis*, a slave describes a military campaign with great accuracy, even mentioning some recent innovations in the art of war (*Aspis* 23-82). In the *Perikeiromene*, a soldier "laying siege" to the house of his lover makes a series of dirty jokes based on verbs that are specific to siege craft (*Pk.* 482-485). Menander makes his characters familiar with warfare, and well versed in its vocabulary, thus highlighting the integral role war plays in their lives.

Menander also stresses how war is part of city life through the positive representations of mercenaries, who are not a threat to the *polis*, but well-integrated citizens. In the *Aspis*, the young man only went abroad to better his and his family's position in Athens (*Aspis* 1-10). In the *Misoumenos*, the soldier is the lovesick and sympathetic character. A negative connotation is instead given to war itself: this "common enemy" (*Mis.* 231-234), looms large on citizens, threatening them with poverty and enslavement.

Through a close analysis of his works, I argue that Menander represents warfare not as a distant reality, but as a familiar presence, that is close to the lives of Athenian citizens. The abundance of references to warfare, the characters' ability to discuss it with precision, and the depiction of mercenaries as well integrated in the *polis*, all reflect the author's efforts to portray war as embedded in civic life. In Menander's narrative, warfare and mercenary service are not the undesired effects of new international conditions, but phenomena that citizens can somewhat control.

By examining Menander's portrayal of war and military service, this paper contributes to our understanding of Athenian civic life and its responses to the rapid changes of the early Hellenistic period.

Bibliography

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