

Female Guardianship in New Comedy: Critiquing Patriarchal Households

Greek and Roman New Comedies often stage the return of a long-lost young girl to her citizen family. Multiple characters work toward their recognition, on the presumption that the girls will benefit from the social status, financial security, and marriage prospects that citizenship provides. I argue that extant New Comedy takes pains to show that sometimes a young girl is safer before restoration to her citizen family. Menander, Plautus, and Terence prompt this conclusion by contrasting protective female guardianship with male family members who exhibit violent and misguided behaviors.

Households managed by women prioritize the safety of citizen girls over the convenience or sexual interests of men. In Menander's *Perikeiromene*, Glykera's neighbor Myrrhine protects her from the two aggressive young men who pursue her: her "spontaneous and bold" (151, τὰτομάτου...θρασύτερου) brother Moschion, who makes amorous advances without knowing about their relationship (154–156), and the "violent" (128, σφοδρού) and "unstable" (144, βέβαιον δ' οὐθὲν) soldier, Polemon, who jealously cut off her hair before the beginning of the play (Arnott 1996, Konstan 1987). Myrrhine provides Glykera with refuge from Polemon and attempts to shield her from Moschion (318–323). In Menander's other plays, similarly, the figure of the *hetaira* is always well-intentioned and helpful to citizen families (Henry 1987).

Roman playwrights modify this pattern. In Menander, once young men reform from their bad behavior, they are ready to be mature husbands (e.g., Polemon in *Perikeiromene*, Moschion in *Samia*, Charisios in *Epitrepontes*). In Roman comedy, however, *meretrices* work harder than citizen males to nurture and protect citizen girls. These subaltern women consider the citizen girls family, even though none are blood-related, and they work hard to keep them out of commercial sexual relationships. Thus Chrysis of Terence's *Andria*, driven into prostitution in

Athens by the negligence of her male kin, ensures her foster-sister Glycerium's safety by presiding over a pseudo-marriage with her lover, Pamphilus (282–297, Williams 1958, Hersch 2010).

In *Cistellaria*, Plautus contrasts the *meretrix* Melaenis' care for her foster-daughter Selenium to the violent temperament of her lover, Alcesimarchus. Melaenis and Selenium have a relationship based on mutual obedience (83–85), and Melaenis consistently acts in Selenium's best interest, whether this means returning her to her citizen family (633–634) or denying Alcesimarchus access to her (450–535). Alcesimarchus responds with frightening violence (520–527), physically abducting Selenium (639–652). His aggressive behavior might have given some members of the audience pause about her future welfare as his wife.

In *Eunuchus*, Terence raises the question of whether Pamphila's move from a caring female household to a traditional male-led citizen family makes her better off. Her transition is founded on violent rape, after the ephebe Chaerea enters the household of her *meretrix* foster-sister Thais disguised as a eunuch. Chaerea transforms Thais' house from a place of safety to the site of an attack, violating not only Pamphila but the women's interior space and their protective household. He traumatizes Pamphila so much that she cannot say what happened (659).

Scholars have recognized this rape as unusually disturbing (e.g., Smith 1994, James 1998, Christensen 2013), but Terence shows other men in Pamphila's natal and married family harming the women in the play, whether by misjudging Thais (Phaedria, Chremes, Parmeno, Phaedria's father) or trafficking Pamphila (pirates, Thais' uncle, the soldier Thraso). Meanwhile, women have supported Pamphila, including Thais' mother, who raised her (116–117); Thais, who finds her family and arranges her marriage to Chaerea (unfortunately, her only recourse); and the enslaved Pythias, who tries to avenge her (647–648, 719, 941–944).

In all three playwrights, women are supportive of citizen girls; in Roman comedy, subaltern women more so than citizen men. These plays cast doubt on foundational values in the ancient world—such concepts as citizenship, blood relationships, and patriarchy. Instead of endorsing wholeheartedly the quest for citizen family that drives their genre, the playwrights supply another possibility: that the mutual trust and affection found between women, even subaltern women, might have advantages over traditionally-structured relationships.

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