

Men are from Pontos, Women are from Samos: Spatial Dynamics in Menander's *Samia*

Act 3 of Menander's *Samia* opens with a monologue in which Demeas explains how he learned that his son Moschion had fathered a child. In elaborate detail, he describes the storeroom he was in when he overheard an old nurse talking to the baby: "While I was in there, a woman came down from upstairs into the room in front of the storeroom – it's a weaving room, situated so that both the way upstairs and the storeroom are through there" (ll. 231-236). Because of its vivid details, this passage is frequently cited in discussions of classical Greek domestic architecture (Cahill 2002), but its thematic significance within the play has not been fully recognized. In this paper, I argue that this house description belongs to a dynamic system of space, gender, and status at work throughout the play. Language connected to space and movement are pervasive throughout the *Samia*, a reminder of the essential question at the heart of the play: who belongs, and who does not belong, to the *oikos*?

My approach to interpreting the spatial dynamics of the *Samia* is influenced by work on the tragedians' use of offstage space, particularly the imagined extent of the house (Padel 1990). Space in tragedy often reproduces a gendered division that assigns men to the outdoors, women to the house. The use of offstage space in New Comedy is directly inherited from tragedy, along with the thematic centrality of the house and its preservation (Lowe 1987). This paper shows how the *Samia* both reproduces and subverts the patterns of gendered spatiality found in tragedy.

At its edges, the *Samia* accords with traditional gendered divisions of space with a framing device that emphasizes male mobility and distance: early in the play, Demeas and Nikeratos return to Athens from the Black Sea (ll. 96-105), while near the end Moschion pretends to be enlisting to Bactria or Caria (ll. 628-629). In contrast to the male characters' (real and imagined) journeys, the women of the play engage in typically domestic

activities: celebrating the Adonia, raising a baby, preparing for marriage. The gendered division of space, however, is repeatedly undermined: in fact, the very idea of spatial division is belied by the farcical rate at which the characters move in and out of houses (Arnott 2000). The subversion of gendered space is most striking in the house description, which places Demeas in an extremely interior place, immobile, while women move all around him. Demeas's interiority in the scene contrasts with his far-off travels, creating an inward-focused sense of concentricity between distant lands and the innermost space of the house: he finds himself in the place that the woman of the house would be expected to occupy.

The woman of the house is Chrysis, the eponymous Samian woman, a metic who cannot legally belong to Demeas's *oikos*. She complicates the play's gendered spatiality; unlike the other women in the play, she is a speaking character and spends about a fifth of the play onstage. She is also extraordinarily mobile, moving on and offstage – at first freely, and then forced from house to house. Yet by the end of the play, Chrysis is restored as the woman of the house, in command of the wedding personnel (l. 730). This resolution is incongruous in comparison with the tropes of New Comedy; Chrysis is the exception to the rule that only citizen couples can have a happy ending (Lape 2004).

This play was written and performed during a time of great social change and reevaluation of previously established identities, and it might have had an influence on the redefinition of citizenship from Athens outward to the wider Hellenistic world (Vester 2003). My analysis of the spatial dynamics at work in the *Samia* reveals how, by subverting the spatiality inherited from tragedy and widely present in other examples of New Comedy, it makes room for new interpretations of gender, status, and the *oikos*.

Bibliography

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