

Staging the Soldier in Menander

In addition to being complex literary figures, soldiers in Menander's plays are constant sources of dramatic tension and social anxiety (Major 1997), so Menander invokes the rich iconic history of Greek soldiers (on the stage and in other visual arts) to ground his characters in tradition while he addresses controversial contemporary issues.

Recent work on staging Greek drama demonstrates the profound ramifications for conceiving of ancient play scripts as full productions (e.g., Taplin 2003, Revermann 2006, Goldhill 2007), but such studies have had only limited impact on Menander (e.g., Wiles 1991). Even though composing later than the classical playwrights and apparently expecting a detached chorus, Menander wrote for a classical Greek theatrical space and consciously evoked the earlier theatrical tradition. The documented impact of Euripides alone on Menander (Arnott 1986) should give scholars reason to explore Menander's staging techniques, given Euripides' powerful and innovative use of theatrical space, and comedy has an intertwined but distinct legacy of staging spectacles.

In the extant remains of Menander, the most basic prop or visual emblem of a soldier seems to have been the cloak and sword. In the last act of *Samia*, when Moschion prepares to abandon his wedding by becoming a soldier, he ostentatiously asks for a sword and cloak. The fragments of *Misoumenos* indicate that cloaks and swords designate Thrasonides' military identity. A wall painting in Ephesus depicting a scene from *Perikeiromene* shows Polemon wearing a heavy scarlet cloak. In this play, however, Polemon's beloved Glykera more strikingly represents the anxiety about a soldier's identity. Although the scene of Polemon actually cutting Glykera's hair remains lost, her appearance on stage later in the play emphasizes Polemon's violent military life. Here Menander may also be invoking visual iconography from the stage tradition (cf. Euripides' *Electra*, where the heroine has a conspicuously short haircut).

No item represents a soldier's identity more than his shield, however, both ideologically and visually, from Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* to Lamachus in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, and suffused everywhere with the cultural importance attached to a soldier's shield as evidence of his behavior in combat. Menander makes manifold use of these traditions in his *Aspis*. In the opening sequence, the damaged shield on stage represents the loss, hope and valor of the young soldier Kleostratos, while the greedy Smikrines and the depressed slave Daos spar over Kleostratos' booty (cf. the use of soldiers' shields in vase paintings, especially that of Ajax when he is committing suicide). Menander depicts Kleostratos as a traditional heroic soldier, although he has been off on a mercenary mission. When the divine Tyche appears on stage to re-narrate the fate of Kleostratos, both the shield and the actor may be on stage, so that the spectators can recognize Kleostratos when he makes his unheralded return in the fourth act.

Such techniques can provide new insight into how Menander invoked Greek theatrical tradition (e.g., Euripidean staging) while addressing contemporary social anxieties (e.g., mercenaries in local communities) and so conveyed simultaneously cultural depth and immediacy in a way that helps us understand Menander's enduring appeal to audiences buffeted by the upheavals of the Hellenistic world.