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INTRODUCTION

Two traditions of writing

It is no accident of modern archaeology that Menander is the only writer of Greek New Comedy whose works have survived in anything more than tiny fragments. After his death, Menander was recognized as the outstanding exponent of the genre. Texts of his plays were widely circulated, and illustrations of scenes served to decorate the floors and walls of rich men's houses around the Mediterranean world. In his lifetime Menander won the prize for comedy only eight times in Athens, and there is no evidence that he was considered pre-eminent from the beginning. Whether modern readers would share the considered verdict of the Graeco-Roman world, if given the means of comparison, cannot be known.

Menander was an upper-class Athenian citizen and an intellectual, and this social placing distinguished him from his rivals. He was educated by Theophrastos, Aristotle's successor as head of the Lyceum, and he was an exact contemporary of Epicurus.[1] Because of his background, he was necessarily involved in the intense philosophical and political arguments of the time. He was also caught up in an aesthetic argument triggered by Plato's renunciation of a theatrical career and subsequent denunciation of drama. A man with such a background, in this turbulent political period, did not commit himself to theatre as a quick route to profit or glory, and can have done so only because he had clearly defined moral and aesthetic objectives. I would suggest that he was a great playwright (by which I mean that his plays seemed to repay rereading and reperforming over the centuries) because his historical position placed him at the centre of political and philosophical change. He was at the centre of the emotions and arguments which surrounded the demise of the autonomous *polis*. From this historical vantage point he developed perceptions that continued to seem relevant.

The apolitical format of New Comedy can be seen as a negative phenomenon, a product of caution. Today it is easy to see the genre as a

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symptom of decadence and intellectual retreat. Yet at least one contemporary, Philippides, continued to make overt references to the political scene when democratic freedom was offered.[2] The apparent apoliticism of Menander and most other dramatists of the time can be seen, paradoxically, as a political decision. A striking feature of Menander's plays is their adherence to the aesthetic tenets of Aristotle. Although the *Poetics* has in many respects had a distorting effect upon the subsequent study of Greek tragedy, it proves an illuminating guide to the methods and principles of Menander. Less obvious, from a modern perspective, is the extent to which Aristotle's aesthetics and his politics are enmeshed. Once one gains a sense of the coherence of Aristotelian thinking, one can see how the apolitical aesthetic of Menander is, in fact, a political strategy. While Aristophanes cast his democratic audience in the role of political decision-makers, Menander, through offering his plays as a mimesis of reality, cast his audience in the role of detached observers. The audience are offered a mirror-image of themselves, not as a political mass, but as private individuals. The *dêmos* can no longer be represented theatrically by a single stage character.

Although the section of the *Poetics* which deals with comedy is lost, there can be no doubt that Aristotle found the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides more to his taste than the comedies of Aristophanes. According to Aristotle's definitions, while tragedy naturally represents the actions of men better than we are, comedy represents the actions of men worse than we are. The masks of Old Comedy provoke laughter because they are base and distorted.[3] It follows from this analysis that tragedy must be a form superior to comedy. A generation after Aristotle, Menander and his contemporaries evidently accepted the logic of Aristotle's thinking, and evolved a new concept of generic difference. The new dichotomy between comedy and tragedy was to be that which differentiated Euripides from Sophocles, Euripides portraying men as they are, Sophocles men as they ought to be.[4] The new symbol of tragedy became the *onkos*: the elevated hair-style which made the tragic mask larger than life. The same word, *onkos*, was used at the same time of the elevated poetic style which raised heroic verse above everyday speech.[5] Comedy, meanwhile, abandoned phallic costumes, participant deities, and all other signs that the play was a Dionysiac ritual acting upon reality, and the 'New Comedy' proclaimed itself an accurate imitation of life. We do not know how precisely Aristotle countered Plato's charge that, because *mimêsis* is a natural learning procedure, comic *mimêsis* corrupts its spectators and actors who necessarily acquire the behaviour patterns of the persons imitated,[6] but clearly

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the new concept of comic *mimêsis* drained Plato's charge of its force. New Comedy could claim some kind of moral parity with tragedy on account of its roots in the respected work of Euripides.

As in many Greek tragedies – *Oedipus Tyrannus* being the most obvious example – so in Menander, prior events may be extraordinary, but given the initial situation, everything that happens within the play is plausible. In accordance with Aristotle's prescription for good tragedy, Menander's comedies have single plots, and the *peripeteia* turns upon an *anagnôrisis*, a 'recognition' which is simultaneously factual and moral. *Old Cantankerous*, for example, turns upon the misanthropist's recognition that human beings cannot survive in isolation from society, hence his daughter must marry. *The Arbitration* turns upon the young man's recognition that he has raped his own future bride, and that he is guilty of sexual double standards. When the old man falls down a well by chance, or a ring identifies the rape victim, these trivial plot devices become the framework for the correction of a *hamartia* (error) that is strictly ethical. Sophocles' tragic heroes may, arguably, have no 'moral flaw', but Menander's characters certainly do.

The Aristotelian working method, to start with the whole and then complete the parts, yields a strong sense of form, and the formal perfection of Menander's plots is perhaps to a modern eye the most remarkable feature of his writing. The primacy which Menander gives to plot, however, often causes the modern reader to sense that something is lacking in his plays. Characters like Knemon and Smikrines seem pale and unmemorable when placed alongside some of the great comic characters of the European repertoire – Dikaiopolis, or Harpagon, or Malvolio, for example. In order to make sense of Menander's method, we need to replace our modern concept of dramatic 'character' with an Aristotelian concept. For Aristotle, people are born with certain capacities, they develop through their habits certain *êthê* (character traits), they experience habitually certain emotions – but virtue in the last analysis is separable from all of these and involves choice, *prohairesis*. In tragedy, Aristotle states, choice reveals *êthos* (character).[7] Within the limits imposed by capacity, one can *choose* to indulge or reject emotions, one can *choose* to adopt or abandon habits which, if adopted, will eventually shape one's *êthos*.[8] The study of character is necessarily the study of ethics in Aristotelian thinking. Modern thought finds this equation between character and morality hard to accept. The modern actor who constructs a character is not expected to think in the first instance about questions of morality.

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The carefully constructed action of Menander's plays allows the choices of the *dramatis personae* to crystallize and become visible in a way that is impossible outside the framework of art. The playwright has learned from the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, which likewise focussed upon choice. The new and remarkable feature of New Comedy is its system of masks. The distinctive mask worn for each role depicted a 'character', that is, a pre-formed ethical disposition. The stage figure offered to the audience at the start of the play was no longer, as in tragedy, an ethical *tabula rasa*. Moral choices could only be made in the context of a person's pre-formed ethical disposition.

Menander's everyday scenes of bourgeois life take their apparently natural course within a rigorously organized artistic structure. The plays broadly observe the three unities of action, place and time. That is to say, the plays have single plots, they take place in a single location outside two adjacent houses, and the action is completed within a single day. Stage time is identical with the real time of the audience. The plays are written in five acts, and choral interludes mark time lapses when off-stage business is deemed to be accomplished. Finally, the action is organized so that the speaking roles are taken by only three actors. Menander profits from these limitations, creating plays of formal elegance and emotional concentration. The spectacle which Menander presents to his audience is a *mimêsis* of bourgeois life, but cannot be confused with life. The controlling hand of the author is far too obvious.

The number of the acts plainly meets the Aristotelian requirement of furnishing a beginning, a middle, and an end. The action is a closed structure containing a *desis* (entanglement) and a *lysis* (dénouement). One might contrast the Hellenistic five-act structure with the dialectical structure of Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy, where the form suggests the possibility of an infinite progression of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, and the end of the trilogy interpenetrates the contemporary world of the audience. The Aristotelian theory of *mimêsis* assumed a hermetic divide between the world of the audience and the mimetic world of the play.

Aristotelian theory, however influential upon Menander, cannot give us a complete picture of Menander's dramatic technique in the Theatre of Dionysus. For Aristotle, the Dionysiac context of performance was merely of antiquarian interest, but for Menander this context was an inescapable condition of his work. While the structure of Aristophanic comedy makes sense only within the context of an Athenian festival, Menander's comedy, on the model of Euripidean tragedy, makes no formal reference to the fact that its performance is part of a festival of

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Dionysus. Yet the context is not forgotten, for the element of festival is, as it were, enclosed within the realistic frame of the plot. A repeated device of Menander is to build the action around the interruption of a festival. Through this device, Menander replicates the experience of his spectators, who interrupt their active participation in processions, dances, sacrifices, and extemporal ribaldry in order to sit passively watching a play.

The device of the interrupted festival is more noticeable in performance than in reading. *The Farmer*, *The Phantom*, *The Shield*, *The Girl from Samos*, and *The Girl from Perinthos* incorporate wedding feasts which go awry. Feasts evolve into wedding feasts in *Old Cantankerous* and *The Man She Hated*. The heroes of *The Arbitration* and *The Rape of the Locks* turn to revelry in an attempt to escape their troubles. More feasts appear in *The Girl from Andros*, *The Peplos-Bearer*, *The Confectioner*, *The Head-Dress*, *The Toady*, *The Girl from Messene*, *Drunkenness*, *Trophonios*, and *The False Heracles*. A literary analysis of the plays can easily miss the impact created by the procession of live animals across the stage, the arrival of cooks, and musicians and their equipment, the sight and smell of sacrificial fires, the wearing of ceremonial costume. It is frequently in the course of a festival that a young man is said to have raped a free girl, and the performance can thus in a double sense be seen as the restoration of order within the disorderly progress of the feast.[9] The action of the play is in some measure reintegrated with that of the festival when the *dramatis personae* appear with torches and garlands at the end of the play, anticipating the climax of the theatrical festival when the victorious poet and actor appear on the stage with garlands.[10]

When Plutarch asserted that a symposium was better conducted without wine than without the accompaniment of a recitation from Menander,[11] he took it for granted that Menander's plays made sense within a Dionysiac context. The chorus who enter the *orchêstra* during the four act breaks are not an irrelevance: rather, they help maintain a tension between the real and represented worlds of the performance. The inclusion within the play of recitative and direct address to the audience represents a compromise with the strict requirements of *mimêsis* theory. It has been plausibly argued that Menander became more purist, and abandoned the use of musical accompaniment in his later plays.[12]

Menander's surface realism conceals not only ritual but also mythic elements, for the plays can also be read, could also be watched, as metatheatrical reworkings of Euripides.[13] The theatre of Aristophanes had a symbiotic relationship with tragedy, reversing all the conventions

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of tragic performance, not least the relationship between actor and audience. Aristophanes parodied scenes from tragic performances, and in so doing helped audiences to see those tragedies as controversial and relevant. In a similar way, Menander wrote for an audience familiar with a now classic canon of fifth-century tragedies. Even more markedly than Aristophanes, Menander drew upon Euripides for his material. An apparently ephemeral theatrical situation – a youth hiding, watching a peasant girl come to draw water, a man reporting a democratic assembly, the anger of an Athenian who believes his son to have slept with his foreign consort – could be perceived as mythic, could be pondered and remembered by an audience which had seen parallel situations played out in Euripides' *Electra*, *Orestes*, or *Hippolytus*. Many scenes which appear slight to us would become semiologically dense for an audience familiar with tragedies now unknown to us.

This metatheatrical technique is not one that Menander tries to conceal. In the final act of *The Arbitration* a slave quotes a line from Euripides' *Auge* and cites the source in order to point up a parallel plot structure. In both *Auge* and *The Arbitration*, the hero rapes the heroine during a nocturnal festival, and leaves her a ring which later enables him to identify his child. The *Auge* is not the only metatext in *The Arbitration*, for the arbitration scene which occupies Act II is based on Euripides' *Alope*, where a grandfather likewise arbitrates over the fate of his changeling grandchild.[14] The tragic metatext helped the Greek audience read the ravisher, the heroine, the grandfather, not as mere social types, but as archetypes. The comedy is rooted simultaneously in the world of contemporary Athens and the world of myth. Here again we see the limitations of the theory that art is simply a *mimêsis* of life.

Menander and Terence belong to a single aesthetic tradition governing the role of the writer. Their assumptions differ almost totally from those of Plautus, and it is to Plautus that we must turn for comparison. Plautus was not a member of the intellectual elite, but was a common actor for whom writing was a natural extension of his craft. He did not see himself as a detached observer of life, nor did he see himself as a hidden *animateur* whose task was to efface his own activity as the creator of illusion. He ignores or overturns Aristotle's two basic premises about drama, that plot has primacy over character, and that the play imitates an exterior, separable reality. Plautus' *dramatis personae* owe much to an extemporal performance tradition, and scarcely need the excuse of a story-line in order to justify their presence on stage as entertainers of the audience. The plots are loosely organized and open in structure. The performance

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is not the *mimêsis* of an action, but is, rather, in itself an action, an integral part of the Roman *ludi* (the games or festival). In these assumptions, Plautus is closer to Aristophanes than to Menander.

The *Curculio* may serve as an example of how Plautus subordinates plot to character. The plot is designed to allow a sequence of comic grotesques to hold the stage: a lover grasping a phallic candle, an old bawd who walks with her nose to the ground, an owl-eyed nymphomaniac, a corpulent pimp with indigestion, the one-eyed 'maggot' who gives the play its title, a homosexual banker, a blustering *miles gloriosus* in a borrowed cloak. The slave alone provides some kind of initial touchstone of normality. The rhythm of the action is created by the musician, whose role becomes ever more dominant as the action accelerates. When the actors banter with each other or with the audience, they speak, but in burlesque narratives and scenes of rapid action or high emotion they adopt a quasi-operatic style of delivery. The audience are not offered any internally consistent replica of reality, and they can make no psychological deductions or predictions. The soldier is risible at one moment, ferocious at the next. The pleasures which the play offers have nothing to do with the hermeneutics of *êthos*.

It is now a commonplace of Plautine criticism to note the congruence between Plautus' plays and the Roman *ludi* of which they form part.[15] The action on Plautus' stage is a symbolic inversion of everyday life. Plautus disengages his *Curculio* from the Hellenistic unities of time, place, and action in order to locate the play within an other-world of festival where normality must seem to be suspended. Time is collapsible, for there are no act breaks to cover off-stage action, and real time is accelerated by the pace of events. Unity of place disintegrates when the costumier of the production appears and takes the audience on an imaginary tour of Rome. Just as words lose their expected meanings in Plautus and acquire double meanings, so there is a severance between cause and effect, between an action and its predictable consequences. Instead of unity of action, we find, effectively, a variety show.

While Menander relies upon Euripides, Plautus relies upon Greek New Comedy to provide his metatext.[16] Plautus uses the Greek stage world of Menander to create a utopia, a world which casts a strange illumination upon Roman moral stances. The sense of a festive transgression against morality is enhanced by the fact that a Roman writer is transgressing the rules of Greek comedy. A Greek story-line, with a ring for a recognition token, holds the action together – but the supposed prostitute acts like a prostitute, not like the bride she becomes, and her

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soldier brother acts like a buffoon, not like a citizen. The parasite, like many a Menandrean slave, may quote from what 'an ancient poet wrote in a tragedy', but his quotation is bogus.[17] The pleasure of the audience lies in its sense that it is an accomplice in transgression.

The linear structure of *Curculio* is acceptable because the play is short. Recent Plautine criticism has tried to define a more complex narrative strategy adopted in many plays, of which *Pseudolus* is the most striking example. After the initial complexities of the plot have been clarified, the slave Pseudolus declares: '*nunc ego poeta fiam*' ('now I shall be the poet')[18] and he presents what follows as a sustained improvisation. The slave develops what has been described as a play-within-a-play, with disguises for himself and for his accomplice. The model of the play-within-a-play, as a basis for the critical exegesis of Plautus, is misleading in its suggestion of enclosure. Plautus' supposed 'framing' technique does not correlate with the operatic structure of the writing, which keeps moving from speech via optional arias to recitative and back to speech again. The structure is not closed, but open and dialectical. There is a sustained ambiguity as to whether the actor or the poet is controlling the performance. This ambiguity, which reflects Plautus' own double identity as actor and poet, is homologous with another, more important ambiguity: who controls the *ludi*, the senatorial sponsor of the games, or the massed populace who must at all costs be satisfied?

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CHAPTER I

Text and performance

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PROBLEM

> Tragedy produces its effect even without movement, just as epic does; for a reading makes its nature quite clear.[1]

Thus does Aristotle justify a division which has come to seem a common-sense intellectual practice, a division between the study of text and the study of performance. In Greek terminology, the writer is after all the *poiêtês*, the maker of the play, while the actor is the *hypokritês*, the interpreter of the oracular poet.[2] Sophocles and Euripides died some twenty years before Aristotle was born, so the philosopher saw not original performances but revivals. In Aristotle's day the performance existed independently of the text and might also involve corruption of the text when actors chose to rewrite their lines. A belief that the play has a true 'nature' not contingent upon the physical presence of the actor lies behind Aristotle's lament that in his generation 'actors now count for more than poets' – '*meidzon dynantai nyn tôn poiêtôn hoi hypokritai*'.[3] Students of the Lyceum who read or listened to the text of a play by Sophocles could approach the poet more closely, it must have seemed, than any actor or spectator in the theatre. Aristotle, with a new concept of scientific truth, had no truck with Plato's claim that 'a writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers', and that oral communication is therefore necessarily superior to written communication.[4] For Plato, truth inhered in the parent of the written word, and this parent needed therefore to be present to defend his progeny from misconstruction. For Aristotle every idea had an objective rendering in language. The written word could be regarded as a signifier with a fixed referent. It was assumed that the careful reader of Aristotle's books would know exactly what Aristotle meant.

This changed understanding of language has its parallel in the theatrical sphere. The statesman Lycurgus, who oversaw the building of

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a permanent stone theatre in Aristotle's day, was also the man who compelled actors to perform the authentic, authorial texts of classic plays.[5] Paradoxically, while Lycurgus preserved the texts of fifth-century writers, the design of his theatre confirmed or precipitated fundamental changes in the way those texts were delivered. The author's meaning was assumed to be inherent in the words of his play, whether or not the words were delivered in the way the author intended. In this manner, with the emergence of a classical repertory, text and performance were ruptured in Aristotle's day, and went their separate ways.

Some theatres are dominated by the writer, others by the actor. The history of theatre in post-war Britain could be charted in terms of a transition from actors' theatre through writers' and directors' theatre to the designers' theatre of the eighties. Aristotle's lament that 'actors now count for more than poets' reflects a historical situation in which the actor was becoming dominant. Actors like Polos and Theodoros were cosmopolitan individuals, famed across the Greek world, while the ideal of the *polis*, which inspired both the great themes of fifth-century tragedy and the dedication of amateur choral dancers, had a waning hold upon the Greek imagination. Theatre as an institution was not in decline in the fourth century.

When Menander began writing for the Athenian theatre in approximately the year of Aristotle's death, his experience was conditioned by the new theatrical environment – the new Lycurgan building, a new Aristotelian aesthetic code, and a profession dominated not by writers but by virtuoso actors. We can discern in Menander's texts ethical and aesthetic assumptions which give evidence of a profound debt to Aristotle.[6] I shall argue in the course of this chapter that Menander parted company with Aristotle's aesthetics at the point where Aristotle proposes that the visual element is superimposed upon the play and is not intrinsically part of it.

It is easy when we read Menander's texts today to ignore the conventions of the theatre for which he wrote. His social realism seems comfortingly familiar. It costs us no effort to envisage a style of performance similar to our own – the style used by modern actors when they play dramas of everyday life written by a Rattigan or an Ayckbourn. One might all too quickly conclude that, when all is said and done, theatre changes very little over the years. The blatant un-realism of Menander's plots, with their changelings, recognition tokens, and love affairs, no less than the cast lists, with their philosophical servants, introspective lovers, and ambitious fathers, seem instantly familiar to readers and theatre-

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