

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER I

*Those obscure objects of desire*

κατὰ πολλά γ' ἔστιν οὐ καλῶς εἰρημένον  
 τὸ γνῶθι σαυτόν· χρησιμώτερον γὰρ ἦν  
 τὸ γνῶθι τοὺς ἄλλους

(*Thrasyleon*, Men. fr. 181 K-A)

Most of the time ‘know thyself’ is not good advice: ‘know other people’ would be a lot more useful.

There is a plot type that has become a staple in the western comic repertoire: the troubles of a small community – a few families, some friends – escalate as misunderstandings grow, accusations fly, and everything threatens to unravel until the situation is set right with the discovery of a long-lost son or daughter. The lovers can now marry; the rich man has an heir; the orphan finds his or her parents. These mistaken identity plots are essentially stories of wish-fulfillment which pretend, perhaps in deference to conservative attitudes towards social mobility, that the transformations required by poetic justice are simply revelations of a hidden truth. The plot type may be traced back to Plautus and Terence, who inspired the Renaissance dramatists who in turn instated it at the heart of the western comic tradition. Credit for its original development, however, must go to the Greek models for the Roman plays, most of which have been lost. Fortunately, a number of the comedies of Menander (342/1 – c. 290 BC), the most famous Greek New Comic playwright, still survive. They center on problems of social identity and the obstacles that blind people to truths about their closest friends and family. Over and over in Menander’s mistaken identity plots characters are forced to make judgments on partial or misleading evidence, while emotion, self-interest and self-delusion foster misapprehension (ἄγνοια) – the recurring theme of the plays. Proverbial wisdom may have urged “Know thyself,” but Menander’s comedy had the more utilitarian goal, “Know other people.” The plays dramatize how and why things go wrong.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The basic narrative pattern of the mistaken identity plot has a long history prior to comedy. “Theoxeny” stories of gods such as Demeter, Dionysus, or Aphrodite disguising themselves to test mortals are common in Greek myth and folk tale.<sup>1</sup> The motif first appears in epic, where gods regularly appear incognito and where a favored mortal like Odysseus can even perform his own “test” in disguise, complete with epiphany, revelation of special powers, and distribution of rewards and punishments.<sup>2</sup> Once mortals become the protagonists, the disguise-recognition story begins to take on a familiar dramatic form, particularly in Euripidean tragedy. Alcestis, Telephus, and Menelaos in the *Helen* conceal their true identities; Ion and Iphigeneia (from the *Iphigeneia in Tauris*) do so as well, although not by choice. All are eventually recognized and restored to their rightful positions. In the cases of Alcestis, Menelaos, and Iphigeneia, the recognition is clearly associated with transcending mortality, a connection already evident in Homer and still detectable in Menander. In the *Aspis* and *Perikeiromenē*, for example, misrecognized figures are left for dead.<sup>3</sup> This plot type was not entirely foreign to Old Comedy: although he makes little use of other forms of mistaken identity, Aristophanes does spoof the disguise motif in the *Acharnians*, *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Frogs*. It is hard to know whether New Comedy borrowed this central, structuring device directly from tragedy or whether earlier fourth-century comic poets should be given credit for adapting it. In either case, so thoroughly were disguise and recognition stories naturalized in their new genre that ancient scholars started to identify prototypical elements of “comedy” in the *Odyssey*.<sup>4</sup>

This book explores how the mistaken identity plot was used by one of the playwrights who helped to give it definitive form as a comic device. Two major developments from myth and tragedy are noticeable in Menander. First, the motif takes on an increasingly sophisticated shape. Mistakes are rationalized, with supernatural intervention yielding to human psychology as the primary cause. The “disguise” is usually unwitting and the focus is the dupe, not the trickster, with a corresponding emphasis on *how* the mistake is made. By grounding identity mistakes in psychological mechanisms, Menander was able to use comedy to explore questions of perception and subjectivity. Second, the misrecognized characters are disproportionately

<sup>1</sup> Burnett 1970: 24–5 n. 8. See Thompson 1955–8 K8111 “Gods (saints) in disguise visit mortals” for folk-tale examples.

<sup>2</sup> Murnaghan 1987: 11–13. <sup>3</sup> On the Homeric association see Murnaghan 1987: 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Ps.-Long. 9.15, Eust. *Com. ad Hom.* 2. 3.488.17–20. Even Aristotle thought the resolution of the *Odyssey* was more comic than tragic (*Poet.* 1453a31–9). See further Knox 1970: 89. The *kyrieia* disputes discussed in chapter 2 are arguably prefigured in the *Odyssey* (Lacey 1966: 62).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Those obscure objects of desire*

3

women, particularly when the mistakes concern relatively objective aspects of identity, such as social status. Plays frequently revolve around attempts to free or marry a seemingly forbidden woman, such as a slave, captive or prostitute, who is eventually restored to her rightful status. The characters who suffer loss of status – e.g., through piracy, war, exposure or more complicated mishaps – are predominantly women. One particular group is a useful entry point to my discussion because they typify a problem Menander explored with many different characters: the difficulty of knowing the truth about one's φίλοι ("loved ones," immediate family and close friends). In Athens and other Greek cities there was a demimonde of women who could not marry for economic or legal reasons and who therefore had to form other relationships for support. These women included the expensive call girls and musicians Greeks called hetairai ("companions").<sup>5</sup> The foreigners, freedwomen and slaves who made up the majority of historically attested hetairai are the women with the largest speaking roles in Menander, including many of his female romantic leads.<sup>6</sup>

Although these women are misidentified in many different ways, some of the wilder mistakes concern their moral character. Readers since antiquity have suggested that some of Menander's hetairai are "good," since they usually prove innocent of the worst charges laid against them. His brand of mistaken identity certainly involves falsely suspected hetairai and some "good" women who are not hetairai at all, but did he really depict – or even invent – the whore with a heart of gold?<sup>7</sup> The strongest positive claim occurs in Plutarch's *Moralia* at the end of a speech on the merits of various dinner entertainments. This passage is worth examining because it raises questions about the definition of status, the relationship between status and character and the appropriate criteria for virtue – the same questions

<sup>5</sup> On the etymology and connotations of the name see Davidson 2006: 35–6.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of foreigners include Chrysis (*Sam.*), Thais (Ter. *Eun.*), the "Bacchides" (*Dis Ex.*), Pythias (*Syn.*), and probably a number of title characters (*And.*, *Per.*, *Hymn.*, *Khalk.*, *Leuc.*, *Mess.*, *Olyn.*). Slaves include the two Habrotonons (*Epir.*, *Perik.*), Malthake (*Sik.*), Dorkion (*Fab. Inc.* 5 Arnott), the title figures in the *Aulētris* (and *Paidion?*), a *habra*-turned-*pallakē* (*Pseudher.*), and the three-mina woman in the *Kolax*. There are a few lost daughters (Glykera, *Perik.*; Plangon, *Syn.*; Krateia, *Mis.*) but no hetairai of recognized citizen status. There may be a few freedwomen, such as the ἀπτελευθέρᾳ mentioned in *Rhap.* fr. 332 K-A, if she is the woman who is 'slapped' (a sign of a lover's jealousy, Luc. *Dial. Mer.* 8.1) and perhaps the title figure of the *Anatithemenē*. The title character of the *Thais* and the two hetairai in *Fab. Inc.* 8 Arnott are free but nothing more is known about their status.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Keuls 1985: 188 "the stereotype [of "the whore with the noble character"] can be traced back to Classical Greece, at least as far as the fourth-century playwright Menander, and perhaps further." See also Webster 1953: 117, Henry 1988: 113–15, Zanker 1987: 149, and Zagagi 1994: 33. Modern scholars agree that Menander depicted women sympathetically (e.g., Ruiz 1981: 49 and *passim*, Keuls 1985: 191–4, Henry 1988 and 1987 and Martina 1997 11.2: 287) but no one quite matches Post 1940: 457–8: "Every woman in Menander's gallery is courageous and independent in face of trouble."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that create misunderstandings in the plays. After praising Menander for offering both pleasure and instruction, Plutarch claims that he is the sort of poet to send symposiasts running back to their wives. But the philosopher has to resort to some special pleading about the sexual content:

τὰ δὲ πρὸς τὰς ἑταίρας, ἂν μὲν ὥσιν ἱταμαὶ καὶ θρασεῖαι, διακόπτεται σωφρονισμοῖς τισιν ἢ μετανοαῖς τῶν νέων· ταῖς δὲ χρησταῖς καὶ ἀντερώσαις ἢ πατήρ τις ἀνευρίσκεται γνήσιος, ἢ χρόνος τις ἐπιμετρήται τῷ ἔρωτι, συμπεριφορὰν αἰδοῦς ἔχων φιλάνθρωπον. (*Mor.* 712c)

As regards hetairai, if they are audacious and bold, the affair is cut short by self-control or a change of mind in the young men; for those who are good and loving in return, either a legitimate father is found or some additional time is allotted to the affair, with a humanely indulgent attitude towards the disgrace.<sup>8</sup>

Scholarly efforts to apply these categories to the extant Menandrian comedies and Roman adaptations have been unconvincing, in part because of the limitations of the evidence and in part because this passage is selective and slightly tendentious.<sup>9</sup> Plutarch's categories do not hold up well, even for the few plot endings that survive. The only affair to be "cut short" (in the *Heauton Timoroumenos*) is terminated by paternal authority, not youthful remorse, while one of the two affairs granted "additional time" (between an old man and his live-in mistress in the *Samia*) seems permanent. It is hard to believe that a time limit figured prominently in any resolution that left a lover and a hetaira together (no limit is mentioned in the other example, in the *Eunuchus*); furthermore, the sudden shift to the topic of "humanity," φιλάνθρωπία, suggests that these endings did not promote marriage in quite the same way as fifth act weddings.

Scholars have also asked who counts as a hetaira and how many types are distinguished.<sup>10</sup> Plutarch's categories require a broad definition of the

<sup>8</sup> With Minar, Sandbach and Helmbold, I take συμπεριφορὰ as "indulgence" rather than "companionship." Brown 1990: 246, follows Russell and Winterbottom's "which brings a humane relationship of respect," with reservations. αἰδώς, usually "sense of shame," can mean "that which causes shame, scandal" (LSJ s.v. II.1). Cf. Gilula 1987: 513–14.

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch's scheme excludes certain plays (Gilula 1987: 512–13, Brown 1990: 246). *Contra* Anderson 1984: 128 takes it as roughly accurate. Plutarch consistently criticizes hetairai (Pomeroy 1999: 118) and his views on marriage may reflect a new "reciprocal" ideal promoted by Stoic and Christian ethics (but *contra* Patterson in Pomeroy 1999 argues that much of this is traditional).

<sup>10</sup> Gilula 1987, Anderson 1984. Brown 1990: 249–50 argues that two of these women (Glykera and Krateia) are παλλακαὶ ("mistresses") and not hetairai, but Davidson 1997: 101–2 cites cases where such women are called hetairai. These are subjective terms reflecting the attitude of the speaker as much as the status of the referent (Reinsberg 1989: 89, Konstan 1993: 142) and categorical distinctions may be impossible (Ogden 1996: 157). Since kinless women had little hope of marriage, any arrangements they might make were liable to be represented as prostitution. Cf. Omitowaju 200: 213, McClure 2003: 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Those obscure objects of desire*

5

term hetaira. His argument, after all, is that these women get their just deserts, not that most of the women who appear to be hetairai are really something else. The underlying opposition between marital and extra-marital relations suggests that “hetaira” covers virtually all objects of male affection who are not recognized daughters of respectable families from the start of the play. It is not entirely unreasonable to group these women together, but in the surviving plays young women with “legitimate fathers” in their background are not openly and straightforwardly classed as hetairai. The four best-known lost daughters are described as a “captive” and soldier’s “beloved” (ἑρωμένη, *Misoumenos*), as a “beloved” who was “raised as befits a free woman” (*Sikyōnioi*), as a “slave . . . to an extent, in a way” (*Hērōs*), and simply as a “girl” (κόρη, μείραξ, *Perikeiromenē*). The lost daughters in Terence and Plautus are described as a “girl” (*puella, virgo*) and a “citizen . . . I think” (*Eunuchus*), as a “teenager” (*adulescentula*) and “foreigner” (*peregrina, Andria*), as a “girlfriend” (*amica, Heauton*), and as a “girl” (*puella*) reared “decently and chastely” (*bene et pudice, Cistellaria*). None of these characters accepts the label of hetaira and one explicitly rejects it (*Perik.* 711).

This problem stems from real ambiguities about the status of women in fourth-century Athens. One of the arguments of this book is that Menander’s plots characteristically involve women whose social position is unclear, many of whom could be (and sometime are) called “hetairai” by biased observers. A more troubling issue is that Plutarch’s categories are not parallel. In the surviving fragments of Menander, “audacious” (ἰταμή) and “bold” (θρασεῖα) are stock epithets for hetairai but “good” (χρηστή) and “loving in return” (ἀντερωσσα) are not.<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested that the latter should be split, so that “good” women find fathers and “loving” women earn extensions, although as Peter Brown points out, the Greek construction μὲν . . . δὲ indicates that “good and loving” is meant to parallel “audacious and bold.”<sup>12</sup> There appear to be only two groups here, one of which – the “good and loving in return” – does not correspond to a Menandrian type.

Finally, it is also unclear whether Plutarch uses “good” (χρηστή) in a Menandrian sense: does it carry social implications which would make its application to hetairai oxymoronic, or does it mean little more than “nice” and potentially apply to anyone?<sup>13</sup> Menander uses the feminine form

<sup>11</sup> For ἰταμή, cf. *Dis Ex.* 21, 101, *Perik.* 713. For θρασεῖα, cf. 163 K–A, *P. I.F.A.O.* 337 (= *Demiourgos* iv K–A).

<sup>12</sup> Brown 1990: 251. I would add that the single article in ταῖς δὲ χρησταῖς καὶ ἀντερώσαις also supports this reading.

<sup>13</sup> Gilula 1980: 147 restricts χρηστή to citizens. Brown 1990: 252 argues that it was used in a broader sense in the fourth century BC and suggests the translation “nice” here.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

surprisingly rarely (whereas the masculine and neuter are quite common), and two examples turn up in *sententiae* which leave no doubt that the virtues commended belong to a wife: “a good (χρηστή) woman is the rudder of the house” (*Mon.* 155); “a good woman is a prized possession for a decent man” (*Mon.* 835). Menander wrote a *Khrēstē*, which may have featured an atypical hetaira (a “good” wife or daughter is not much of a premise), but nothing is known of the play. “Loving in return” is equally problematic. It means “rival in love” as often as “love in return” (cf. the “young rivals,” ἀντεραστῶν μεροκίων, at *Samia* 26).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Menander barely recognizes the possibility that a woman might reciprocate her lover’s passion. The most devoted women, the loyal young wives in the *Epitrepontes*, *Stichus* and (probably non-Menandrian) Didot Papyrus 1, do not even speak of affection, much less the intense sexual passion of ἔρως.<sup>15</sup> The hetaira in the *Epitrepontes* would like to *be* loved (ἐρᾶσθαι 432) but shows no sign of succumbing to ἔρως herself, while the “Samian Girl” speaks of her lover’s ἔρως with good-natured condescension (“he’s in love too, and pretty badly” *Sam.* 81). The title character in the *Perikeiromenē* is assumed, at most, to have “liked” her lover (491). In fact, in the entire Menandrian corpus only two women are “in love:” the title character of the lost play *Synerōsa* (a feminine participle which translates roughly “loving jointly with,” perhaps in a kind of rivalry?) and the lost daughter Plangon in the *Synaristōsai*, who returns her lover’s ἀγάπη (fr. 338 K-A) – the sort of emotion a nurse might feel for a baby (e.g., *Sam.* 247, 278). If Plautus’ adaptation of this play is any reliable guide, the opening scene dwelt on the bizarreness of her problem (“A heart-ache? Where did you get a heart?” *Cist.* 65).

Plutarch is probably referring to hetairai who forego multiple relationships in favor of a single lover. They are “good” because they are faithful. But he makes an association that Menander does not. Sexual fidelity for Menandrian women has comparatively little to do with virtue and a great deal to do with opportunity. The luxury of a monogamous relationship is out of reach for slaves in the clutches of pimps and for many freeborn hetairai as well. The important choices facing these women are not about fidelity to a lover but about dedication to a natal family, if they have one, or to the welfare of their community, if they do not. Romantic attachments were anything but virtuous, except in the eyes of the lover. As L. A.

<sup>14</sup> Both Antiphanes and Nikostratos wrote an *Anterōsa* (“qui peut signifier *la Rivale*,” Legrand 1910: 112). There are, however, love-struck hetairai in Plautus, Lucian and Alciphron. Posidippus’ *Apoklēiomenē* may have been another (Legrand 116).

<sup>15</sup> They admit only to “goodwill” and “liking” (*Epitr.* 830, *P. Did.* 1.18). Cf. Konstan 1994: 142–3, 145–6.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Those obscure objects of desire*

7

Post remarks, “the word *eros* did not become respectable until late, at least where women were concerned.”<sup>16</sup> For Plutarch, who is arguing that the plays promote married love, it is not unreasonable to claim that virtue and “loving in return” go hand in hand, but nothing could be less Menandrian. *ἔρω*s, a disruptive and often violent emotion, is not associated with good behavior in anyone.<sup>17</sup> Its male victims may be treated with considerable sympathy, but their obsessive desire is still an affliction, an embarrassment, and a potential threat to the stability of the community. If Menander was playing to the fantasies of a freeborn male audience, it was surely by making their kin, and not their hired girlfriends, good and loyal.

Plutarch might be dismissed as a moralist writing five centuries after Menander and determined to find lessons the plays were not written to teach, but arguments over the moral character of hetairai go back to at least the fourth century, when Middle Comic poets started to describe hetairai in positive terms and to debate the virtues of individual women, praising them as “dignified” (σεμνή), “clever” (σοφή), “witty” (ἄστεϊα), and “well-behaved” (κοσμία).<sup>18</sup> The comic poet Antiphanes (IV BC), perhaps the first to give a heart of gold to a whore, defended the “true” hetaira in his *Hydria*:

οὔτος δ' ὃν λέγω  
ἐν γειτόνων αὐτῷ κατοικούσης τινὸς  
ἰδὼν ἑταίρας εἰς ἔρωτ' ἀφίκετο,  
ἀστῆς, ἐρήμου δ' ἐπιτρόπου καὶ συγγενῶν,  
ἧθός τι χρυσοῦν πρὸς ἀρετὴν κεκτημένης,  
ὄντως ἑταίρας. αἱ μὲν ἄλλαι τοῦνομα  
βλάπτουσι τοῖς τρόποις γὰρ ὄντως ὃν καλόν

The man I'm speaking about saw a certain hetaira living in his neighborhood and fell in love with her – a citizen, but bereft of a guardian and relatives, in possession of a character of gold where virtue is concerned, in truth a “companion”. The rest damage the name with their character, although it is in reality a fine one. (Athen. 572a = fr. 210 K-A)

The word “hetaira,” itself a euphemism, had acquired some tarnish by the fourth century. In Anaxilas' (IV BC) *Neottis* (“The Chick”), the modest suggestion from an unidentified speaker that “hetaira” is a more appropriate term than “whore” (πόρνη) for a particular woman elicits a rant from his companion about the general destructiveness of hetairai, followed by a point

<sup>16</sup> Post 1940: 454.

<sup>17</sup> Dover 1974: 212, for example, defines *ἔρω*s as “an exceptionally strong response to stimuli, i.e. a very strong and obsessive desire.”

<sup>18</sup> Henry 1988: 37.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by point comparison between named individuals and the legendary monsters of myth (Chimaera, Charybdis, Scylla, the Sphinx, Harpies, Sirens, fr. 21–2). The speaker in the Antiphanes passage above, however, is not simply pointing out the hypocrisy of the name. He is making the paradoxical argument that the woman's virtue (ἀρετή) makes her all the more a hetaira. He takes pains to distinguish her ἥθος ("character," often in a moral sense) from the τρόποι ("ways" or "character" in the sense of habits and temperament) of other hetairai. His argument requires redefining "hetaira" by resurrecting its original meaning. Any suggestion that it might be possible to be virtuous *despite* being a hetaira is undercut both by the concession that this woman is an exception to the rule ("the rest hurt the name") and by her juridical status. Destitution, he seems to imply, is what drove her to become a hetaira, and her heart of gold is unmistakably associated with citizenship. Since Athenian citizenship required two married Athenian parents, she is, evidently, another lost daughter who was probably not left to a life of prostitution.

The suggestion that individual hetairai ought to be called something more in accordance with their character would be wholeheartedly endorsed by several Menandrian figures who bandy about less euphemistic names like "whore" and "ground-beater". An anecdote recorded in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, composed some time after the death of Commodus in 192, describes a disagreement between Menander and his fellow comic playwright Philemon:

ὅτι δὲ καὶ Μένανδρος ὁ ποιητὴς ἦρα Γλυκέρας κοινόν· ἐνεμεσῆθη δέ. Φιλήμονος γὰρ ἑταίρας ἑρασθέντος, καὶ χρηστὴν ταύτην ὀνομάσαντος διὰ τοῦ δράματος, ἀντέγραψεν Μένανδρος ὥς οὐδεμιᾶς οὔσης χρηστῆς.

That Menander the poet loved Glykera is common knowledge. But he was ashamed of it. For when Philemon fell in love with a hetaira and called her "good" on stage, Menander wrote in response that none [sc. no hetaira] was good. (13.594d)

Athenaeus' acceptance of the dubious tradition that Menander loved a hetaira named Glykera is consistent with the assumption, common in antiquity, that playwrights' lives provided material for their plays.<sup>19</sup> By this principle, if Philemon expressed his opinion in a play, Menander must have responded in kind. The story has a suspiciously comic flavor: an infatuated lover finds in his girlfriend virtues that a more cynical lover denies to her whole profession. The phrase "none is good" suggests a lover at a low point, not a playwright discussing his work. It looks as if a biographical incident

<sup>19</sup> See Körte 1919 on Menander and "Glykera."



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Those obscure objects of desire*

9

has been extrapolated from passages that happened to make contradictory claims about hetairai, but unfortunately none survive.<sup>20</sup> All this story can confirm is something implicit in the Antiphanes passage: it was provocative to claim that a hetaira could be “good” since her profession was thought to preclude it. The issue, then, is not literary innovation – at least, not before Donatus – but whether a member of a despised status and profession could be “good” in any sense.<sup>21</sup> Antiphanes and Athenaeus are operating within the fictional world of New Comedy. Plutarch is more detached, but what he sees is noticeably shaped by his own agenda. It is questionable whether any of these references really provides evidence for a “good” stock type on the comic stage, although they do testify to an interest in the moral character of a type that had formerly embodied only vice.

I have used the question of the good hetaira as a point of departure because it introduces larger questions about female identity. Menander’s female characters were shaped by a combination of literary traditions, philosophical ideas and the real circumstances of life in the Hellenistic Greek world. Economic and social conditions dictate some of their behavior, as do contemporary expectations about qualities that come naturally to different subsections of the population. Greeks recognized many significant status distinctions among women: legal (e.g., citizen, foreigner, slave, freedwoman), social (e.g., unmarried girls, wives, old women), even professional (e.g., midwives, market sellers, pipe players). Menander’s plays fully acknowledge the status divisions which Greeks – and Athenians in particular – considered important, but they also challenge notions of absolute and clearly demarcated groups by presenting women whose status is not quite clear. Problems of determining status lie at the center of these plays: virtually all contain errors about a woman’s position within her community.

This book begins with an examination of relatively objective mistakes, the most common type for women. Chapter 2 argues that Menander devised ingenious variations in order to explore how and why characters make blatant mistakes which they often refuse to give up. The underlying psychology in the plays is consistent with fourth-century theories of perception. Chapter 3 examines errors about more subjective aspects of identity, arguing that serious suspicions about a woman’s moral character are acceptable only when her status is low. These suspicions often draw on the stereotype of the wicked prostitute, whether the woman is a prostitute or not, and

<sup>20</sup> Henry 1988: 44, Gilula 1987: 514–15, n. 16. See also Legrand 1910: 113, Anderson 1984: 133 n. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Donatus credited Terence with inventing the “good hetaira” (*ad Eun.* 198, *ad Hec.* 774, cf. Evanthius *De Fabula* 2.4, discussed by Norwood 1923: 145, Duckworth 1952: 259, Perelli 1973: 39 and Gilula 1980). On his generally sympathetic treatment of women see Taladoire 1972: 114 and Perelli 1973: 32.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88226-2 - Women and the Comic Plot in Menander

Ariana Traill

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the emotional disposition of the viewer plays an even greater role than in mistakes about status. Naturally, the audience needed to recognize mistakes as such, since they provide much of the dramatic interest, and New Comedy often resorts to artificial means to provide the sort of background knowledge that tragedy could simply assume. This was particularly tricky for morally ambiguous behavior, since the audience had to be convinced, and not merely informed, of the correct interpretation. Chapter 4, which explores questions of women's moral agency and the relationship between social roles and moral expectations, examines how Menander tries to engage our sympathies for the characters who are rewarded at the end of the play. Chapter 5 focuses on a single play, the *Epitrepontes*, which features the likeliest "whore with a heart of gold" in Menander. This chapter shows the connection between mistakes about "who" (socially, legally) and mistakes about "what" (personally, morally) a woman is and argues that even a sympathetic hetaira can only be called "good" in a limited sense. The final chapter turns to broader questions about the Menandrian mistaken-identity plot: where did it come from and why did women become the typical objects of mistakes? Did Menander also create *la femme incomprise*?

The core of my argument derives from close analysis of speeches by and about women, with particular attention to the language Menander uses to articulate problems of knowledge, perception, responsibility, and judgment, as well as the multiple means he employs to keep his audience in a position of privileged understanding. I concentrate on the Greek plays and fragments. Although some reference is made to Roman adaptations, these are of limited use in demonstrating that devices and themes are characteristic of Menander (my findings do, however, offer new insights into Plautus and Terence). My primary concern is how Menandrian women are seen and judged by Menandrian men. I am interested in the subjective elements of statements about status and moral character, and my readings emphasize both the fictional context and dramatic character of the speaker. My goal is to recuperate the range of meanings available to an original audience, including both implicit and contextual meanings and the nuances of individual words or phrases. "Contextual meanings" include the specific dramatic context, the generic context (how conventions of New Comedy, or in some cases tragedy, influence what is said and how it is received), and the broader historical context. My basic approach is philological, starting with close readings of the text and drawing on the growing corpus of Menandrian textual criticism and commentary. Emphasis is placed on concepts expressed within the plays themselves (e.g., ἄγνοια, τρόπος) and interpretive tools available to the playwright and his audience (e.g., contemporary