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# WOMEN AND THE COMIC PLOT IN MENANDER

Taking a fresh look at mistaken identity in the work of an author who helped to introduce the device to comedy, Professor Traill shows how the outrageous mistakes many male characters in Menander make about women are grounded in their own emotional needs. The core of the argument derives from analysis of speeches by or about women, with particular attention to the language used to articulate problems of knowledge and perception, responsibility and judgment. Not only does Menander freely borrow language, situations, and themes from tragedy, but he also engages with some of tragedy's epistemological questions, particularly the question of how people interpret what they see and hear.

Menander was instrumental in turning the tragic theme of human ignorance into a comic device and inventing a plot type with enormous impact on the western tradition. This book provides new insights into his achievements within their historical and intellectual context.

ARIANA TRAILL is Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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*University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign*

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*For Brian*

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# *Preface*

This project began as an attempt to explain the origins of the so-called *bona meretrix* ("good prostitute") in Terence, but the Menandrian material proved so richly informative that it soon became a study of Menander's hetairai. It transformed into something much broader when it became clear that the mechanisms at work in the representation of hetairai applied to other female characters. The simple question "Are they good?" led to many other questions about the dramatic representation of women, women's identity, and the basic premise of mistaken identity. With roots in folk tale, tragedy, and Old Comedy, the mistaken identity plot was developed by Menander and his contemporaries into a versatile and productive comic form. Menander's plays, in particular, show how it could be adapted to all kinds of situations. This book traces some of these variations and explores the rich dialogue Menander engaged in with his literary predecessors and with the intellectual currents of his time. His comedies have not only enriched the western tradition with many of its basic plots and devices, but they also open a fascinating window into the laws, customs and social mores of late fourth-century Athens.

This book has been many years in the making. I owe special thanks to Richard Thomas, who supervised the Ph.D. thesis from which it grew, and to Cynthia Damon and James Halporn, who both read the thesis with a critical eye. I have been very fortunate to have had supportive colleagues both at the University of Colorado at Boulder and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Peter Hunt patiently answered many questions about Greek historical topics. David Sansone, Maryline Parca, and Angeliki Tzanetou all read chapters with their usual painstaking care, generously sharing their expertise on ancient women, tragedy and Greek literature in general. I am very grateful to Kirk Freudenburg for his support and advice, both as a department chair and a friend. David Konstan was kind enough to read chapter four, giving invaluable advice. Andreola Rossi and Jud Hermann invited me to present portions of the work in progress



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and provided both warm hospitality and an appreciative audience. Thanks are also due to my editor, Michael Sharp, to my copy-editor, Muriel Hall, and to the anonymous readers for Cambridge who offered valuable suggestions for making this more of a book and less of a dissertation.

Students in classes at the University of Illinois, both graduate and undergraduate, have commented helpfully on excerpts. My graduate research assistants Lindsay DesLauriers, Angela Kinney, Ryan McConnell, Michael Monroe, and Rebecca Muich all took time from their own work to make this a better book, reading it with an awareness of the needs of the non-specialist, pointing out opportunities for clarification, and catching innumerable errors. I owe a special debt to Michael for his sensible suggestions and his tireless proofreading and reference checking; now there is, indeed, a little bit of him in the book. Thanks are also due to the other Greek historian who has provided so much advice and encouragement over the years: my father, John Traill. Finally, no thanks can ever express my gratitude to my husband Brian whose unwavering support has done more than anything else to bring this book to completion.

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