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Antonis K. Petrides

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

At first sight, New Comedy performances are liable to appear conventional and uni-dimensional. They can look like plain and rather shallow romantic fables, along the lines of a 'boy-meets-girl' scenario, deprived of the political engagement and laugh-out-loud quality of Old Comedy. Performatively speaking also, New Comedy could be regarded as a tame show, with common urban stage settings, uncaptivating realistic costumes and little stage hullabaloo; that is, a theatrical performance without the linguistic, visual and musical flamboyance of earlier comic tradition, or the spectacle of contemporary, fourth-century tragedy, which made imaginative use of lavish dress, impressive masks, stage machinery, rhetorical pyrotechnics and other means to set up an engrossing event. In effect, even to the eyes of many scholars today, New Comedy seems like a denuded genre, whose sole interest lay in the sensitive depiction of social reality and human nature.

In fact, it is the impression, not the genre, that is skin-deep. The common motif of the five chapters that constitute this book is that New Comedy has a far richer and more sophisticated performance texture than transpires from the script. A fuller appreciation of New Comedy can be achieved if one moves towards a pragmatic approach to performance analysis, which repositions theatre semiotics 'in the communicative process',<sup>1</sup> that is, in the productive and receptive context of the real-time event that is the theatre,

<sup>1</sup> For a sophisticated theoretical approach to theatre semiotics from a pragmatic point of view, see de Marinis (1993). De Marinis singles out three areas of focus: '(a) the relationship of *the text to its sources*, which emphasizes the dynamics of enunciation and communicative intentionality; (b) the question of the *text's relationship to other texts*, where the issues of context and intertextual practices are brought into play; and (c) the relationship of *the text to its receiver*, which includes the act of reading and interpretation' (emphasis in original) (p. 3).

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taking into account the dynamics of contextuality, intertextuality and audience reception.

Intertextuality – the sustained dialogue of New Comedy performance with a diverse range of ideological, philosophical, literary and theatrical discourses of the democratic polis – plays a most crucial role, I argue, in creating semantic depth and perspective on stage, and in checking the reductive impression of Menander as a mere ‘mirror of life’. It is explored initially in Chapter 1, which lays the basic theoretical foundations, chiefly as regards New Comedy’s dialogue with the ‘general text’ of polis culture, as well as with tragic myth and performance. In its ‘inter-visual’ facet it dominates the chapters that follow.

For it is a fundamental tenet of this book that the role of the visual in bringing forth the referentiality, the *density*, of Menander’s performance is paramount, just as important as any verbal means of signification, and without an exact, identifiable fifth-century precedent. New Comedy performances, it is argued, are stratified and thickened in two major ways: first, by way of a triple layering of the plot on the verbal/narrative level through a synergy of realistic, ideological and archetypal narrative strata; and, then, by the new-fangled capacity of *opsis*, the visual aspect of performance, dynamically to infuse various systems of reference into the performance – a phenomenon for which I reserve the term *intervisuality*. New Comedy displays a dense stratigraphy of semantic layers (textual and intertextual, visual and ‘intervisual’, realistic and ideological), which coalesce and cooperate in a composite and erudite mixture, *more hellenistico*.

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Chapter 1 attempts to locate the stamp of Menander’s theatrical craft between realistic mimesis and ideology, between fictionality and (inter)textuality. It examines how the limited scope of the romantic love story is expanded, as it resonates with the values of patriarchal civic ideology. It also examines how the realistic façade of Menander’s theatrical narratives is problematised, as it measures itself continuously, and in various lengths, against mythical archetypes, which as a rule had already been the subject matter of tragedy.

The first part of the chapter discusses Menander’s notorious ‘realism’, combining ideology with ‘possible-worlds’ theory to

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demonstrate how Menander departs from realism in both senses of this ambiguous word. Menander, it is argued, anchors his stories in a recognisable social milieu (most commonly, Athens of the day), only to leave it far behind, and vocally so, in the ending of the play, where the real problems plaguing the characters find fortuitous, ‘magical’ solutions. With a sleight of hand, Menander’s denouements resolve intractable conflicts and effect unmanageable marital unions, enlarging the narrow confines of social reality into a more inclusive, but ultimately fictional, comic universe. On the face of it, Tyche, acting as the veritable agent of civic ideology, intervenes and transforms historical reality into a place of merriment, cohesion and democratic unity. The crux of the matter, though, is that this transformation is not disguised as being anything other than ‘comic’, and its artificiality is hardly kept unseen. The overall realistic ambience, the very fact that the play begins from a realistic point of departure, and the way it resolves its plot by abandoning verisimilitude so palpably in the end, invites an inescapable comparison between historical reality and its fictional analogue in Menander’s denouements, which invests the latter with a disquieting, bittersweet aftertaste. The profound, strongly accentuated distance between reality and fictionality creates a pregnant sense of comic *unreality* in the denouements of Menander, which, contrary to appearances, is not far removed from Aristophanes. Anything but an unsophisticated mirror of life, Menander oscillates craftily between realistic representation and fictional world-making. The space opened up as the pendulum swings between the two extremes is loaded with subtle humour and ideological gravity.

Therefore, counter-intuitively perhaps, the poetics of fictionality and world-making is most essential for fathoming Menander’s ‘realistic’ drama. The whiff of an intricate theatrical art lurking behind an unfussy exterior is heightened even further, as Menander’s plots prove to radiate from theatrical memory as much as they emulate ‘real life’. Menander’s fictional universe, the second part of Chapter 1 submits, exploits its realistic façade also in order to call attention to the textuality and the theatricality that underpins it. Subtle literary and theatrical artifices, with ample awareness that they operate at the crossroads of *two traditions*,

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the comic and the tragic – in fact, that they constitute a singular product of generic hybridisation – Menander’s realistic-looking stories incorporate, apart from the romantic and the ideological, an inalienable third, mythical stratum. To a larger or lesser extent, Menander’s plots ‘urbanise’ (put into an urban context) narrative patterns drawn from tragic myth; in other words, they are not so much mirrors of life, as *mirrors of stories*. As a set of narrative and performative precedents, tragedy for Menander is not an extraneous theatrical mode to be deconstructed, debunked or antagonised (although such traditional comic reactions to tragedy are not entirely lacking), but is an inherent mode, a constituent of New Comic theatrical medium, deeply ingrained in the genome of Menander’s hybrid world. Menander’s spectators – often his characters, too – are constantly aware of the fact that the urban scenario runs on the tracks of tragic exempla, which can either be followed or derailed, but still are always absolutely critical for completing the semantic space of the scene. The romantic kernel of Menander’s plot reflects the anxieties, and the failings, of civic ideology, but also, in a triple over-determination, which enhances the humour and the consistency of the narrative, ‘urbanises’ and ‘secularises’ material known from legend – in a manner that continues and apparently improves upon a practice already established by and large in the period of Middle Comedy.

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New Comedy, in a nutshell, far from being a cardboard reflection of contemporary *vita privata*, constitutes an elaborate theatrical construct, which problematises the values of polis culture, all the while looking decidedly towards the Hellenistic poetics of allusion. Just as importantly, as Chapter 2 expounds, performative density in New Comedy is achieved, in a manner unparalleled in fifth-century comic or tragic theatre, thanks to the increased sensitivity of theatrical and extratheatrical audiences, from the fourth century BC and increasingly onwards, to the minutiae of visual representation and to what could be called the politics of the gaze. The fourth century saw a virtual revolution in matters of theatre performance, as theatre was internationalised (exported to the four corners of the Greek world and performed in an ever-increasing number of local festivals); professionalised (theatre practitioners

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were now celebrated specialised *technitai*, who soon enough would become unionised to boot); and theorised (reflected upon both in theoretical writings and during the act of making theatre on stage). Not only was theatre good to think about in the fourth century; it was also, as time went by, good to think and act with: theatricality percolated into an increasing spectrum of public functions, not least in Ecclesia and the courts. The immersion of Greek society from the fourth century onwards into a wide array of attentively orchestrated public spectacles – in other words, the constitution of a culture of viewing and of spectators – awakened the average individual to the potent capability of the visual to create meaning even on the micro-level of the human face.

New Comedy performance carries this cultural baggage. By the time of Menander the ‘science’ of Physiognomics, that is, the art of scrutinising the external signs of the body, especially the features of the face, in order to gain insight into the interior of the soul – specifically, to determine a person’s proclivity for virtue or vice (what the ancients called *ēthos*) – is already pervasive. Clearly, Physiognomics was far from ideologically innocent: it encoded and enforced the patriarchal value system of the polis upon the body of the citizen. Of course, as any ideological endeavour, Physiognomics, too, was fraught with the anxiety and the inherent instability dogging any syllogism ἐκ σημείων (rhetorical deductions based on external signs). This instability, I maintain, renders it even more useful as a theatrical code, specifically as an intertextual – actually, *intervisual* – stratum on a novel kind of theatrical mask.

Three processes, which again unfolded in the course of the fourth century, determined the internal development of the comic genre: the aforementioned hybridisation (the creation of a hybrid with tragedy through the absorption of elements from tragedy not only on the level of diction and plot, but also on the level of *opsis*, especially in the arrangement of space and the system of masks); standardisation (the constitution of a limited and concerted system of signs); and semiotisation (to use the terminology of C. S. Pierce, the transformation of formerly ‘iconic’ theatrical signs, for instance, the features of the mask, into ‘indexes’ of disposition by way of Physiognomics). Hybridisation, standardisation and semiotisation

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render the visual aspect of New Comedy performance, especially of its two most foregrounded signs, namely, space and the mask, a potential marker of allusion to literary or cultural systems of reference. Chapter 2 deals briefly with the referential capacity of space, as promoted by the extensive confluence of New Comedy with the spatial practices of tragedy, now even more discernible in the permanent stone *skēnē* (stage-building) of the Theatre of Lycurgus, which creates fresh allusive possibilities.

However, it is a prime contention of this book that if the visual element in New Comedy is indeed laden with the potential to evoke intertexts, the mask is protagonistic in this respect. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 delve specifically into the mask and its critical intervisual input in New Comedy performance. The mask, it is argued, whose semiotic gravity is greatly augmented in comparison with the fifth century, should always be acknowledged in the analysis of New Comedy performance, albeit not without methodological caution.

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Chapter 3 examines the role of the mask in constructing character on stage, defending the significance of Physiognomics against doubts expressed, most stridently by Joe Park Poe, and attempting to re-situate the perception of the mask and its theatrical function within a Greek frame of analysis, namely, Aristotelian ethics and the critical notions of *ēthos* (proclivity towards virtue or vice), *praxis* (action) and *prohairesis* (the process of moral choice). Chapters 3–5 focus mostly on masks of young men. This is not a random choice. The so-called ‘New Style’ series of New Comedy masks, which surfaced around the time of Menander as shown by the archaeological record, break with Middle Comedy tradition not only thanks to their more delicate physical features and their stylistic kinship with contemporary plastic arts, but also because they emphasise the genera of young boys and girls at the expense of fathers, slaves and courtesans. This was no accident. New Comedy re-invented itself as a genre revolving around the social mechanics of marriage and the civic processes that generate citizens – in the double sense of perpetuating the body politic through legitimate procreation and of seeing an adolescent through a rite of passage

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that makes of him a mature adult. It is only natural that the ‘couple in trouble’ and their idealised masks, which, it must be noted, bear close iconographic associations with the respective masks of tragic youths, are foregrounded.

To underscore further the importance of the youth as a citizen *in statu formandi*, New Comedy does away with the tripartite Middle Comedy division distinguishing the masks of free men into masks of ‘young’, ‘younger’ and ‘old’ men, opting to open a large gap of age and status between juvenile ‘sons’ (*neaniskoi*) and declining ‘grandfathers’ (*pappoi*). This innovation is momentous, not least because, according to the Aristotelian ethics that obviously inform the comedy of Menander, these are the two categories of moral agent in whom the prerogatives of adulthood are either lacking or in a state of degeneration. The New Comedy mask of the youth, the chapter argues, is ideally suited – one could say even purposefully designed – to suggest an individual that is not inherently vicious, but is certainly prone to counter-proairetic choices due to *akrasia*, one’s inability to rein in one’s carnal impulses through the exercise of logical control. Thus, the purpose of Chapter 3 is to clarify why and how exactly the physiognomic make-up of the mask is a principal semantic layer of New Comedy *opsis*. Physiognomics cannot, and should not, be dismissed with non-chalance in performance analysis; however, it should be used in accordance with the proper nature and principles of contemporary (fourth-century BC) praxis.

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Chapter 4 continues to explore the mechanisms of producing theatrical meaning by the visual means of the mask (*prosōpon*), investigating the dialectic or ‘interfacial’ dimension of the mask. Through the example of the professional soldier interacting with his valet, the chapter qualifies a fundamental datum of structuralist research into masks, namely, that they are not isolated but dialectic signs. Masks determine and transform each other’s signification as they face off syntagmatically on stage, all the while forming a continuum with other signs (proxemic, kinesic, visual, verbal), and also playing against the literary and other narratives that inform them. Nonetheless, expounding on the latter point, the chapter emphasises that the semiotics of the mask in performance

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is over-determined: displaying a multiple semantic stratification similar to the plot, the mask's semiosis, carries ideological and anthropological baggage; is the product of juxtaposition to significant antithetical signs of other masks; receives input from other signs, such as, especially in the case of the soldier, the costumes and the props; and is also fundamentally defined by intertextuality. In other words, masks do signify by way of differentials, but what actually constitutes a significant difference on a mask, and how this difference plays out as a theatrical sign, is determined not only by the added value of communal ideology, but also, most importantly, by the interface of the characters on stage (thus, by the involvement of the mask in an ensemble of signs interrelating in real-time), and by the constellation of literary and cultural intertexts that underpin the plot. Thus, the spectator's role in the construction of the mask's semantic field is cardinal, and the whole process of reading the mask 'interfacially' – as an interface of *prosōpa*, but also of actors and spectators – is much more dynamic and fluid, much 'messier', than pure structuralism would allow.

The professional soldier, whose dramatic destiny is to be deflated and debunked, at least in some of his New Comedy manifestations, is a telling case in point. Syntagmatic association with a craftier parasite, most probably wearing the *kolax* mask (Pollux, Comic Mask No. 17), deconstructs and discredits the soldier's physiognomy, which is otherwise disconcertingly 'manly' (a feature Menander takes advantage of in the *Sikyonioides*, to turn the very mask that Plautus, for one, undercuts to Stratonophanes' advantage). The soldier's 'dialogue' with his parasitic flatterer transforms the semiosis of the first *episeistos* ('the wavy-haired youth', Pollux Comic Mask No. 15) utterly. But, as Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* suggests, the soldier's 'deposition' is also effected, forcefully and conclusively, through a clever intertextual game: in Plautus' play the soldier, who nurses illusions of grandeur, which his parasite is all too happy first to feed and then to debunk, is constantly crash-landed from 'higher' to 'lower' literary paradigms, from the marble pedestal of Homeric epic, for example, to the lowly bleachers of epic parody.

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Chapter 5 concludes this book with the case study of the *panchrēstos* (Pollux, Comic Mask No. 10), which synthesises the principal significance of the mask as a polyvalent theatrical tool and a rich marker of allusion. The intervisuality of New Comedy *opsis*, the chapter claims, and the precarious ‘politics of the gaze’ in the context of the fourth-century polis culture are ideally combined on the *panchrēstos*, illustrating the multilayered nature of New Comedy performance and the benefits of a pragmatic approach to theatre semiotics. The attribution of the *panchrēstos* to Menander’s Charisios (*Epitrepontes*) and the two Pamphili of Terence (*Andria*, *Hecyra*) must remain, of course, tentative, although hopefully the argumentation that supports it will convince the reader of its likelihood. As this book repeats more than once, what counts the most is the principle: as long as New Comedy personages play in mask, and since that mask is protagonistic in the construction of *ēthos* and the articulation of stage semantics, the mask, which more than any other sign asserts the vitality of *opsis* in this innovative kind of theatre, cannot but be acknowledged in the analysis of New Comedy performance, even if the particular attributions proposed remain indicative and heuristic.

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## I

MENANDER'S NEW COMEDY BETWEEN  
REALITY AND TEXTUALITY

## How 'real' is the realistic?

The impression that New Comedy is a realistic imitation of life, and that this, the authentic representation of social reality, is the genre's essential purpose, seems to have summed up the value of Menander's art for many ancient critics, most of whom lived much later than Menander. The following famous lines by Aristophanes of Byzantium (257–180 BC) constitute the most succinct among many such judgements that have come down to us (test. 83 K.-A.):

ὦ Μένανδρε καὶ βίε  
πότερος ἄρ' ὑμῶν πότερον ἀπεμιμήσατο;

O Menander and Life

Which of you two truly imitates the other?

Many more similar quotes survive from various periods. For Quintilian (10.1.69 = test. 101 K.-A.) Menander *omnem vitae imaginem expressit* ('painted a complete picture of life'); and for Manilius (5.470–6 = test. 94 K.-A.), Menander *vitae ostendit vitam chartisque sacrauit* ('showed life to life itself and enshrined it in his writings'), even if his own *urbs* failed to see that properly during his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> A brief look at the *Testimonia* in the relevant Menandrian volume of the *Poetae Comici Graeci* (vol. VI.2) suffices to show that the ancients were almost invariably fascinated by Menander's detailed accuracy and insightful observation of the world around him.<sup>2</sup> Menander's comedy was

<sup>1</sup> Manilius is hinting at Menander's supposed lack of success in the Athenian dramatic competitions. For a dissenting modern view, see Konstantakos (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Some unrepentant Atticists were the most notable (and ultimately fatal) exception to antiquity's adoration of Menander. See, e.g., the notorious test. 119 from Phrynichus (second century AD): 'By Hercules, I really cannot understand what is wrong with those people who think so highly of Menander and raise him above any other writer in Greek literature' (οὐχ ὁρῶ, μὰ τὸν Ἡρακλέα, τί πάσχουσιν οἱ τὸν Μένανδρον μέγαν ἄγοντες καὶ