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INTRODUCTION

1. GREEK NEW COMEDY

The plays of Plautus are not completely original creations, but adaptations into Latin, for the Roman stage, of Greek comedies first produced in Athens. Attic comedy is conventionally divided into three periods: Old Comedy, Middle Comedy and New Comedy. Old Comedy was the work of various poets active during the fifth century B.C.; only nine plays of Aristophanes have survived from this period, though the work of Eupolis, Cratinus and others is known to us through fragments. The beginning of Middle Comedy is set either at the end of the fifth century or in 388 at the death of Aristophanes, whose last two extant plays, *Ecclesiazusae* and *Plutus*, differ in important respects from his earlier plays and are considered to mark the transition to this second period. In addition, we have fragments of plays by Alexis, Anaxandrides, Antiphanes and others. The first production of Menander, in 321, is taken as the beginning of New Comedy, which extends to the middle of the third century, when our evidence for activity on the comic stage in Athens comes to an end. From this period we have one complete play, and five others more or less complete, of Menander, and fragments of plays by Diphilus, Philemon and others. All of Plautus' plays are thought to have been adapted from New Comedy originals.[1]

Greek New Comedy is a dramatic form which is in some respects quite foreign to modern audiences and in others essentially the same as much of the comedy which is even now being produced. We can reconstruct the plots of about fifty of these plays. Generally there are two young lovers who are separated by some kind of barrier: the girl is thought to be a slave or a foreigner and therefore unmarriageable; the boy is not acceptable to her father; there are rival lovers or previously arranged marriages. The action of the play is concen-

[1] For earlier dating of the originals of the *Amphitruo* and the *Menaechmi*, see Webster 67–97.

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trated on removing these barriers so that the lovers can be married. This is accomplished by recognition and reconciliation between estranged members of the family or changes in attitude which unexpected new circumstances bring about. These 'barrier comedies' tend to end in some form of marriage: usually the young lovers gain their parents' approval for an actual marriage; if the plot turns on a misunderstanding between husband and wife, there is reconciliation; if the girl is in fact unmarriageable under Attic law, her arrangement with the boy is nevertheless stabilized by a guarantee of financial support from his father. We see in this achievement of the young lovers a promise of new life and fertility, and a restatement of the values of social life: people can and should get along with each other, and, when they understand each other's good intentions, they do. Menander put this succinctly: ὡς χάριέν ἐστ' ἄνθρωπος, ἂν ἄνθρωπος ᾖ (fr. 484), 'man is a thing of grace and goodness, so long as he follows his nature'. The barriers are perversions of human nature; youth triumphs over age, love over money, charity and goodness over selfishness and aggressiveness.

There are complications to this main action, and characters subordinate to the young lovers and their parents. We find various professional types – soldiers, courtesans, cooks, parasites, pimps, doctors, money-lenders – in addition to household slaves and family friends. The social conventions which make the plots work seem strange to us: babies are abandoned and raised by strangers or stolen by pirates and sold into slavery; free women of the upper classes are secluded from male company and a variety of professional women fill their place; members of wealthy families have no occupations, but live off their lands, which are worked by slaves. We seldom find serious social criticism in the plays, nor indeed does our appreciation of them depend essentially on knowledge of the times in which they were written. Nevertheless we should know that there is some relation between their conventions and reality. So, too, we should see New Comedy as a development – the final development – in the long history of Greek drama; it did not spring suddenly from the context of fourth-century society, but grew out of the combined traditions of earlier comedy, tragedy and satyr play.

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(*a*) ITS RELATION TO PREVIOUS DRAMA

Drama was produced at Athens at the various festivals held in honour of Dionysus. There were the great mythological tragedies, represented for us by the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, with their companion pieces the satyr plays, which treated the same mythological material in a ludicrous manner. In a different category altogether was the comedy of Aristophanes and his contemporaries. Aristophanes based his comedies on purely fictional, i.e. non-mythical, material. If gods and heroes appear in his plays, it is not to act out famous myths. This is an important distinction, since in New Comedy we find patterns of action similar to those, based on myth, which characterize tragedy and satyr play.

There are other differences between Aristophanes and the poets of New Comedy. Aristophanic comedy celebrates the triumph of the individual; in New Comedy, individuals are forced to meet the requirements of society. Aristophanic comedy is full of fantasy: one old Athenian flies to heaven on a dung beetle to free the personified abstraction Peace from bondage; another establishes his own kingdom in the sky; the god Dionysus descends into Hades to bring back Euripides from the dead, changes his mind and brings back Aeschylus instead. In New Comedy the essential comic element of wish-fulfilment is still there, but the scope has been reduced. There is no cosmic change, only the removal of barriers which have prevented desired marriages. The only fantasy is circumstantial: a passer-by is asked to masquerade as a young girl's father and turns out to be her father in fact; a young man who quarrels with his wife when he discovers she became pregnant before their marriage hires a prostitute, who happens to have been present when the wife was sexually assaulted and can identify the assailant as the husband himself; two young men are in love with a girl and one turns out to be her brother.

Aristophanic comedy is musical, full of complex choral sections and all sorts of metrical variation. New Comedy is written almost entirely in iambic trimeters, the standard dialogue metre of Greek drama. It is uncertain to what extent the fantastic scenes described in Aristophanes' plays were physically represented on stage by means of sets and other equipment, but contemporary vase-paintings show how elaborate his costumes were. By contrast, Menander needed only two

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or three house fronts for his action; his characters wore ordinary clothes. Aristophanes' language is rich and allusive; Menander's is remarkably free of imagery and artifice.

Ancient critics remarked on the influence of Euripides on Menander. This was indirect as well as direct: Menander knew Euripides from contemporary revivals of his plays as well as from written copies of them in circulation, but Euripides had already had a tremendous influence on the development of Greek drama and it is this indirect influence, through the tradition, which can be claimed for Philemon and Diphilus as well as for Menander. In his late plays Euripides experimented with the conventions of tragedy to such an extent that the genre barely survived his career. He allowed the audience such intimacy with his characters, demanded of them such close scrutiny of their condition and exposed so ruthlessly the insignificance of human action, the capriciousness of divine, that theatre was more 'absurd' at the time of his death than at any other until the present. All sorts of labels have been attached to Euripides' *Helen* and *Ion* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*: tragicomedy, romantic comedy, comedy of ideas, melodrama. The suggestion is that since Euripides presents in these plays characters who are less than heroic, situations which are outlandish and slightly ludicrous, plots which turn on coincidence and the supernatural, and happy endings, he is somehow confounding tragedy with comedy. Since there is nothing of Aristophanes and the contemporary comic stage in Euripides, one would have to credit him with complete originality if these very elements had not been the mainstay of the satyr plays produced as after-pieces with tragic trilogies by all the masters of tragedy throughout the fifth century. What Aeschylus and Sophocles had kept in its place to conclude a sequence of three serious pieces, Euripides expanded to become the whole dramatic experience. Already in the *Alcestis*, an early tragedy produced in the position normally assigned to a satyr play, we find that mixture of the ludicrous and the serious, the fantastic and the familiar, which is to characterize his later work. The basic pattern of action in the *Alcestis*, like that of the later *Helen* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, is the woman freed from bondage: a Persephone-like figure is carried off to a foreign land by an unchosen lover and her rescue is the climax of the play. This is the pattern of all romantic comedies, from Plautus' *Rudens* to Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*. In Euripides' treatments it has rich sug-

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gestions and associations: the conflict between life and death, the power of love to change life, the persistence into adult life of a child's sexual fantasies. In combining the two forms of mythological drama, tragedy and satyr play, Euripides laid the foundations for later comedy.

Most Greek drama, with the exception of Aristophanes, is domestic: the *Agamemnon* and the *Oedipus Rex*, like the plays of New Comedy, deal with family problems. This is not surprising, since the most popular of the Greek myths – those which were written about and re-interpreted most often – concern relations within the family, and Greek tragedy is based directly, New Comedy indirectly, on these myths. There is, however, a vast difference between the two types of treatment, and Euripides bridges the gap. In Euripides' late plays we see the beginnings of realistic drama. Like Chekhov and Ibsen Euripides delights in trivia: he is concerned with whether or not Electra's face is clean, with the style of her dress and the way in which her house is furnished. The introduction of these intimate details destroys any illusions one might have of her heroic nature; her thoughts and reactions confirm us in the opinion that she is a bitter, frustrated woman very much like the bitter, frustrated women we have met outside the theatre. She is a quite ordinary human being caught up in extraordinary events over which she has no control. Once Euripides had changed the point of view in drama, so that we see the characters as no better than ourselves, it only remained for Menander to change the actual events and drop the mythical names. We do not find in New Comedy a man marrying his mother, but a man who is suspected by his adoptive father of being seduced by his father's mistress; a wife does not murder her husband upon his return from war, but a soldier's mistress does desert her lover in his absence and seek refuge in a temple. The patterns of sexual attraction and antagonism are the same, but they have been given a more mundane, realistic treatment. Gone is the rich fantasy life captured by Euripides, and instead of the fabulous Helen we are presented with Pamphile or Glykera or some other unremarkable young girl.

(*b*) ITS RELATION TO REALITY

The quality of the realism in New Comedy is a major problem. Some of the plots seem so outlandish that we have difficulty believing they

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had any relation to reality. The major institution with which they are concerned is marriage, but citizenship, inheritance and other related social circumstances are involved. Athenian laws and customs of marriage are known mainly from the orators in their speeches on private as opposed to political cases, but comedy itself offers corroboration of that evidence. A woman's legal activity was entirely regulated by a guardian (κύριος); this would be her father or someone appointed by him to assume this function on his death, or, with limitations, her husband. The premise on which this protective custody seems to have been based is that a woman, like a slave, was not a person. She was a citizen in so far as she could produce children who were citizens, but she had no legal standing. Since she could not initiate contracts or court cases or in any other way proceed before the law, someone must do these things for her. Marriage being a legal contract, she could not enter into it on her own, but must be committed to it by her father. She then moved physically out of her father's house and into her husband's and legally under her husband's guardianship. She took with her a dowry consisting of money, goods or land, and this was inalienable from her. If the marriage was dissolved she returned with the dowry to her father.

Life in her husband's house would have been very much the same as in her father's. She was restricted to a set of rooms which only women, and occasionally her husband and the male members of her family, entered. Here she spun wool, wove cloth and made clothes; she managed the education of her male children to the age of six and of her female children until marriage. She took no part in the social, economic and political life of the city, rarely leaving her husband's house, never conversing with men outside her family.

It was possible for a slave woman to move more freely in the world than her free-born mistress. A slave woman might be forced into a union with a man of her master's choosing, though legal marriage was not possible for slaves, just as a free-born woman would have her husband chosen for her by her father, but the slave woman might be able to buy her freedom and achieve some degree of independence. One gets the impression from New Comedy that it was these unattached women, freed slaves or immigrants from abroad, who dominated Athenian society, and this was probably true. Pericles' famous aphorism on women – that their greatest glory is to have

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nothing said of them, whether good or bad[1] – was endorsed by his contemporaries and later generations; we simply do not hear of the sequestered ladies who bore children and made clothing, except on those rare occasions when they were released to perform religious functions. We do hear occasionally of women like Pericles' mistress Aspasia, a foreign-born, well-educated woman who played an active part in Athens' political and social life.

While women's lives were rigorously regulated, the lives of new-born children were sometimes simply extinguished. It was entirely at the discretion of the father as to whether a child would be raised or exposed to die.[2] We cannot tell how often fathers decided on the negative alternative but it is clear that daughters were more frequently exposed than sons. Thus the romantic possibilities for recognition which play such an important part in New Comedy had their grisly origin in reality.

(*c*) ITS RELATION TO UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF COMEDY

This brief social background for New Comedy is meant only to illustrate the basis for its conventions;[3] the appeal of its patterns is quite another problem. The comic poets could construct their plots around the repression of women and the exposure of babies because these were familiar and even socially acceptable; the same situations, however, continue to be exploited even when audiences cannot recognize their own social circumstances in them. Oscar Wilde reveals at the end of *The importance of being earnest* that the character we know as Jack Worthing is in fact named Ernest Moncrieff and as an infant was left in a black leather hand-bag by an absent-minded nurse in the cloakroom of Victoria Station. At the end of Joe Orton's play *What the butler saw* we realize that the secretary whom the doctor has attempted to rape and the bellhop who has attempted to rape the doctor's wife are, in fact, the lost children of the doctor and his wife. No doubt one could find reports of such things actually happening in London during the past century, but that is hardly the point. What one must appreciate about the patterns of New Comedy is that they recur because they have a certain appeal.

[1] Thucydides 2.45. [2] See Commentary at line 41.
[3] For more evidence see Harrison *passim*, Gomme and Sandbach 28–35.

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This appeal is obvious in the late plays of Euripides; in *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Helen* we find the combination of two dramatic actions: the release of a woman from bondage and the recognition of a lost relative. The setting for these plays is exotic; supernatural agencies are at work; the plots are full of twists and turns; the endings are happy – these are the features of romantic comedy and they are evident to varying degrees in the plays of New Comedy. Menander frequently exploits the theme of the woman freed from bondage by recognition: in several plays we see a young girl flee her soldier-lover in search of the father who can recognize her as a free-born Athenian who should be a wife rather than a concubine. Our delight in her success is manifold: she is a good and noble person assuming her rightful place in the world; her sexual union with the soldier is blessed by the father, so she need no longer feel that she was taken from him without his consent; her marriage is symbolic of a whole new life beginning for all those around her.

Philemon's treatment of the pattern is known only from adaptations of two of his plays by Plautus. In the *Trinummus* a young man has wasted his father's fortune on a mistress, but insists on providing a dowry for his sister so that she will be considered the true wife rather than the concubine of her intended husband; in the *Mercator* father and son try to gain possession of the same slave girl, and the son, who truly loves her, is successful. In each play Philemon develops the intrigue (slaves and friends of the young man complicate the situation for his benefit) and moral implications (young men should not waste money; old men should not fall in love) rather than concentrate on the plight of the young girl. Diphilus, in two plays which are also known from adaptations by Plautus, offers further variations. In the *Rudens* a young girl is rescued from the pimp who owns her by four agents: the god Arcturus, who wrecks the ship in which she is being carried from Cyrene to a life of prostitution in Sicily; a priestess of Venus, who gives her shelter; her young lover, who attempts to prosecute the pimp for breaking his contract to sell her; and her father, who happens to live at the site of the shipwreck and recognizes her as his free-born, and therefore marriageable, daughter. Here are the exotic setting, supernatural intervention, complicated plot and happy ending in combination with the woman-in-bondage pattern. Diphilus seems even closer to Euripides than Menander does.

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The other play by Diphilus of which we can speak with any certainty is *Kleroumenoi*, on which Plautus based his *Casina*. The situation is like that of his *Mercator*, based on Philemon's *Emporos*. A father lusts after the slave girl his son loves; each proposes a slave husband for her; the mother takes the son's side, but they are defeated by the father; a male slave is dressed up like the girl for her wedding and beats the old man when he tries to have intercourse with 'her'; the girl is finally recognized as the neighbour's daughter and marries the son. The pattern is overwhelmingly attractive; not only is the girl rescued from the bonds of slavery but also from the sexual threat posed by the old man, and all the women enjoy his discomfiture; she is finally able to choose her lover, after being recognized by her father. We have, then, a reversal of traditional roles on three levels: the young triumph over the old, the slaves triumph over their masters and the women triumph over the men. In addition, Diphilus seems to be in touch with the patterns of earlier Greek drama, the patterns of myth, perhaps by way of more recent comedy: each of the spectacular scenes in the *Casina* and *Rudens* can be traced back through numerous treatments on the Greek stage to early tragedy and satyr play.[1] Though the *Casina* is more purely a play of intrigue, more of a farce and less of a romantic comedy than the *Rudens*, nevertheless both plays are richer in texture, more allusive and exotic than the plays we know of Menander and Philemon.

2. ROMAN COMEDY

The principal period of comedy at Rome extended from 240 B.C., when a Greek play was first presented in a Latin adaptation by Livius Andronicus, to 159 B.C., the death of Terence. It was a time when Rome was particularly receptive to Greek art and literature, beginning with a series of wars which brought the Roman people into contact with many Greek cities and ending only shortly after Rome was acknowledged master of all Greece. Whereas the political power of Athens had been eclipsed before the period of New Comedy, Roman comedy flourished in a period of brash expansionism. Prior to this time a kind of native Italian popular comedy flourished in towns where Oscan was spoken, not far from primarily Greek-speaking

[1] See below, Section 4 (*d*), and MacCary, 'Comic tradition'.

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Italian cities where Greek comedies were being performed in Greek. The native Italian drama is known as Atellan Farce, because its centre was the Campanian town Atella; it was improvisational and depended upon a cast of stereotyped characters: Pappus, the old man; Maccus, the clown; Bucco, the braggart; and Dossenus, the trickster. The origins of these characters and their kind of comedy are obscure; most of our information about it comes from a later period, at the end of the Republic when it was still flourishing. Some of the titles suggest the sort of situations that are found in all comic traditions: *Maccus the virgin*, *The twin Macci*, *The bride of Pappus*. The parallels with Commedia dell'Arte tempt us to reconstruct a drama which was musical and involved a lot of stage business, but this is based on conjecture rather than evidence.

Livius Andronicus introduced literary drama to Rome in 240 B.C. He was Greek, a native of Tarentum, a Greek city in the extreme south of Italy. Since Greek comedy is known to have been produced there throughout the third century B.C., one should probably not presume that Livius was much influenced by native Italian popular comedy. Even if one doubts that his comedies were straight translations from the sophisticated plays of the Greek New Comedy, and even if one is convinced that the titles which survive of his plays – *Gladiolus*, *Ludius*, *Virgo* or *Verpus*, etc. – suggest low and obscene comedy, nevertheless Greek sources should be expected for such features: perhaps the *phlyax* plays, burlesques of mythology and everyday life popular in Tarentum and other Greek cities in Italy. These plays were full of lively and obscene stage action; the actors wore padded costumes and grotesque masks; there were scripts, but improvised jokes must have been part of the fun.

Livius' successor, or younger contemporary, in Roman comedy, Gnaeus Naevius, can more readily be aligned with native Italian popular comedy. His home was in Campania, so presumably he spoke Oscan before learning Latin – just as Livius would have spoken Greek before Latin – and Oscan was the original language of the Atellan Farce. Only thirty titles of his plays survive and some fragments of dialogue. He relied on Greek originals, probably of the New Comedy period, but seems to have interpolated into his texts references to Roman politics and other original elements. He has even been credited with introducing into Roman comedy some of the

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