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0521543525 - The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance

David Wiles

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This book provides a detailed analysis of the conventions and techniques of performance characteristic of the Greek theatre of Menander and the subsequent Roman theatre of Plautus and Terence.

Drawing on literary and archaeological sources, and on scientific treatises, David Wiles identifies the mask as crucial to the actor's art, and shows how sophisticated the art of the mask-maker became. He also examines the other main elements which the audience learned to decode: costume, voice, movement, etc. In order to identify features that were unique to Hellenistic theatre he contrasts Greek New Comedy with other traditions of masked performance. A substantial part of the book is devoted to Roman comedy, and shows how different Roman conventions of performance rest upon different underlying assumptions about religion, marriage and class.

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THE MASKS OF
MENANDER



*Sign and meaning in
Greek and Roman
Performance*

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Abbreviations used in the notes

BICS	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies</i>
DFA	A. Pickard-Cambridge, <i>The Dramatic Festivals of Athens</i> , revised by John Gould and D. M. Lewis (Oxford, 1968)
HGRT	M. Bieber, <i>The History of the Greek and Roman Theater</i> , revised edition (Princeton, 1961)
MC	A. W. Gomme and F. H. Sandbach, <i>Menander – a Commentary</i> (Oxford, 1973)
MINC	T. B. L. Webster, <i>Monuments Illustrating New Comedy</i> , second edition, <i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies</i> , Supplement no. 24 (1969)
MTGTL	L. Bernabò-Brea, <i>Menandro e il teatro greco nelle terracotte liparesi</i> (Genoa, 1981)
RAGA	P. Ghiron-Bistagne, <i>Recherches sur les acteurs dans la Grèce antique</i> (Paris, 1976)

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Note on conventions used in the text

Translations of ancient and modern material are my own unless otherwise stated. For the convenience of readers who do not read classical languages, I have used translated titles where there seems to be no risk of confusion. For Menander's plays I have used the titles in Norma Miller's Penguin edition, *Menander: Plays and Fragments* (Harmondsworth, 1987); for fragments which do not appear in this edition, I have used the translated titles in F. G. Allinson's Loeb edition, *Menander: the Principal Fragments* (London, 1921). For Terence's plays, I have used the titles in Betty Radice's Penguin edition, *The Brothers and Other Plays* (London, 1965) and *Phormio and Other Plays* (London, 1967). For Plautus, I have used the translated titles in Paul Nixon's Loeb edition, *Plautus, 5 vols* (London, New York & Cambridge, Mass., 1916–1938). For the text of Menander, I have used the Oxford Classical text edited by F. H. Sandbach (Oxford, 1972). For fragments not in the OCT, I have used the Teubner edition by A. Koerte and revised by A. Thierfelder (Leipzig, 1953/5).

Classical references are conveniently standardized, and I have not attempted to direct readers to the page numbers of particular translations. Note that for Aristotle two forms of reference are used: first, the book/chapter/section numbers of the specific work cited, and second, the page reference to Aristotle's *Complete Works*.

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Preface

Within the study of ancient drama, obvious intellectual advances, it seems, have been made in recent years in two distinct directions. First there has been the structuralist approach. Scholars like J.-P. Vernant, Froma Zeitlin, Charles Segal, and Simon Goldhill, having absorbed the ideas of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, and other (mainly French) thinkers, have come back to ancient drama with new premises and new questions. Second, there has been the ‘stagecraft’ approach. Critics favouring this approach, usually inspired by Oliver Taplin’s seminal study of Aeschylus, have refused to read classical plays as self-contained verbal constructs, and have insisted that a dramatic text is the score for an event located in space and time. These have until the last few years tended to constitute quite separate attacks on orthodox literary criticism.¹

The present study of New Comedy attempts to place itself within the liminal area located between stagecraft and structuralism. Although in many respects my research is of an applied, pragmatic nature, the basic orientation is indebted to structural modes of thinking. Institutional structures tend to set up a sharp divide between people working in ‘classics’ and people working in ‘drama and theatre studies’, and I have attempted to draw insights from both these disciplines. I hope that this study will be found useful by a variety of people who may be seeking, like myself, to make connexions: social historians wanting to understand how drama functioned as part of the nexus of relationships that constitutes a ‘society’; literary critics and archaeologists interested in seeing how their two spheres of exploration relate to a single artistic practice; and theatre historians interested in performance theory, wanting to see how a semiological approach can have practical application.

New Comedy tends to be overshadowed by Greek tragedy. While everyone with an interest in theatre knows something about Greek tragedy, New Comedy tends to be a historical byway. This is due in part

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to the accident that Menander's texts were not available to serve as an inspiration to the Renaissance. Now that texts are available, they tend to be read through Roman spectacles, to be read in the way that people have learned to read Terence. There is also a widespread feeling that New Comedy belongs to a period of decadence and decline. One keeps meeting the assumption that, in the twilight of Athenian democracy, playwrights ceased to handle major themes, and resorted to writing about domestic trivia. This 'decline' is of questionable value as a historical concept. The age of Menander was a period of great creativity, most obviously within the spheres of philosophy, science and the visual arts. In the theatre, it was a time of increasing interest in the art of the actor, an art less accessible to us than the art of the writer. As a period, Athens at the end of the third century seems to me, living in Europe at the end of the twentieth century, to be a period of very great interest, for it was a time when people were struggling to reconcile local democratic ideals with the awareness that they lived perforce in a cosmopolitan world in which national boundaries were disintegrating. By comparison with the classical period, the Hellenistic period proves rewarding to study because we are so much better informed about the intellectual context. We can form a good picture of how educated Athenians understood themselves in terms of morality, biology, psychology, politics, and the like. Such information allows us to piece together techniques used by the actor in order to communicate with an audience.

The Hellenistic period offers the theatre historian more data than the classical period in every respect save one – a supply of complete play texts. Terracotta masks, mosaics representing scenes, and treatises on rhetoric full of observations about acting reflect an increased interest in visual modes of communication. Although we lack integral texts from the period, we have an abundant supply of fragments of Menander's work. The lack of integral texts is demoralizing if one's object is to focus on the author as the unique and coherent source of meaning; the deficiency is far less demoralizing if one's object is to understand a theatrical language, a set of conventions used to produce meaning. The fact that we have a large and more-or-less random corpus of fragments allows us to reconstruct a dramatic technique, as distinct from a set of individual art works.

It seems to be time for a synthesis, now that papyrologists have finished the bulk of their valuable and necessary work on the texts of Menander, and now that archaeologists have compiled usable catalogues of masks and monuments.² We need to form an understanding of how the Greeks used texts and masks as their tools for producing meaning. Although I

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lack the same specialist expertise, my research in a sense takes up where T. B. L. Webster left off. Webster was a theatre historian: he catalogued masks, he examined papyri, and he wrote literary criticism. Because of this diversity of interest, he was able to make many useful suggestions about how monuments or portions of text related to the practicalities of performance. He seems in this catholicity of interest to have had no successors in the 1980s. In his last book, *Studies in Menander*, written in the early 1970s, Webster recognized the importance of Lévi-Strauss for the analysis of Menander. His willingness to accept structuralist ideas possibly derives from the fact that he was then working not in Britain but in the United States. Although, unfortunately, the structuralist methodology is skin-deep, and provides few fresh insights, it is significant that Webster saw the need for this kind of approach if he was to write about Menander with a view to integrating social, moral, and theatrical concerns. I have attempted to use in this book an intellectual apparatus that was not available to scholars of Webster's generation.

It is not by chance that I have turned to France to find a methodology. The semiotics of performance was first developed as a discipline in Prague in the 1930s. A second generation of theatre semioticians followed the lead offered by Barthes in the 1960s. Although better known for his studies of the novel, Barthes is a seminal figure for the semiotics of performance. Anne Ubersfeld and Patrice Pavis at the Sorbonne have subsequently done much patient work, making mechanistic theories more flexible, demonstrating how in practice an audience reads the minutiae of a performance, and teasing apart the different sign systems which a performance comprises. The same kind of work has not been developed in Britain, for complex cultural reasons. Until recent years, there has been within literary circles a hostility towards theory, and a Leavisite privileging of feeling over thought, of common sense over abstraction. Within theatre studies in Britain, there tends to have been more interest in the production of performances than in their reception. I have attempted to release myself from this British tradition. The attraction of structuralism is the way it establishes coherent patterns where previously there seemed to be only incoherence – within, for example, the jargon of advertising, the world of fashion, Indian myths, or the tenses of a narrative. I have attempted to find this kind of coherence, both within the performance in all its multiple aspects, and within the society which can be regarded, no less than the writer, as the 'author' of the play.

It may seem perverse, in the circumstances, to have entitled this book

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The Masks of Menander, giving such prominence to the writer. The masks of New Comedy, I shall argue, were the focus of the audience's attentions. My purpose is to reconcile the evidence of artefacts (principally masks) with the evidence of texts (principally by Menander). It is the texts of this particular playwright that have survived because his plays were selected by subsequent generations as the core of the New Comedy tradition. The culture that will concern me is not specifically the culture of Athens, but rather that of the Hellenistic world. The fact that Menander's plays rapidly became canonical gives them a unique importance in relation to Hellenistic culture at large. Enough fragments survive from other dramatists of Menander's generation to reassure us that they observed broadly the same set of theatrical conventions. That having been said, the lack of any surviving plays by Philemon can only be lamented.

I have devoted considerable space in this book to Roman comedy. Plautus and Terence wrote at a time when Rome was establishing itself as an imperial power. The hierarchical, militaristic culture of Rome could scarcely be more different from that of Athens and the democratic Greek world. It is of great interest, therefore, to see how the genre of New Comedy changed its nature within the Roman world. Although the texts of Plautus and Terence survive in far better condition than the texts of Menander, we have very little information about the intellectual context, and a complete lack of any iconography related to the plays of those dramatists in the Republican period. Evidence has, almost exclusively, to be extrapolated from the texts. What is interesting about Plautus and Terence for my purposes is the way they differ from Menander. I have aimed to isolate and explore those differences.

Several people have been kind enough to read short sections of this book in draft form: Christopher Gill, Adam Mills, Karina Mitens, Masahiro Takenaka, Oliver Taplin. I am grateful to them for their comments and suggestions. I have also incorporated helpful suggestions from three readers at Cambridge University Press. Peter Brown supplied me with useful bibliographical information. Students at Oxford acting in my production of *Old Cantankerous* and at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College acting in my production of *Stichus* taught me much about Menander and Plautus. Colleagues in the Department of Drama at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, released me from teaching for a term, during which time I completed the initial research for this book. UCW Aberystwyth gave me a grant in order to visit the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow. The British Academy gave me a grant in order to

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visit Lipari and Naples. Andrew Foxon at the Kelvingrove Museum and Madeleine Cavalier at the Museo Eoliano gave me all help and assistance and provided me with photographs. Andrew Foxon also arranged for an analysis of pigments to be made. Staff at the computer centres at RHBNC and the University of London transferred two chapters of typescript onto disquette. Gayna Wiles provided the line drawings, and back-up services over the years. My mother lent me her word processor. My thanks are due to all.