

The breaking of scenic illusion in the comedies of Menander*

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This thesis is dedicated to the work of the comic writer Menander from a perspective which is rarely applied in the study of his comedies, the perspective of Menander's dramaturgy. The comedies of Menander are studied through the declaration or text of the comedies and through the expression or performance of the comedies. In other words, the comedies of Menander are studied in their context, that of the theatre. The study of dramaturgy in this thesis is limited to one part of this complex phenomenon, and that is, as the title says, the breaking of scenic illusion: the methods and devices employed for breaking comic illusion—devices which originate from the dramatic text and from the dramatic performance.

The period of New Attic Comedy, whose chief representative is Menander, saw the emergence of changes which were gradually embracing the dramatic genre of comedy, i.e. its distancing of itself from ritual, leaving out the elements which had dominated in the cult, and the shaping of comedy in accordance with Aristotle's theory of poetics. Leaving out the elements which originated from the cult, primarily the direct address to the audience and to individuals in the audience, resulted in insisting more and more upon maintaining scenic illusion and in turn to the methods of breaking scenic illusion becoming rarer and more generalized. In parallel with this development, comic expression as a device for producing comic effect, abundant in the comedies of Aristophanes, became minimized. Instead of comic expression, the emphasis in New Comedy is placed on the structure or *διάθεσις* of the comedy as a device for producing comic effect.

In parallel with the changing of devices for producing comic effect was a change in type of humor. In the comedies of Menander, humor is less intense because it is based on understanding and depends on the structure of the comedy—unlike the works of his predecessors whose comedies were abundant with a rude type of humor and personal vilification as a residuum from the cult. This is at least the scheme according to which Menander makes his comedies and it can be said with certainty that Menander traverses from comic expression to the structure of comedy as a device for producing comic effect, and within this change the breaking of comic illusion in his comedies becomes a less exploited phenomenon.

The new method for producing comic effect as well as the insistence on maintaining comic illusion is only a tendency in New Comedy and the elements which represent a heritage

from the cult and are part of the comic tradition can also be seen in the comedies of Menander. It should not be forgotten that the last comedy of Aristophanes was produced in the first decade of the fourth century B.C. and that, in the same century, in 321, Menander started his career as a comic writer, which is not that great a distance in time. Like Aristophanes, Menander was also a comic writer who wrote for the same city, Athens, following the comic tradition, and the elements which depart from this dramatic genre are visible in the comedies of Menander but in a smaller portion. The difference between the New and the Old Comedy, among other things, consisted in the methods with which the scenic illusion was broken, which are more diverse in the comedies of Aristophanes compared to those which Menander uses in his comedies. In fact, Aristophanes used all methods for breaking scenic illusion, those belonging to the text and others to the performance. From those which belong to the text are the direct addresses to the audience, reference to its own theatricality, reference to the poet and parody. The breaking of scenic illusion through masks and costumes belongs to the text and to the performance; in other words, they can be indicated in the dramatic text, or on the stage if the *dramatis personae* change their costumes and masks on the stage, not behind the stage, which is common. Changing costumes and masks on scene, which is usual for Aristophanes, is not typical of the comedies of Menander, or of the New Comedy at all, considering the plot of these comedies. Because all these methods of breaking comic illusion are realized through self-reference as a device for breaking comic illusion, accordingly it can be said that the following types of self-reference exist: self-reference to the audience, self-reference to its own theatricality, self-reference to the poet, self-reference through parody, and self-reference through costumes and masks. Self-reference through the audience is the only type of self-reference which Menander uses in his comedies and this type of self-reference can be said to be the most archaic because it originates from the vilification *ad personam*, or the phallic cult.

As the comedies of Menander employ a form of self-reference that originates from the dramatic text, as a self-reference to the audience, a division can be made according to the type of speeches that are used in addressing the audience. Such speeches can be:

- 1) back-stage reports, which represents archaism because they originate from the messenger speeches in classic tragedy, and have a narrative form;
- 2) expressions of intentions, usually before the *dramatis persona* leaves the scene, which also originate from the tragedy; and
- 3) comments aside when the *dramatis persona* is not alone on the stage but is making a comment about the happenings on the stage or about some other *dramatis persona* who may be on or off-stage—another form which originates from the comic tradition.

From all these speeches, by which self-reference can be used as a device for breaking scenic illusion, only the comments/asides are important for this thesis because they are a heritage from comic tradition. With these comments it can be proven that the comic writer Menander formed his comedies in continuity with comic tradition, although there was a tendency in New Comedy to drop elements which originated from comic tradition.

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