

Anatole MORI

Aristotelian Politics and the Absent *Despotes* in Menander

This paper reopens the question of Aristotelian influence on New Comedy by examining the question of Menander's political relevance from the perspective of Aristotle's *Politics*. The characteristic emphasis on domestic society does not mean that Menander has abandoned the political focus of Old Comedy. Rather, the internal threats to the *oikos* that are central to Menander's plots address the larger question of the stability of the polis. While Menander's work does not, as Heinrichs has observed, offer a mirror image of Athenian society, it does address contemporary political upheaval by dramatizing the consequences of an absent or intemperate *kurios* (or *despotes*, to use Aristotle's term).

The relevance of Aristotelian *agnoia*, *hamartia*, and *anagnorisis* for *Menander* has long been established, as have parallels between the plots and characters of New Comedy and Aristotelian philosophy, primarily the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*. Webster comments that the Athenian audience would have recognized the Aristotelian origins of Menander's "ethical code," made explicit by the use of terms such as *atuxema* and *mikropsychos*. Menander's political code is similarly grounded in Aristotelian philosophy. This approach accordingly bridges the gap between earlier interest in Peripatetic influence and more recent work that addresses the social and political implications of the comedies.

Centrifugal political and economic demands on the *despotes* (e.g., mercenary service, the acquisition of wealth overseas) pull him away from the *oikos* and, from an Aristotelian point of view, weaken its monarchic organization. This absence or social withdrawal of the male head of the household, such as Charisios in the *Epitrepontes*, Demeas in the *Samia* and Knemon in the *Dyskolos*, humorously compromises the integrity of the *oikos* by placing women and slaves in dominant roles. The Alexandrian Herodas creates a similar feeling of comic disorder with the absent Mandris in *Mime One* and the incorrigible youth Kottalos in *Mime Three*, although Herodas differs from Menander inasmuch as paternal figures play no role in restoring order.

According to Aristotle in *Politics* Book 1, women, slaves, and intemperate youths are better suited by nature for subordinate positions in the *oikos*. On this view the displacement of the male head of the household is unnatural, and is by extension likely to endanger the health of the polis as a whole. For Aristotle the *oikos* presupposes the polis and, while the two are distinct and have distinctly different functions, correct governance of the one entails the correct governance of the other. The stability of society broadly conceived is of primary importance to *Menander*, which explains why the dramatic emphasis of the plays repeatedly falls, for example, on the *nothos* or on the legal status of the rape victim rather than the emotional consequences of her assault. The restoration of the *despotes* within the *oikos* therefore has implications for the restoration of those best suited to govern the polis.