

ALAN H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Menander: Epitrepontes*, Bloomsbury Ancient Comedy Companions, London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 152 pp., £70.00; ISBN 978-1-350-02364-2.

This book is one of seven volumes dealing in brief compass with individual comic plays: so far, Aristophanes' *Frogs* and *Peace*, Menander's *Samia*, Plautus' *Casina* and *Curculio*, and Terence's *Andria*. Tragedy has long been served by accessible volumes of this type, and one can only applaud the initiative of an equivalent series for comedy. At least in Anglophone classics curricula, comedy is frequently neglected, or worse, relegated to the status of an historical document rather than a crucial department of ancient literature; there is ever less excuse for this deplorable state of affairs to continue. The existence of a book of under a hundred pages outlining the plot and literary attraction of a New Comedy will greatly facilitate student access to the genre. In any case, the *Epitrepontes* is an exciting and funny play, representing some of Menander's best work.

Sommerstein, perhaps best known as the editor of Aeschylus and Aristophanes, has in recent years turned his attention increasingly to Menander: leaving numerous papers aside, a collected volume, *Menander in Contexts*, appeared in 2014, and a superb edition of the *Samia* in 2013. *Epitrepontes* here gets the Sommerstein treatment, in a beautifully succinct, accurate reading. The book is divided into nine chapters, of which the longest by some measure is chapter 4 (22 pages); most are less than half this length, which illustrates the jewel-like quality of the volume's concision. The chapters cover background about Menander (1-2) before turning to the material evidence for *Epitrepontes* (3), a commented account of the plot (4), key themes (5), characters (6), structural features (7), literary and intellectual contexts (8), and reception (9). Full back-matter includes a list of texts, translations, and commentaries; a glossary of technical terms; notes;¹ references (mainly but by no means exclusively to Anglophone research – not inappropriate, perhaps, in a work aimed at English-speaking students); and index. The illustrations are useful and give good supplementary details. The book's extreme concision makes it hard to argue about omissions: the book is just about as jam-packed as it could be.

The Cairo Codex is given its due as a source for Eupolis' *Demes* as well as Menander (16, 86); for text, translation and commentary on this play, see I.C. Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy*, Cambridge, MA & London 2011,

¹ Which are infuriating – why are we still using endnotes? Some of the endnotes are 'off the cuff' remarks – sometimes amusing – which one would prefer to have on the page.

94-128; S.D. Olson, *Eupolis. Einleitung, Testimonia, und Aiges-Demoi*, Heidelberg 2017, 286-471. It is worth remarking that the *editio princeps* of the Cairo Codex attributed the play (doubtfully) to Aristophanes (Lefebvre, 1911, xxi-xxiii). The pull of the 'big name' is still exerted over anonymous comic fragments, which are always more readily attributed to Menander and Aristophanes than to other candidates, for somewhat circular reasons. The history of Eupolis' *Demes* is an instructive reminder that we should resist this tendency.

Sommerstein's overview of the history of *Epitrepontes*' text ('What We Know and How We Know It' – the title is characteristic) takes the evidence in the order of textual importance – thus he begins with the Cairo Codex and then surveys the smaller scraps of text from other papyri as well as the 'unplaced' quotations from the rest of the play. This is perfectly reasonable, but as an exercise I offer an alternative approach. Something that might have been interesting to review is the presence of the play in the secondary tradition – that is in the form of quotations by later writers. That would shift the chapter's focus to a chronological account of our knowledge of the play, an exercise which might teach us much about plays for which we still only have quotations. To take an example: on the first page of the Cairo Codex text of *Epitrepontes* we read lines 218-53 Sandbach. Four quotations from this portion of the play were already known (or at least accessible) when the papyrus was discovered:

1. ἐπιτρεπτέον τινί ἐστι περὶ τούτων (218-19, Σ. Ar. *Ach.* 1115)
2. μὴ καταφρονήσης <πρὸς> θεῶν ἐν παντὶ δεῖ | καιρῶ τὸ δίκαιον ἐπικρατεῖν ἀπανταχοῦ, | καὶ τὸν παρατυγχάνοντα τούτου <τοῦ> μέρους | ἔχειν πρόνοιαν κοινόν ἐστι τῶ βίῳ (232-5, Orion, *Anthol.* 6.4);
3. ἐν παντὶ δεῖ | καιρῶ τὸ δίκαιον ἐπικρατεῖν (232-3, Stobaeus *Ecl.* 3.9.11)
4. ἐν νυκτὶ βουλάς δ', ὅπερ ἅπασι γίνεται, | διδοὺς ἑμαυτῶ (252-3, *Et. Gud.* 2222.40)

It will be noted that (3) overlaps with (2) in this list. Nevertheless, it shows something of the culture of excerpting that beset this text, as well as an interesting index of the quality of our quotations (some easily restored words omitted in (2); βουλάς for βουλήν in (4)). Now the existence of these quotations, often attributed to author and play by the source, are an important criterion for assigning papyrus texts to authors at all. But the reverse can happen too: thus Nünlist assigned an anonymous quotation to *Epitrepontes* (formerly known as fr. adesp. com. 78 K.-A. and guessed on stylistic grounds to belong to New Comedy) on the basis of an overlap with

a newly discovered papyrus (= 665-8 Furley; see R. Nünlist, *ZPE* 128, 1999, 54-6).

Sommerstein's account of the plot of *Epitrepontes* (ch. 4) is a joy to read, and succeeds in making the plot clear without making it pedestrian. (As an aside, at 119 n. 5, there is a superb nine-line summary of the *Aspis*). He follows, in a way, the development of the play itself, dropping hints about how our expectations will be confirmed or frustrated but without giving the game away. It is therefore less a 'plot summary' than a 'page production' of the play, and communicates how entertaining the play is. It also helps a reader of the Greek text through the sometimes bafflingly fragmented passages of the text (particularly in Acts 3-5).

Chapter 5 draws on the account of the plot sketched in chapter 4, but also draws parallels between *Epitrepontes* and the rest of Menander's output. By contrast, the account of the characters emphasises their function within the play; as a result, the characters of the play stand out as individuals, and the question of stereotypes or 'stock characters' in Menander's plays is not discussed (there is however a footnote on cooks. This is probably sensible: stock characters have been studied extensively (MacCary's papers on the subject from the 1970s are still fundamental: with relevance to *Ep.*, see *TAPA* 100, 1969, 277-94 on slaves and *TAPA* 102, 1971, 303-25 on old men); taking a functional approach which shows why particular features of each character are emphasised is a welcome demonstration of Menander's originality. The string of (16!) counterfactuals on p. 61 is a little bewildering to follow, but is a good exercise for testing the construction of Menander's comedy. They are used to create a taxonomy of 'virtues' and 'vices', which have both positive and negative outcomes. I admit to some doubts about individual decisions here, particularly whether 'talkativeness' is necessarily a vice (very hard to assess in a dramatic, i.e. spoken, text – talkativeness is surely unavoidable at least for the benefit of the audience); nonetheless, these represent good exercises for students of Menander to work through.

The account of structural patterns wisely neglects Gilbert Murray's rather fanciful interpretation of what Sommerstein calls 'the baby's journey' (G. Murray, *The Arbitration*, 1945: 7-9; for the translation of the play, see 87-8). I mention it here only because of its interest for the history of scholarship, and for the intriguing alignment of Menander to the research focus of the 'Cambridge Ritualists'. The passage quoted at the top of p.66 is *Ep.* 927-31,² and the reference to the 'commentators' seems to refer to W.D. Furley, *Epitrepontes*, London 2009, 238 (I have not found the remark in question in Wilamowitz, Gomme-Sandbach, or Martina).

² The only other typo I have found is a broken cross-reference at 119 n. 5, which I think should refer to the glossary's entry for *epikleros* on 94.

The intellectual and dramatic background to the play is sketched in chapter 8 – again, a sensible and focussed discussion. Menander's relationship to tragedy, on the one hand, and the Peripatos, on the other, are heavily burdened by scholarly literature; Sommerstein offers a good selection of sound modern contributions. I might add V. Cinaglia's monograph *Aristotle and Menander on the Ethics of Understanding* (Leiden-Boston 2015) (esp. ch. 2 with reference to *Ep.*); for those who read Italian, A. Martina, *Menandrea: vol. III*, Pisa 2016, 1-266 has a rich compilation of material on tragedy (72-107 for *Ep.*).

Finally, we have a full treatment of the play's life, death, and resurrection (including modern production history) – much more dramatic than a mere 'afterlife'. Had Menander been discovered only a little earlier, he might (at least in England) have reached a public raised on Gilbert & Sullivan and the case of the Tichborne Claimant. It is possible that Menander is waiting to come into his own on stage again: the concepts of identity, of lost and found knowledge, and of ambiguity in the search for truth, might resonate with modern interests. If so, books like Sommerstein's will be an essential bridge for students seeking to inform themselves about this branch of literature.

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