

Aristotle and Menander on the Ethics of Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis explores a subject falling in the interface between ancient Greek philosophy and literature. Specifically, I am concerned with common ground between the New Comedy of Menander and aspects of Aristotle's philosophy. The thesis does not argue that the resemblance identified between the two writers shows the direct influence of Aristotle on Menander but rather that they share a common thought-world. The thesis is structured around a series of parallel readings of Menander and Aristotle; key relevant texts are Menander's *Epitrepontes*, *Samia*, *Aspis*, *Perikeiromene* and *Dyscolos* and Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, *De Anima* and *Poetics*. My claim is that Menander's construction of characters and plots and Aristotle's philosophical analyses express analogous approaches on the subject of the relationship between knowledge and ethics.

Central for my argument is the consideration that in Aristotle's writings on ethics, logic, and psychology, we can identify a specific set of ideas about the interconnection between knowledge-formation and character or emotion, which shows, for instance, how ethical failings typically depend on a combination of cognitive mistakes and emotional lapses. A few years later than the composition of Aristotle's school-texts, Menander's comedies, as expressed in the extant texts, present to a wider audience a type of drama which, as I argue, reflects an analogously complex and sophisticated understanding of the interplay between cognitive or rational understanding and character or emotion.

More broadly, Aristotle and Menander offer analogous views of the way that perceptions and emotional responses to situations are linked with the presence or absence of ethical and cognitive understanding, or the state of ethical character-development in any given person. Thus, I suggest, the interpersonal crises and the progress towards recognition of the identity of the crucial figures in Menandrian comedies embody a pattern of thinking about perception, knowledge and the role of emotion that shows substantial linkage with Aristotle's thinking on comparable topics.

LIST OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	5
NOTES ON CONVENTIONS	8
INTRODUCTION	11
1. Setting the scene: Aristotle and Menander	11
2. The questions underlying my hypothesis.....	14
2.1 Menander and Theophrastus on <i>Character(s)</i> ?.....	14
2.2 Menander and the previous dramatic tradition?.....	18
3. The structure of the thesis and the method of enquiry.....	23
CHAPTER 1. Setting the broader background.....	27
1. Understanding, ethics and ancient philosophy	28
2. Understanding, ethics and aesthetic pleasure	32
CHAPTER 2. Degrees of understanding: Menander and Aristotle on how we understand.....	38
1. <i>Epitrepontes</i> : recognition and understanding.	40
2. Notes on recognition in Euripides' <i>Electra</i>	50
3. Grasping the sense	57
3.1 Understanding and missing understanding.....	60
3.2 Grasping and missing the grasp	64
4. Conclusions.....	72
CHAPTER 3. The misleading power of perceptions and emotions.....	75
1. "Is this plausible?" (Men. <i>Sam.</i> 216)	78
1.1 Demeas.....	78
1.2 Moschion	94
2. Aristotle on the vulnerability of correct (ethical) reasoning.....	98
2.1 Thinking about one's own perceptions	100
2.2 Acting on the basis of one's own perceptions	104
3. Conclusions.....	112

CHAPTER 4. Luck, ignorance and human agency	114
1. A play of chance / a chance to play.	117
1.1 <i>Perikeiromene</i>	117
1.1.1 The prologue of Ἄγνοια.....	118
1.1.2 Polemon and Moschion	123
1.2 <i>Aspis</i>	129
1.2.1 The prologue of Τύχη	129
1.2.2 Smikrines and Daos	131
1.3 Divine prologue speakers and related matters	134
2. Aristotle on chance, ignorance and rational agents	140
2.1 Prologues and likelihood	140
2.2 Aristotle, Τύχη and Ἄγνοια	142
2.2.1 Chance and mere chance.....	144
2.2.2 Voluntary, non-voluntary, involuntary actions.....	150
3. Conclusions.....	155
 CHAPTER 5. Character, ethics and human relationships: Menander and Aristotle on how we learn to be good and how we become bad	 157
1. The young man and the old man.....	162
1.2 Other examples of young men and old men	173
2. Aristotle on the individual and his community.....	183
2.1 Listening and watching friends.....	185
2.2 Talking and living with friends.....	193
3. Conclusions.....	199
 CONCLUSIONS.....	 203
1. The main ideas	203
2. Further implications of the thesis.....	206
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 211