

BOOK REVIEW

Menander in Antiquity: The Contexts of Reception. By SEBASTIANA NERVEGNA. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 317. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-00422-1.

The title of this fascinating if occasionally frustrating book would seem to promise detailed consideration of how Menander and his plays were read in the Greco-Roman world. Nervegna is not uninterested in such matters. But her subtitle is considerably more true to her real topic, which is a survey of the major social and cultural settings in which Menandrian comedy (and much else besides) was quoted, copied, performed, borrowed from, illustrated and/or alluded to in literary or visual form. In the end, there is relatively little here about Menander or Menander's plays, and only a bit more about how the plays were received by ancient theatrical audiences, playwrights and essayists. What Nervegna has produced is instead an enormously learned study of how theatrical texts "worked" as "classics" mostly outside the theater and generally in ways that had little to do with their original dramatic, political or social purposes. Put another way, this is less a history of Menander or the so-called "New Comedy" than a careful, historically grounded attempt to make sense of theatricality and its functions in a period or series of periods from which vanishingly little original dramatic material survives, with Menander serving as a convenient critical lens. The book that results is in many ways a greater service to the field than yet another monograph focused on an individual author and his legacy (or what can be discerned of it) would have been, and certainly a far greater and more daring act of cultural and literary imagination.

Menander in Antiquity consists of four main chapters, the first of which ("Canonizing Menander in Athens, Alexandria and Rome") offers an extended overview of what is known of the historical Menander and his connections with the Peripatetic school and the Macedonian-backed dictator Demetrius of Phaleron, and of developments within the festivals and the pool of comic poets staging plays in Athens. Nervegna's Menander is a shadowy and somewhat unnerving character, "an oligarchic, pro-Macedonian intellectual" who as an Athenian (as many comic poets of his time were not) might easily have expressed political

opinions in his plays but chose not to do so, at least not overtly. What matters more for the argument of the book is that Menander's intellectual and political connections to the Peripatetics led to his plays being inscribed as classics in the Library at Alexandria—and thus to their transformation into something that for hundreds of years thereafter any properly educated person would be expected to know and appreciate.

The next three chapters explore what Nervegna takes to be the three main contexts in which Menander's comedies were experienced in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds: in public theaters, at dinner parties and in schools. "Menander in public theatres" is concerned with re-performance and adaptation, and with the extent to which the comedies were reworked by poets (constantly), on the one hand, and subsequently excerpted by actors (little if at all), on the other. "Menander at dinner parties" is in large part concerned with visual evidence, above all else wall-paintings and mosaics that purport to illustrate comedy, as a means of displaying the supposed cultural sophistication of the house-owner. "Menander in schools" surveys how the comedies were used at every stage in ancient education, first as a source of maxims to be copied out to learn one's letters, then as material for grammatical analysis, and finally as models for rhetorical exercises.

These chapters are primarily descriptive and thus impossible to summarize, and in the latter fact lies both the strength and the weakness of *Menander in Antiquity*. Nervegna has assembled an astonishing amount of primary information about how plays were staged, read and represented, and by whom and where, and with what purposes in mind. This material is intelligently and carefully assembled, with one surprising, intriguing or amusing anecdote or observation following another. Documentation is rich and careful; clever and insightful remarks abound; and the intellectual trail winds ever onward, frequently in unexpected directions. But the discussion is also dizzying, and again and again I found myself unable to articulate exactly what Nervegna was arguing or why. Some books are more important for the large synthetic points they make, others for the evidence they assemble. *Menander in Antiquity* is in many ways an astonishing intellectual achievement. It nonetheless falls firmly in the second category.

The production quality of the book is high, and while the numerous black-and-white plates are far from beautiful, they adequately serve their purpose. The author's English is adequate but occasionally awkward, and should have been more carefully vetted by a native speaker. It makes no sense, for example, to speak of putting a subject "under the scholarly radar" (5). Fortunately, *Menander in Antiquity* is a good enough book for that to make no difference. As noted above,

Menander and his plays are not really the focus of Nervegna's work. Indeed, he often disappears from the discussion for pages at a time. But what Nervegna has accomplished is to begin the process of reconstructing important, largely overlooked aspects of ancient dramatic history that have little to do with the texts of the plays themselves and everything to do with how they were read (or in some cases apparently *not* read) and imagined. One looks forward to her next project and to the additional ideas and insights that can be expected to emerge from it.

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