CHAPTER 2

Degrees of Understanding:
Menander and Aristotle on How We Understand

This chapter continues my enquiry into the analogies between the epistemological frameworks that can be identified in the comic plays of Menander and the philosophical writings of Aristotle. I will analyse how Aristotle and Menander present the processes of understanding and the problems involved in reaching understanding. In this chapter, I focus particularly on Menander’s Epitrepontes and its relationship to Aristotle’s epistemology. I argue that Menander’s dramatic presentation of the way that characters get to know (or to recognise) something or someone and Aristotle’s philosophical treatment of how we gain understanding are similar in certain key respects. In Menander, for instance, recognition-scenes present the achievement of a complete understanding of what has happened following confusion created by ignorance of facts, especially of people’s identity and their social roles. The final resolution re-organises the actions into a new and more desirable order:1 dispersed tokens of recognition find their full meaning at the end of the recognition process. Similarly, for Aristotle, to gain understanding is to locate empirical evidence in a more comprehensive context which involves grasping universal principles that explain the empirical evidence itself.

In the first part of this chapter I start with the analysis of Menander’s Epitrepontes. The overall structure of this play is an extended recognition the solution of which requires the interaction of several people and a range of different approaches. My reading of this comedy shows that the main focus of this work is on recognition and on the danger of failing to recognise. Firstly, the confusing nexus of events which links all the characters of the plot is built on a multiple anagnorisis (recognition): namely, the recognition of the identity of the baby and of his mother and his father. This process is brought to an end after a long process of verification which is organised by one of the characters so as to avoid

1 See Frye 1957, pp. 160–171 and Booker 2004, p. 111. “At the beginning of the play, the obstructing characters are in charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment in which this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution of the action, the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognitio” (Frye 1957, p. 163).
false conjectures and to find out the truth of the whole story. Secondly, all the characters on the stage potentially possess all the pieces of information needed to draw correct inferences about what has happened; nevertheless, the final understanding is possible solely thanks to one of them, a female character, who is able to draw the evidence together. Consequently, my analysis of this play will focus specifically on the various steps of the recognition process that extends throughout the plot and on Menander’s representation of characters with different intellectual skills who are involved in this process.

To bring out the distinctive character of the Menandrian pattern, I shall discuss a passage of Euripides' *Electra* that features a process of recognition apparently similar to that of the *Epitrepontes*. At first glance, it might seem that Menander adapts rather mechanically in his plays the motifs used by the previous tragic tradition, and, specifically, by Euripides' *Electra*. However, comparison between *Electra* and *Epitrepontes* will suggest that this is not the case: Menander’s *Epitrepontes* seems to have a distinctive focus. Menander is interested in themes that are in some ways similar to those treated by fifth-century Attic tragedy but he presents them in an original, distinctive way.

The second part of this chapter will focus on an analysis of philosophical ideas worked out by Aristotle. In examining degrees of knowledge, belief and error in cognition, I offer an example of Aristotle’s approach to scientific knowledge or understanding in the *Posterior Analytics*. At the end of the chapter, I aim to show that Menander’s comedy and Aristotle’s epistemological thought share a focus on a distinct set of topics and treat them in an analogous way. In particular, I believe that they share analogous ideas about the process of getting to know something or someone and about people’s differing ability to do so, and also about the danger of not having this ability or having it only to a certain degree. Understanding, for Aristotle and Menander, seems to depend on an accurate evaluation of perceived particulars that includes a comprehensive understanding which gives an account of what has been perceived. Both perceptive insight and intellectual habituation are needed in order to sharpen multiple perceptions according to principles that show how things stand in the world and how situations are to be understood.

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2 For a broader discussion of the prominent, often dominant, role of female characters in Greek drama see particularly Foley 1981; Zeitlin 1990 and (with specific reference to women in Menandrian comedies) Henry 1985 and Traill 2008. See also pp. 58–59 below where I point out the fact that, in Aristotle, by contrast, given the different aim of his works, women are not even included as possible candidates in the process of acquisition of knowledge.