In Act II of Menander’s *Aspis*, matters seem very bleak for young Chaireas. Cleostratus, the brother of the girl he loves, is thought to have died on a mercenary expedition abroad; now Cleostratus’ greedy uncle Smicrines has announced that he will marry the sister, Cleostratus’ heir, in order to inherit his booty. What to do? Chaireas and his stepfather Chairestratus can only tear their hair out and lament. But after all this is New Comedy: Daus, Cleostratus’ loyal and resourceful slave, comes up, as comic slaves always do, with an ingenious plan. They will pretend that Chairestratus has gone mad and is dying of melancholy; after the old man’s fake funeral, Smicrines will doubtless prefer to marry Chairestratus’ extremely wealthy daughter rather than Cleostratus’ only moderately wealthy sister and will be delighted to leave the latter for Chaireas.

Menander allows his characters, especially his stand-in Daus, to play knowledgeably, amusingly, and amusedly upon the contemporary technical vocabulary for madness and upon the experts who made good money out of diagnosing and, much more rarely, curing it. Already Chairestratus complains that he is doing terribly and has become melancholic because of the turn of events (Δᾶε παι, κακῶς ἔχω.| μελαγχολῶ τοῖς πράγμασιν 305–306); he has lost his self-control and almost gone mad (οὐκ εἰμ᾽ ἐν ἐμαυτῷ, μαίνομαι δ᾽ ἀκαρῆς πάνυ 307). Then Daus takes over: Chairestratus must pretend to fall into a depression (ἀθυμίαν 331, ἀθυμοῦντ᾽ 334)—after all, Daus opines sententiously, grief (λύπης 337) is the cause of most illnesses, and, he adds, with a pseudo-professional view to the specific circumstances of this particular patient, he knows that Chairestratus has a natural inclination to just such depressions (φύσει δὲ σ’ ὄντα πικρὸν εὗ ὤιδα καὶ | μελαγχολικὸν 338–339).
They will have to summon a doctor, a real intellectual (ἰατρός τις φιλοσοφῶν 340), who will diagnose pleurisy or phrenitis (πλευρῖτιν ... ἢ φρενῖτιν 341)—in any case, a disease sure to cause death quickly (342). He will have to be a foreigner, quick-witted and a bit of a braggart (374–375); in the absence of the real thing, Chaíreas will fit out one of his friends with the necessary toupee, cloak, and walking-stick (377–378)—and, as we discover when the fake doctor enters, with a broad Doric accent as well (439–464). Dáos provides Smícrines with his own quite professional sounding list of Chairestratus’ symptoms, ‘bile, some grief, loss of his mind, shortness of breath’ (χολή, λύπη τις, ἔκστασις φρενῶν, | πνιγμός 422–423), and in a few moments his diagnosis will apparently be confirmed and further specified by the doctor (φρενῖτιν 446, cf. 450–454).

Such scenes of intellectuals and professionals, fake and real, are common in Attic comedy; they permit us to estimate how far pseudo-scientific terminology had become diffused in various levels of contemporary Athenian society, just as in our own. The comic effect depends upon a shrewd interplay between familiarity and unintelligibility: to different degrees, different members of the audience must have heard such words, or ones much like them, and may well have even used them themselves, to describe themselves and others they knew, even if they were not always sure of just what they meant; seeing Smícrines being fooled will have reminded them how often they had wondered whether they were not being fooled themselves.

But if this scene in Menander tells us much about the dissemination of the technical discourse about insanity within the real language of his Athenian contemporaries, it also tells us much about the identification of the phenomenon of publicly staged insanity with the literary genre of Athenian tragedy. For Menander’s comedies are full of clever stratagems like the one Dáos proposes here. But this one, unlike all those others, turns out to have a manifest and significant relation with the genre of tragedy—as it were, it seems to be impossible for Menander to introduce a plot founded upon the appearance of madness without immediately and persistently invoking tragedy. When Chairestratus asks Dáos what his plan is, the slave responds that they will have to stage an inauspicious kind of suffering, a real tragedy (δεῖ τραγῳδῆσαι πάθος | ἄλλοιον ύμάς 329–330). And when in Act III Dáos’ plan moves into the operational phase, Menander’s text becomes adorned for almost thirty lines with the richest collection of tragic quotations in all his surviving oeuvre: an unidentified citation of the opening of Eurípides’ Stheneboia (407), an unidentified line from Chaeremon’s Achilles (411), a line from Aeschylus’ Niobe attributed explicitly to that playwright (412–413), an unidentified line (415), a line attributed explicitly to Carcinus (416), another