
München

Mathias Witt


This monograph is a comprehensive survey of the character of the hetaera, the usual English translation for which is ‘courtesan’. The word (‘Hetäre’ in German) is usually presented by A., for good discursive reasons, in its Greek form, hetaira: this is appropriate to the argument, since, as A. points out (278), the Greek hetaira is a ‘companion’, whereas the Latin meretrix is one who ‘earns’, an important distinction. The study is concerned primarily with the representation of this character in Greek new comedy and Roman palliata comedy, but this is set into a wider context that ranges from fifth century Athens (where I found the comparison with Plautus particularly useful, 43) to 16th century Europe. The argument attempts to understand the representation in these different cultural milieus of a particular but necessarily imprecisely-defined category of woman whose main purpose, from the perspective of the males with whom she either interacts or is watched in interaction, is the provision of sexual pleasure and affective companionship, with varying degrees of balance between these two elements. In the world of Menander, as A. shows, it is meaningful to conceptualise the hetaira as an erotic and emotive companion with whom marriage is politically and socially impossible, but for Plautus and, to a lesser extent, Terence, such a category does not really exist, and therefore the former playwright, in particular, has relatively little interest in the character.

A hetaera is not a scortum, as we are taught, but what does it mean to call her, as is commonly done, a ‘courtesan’, itself often glossed as ‘a high-class prostitute’? Even in fifth and fourth century Athens, where it may well be true that a small number of non-Athenian women were able to achieve significant influence
and social status as the lovers of Athenian leaders, a status, perhaps, in some
sense higher than that enjoyed by their citizen counterparts (although in other
important senses considerably lower), nonetheless an issue which is not much
considered in the book under review is that these women remained dependent on
the whims of their lovers and, in the vast majority of cases, were financially de-
pendent on providing an acceptable level of sexual and social companionship,
without other male support to help them if things went wrong. Sharon James has
shown how fundamental this economic imperative should be to any understand-
ing of, in that case, the beloved of Roman elegy, if we take the woman’s status to
be in any way connected with the real world.¹

The volume follows the same pattern throughout its survey of hetaera-figures,
offering an introduction to each generic medium (old comedy, middle comedy,
new comedy, Roman comedy, and later representations), followed by subsec-
tions on each relevant playwright, and each relevant play, each of which (unless
the text is too fragmentary) has an introduction followed by a linear analysis of
all the scenes in which hetaerae appear or are significantly discussed, and finally
by a conclusion drawing points together. This is an extremely thorough proce-
dure, which will provide a great deal of useful information for other researchers
with an interest in drama, in the study of women in antiquity, and in ancient
social history. It can lead to some repetition, especially in some of the conclu-
sions to relatively short discussions, which seem mostly just to summarise what
had previously been said, and that especially so when the nested conclusions
build up. This strategy does, however, provide useful material for those who
want to dip into the book and to get a quick sense of what is going on with re-
gard to the hetaera in any particular play, playwright, or period.

In addition to this linear progression, the volume also has a chiastic structure:
after a general introduction, it is divided into three main sections, the middle one
of which is by far the largest (this is not exactly the chapter-divisions of the
book, but I think that it can help to describe its overall shape and purpose). The
sections on old and middle comedy are the warm-up act providing background
to the A-list, which bursts onto the scene at page 80, with the arrival of the hero
of the piece, Menander himself. Other playwrights of the Greek new comic era
are then squeezed for every drop of information their meagre fragments can
provide on the subject, before the central panel continues with the extensive
material from the two main surviving playwrights of Roman comedy, Plautus
and Terence. Plautus’ meretrices are divided into malae and bonae (more on this
below); in discussion of the second category there begins a telling addition to the
standard formula for each poet, in that before the threads of the discussion are
drawn together, there is a section explicitly exploring the possible relationship
between the Roman play and its Greek ‘original’. In brief, it is in most cases
suggested by A. that Plautus’ ‘good’ prostitutes have been downgraded from
their Greek ancestors, and that in many cases in the Greek originals they may
have turned out to be pseudo-prostitutes (i.e., marriageable girls who had fallen

¹ James, S. L. (2003). Learned Girls and Male Persuasion: Gender and Reading in Roman
Love Elegy. Berkeley, CA.
into a situation of prostitution by accident, but conveniently are in love only with one man). After Terence, there is a survey of the surviving fragments of other playwrights of Roman comedy, both palliata (comedy based on Greek themes and characters) and togata (plays based on Roman themes and characters).

The final panel in the book takes the story beyond the lifetime of Roman comedy. First comes a short survey of the rise of Greek-style high-class prostitution (my description) in the late Republican period, followed by brief discussion of Roman love poetry and the elegiac puella (for reasons that were not clear to me, not including Ovid). I could not really see this survey as adding anything very much to our understanding either of the comic centrepiece or of the erotic and social world of late Republican and Augustan Rome. It was followed by a section that, at first, surprised me even more: this was a discussion of both the life and the literature of 15th and 16th century European courts, especially in the eternal city itself. The argument here is that the social environment of Renaissance Rome provided the opportunity for unmarried female partners to gain the kind of social stability and financial power with their powerful lovers such as may have existed also in classical Athenian characters such as Aspasia, mistress of Pericles; moreover, such women were reflected also in the Renaissance flowering of literature, including comedy, in the classical style. It was only at the very end of the book that I saw the point: these Renaissance reinterpreters of Plautus not only made their ‘good’ prostitutes even ‘better’ than the Roman originals, but also produced a Recognition that brought them into safe harbour, thus unknowingly taking the structure of their plays closer to that of Greek new comedy (Roman comedy’s originals) than that of Roman comedy (their own originals). A. interprets this phenomenon as representing a kind of ring composition, A–B–A form. I found this pleasing, and also pleasingly self-referential in its reflection on the book’s own A–B–A form.

In the core chapters of the book, A.’s programme is considerably driven by the famous Plutarchan comment (mor. 712c, quoted on page 81) about the two types of Menandrian hetaira: one ‘bold’ (and indeed ‘bold’), the other ‘good and loving in return’. A. remarks that the second category must be further subdivided into those women who will be recognised and so turn out to be able to marry their lover and those who remain unmarriageable but are rewarded by a reasonably long and stable ongoing relationship. The first category, by contrast, is exactly the kind of prostitute who causes trouble for young men. In the extant remains of Menander, the ‘bold’ (equals ‘bad’) category is rare, but the ‘good and loving-in-return’ women are well represented. One goal of this book is to show that these categories fit much better into the Menandrian world than for that of republican Rome. I quite agree with A.’s assessment of the important differences for Plautus and Terence compared with Menander in this regard, but I would take the point further and question whether the distinctions derived from Menander (and Plutarch) are really the most helpful framework in which to assess Roman comedy, even if that analysis comes to the conclusion of significant difference. Take, for example, the word mala, applied to comic prostitutes both within the genre and without, and used as the equivalent to Plutarch’s first cate-
gory. The attempt to fit the plays of Plautus to the mould of Menander may, I suggest, cause us to undervalue the category of malitia as it functions within the world of Plautine trickery. Phronesium (Truculentus) is the only really powerful example of a manipulative and demanding prostitute (as opposed to one who is a clever businesswoman – though she is that also), whereas both Philocomasium (who is ‘loving in return’, or at least sees the hero as a better bet) and Acroteleutium (Miles Gloriosus) are clever tricksters who work with the play’s controlling hero in order to achieve the comic outcome. (I would say that Phronesium is the play’s controlling hero, but that’s another matter.) A. seems to me to play down the theatrical and metatheatrical force of malitia (173, 176), which is not so much a moral judgement as a comment about the power of trickery. This is not to say, of course, that the ‘bad’ prostitutes are not at least sometimes and from some perspectives regarded negatively. On the other hand, I wonder whether it is really always right to perceive ‘loving-in-return’ prostitutes as ‘good’ (in the socio-political sense which is important but largely occluded in this debate). It sometimes seemed to me that A. was over-influenced by Plutarch’s designations into seeing the likes of Phoenicium in Pseudolus (190–3) and the Samian Bacchis (Bacchides, 153: treated under the category of ‘bad’ prostitutes alongside her more obviously manipulative sister) as ‘good’ because they express love for the hero. Might they not just as much be clever practitioners, especially ones who would prefer a dopey young man who is going to free them over a demanding and abusive soldier who probably won’t? They are very different kinds of characters from the wholly ‘good’ pseudo-prostitute Selenium (Cistellaria) who is genuinely devoted to her one lover, and – surprise – turns out to be ‘good’ in the social sense.

The biggest problem, it seems to me, with Plutarch’s designations is that by lumping together the ‘good’ and the ‘loving in return’ woman he is really most interested, consciously or otherwise, in those who will turn out to be marriageable. Those who love in return, apart perhaps from Chrysis in Menander’s Samia, are not by and large those who act in the selfless way which commentators want to see as the epitome of the ‘whore with a heart of gold’. For all that they may be argued to have ulterior motives, the best examples of this category are Habrotonon in Menander’s Epitrepontes and the intertextually closely connected Bacchis in Terence’s Hecyra, neither of whom act out of love for the male lead, but rather out of some higher sense of justice, and possibly also Thais in Terence’ Eunuchus. Chrysis perhaps also comes into this category, since although she is involved in a relationship with the father of the young man who is the romantic hero of the play, her actions in helping the young couple and their baby are not connected with, indeed potentially detrimental to, her relationship with the older man. While we may reasonably assume that her relationship with Demeas is restored at the end of the play, this is not the focus of interest nor is it in any clear sense a reward for her altruistic behaviour.

This criticism, however, which is partly a criticism of Plutarch, should not be taken to detract from the many good qualities of this book. It will be particularly useful for the fullness of its treatment of the subject. As an example, I mention the discussion at 176–7 of a lost play of Plautus, entitled Fretum, which is, con-
vincingly, interpreted as a prostitute-play, based on the imagery of seafaring and potential shipwreck which surrounds the relationship with a dangerously manipulative prostitute. I learned a lot from passages such as this, while I recommend the book as a clear and comprehensive presentation of important material.

Manchester

Alison Sharrock


Nel novembre 1921, in apertura del suo articolo La metafora nel numero XXXV della rivista ‘Cosmópolis’,¹ Jorge Luís Borges scriveva che «non esiste una differenza sostanziale tra la metafora e ciò che i professionisti della scienza chiamano la spiegazione di un fenomeno», perché «entrambe sono un legame intrattato tra due cose diverse, una delle quali si riversa nell’altra. Entrambe sono ugualmente false o vere»; Borges definiva la metafora come «un’identificazione volontaria di due o più concetti diversi, finalizzata all’emozione». Principally della metafora – ma anche della metonimia e di altre figure retoriche, come la sineddoche, che implicano uno slittamento dal senso proprio di un termine a quello figurato – intende occuparsi l’ampio studio che R. ha dedicato alla presenza del linguaggio figurato nella poesia di Properzio. Solide sono le basi teoriche su cui si fonda la sua indagine: egli rinvia esplicitamente (p. 28, ma anche p. 20 n. 3) a I. A. Richards² e, in particolare, alla definizione che fa dipendere l’effetto della metafora (e della metonimia) dalla compresenza di ‘tenor’ (cioè del senso letterale) e di ‘vehicle’ (cioè del senso figurato): ciò sta a significare che il senso figurato non annulla quello proprio, ma ad esso resta intimamente legato in base a un criterio di somiglianza. I fondamentali e pionieristici studi di Roman Jakobson sono citati da R. nella bibliografia generale, ma avrebbero meritato una sorte migliore, perché ad essi non si fa alcun riferimento nell’esposizione della ‘moderne Metapherntheorie’. È proprio quella duplicità indicata da Richards ma già avvertita da Borges, grazie alla quale la metafora estende la sua valenza all’intero contesto in cui viene inserita, a giustificare il taglio della ricerca di R., che non si limita a individuare e a catalogare diligentemente le occorrenze properziane, ma s’ingegna di contestualizzarle, evitando al tempo stesso di ridurre la loro presentazione a una banale parafrasi.

Il volume riproduce, con minimi cambiamenti (p. VII), la dissertazione approvata nel semestre estivo del 2006 dalla Philosophische Fakultät della Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität di Bonn, e di una dissertazione presenta qua e là qualche tradizionale difetto, specie nell’accumulazione talora sovrabondante del mate-
