

## Serena WITZKE An Influence of No Importance? New Comedy in Oscar Wilde's Society Plays

The relationship of Oscar Wilde's society dramas to ancient New Comedy is much deeper than has been recognized. Though Wilde was an Oxford-educated classicist, well trained in Greek and Latin, and a dedicated scholar of classical literature and theatre, scholars have assumed that he had no direct interaction with Menander (Arnott 140, Sharrock/Ash 139, citing the late discoveries of extensive fragments), and little taste for Roman Comedy (noting that Wilde's tutor Mahaffy had an aversion to Roman literature [Armitage 16, Ellmann 28]). Beyond the perfunctory acknowledgment of similarities between Wilde's social dramas and New Comedy (cf. Ross 249–251), there has been no study, among classicists or English scholars, of the many parallels between Wilde and ancient New Comedy. This paper takes up that study, arguing that Wilde drew heavily on Terence and Menander.

The extensive research of Ross into Wilde's library and notebooks demonstrates Wilde's knowledge of New Comedy. In 1874, at Trinity College in Dublin, Wilde won the Berkeley Medal for Greek, his set text being Meineke's *Fragmenta Comico-rum Graecorum*. His notes indicate that he studied Menander in the *Novae* volume and knew the fragments well. He annotated his copy of Symonds, correcting that scholar's assertion of Menander's loss, scribbling, "Over 2000 lines of Menander remain!" Wilde was very familiar with Plautus and Terence, required reading for his exams at Oxford (*Exam. Stat.*); he was fond of Terence and checked him out of the Bodleian (Smith 290). Wilde disdained vulgarity (Douglas 88–89, Pearson 183) and favored the refinement of Terence over the riotous spectacles of Plautus. He conjures up Menander through the hints of Meineke's fragments and plot summaries heavily reconstructed from Terence (a well-known Victorian practice encouraged by Müller [II, 63] and Mahaffy [115]).

Thus we can make a close reading of Wilde's dramas against New Comedy. Shared elements include *ἀναγνώρισις* plots, strong female characters, the 'wronged woman'/'woman with a past' motifs, foundlings, hidden identities, marriages endangered through misunderstanding, clever friends who save the day, and outcomes where "the good end happily and the bad unhappily" (*Earnest*, Act 2). I will focus on *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

*Windermere* is a variation on Terence's Menandrian *Hecyra* plot: a young, loving couple is separated by mistaken beliefs of infidelity by both parties, then reunited by a woman with a checkered past and a token of recognition. To protect feelings and reputations, dark secrets must be kept, impeding *ἀναγνώρισις*. Lady Windermere's long-lost mother resembles both the hardened courtesans (Plaut. *Bacc.*, *Truc.*; Ter. *Ad.*, *Hec.*) and the wronged mothers (Plaut. *Cist.*, *Epid.*) of Roman New Comedy. Lady Windermere herself is a variation on the female foundlings of New Comedy (Plaut. *Cas.*, *Cist.*, *Curc.*, *Epid.*, *Poen.*, *Rud.*; Ter. *An.*, *Haut.*, *Phorm.*), as she has lost both a mother and a part of her identity.

*Earnest* is a pastiche of many comic plots: a missing boy (Plaut. *Men.*), double love story (Plaut. *Rud.*, *Stich.*, *Trin.*; Ter. *Ad.*, *An.*, *Eun.*), playing dress-up (Ter. *Eun.*), recognition and tokens (Ter. *Hec.*), and formidable wealthy women (Plaut. *Asin.*, *Cas.*, *Merc.*). It owes its structure to Terence's (and Menander's) *Adelphoe* and *Eunuchus*. The former has two brothers who go back and forth between city and country. The latter's disturbing plot is lightheartedly adapted: the younger brother (Chaerea/Algernon) dresses up under pretence to meet a girl (Pamphila/Cecily) connected to his brother (Phaedria/Jack), who is frustrated in love with his own girl (Thais/Gwendolen). In *Earnest* an engagement is swapped in for the rape, and after the resolution of an added recognition plot, the two couples are permitted to be together. In these two plays, and elsewhere, I argue, Wilde systematically revives and recreates New Comedy.