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Going Beyond the Athenian *Polis*: An Interpretation of Menander, *Samia* 96-118

When Demeas and Nikeratos appear on the stage in the first act of Menander's *Samia* (96ff.), they have just arrived in Athens after a long trip to Byzantium and the Pontos. Various negative comments concerning those places run through their dialogue, whereas Athens is addressed in a manner which is suggestive of its physical beauty and cultural superiority. Such a contrast may be particularly revealing with respect to notions of cultural and ethnic identities developed during a period of tension and anxiety in which the citizen of Athens was gradually becoming a citizen of the Hellenistic world.

The "eulogy" of Athens is examined in terms of earlier dramatic traditions and the conventions of Menander's comedy. The contrast between Greek and barbarian occurs in various literary contexts and reflects the ways the Greeks conceived their ethnic identity. Bearing in mind the affinities between Menander's comedy and fifth-century tragedy, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the comparison of the *Samia* has tragic origins since tragedy, in particular, formed a means through which such concerns were brought to the foreground of the cultural and political life of the Athenian *polis*. Yet the city of Athens, which appears in the *Samia*, seems deprived of most of its former power and prestige. Such a conception may reflect recent historical events, but in any case encapsulates a more widespread and socially determined disbelief concerning the city's ability to retain its former dominant role in the Greek world.

Although the "eulogy" of Athens in the *Samia* brings to mind various Aristophanic addresses to the city and the citizens of Athens, it is deprived of the relatively optimistic Aristophanic point of view as far as the city's future is concerned. By contrast, it is dominated by a nostalgic view of the city's past and an implicit acknowledgment of its inability to change things and regain its former status. Hence its conventionalized form of an "address to one's homeland on return to it" which would make it dramatically functional even in a non-Athenian context of performance.

The reference made by Demeas and Nikeratos to the prospective marriage of Moschion and Plangon is indicative of Menander's vivid interest in the depiction not of political, but of private life set in the context not of the *polis*, but of the much wider Hellenistic world. The aim of this paper is to point out certain socially produced ideas which are hidden behind the exchange of Demeas and Nikeratos, and are related to an awareness of Athens' political decadence, a sense of Greek cultural superiority, and a growing interest in the private life and prosperity of the individual.