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A Flawed Diamond: Syriskos' Character in Menander's Epitrepontes

In Act II of Menander's Epitrepontes, the charcoal-burner Syriskos and the shepherd Daos argue over who should keep a foundling's tokens. Syriskos, to whom Daos had earlier given the foundling, argues that the tokens belong with the baby, but Daos contends that since he was alone when he found the child, he is entitled to keep them. Unfortunately, the portions of the play just prior to this scene are missing, and so it is difficult to gauge the motives of the two disputants (for a full analysis of the two speeches, see J. Cohoon, "Rhetorical Studies in the Arbitration of Scene of Menander's Epitrepontes," TAPhA 45 1914, pp. 141-230). Nonetheless, a quote by Francis Allison sums up the prevailing view of these two characters: "The sterling goodness of Syrisus, the charcoalman, might convert coals into diamonds," while Davus "is the only villain in the play" (Menander. The Principal Fragments, Loeb Classical Library, 1930, p. 8). Against this saccharine view of Syriskos as an angel of benevolence, in this talk it will be argued that he was not, in fact, intending to keep the tokens for the child, rather he wished to use them to pay dues to his master.

Lines 376-381 of Sandbach's OCT are the key verses in the play which demonstrate that flaws may be found under the brilliant luster of Syriskos' rhetoric. After Syriskos has won the tokens from Daos, he immediately turns to his wife and says:

sù dè tautí, gúnai, 376
labôusa pròs tòn tróphimon enthad' eísphere
Chairéstraton. nûn gàr menoûmen entháde,
eis aúrion d' ep' érgon exormésomen
tèn apophoràn apodóntes. allà taûtá moi; 380
prôt' aparíthmesai kath' hén.

We know from lines 407-8 that Syriskos is the servant (oikétes) of Chairestratos, and so this passage makes clear that he has an arrangement with his master to turn in a portion (apophorá) of the proceeds he makes from his profession as a charcoal-burner. Only Ernst Honigmann has noted in passing that Syriskos intends to pay his dues to Chairestratos with the trinkets ("The Lost End of Menander's Epitrepontes," in Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques, Tome 46, fasc. 2, Bruxelles, 1950, p. 20 -- "I cannot help inferring from these words that he intends to pay off his tribute with the valuables he had just received as the guardian of the child."). These lines, therefore, warrant close analysis.

For the purposes of staging and dramatic economy, the word tautí (line 376) can only refer to the tokens (compare the taûtá in line 380, which clearly points to the tokens). Furthermore, the verb eísphere means "to contribute" (LSJ I.2). It refers to the apophorá of line 380, to which it is etymologically related. We should, therefore, translate this passage "take these here things as a contribution to master." If it had been Syriskos' intention to merely deposit the tokens in Chairestratos' house for later retrieval (so says Eduard Schwartz, "Zu den Epitrepontes Menanders," Hermes 50, 1915, p. 312; and so

implies W.G. Arnott, "The Time-Scale of Menander's *Epitrepontes*," *ZPE* 70, 1987, p. 24), then some form of the verb *tithemi* would have been more appropriate. Besides, Syriskos explicitly bids his wife to take them to their master (*pròs tòn tróphimon*), not into the house. A rather obvious and realistic explanation for why they are counting them at this point, apart from the dramatic need for Onesimos to spot his master's ring on the doorstep, is that they wish to ascertain their value before they hand them over to Chairestratos as a payment.

Once we realise that only Syriskos' rhetoric sparkles like diamonds and that below the surface there lurk carbon imperfections, then we can appreciate the ironies of his impassioned pleadings on behalf of the child. We can also better understand the amusement the audience must have felt at his rhetorical artistry, play-acting, and flourishes of mythological knowledge. In actuality he stands somewhat in contrast to the more helpful servant Onesimos and the harp-player Habrotonon, who would be superfluous if Syriskos and his wife were the mere altruistic champions of the child. Such one-dimensional selflessness is foreign to Menander's characters in his other plays. Even Onesimos and Habrotonon are motivated by the prospect of personal gain and are not saintly, cardboard cut-outs.

The foundling, therefore, is saved by the comic twists of chance alone (*tautómaton*, line 1108). This happens despite, or even as a result of, the failings and self-interested pursuits of all the characters, including Syriskos.