

Women and sacrifice in Menander and Plautus

Scholars working on Graeco-Roman comedy have discussed the importance to comedy of eating (Gowers), cooks (Dohm), and even parasites (Tylawsky). Sacrifice—the central act of Graeco-Roman religion (Jameson, North) and a ritual that prominently featured a feast, an expression of civic commensality (Evans, Scheid)—has received some study (Sfyrroeras, Scodel). Yet the gender patterns latent in Menander and Plautus' uses of sacrifice have not previously been considered. In this paper I investigate their presentation of women's roles in religious activity. New Comedy reflects many aspects of lived reality in the Greece and Rome, and through analysis of this underexplored comic material we can enhance our picture of women and religion in the ancient world.

What do women sacrifice, are they successful, and what influence do they have on the plot? What religious roles do they play? How do they talk about sacrifice? In the comedies of Menander and Plautus, every class of woman—including wives, unmarried citizen girls, self-employed courtesans, and enslaved women—performs sacrifice. In Plautus, while citizen men are almost never devout, citizen women regularly are, as demonstrated by their ritual devotion—and clever *meretrices* misuse such ritual to further their own interests and deception plots.

Adjusting for the number of lines delivered by women compared to men, women in fact sacrifice much more often than men. Women's and men's offerings do not significantly differ. Both sacrifice sheep, cattle, wine, and garlands. Incense and fragrances are offerings made exclusively by citizen women, or by courtesans mimicking citizen women. In a striking contrast to male characters, women in extant New Comedy simply do not make jokes about sacrifice, and nor use ritual imagery to mock others.

Citizen women in extant New Comedy repeatedly express their religious devotion in concrete form—that is, through material offerings—and with consistent acceptance by the gods (an important contrast with Greek tragedy). Knemon's daughter Plangon and Sostratos' mother in *Dyskolos*, the mother of Menander's *Phasma*, and Phaedria in *Aulularia* are all characterized as sacrificing habitually; such sacrifice by the unwed girls brings them reward within the plays, and their habitual sacrifice also aligns the audience with them, just as it did with Sostratos' mother. The priestess of Venus in *Rudens* wields a remarkable ritual authority onstage; unlike the play's males, she does not distort ritual imagery for her own benefit, but rather talks about proper sacrifice—and, by extension, a proper way of participating in healthy citizen society.

Women in both Menander and Plautus play important roles in festal banquets attendant upon sacrifice. Sostratos' mother initiates one in *Dyskolos*, much to the title character's dismay, while the reunion between male citizen and beloved female (whether daughter or spouse) occasions both sacrifice and feasting in *Perikeiromene* and *Rudens*. Both instances highlight the value the genre—whose main objective (especially in Menander) is marriage and citizen children—places on citizen girls. The primary objective of New Comedy, especially in Menander, is

marriage and citizen children, so marriageable citizen girls form a hinge for the stock plot—and hence merit celebration when reunited with kin.

If citizen women are comedic models of religious piety, *meretrices* are the polar opposite. Only two *meretrices* offer sacrifice, both of which are insincere, in contrast with the two citizen girls held as *meretrices* in *Poenulus*, who sacrifice successfully when their owner cannot. We see, therefore, a religious dimension to the generic character prescription for the *meretrix*: she is clever, deceptive, self-centered—and in the realm of sacrifice, her actions amount to sacrilege.

Although it is the men in New Comedy—the cooks, the lovers, the clever slaves—who riff on lists of delicacies and get fall-down drunk at symposia, it is the women who (sometimes) bring order to rowdy parties, whose moral uprightness is marked by animal sacrifice and libations of wine, and whose piety frequently occasions a feast. Women’s religious devotion, indeed, reflects their importance both to generic concerns and to the proper, pious ordering of comedic society.

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