

The Girl's Tragedy and New Comedy: The Importance of Citizen Daughters

In the mythic pattern “the girl’s tragedy,” a *parthenos* is raped and impregnated by a god, punished by her kin, then, usually, rescued, all “as a prelude to the emergence of the hero [her son]” (Burkert 1979: 7) and his foundation or inheritance of a Greek city. I argue that this motif reflects an underlying tension between the two main social functions of a “respectable” (i.e., not slave or metic) daughter: to represent the honor of male kin and to reproduce the community. This tension persisted in the *polis*, where these myths were dramatized as tragedies and templates for New Comedy, and in Rome. With casts and plots relevant to all classes, New Comedy’s adaptation of the girl’s tragedy testifies to a cultural concern for daughters, beyond the divine, heroic, and elite levels of myth.

Reproduction and honor potentially conflict: the former requires sexuality and exchange of women, while the latter encourages insulation and virginity. Marriage should resolve this conflict by enabling honorable reproduction and uniting a woman’s kin and husband, both of whose honor she represents. But in the girl’s tragedy, the rapist (a god or itinerant hero) is unmarriageable. To restore his honor, the girl’s father (or his representative) typically punishes her on discovery of her premarital sexuality (Alope, Antiope, Auge, Danae, Melanippe, Tyro). The *nothos* usually goes on to rule a city, either one of his own founding (Aigina, Aiolia and Boiotia on the Propontis, Memphis, Mykenai) or, in a transfer of the original patriline to the daughter’s offspring amounting to a refoundation, his maternal grandfather’s (Thebes, Eleusis, Athens). The grandfather neither reconciles with his daughter nor benefits from her sexuality; sometimes he is killed. The production of cities and city-founders wins out over paternal interests. Roman foundational myths express the same tension between honor and reproduction, but either legiti-

mize the new families and reconcile fathers to sons-in-law (the Sabines), or subsume the claims of kin under those of the community (Ilia, Lucretia, Verginia).

In New Comedy, by contrast, rapists must marry their victims, raped girls are not tortured by their kin, and the children of rape will not grow up to depose their grandfathers or found cities. But this genre uses themes and plot patterns inherited from the girl's tragedy (Scafuro 1997: 272-78, Rosivach 1998: 42-46) to dramatize social values in a way that must have related to the lived reality of its audiences, since New Comedy was considered a mirror of life (Hunter 2014: 373-79). The dramatic tension over the status and safety of daughters and grandchildren reveals a real anxiety: every generation and class, from the Athenian *polis* to the Roman *urbs*, must see citizen daughters put to proper use—that is, that they fulfill their social functions, generally under their fathers' rule, by marrying respectably and producing legitimate offspring.

The elite citizen Menander resolves, to general satisfaction, the conflict between honor and reproduction by staging the creation of civic identity and citizen families through daughters. In *Misoumenos*, *Perikeiromene*, and *Sikyonioi*, fathers happily give their daughters to suitable husbands; resistance to marriage is portrayed as unreasonable and antisocial in *Dyskolos* and *Samia*. The violence of rape is minimized, and rapists marry their victims out of duty and love (Rosivach 1998: 35-37, Lape 2001: 92-93). Marriage is celebrated as the basis of communal cohesion and continuity (Lape 2004), as in *Dyskolos*.

By contrast, the non-elite, non-Roman Plautus and Terence stress the conflict between honor and reproduction (*Trinummus*, *Adelphoe*, *Andria*) and stage the fulfillment of these social functions as objectifying and psychologically, sometimes physically, violent. Girls can explicitly be considered property by their fathers and husbands (*Aulularia*, *Poenulus*, *Eunuchus*). Terence frequently emphasizes the social and sexual exploitation of daughters and the emotional cost to

them (James 1998, 2013). Thus the Roman comic playwrights reveal the potential for instability and brutality in Roman citizenship.

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