

MENANDER'S THAIS AND CATULLUS' LESBIA

Menander's lost comedy *Thais* with its famous protagonist, the *hetaira* lover of Ptolemy I Soter and perhaps Alexander himself,¹ was plainly well known at Rome, and is alluded to several times in Latin poetry of the Augustan and later periods, as Ariana Traill has shown.² My purpose here is to argue that the literary characterisation of Thais in Menander's play underlies certain aspects of Lesbia as presented in the poetry of Catullus; that Catullus' poetry uses the plays of Menander has been demonstrated by Richard Thomas, arguing that Catullus 8 shows clear traces of Demea's monologue in the *Samia* (325–56).³

Of the few preserved fragments of Menander's play,⁴ possibly his earliest,⁵ the most substantial is a description of the protagonist, very likely from the prologue and possibly the opening lines of the play (*PCG* 6.2 163):⁶

Ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν ἄειδε τοιαύτην, θεά,
θρασεῖαν, ὠραίαν δὲ καὶ πιθανὴν ἄμα,
ἀδικοῦσαν, ἀποκλείουσαν, αἰτοῦσαν πυκνά,
μηδενὸς ἐρώσαν, προσποιουμένην δ' ἄει.

The similarity to the famous lines of dismissal of the *puella* (presumably Lesbia) at Catullus 11.17–20 is striking:

cum suis uiuat ualeatque moechis,
quos simul complexa tenet trecentos,
nullum amans uere, sed identidem omnium
ilia rumpens;

Two lexical details stand out here, with the same Menandrian line being picked up twice in the same Catullan line: μηδενὸς ἐρώσαν, προσποιουμένην δ' ἄει looks to be echoed in both *nullum amans uere*, stressing insincerity, and *identidem*, stressing repetition.

This suggested link between Lesbia and Thais is perhaps supported by further Catullan poems which treat Lesbia as indiscriminately promiscuous. Most direct of these is 58, where Lesbia is imagined as delivering sexual services on the streets of Rome like any common prostitute:

¹ On Thais and her ancient and modern reception see C. Ravazzolo, *Thais, etera di Alessandro: da Plutarco ai manga* (Padua, 2009).

² See esp. A. Traill, 'Menander's *Thais* and the Roman poets', *Phoenix* 55 (2001), 284–303. I am very grateful to Prof. Traill for her helpful suggestions on this piece.

³ See R.F. Thomas, 'Menander and Catullus 8', *RhM* 127 (1984), 308–16.

⁴ Another may be a line apparently cited at 1 Corinthians 15:33: see *PCG* 6.2 165 φθειρουσιν ἡθη χρησθ' ὀμιλία κακαί with commentary; B. Dunsch, 'Menander bei Paulus: Oralität, Performanz und Zitationstechnik im Corpus Paulinum', *JbAC* 53 (2010), 5–19.

⁵ See P.A. Iversen, 'Menander's *Thais*: "hac primum iuuenum lascivos lusit amores"', *CQ* 61 (2011), 186–91.

⁶ So Traill (n. 2).

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc in quadriuiis et angiportis
glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.⁷

Similar implications are found in poem 37, where it is suggested that Lesbia provides sexual gratification for the low-life *habitués* of the *salax taberna*, the ‘filthy tavern’ to which she is presented as retreating after a break with the poet (37.14–16):

hanc boni beatique
omnes amatis, et quidem, quod indignum est,
omnes pusilli et semitarii moechi ...

Though Thais and the other *hetairai* of New Comedy are not street prostitutes, there is something of a parallel in the words of Demeas to his *hetaera* girlfriend Chrysis at *Samia* 390–9, where in throwing her out of his house for supposed infidelity he suggests that she will end up amongst the cheap prostitutes who are publicly available.⁸ Invidious comparisons with prostitutes, whether high-class or low-class, clearly form part of the same discourse in the poems of Catullus.

Other details of the Menandrian passage may also be echoed in further Catullan attacks on Lesbia. The beauty claimed for both women goes without saying and cannot in itself be counted as a significant link, but the combination of beauty and wit celebrated in poem 86.5–6 (*Lesbia formosa est, quae cum pulcherrima tota est, | tum omnibus una omnis surripuit Veneres*), might pick up the united beauty and persuasiveness of Thais in Menander (ὄρσίαν δὲ καὶ πιθανήν). Thais’ boldness (θρασεῖαν), if referred to verbal sharpness, could be reflected in poems such as 83, where Catullus interprets Lesbia’s verbal attacks on himself in the presence of her *uir* as signs of love, or 92, where she is presented as always talking disparagingly about him. Her injustice (ὀδικοῦσαν) could be alluded to in the similar moralizing language that Catullus uses of Lesbia in 72.7, referring to her *iniuria* towards him as her lover, or in 75.1, where he talks of her *culpa* in the same context.

In sum, the comparison of Catullus’ Lesbia to Menander’s Thais contributes interestingly to her characterization in poems where the poet is attacking her after an implied break in their relationship. This further link with Menander would add to Catullus’ Greek learning, increasingly appreciated by scholars,⁹ and would match his evident use of language and situations from Roman New Comedy.¹⁰

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⁷ On *glubit* here (the image is that of peeling bark from a log), see J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 168.

⁸ I owe this reference to *CQ*’s anonymous referee, whom I thank warmly.

⁹ See e.g. the emphasis on this aspect in the recent volume of I.M. Le M. Du Quesnay and A.J. Woodman (edd.), *Catullus: Poems, Books, Readers* (Cambridge, 2013).

¹⁰ On Catullus and New Comedy see S. O’Byrhim, ‘Catullus 23 and Roman Comedy’, *TAPhA* 137 (2007), 133–45, with bibliography.