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DOMESTIC COMEDY AND THE CLASSICAL GREEK HOUSE

Greek comedy, especially New Comedy, contains many incidental descriptions of domestic interiors. This article argues that such descriptions constitute a valuable and overlooked source of evidence for historians of the classical Greek house; they are also of interest to literary critics in that they contribute to the thematic and conceptual meaning of the plays. The article presents and discusses all the surviving comic evidence for houses, including many previously neglected comic fragments, as well as a key scene from Menander's *Samia* which is more detailed than any other surviving literary depiction.

Keywords: classical Greek house, Old Comedy, New Comedy, Menander, fragments

I

Given that later Greek comedy, especially the work of Menander, is characterized by its preoccupation with domestic life, it is remarkable how little attention has been paid to the houses that feature in the plays. Perhaps one reason for this is that we do not normally look to drama for meticulous evocations of settings or buildings: we tend to associate topographic details more with literary genres such as epic or narrative fiction. Certainly drama is different from these other genres, and somewhat more restricted, in the ways that it creates a sense of place; but it is surprising just how much incidental descriptive detail the plays contain and what this material can reveal to us. The houses in Greek comedy are important in two distinct ways. In the first part of this article, I demonstrate that they constitute good evidence for real-life Greek houses of the period, and, indeed, they are more valuable as historical source material than has generally been recognized. In

the second part, I argue that comic houses are significant in a thematic and conceptual sense within the world of the plays.

Modern scholarship on the classical Greek house has a predominantly archaeological bent. In the two most important recent books on the subject, Lisa Nevett and Janett Morgan both criticize previous generations of historians for their over-reliance on literary sources, and deliberately downplay the significance of textual evidence in relation to material remains.¹ There are several good reasons for adopting such an approach, including the rejection of traditional hierarchies within the discipline of classical studies, the scarcity of relevant texts, and the cautionary observation that literary descriptions do not always match the remains of real houses. It may be thought that the documentary value of imaginative literature – which after all was not written for the purpose of furnishing future historians with ‘evidence’ – is inherently questionable.² As Morgan observes,

We obtain our impressions from excerpts that are incidental to wider narratives or derived from fantastic situations. We try to understand life in the classical Greek house from studying the domestic behaviour of royal families in tragedies or the ideological descriptions of philosophers. The arrangements in each of these cases are serving the needs of the author and narrative rather than offering a true reflection of private life in a classical Greek household.³

Nevertheless, I suggest that this contrast between ‘the needs of the author’ and the ‘truth’ about real life is variable rather than absolute. Rather than devalue or reject literature entirely, we need to distinguish more clearly between different types of literary text. It may well be that certain genres are more useful to the historian than others. Obviously the sort of milieux described in genres such as tragedy or epic are usually so far removed from everyday life that their direct evidential value is low. Philosophical texts offer a more variable, complicated reflection of life, though Morgan is no doubt right to see them as ideologically

¹ L. C. Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. 2–3, 4–7, 10–12; J. Morgan, *The Classical Greek House* (Exeter, 2005), esp. 6–9, 167–71. For similar archaeology-based approaches, see M. H. Jameson, ‘Domestic Space in the Greek City-State’, in S. Kent (ed.), *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space* (Cambridge, 1990), 92–113; B. A. Ault and L. C. Nevett (eds.), *Ancient Greek Houses and Households. Chronological, Regional, and Social Diversity* (Philadelphia, PA, 2005); R. C. Westgate, N. J. Fisher, and A. Whitley (eds.), *Building Communities. House, Settlement and Society in the Aegean and Beyond* (Athens, 2008).

² See E. Griffiths, *If Not Critical* (Oxford, 2018), 7–10, on the problems of ‘literature as evidence’.

³ Morgan (n. 1), 6; cf. Nevett (n. 1), 6–20, for the ways in which ancient texts are coloured by their authors’ perspective on society, gender, and politics.

slanted or otherwise oblique in their representation of reality. Oratory is a more controversial category: most scholars have tended to treat law-court speeches as straightforward reflections of real-life settings, events, and popular beliefs, but Morgan prefers to emphasize their artificiality, arguing that their images of domestic life are to be read as rhetorical or ideological constructs rather than neutral or normative descriptions of reality.⁴

Where does comedy fit into the picture? Oddly, it has not been discussed very much in this context. References to ancient comedies are found here and there in modern discussions, often in parentheses and footnotes, but there has been little explicit interest in comedy as a specific category of literary evidence. It is unclear why this should be so. Perhaps it is assumed that comedy contains so many jokes, exaggerations, or fantastic elements that it is automatically ruled out of consideration as a serious historical source.⁵ Perhaps it is seen as unacceptably 'ideological' in much the same way as other genres.⁶ Or perhaps it is supposed that the world of comedy constitutes some sort of heterocosm or alternative reality rather than a recognizable version of real-life Athens.⁷

At any rate, when historians of the classical Greek house discuss literature at all, their main focus is not on comedy but on other genres. A couple of fourth-century texts in particular – Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (9.2–5) and Lysias' speech *On The Killing of Eratosthenes* (1.9–10) – have been repeatedly cited and discussed: these are described by Nevett as 'offer[ing] the most detailed picture of the organization of a household of any of our textual sources', despite their interpretative problems.⁸ But in fact Greek comedy can be seen as offering a *more* detailed and revealing picture than either of these texts; it is just that it has never been as thoroughly investigated. The remains of lost comedies contain many important snippets and glimpses of

⁴ Morgan (n. 1), 8–9.

⁵ See, however, C. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London, 2000), 123–40, on methods of extracting historical evidence from jokes.

⁶ Note, however, that the presence of ideology (understood in one sense or another) does not preclude us from seeing the plays as depictions of real life: see D. Konstan, *Greek Comedy and Ideology* (Oxford and New York, 1995), esp. 4–5, 93–4 (on Menander).

⁷ See, e.g., I. A. Ruffell, *Politics and Anti-Realism in Old Comedy. The Art of the Impossible* (Oxford, 2011), for an anti-realistic approach to fifth-century comedy based on 'possible world' theory. Cf. A. Petrides, *Menander, New Comedy and the Visual* (Cambridge, 2014), 10–48, on realistic vs non-realistic aspects of Menander's world.

⁸ Nevett (n. 1), 17.

domestic settings that have never been brought fully into the discussion. Their fragmentary state means that they give only an incomplete picture, but collectively they contain a good deal of information. One comedy in particular – Menander’s *Samia*, which survives in a more complete state – happens to contain a lengthy description of a domestic interior which is more detailed and, arguably, more realistic, than those seen in Lysias or Xenophon.⁹

It is not just the quantity of information or the degree of specific detail they contain that makes these comic sources so important. I suggest that comedy is intrinsically more valuable as evidence for real life than any other genre of Greek literature. Of course, comedy cannot be treated as straightforwardly or completely realistic. Extreme caution is needed, and (as I emphasize in what follows) we always have to be on the lookout for humorous exaggerations and distortions of one sort or another.¹⁰ Nevertheless, comedy is popular mass entertainment. It centres on the sort of experience with which average audience members can identify. It depicts a world that (unlike the world of tragedy) can be clearly pinned down in specific temporal and geographical terms. Its action is set in the present day. It has a penchant for the low, the banal, the unglamorous, the messy, the quotidian. And it is packed with incidental details that are just *there* in the background, rather than (as in Xenophon or Lysias) the main focus of attention.

As I have said, I am thinking primarily of fourth-century comedy, and especially the comedy of Menander, which has long been renowned for its naturalism (as in the much-quoted saying of Aristophanes of Byzantium: ‘O Menander! O Life! Which of you imitated which?’).¹¹ But fifth-century comedy should not be ignored. Even though the main focus of Aristophanes and his contemporaries is on political and fantastic themes rather than everyday families and their affairs, and even though their treatment of space and *mise en*

⁹ The key scene is *Sam.* 219–64 (see pp. 294–95 below); cf. other descriptive details at 40–5, 72, 286–92, 357–69, 592–3. The importance of this scene has not been fully recognized, though A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Menander. Samia* (Cambridge, 2013), 175–6, contextualizes the details in Menander in relation to archaeological evidence.

¹⁰ For further discussion of the pros and cons of comedy as ‘evidence’, see M. E. Wright, *Menander. Samia* (London, 2020), 125–9.

¹¹ Menander test. 83 K-A (ὁ Μένωνδρε καὶ βίε· πότερος ἄρ’ ἐὶ ὑμῶν πότερον ἀπεμιμήσατο;). Cf. Quintilian 10.1.69 (test. 101 K-A). On the meaning of this *bon mot* and its significance in Menander’s reception history, see S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), 287–8; A. Blanchard, *La comédie de Menandre. Politique, éthique, esthétique* (Paris, 2007), 11–12; S. Nervegna, *Menander in Antiquity. The Contexts of Reception* (Cambridge, 2011), 56–7. Petrides (n. 7) offers a sceptical view of the tradition.

scène is eccentric,¹² the plays and fragments of ‘old’ comedy still contain valuable information. Some caution is needed, but it is usually possible to distinguish what look like normal features of everyday houses from what look like fantastic or ludicrous elements. Consider, for instance, the house of Philocleon in *Wasps*, the most fully described house in extant Aristophanes.¹³ If we discount its manifestly absurd aspects (such as the fact that it seems to consist largely of openings and passageways large enough for Philocleon to pass through, or the fact that it is surrounded by an enormous net to prevent him escaping), what remains is a carefully detailed description of a building which, if not exactly realistic, is still supposed to represent a ‘typical’ fifth-century family house for the purposes of the play.

In what follows I examine exactly what the comedians have to tell us about Greek houses, arranging the material feature by feature rather than author by author. I am concerned specifically with the realistic *verbal* description of comic houses – that is, their architecture, layout, use of space, fittings and furnishings, and other such details – in the words of the characters. I have nothing much to say about their *visual* presentation in the theatre, a subject already exhaustively discussed by others,¹⁴ though aspects such as stage production and dramatic function will be mentioned from time to time. For the sake of completeness, I include all surviving references from Greek comedy of all periods.¹⁵ However, apart from one or two parallel passages cited where relevant, I have preferred not to include any discussion of Roman comedies, even though they contain plenty of domestic details, as well as a few interesting extended descriptions (such as the interior scenes in Plautus’ *Mostellaria* and *Bacchides* and Terence’s *Eunuch*). This is because we can never be certain whether any given detail in a Roman

¹² See N. J. Lowe, ‘Aristophanic Spacecraft’, in L. Kosak and J. Rich (eds.), *Playing Around Aristophanes* (Oxford, 2006), 48–64.

¹³ Ar. *Vesp.* esp. 113–402.

¹⁴ The appearance and use of the stage-building (*skene*) is the main concern of all those who have written on the topic, e.g. A. Frickenhaus, *Die altgriechischer Bühne* (Strasbourg, 1917); C. O. Dalman, *De aedibus scaenicis comoediae novae* (Leipzig, 1929); T. B. L. Webster, *Greek Theatre Production*, second edition (London, 1970), 22–6; D. Del Corno, ‘Spazio e messa in scena nelle commedie di Menandro’, *Dioniso* 59 (1989), 201–11; E. Pöhlmann, *Studien zur Bühnendichtung und zum Theaterbau der Antike* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), 155–64; D. Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance* (Cambridge, 2000), 118–24; J. Green, ‘Comic Cuts’, *BICS* 45 (2001), 37–64.

¹⁵ Comic fragments are cited following the text and numeration of *Poetae Comici Graeci*, ed. R. Kassel and C. Austin; complete plays by Aristophanes and Menander are cited from the Loeb editions of J. Henderson and W. G. Arnott. Translations are my own.

version is taken from a Greek model or whether it has been updated in some way to reflect a Roman setting or Roman domestic architecture.¹⁶

II

Fourth-century comedies mostly depict a pair of family homes situated side by side in an urban setting. Typically, one of the families featured is wealthier than the other, but their respective houses are not clearly differentiated. The only place in which a contrast is marked is Menander's *Samia* (592–3), where the house of Nikeratos is assumed to be in poor condition (its roof is leaky and in need of substantial repair). The plots of the plays, as well as their staging, require the two houses to be situated very close together. Such houses might be imagined as adjoining within the same block, or closely adjacent, as in real-life Athenian streets.¹⁷ We have a couple of references to a narrow passage (*stenôpon*) separating a house from its neighbour: the cook in Hegesippus' *Adelphoi* (fr. 1) imagines that people passing through this alleyway will be greeted by delicious smells drifting out from his kitchen, while Thrasonides in Menander's *Misoumenos*, locked out of his own house, is forced to pace up and down all night in the alley by his door (πρὸς ταῖς ἐμμαντοῦ νῦν θύραις ἔστηκ' ἐγὼ | ἐν τῷ στενωπῷ περιπατῶ τ' ἄνω κάτω, 6–7).

No trace survives of any physical description of the exterior of these buildings, and nothing is said about their architecture, fabric, or building materials. Perhaps such features were visually represented on the stage-building, or perhaps the playwrights preferred to leave them up to the audience's imagination. The only exterior detail that is described is the **doorway**. Just outside the door one might find a shrine, an altar, or a herm;¹⁸ we even find a reference to the practice of burying the head of a squill by the hinge of the front door as a way of averting evil spirits.¹⁹ For weddings, funerals, and other specific ritual purposes, the doorway could

¹⁶ For discussion of houses in Roman comedy (mostly with ref. to staging conventions), see, e.g., Dalman (n. 14), esp. 43–4 (on Greek vs Roman); P. Grimal, 'La maison de Simon et celle de Theopropides dans la *Mostellaria*', in *L'Italie préromaine et la Rome républicaine* (Paris, 1976), 371–86; K. L. Milnor, 'Playing House: Space and Domesticity in Plautus' *Mostellaria*', *Helios* 29 (2002), 3–25.

¹⁷ For diagrams of adjoining houses/blocks in Athens, Olynthus, Priene, and Colophon (showing the proximity of the main entrances), see Nevett (n. 1), figs. 10, 17, 18, 20; Jameson (n. 1), figs. 7.7, 7.11, 7.12. See also p. 293 below.

¹⁸ Ar. *Thesm.* 489; *Vesp.* 802–4, 875; Menander, *Dys.* 2–14, 51, 172–5 (etc.); *Misoumenos* 715; *Sam.* 444–5; Eubulus, *Semele* fr. 96.

¹⁹ Ar. *Danaids* fr. 266.

be decked out with garlands or other paraphernalia.²⁰ The door might have some sort of porch or vestibule directly in front of it: the word *prothuron* is found in this sense in a few places, though it is not clear what type of structure is being described.²¹

The **front door** is a recurrent focus of interest within the plays because it is the main route for the entrances and exits of characters.²² The door itself is not normally described in detail. The singular *thura* and the plural *thurai* seem to be used interchangeably, but it can normally be assumed that we are dealing with stout double doors, opening inwards and lockable from the inside with a bolt or other sort of fastening.²³ A running joke throughout Greek comedy, attested in the fifth century but used more and more often thereafter, relies on the perception that such doors tended to creak rather loudly upon opening. This noise is sometimes heard, and referred to in a self-consciously silly manner, numerous times within a single play.²⁴ For dramatic purposes these houses are normally treated as having a single external door, but exceptionally a second entrance might be mentioned, as in Menander's *Dyskolos*, where Sikon, denied entry to Knemon's house via the front door, asks: 'Shall I try another door? (ἐφ' ἑτέραν βαδίζω | θύραν; 925–6). Perhaps Sikon's words are supposed to be funny, but archaeological and literary evidence confirms that, even though a single door was much more common, some Greek houses did have more than one external door.²⁵

A surprisingly large number of comic passages are concerned with the particulars of **bolts, seals, and locks**.²⁶ Sometimes it seems that an unusual or innovative sort of device is being described. Characters

²⁰ E.g. Ephippus, *Geryon* fr. 3. See C. A. Faraone, 'Household Religion in Ancient Greece', in J. Bodel and S. Olyan (eds.), *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (Oxford, 2008), 210–18.

²¹ πρόθυρον (or πρόθυρα): Ar. *Eccl.* 709; Cratinus, *Dionysalexandros* fr. 42; Theopompus fr. 64; Alexis fr. 268. See K. Rees, 'The Function of the πρόθυρον in the Production of Greek Plays', *CPhil* 10 (1915), 117–38; Dalman (n. 14), 24–31; Webster (n. 14), 24–6, all with reference to staging aspects only.

²² K. B. Frost, *Exits and Entrances in Menander* (Oxford, 1988), esp. 1–17.

²³ This type of door is depicted in theatrically inspired vase-paintings: see Green (n. 14), figs. 6, 7, 9, 12.

²⁴ E.g. Ar. *Eq.* 132; Men. *Dys.* 204, 586, 689–90 (cf. 989–90, where the *non* creaking of the door is, unusually, noticed); *Sam.* 300–1, 365–6, 532, 555, 567, 669; *Misoumenos* 683–4, 972–3; *Pk.* 1004; *Carchedonios* fr. 4. See E. Fraenkel, *De media et nova comoedia quaestiones selectae* (Göttingen, 1912), 60–3; B. Bader, 'The ψόφος of the House-Door in Greek New Comedy', *Antichthon* 5 (1971), 35–48; Frost (n. 22), 6–7.

²⁵ See, e.g., the pair of houses depicted in [Figure 1](#); Morgan (n. 1), figs. 2 and 4; Nevett (n. 1), fig. 34. Cf. the house of Damnippus in Lysias, *Against Eratosthenes*, 12.15–16.

²⁶ Ar. *Vesp.* 154–5; *Storks* frs. 447, 685, 737; Men. *Aspis* 356; *Epit.* 1075–8; *Pk.* 291–2, *Pseudheracles* fr. 519; Apollodorus fr. 6.

in Menander (*Misoumenos* fr. 8) and Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 414–28) take care to emphasize the fact that they are using a ‘Spartan key’, which (like a modern key) could lock a door from either side;²⁷ and a door in Poseidippus’ *Galatian* is fastened with a special type of latch known as a ‘raven’ (κόρακι κλείεθ’ ἡ θύρα, fr. 7). Ordinary, trivial-seeming details such as this are particularly revealing. They not only preserve the sort of information that never survives in material form, but they also reflect the extent to which these comedies are preoccupied with the idea of domestic privacy and security – an aspect to which I shall return.

With one important exception (Menander’s *Samia* – see below), the internal plan and layout of comic houses is obscure, and the exact number and arrangement of rooms is left to the imagination. The size of a house might sometimes be implied but not stated – as in Menander’s *Perikeiromene* (538–43), where Moschion’s house must be large enough for family members to be unaware of one another’s presence or absence, and for Moschion himself to be able to retreat ‘to a room out of the way’ for a bit of peace and quiet.²⁸ (By contrast, Moschion in *Samia* 94–6 has to go outdoors to get some privacy, and plot developments in that play require that conversations within the house can be easily overheard.) Sometimes reference is made to an **upper storey** or **roof**, accessed via stairs: the upper level might contain bedrooms or other spaces big enough to hold rituals or private parties (notably including the female-only Adonia festival).²⁹

No doubt every house, in comedy and in real life alike, was slightly different, and we should not assume the existence of a single ‘typical’ model.³⁰ Nevertheless, on the basis of archaeological remains it has been concluded that ‘the classical Greek house shows a common, underlying conception, even though the actual working out may vary considerably’.³¹ The majority of Greek houses known to us from

²⁷ Cf. Plaut. *Mostell.* 404–5, with I. Barton, ‘Tranio’s Laconian Key’, *G&R* 19 (1972), 25–31. See also Σ Ar. *Thesm.* 423; A. W. Gomme and F. H. Sandbach, *Menander. A Commentary* (Oxford, 1973), 463.

²⁸ Men. *Pk.* 540 (εἰς οἶκον ἐλθὼν ἐκποδῶν); see Gomme and Sandbach (n. 27) *ad loc.*, comparing *Misoumenos* 178. See also *Epit.* 442–3, also implying a house so large that locating one of its inhabitants within constitutes a huge effort for the slave Syros.

²⁹ Ar. *Ach.* 262; *Thesm.* 477–89 (upstairs bedroom); *Vesp.* 68; *Aeolosicon* fr. 10; *Babylonians* fr. 70; *Cocalus* fr. 363; Platon fr. 120; Antiphanes frs. 302, 310. For the Adonia in particular, see Pherecrates fr. 181; Diphilus, *Zographos* fr. 42 (on a brothel roof); Men. *Sam.* 40–7. See also the upstairs bedroom in Lys. 1.9–10.

³⁰ A point made emphatically by Nevett (n. 1), 103, 123; Morgan (n. 1), 7–8.

³¹ Jameson (n. 1), 97.

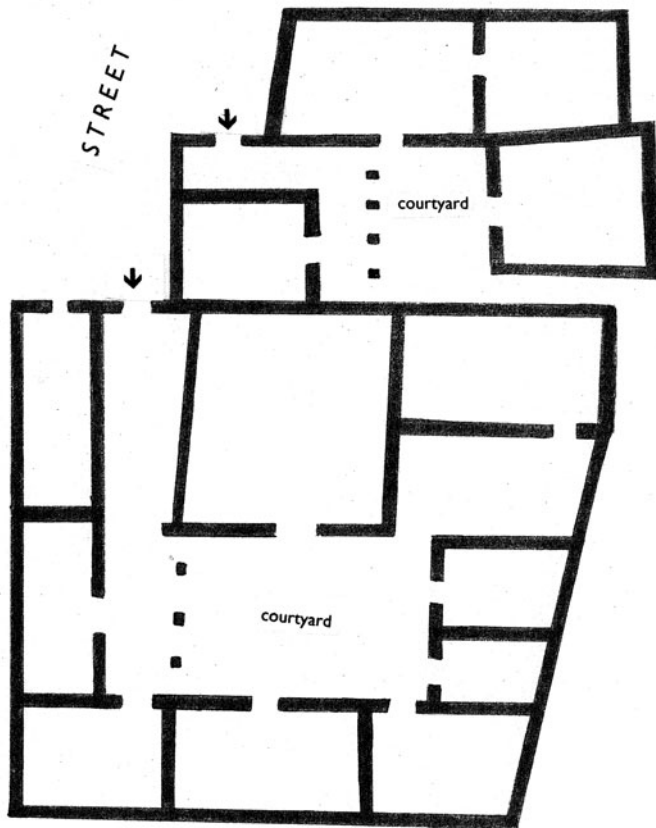


Figure 1. An adjoining pair of fifth-century Athenian houses.

Athens and other city-states were constructed around a central **courtyard** with rooms opening directly off it, as in [Figure 1](#) (showing two adjoining Athenian houses from the fifth century).³² As has been widely observed, this sort of design seems to have two main functional advantages: it ensures a high degree of privacy from the outside world and a high degree of visibility and control over movement within the house, since everyone, family members and visitors alike, must pass through the courtyard.³³ This type of

³² Adapted from Jameson (n. 1), 103, fig. 7.12. See also H. A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley, *The Agora of Athens* (Princeton, NJ, 1972), 173–85, with fig. 44.

³³ Nevett (n. 1), 69, 79, 154–5.

plan may not correspond to every comic house, but several of our plays do explicitly mention a courtyard.³⁴

The information provided at various points throughout *Samia* not only shows that Demeas' house has a central courtyard but also, extraordinarily, allows us to sketch out a notional plan of most of the house. In the prologue (40–6) Moschion mentions an upper storey, which was evidently spacious and equipped with hiding places, since he is able to sit and watch the women's Adonia celebrations, and later have sex with one of the participants, without being seen or heard. Fuller details are provided by Demeas, who delivers a long narrative of an interior scene at the start of Act III (219–64). The narrative concerns the hustle and bustle of preparations for a wedding feast: the master of the house instructs the women to clean the house and start making food, but he is so keen to get things moving that he himself assists them in their work. The crucial portion (225–41) is worth quoting at length:

ἐπὶ κλίνης μὲν ἔρριπτ' ἐκποδὸν
 τὸ παιδίον κεκραγὸς· αἱ δ' ἐβόων ἅμα
 ἄλευρ', ὕδωρ, ἔλαιον ἀπόδος, ἄνθρακας'.
 καυτὸς διδοὺς τούτων τι καὶ συλλαμβάνων
 εἰς τ]ὸ ταμειῖον ἔτυχον εἰσελθὼν, ὅθεν
 πλείω προαιρῶν καὶ σκοπούμενος σ[χολῆ
 οὐκ εὐθὺς ἐξῆλθον. Καθ' ὃν δ' ἦν χρόνον ἐγὼ
 ἐνταῦθα, κατέβαιν' ἀφ' ὑπερφύου τις γυνή
 ἄνωθεν εἰς τοῦμπροσθε τοῦ ταμειδίου
 οἴκημα· τυγχάνει γὰρ ἰστέων τις ὢν,
 ὥσθ' ἢ τ' ἀνάβασίς ἐστι διὰ τούτου, τό τε
 ταμειῖον ἡμῖν. τοῦ δὲ Μοσχίωνος ἦν
 τίτθη τις αὐτῆ, πρεσβυτέρα, γεγονυῖ' ἐμῆ
 θεράπαιν', ἐλευθέρα δὲ νῦν. ἰδοῦσα δὲ
 τὸ παιδίον κεκραγὸς ἡμελημένον,
 ἐμέ τ' οὐδὲν εἰδυῖ' ἔνδον ὄντ', ἐν ἀσφαλεῖ
 εἶναι νομίσασα τοῦ λαλεῖν, προσέρχεται. . .

The baby had been chucked down on a couch out of the way and was howling. The women kept shouting 'Flour! Water! Oil! Coal!' all at the same time. I myself went to fetch one or other of these things and take it to them. I happened to go into the pantry, and I did not come out straightaway because I was taking my time looking for something and taking out more supplies. At the same time as I was doing all that, a woman came down from the upper storey and went into the room that was directly

³⁴ Eupolis, *Kolakes* frs. 167, 410; Ar. *Vesp.* 126–7; Men. *Dys.* 584–5 (implying that animals were kept there); *Sam.* 251–2, 264; com. adesp. fr. 1095 K-A.

in front of the storeroom – that room happens to be a weaving room, built in such a way that one has to pass through it in order to go upstairs or go to the pantry. The woman was the nurse of Moschion, a rather elderly person, and nowadays free, though she used to be a slave of mine. When she saw the child crying and unattended, she went up to it. Since she didn't know I was in the room to hear her, she thought that she could talk to it freely.

A few lines later, the narrative continues when a young slave-girl comes in 'from outside' (ἐξῶθεν εἰστρέχοντι, 252): this must mean that she enters the weaving room from the courtyard.³⁵ The girl remonstrates with the nurse and informs her that Demeas is actually in the pantry within earshot (256–7). A little later still, when the women have left the weaving room, Demeas emerges and makes his way out of the house via the courtyard (262–3).³⁶ Putting all these details together, we can draw a reasonably accurate diagram of the house (Figure 2).³⁷

One aspect of Demeas' household that is especially worth observing is that it does *not* have **separate areas for men and women**. In the scene above and elsewhere, Demeas mixes freely with the women of the household, and even joins in with what we might have supposed were exclusively feminine activities. Nor, evidently, do the women in Nikeratos' house in the same play have private quarters, since Plangon is unable to breastfeed her baby in secret (540–2). (Another relevant passage for comparison is Menander's *Perikeiromene* [519–20], where Polemon has free access to the wardrobe or dressing room of his mistress, Glycera.) Whether or not the gendered segregation of domestic space was normal in classical Greece is a difficult question to answer. Those literary sources which have traditionally been treated as evidence, such as Lysias and Xenophon, do appear to describe a strict separation into men's quarters and women's quarters. However, as already mentioned, recent scholars have questioned the supposedly normative image that these texts give us. In particular, it has been pointed out that no easily identifiable 'women's quarters' or binary structures (i.e. distinct areas or separate suites of interconnecting rooms) can be seen in the archaeological evidence, and it has been suggested that the segregation of family members was much less important than the protection of female householders from male visitors or intruders.³⁸

³⁵ So W. G. Arnott, 'Second Notes on Menander's *Samia*', *ZPE* 122 (1998), 12.

³⁶ See Sommerstein (n. 9), 182, on the meaning of προίμειν (*Sam.* 262).

³⁷ This sketch is conjectural in part, but for images of very similar houses see Nevett (n. 1), 102–4, figs. 28–9.

³⁸ L. C. Nevett, 'Gender Relations in the Classical Greek Household: The Archaeological Evidence', *ABSA* 90 (1995), 363–91. See also L. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite's Tortoise. The Veiled Women of Ancient Greece* (London and Swansea, 2003), 189–97 (where it is suggested

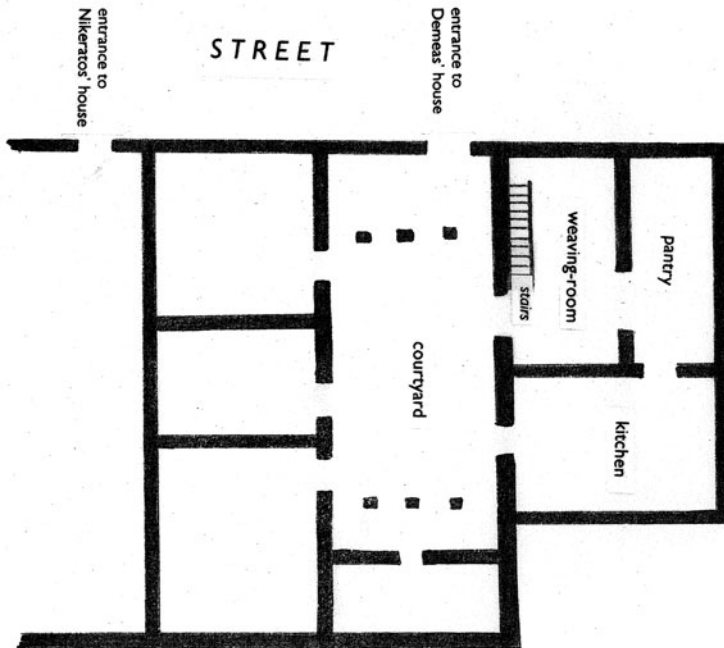


Figure 2. Demeas' house as described by Menander in *Samia*.

Comic evidence cannot definitively answer the question, but it does seem to suggest that the archaeologists are correct. Just two passages explicitly mention separate women's areas of the house, using the word *gunaikonitis*.³⁹ These texts have been widely cited as evidence for everyday life in an Athenian household, but perhaps the most significant fact about them is that neither of them describes a normative or real-life situation. Both texts are specifically concerned with a hypothetical or imaginary scenario: in each of them what we see is a husband's or householder's anxiety about adulterous lovers or other male intruders making their way nefariously into the household.

that internal doors and curtains functioned in a similar way to veils); Jameson (n. 1), 104–5; Nevett (n. 1), 69–73; Morgan (n. 1), 117–42; Ault and Nevett (n. 1), 1–5. For a more traditional interpretation, see S. Walker, 'Women and Housing in Classical Greece: The Archaeological Evidence', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1983), 81–92.

³⁹ Menander, *Pseudheracles* fr. 519; *Ar. Thesm.* 414–17 (the latter passage imagines that the *gunaikonitis* can be locked and bolted).

Apart from these brief references, the plays are silent on the topic, but their plots and action generally seem to imply free interaction between the men and women in a house, along with complete freedom of movement. On balance, then, it is hard to know exactly what the word *gunaikonitis* was supposed to denote in reality. But it is clear, at least, that the corresponding word *andron* does not normally mean ‘the men’s quarters’ as opposed to ‘the women’s quarters’; it more accurately denotes the dining room.

Dining rooms are bound to be important in a genre that is so firmly associated with eating and drinking. But the comic evidence seems to show us something slightly different from the archaeological evidence. Many of the Greek houses that have been excavated have a room distinguished by certain features (such as an antechamber, mosaic floors or other decorations, or a raised platform big enough to accommodate dining tables or couches), suggesting that it was used for feasting or entertaining guests.⁴⁰ This room is typically labelled as the *andron* in archaeological floor plans and discussions, following the use of the word in this sense in a variety of literary texts.⁴¹ But this word is found only once in comedy, in an unrevealing fragment of Aristophanes’ *Babylonians* where a character enquires ‘how many roof-beams does this *andron* have?’ (fr. 69). There are many scenes in which feasting and drinking are evoked, but there is no other mention of a so-called *andron*.

The word *triklinion*, by contrast, is found several times in comedy.⁴² But it is striking that the sort of space it describes looks like an improvised setting, specially arranged according to the needs of the occasion, rather than a permanently furnished dining room. A *triklinion* was literally a space into which three couches were carried for the diners to recline upon. If more guests were invited, more couches could be brought in. This is precisely what is being described in a fragment of Eubulus, where a slave is ordered to bring up to seven couches (and the dining area is thus relabelled a *heptaklinon*).⁴³ The slave who

⁴⁰ See esp. J. W. Graham, ‘Houses of Classical Athens’, *Phoenix* 28 (1974), 45–54 (with figs. 2–4); Nevett (n. 1), 369–72 (with figs. 3–12).

⁴¹ E.g. W. Hoepfner and E.-L. Schwandner, *Haus und Stadt im klassischen Griechenland*, second edition (Munich, 1994); Jameson (n. 1), 99–100; Nevett (n. 1), 37–8. Literary references to *andron* (or equivalent *andronitis*) include Aesch. *Ag.* 244; *Cho.* 712; Eur. *HF* 954; Xen. *Symp.* 1.13.1; *Oec.* 9.6; *Hdt.* 1.34.15–16; Lys. 1.9. The two comic passages cited by Nevett (*Ar. Eccl.* 675; *Vesp.* 1215) do not in fact mention the word.

⁴² Anaxandrides fr. 70; Antiphanes fr. 299; Diphilus fr. 43; Menander fr. 923; Theopompus fr. 65.

⁴³ Eubulus frs. 121–2. See R. Hunter (ed.), *Eubulus. The Fragments* (Cambridge, 1983), 221; Dalman (n. 14), 103–7, for further discussion. Athenaeus (2.47f, 2.49c, 15.685e), who preserves Eubulus frs. 121–2, cites other relevant texts including Eubulus, *Tithai* fr. 112 (extra tables brought in as new guests arrive), and Antiphanes fr. 299 (different sizes of dining room).

arranged the dining room was known as the *trapezopoios*, and several other comedies featured such a character in action.⁴⁴ In other words, comic houses repeatedly seem to reflect a flexible use of space, suggesting that individual rooms may not have had fixed functions but could be reconfigured according to need.⁴⁵ (Such an approach, if correct, could also affect our perspective on ‘women’s quarters’ as well as dining areas.) No doubt some houses had a permanent dining room set aside exclusively for that purpose, but it appears that entertaining did not actually require a special sort of room or a fancy tiled floor. Nevertheless, these comic scenes and their terminology are not necessarily inconsistent with the evidence of archaeology, nor should they be rejected as evidence. In fact, they may help us to interpret the material remains and suggest to us ways, irrecoverable through archaeology alone, in which observable domestic spaces were actually used in practice.

Given the importance of food in comedy, we might have expected to see more mention of the **kitchen**. Certainly we encounter plenty of comic cooks, but we have few glimpses of the settings in which they worked. Pherecrates wrote a whole play entitled Ἰρνός (*The Kitchen* or *The Oven*), which would have been a precious source of knowledge if only it had survived: its title and a few tiny fragments indicate ‘a domestically-centred comedy’, which may well mark it out as unusual for an ‘old’ comedy of the mid-to-late fifth century, but we can say little more than that.⁴⁶ Apart from a handful of passing references to kitchens,⁴⁷ the only relevant comic source (once again) is *Samia*, where we encounter a cook questioning his employer about his domestic set-up (286–92): he wants to know at what time to serve dinner, how many assistants will be available, whether there will be enough crockery, and whether or not the kitchen has a roof. But since no one answers

⁴⁴ Alexis, *Hesione* fr. 86; Antiphanes, *Metoikos* fr. 152; Diphilus, *Zographos* fr. 43; Men. *Sam.* 286–92; *Kekryphalos* fr. 209. Knemon at Men. *Dys.* 942–4 rearranges his own furniture. See I. Konstantakos, ‘The Drinking Theatre: Staged Symposia in Greek Comedy’, *Mnemosyne* 58 (2005), 183–217.

⁴⁵ The same conclusion is reached on purely archaeological grounds by Morgan (n. 1), 123–6. See also B. Ault, ‘Haus und Stadt im klassischen Griechenland. Its Theoretical Impact 25 Years On’, in L. Nevett (ed.), *Theoretical Approaches to the Archaeology of Ancient Greece* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2017), 40–50, for criticism of Hoepfner and Schwandner (n. 40) and others who seek ‘to impose order and regularity onto...houses that were considerably less tidy and uniform in reality’.

⁴⁶ I. C. Storey (ed.), *Fragments of Old Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), ii.446–9; fr. 64 refers to a house being placed under mortgage.

⁴⁷ Ar. *Vesp.* 136, 837; *Plutus* 815; Alexis, *Pamychis* fr. 177; Diphilus fr. 18.

the cook's questions, we never discover what the kitchen chez Demeas is actually like.

In many houses there will have been **other rooms** aside from the kitchen designated for food preparation, storage, cleaning, laundry, or other types of housework. Several such rooms feature in comic houses, and are given specific names: we find a couple of references to a pantry or storeroom (*tamieion*),⁴⁸ a room exclusively set aside for weaving cloth (*isteon*),⁴⁹ and some sort of cupboard for the storage of drinking vessels (*kulikeion*).⁵⁰

Practical activities or home industries might also spill out of the main house and occupy **adjoining spaces** – as in the plot of Antiphanes' comedy *Akestria* (*The Seamstress*), which involved the conversion of an outbuilding or shed (*klision*) into a workshop (*ergasterion*) for embroidery:

† εἰ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐργαστήριον οἰκίας τὸ κλισίον
πρότερον ποτ' ἦν τοῖς ἐξ ἀγροῦ βοῦσι σταθμὸς
καὶ τοῖς ὄνοις, πεποίηκεν ἐργαστήριον

[† if there is a workshop inside the house] he has converted the outhouse, which in former times was used as a stable for cattle and donkeys, into a workshop.

Pollux, who quotes the fragment above (fr. 22), adds the detail that the *klision* was directly adjacent to the house and separated from it by curtains (*parapetasmata*); however, it is not clear whether he is describing the 'actual' house (in the world of the play) or the use of the *skene* and stage properties to represent these buildings in the theatre.⁵¹ A further complication is introduced by fr. 23, which hints that the supposed 'workshop' in this comedy may in fact have functioned as a brothel or a secret meeting place for lovers. Much is uncertain about this play, then, but its main action evidently centred on the minutiae of domestic geography and the relationship between a house and the buildings that surround or adjoin it. Furthermore, it was clearly interested in exploring the comic possibilities of party walls, property boundaries, and secret entrances – an interest which was shared by

⁴⁸ Men. *Sam.* 229; *Pseudheracles* fr. 519. The latter reference is to a room with a lockable door.

⁴⁹ Men. *Sam.* 229–36. See discussion above, p. 295.

⁵⁰ Eubulus, *Spartans* or *Leda* fr. 62; *Semele* fr. 96; Cratinus the Younger, *Cheiron* fr. 9. In the last of these fragments a returning soldier treats the *kulikeion* as symbolizing home and a sense of belonging. The word might denote a piece of furniture rather than a room (Ath. 11.460d).

⁵¹ Pollux 4.125. The text, which may belong to the play's prologue, is corrupt: see Kassel-Austin *ad loc.* (PCG ii.321).

Menander's *Phasma*.⁵² The plot of Menander's play, partly preserved in summary form, featured a woman who secretly gave birth to a daughter and hid her in the house next door; she later made a hole through the party wall so that she could visit her daughter, and disguised this entrance by decorating it as a domestic shrine and hanging curtains over the opening.⁵³ A scenario in Diphilus' *Chrysochoos* (*The Goldsmith*) is more obscure but in some ways comparable: fr. 84 mentions an ὀπεία κεραμῖς, a tile with a hole designed to allow smoke to escape from the house, which also happens to be just big enough to allow a young man to catch a glimpse of a beautiful girl on the other side.⁵⁴

Perhaps what we are looking at in *Akestria* is an example of a building that combined domestic/private and commercial/public activities side by side. This type of structure is found quite often among archaeological remains in various Greek settlements;⁵⁵ in literary sources it is unusual but not unparalleled. Comedy provides three further examples: in both Eubulus' *Pamphilus* (fr. 80) and Menander's *Theophoroumene* (28–9) we see a private house immediately adjacent to an inn, and in Theopompus' *Althaea* (fr. 3) a room in a house seems to be doubling up as a doctor's surgery or pharmacist's shop. It seems likely that the humour in each case arose from some sort of conflict between different uses of space, or some sort of threat to the privacy of the main characters.

A few references are found to **water supplies and drainage facilities**, though all are somewhat vague. In Menander's *Dyskolos*, Knemon's house has its own private well, located somewhere inside the house (presumably within the central courtyard, though this is not explicitly stated). This well turns out to be crucial to the plot, since objects or people repeatedly fall into it (189–91, 574, 620–5), but the scenes in question are narrated rather than acted out, and they do not include any detailed description of the well itself. In a couple of other comedies we see drainage channels being exploited for

⁵² Cf. Plautus' later *Mostellaria*, though this play was probably based on the *Phasma* of Philemon, not Menander. See M. Knorr, *Das griechische Vorbild der Mostellaria des Plautus* (Munich, 1934), 60.

⁵³ *Phasma* test. vi (Donatus ad Ter. *Eum.* 9.3, 1.272 Wessner). Cf. the surviving portions of the prologue (*Phasma* 43–56) with W. G. Arnott (ed.), *Menander III* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 384–5. Gomme and Sandbach (n. 27), 678, add a reference to Hypereides, *Pro Lycophrone* (a real-life lawsuit concerning adultery committed via similar means).

⁵⁴ See other comic references to chimneys or smoke vents: Ar. *Vesp.* 143–7; *Aeolosicon* fr. 10; Sannyrion, *Danae* fr. 8.

⁵⁵ Nevett (n. 1), 66–8. See also one of the Athenian houses pictured in [Figure 1](#).

other uses: even though these uses are ludicrously far-fetched, I take it that they are still broadly ‘realistic’ in terms of the physical features that they evoke. Smikrines in Menander’s *Aspis* seems to think that the women in his house are using the water course as a means of communicating (somehow) with the next-door neighbours.⁵⁶ Philocleon in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, imprisoned in his own house, tries to escape by passing through the drain.⁵⁷ The two passages use the same word (ὕδρορροά), which seems to refer to a ground-level drain or a gutter.⁵⁸

Finally, the **lavatory** is a feature of the household that is decorously passed over by other literary sources – all the more reason, then, to be thankful for the evidence of the comedians, with their mentioning of the unmentionable and their fixation on the squalid and excremental. In Eubulus’ *Cercopes* (fr. 53), an unidentified character describes the luxurious habits of the Thebans, including the fact that ‘every house has a toilet (*koprôn*) right by its doorway: there is no greater good than this for mankind, since the man who’s desperate for a shit but has to make a long run for it, biting his lips and groaning, is a ludicrous sight’. The tone of exaggerated admiration implies that many Athenian homes did *not* have their own lavatory near to hand – a state of affairs that is apparently confirmed by a number of similar passages from Aristophanes.⁵⁹ The Kinsman in *Thesmophoriazusae*, for instance, imagines a scenario in which a young wife uses an emergency nocturnal dash to the toilet as an excuse to pop outside and meet her lover (477–89); as in the Eubulus fragment, we are meant to imagine an outdoor privy situated near the door of the house, inconveniently far from the upstairs bedroom.⁶⁰ *Ecclesiazusae* features a grotesquely extended sequence (320–71) in which Blepyrus, gravely troubled by the state of his bowels, cannot find anywhere to relieve himself: it seems that he has no toilet either inside or immediately adjacent to his own house, and cannot even find a private spot within easy reach. The humour of all these episodes (such as it

⁵⁶ *Aspis* 466–7 (ἐπιτάττεται τοῖς γείτοσι | διὰ τῶν ὑδρορροῶν). W. G. Arnott (ed.), *Menander I* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 80–1, finds the exact meaning obscure.

⁵⁷ *Vesp.* 126–7; cf. 141, where Bdelycleon imagines his father going down the plughole of a bathtub (κατὰ τῆς πυέλου τὸ τρήμα). S. D. Olson and Z. Biles (eds.), *Aristophanes. Wasps* (Oxford, 2015), 131–2, compare Pl. *Grg.* 494b for a bath with integral drain.

⁵⁸ See Gomme and Sandbach (n. 27), 102, citing additional refs.

⁵⁹ Cf. Hunter (n. 43), 144, citing Eupolis frs. 46 and 224; and Ar. *Ran.* 489, 1075, in addition to the passages discussed here. *Ran.* 7–10 may imply that the topic was a cliché long before Eubulus.

⁶⁰ Chamber pots are attested elsewhere in Aristophanes, e.g. *Eccl.* 371 (σκαοραμίς); *Vesp.* 935 (ὄμις); fr. 180 (οὐράνη), but were obviously not always considered suitable – or suitably funny? – for use in the bedroom.

is) depends on the spectators finding the situation basically credible and relating it to their own experiences.⁶¹

III

I have suggested that all these little details – many of which are only minimally or obliquely revealing by themselves – add up to a substantial and important body of evidence. Assembled together in this way, they seem to form, in effect, a composite image of a Greek house in the period when the plays were performed. That is not to claim that the resulting image is realistic in every conceivable aspect, or that all the features discussed here were straightforwardly typical, or that all houses, either in comedy or in real life, were alike. What is important is that many individual details are preserved in these plays, and that they feature in the background as everyday, apparently unexceptional features of domestic life. Furthermore, as we have seen, it is striking that most of these details are found repeatedly in more than one source, thus lessening the likelihood that they have been invented or shaped to suit the needs of any specific author or text. I conclude that they can be used, with advantage, alongside the evidence from archaeology.

But comic houses are not just a good source of evidence for the social historian. They are also significant to the literary critic, in terms of their meaning and function within the plays. By the time of the mid-to-late fourth century, Greek comedy had become more or less synonymous with domestic comedy. These plays, in contrast to the world of ‘old’ comedy, are relentlessly concerned with intimate family relationships, private business, and the sort of behaviour and conversation that normally takes place behind closed doors. They are also preoccupied with questions of property, inheritance, and ownership. All of this means that these houses are central to the works in which they appear. They shape and contain the action. In their symmetry, as well as their paradoxical combination of proximity and separation, they provide the structural framework in which the plots unfold. To a large extent they symbolize the characters and their relationships; it is no coincidence that *oikos* in Greek, like ‘house’ in English, can refer to the family members as well as the

⁶¹ Cf. Theophr. *Char.* 14.5 for a similarly ‘typical’ experience (an outside lavatory is confused with the neighbours’ dog kennel).

building in which they live.⁶² They embody personal and social status, family ancestry, and financial security. In sum, these houses are not just a convenient backdrop for the action; they are, in a real sense, what these plays are all about. Plot, character, *and* setting are all intimately connected in domestic comedy, in a way that is not paralleled in other forms of classical drama.

The meaning of comic houses is heavily dependent on their realism, an aspect which I have emphasized. Of course, there are several ways in which fourth-century comedy can be seen as *unrealistic*, such as its extreme formal stylization, its limited range of ‘stock’ situations, or its debt to tragic motifs and plot patterns.⁶³ But the crucial point is that the houses themselves are apparently normal and ordinary. They are not like the grand houses of tragedy; they are not especially unusual or distinctive; not one of them stands out as a memorable literary creation in its own right. They are significant and symbolic precisely because of their ordinariness: that is, they represent the sort of house in which any of the spectators might themselves live.⁶⁴ The Athenian street scenes evoked by Menander and other later Greek comedians, with their adjacent pairs of houses, are highly conventional and artificial, but at the same time they are a genuine reflection of everyday life – even, perhaps, a microcosm of Greek society. (In this respect, the sort of world depicted in these plays might almost seem to anticipate postmodern literary techniques, as exemplified in George Perec’s experimental novel *La vie. Mode d’emploi* (1976), in which a minutely particularized Parisian apartment block functions as a microcosm of all human life.)

Many of these observations about Greek comic houses could apply equally well to the houses or apartments in modern television sitcoms (a genre to which Menander’s comedy is often compared). The domestic settings in *Friends*, *Frasier*, *My Family*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and

⁶² See e.g. Men. *Asp.* 402–3 for *oikos* as synonymous with the building and its inhabitants. A good example of the link between a house and the personality of its owner is seen in Men. *Dys.* 444–6, where Knemnon’s proposal to demolish his house symbolizes his extreme withdrawal from society. Philolaches’ speech at Plaut. *Mostell.* 84–156, a virtuoso elaboration of the concept that a man is like a house, may derive from a Greek model.

⁶³ See esp. Petrides (n. 7); cf. K. Gutzwiller, ‘The Tragic Mask of Comedy: Metatheatricality in Menander’, *CLAnt* 19 (2000), 102–37, for the view that Menander’s world is in some respects a pastiche of tragic elements. Lowe (n. 12) observes that the scenic conventions of Menander (incl. use of the *skene*) largely mirror those of tragedy.

⁶⁴ Acutely observed by Del Corno (n. 14), 204–5, who writes of ‘l’osmosi fra scena e platea’ (‘the osmosis between stage and audience’).

hundreds of other examples similarly combine stylized elements (such as open-plan living, quirky interior décor, and so on) with a significant degree of verisimilitude. They are precisely the sort of setting required for the plots to unfold in; and they typify the lives and personalities of their inhabitants. They do not perhaps meet the criteria for realism in every respect, but they represent the sort of home that the target audience member could imagine themselves inhabiting. Nevertheless, it is instructive to point out one crucial difference between the two types of *mise en scène*. In sitcom homes (as in most modern theatrical productions) the audience can actually see the domestic interior: all the action takes place indoors but in full view, because the stage or television set represents the rooms of the house or apartment. In ancient comedy, by contrast, the interior scenes are almost completely invisible: either the action takes place outside in the street (another way in which these plays flout strict realism), or it must be described through narrative rather than acted out directly in front of us. There is a huge difference between what we *see* and what we are induced to *imagine*.

These considerations explain why I am not concerned here with stage production or the appearance of the *skene*. Most of the descriptive details recorded above come from narrative sections and were not physically represented in the theatre. The comic house, in other words, is essentially an invisible and virtual construct. For this reason the notion of everyday realism is even more important for understanding how the houses work within the plays on a conceptual level. In spite of all the nitty-gritty detail that they provide, there is an awful lot that the plays do *not* tell us; and so we are required to imagine all these unseen interiors for ourselves, supplementing the information in the text on the basis of real-life experiences and personal memories. In a sense, each individual spectator or reader ‘builds’ these houses inside their own head. This type of cognitive process is memorably evoked by Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space*, which treats the house in literature (in a broad sense) as a locus for memory and imagination. According to Bachelard, a house is ‘a body of images’ or ‘a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space’. Whenever we encounter a fictional house, ‘the reader who is “reading a room” leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past... To read poetry is essentially to daydream.’⁶⁵ Even

⁶⁵ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. M. Jolas (Boston, MA, 1964), 3, 16–17.

though Bachelard has nothing to say about classical literature as such, his insights can readily be applied to our ancient comedies.

An aspect of the poetics of domestic space that especially interests Bachelard is ‘the dialectics of outside and inside’, and the fact that, when we conceptualize a real or imaginary house, we inevitably do so from either an interior or an exterior perspective. One of the reasons why people enjoy reading about houses, he argues, is that we are all naturally afflicted by a voyeuristic sense of curiosity: literature allows us the access to other people’s homes and private lives which we desire but are normally denied.⁶⁶ Once again, even though Bachelard is thinking exclusively of modern poetry and novels, this inside/outside dichotomy is very obviously applicable to Greek comedy. It helps us to make sense of the plays’ persistent focus on the privacy and security of its houses, their unusually specific interest in locks and bolts, their tantalizing glimpses of the interior domain, and the huge amount of stage business involving the open or closed front door.⁶⁷ This conceptual dichotomy can also be closely linked to the archaeologists’ conclusion (mentioned above) that privacy was the most important principle underlying the design of real-life Greek houses.⁶⁸

The interpretative significance of the Greek comic house lies chiefly in the fact that, for the duration of the plot, its doors are opened and its private secrets and problems spill out into the public domain. This scenario (so it is implied) marks a sharp contrast with the normal state of affairs, in which houses do successfully control their inhabitants’ personal relationships, and in which it is possible to be almost totally oblivious of other people’s affairs. Perhaps we could read the plots of these comedies as springing from deep anxieties about what might happen when Athenian citizens open their front doors and come into contact with the world outside. Alternatively, we might choose to see them as embodying a ‘carnavalesque’ inversion of normal life: they could be treated as a rare and limited occasion when the normal categories of public vs private, inside vs outside, visible vs invisible

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 211–31.

⁶⁷ See Frost (n. 22), esp. 9, on door-knocking scenes; see also Wiles (n. 14), 118, on the semiotics of inside versus outside in performance. Note, too, that Menander wrote an entire comedy called *Thurōros* (*The Door-Keeper*), and that Aristomenes was nicknamed θυροποιός (‘the door-maker’), perhaps an oblique way of referring to the distinctive use of doorways in his comedies: see C. Orth (ed.), *Aristomenes–Metagenes* (Berlin, 2014), 21–3.

⁶⁸ See Nevett (n. 1), esp. 69, 79.

(and so on) are jumbled up, before the plays' happy endings mark a return to the safe and secure status quo.⁶⁹

No matter what our own perspective on this material may be, it strikes me that all of us, as modern scholars and students of the ancient world, are in a very similar position to the audience in the theatre or the person in the street in classical Athens. We stand outside these houses, peering in with intense curiosity, desperate to know more, but able to discern only tantalizing glimpses of a world that is basically inaccessible to us. Investigating domestic life in classical Greece can be a frustrating business. Nevertheless, despite the nature of the subject and the shortage of evidence, the houses in comedy can tell us much more than we might have imagined.

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⁶⁹ On the ways in which Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque has been applied to (mainly fifth-century) comedy, see P. von Möllendorff, *Grundlagen einer Ästhetik der alten Komödie. Untersuchungen zu Aristophanes und Michail Bachtin* (Tübingen, 1995).