

MENANDER IN PLUTARCH:  
A CONJECTURE FOR EROS (FR. 791 K.-A.)

*Devoted to “Padre Brenk”*

It is with great esteem and friendship (not without a touch of wistfulness) that I dedicate these pages to Frederick Brenk, as I recall a long and friendly discussion on the subject of love with him and two common friends who have left us – professor Adelmo Barigazzi, my unforgotten teacher, and his beloved wife Giulia – which took place long ago, during a small conference on Plutarch held at Athens, in June 1987, at the dinner table, in a part of town where Aristotle’s voice could once be heard.

Plutarch’s fr. 134 Sandbach<sup>1</sup>, preserved by Stobaeus (IV 20.34) as part of a lost work, Περὶ ἔρωτος (not included in Lamprias’ Catalogue), contains the unqualified statement that the unifying motif of all of Menander’s plays is love, seen as the one pervading element of each one<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Plutarch goes as far as defining this playwright θιασώτης τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ὀργιαστής, that is a participant in the *thiasos* and the mysteries of Eros, the god of love: so, according to Plutarch, Menander is a companion of Eros who is at one with him, and therefore enabled to speak in his name. This is why Plutarch expressly states that he will take the playwright as his guide and helper in his research (συμπαράλαβωμεν εἰς ζήτησιν), also considering that the latter expressed himself in a rather philosophical way concerning this state of mind (ἐπεὶ καὶ λελάληκε περὶ τοῦ πάθους φιλοσοφώτερον). This appears to be an important programmatic statement concerning the whole work, about which, unfortunately, very little is known.

In the sequel, Plutarch substantiates this statement by referring to a remarkable instance of Menander’s expertise in the field of love. He is

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the Loeb edition, Sandbach 1969. He is also the author of the more conservative Teubner edition (Sandbach 1967).

<sup>2</sup> On this theme see *supra*, Scritto nr. 4 (p. 39 ff.) and also Scritto nr. 6 (p. 61 ff.).

a specialist and scientific interpreter of Eros: he has attained a fine and correct (εὖ καὶ ὀρθῶς are the words which appear, as a conclusion, seven lines before the end of the fragment) understanding of love's physiology, pathology and development. This is made apparent by eight verses of his, in which the causes of falling in love are carefully investigated (Menander, fr. 791 K.-A.)<sup>3</sup>. Plutarch quotes them in full and discusses them at length.

τίνι δεδούλωνταί ποτε;  
 ὄψει; φλύαρος· τῆς γὰρ αὐτῆς πάντες ἄν  
 ἥρων· κρίσιν γὰρ τὸ βλέπειν ἴσην ἔχει.  
 ἀλλ' ἡδονὴ τις τοὺς ἐρῶντας ἐπάγεται  
 5 συνουσίας; πῶς οὖν ἕτερος ταύτην ἔχων  
 οὐδὲν πέπονθεν, ἀλλ' ἀπῆλθε καταγελῶν,  
 ἕτερος <δ'> ἀπόλωλε; καιρός ἐστιν ἢ νόσος  
 ψυχῆς· ὁ πληγεὶς δ' ἴεισω δὴ† τιτρώσκεται.

Franco Ferrari's Italian translation runs as follows:

Che cosa incatena gli innamorati? La bellezza? Sciocchezze! Altrimenti tutti amerebbero la stessa ragazza, visto che gli occhi sono soliti giudicare con lo stesso criterio. Forse li attira il piacere dell'intimità? E allora com'è che dopo un incontro uno non prova niente e se ne va facendosi beffe di lei e un altro invece si sente morire? Che l'anima si ammali d'amore dipende dalle circostanze: resta ferito chiunque venga colpito al momento opportuno.<sup>4</sup>

Several points, however, need to be clarified.

First of all, the last verse is corrupt and its healing appears to be very difficult. We shall return to this later.

In this passage, from an unknown play, an equally unknown character asks himself why men fall in love: is the cause to be sought in what meets the eye (ὄψεις)? No: if it were so, all would fall in love with the same woman. In sexual pleasure? No, because after making love to a woman some react with scorn, some fall desperately in love.

Plutarch wholly agrees with Menander's way of arguing, as shown in the sequel of the fragment, where he confirms that love is inspired neither by beauty (ὄψεις) nor by sex (συνουσία): these are merely the initial circumstances giving rise to love (its ἀρχαί), but the real strength and root of passion resides elsewhere (ἡ δὲ ἰσχὺς καὶ ρίζωσις τοῦ

<sup>3</sup> PCG VI.2, (ed. R. Kassel - C. Austin, Berlin 1998), 378 f.

<sup>4</sup> Ferrari 2001, 639.

πάθους ἐν ἑτέροις). Plutarch, however, considers the poet's treatment of the problem to be superficial and hardly correct (ἢ δ' ἀπόδειξις ἐλαφρὰ καὶ οὐδ' ἀληθής)<sup>5</sup>: it is not true that if what meets the eye – *i.e.* beauty – were all-important, everybody would fall in love with the same woman. Some people are able to perceive beauty better than others, painters in particular, just as perfumes are better appreciated by those who are trained in the field, *i.e.* the makers of perfumes; the same applies to musicians as far as harmony and singing are concerned, or to cooks, when it comes to food; and it seems to be the case that some men are obsessed with sex (or specialized in it).

But aside from this clarifying interlude on Menander's method of argument (apparently following a Socratic-Platonic mold), which Plutarch cuts short in the following paragraph (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν ἐάσωμεν), it is clearly reaffirmed that Menander was right in everything else. He spoke well and correctly (εὖ καὶ ὀρθῶς): falling in love, which amounts to a disease of the soul, is nothing but a *καῖρός*, that is the mere chance of a moment. This is fully explained by Plutarch in the sequel. Menander's text still adds that whoever is smitten by love is wounded "right inside" (or this seems to be implied by the transmitted text, εἴσω δὴ – a reading, however, which is certainly corrupt, as also shown by the meter<sup>6</sup>); but Plutarch does not dwell on this.

While analyzing these two lines it is necessary to proceed slowly and carefully, since the text is brimming with problems. The last sentence is corrupt; and the preceding one has been misunderstood (see, *e.g.*, Sandbach's translation: "This disease comes when the heart is ready"). I believe that no doubt should be entertained as far as the meaning is concerned: the disease of love is the matter of a moment, of chance, of the right time (*καῖρός*); Plutarch's comments, in fact, are a crucial help for the understanding of Menander's meaning. He so argues at the end of the passage: "it is necessary that the party affected by love and the party causing it meet at the same time and place in a certain disposition

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of the few instances in which Plutarch takes the liberty to correct a statement by Menander; but a mere detail is concerned. Two more instances are found at *De aud. poet.* 33EF = *Praec. ger. reip.* 801C, and at *De tranq. an.* 474B. Every time these are only small 'philosophical' corrections in no way marring Plutarch's great esteem of the playwright, who remains, in his eyes, a supreme authority on the subject of love.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the edition by K.-A. The reading is undoubtedly banal and entails a broken spondee in the fourth place.

of mind, for the arousing factor is powerless (ἄκυρον) if a passive disposition is lacking. In other words, it is the matter of seizing (εὐστοχίας ἐστὶ) an opportunity (καιροῦ) which puts together at their top level (ἐν ἀκμῇ) what by nature is able to inspire love and someone ready to be affected by it”.

Taking the cue from this explanation of Plutarch’s, which punctually illustrates Menander’s first statement (namely, that “love is a καιρός), Sandbach tried to heal the last sentence of the playwright’s fragment by inserting the words εἰς ἀκμῆν. This, however, only proves that Sandbach did not understand this passage – as confirmed by his translation mentioned above. The previous attempts at correction may confidently be dismissed<sup>7</sup>. In my opinion, the last sentence has not been explained by Plutarch. His comments end with the discussion of love as καιρός, or product of chance.

These lines by Menander are deemed so important for the definition of love that Plutarch quotes them again at *Amat.* 763B, where he profusely comments upon the power of Eros, the god – the real responsible for falling in love, since love is θεοληψία, *i.e.* “divine possession” or “divine intervention”. In support of this statement Plutarch once more resorts to Menander, and quotes the last two lines of the same fragment. This text was believed for a long time to contradict the points made in Plutarch’s fragment 134 S.<sup>8</sup>: Francesco Becchi<sup>9</sup> is to be credited with offering a reliable – and in my opinion definitive – explanation, according to which the text from the *Amatorius* includes a series of rhetorical questions whose meaning must be taken as unambiguously positive, and does not mean “we understand Menander”, but rather “we learn from Menander”. This is unequivocally confirmed by LSJ: “μ. τί τινος learn from...”<sup>10</sup>.

For clarity, I will quote the whole passage with the new punctuation; I will actually use two question marks, to make my point stand out more clearly.

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<sup>7</sup> The following may be listed: εἰς ὃ δεῖ Wytttenbach, εἰς ὃδὶ G. Hermann, εὐστοχία Jacobs, οἶδεν ἤτι Papabasileios, οὖν ἐκόν Post (and Helmbold), εἴσεθ’ ἤτι Wilamowitz (and Hubert); εἰς ἐκόν appears in Sandbach’s apparatus, attributed to Post. In his 1967 Teubner edition Sandbach printed †εἴσω δῆ in the text, as still rightly done by K.-A.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Frazier 2003, 63-87.

<sup>9</sup> Becchi 2006, 81-92.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. LSJ *s.v.* (I); examples follow from Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles (and “etc.”).



greatly differs from the sentiment of love, which can only arise when the god Eros comes to the scene<sup>13</sup>.

The problem posed by the lacuna in Menander's verse, then, is still a puzzling, but perhaps not a totally insoluble one. It must be avowed that only a felicitous papyrological finding could provide an incontrovertible solution. Yet, after so much reflection upon the text, a possible solution seems to offer itself. I believe that what must be sought in this verse is not the god or the *akmé*, but rather a word related to the psychological sphere: in other words, I think that it was natural for the poet to explain that, though being affected by the disease of love is the matter of a moment, the disease itself is indeed psychological, that is... pertaining to the soul! Ψυχῆς is the only word in need of an explanation. Consequently, I would think of a (very simple) conceptual integration such as "but whoever is smitten is wounded in the heart", and suggest the conjecture εἰς τὸ κῆρ. As compared with other proposals I have considered, this one seems to me to be paleographically close to the transmitted εἶσω δῆ, metrically correct, and linguistically plausible, as made apparent by the parallel in Xenophon, *An.* 2.5.33 τετρωμένος εἰς τὴν γαστήρα. Actually, the more I think about it, the more I find it likely, as it seems very possible that in Stobaeus' tradition εἶστο may have been hastily read εἶσω and then 'completed' with the addition of δῆ in lieu of κῆρ (κ/δ exchange?), whereas in the *Amatorius* tradition the difficulty of reading simply resulted in a lacuna.

In fact, Plutarch adequately clarifies Menander's lines. Love is a disease of the soul and falling in love is the matter of a moment: those that fall ill, are smitten at the heart, but the only culprit is the God Eros, who strikes many people's heart, while ignoring the rest.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Barigazzi 1988, 99.