

Proof of Consummation of Marriage in Menander Rhetor*

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In the late third century CE, Menander Rhetor, writing from Athens or Laodicea to a student in Alexandria Troas¹, explains how to compose a bridal chamber speech (κατευναστικός). Not to be confused with the more familiar rhetorical wedding speech (ἐπιθαλάμιον), which was delivered earlier in the day at the wedding, the κατευναστικός was delivered outside the bridal chamber in the late evening following the wedding. It was, in Menander's words, "an exhortation to sexual intercourse" (προτροπή πρὸς τὴν συμπλοκήν, Men. Rhet. 405.22-23, ed. Russell and Wilson). Unlike the ἐπιθαλάμιον, the κατευναστικός purposefully ignores the moral qualities of the bride and praises only her "youth and beauty" (τῆς ὥρας καὶ τοῦ κάλλους, 405.28-31)². As for the groom, Menander advises the speaker to praise his "prowess and strength, encouraging him not to dishonor these

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1 — For the date of the work and the identity and location of Menander Rhetor II and his addressee, see Russell and Wilson 1981, xxxviii-xl; Race 2019, 4-14. Athens: Russell and Wilson 1981, xxxviii; Laodicea: Race 2019, 4-5. All translations are mine.

2 — Cf. Men. Rhet. 407.6, 13; 411.5-6.

things, since so many witnesses will be present on the day after the rite” (τοῦ δὲ νεανίσκου τὴν ἀλκὴν καὶ τὴν ῥώμην, παραινούντες μὴ καταισχύναι ταῦτα τοσοῦτων μαρτύρων γενησομένων τῇ ὑστεραίᾳ τῆς τελετῆς, 406.1-4). The “rite” or “initiation” mentioned here (τῆς τελετῆς) is simply the act of wedding-night intercourse, as many instances in this treatise make clear³. But to what will a large number of people serve as witnesses the next morning, and on the basis of what evidence? Menander does not say, and other references to “witnesses” and “testimony” in his work – concepts that were quite familiar to Menander’s readers from their previous intensive study of judicial rhetoric – are uninformative⁴. I suggest that this passage implies that visible postcoital proof of the new bride’s loss of virginity was exhibited before witnesses on the day after the wedding. To my knowledge, this would be the earliest literary evidence for this practice in the ancient Greek-speaking world⁵.

In the *κατευναστικός*, the speaker, who can be a male friend or relative of the groom (407.26), encourages the groom to make a display of his athletic and martial prowess behind the closed doors of the bedroom by consummating the marriage. He tells the groom to think of his bride as a beautiful object (405.28-31; cf. 411.5-6). He praises the groom for his manly physicality (τὴν ἀλκὴν καὶ τὴν ῥώμην, 406.2; cf. 406.11) and uses the threat of a public shaming the next morning if he should fail (406.1-4, 410.12-14). Menander Rhetor advises the speaker to say to the groom, “...we want you to make a public display (ἐπίδειξιν) of the prowess and strength that you possess, so that we, your agemates, and the members of your family themselves may be proud of you; and do not consider the matter of the public display as trivial” (τῆς ἀλκῆς ἧς ἔχεις καὶ ῥώμης ἐπίδειξιν βουλόμενοι σε ποιήσασθαι, ἵνα ἐπὶ σοι σεμνυνώμεθα αὐτοὶ τε οἱ τοῦ γένους καὶ ἡμεῖς οἱ ἡλικιώται · σὺ δὲ μὴ ἐν φαύλῳ τὰ τῆς ἐπιδείξεως ποιήσῃ, 406.11-14). Menander goes on to compare the upcoming night’s actions

3 — It is twice simply called “the rite/initiation” (Men. Rhet. 407.1, 408.16) and twice called “the rite/initiation of marriage (γάμου)” (405.19, 406.18). That this is not simply a metaphor for “wedding” or a pleonasm for “marriage” but a euphemism specifically for the act of wedding-night intercourse is clear from several passages: (a) “The occasion of the rite is one that is also dear to the god of marriages” (καιρὸς δὲ τελετῆς δὸς καὶ φίλος ἐστὶ τῷ θεῷ τῶν γάμων, 406.24-25). This rite has not yet occurred, but the wedding has, and the words immediately following show that “the occasion” is nighttime (406.25-29; cf. 410.18-25); (b) “initiation and marriage” are separate terms linked in a pair in 408.16; (c) The speaker asks rhetorically why everyone is gathered here, and answers, “for the young man’s marriage, of course, and his erotic initiation” (γάμου τοῦ νεανίου δηλονότι καὶ τελετῆς ἐρωτικῆς, 410.6-7). Using different vocabulary, Menander’s speaker also tells the bride and groom that they will have been “initiated” as a pair when they wake up the next morning (ὕμᾱς ... μεμνημένους, 408.10-12).

4 — Men. Rhet. 385.10, 439.27.

5 — Herrin and Kazhdan, *ODB*: “By dawn, the guests expected to see proof of the bride’s virginity and of the consummation of the marriage”. No source is given, and I have been unable to track one down.

to an athlete's performance in the Olympic or Pythian games, complete with a prize, a herald, a judge, and a public venue (406.14-17). He also compares the groom's upcoming performance to a soldier's engagement in battle, where he must not show cowardice but must fight in a manner worthy of his male ancestry (406.18-24)⁶.

At the end of the speech, the speaker encourages the audience, "while [the couple] themselves are initiating [each other] and being initiated in the rites of marriage" (ἕως αὐτοὶ τελοῦσι τὰ ὄργια τοῦ γάμου καὶ τελοῦνται, 409.8-9), to put on flower garlands, light torches, sing, clap their hands, and dance outside the bridal chamber (409.8-13). Meanwhile, the groom has "the act" (τὸ πρᾶγμα, 410.7; cf. ταῖς πράξεις, 407.17) to perform. The speaker has already told the groom that the attendees have grown impatient: "Why is the act not in the process of being completed already, for which we have convened here, in order to share in the pleasure of what is happening?" (τί οὖν οὐκ ἤδη τὸ πρᾶγμα τελεῖται, ἐφ' ᾧ δὴ καὶ συνεληλύθαμεν, συνησθησόμενοι τοῖς γινομένοις, 410.7-9). It is now the assembled company's duty to march the groom to the bridal chamber, "whether he wants to go or not" (καὶ ἐκόντα καὶ ἄκοντα, 410.17). Meanwhile, the wedding party remains outside the bridal chamber to celebrate and guarantee that consummation takes place, and tomorrow morning a large number of witnesses will come (τοσοῦτων μαρτύρων γενησομένων) to attest to its completion.

Male athleticism and martial valor are commonly associated with a woman's first experience of sexual intercourse in imperial-era literary sources. In the second or third century CE, the novelist Longus describes the sexual awakening of his young male protagonist Daphnis when an older, married woman from town seduces him with his first experience of sexual intercourse. "When his erotic education had just been completed" (τελεσθείσης δὲ τῆς ἐρωτικῆς παιδαγωγίας), Daphnis is eager to try what he has learned on his beloved Chloe, but the woman Lycaenion warns him against it (3.19, ed. Reeve):

ἔτι καὶ ταῦτά σε δεῖ μαθεῖν, Δάφνι. ἐγὼ γυνὴ τυγχάνουσα πέπονθα νῦν οὐδέν (πάλαι γάρ με ταῦτα ἀνὴρ ἄλλος ἐπαίδευσε, μισθὸν τὴν παρθενίαν λαβών), Χλόη δὲ συμπαλαίουσά σοι ταύτην τὴν πάλην καὶ οἰμῶξει καὶ κλαύσεται κὰν αἵματι κείσεται πολλῶ [καθάπερ πεφονευμένη]. ἀλλὰ σὺ τὸ αἶμα μὴ φοβηθῆς ἀλλ' ἠνίκα ἂν πείσης αὐτὴν σοι παρασχεῖν ἄγαγε αὐτὴν εἰς τοῦτο τὸ χωρίον, ἵνα κὰν βοήση μηδεὶς ἀκούση κὰν δακρύση μηδεὶς ἴδῃ κὰν αἵμαχθῆ λούσεται τῇ πηγῇ· καὶ μέμνησο ὅτι σε ἄνδρα ἐγὼ πρὸ Χλόης πεποίηκα.

6 — Cf. Men. Rhet. 407.29-408.1, 409.31-32, 410.12-13.

Furthermore, you must understand this, Daphnis. I have suffered nothing, since I am a [married] woman; for another man taught me this a long time ago, taking my virginity as his compensation. But when Chloe engages in this wrestling match with you, she will cry out and weep aloud and lie there in a lot of blood. But don't you be afraid of the blood – no, when you persuade her to give herself to you, bring her here to this place, so that, if she shouts, no one may hear her, and if she sheds tears, no one may see her, and if she is made bloody, she may wash herself in the spring. And remember that I have made you a man before Chloe.

Just as Menander compared the man's sexual performance to an athlete's performance at the Olympic or Pythian games (406.14-17), Longus depicts the sexually experienced woman telling the naïve Daphnis that intercourse with the virgin Chloe will be like a "wrestling-match" (συμπαλαίουσά σοι ταύτην τὴν πάλην). Since Chloe will cry out and weep during the act, the woman explains, Daphnis must bring her to this isolated place in the woods where no one can hear her. Lycaenion says that the result of this first act of intercourse will be "blood" (τὸ αἷμα), "a lot of blood" (αἷματι ... πολλῶ), and "bleeding" (αἱμαχθῆ)⁷.

Longus' connection of blood to a woman's first experience of intercourse is not uncommon in ancient thought, and fortunately it does not require us to take a position on the vexed question of ancient belief in or knowledge of the hymen to say this. The medical author Soranus of Ephesus acknowledged and accounted for the blood resulting from first intercourse while also explicitly rejecting the existence of the hymen⁸. For Soranus, vaginal bleeding after intercourse resulted from burst blood vessels, not from a ruptured membrane.

In the fourth century, Ausonius' raunchy Vergilian *Nuptial Cento* depicts the wedding night as a site of military prowess resulting in the bride's bleeding. Lifting and redeploying lines and half-lines from Vergil, Ausonius describes how the couple "tries out new battles" (*nova proelia temptant*, 102, ed. Green) and the groom "leans over and uses his very great strength to drive in his spear" (*intorquet summis adnixus viribus hastam*, 117), which "sticks there and, upon being driven in, drinks deeply of the virgin's blood" (*haesit virgineumque alte bibit acta cruorem*, 118) and "remains in the wound" (*persedit vulnere*, 121). The bloody violence associated with the penis as "spear" (*hastam*) is reinforced with the metaphor of the penis as a "javelin" (*telum*, 120), a "sword" (*mucro*, 121),

7 — See further Winkler 1989, esp. 120-122.

8 — According to Sissa 1990, 116 (citing Sor. *Gyn.* 1.16-17), Soranus accounted for "the bloody trauma of defloration" as "merely the effect of a first, violent penetration to which an organ not yet fully relaxed reacted painfully" (cf. Sissa 1990, 113); see also Kelly 2000, 25-26. For brief summaries of the modern debate over ancient belief in and knowledge of the hymen, see Kelly 2000, 22-28; Rosenberg 2018, 13-14. Sissa 2013 reviews the question in detail.

and a “nail” that the groom “drives in” (*clavumque adfixus*, 124). “With her womb reverberating”, writes Ausonius, “he drives it up past her ribs” (*uteroque recusso / transadigit costas*, 126-127). Just as Menander portrays the groom as a courageous soldier in battle (406.18-24), Ausonius too depicts intercourse on the wedding night as a battle, but he takes it an explicit step further by having the groom assault the bride-as-enemy with a weaponized penis and draw blood.

Ancient scholarship on weddings also supports the idea that consummation could entail violence. The scholia to Theocritus, *Idyll* 18, a Hellenistic wedding poem, characterize the actions of the husband on the wedding night as a rape and explain that the singing of other virgins outside the bridal chamber is intended to mask the cries of the virgin bride: “Virgins sing the wedding song in front of the bridal chamber so that the voice of the [one] virgin may not be heard as she is being raped by her husband, but may go unnoticed, being kept hidden by the voice of the [other] virgins” (ἄδουσι δὲ τὸν ἐπιθαλάμιον αἱ παρθένοι πρὸ τοῦ θαλάμου, ἵνα τῆς παρθένου βιαζομένης ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἡ φωνὴ μὴ ἐξακούηται, λανθάνη δὲ κρυπτομένη διὰ τῆς τῶν παρθένων φωνῆς, schol. in Theoc. *Id.* 18 arg.). These scholia, written in the present tense (ἄδουσι) and therefore purporting to describe contemporary practices, draw on research produced in the Augustan age⁹. In the second century CE, the lexicographer Pollux also purports to describe contemporary practices when he explains that a doorkeeper stands outside the bridal chamber to “prevent the [married] women from coming to the rescue of the bride as she shouts” (εἴργει τὰς γυναῖκας τῇ νύμφῃ βοώσῃ βοηθεῖν, 3.42)¹⁰. Note that these two early-imperial scholars corroborate the evidence from Longus that a virgin is expected to shout, cry, and shed tears (βοήσῃ, οἰμώξει, κλαύσεται, δακρύσῃ) at the consummation. And whereas Longus’ woman from town advises Daphnis for this reason to take the virgin Chloe to a remote area to deflower her, in the context of a societally-sanctioned consummation it is the job of other virgins to drown out the bride’s cries with singing and the job of a male doorman to block sympathetic married women from coming to the bride’s aid¹¹.

Longus and Ausonius connect consummation with blood. Furthermore, Longus describes the groom’s actions in athletic terms (wrestling), and

9 — Dickey 2007, 93.

10 — I found citations of Pollux and the scholia to Theocritus in Oakley and Sinos 1993, 37. In 138nn.106-117, they also helpfully cite Theoc. *Id.* 15.77 and Hsch. s.v. θυρωρός (Θ 957) for the doorkeeper; Pind. *Pyth.* 3.16-19; Theoc. *Id.* 18; Longus 4.40; and Himer. *Or.* 9.4 for songs at the bridal chamber; and *Anth. Pal.* 7.182 and 7.711 and Hsch. s.v. κτυπιῶν (Κ 4330) for the friends beating on the door.

11 — On the violence of the wedding night in Roman thought and practice, see Hersch 2020, 79-84.

Ausonius describes them in military terms. Pollux and the scholia to Theocritus do not mention blood, but they do depict consummation as a violent act during the commission of which the bride continually protests: Pollux uses the present participle βοώση (“shouting” or “screaming”), and the scholia to Theocritus speak of the bride’s voice “being kept hidden” (κρυπτομένη) while she is “being raped” (βιαζομένης). Menander Rhetor, by contrast, does not portray the wedding night as a time of violence and victimization, nor should we expect him to do so. This is a happy, festive occasion with a mixed-gender audience, including the bride, friends, and family. Nevertheless, the bride and groom and everyone celebrating outside the bridal chamber – and celebrating in part so as to drown out the sounds from inside the bridal chamber, if we follow the evidence of early imperial scholars – knew that this act/initiation/athletic contest/battle would draw blood, just as Longus and Ausonius and the medical writer Soranus did. And so, just after the speaker praises the groom’s manly physicality and warns him of public shame the next morning if he fails to consummate the marriage (406.1-4), and just before he tells the groom to make a “public display” (ἐπίδειξιν) of his physical power and not consider it a trivial matter (406.11-14), Menander admonishes the speaker in no uncertain terms to keep the speech clean and respectable: “But in doing this, we must guard against seeming to say anything disgraceful, cheap, or vulgar, by lowering ourselves to disgraceful and trivial things, for we must say whatever is honorable and whatever brings dignity and is charming” (φυλακτέον δ’ ἐν τούτῳ, μὴ τι τῶν αἰσχρῶν μηδὲ τῶν εὐτελῶν ἢ φαύλων λέγειν δόξωμεν, καθιέντες εἰς τὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ μικρά, λέγειν γὰρ δεῖ ὅσα ἔνδοξά ἐστι καὶ ὅσα σεμνότητα φέρει καὶ ἐστὶν εὐχαρῆ, 406.4-7). While Menander’s instructions for composing this very male-centered speech encouraging the groom to be physically aggressive implicitly confirm the picture of a potentially traumatic wedding night for the bride, he also emphasizes that this exhortation should not offer anything to spoil the mood: no coarse language, nothing vulgar, no allusions to anything unpleasant, and (I would add) certainly no mention of blood.

So who are Menander’s “witnesses” (μαρτύρων) who will be present tomorrow morning? To what will they bear witness, and on the basis of what evidence? If the witnesses are the same people who are now in attendance outside the bridal chamber, they could testify that they saw the couple enter the bedchamber and later heard sounds that confirmed that intercourse was taking place. Similarly, “[a] Kuwaiti tradition calls for the women of the household to sit in a room adjoining the bridal chamber to listen for any sounds that may come through the wall indicating that the marriage has been consummated and that the bride was a virgin”¹².

12 — Monger 2013, 178.

In ancient Greece, however, the festivities outside the bedchamber may have masked the sounds inside, as the scholia to Theocritus and the lexicographer Pollux explain, and as Menander himself implies (409.8-13). Another option is that the group could see the couple emerge from the bedchamber the next morning and draw the conclusion that intercourse had taken place from their appearance or demeanor or from verbal confirmation from one or both of them. However, this seems to me to fall short of the ἐπίδειξις (“public display”) demanded by the speaker as proof of the groom’s performance (406.11, 14). I prefer to think that “so many witnesses” refers to an even larger group that includes new arrivals the next morning, and that the speaker is applying additional pressure to the groom by reminding him of a separate, higher-stakes social event at which proof of his manliness will be expected and demanded. The exhibition of bloody sheets, bedclothes, or just a piece of cloth to guests at a party the next morning would clearly and unmistakably satisfy the conditions of the speaker’s exhortation to the groom, in which he warns him not to disgrace himself by failure to perform and reminds him that a large audience of witnesses will convene tomorrow to see the proof for themselves.

Outside of the ancient Greek-speaking world, potential parallels for my proposal abound in ancient, medieval, and modern times. In Deuteronomy 22:13-21, a husband announced that he found his new wife not to be a virgin; according to J. H. Tigay, the young woman’s parents countered his slander by “produc[ing] physical evidence of her virginity, namely, a sheet or garment that was spotted with blood when the marriage was consummated,” and he adds that “[t]his custom is well known in the Middle East and has been practiced among various Jewish and Arab communities until recent times”¹³. Among the medieval Orthodox Slavs, “...the traditional customs surrounding the celebration of a wedding, including escorting the new couple to bed and examining the bedclothes for blood the following morning, were designed to guarantee that the conjugal union was established”, and “...the family could be embarrassed if the proofs of virginity were not forthcoming the morning after the wedding”¹⁴. In modern times, “[a]mong Bulgarian Gypsies, a couple may elope for a night, have sex, return with the evidence of the girl losing her virginity (the blood-stained sheet), and be considered married; however, they would still be publicly married with the usual ceremony after settlement negotiations were completed between

13 — Tigay 1996, 204, 205 with 384n.47; *contra*, Kelly 2000, 19: “A modern reader may reasonably conclude that such ‘tokens’ refer to traces of blood on the garment (or wedding sheet), yet the text itself does not furnish the basis for such a conclusion”.

14 — Levin 1989, 87, 186.

the two parties”¹⁵. In rural areas of modern Egypt, in both Muslim and Coptic Christian marriages, a bloody handkerchief rather than a sheet is displayed the morning after the wedding¹⁶. Among the Wolof people of coastal Senegal, as described in 1936,

...the bride was escorted to the bridal chamber by her grandmothers and other older female relatives, and prepared for bed. The bridegroom was summoned, and the old women left. They would then listen for a scream from the bride, whereupon they would rush into the room, and the bridegroom would leave. The girl was expected to have fainted, and the women would revive her and remake the bed, replacing and taking away the sheet. The sheet was exhibited to the guests the next morning. If it showed signs of the loss of virginity, there would be rejoicing and the bride would be showered with gifts¹⁷.

Moreover, we already have independent knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman celebrations the next day at which the relatives of the bride and groom brought gifts to the bride in their new home¹⁸. Outside of ancient Greece, there are examples of such celebrations that also incorporate the proof of consummation. In Muslim weddings in Morocco, the new bride receives gifts from guests the next morning, still wearing her blood-stained sleepwear from the night before¹⁹. Among the Wolof people of Senegal, as we saw above, viewing of the bloody sheet was the precondition for celebration and gift-giving at a party the morning after consummation. Might something like this have happened in ancient Greece? The next morning, members of the wedding party could become “witnesses” by telling the assembled guests what they have seen, or better yet, the assembled guests could see the evidence for themselves and go out to testify to the larger community that the marriage has been consummated. In this way, the guests would serve an important social legitimation function for the two families, the newlywed couple, and their future children, which are frequently mentioned in the speech and which are in fact the purpose and goal of the marriage²⁰.

So far as I know, there is no other ancient Greek evidence for the exhibition of a blood-stained item at a social gathering on the morning after a marriage is consummated. While it is true that our knowledge of many

15 — Monger 2013, 330.

16 — Monger 2013, 251, 252.

17 — Monger 2013, 178.

18 — On the classical Athenian celebration called the *ἐπαύλια*, see Redfield 1982, 193-194, who cites *Suda* E 1990, which is derived in part from the lexicographer Pausanias Atticista E 49 (second century CE). On the wedding night and celebrations the next day among the Romans, see Treggiari 1991, 168-169.

19 — Monger 2013, 480.

20 — Men. Rhet. 407.8-9, 16, 19, 23-24; 408.7-8; 411.16-18, 20-21.

aspects of ancient Greek weddings depends on tenuous evidence assembled from different places and periods, few will be willing to accept the proposition of a supposedly widespread but previously unknown cultural practice on the basis of a single piece of ambiguous testimony. And rightly so. Nor would severely limiting the claim in space or time – suggesting, for example, that this was the custom only in imperial-era Alexandria Troas, where Menander’s addressee might have to deliver such a speech, and that Menander therefore tailored his instructions to conform to a unique local practice – necessarily make the proposition more credible. I offer this speculative interpretation of Menander Rhetor in order to suggest that a practice which is attested in other societies both historical and modern may perhaps have been part of wedding celebrations in some parts of the Greek-speaking world in Menander’s day, as well. My hope is at least to have made the possibility thinkable, so that scholars who *know* that there was no such practice in ancient Greece might be willing to reconsider familiar and potentially corroborating evidence in a new light.

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