

On Doctrinal Backgrounds of Popular Philosophy behind Menander's Maxims

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Moral teachings occur in Greek poetry as early as the Archaic Era, almost 500 years before Menander. They are found especially in didactic poetry, in Hesiod, among others, in the elegies of Solon and Theognis and in jambographs, at least in Archilochus and Semonides. The earliest collections of Menander's maxims date back to the beginning of the Imperial Era, and were then used, for instance, as teaching material in schools. The same thing happened in the case of *Disticha Catonis*, the Latin equivalent, written around 300 AD by Dionysius Cato: This "moral compass" became the most popular medieval schoolbook for teaching Latin. The text of Menander's Γνωμαί μονοστιχοί, consisting of a bit more than 1000 lines in classical Greek and of 877 maxims in all, survived in numerous papyri, ostracons and writing (wax) tablets till the 1st to 7th centuries AD. Furthermore, we have an Arabic translation dating back to the 9th century and a translation into Old Church Slavonic from about 1200 AD. The most recent critical edition is based on 40 Byzantine manuscripts from the period between the 13th and 16th centuries. *Editio princeps* was published by John Lascaris in Florence in 1494, and quite soon thereafter a reprint by Aldo Manuzio appeared in Venice; in addition, there are translations into Latin from the 16th and 17th centuries (H. Grotius, H. Estienne [1596] and R. Bentley). For at least 2300 years, these texts have had many kinds of effects: they have worked, for instance, as ethical "building material" for Roman Catholics, Orthodoxians, Muslims and Protestants. There is a relatively modern edition by J.M. Edmonds 1961

(Leiden, E. J. Brill, with an English translation). The most recent critical edition is by *Siegfried Jäkel, Menandri Sententiae e codicibus Byzantinis ductae. Academia Scientiarum Germanica Berolinensis, Lipsiae* 1964 (Teubner).

One must bear in mind that not all the maxims are based on Menander's own ideas or come from his comedies. Menander was a student of *Theophrastus* who had been a student of *Aristotle* in the *Lykeion* in Athens; besides, he knew *Epicure* and the *Cynics* as well. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace their influence in Menander's text, mainly because the isolated verses lack all context. Nevertheless, in 172 cases (some 20 per cent of the total 877) one might be able to make assumptions of their original provenance. Most of these cases seem to pertain to the world of thoughts of *Theophrastus* (66), almost an equal number to that of *Epicure* (60), three times less to that of *Aristotle* (23), and least of all to the ideas of the *Stoics* (11) and the *Cynics* (10). There are also some cases that seem to refer to the *Sceptics* and some others that even bear resemblance to later Christian ideas.

The central themes of the maxims are as follows: woman in good and bad, marriage (< *Theophrastus*?), friendship (< *Epicure*, among others), education, luck, scoundrels, doctors, praise of virtue, constraint of anger and speech, respect for gods, parents and law, diligence – useful advice for the soul.