

## Menander and the Macedonians: Dating the *Aspis*

Generally speaking, the business of dating Menander's plays is an exercise in futility. Out of the plays that we have today, only the *Dyskolos* can be dated with any precision. Like the rest of the Menandrian corpus, the *Aspis* has been frustratingly undatable since Kasser and Austin's publication of a partial text in 1969. I shall argue in this paper that stylistic arguments cannot provide a satisfactory date, but that historical references in the play offer a strong case for a date between 311 and 307.

In the introduction to his edition and translation, Arnott (1979) notes the contradictions in style presented within the play: on one hand the tripartite dialogues are handled poorly (if included at all), and the characterization of the main characters (Daos and Smikrines) is one-sided to the point of caricature. He suggests that these inadequacies suggest an early date for the play. It is quite possible, however, that the missing portions of the text included more tripartite dialogue and more subtle characterization. Furthermore, there are numerous features of the play, such as Daos' vivid description of the failed Lycian expedition and the use of tragic quotation to bring out an ironic atmosphere, that belie any attempt to paint the author as anything less than a skilled and mature artist.

The play's social background gives more secure grounds for dating. During the regency of Demetrius of Phaleron at Athens (317-307), the Athenian constitution was altered to place an emphasis on money rather than birthright when deciding citizenship status. From that, it is possible to speculate that just as citizenship was based on financial considerations, so too was the ability to seek/hold higher office. When Daos begins to bewail the fate of his supposedly-lost master Kleostratus, he gives Kleostratus' reasoning for going abroad, namely to accumulate enough wealth to dower his sister and to gain some rank (*strathgo* \n h) \ s[u/m]b[o]julon w)nomasmenon *Aspis* 7) in Athens upon his return. However, it seems that Kleostratus' family, at least if Chairestratus and Smikrines are to be taken as examples, seems to be from a sufficiently high status that, in a more democratic society, would be means enough to achieve office. This suggests that the play dates to some point in Demetrius' regency.

If Kleostratus was a mercenary during Demetrius' regime, following Trundle's arguments (2004) about the characteristics of Greek mercenaries, he would have most likely served at a time when Athens was at peace. During the first seven years of Demetrius' regency, Athens was embroiled in an ultimately unsuccessful campaign to retain control of Lemnos, Imbros, and Delos; but in the final four years of his control, Athens was at peace. During these years of peace, there was a greater chance that Athenian citizens would serve as mercenaries, as Kleostratus did in the *Aspis*. As a result, it is not only likely but most probable that the *Aspis* was produced between 311 and 307.

The ability to date the *Aspis* provides us the cultural context for the tumultuous city of Athens in which Menander lived and produced his plays. What we know about Athenian law from this period is extremely fragmentary, but perhaps by reading the *Aspis* in its proper socio-political context we can think more precisely about the functions of law and society in Macedonian Athens. The crux of the *Aspis*' plot is the conflict between love and property/familial laws that MacDowell rightly reads as critique of contemporary society (1982). But for us to accurately consider the ramifications of the play's story, we need to have the societal context. If I am right in hypothesizing a date of 311-307, we can supplement what we know from the play's details with what we know of Athens at this point in its history, which would greatly help our own understanding of both the *Aspis* and society.

#### Partial Bibliography

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