

Queering the Family in Hellenistic Philosophy: Menedemus of Eretria

Menedemus of Eretria is a relatively unknown philosopher from the early Hellenistic period who studied and taught at various stops in the eastern Mediterranean and developed ties with multiple Hellenistic courts, all of which was typical for someone in his profession. His private life, however, tells a different story. Menedemus' personal relationships are recorded in his biography in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (2.125-144). The significance of these anecdotes have not yet been fully appreciated. Menedemus fostered a range of non-normative relationships and built a queer family. Not much is known about his teachings, but once when a rival was trying to trap him in a logical paradox, he responded, "it is laughable for me to follow your rules, when it is possible to meet you on the threshold" (D.L. 2.135). This sentiment reflects a basic principle of queer theory (Haselswerdt et al 2024: 1-2), and this talk will show how a similar principle is reflected in Menedemus' personal relationships.

Menedemus had a life-long partnership with his 'best friend,' Asclepiades of Phlius. Menedemus was the younger *eromenos*, and they remained together long after the age at which society prescribed the end of the traditional pederastic relationship. The two were a prominent couple and were sometimes bullied by the Cynic philosopher, Crates of Thebes (D.L. 2.126, 2.137 6.91). Perhaps as a result, Menedemus occasionally tried to conceal the relationship in public (D.L. 2.131), an early and overlooked ancient example of 'being in the closet.' Archaeological surveys have even revealed the gravestone of Asclepiades, whom Menedemus buried in his own home town of Eretria (SEG LV 979; Haake 2010). Menedemus' life-long relationship with Asclepiades did not, however, prevent him from marrying. In fact, the couple married a mother-daughter pair, and they all lived together in a sort of commune (D.L. 2.137). The sources also mention a second marriage for Menedemus with a rich woman from Oropus, which produced three daughters (D.L. 2.137–138). The second marriage likely began around 20 years before the death of Asclepiades (Knoepfler 1991: 193), whose burial in Eretria suggests that Menedemus' marriage did not stop him from

remaining with his male life-partner. The specific nature and the extent of overlap between these relationships is difficult to determine, but it seems clear that Menedemus fostered relationships that stood on the threshold of the norms of the time. Such an openness to variation and individualized shaping of overlapping relationships are key components in the formation of queer families (Nicolaisen 2021: 23-30).

Menedemus deserves more attention in studies of queer figures from antiquity. His philosophical school was known for its Socratic bent, questioning established truths and reveling in paradoxes (Döring 1998: 244). He had ties to the Academy, but ultimately parted ways with their teachings (D.L. 2.134). A papyrus from Egypt (P. Oxy LII 3656; Meccariello 2017) even suggests that he took on a female former student of the Academy, perhaps the cross-dressing Axiothea of Phlius, who came from the same city as his boyfriend. If true, this is an instance of Menedemus supporting another queer person and building a queer chosen family.

The lives of philosophers are often either overlooked or treated as nothing more than trivia. Yet, Menedemus' life reveals his philosophy as well as or better than the scanty fragments of his work that have come down to us. He serves as a fascinating example of non-normative family formation in antiquity.

Bibliography

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