

Sketching the Stereotype: A Comparison of Characterization in Menander and Aristotle

Even before scholars had extensive lines of Menander, they were aware that stock characters were a key element to his works and the genre of New Comedy. Ancient authors such as Plutarch and Julius Pollux demonstrate that there was an awareness of the trope-based nature of these plays in antiquity. The relatively recent discovery of the *Dyskolos* did not contradict this assertion, but rather provided a play filled with recognizable stock figures. The use of generically structured plots might be a point of criticism for modern readers, but the effect of character on the narrative seems to be more of a focus within the genre than the structuring narrative itself. As Netta Zagagi states, “It has long been recognized that Menander’s main concern in *Dyskolos* is *not* the love element but a character study of the misanthrope” (Zagagi, 1995). Menander’s forte as a writer was his ability to create a condensed depiction of human traits in a way that was recognizable to his audience. New Comedy was not the only genre among the Greeks that focused on defining character, both ethical and rhetorical philosophy provide methods of examining and defining the behaviors and thoughts of certain character types. Aristotle perhaps provides the best examples of both ethical and rhetorical philosophy, at least in terms of undertaking extensive studies of character, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Art of Rhetoric* respectively.

My research for this presentation comes from my undergraduate thesis in which I compare Menander with Plato, Aristotle, and Theophrastus in terms of the respective author’s manner of characterization. Working with Koen de Temmerman’s definition of characterization (de Temmerman, 2014) I argue that there are many similarities in the methods of characterization between the playwright and the philosophers. For the sake of this presentation I

will only focus on one of Menander's plays, the *Dyskolos*, and only one of the philosophers, Aristotle.

The focus of my research is to look at the methods of characterization within the context of the text itself, yet still incorporate the social context of the play in my examination of characterization using scholars such as Susan Lape and William Owens. My assessment and analysis of the various forms of characterization in the play are primarily based upon my own reading, incorporating other scholarly commentary on the play for some support. I then compare the elements of character from the *Dyskolos* with their corresponding discussions in Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. My argument demonstrates that there are noteworthy similarities between the way certain character traits are depicted by Menander and Aristotle. In some cases, these similarities are general; in other cases, there are specific features that are unquestionably identical. Practically never is there disagreement between the way the two authors depict a characteristic.

My presentation recognizes that according to the ancient tradition Menander was essentially Aristotle's scholarly grandson, having been reported schooled by Theophrastus. I do not attempt to dismiss the notion that Menander's tutelage might be responsible for these similarities, but I also do not rest my argument upon that idea. Based upon my research, I maintain that there is not enough evidence to claim any cause for the similar elements of Menander and Aristotle; it could be the result of a scholarly tradition, or it could be the result of a shared cultural understanding of character. Either way, I believe that the similar methods of characterization found between authors writing in different genres, separated by two generations should affect the way we as scholars approach ancient notions of character.

Bibliography

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