

Creative Ways to Praise Gods: Marriage in Menander Rhetor's *Epithalamium*

Within his treatise on Epideictic speeches, Menander Rhetor provides tips for praising both humans and gods in different situations. Just like the earlier writers of progymnasmata handbooks, he gives general lists of praiseworthy subjects and criteria for praise. The orator uses these topics and thus learns how to praise a variety of subjects by using the same tool-kit and applying them in more challenging and creative ways. Generally, this list includes birth, native land, lineage/family, upbringing/nurture, virtues, and deeds (Theon 110-112; Ps. Herm. 15-17; Aphth. 36, 22R). Praising gods, on the other hand, provides an interesting opportunity for the orator to apply the encomiastic topics to such a grand subject. In his section on the *Epithalamium* Menander personifies the god Marriage and sets him within an atypical version of the creation myth. Rather than writing strictly a hymn to the god, which would include things like his powers and cult worship, Menander creatively praises the god by applying criteria typically found in an *encomium* to a person. By reversing the norm of encomiastic elements, such as lineage and deeds, Menander gives Marriage his own agency and makes his deeds more notable.

First Menander reinterprets the topics of lineage and nurture by making Marriage the ancestor and caretaker of all things. In *encomia* ancient authors agree that good birth and noble ancestors ought to be mentioned in order to demonstrate the impressive heritage of the one being praised (Theon 110; Aphth. 36, 22R). Since Marriage was born directly from Chaos and Nature one cannot provide a long list of ancestors. Menander instead reverses the praise of lineage by replacing the usual list of ancestors with the countless creations of Marriage. Where an *encomium* would trace the lineage of the subject starting from a certain god and working up to his more recent and esteemed family members, Menander traces the descendants of Marriage

(401.5-402.5). Ultimately, everything since creation has happened due to Marriage. The praise of lineage is made all the more impressive when the noble creations come from Marriage and not the other way around.

Since Marriage governs unions and birth, Menander then praises the god's deeds in creating life and demonstrates how the god continues to nurture mankind. In his handbook on progymnasmata, Theon claims that deeds are praiseworthy if they benefit the common good. (Theon 110). Menander's description of Marriage perpetually joining things is essentially praise of Marriage's endless deeds. Marriage was the first to join gods, people, and everything else in the world. Furthermore, Marriage benefited the common good by providing things such as farmable land (Men. Rh. II. 401.25). Marriage's deeds are all the more impressive because he provides things that are not only beneficial but crucial for human life. Instead of praising how the god was raised and nurtured, Menander shows how Marriage nurtures mankind by giving them the tools for sustaining life. Thus, Menander has creatively intertwined the creations of Marriage to fit the criteria of lineage, deeds, and nurture. This unique form of praise demonstrates how powerful Marriage is and ultimately why marriage as an event should be desired.

In section 22R Aphthonius says that the orator should also compare the subject to someone more esteemed in order to elevate the new subject to a higher status (Kennedy 108). Menander accomplishes this by comparing Marriage's deeds to Prometheus, who "merely brought people fire, while Marriage gives us immortality" (401.20). Here Menander is showing that Marriage has made mankind immortal through human progeny. This statement solidifies Marriage's continuous role in creation and how Marriage has benefited humans through reproduction. Furthermore, by setting Marriage over Prometheus, Menander demonstrates how

important his subject matter is. Prometheus would not have even existed if not for Marriage, who precedes all gods.

As Menander praises Marriage he must find unique ways to apply the typical topics of *encomium*. He does this by first establishing Marriage's birth and power from the very moment of creation. The marvelous birth and age of the god allowed Menander to get creative with the topics that typically follow, that being lineage, nurture, and deeds. These last three topics of *encomium* are tied together and reinterpreted to make Marriage the head of its family and the creator and caretaker of all things. Menander's section on *Epithalamium* shows how an orator could praise a person or a god with the same tools from their education, no matter how different.

Bibliography

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