

“Worst Bad Fortune” or Not? The Revival of the Old Lover Theme in Menander

The motif of the old lover has one of its oldest known origins in the Archaic poets (Gomme and Sandbach 1973: 582), particularly in Anacreon (Fr. 1), but the reception of this theme in Menander needs further exploration. Menander’s comedy *Samia* presents an elderly man, Demeas, who has taken a Samian *pallakē*, Chrysis, into his home at the recommendation of his adopted son Moschion (23-27). Scholarship on Menander has not yet dealt with the question of how Menander and Anacreon depart from the negative judgment of sexual love in old age. Conca (1970: 81-83) tracks the theme of the “*vecchio innamorato*” in Menander but does not compare Demeas with other old men in the Menandrian plays except for the old miser Smikrines from the *Aspis*. Gomme and Sandbach (1973: 582) connect Menander with Archaic lyric but mention only Ibycus as a source for Demeas’ characterization. MacCary (1973: 315-16) has written on Demeas’ lack of trust but omits discussion of Demeas’ exceptional generosity, which stands out from that of other elderly men in Menander’s comedies. Kiritsi (2013: 96-99) rightly connects Menander with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* but omits a discussion of Aristotle’s description of old men in the *Rhetoric*. Drawing from the second book of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in which the Stagirite outlines and contrasts the personalities of old and young men, this paper argues that Menander characterizes Demeas as possessing both the virtues and the vices of young men, even though Demeas is ultimately vindicated by his reunification with Chrysis at the end of the play.

In other works, however, Menander seems to follow an earlier literary tradition in which erotic love is deemed inappropriate for a man of advanced age. In one of the *Monostichoi* the poet states that “an elderly lover is the worst bad fortune” (Meineke 1970: 342, l. 90, translations

mine). In a fragment of his mostly lost play *Ἀνεψιοί* (*Cousins*) Menander connects love with youthful foolishness: “For love by nature is a thing deaf to the one who gives advice; it is not easy for youth to overcome the god [of love] by reason” (Meineke 1970: 86, Fr. 1). This same skepticism is seen in Archaic poets such as Mimnermus (Fr. 1) and Theognis (Fr. 1). In book two of the *Rhetoric* Aristotle observes that young men are inclined toward sexual pleasure but are also more likely to be generous (1389a3 and a14), whereas old men tend to be greedy and cynical (1390b13). Anacreon, however, is unapologetic about being in love in old age (Fr. 358; Kantzios 2010: 582). In the *Samia* Menander not only follows Anacreon’s model of a socially acceptable old lover but also emphasizes the fact that Demeas, although prone to the faults of the young, is one of the most generous characters in the extant comedies.

Demeas displays both the virtues and vices of young men as described in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. He is generous by adopting and liberally raising Moschion (13-17), but he is also passionate and jealous about his concubine and hastily concludes from her nursing an infant that she has given birth to Moschion’s child (ll. 316-18; Cinaglia 2012: 555). He adopts a vengeful and juvenile attitude towards her and refuses to hear the full story from his slave Parmenon (321 ff.; Sommerstein 2013: 380). He expels Chrysis from his home (359 ff.) and even urges that her alleged child be exposed to die (372-73). Demeas, however, also displays self-control in that he is willing to part with Chrysis rather than live with her in shame as a result of her supposed relationship with Moschion (Conca 1970: 82; Flury 1968: 49). Although Menander in his fragments suggests that love in old age is an unfortunate occurrence, the happy reunion of Demeas and Chrysis in the *Samia* reveals that Menander has no consistent opposition to love in advanced age and even believes that such love can promote virtue.

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