CHAPTER ELEVEN

COMIC FRAGMENTS:
TRANSMISSION AND TEXTUAL CRITICISM

HEINZ-GÜNTHER NESSELRATH

Preliminary Remarks

For a very long time after the end of antiquity, Greek comedy was mainly represented by just one author—namely, Aristophanes. In the course of the twentieth century, papyri have restored to us, at least up to a substantial degree, another—namely, Menander. Still, two authors, even though they may be the most excellent of their kind, cannot possibly provide an adequate picture of a genre in whose development hundreds of authors had participated over hundreds of years, producing and staging thousands of plays. To make up for the inevitable distortions in our view of Greek comedy that looking only at Aristophanes and Menander would cause, we have to take into account the widely spread debris of all those comic plays that have not survived (or been restored by papyrus), that is, tens of thousands of fragments of very variable length (ranging from just one word to sometimes—but very rarely—fifty or more lines) and content (ranging from unusual forms of single words to sometimes quite precious glimpses into a plot of a play). On the following pages, I shall first have a look at the sources of our Greek comic fragments¹ and then will try to formulate some observations and tentative rules of how we

¹ This task has been made fairly easy by Poetae Comici Graeci, the new comprehensive edition of all the remains of ancient Greek comedy by Rudolf Kassel and Colin Austin (1983–), of which by now only two volumes are still missing, that is, vol. VI 1 (covering the papyrus fragments of Menander) and vol. III 1 (the plays of Aristophanes preserved in the manuscript tradition). Since the appearance of the first volume (IV) in 1983, PCG has been deservedly praised by every reviewer, for never have the comic fragments been presented more fully and more clearly; among other things, the presentation of those fragments that have been preserved by the very complex lexicographical traditions must be regarded as a most impressive advance compared with all earlier editions.
should deal with them when we try to tease comic fragments out of their contexts.

At first look, there does not seem to be much difference between the various sources of comic fragments, and in fact pretty much the same authors and works provide fragments from comic plays of all stages of the development of the genre. On closer inspection, however, those sources quite noticeably vary in frequency from one phase of comedy to another, thus reflecting how later epochs took quite different interests in those phases. To demonstrate this, I will look at a few representative authors from Old, Middle, and New Comedy each and see how they fared in later times respectively.

1. Transmission

a. Old Comic Fragments

First, the oldest of the Big Three of Old Attic Comedy, Cratinus. He is present in PCGT IV with 514 fragments (of which 10 are dubious). Of these fragments, the largest group is provided by the lexicographical tradition, which—while beginning ultimately in Hellenistic times (see below)—produced its most important extant representatives (apart from Hesychius of Alexandria, about whom more follows) between the ninth and the eleventh century: 144 Cratineahave been preserved in the lexicon.

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2 This approach may actually provide a further argument for the tripartite division of Attic comedy as being something real and not an invention of scholars in later antiquity, as has been thought by a number of classicists. I hope to have provided other arguments to refute this view in Nesselrath (1990a).

3 Please note that the numbers given in the following survey do not exactly add up to the total of 514, but exceed it, because numerous fragments are found in more than one source.


5 For a very long time, Photius’ lexicon could be read only with very substantial gaps: the codex Galeanus edited by R. Porson (1822) missed large parts of letter α, the whole of letters β–δ, and substantial parts of letters ε, ξ, η, and ψ, as well as the end. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the missing parts of α could be largely restored by a newly edited codex Berolinensis (Reitzenstein 1907). It was only in 1959 that the codex Zavordensis was discovered, the one manuscript containing the complete Photius Lexicon, though unfortunately rather often in an abbreviated form (compared to its fuller ancestor, the Galeanus); for some parts the Zavordensis writer himself provided