PROVERBS IN MENANDER’S *DYSKOLOS*
THE RHETORIC OF POPULAR WISDOM

BY

YANNIS Z TZIFOPoulos

The traditional approach to ancient Greek proverbs has almost been limited to collecting them and listing references of their occurrence in ancient authors. The significant dimensions that have been left out are the reason for the proverb’s employment by a particular author, its function within its immediate context, and especially its implications on character portrayal and social behavior within the wider narrative. These are some of the proverbs’ significant aspects Aristotle recognised and studied systematically in his lost work *Παρομοίαι*. Recently, Richard P Martin has argued convincingly that proverbial expressions belong to “a genre of social speech” and “have their own poetic markings.” A thorough study, then, of proverbs is very much justified.

1) This, for example, was a favourite dissertation topic at the turn of the century in Germany: L. Bauck, *De proverbiis et locutionibus ex usu vitae communis petitis a lud Aristophanem comicum* (Königsberg 1880); T. W. Rein, *Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten bei Lukian* (Tübingen 1894); C. Wunderer, *Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten bei Polybios* (Leipzig 1898); E. Salzmann, *Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten bei Libanius*, Diss (Tübingen 1910); E. von Prittwitz-Gaffron, *Das Sprichwort im griechischen Epigramm*, Diss (München 1912); D. Tsirimbas, *Sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche Redensarten bei den Epistolographen der zweiten Sophistik Alkiphron-Cl Aelianus*, Diss (München 1936).


2) In 5 26 Diogenes Laertios registers this work of Aristotle, and in 5 45 he mentions Theophrastus’ *Ἰπτὶ παραμιμὴν ἃ* For Aristotle’s interest in proverbs see: Huxley, 332-3 and the bibliography there.

3) R. P. Martin, *Hesiod’s Metanastic Poetics*, Ramus 21 1 (1992), 11-33, esp. 25. His discussion of proverbs in Hesiod (23-7) is indeed informative. The absence of
by their generally accepted folklore aspect the proverb is one of the few remnants of ancient literature that was commonly understood by everyone, because it embodied popular wisdom. Often that wisdom was embellished by a story or vice-versa proverbs originated in fables. The ancient reader/audience, one may safely assume, understood at once the background of the proverb and its usage in a particular setting. In literary texts, therefore, proverbs uniquely combine everyday language, the parlance of the common folk so to speak, with literary language.

These general thoughts anticipate much of the intent and focus of this paper and they will be elaborated and clarified by the discussion of proverbs in Menander’s Dyskolas. The selection is intended proverbs from Homer’s epic and the “sudden” appearance of them in Hesiod and especially in the corpus of Greek Lyric Poetry strongly suggests the parallel existence of what we may call with Martin a sub-genre of proverbs within the larger context of wisdom literature. Indeed, in that respect we may understand the proverbial tone of many Archilochian fragments that were preserved for that very reason, as my future study on Hesiod and Archilochus and their use of proverbs will try to show.

4) The term fable is used here instead of story to denote a category of proverbs that originated in or were responsible for the creation of a story. On this see especially D. Loukatos, Νεοελληνικά Παραμύθια (Athens 1978), who collected modern Greek proverbs behind which lies a story; and also P. Carnes (ed.), Proberbia in Fabula Essays on the Relationship of the Proverb and the Fable, Sprichwörterforschung 10 (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris 1988) with a briefly annotated bibliography in 333-43 for further reading on the subject.


5) For the significant possibilities and some interesting ideas for classroom teaching of proverbs see: J. F. McKenna, The Proverb in Humanistic Studies Language, Literature and Culture, Theory and Classroom Practice, French Review 48 (1974), 377-91

6) The text of Menander’s Dyskolas is F. H. Sandbach, Menandri reliquiae selectae (Oxford 1972) — J. D. Quinn’s study, Menander and his Proverbs, CJ 44 (1949), 490-94, concentrates on proverbs that “fall into one of the three great general divisions of philosophical studies, that is, as they concern God, the world, and man.” (491) This definition apparently includes only one category of proverbs, i.e., maxims and gnomes that are registered under what may be called popular philosophy. Menander’s proverbs are by no means limited to those, or to the three subjects that Quinn has chosen to illuminate.