HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Menander (342 B.C.-292 B.C.)

Menander was born to a prosperous Athenian family, and was privileged to move in influential social circles, where he had ample leisure to observe the ins and outs of big city social life. He was a prolific dramatist, one of the most prized of Greek writers, yet for all that he comes down to us in fragmentary condition. As recently as the eleventh century A.D. twenty two of Menanders' plays were known, in a Byzantine manuscript, but today only play, the *Dyskolos*, remains to us in its entirety.

The world view of Theophrastus' *Characters* is all over the work of Menander, who was probably his pupil. *The Characters*, as we have seen, are the byproduct of a society on show to itself, parading before itself those stylized stock figures of a sophisticated Hellenistic city open to observation. We have come a long way, sociologically, from the days of the Persian invasions, the tragedies of Aeschylus, the polis that Thucydides anatomized; and although the time separating Menander from that era is only a little over a century, we can see the huge growth of 'bourgeoisification' that has taken place in the intervening years. The typical plot of the Menander play bears out this change. We are in a world of stock plots: the type of them would be the kind of line we know from Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well* or *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*: a young woman is seduced, a child born of the rape, the child abandoned, the villain disappears, the villain later reenters the life of the former maiden, the two are married—without knowing their mutual pasts--the child (now of marriage age) returns to the vicinity of her parents, her parents are made aware by chance comments of the hidden bond that joins them all, and a grand reconciliation brings light hearted harmony back to the world.

The world of Aristophanic comedy contains the same reconciliatory tweaks as that of Menander, but there the similarity stops. What in Aristophanes is hard hitting and sharp edged is in Menander light—though, as in the above plot-precis, it is dealing in social criticism. Aristophanes still remains proximate to the archaic world of rural festival and primitive rite; while Menander is writing for a 'Broadway audience.'