



LUND UNIVERSITY

The Apophthegmata Patrum and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition

Larsen, Lillian

Published in:

Studia Patristica. Vol. XXXIX : Historica, Biblica, Ascetica et Hagiographica

2006

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Larsen, L. (2006). The Apophthegmata Patrum and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition. In F. Young, M. Edwards, & P. Parvis (Eds.), *Studia Patristica*. Vol. XXXIX : Historica, Biblica, Ascetica et Hagiographica (Vol. 39, pp. 409-415). Peeters Publishers.

Total number of authors:

1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

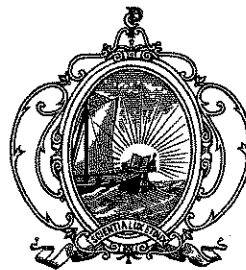
STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. XXXIX

Papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference
on Patristic Studies held
in Oxford 2003

Historica
Biblica
Ascetica et Hagiographica

Edited by
F. YOUNG, M. EDWARDS and P. PARVIS



PEETERS
LEUVEN - PARIS - DUDLEY, MA
2006

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Classical Rhetorical Tradition

Lillian LARSEN, New York

Introduction

The French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot suggests the simple interpretative principle of reading texts 'in light of the literary genre to which [they belong]'¹. At minimum, this requires consideration of often rigorously codified rules, forms, and models of discourse that function as the framework for a given narrative form². The *Apophthegmata Patrum* have largely escaped such literary and rhetorical contextualization³. Instead, a search for 'origins' and a derivative preoccupation with ascertaining 'authenticity' has characterized a significant portion of twentieth-century scholarly treatment of these texts.

History of Scholarship

In the early decades of the century, Wilhelm Bousset linked the 'reliability' of an apophthegm to criteria having to do with the form of the saying and to some degree its content. Forms compatible with orality, such as *sententiae*, parables, and brief anecdotes, were characterized as part of an original tradition⁴. Narratives, dialogues, and exhortations were thought to be later developments⁵. Subsequent scholarship has generally followed Bousset, and the particularities of his analysis have been refined. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Jean-Claude Guy argued a schema of three stages in the development of the *Apophthegmata*: the primitive and authentic *logos*, the generalized

¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, tr. Michael Chare (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 52.

² Hadot, *Philosophy*, 7.

³ One of few exceptions is Kathleen McVey's essay, 'Chreia in the Desert: Rhetoric and the Bible in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*', in *Early Church in its Context* ed. Abraham J. Malherbe, et al. (London: Brill, 1998), 245-56.

⁴ Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata, Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1923), 76-93.

⁵ Samuel Rubenson, *Letters of St. Antony* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 151.

logos, and the narrative or sermon⁶, positing that only the third, and most developed, stage is evidenced in extant monastic collections⁷. The generalization of the primitive *logos* (stage two in his construct) signifies a first step away from the spiritual purpose for which the sayings were intended⁸. More recently, Graham Gould has faulted both Bousset and Guy with being 'led away by a theory that is too simple for the material'⁹. Building on the thought of Lucien Regnault¹⁰, Gould argues that narratives, biblical interpretations, and exhortations must also be counted as 'authentic'¹¹.

Establishing and preserving the particularity and purity of an 'original' tradition is an equally fixed element in scholarly treatments of the pedagogical and literary aspects of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Depictions of the desert fathers as 'educational innovators' offer the *Sayings* as the embodiment of a unique spiritual and moral transmission that took place between master and student. Guy describes the *Apophthegmata* as the 'expression of an altogether original method of spiritual education'¹². Benedicta Ward names them 'a remarkable new literary genre'¹³. Douglas Burton-Christie suggests that 'in the stark solitude of the desert a vibrant and original spirituality was born'¹⁴. Each characterizes the principles of the 'university of the desert'¹⁵ as singularly innovative.

The 'ring' of this commentary is hauntingly familiar when placed alongside the 'myth [of] a "uniquely" pristine "original" Christianity which suffered later "corruptions"'¹⁶. The erudite search for origins within and among the monastic *apophthegmata* bears remarkable resemblance to the parallel 'quest for a singular genesis of Christianity'¹⁷. Vehement denial of 'pagan' influence

⁶ Jean-Claude Guy, 'Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata Patrum*', *RechScRelig* 43 (1955), 252-8; Jean-Claude Guy, 'Note sur l'évolution du genre apophthegmatique', *RAM* 32 (1956), 63-8.

⁷ Guy, 'Remarques', 252-8; Guy, 'Note', 63-8.

⁸ Jean-Claude Guy, 'Les *Apophthegmata Patrum*', in *Théologie de la vie monastique*, ed. G. LeMaitre, Collection Théologie 49 (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 73-83; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: Collection Systematique*, SC 387 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993).

⁹ Graham Gould, 'A Note on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*', *JThSt* NS 37 (1986), 134.

¹⁰ Lucien Regnault, *Les Sentences des Pères du désert, Nouveau recueil*, 2nd edn (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre-de-Solermes, 1977) 10.

¹¹ Gould, 'Note', 133-8.

¹² Jean-Claude Guy, 'Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers', *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974), 44.

¹³ Benedicta Ward, SLG, tr., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), xix.

¹⁴ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1993), 3.

¹⁵ As cited in Guy, 'Educational Innovation', 44.

¹⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 43.

¹⁷ Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence, Mark and Christian Origins* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 3.

on nascent Christian ideals is recorded as early as Tertullian's infamous second-century query, – 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' However, any 'notion of an origin within history is strange if taken to the extreme'¹⁸. There is no startling moment that accounts for the emergence of a particular literary genre, pedagogical approach, or body of texts¹⁹. Each can only be understood as developing within and out of a distinct historical and intellectual frame.

While questions pertaining to 'origins' and 'authenticity' have their place, measures aimed at adducing verifiable kernels of 'truth' at the heart of recorded collections of *apophthegmata* can only be speculative in nature. The search for evidence of an original tradition is premised on the assumption that there is an 'originary' moment to be found; that the genesis of the monastic *apophthegmata* resides within the locus of late antique monasticism and that the collections of sayings attributed to the earliest monks are largely without precedent. In order to nuance claims for the *Apophthegmata Patrum* as ideologically, pedagogically, and literarily singular, it is important to consider these sayings against the backdrop of their wider philosophical and rhetorical milieu.

Gnomic Traditions

While the origins and development of the earliest monastic collections of *apophthegmata* are decidedly murky²⁰, formal collections of classical sayings and maxims are first explicitly referenced in the fourth century BCE²¹. Early anthologies draw on the works of Homer, Menander, Euripides, and Pindar with particular frequency. Appearing in the guise of rhetoric, philosophy, and history, sayings were copied and recopied, circulating freely across literary genres. The most common collections are school-text anthologies. More gnomic sayings and stories survive as school texts than fragments of any other ancient form²².

Ostensibly compiled to familiarize students with a spectrum of classical authors, these collections also functioned as something of a distillation of approved social mores. Underscoring the relationship between education and

¹⁸ Mack, *Myth*, 3.

¹⁹ Mack, *Myth*, 4.

²⁰ Rubenson summarizes this discussion in chapter 7 of *Letters of St. Antony*, pages 145-62.

²¹ Plato, *Leg.* 810e-812a.

²² Cf. Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 120-51; Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001); Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds., *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric: The Progymnasmata* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Ronald F. Hock and Edward N. O'Neil, eds., *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2002).

society, they served to communicate the strictures of civic virtue and to emphasize an often hierarchical status quo. In training students to live well, sayings were instrumental in forming the type of citizen that a particular society needed²³. In Plato's dialogue on *The Laws*, the Athenian interlocutor suggests that the end result of 'compil[ing] anthologies of the poets and mak[ing] collections of whole passages, which ... must be committed to memory' is not only that a student gain wide familiarity with literature, but 'to make a good and wise man of him'²⁴. Similarly, in the *Antidosis*, Isocrates explicitly links the fortunes of the state with educating the next generation of its citizens²⁵. As a pedagogical ideal he suggests two disciplines – 'physical training for the body ... and for the mind, philosophy'²⁶. Moulding a citizenry distinguished by wisdom (φρόνησις), sound judgment (σωφροσύνη), justice (δικαιοσύνη) and courage (ἀνδρεία) was a matter of broad civic concern²⁷.

By the early decades of the Common Era, these blueprints of civic formation included the storied *exempla* of illustrious statesmen and philosophers²⁸. Narrative collections such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* or Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* were self-consciously patterned so as to 'inculcate moral values in the reader'²⁹. Six sets of *apophthegmata* are included in Plutarch's *Moralia*. Quintilian discusses *gnomai* in connection with the teaching of rhetoric, while Seneca approves of gnomonic advice because of its inherent capacity to arouse and catalyze virtue and to strengthen judgement concerning good and evil³⁰. Second century rhetorical manuals detail the mechanics of prescribing gnomonic sentences as subject matter for elementary and advanced instruction in rhetoric³¹. As students honed their syntactical and rhetorical skills through reading, memorizing, expanding, praising, refuting, and paraphrasing the wisdom of philosophers, statesmen, and kings, they also came to an intimate knowledge of the teachings and the civic *exempla* of their illustrious forebears.

²³ Morgan, *Literate Education*, 242.

²⁴ Plato, *Leg.* 810e-812a. Tr. from Plato: *Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns; tr. A.E. Taylor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Isocrates, *Antidosis* 174 (ed. and tr. George Norlin, LCL).

²⁶ Isocrates, *Antidosis* 181.

²⁷ Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

²⁸ Exemplars are largely male. However, Plutarch's *Moralia* includes the 'Sayings of Spartan Women' and 'Bravery of Women'.

²⁹ Timothy E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

³⁰ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.5.3; Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 94.28-29, 32, 34.

³¹ Hermogenes, *Progymnasmata*; Theon, *Progymnasmata*, ed. and tr. James R. Butts, 'The Progymnasmata of Theon' (Ph.D. Dissertation: Claremont Graduate School, 1986); Hock and O'Neil, *Progymnasmata*; Hock and O'Neil, *Classroom Exercises*.

Monastic Gnomologies

In dissociating 'Jerusalem' from 'Athens', Tertullian is not alone in disclaiming 'pagan' influence on early Christian ideals. At the far end of a spectrum of apologists, Tatian, the *Didascalia*, and Epiphanius of Salamis give explicit voice to a rejection of Hellenistic rhetoric and pedagogy out of hand³². It is plain, however, that even the most fervent proponents of such a position have synthesized some measure of Greek philosophy and eloquence with the particularities of their Christian message. This is evident in monastic practice as well. Countering claims for radical innovation on the part of the early monks, monastic apophthegmatic traditions afford a particularly lucid example of such a Greek/Christian synthesis.

In keeping with extant Graeco-Roman texts, the most extensive literary records that come down to us from the early 'monastic' communities are also gnostic in form. Preserved in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are recorded in three main anthologies – the alphabetical collection, the systematic collection, and the anonymous collection. Other compilations of sayings are attributed to Evagrius, Arsenius, Pseudo-Macarius, and the 'Twelve Anchorites'. *The Sentences of Sextus* are thought to derive from an early monastic milieu.

Elsewhere I have considered the relationship between these collections of sayings and monastic literacy³³. One can speculate whether anthologies such as the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were employed in teaching rudimentary grammatical and rhetorical skills even as the wider rhetorical schools employed the sayings of the philosophers. In addition to formulaic parallels, however, the content of these narratives speaks to their rootedness in both Christian and classical tradition. Like the gnostic collections of a wider Graeco-Roman milieu, the monastic apophthegmata evidence the distillation of patently humanistic ideals. Even stories describing monks in angelic terms, the highest compliment that could be paid a virtuous member of the community, showcase *exempla* modelling behaviour conducive to peaceful coexistence in a this-worldly frame. Abba Macarius is remembered as 'a god upon earth' because he treated the faults that he saw as though he did not see them, and those that he heard as though he did not hear them³⁴.

Consonant with apophthegmatic anthologies of wider pedagogical acclaim the illustrious exemplars of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are held up for emulation in behaviour that applies oil to the wheels of life in community.

³² Tatian, *Oration* 22-28; *Didascalia apostolorum* (Syr.) 1.6; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, esp. hapr. 5-8.

³³ Lillian Larsen, 'Ørkenfedrenes *Apophthegmata* og den klassiske Retoriske Tradisjon', in *Meddelanden från Collegium Patristicum Lundense* 16 (Spring, 2002), 26-37.

³⁴ Macarius 32.

Inheriting Christian and Jewish imagery, alongside the civic traditions of Hellenistic philosophy, the collections of monastic apophthegmata render the ideals of a monastic context as something of a hybrid plant, 'born of the crossing of a paradisaical, other-worldly belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth'³⁵. If the rewards garnered by these saintly ascetics were ultimately heavenly, their virtue could hardly have yielded negligible this-worldly dividends. Couched in otherworldly nomenclature, there is a this-worldly civic pragmatism that runs through these narratives.

Like the moral narratives of the late antique popular philosophers, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* may be characterized as both nostalgic and forward-looking in their reconstitution of history. In a re-presentation of the heroic past, these accounts of the virtue of 'great men'³⁶ of a bygone era address communal concerns of the present. To a greater or lesser degree, the monastic heroes have been recreated to embody active civic ideals. The non-judgement modelled by Abba Ammonas³⁷, and the uncomplaining obedience of John the Dwarf³⁸, may well reveal less about the habits of respective individuals than about the civic concerns of the communities in which such stories served as vehicles of formation.

So framed, the monks are perhaps most accurately construed not as inventing literary genres and pedagogical strategies, but as adeptly appropriating the rhetorical and pedagogical tools of the classical world in refashioning the former *ecclesia* of the Greek city-state into a distinctive *ecclesia* of Christian people³⁹. In redirecting the gnomic form to moulding citizens of the City of God, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* are pedagogically consonant with wider applications of this genre. That is, they are emblematic of an inherently civic enterprise of *morphosis*, the humanistic formation of the ideal citizen⁴⁰. In fact, if one posits an integral connection between the late antique monastery and the ideal *polis*, the monastic apophthegmata fit rather seamlessly into the literary trajectory of ancient gnomic articulations. The progress in piety advanced in these narratives is evidenced in a monastically particularized construal of this-worldly civic virtue. Albeit replete with imagery of the earliest monks as solitary heroes, these sayings countenance life in community – at its best, the 'City of God' on earth.

³⁵ Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979), 15.

³⁶ A few exemplary women appear in the monastic 'canon' as well.

³⁷ Ammonas 8, 10.

³⁸ John the Dwarf 1.

³⁹ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 11.

⁴⁰ Carruthers, *Craft*, Introduction.

Conclusion

Placed within a broader cultural context, claims for radical discontinuity between the monastic *apophthegmata* and the literary and rhetorical traditions of the ancient world are difficult to sustain. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* are apparently not exceptional in form or function. Rather, these gnomic anthologies afford an extraordinary opportunity to examine early monasticism as derivative of, and in complex relationship to, the late antique Graeco-Roman milieu. Understood as instruments of moral, civic, and rhetorical formation, they may well provide the greatest elucidation of monastic mores available. What is striking, then, about the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is not their singularity, but their similarity to other ancient pedagogical models. Within a frame of correspondence, the modicum of difference that does exist allows for some conjecture as to how those involved in forming the earliest monastic establishments took a widely practiced received tradition and turned it to their own ends.