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CLASSICAL ECHOES (CALLIMACHUS, CHARITON) IN THE ACTA IOHANNIS?


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In Book III of his Aeta Callimachus includes the story of Acontius and Cydippe. The young girl has unwittingly made a vow, of which her father is uninformed, to marry Acontius. Three times divine interventions send illness to the girl in order to prevent marriages with other men projected by her father:

\[ \text{δὴ \ τὸ \ τότε \ ἀνιγρὴ \ τὴν \ κοὐρὴν \ 'Α[δ]έω \ μέχρις \ ἔτηξε \ δῶμων.} \]
\[ \text{δεύτερον \ ἑστόρνυντο \ τὰ \ κλησία, \ δεύτερον \ ἡ \ πα[i]ς} \]
\[ \text{ἐπτὰ \ τεταρταῖο \ μήνας \ ἔκαμεν \ πυρί.} \]
\[ \text{τὸ \ τρίτον \ ἐμνήσαντο \ γάμου \ κάτα, \ τὸ \ τρίτον \ αὐτῆς} \]
\[ \text{Κυθίσσων \ ὀλοίος \ κρύμως \ ἐσφυκάκασε.} \] (fr. 75.14-19)

“That terrible illness then wasted the girl to the house of Hades. A second time the (nuptial) bed was made, a second time the girl was ill for seven months with quaternal fever (= malaria). The third time they planned a marriage, the third time in its turn a terrible cold settled on Cydippe.”

The motif of illness which three times hinders a planned marriage recurs in c. 113 of the Acta Ioannis (second century AD). Despite the fact that Christ wants the young John to preserve his virginity, the future apostle three times plans a marriage. All three times it is frustrated by illness:

\[ \text{ὢ \ ἡδη \ γαμοντὶ \ μοι \ νόσον \ σωματικὴν \ οἰκονομὴς \ ο \ τρίτον \ βουληθέντος} \]
\[ \text{μου \ γῆμα \ παρακουσθεὶς \ ἐμποδίσες} \] μοι (c. 113.3-5).

“… who when I was about to marry didst prepare for me a bodily sickness; who, though disobeyed, on the third occasion when I wished to marry didst prevent me …”

It is a commonplace that the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles have a low literary level. But the author of what is probably the earliest of them, the Acts of John, may well have known the work of Callimachus: First, the young man who cuts off his testicles after a conflict with his father does so with a sickle (δρέπανον, Acts of John 53.2), the same instrument that Cronus used to castrate his father, as Callimachus tells in Aetia Book II (fr. 43.69-71). Secondly, one of the main characters in the fictional narratives of the Acts of John is actually called Callimachus (c.63-86).

The Acts of John also display a familiarity with ancient novels, specifically with Chariton’s Callirhoe. In addition to the already observed echoes from Callirhoe, two more instances may be taken into consideration. First, when confronted by a large crowd with mixed intentions, both Chaireas (Callirhoe 3.3.4) and John (Acts of John 43.1-2) lift up their hands (ἀνοτείνος τὰς χεῖρας) to the heavens and pray. Secondly, when overwhelmed by anguish, both Chaireas (Callirhoe 3.3.7) and Lykomedes (Acts of John 20.14-19) address their beloved wife to express indignity about their undeserved fate and in trying to explain their future behaviour use the verb ἐπολογοῦμαι. In view of the situational and lexical similarities, these cases may well constitute allusions to Callirhoe.

The above seems to show that the author of the Acta Ioannis was more familiar with literature outside the emerging New Testament than is often thought.

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