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

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In Book III of his *Aetia* 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:

ἢ τότ' ἀνιγρή
 τὴν κούρην Ἀ[ίδ]εω μέχρις ἔτηξε δόμων.
 δεύτερον ἐστόρνυντο τὰ κλισμῖα, δεύτερον ἢ πα[ί]ς
 ἑπτὰ τεταρταίῳ μῆνας ἔκαμνε πυρί.
 τὸ τρίτον ἐμνήσαντο γάμου κάττα, τὸ τρίτον ἀϋτ[ί]ς
 Κυδίππην ὀλοὸς κρυμὸς ἐσφκίσσατο. (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 Iohannis* (second century AD).¹ 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:

ὁ ἤδη γαμοῦντί μοι νόσον σωματικὴν οἰκονομήσας· ὁ τρίτον βουληθέντος
 μου γῆμαι παρακουσθεὶς ἐμποδίσας 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 ...”²

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*,³ 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 (ἀνατείνας 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 ἀπολογοῦμαι. 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 Iohannis* was more familiar with literature outside the emerging New Testament than is often thought.

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¹ E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2 vols (Turnhout, 1983). For the possible date and place of publication of these *Acts* see the contributions of J.N. Bremmer and P.J. Lalleman in *Studies in the Apocryphal Acts of John* (Kampen, 1995) 37-56 and 97-118, respectively.

² Trans. E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, trans. R.McL. Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha* II (Cambridge, 1991) 203. The translation by J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1993) 337 is insufficiently literal here.

³ See Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 516-20: *Acts of John* 48.7-8 echoes *Callirhoe* 1.4.12 - 5.1; *Acts of John* 51.10-11 echoes *Callirhoe* 1.5.4-5.