The Thin Muse: The Poetics and Politics of Health in the *Aetia*

Reitzenstein’s 1931 monograph promiently sets forth how thinness (*leptotês*) in Hellenstic poetry (and particularly in the *Aetia* Prologue) represents a new trend towards rejection of archaic epic as a model for literary production. This paper will argue that the image of the thin muse, the fine song of the cicada, and the rejuvenated and slimmed body of the poet in Callimachus’ *Aetia* Prologue—all crucial signifiers of the poet’s thin muse—have medical associations that function to embed Callimachus’ program of thin poetry within a frameworkthat posits good poetry as “healthy” poetry. This “therapoetic” project is picked up again in *Aetia* 3 with the figure of Cydippe’s illness which inversely mirrors Callimachus’ poetic program: the effects of illness on her body are similar to the effects of the healing Muse on Callimachus’ poetry, in that her body and Callimachus’ verses are both reduced and slimmed and ultimately healed. By connecting the previously unrecognized medical imagery in the *Aetia* Prologue to the medicalization of lovesickness (a “clinical” disease by the 3rd century) in the Acontius and Cydippe scene of *Aetia* 3, we will see how deeply Callimachus’ program of thin poetry is indebted to the increasing prominence of doctors and medical rhetoric in the 4th-3rd centuries.

Part of Callimachus’ strategy of asserting a new, slimmer, non-epic type of poetry that can

access knowledge and wisdom is to weigh poems in a scale, recalling the weighing of poetry in Aristophanes (*Fr.* 1378ff.). What has not been widely appreciated about this important passage, however, is that the “diet” that Euripides prescribes for Aeschylus’ “fat” poetry (*Fr.* 939-44) has its roots in Hippocratic slimming therapy and posits good poetry as healthy. This passage contains a number of technical Hippocratic terms and phrases, and most of the language Aristophanes uses about poetic theory double as medical terms revolving around fatness and thinness. That Aeschylus’ lines win the weighing contest because they are “heavier,” supports Euripides’ criticism of poetic corpulence in his diagnosis of Aeschylean poetry. Aristophanes’ appropriation of therapeutic words here is by no means random; slimming diets were a major therapeutic technique in Classical and Hellenistic medical treatises.

I will next show that Callimachus’ desire to be rejuvenated and corporeally lightened (*ekduoimi to moi baros Aetia* Prologue, fr. 1.32-5 Pf.) like the small, winged cicada recalls the medical treatment that Euripides claims to have applied to Aeschylean poetry and also taps into the technical-medical language of healing. Callimachus’ description of himself as old and in need of rejuvenation in the Prologue actually sounds more like a doctor’s clinical diagnosis and prescription for medical treatment than a poet’s flight of fancy when we pause to appreciate that old age in antiquity was in and of itself considered a disease state, as Aristotle points out (*GA* 784b.33-4). Furthermore, the cicada, *tettix*, was a popular medical treatment for excess *cholê*—the very humor that weighs down with bilious rage the most conspicuous symbol of the “heavy” epic tradition, Achilles. Not only does Callimachus’ thin Muse appear to have followed the prescription of Euripides’ Hippocratic slimming diet in the *Frogs*; she is also able to actively heal by lightening the weight (*baros*) of old age and providing a cicada remedy for fine poetry. This dual aspect of healing in Callimachus’ Prologue, in which we see a healthy *and* health-giving Muse, is important as the first programmatic treatment of therapoetics in a long line of poets, Greek and Roman, who demonstrate a concern with healthy and health-imparting poetry.

Yet this interest in healing images is not merely a formalistic touch—it is also deeply political. In the Hellenistic period royal patronage of science and poetry could be said to foster the discovery of the miniature: it brought about a revolution in medicine through the provision of live criminals as experimental subjects that laid open the previously unseen parts of the human body and such miniature elements as tissues, veins, and nerves (von Staden 1989) and it enabled authors like Posidippus to display in his epigrams the anatomy of Alexandria to his readers in minature: jewels, statues, healers, tombs, horses—all the elements of a proper Ptolemaic *cosmopolis* (Acosta-Hughes 2004). *Leptotês* is also a part of this miniature world of discovery and is closely linked in Callimachus’ *Aetia* with thin bodies that are ultimately healed to become symbols of a healthy poetics.

Bibliography:

von Staden, H. 1989. *Herophilus*. Cambridge.

**Acosta-Hughes, B. 2004.** “Alexandrian Posidippus: On Rereading the GP Epigrams in Light of P.Mil.Vogl. VIII 309,” in Acosta-Hughes, B., E. Kosmetatou, and M. Baumbach, eds., *Labored in Papyrus Leaves*.  *Perspectives on an Epigram Collection attributed to Posidippus*. Harvard: 42-56.