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An Echo of the Forerunner:
Theodore Prodromos and John Chortasmenos

Several scholars have commented on Theodore Prodromos's significant potential for *mimesis*.¹ While translating and commenting on his poem *Amicitia exulans* (normally rendered as "Friendship in Exile"), I was particularly struck by the phrase ὁ φίλτρον ξένου (v. 149), an expression that encapsulates a common motif in the rhetorical language of friendship.² A query in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*³ yielded an unexpected result: an entire passage from Prodromos appears almost verbatim in a poem by John Chortasmenos (circa 1370–1431).⁴ Chortasmenos, renowned as a scholar, manuscript collector, and literary figure,⁵ was evidently well-acquainted with Prodromos's oeuvre.

In his forty-four-line poem dedicated to the miracles of the Mother of God in the Constantinopolitan church *en to Neorio*, a sixteen-line segment is

1. WOLFRAM HÖRANDNER, *Musterautoren und ihre Nachahmer: Indizien für Elemente einer byzantinischen Poetik*. In: PAOLO ODORICO – PANAGIOTIS A. AGAPITOS – MARTIN HINTERBERGER (eds), "Doux remède": Poésie et poétique à Byzance (Dossiers byzantins 9). Paris 2009, pp. 201–217; MICHIEL OP DE COUL, *Deux inédits à l'ombre de Prodrome*. JÖByz 56 (2006) pp. 177–192; NIKOS ZAGKLAS, *Theodoros Prodromos: Miscellaneous Poems. An Edition and Literary Study* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium). Oxford 2023, pp. 22, 134.

2. A starting point is GUSTAV KARLSSON, *Idéologie et cérémonial dans l'épistolographie byzantine. Textes du X^e siècle analysés et commentés* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Graeca Upsaliensia 3). Uppsala 1962, pp. 99–101.

3. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>

4. The exact date of the scholar's death was discovered by IRMGARD HUTTER, *Corpus der byzantinischen Miniaturhandschriften*, vol. 4, 1–2: Oxford, Christ Church (Denkmäler der Buchkunst 9, 1–2). Stuttgart 1993, p. 157. A confirmation can also be found in PETER SCHREINER, *On the Death of Johannes Chortasmenos*. JÖByz 45 (1995) pp. 219–222, here p. 220: 4 October 1431.

5. He was responsible for the restoration of the Vienna Dioscurides. For his work, see HERBERT HUNGER, *Johannes Chortasmenos* (ca. 1370–ca. 1436/37). *Briefe, Gedichte und kleine Schriften. Einleitung, Regesten, Prosopographie, Text* (Wiener byzantinistische Studien 7). Vienna 1969.

nearly identical to a passage composed by Theodore Prodromos.⁶ In his dialogue *Amicitia Exulans*, the personified figure of Friendship (*Philia*), having been cast out by her husband, the World (*Kosmos*), extols her capacity to unite and harmonize all things. As the antithesis of discord and strife, she asserts her power to bring together disparate elements – humans, professional groups, animals, and even opposites in nature. Rejected by *Kosmos*, she seeks and ultimately finds refuge with a compassionate man referred to as the *Xenos* – a ‘stranger’ or ‘host-friend’. Midway through the conversation, which unfolds largely as an extended monologue, Friendship proclaims the culmination of her powers: the unification of the divine and the human in the Incarnation of the Lord.

Chortasmenos is known for his marked predilection for authors of Late Antiquity as well as for Middle Greek writers.⁷ His profound familiarity with the works of Theodore Prodromos allowed him to incorporate passages from Prodromos seamlessly into his own compositions. By making only minimal textual modifications, Chortasmenos effectively assimilated these verses, thereby not only demonstrating his own poetic skill but also aligning himself with the distinguished literary tradition represented by his predecessor.

The text passage will first be presented and subsequently briefly commented upon. For clarity, the right-hand column of the accompanying table highlights only the textual deviations found in Chortasmenos’s version.

6. HERBERT HUNGER, *Aus den letzten Lebensjahren des Johannes Chortasmenos. Das Synaxarion im Cod. Christ Church gr. 56 und der Metropolit Ignatios von Selybria*. JÖByz 45 (1995) pp. 159–218, pp. 175–176; RAYMOND JANIN, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l’empire Byzantin*. 1: *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat Oecuménique*. 3: *Les églises et les monastères* (Publications de l’Institut français d’études byzantines). Paris 1969, p. 198.

7. MICHAEL GRÜNBART, *Chortasmenos und Libanios oder wie beginnt man einen Brief?* *Hellenika* 50 (2000) pp. 117–118; IDEM, *An der Quelle: Libanios als Vorbild spätbyzantinischer Epistolographen*. In: ALBRECHT BERGER – SERGEI MARIEV – GÜNTER PRINZING – ALEXANDER RIEHLE (eds), *Koinotaton doron. Das späte Byzanz zwischen Machtlosigkeit und kultureller Blüte (1204–1461)* (Byzantinisches Archiv 31). Berlin – Boston 2016, pp. 39–46.

Theodore Prodromos, *The Friendship in Exile*, vv. 140–155⁸

ἐγὼ Θεὸν τὸν ὄντα τὸν παντεργά-
την,
τὸ Πατρὸς ἐκσφράγισμα, τὸν μέγαν
Λόγον,
τὸ παμφαῆς φῶς, τὴν ὑπέρθεον φύ-
σιν,
τὸν ἄχρονον νοῦν, τὴν χρονουργὸν
οὐσίαν,
ἐλθεῖν ἔπεισα μέχρι γῆς καὶ τῶν
κάτω
καὶ τὴν παθητὴν προσλαβεῖν ὅλην
φύσιν
καὶ σωματικὴν ἐνδυθῆναι πορφύραν
ἐκ παρθενικῶν αἱμάτων ὑφασμένην,
παθεῖν, **θανεῖν**, φεῦ, τῆς τοσαύτης
ἀγάπης,
δι' ἧς τοσοῦτον ἔργον – ὦ φίλτρον
ξένου.
δι' ὃ χρονικῶς **μείγνυται** τῷ σαρκίῳ,
ὁ κυριεύων καὶ χρόνου καὶ σαρκίου,
καὶ συνανιστᾷ τὴν πεσοῦσαν εἰκόνα
ἐν τῷ καθ' αὐτὸν ἀναχωνεύσας πά-
θει.
τοιαῦτα τὰ μὰ πρὸς βροτοὺς ἔργα,
Ξένε·
τοιαῦτά μου τὰ δῶρα τὰ πρὸς τὸν
Βίον·

John Chortasmenos, *Poem 7*, vv. 6–21

σὺ γὰρ Θεὸν τὸν ὄντα, τὸν παντ-
εργάτην,
τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκσφράγισμα, τὸν μέγαν
λόγον,
τὸν ἄχρονον νοῦν, τὴν χρονουργὸν
οὐσίαν,
τὸ παμφαῆς φῶς, τὴν ὑπέρθετον φύ-
σιν
ἐλθεῖν ἔπεισας μέχρι γῆς καὶ τῶν
κάτω
καὶ τὴν παθητὴν προσλαβεῖν ὅλην
φύσιν
καὶ σωματικὴν ἐνδυθῆναι πορφύραν
ἐκ παρθενικῶν αἱμάτων ὑφασμένην·
παθεῖν **λαθεῖν**, φεῦ τῆς τοσαύτης
ἀγάπης,
δι' ἧς τοσοῦτον ἔργον, – ὦ φίλτρον
ξένου –
δι' ὃ χρονικῶς μίγνυται τῷ σαρκίῳ
ὁ κυριεύων καὶ χρόνου καὶ σαρκίου
καὶ συνανιστᾷ τὴν πεσοῦσαν εἰκόνα
ἐν τῷ καθ' αὐτὸν ἀναχωνεύσας πά-
θει.
τοιαῦτα τὰ σὰ πρὸς βροτοὺς ἔργα
ξένα,
τοιαῦτα σοῦ τὰ δῶρα, μήτηρ παρ-
θένε.

8. Edition in ZAGKLAS, Theodoros Prodromos, pp. 278–280; translation ibidem, pp. 279–281: “The true God, creator of all, | image of the Father, the great Word, | brightest of lights, supremely divine nature, | timeless mind, essence which creates time | I persuaded him to come down to earth and the creation below | and to take on all passible nature | and to don the fleshly purple | woven from virginal blood, | to suffer, to die, alas, for so much love, | such a great deed because of this love – O what extraordinary affection! | For this He mingled with flesh in time, | He who is Lord both of time and of the flesh, | and makes the fallen image rise, | recasting it through his suffering in his own image. | Such are my deeds for mortals, Stranger; | such are my gifts to the world.”

John Chortasmenos likely appreciated the metrical qualities of his source text and had to make only minimal adjustments to integrate the passage into his own poem. The original words, delivered by *Philia*, are transformed into an address to the Mother of God; the rearrangement of the verses, however, remains unclear. Chortasmenos's substitution of *thanein* (θανεῖν) with *lathein* (λαθεῖν) makes sense in the context of the Theotokos, who suffers in secret. HUNGER points to the proverbial phrase *pathein* – *mathein* (παθεῖν – μαθεῖν, “to suffer is to learn”),⁹ but this connection seems to be merely phonetic in this case. HUNGER writes, “Die Inkarnation ist ein Pathos, das im Verborgenen bleibt” – yet in my view, it is the Mother of God who should be understood as the subject here, enacting this wondrous demonstration of love. Chortasmenos alters the final two lines only minimally to incorporate them into his composition: the gifts are now exceptional offerings, and the Mother of God is addressed at the end as their source.¹⁰ Compared to other sophisticated mimetic adaptations of models, the author takes a more pragmatic approach here.¹¹

Keywords

Theodoros Prodromos; Ioannes Chortasmenos; mimesis

9. HUNGER, *Aus den letzten Lebensjahren des Johannes Chortasmenos*, p. 177.

10. Common in hymnography, e.g. APOSTOLOS SPANOS, *Codex Lesbiacus Leimonos* 11 (*Byzantinisches Archiv* 23). Berlin – New York 2010, 12, 83: Παρθένη Μήτηρ.

11. MICHAEL GRÜNBART, *Zusammenstellen vs. Zusammenstehlen. Zum Traditionsverständnis in Byzanz*. In: ANDREAS RHOBY – ELISABETH SCHIFFER (eds), *Imitatio – aemulatio – variatio. Akten des Internationalen Wissenschaftlichen Symposions zur Byzantinischen Sprache und Literatur* (Wien 22. – 25. Oktober 2008) (*Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung* 21 = Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Kl., Denkschriften 402). Vienna 2010, pp. 129–136.