

Domenico Accorinti (ed.): Brill's Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2016 (Brill's Companions in Classical Studies). XXXII, 872 pp., 38 ill. € 226.00/\$ 293.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-31011-7.

Nonnus of Panopolis could well be considered antiquity's most precocious poet. His gargantuan *Dionysiaca* is a feat of Homeric megalomania, its forty-eight books matching the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, which flaunts from the outset a bendy, protean poetics, breaking every rule of epic decorum to guide its hero through a series of erotic, exuberant adventures. His twenty-one-book *Paraphrase of John's Gospel* displaces *koiné* Greek for the most elaborate, literary and sophisticated language of all, revelling in the challenge of turning epic diction to Johannine Christology, and vice versa. In the novel *Happiness* by Theodore Zeldin,¹ Nonnus is imagined as seated in heaven, annoyed and appalled by a gaggle of school students who have come to question him on his work.² One suspects, however, that he may be rather more entertained by the strenuous attempts at interrogation which have culminated in this volume.

The (re)surgence of scholarly interest in Nonnus is clear from the briefest of overviews. Since the completion of the Budé edition of the *Dionysiaca* (1976–2006, 19 volumes), there have emerged a number of new publications on the poet: monographs (Shorrock 2001 and 2011, Frangoulis 2014, Kröll 2016, Verhelst 2016, Geisz 2017), edited volumes (Spanoudakis 2014, Bannert and Kröll 2017) and editions and commentaries on, thus far, eight books of the *Paraphrase* (the most recent in 2014, ed. Spanoudakis).³

The present companion takes this 'boom' in Nonnian interest as its explicit *raison d'être*. In place of a full-length introduction, Accorinti, the editor, begins by outlining how the poet is now claiming his place in the classical canon ('becoming a classic' is the title of the opening remarks), and describes the aim of the volume as to provide a 'wide-ranging reference handbook' for

1 Th. Zeldin: *Happiness*. London 1988.

2 This vignette is discussed by Accorinti as a conclusion to his chapter in the volume (47).

3 For further on these recent publications, see also Verhelst's review of N. Kröll: *Die Jugend des Dionysos. Die Ampelos-Episode in den Dionysiaka des Nonnos von Panopolis*. Berlin/Boston 2016 (Millennium-Studien 62), in this journal (Plekos 20, 2018, 219–225, URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2018/r-kroell.pdf>).

students and scholars of his work. The result is a veritable *μέγα βιβλίον*: thirty-two chapters, in seven sections, devoted to various aspects of the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase*. Since it would be impossible to discuss all of the contributions without succumbing to the gimmick of a Nonnian sized review for the Nonnian sized companion, I shall instead give an overview of the topics covered in each section, and then focus on the essays which best exemplify my commendations and reservations about the volume, which I shall end by discussing cumulatively.

Part I: Author, Context, and Religion serves as an introduction to the historical figure of Nonnus, sketching the details of his obscure background and setting. Accorinti takes on the biography of the poet, outlining what can (and cannot) plausibly be reconstructed about his life and works. Van Minnen considers the late antique space of Panopolis, addressing why this particular backwater province in Egypt came to produce so many literary stalwarts in this era, and ends with a helpful appendix of the major cultural figures from Panopolis in the first to sixth centuries CE. Dijkstra tackles the thorny question of Nonnus' religious background, closely following the work of Alan Cameron to affirm the now largely-accepted vision of late antique Egypt as characterized not by 'pagan resistance' or religious polarization but complex coexistence and interaction. Taken together, these opening chapters provide clear and helpful orientation to some of the major contextual questions surrounding this baffling poet. Accorinti's essay is particularly commendable for the scope of the background issues it pursues: Nonnus' name, date, authorial (mis)identifications (the hypothesis, for instance, that he is also the author of the *Commentaries* on Gregory of Nazianzus' *Sermons* 4,5,39 and 43, which is deemed unlikely but not impossible) and, anticipating the discussions to follow, the Janus-esque religious character of his poems.

Part 2: The *Dionysiaca* contains six essays on Nonnus' mythological epic, which move, slightly abruptly, from Dionysiac-Orphic Religion (Bernabé and García-Gasco), to the figure of Dionysus (Chuvín), to minor characters (Verhelst) and strategies of narrative and digression (Geisz). Two chapters take a more holistic approach. Hadjittofi gives an overview of the major themes and motifs in the poem, which she splits into 'apotheosis, metamorphosis and soteriology', 'theomachies and gigantomachies' and 'love, rape and paradoxical generation', all defined as integral parts of Nonnus' poetics. Whilst her analyses give a competent account of passages of the poem where

such themes are on display, and demonstrate the importance of related motifs such as mimetic language (for instance Dionysus' torch as an exact imitation – ἀντίτυπον μίμημα – of his father's thunderbolt, 48.66) and the penchant for prolepsis (e. g. Zeus' prophecy to Aion about his son's birth, discovery of wine and apotheosis, 7.97–105), there is no attempt to relate these topics to the aspirations of the poetic voice. Hadjittofi's conclusions, admittedly 'brief', remain descriptive rather than interpretative: whilst she elucidates the difference between, for instance, the metamorphoses afforded to human and divine characters, the wider relevance of these concepts of transformation, hybridity and conflict to Nonnus' protean programmatics does not receive discussion beyond a footnote.⁴ This silence is particularly jarring, since, as the readings which she references make clear, grandiose self-consciousness, poetic as well as narrative hybridity, is also a most 'integral part' of Nonnus' poetics.

Equal but opposite in emphasis is Newbold's account of 'The Psychology in the *Dionysiaca*', which treats the obsessive urges evident in the poem – for conflict, infantilisation, sexual humiliation and repression – through the framework of the cognitive and emotional impulses which shape all artists, and particularly poets, involved in the creative process. So for instance Nonnus' favouritism for the language of imitation (as also discussed by Hadjittofi) is here read as evoking both a delight in the opportunities of variegation, but also a nausea, suspicion and yearning for the simplicity of the supernal: shape-shifting thus conceived can produce paranoia for the transformer poet, raising the question of where one locates the real self. However, if Newbold's hyper programmatic account thus nicely balances Hadjittofi's by providing a *reading* of the major themes of the poem, he too ultimately remains tentative in his conclusions. The reader in this case is left wondering whether or (more likely) why Nonnus is *exceptional* in his exploitation of these impulses which, the chapter repeatedly stresses, are dominant in all 'great works of literature.' Newbold begins by noting that the presence of such fantasies and conflicts should *not* surprise us; 'only 'perhaps, [their] explicitness and salience'. This final clause seems to be crucial, and the chapter

4 E. g. 126 n. 7 on Shorrock's metapoetic reading of the phrase ἀντίτυπον μίμημα (2001, 199) and 141 n. 62 on Hardie's discussions of the similarities between Typhoeus and the poet's own voice (2007, 21).

would have benefited from more exploration into what drives this explicitness, and what the interpretative effects of such salience may be.

Part 3 focuses directly on the *Paraphrase of St John* – the less familiar of Nonnus' works, at least to the classicist. Each of the six essays takes on an aspect of Nonnus' technical, exegetical or intertextual process: the choice of John's Gospel (Franchi), his paraphrastic technique (Fitzgerald Johnson), the use of patristic literature and, particularly, borrowing from Gregory of Nazianzus (Simelidis), the relationship to Biblical epic (Whitby), and engagement with Christology (Sieber) and mystery terminology (Doroszewski). Particularly successful is the chapter by Fitzgerald Johnson, which offers a cogent discussion of how Nonnus ornamentals the Gospel text; using the case study of John 9 (the story of the man born blind) and its motif of self-recognition which Nonnus embroiders to trace both the linguistic and (it is argued, equally significant) theological levels on which the poet expands his biblical model into epic. Conversely, Sieber's analysis of Christological concepts in the *Paraphrase* – namely the Logos, the envoy and the use of majestic titles – is less convincing precisely because it does not engage sufficiently with this tension between genre and form. As Sieber acknowledges in his conclusion, but does not pursue in his argument, the epic casing of Nonnus' text must affect interpretation of any the concepts which he discusses: to what extent does Homeric legacy combine or clash with Christological connotations? Put another way, the ideas in this chapter would have benefited from a dialogue with Fitzgerald Johnson's.

Part 4 treats various features of Nonnus' literary style. Magnelli offers a brief and coherent account of the so-called 'metrical revolution' of the Nonnian hexameter. Dissecting the metrics of the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase* – dactyls, restricted variation, accentuation, pausation and bridges – Magnelli emphasizes both the aspects of modernisation *and* the notable ways in which Nonnus continues to respect the rules of Alexandrian hexameter. He concludes that Nonnus did not intend to subvert or abolish the tradition of Greek epic verse: rather, he sought to blend the old and the new, to complete the process of metrical refinement which he inherited. D'Ippolito considers the related topic of Nonnus' conventional formulaic style, both in longitude, set against Homeric structural formularity, and latitude, via discussion of the stylistic unity between the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*. Also present are chapters on Nonnus' combination of multiple generic models (Lasek), play

with ekphrastic poetry (Faber) and use of themes from late antique art (Kristensen). Gigli Piccardi looks more broadly at ‘Nonnus’ Poetics.’ Here programmatic readings once again take centre stage, as the intense personality of the poetic voice in the *Dionysiaca* is read through the lens of Neoplatonic artistic conceptions and literary exegesis, which emphasize, *inter alia*, the psychological mechanisms of the author’s imagination and the mechanisms of inspiration. Given that Gigli Piccardi focuses almost exclusively on the *Dionysiaca*, this chapter may have found a more natural home in the section explicitly dedicated to that poem; and her reading would certainly complement the analyses found there.

Such organisational questions become more pronounced in Part 5: Nonnus and the Classical Tradition. The five chapters here each neatly analyse ‘Nonnus and’ (as their titles begin) a figure or genre from the classical canon: the Homeric poems (Bannert and Kröll), Hellenistic Poetry (Acosta-Hughes), Imperial Greek epic (Maciver) and the Greek novel (Miguélez-Cavero). Maciver’s essay makes a particularly important contribution, in that it attempts to place Nonnus in dialogue with his more immediate Greek epic siblings: chiefly Oppian, Quintus and Triphiodorus. This intertextual study offsets the usual tendency of scholars to focus on Nonnus’ more ancient poetic predecessors, and issues a powerful reminder that, despite the numerous contextual uncertainties and stylistic differences between these imperial poets, there is a considerable amount which unites them. However, it is regrettable that all of these ‘Nonnus and’ essays focus entirely on the *Dionysiaca*. It would have been interesting to put the same questions, about the presence and relevance of classical models, to the *Paraphrase* too.

Part 6: An Interpretation of Nonnus’ Work, reveals the rewards of interrogating the two poems side by side. The excellent sequential essays by Shorrock on Christian themes in the *Dionysiaca* and Spanoudakis on Pagan themes in the *Paraphrase* create a productive dialectic, which is continued in the following chapters. Lightfoot considers Nonnus’ use of prophecy in, to evoke one of her section headings, ‘both poems together’; and Agosti discusses the ways in which Nonnus addresses the religious, political and cultural concerns of his contemporary Egyptian society, drawing on examples from the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*. This section is one of the volume’s most successful, precisely because it does ‘both poems together.’ When read individually and, particularly, when taken together, the essays affirm the crucial idea that

the intertextual inheritance of the *Paraphrase* is not limited to Christian literature, nor the *Dionysiaca* to classical texts: both are more complex hybrids than that. Were readers new(er) to Nonnus to encounter only Part 3 of the volume on the *Paraphrase*, or Part 5 on the Classical Tradition, they would risk missing this point.

Part 7, the final and shortest section, considers in three chapters ‘The Transmission and Reception of Nonnus’ Poems.’ De Stefani outlines some very brief tenets of the manuscript traditions of both works, with an appendix of the Stemma Codicum of the *Paraphrase* and some images of the copies which he discusses. Tissoni explores Nonnus’ reception in Late Antique, Byzantine and Renaissance literature, from his hallowed status and the so-called ‘Nonnian school’ of the fifth century, to his fluctuating popularity and imitation among Byzantine writers, to his eventual translation into Latin, Italian and French in the fifteenth century. Hernández de la Fuente ends with the reception of the poet, and particularly the *Dionysiaca*, in baroque and modern literature. Much of the discussion in this final chapter finds echoes in the volume’s introductory comments: as we have seen, Accorinti opens by considering ‘the making of a classic’, and makes great use of twentieth and twenty-first century material in his biographical chapter on the poet (both he and Tissoni, for instance, treat the Italian writer Roberto Calasso, who makes sustained use of Nonnus’ Dionysiac myths in his novels). This overlap between the bookends of the volume on the one hand makes for a satisfying ring-composition; however, on the other, it also raises questions about the ‘position’ of reception studies for Nonnus. It is of course a trope of the companion to an ancient author to place reception sections at the end. But given the particular shape of this poet’s legacy, one wonders whether on this occasion tradition might usefully have been broken.

These comments on the individual sections are symptomatic of my verdict on the overall achievements of the volume, and its limitations. In scope, scale and breath, Accorinti and his team deserve plaudits: the project has more than achieved its aim of providing a wide-ranging reference work for scholars of Nonnus and Late Antiquity. The expertise of the collaborators is apparent at every turn of the page; so too is the enthusiasm. Well presented

with very few spelling or typographical errors,⁵ it will become an undoubtedly useful handbook for all future readers who come to ask the poet their questions.

The volume's shortcomings may be summarised as threefold. The first two, more minor, relate to content. Firstly, the introduction, as I have discussed, is more anecdotal than synthesising, and some opening remarks about the topics to be covered would have been helpful to orient the reader. Secondly, in terms of topic, there are a few notable omissions. There is no single chapter on Nonnus and Latin poetry. The sad reason for this lacuna is acknowledged: Adrian Hollis, who had been invited to write a chapter with this title, sadly died in 2013 before being able to complete it. Given the weight of the question of Nonnus' possible Latin influences, and the number of scholars currently working on, for instance, Ovidian connections in the *Dionysiaca*, the absence is particularly regrettable. There is also scant discussion of the fascinating issue of the *Perioche*: the verse summary of the forty-eight books of the *Dionysiaca*. This text is fleetingly referenced on only two occasions.⁶ Given the volume's interest in matters of reception and authorship (with indeed a whole chapter dedicated to manuscript history) this taciturnity is surprising.

The third and most major criticism of the volume concerns its conception. As I have sought to convey in my readings, the companion as a whole is characterised by a lack of coherence between the chapters and parts. The essays vary from primarily informative to interpretative in tone, the sections shift in often un-signposted ways from focusing on the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*, and too few contributions discuss both. The organisation is driven primarily by the interests and specialisms of the authors, which causes overlap at some junctures, and disparateness at others, with insufficient accompanying dialogue to exploit the potential connections between the collaborators' ideas.

Part of the purpose of any companion, of course, is to create chapters sufficiently self-contained to be read in isolation, extractable by readers pursuing individual strands of interest. However, given the particular author being

5 The only inconsistency that I noted was the off-putting shift between retained Greek script and transliteration for key Nonnian terms: so for instance – and particularly – ποικιλία at e. g. 124, 424 versus *poikilia* at e. g. 118, 210.

6 p. 23 and p. 672.

‘handbooked’, the Janus character of his work, and, as Shorrock memorably puts it, his ‘disturbing and exhilarating refusal’ to dictate position and determine meaning,⁷ greater communication between the different parts of the Nonnian web would have made this project the more fitting companion for the ποιητής poet. As it stands, for all of its sizable successes, Nonnus still just manages to slip his way out of containment.

7 2011, 78; as discussed by Accorinti at p. 44 of this volume.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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