

William Levitan/Stamley Lombardo (eds.): *Tales of Dionysus. The Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis. A Group Translation. With an Introduction by Gordon Braden.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2022. XVI, 798 p., 1 ill. \$ 90.00. ISBN: 978-0-472-13311-6.

Research on Nonnus is booming. A biennial conference with proceedings (the “Nonnus in Context” series), a Brill Companion (2016) and a number of monographs, commentaries and articles give a picture of an area of late antique scholarship that has become one of the most popular in recent years.¹ Long overdue, within that context, then, is a modern English translation of the fifth-century poet’s *Dionysiaca*, the 48-Book epic on Dionysus. Since 1940 the only available English translation has been the less than satisfactory Loeb edition by W. H. D. Rouse.² In the pipeline is the much-anticipated translation, a collaboration by a number of leading Nonnian scholars under the editorship of Tim Whitmarsh, to be published in 2024 by the University of California Press. Levitan and Lombardo have, as it were, beaten them to it with the publication of their own translation, which too is a composite work involving a number of translators.

The methodologies and aims of Levitan and Lombardo are far from what might be described as traditional (and in that respect they differ considerably from the forthcoming University of California Press translation), as they themselves acknowledge in their editorial preface. This is a production involving 42 translators, some of whom are not professional Classicists, some of whom are professional poets (for example, Anne Carson) and none of whom are Nonnus experts (except for one scholar, Gordon Braden). The particular aims expressed by the editors are twofold: first, to allow modern

1 D. Accorinti (ed.): *Brill’s Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis.* Leiden/Boston 2016 (Brill’s Companions in Classical Studies). The Nonnus in Context conferences have so far resulted in three volumes, namely K. Spanoudakis (ed.): *Nonnus in Context. Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity with a Section on Nonnus and the Modern World.* Berlin/Boston 2014. (Trends in Classics. Supplementary Volumes 24); H. Bannert/N. Kröll (eds.): *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context II: Poetry, Religion, and Society.* Leiden/Boston 2018 (Mnemosyne. Supplements 408); F. Doroszewski/K. Jazdzewska (eds.): *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context III: Old Questions and New Perspectives.* Leiden/Boston 2021 (Mnemosyne. Supplements 438).

2 *Nonnos: Dionysiaca. With an English Translation by W. H. D. Rouse. Mythological Introduction and Notes by H. J. Rose. Notes on Text Criticism by L. R. Lind.* 3 vols. Cambridge, MA/London 1940 (Loeb Classical Library 344/354/356).

readers of English access to this little-read epic, and second, to offer a sense of what is possible in contemporary practice of translation of the classics by allowing a broad spectrum of choices of styles in the collected translations in the volume. The first aim is a worthy one, but the second brings a number of problems which were not unintended, as the editors note (p. XV): “We did not seek a unison of voices, or even a harmony, for that matter.” Explanation of the varied approaches of each translator is set out in an appendix, which of itself does much to relate the exciting possibilities available to someone seeking to translate an ancient verse text. Somewhat frustratingly for any Classicist familiar with Nonnus’ Greek style (and it should be emphasised that such experts are *not* the intended target of this volume), such a diverse range of translation styles is not in keeping with the rigidity of Nonnus’ neo-Homeric, neo-formulaic diction, and his very regular metre (but some of the contributors do recognise this – such as Frederick Ahl, who translated Book 8). The editors discuss Nonnus’ novelty in word-formation, his love of transformative figures and narratives (mapped on to the Protean poetics set out in Book 1) and point to this very innovation to justify the diversity of types of translation in their volume.

But what is especially unusual about this volume is not just the fact that a translation of one book varies in reading experience so profoundly from another, but that Nonnus’ perceived verbosity is often, for some translators, regarded as something to edit out. For example, the translator of Book 24, Gordon Braden, humorously inserts his own editorial intervention at the point at which Hermes, in the Song of Leucos, mocks Aphrodite for weaving a *πέπλος*. “These jokes keep coming for a while; I’m shipping several, but if you want you can track them down” (p. 388). As Braden himself notes in his excursus on his translation (p. 730), the reason for such subtractions “should be obvious”. He is not the only one to omit verses. The overall working assumption is that Nonnus has faults and such excision provides a more pleasurable, and quicker, reading experience. But why not let Nonnus’ text be read for what it is? Even a Greek-less reader discovering Nonnus through this translation is very unlikely to read it from beginning to end, and such indeed was the most likely experience of the ancient reader too. The surviving manuscripts include summaries of each book which act as a type of index to enable a reader to choose a section, or story, to read in isolation. The *Dionysiaca*, because of its careful construction, allows, too, a more holistic

and interconnected approach to the whole text as 48 books, but a dipping in and out of this giant epic is a warranted experience, too.

Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* is a learned, precisely-constructed and allusive text, as one would expect of this late antique poem which had such an influence on centuries of later Greek poetry. Nonnus is, on the one hand, Hellenistic in his style and learning, and often footnotes his indebtedness to Callimachus and the other Alexandrians. But he is also a product of the fifth century C.E., and a scholar-poet of Panopolis, the famous centre of learning. Late antique rhetorical training, Christian theology, Neoplatonic thought, Coptic and Egyptian culture all have a profound influence on the make-up of the *Dionysiaca*. The *Dionysiaca*, consequently, is replete with learned metonymical play, recondite mythology (sometimes unique in the tradition) and a great deal of astrological accounts. Such obscurity presents challenges even to a trained Hellenist, and certainly to the interested, non-professional public readership. Many of the translators have decided to add glosses (often in square parentheses), often lengthy, to help the modern reader make sense of these details. They are very useful even if they have a tendency to distract from the process and pleasure of reading. Such additions (and subtractions, noted already) inevitably mean that line numbering rarely matches what would find in the Greek text. Given (to stress this point again), the intended audience of *Tales of Dionysus*, this divergence will only be noted by those who use the Greek text (too).

There are some quite beautiful translations. To give just one example: Richard Jenkyns's translation of Book 22 stands out for its poetry. One might cite some of the opening lines of that book (p. 356):

Such as the anthems that the sirens pour
From honeyed throat; the woodland thrilled with it
The oaks learnt music, resonant as pipes,
The dryads ululated, and a nymph
Peeped from the foliage and joined in the song,
Half seen, half hidden in her wreath of leaves.

The *Dionysiaca* is imbued with (and indeed constructed by) pastoral imagery and song (especially its first half); Jenkyns (unsurprisingly, given his work on Virgil) brings out the tenor of Nonnus' bucolic scenes perfectly.

The book is framed by an introduction to the *Dionysiaca* by Gordon Braden, a summary of each of the 48 books, appendices on the methodology behind

the translations, biographies of the translators, a detailed and up-to-date bibliography, a glossary of names found in the poem and a very useful geographical index. The introduction rarely cites modern scholarship but on the whole is a sound synthesis of the most recent work, and is particularly good on the Christian context and the peculiarities of Nonnus' Greek, to give the Greek-less readers a sense of how unusual Nonnus' language is (a type of neo-*Kunstsprache* akin to Homer's but also one that differs profoundly from it).

Occasionally, one comes across errors in the translations. Again, to give just one example: the translator of Book 14 construes line 419 (= line 423 in the translation) as follows: "I saw the stranger and his suspicious drink". This should be "I saw a strange and incredible drink", where ξείνον is an adjective qualifying the object ποτόν, "drink". There are also occasional typos throughout the translations as well as the appendices (including a misspelling of the current reviewer's name).

Scholars of late antique poetry welcome any opportunity for a wider readership to experience texts perhaps not read even by non-late antique Classicists. Levitan and Lombardo, along with their team of translators, are to be congratulated on their bold transformation of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* into English. Each of the 48 books offers the reader with a fresh, exciting retelling of Nonnus' epic, even if, in many cases, the distance from the original is quite considerable.

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