

## SUBJECT REVIEWS

### *Greek literature*

If you cast your mind back to 2016 you may (or may not) recall *Brill's Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis*: a substantial volume, comprising thirty-two chapters in 754 pages of text, together with twenty-six pages of preliminaries, seventy-seven pages of bibliography, and forty-one pages of indices.<sup>1</sup> Prudent readers should be cautious when handling a blockbuster volume on this scale; the risk of dropping one and a half kilos of scholarly text on one's foot is not to be treated with careless abandon. There is, then, something to be said in favour of less demanding but more accessible starting points for the exploration of the Nonnian landscape. For most readers, Robert Shorrock's *The Challenge of Epic. Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca* (2001)<sup>2</sup> and *The Myth of Paganism. Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity* (2011)<sup>3</sup> would provide a more readily accessible resource. Admittedly, accessible guidance is not easy to find when it has been swamped by a *tsunami* of impressive editorial scholarship: for example, Konstantinos Spanoudakis, *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context*,<sup>4</sup> Camille Geisz, *A Study of the Narrator in Nonnus of Panopolis' Dionysiaca. Storytelling in Late Antique Epic*,<sup>5</sup> Herbert Bannert and Nicole Kröll's *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context II. Poetry, Religion, and Society*,<sup>6</sup> and Filip Doroszewski and Katarzyna Jażdżewska's *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context III. Old Questions and New Perspectives*.<sup>7</sup> As for Nonnus' *Paraphrase of John's Gospel*, I confess that I have barely had time to glance at it in its entirety. Perhaps I should have been paying more selective attention to Nonnus, and less to everything else.

<sup>1</sup> *Brill's Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis*. Edited by Domenico Accorinti. Leiden, Brill, 2016. Pp. xxxii + 872, Hardback £179, ISBN: 978-90-04-31011-7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Challenge of Epic. Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca*. By Robert Shorrock. Leiden, Brill, 2001. Pp. vii + 245. Hardback £179, ISBN: 978-90-04-11795-2.

<sup>3</sup> *The Myth of Paganism. Nonnus, Dionysus, and the World of Late Antiquity*. By Robert Shorrock. Bristol Classical Press, 2011. Pp. x + 181. Paperback £19.99, ISBN: 978-0-7156-3668-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context. Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity with a Section on Nonnus and the Modern World*. Edited by Konstantinos Spanoudakis. Leiden, Brill, 2014. Trends in Classics: Supplementary Volumes. Hardback £109, ISBN: 978-3-11-033937-6.

<sup>5</sup> *A Study of the Narrator in Nonnus of Panopolis' Dionysiaca. Storytelling in Late Antique Epic*. By Camille Geisz. Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology, 25. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2017. Pp. ix + 282. Hardback €120, ISBN: 978-90-04-35533-0.

<sup>6</sup> *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context II. Poetry, Religion, and Society*. Edited by Herbert Bannert and Nicole Kröll. Mnemosyne Supplements, 408. Leiden, Brill, 2017. Pp. xviii + 436. Hardback €121, ISBN: 978-90-04-34119-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context III. Old Questions and New Perspectives*. Edited by Filip Doroszewski and Katarzyna Jażdżewska. Mnemosyne Supplements, 438. Leiden, Brill, 2020. Pp. 552. Hardback €135, ISBN: 978-90-04-44323-5.

Here, then, and leaving the *Paraphrase* to one side for convenience, is the beginning of the forty-eight books of Nonnus's *Dionysiaca*; that is to say, the beginning of W. D. H. Rouse's translation, published in 1940 and distributed across three Loeb volumes. Here are the opening lines:<sup>8</sup>

Tell the tale, Goddess, of Cronides' courier with fiery flame, the gasping travail which the thunder-bolt brought with sparks for wedding-torches, the lightning in waiting upon Semele's nuptials; tell the naissance of Bacchos twice-born, whom Zeus lifted still moist from the fire, a baby half-complete born without midwife; how with shrinking hands he cut the incision in his thigh and carried him in his man's womb, father and gracious mother at once—and well he remembered another birth, when his own head conceived, when his temple was big with child, and he carried that incredible unbegotten lump, until he shot out Athena scintillating in her armour.

There is undeniable eloquence in Rouse's translation, at least in the parts that I have read. But there is an alternative: William Levitan and Stanley Lombardo have edited *Tales of Dionysus. The Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis*, with an introduction by Gordon Braden and a multitude of other poetic contributors.<sup>9</sup> Braden's introduction provides a convenient 'Summary of the Poem' (19–38):

It was the classical epic to end all classical epics—which, as it happens, it did. At 20,426 lines it is, if the truth be told, an almost impossible read. It seems longer than that, with a sprawling, repetitive, digressive, often confusing narrative, relentlessly violent. . . written in a highly mannered mutation of Homer's language and style that comes across as tightly ordered and insanely unruly at the same time. (1)

Consider, then, Douglass Parker's disconcerting sample of the beginning of the *Tales of Dionysus*:

*ONE has light-bearing Zeus  
Putting a nymph to sad use.  
The sky-striking fists of Typhoon  
Drag down darkness at noon.*

SING,  
O  
MUSE:

<sup>8</sup> *Nonnus. Dionysiaca, with an English Translation*. Translated and edited by W. H. D. Rouse. Loeb Classical Library volumes 344, 354, and 356. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1940. Hardback £20 each, ISBN: 978-06-74-99379-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Tales of Dionysus. The Dionysiaca of Nonnus of Panopolis*. A Group Translation edited by William Levitan and Stanley Lombardo, with an Introduction by Gordon Braden. Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. xviii + 708. Paperback \$39.95, ISBN: 978-0-472-03896-1.

*Cronides'* go-between gutting the pallet in blaze  
 Thunderbolt's orgasm birthing in strain at the coupling flash  
 Sheet Lightning, *Semele's* chambermaid, strewing her bride-bed

& SING:

Twyborn *Bacchus'* blessed event:  
 Unfinished foetus  
 of mother unmidwifed, scooped still damp from the embers by Zeus—  
 whose gingerly fingers slot his thigh to a he-man womb,  
 a uterine device which doublecasts him, matripaternal,  
 to bring the baby to term in terms of his prior confinement:  
 From forehead gravid with swollen bolus by temple spermatick,  
 Zeus fired unconceived, unconceivable *Athena* glinting in full kit.

Samples taken from various other contributors illustrate the diversity of the *Tales of Dionysus*:

War roared:  
 Bows bent, spears swerved—struck  
 On the center-spot as stone split ox-skin.  
 Blood, more blood: it streams through the pasture,  
 As half-dead bodies eat dust. And with the red din  
 Fading, clamorous Cadmus founded Thebes.

(Book 5: Rob Turner, 125)

Then Zeus, whose divine discourse resonated  
 Across the celestial expanse, spoke by elucidated. . .  
 'My Eternal Creator, clansmen, and self-sown shepherd,  
 Do not resent their misfortune since humanity's truth  
 Ripens or fades with nature just like the moon.  
 Nectar is for gods, but I will give mankind a defence for grief  
 Whose taste flows sweetly, but it is more suitable  
 For drinking and speaking and existing on earth.'

(Book 7: Christian Teresi, 162)

Then came their soft sister, Spring,  
 her lips puffed with breath of the sweet West Wind,  
 a seraphic solace to mortal men,  
 and her hair tied back from her windy face  
 with a dewy diadem, and all the while  
 she laughed like a flower in bloom.

(Book 11: Darwin Micheber-Rutledge, 224)

So Dionysus claimed again his purpose, restored nature's  
 throbbing pulse—he the god of ravishment, of juicy jizm

of glistening life-pumping pearls, of ecstatic joyance.

(Book 12: John L. Gronbeck-Tedesco, 232)

Krunked, libated, pished, schnokered, quadled, poonted, right-rack-ripped,  
shellacked, blasted, hammered—drunk:

the whole wine-basted brood saw rock, rill and river in twos,  
doubling their pleasure and venom.

(Book 15: John L. Gronbeck-Tedesco, 265)

But now to more serious matters.

Simon Hornblower has engaged intensively with Lykophron's *Alexandra*, publishing a Greek text, with an introduction, translation, and commentary, in 2015;<sup>10</sup> then, three years later, a monograph, *Lykophron's Alexandra, Rome, and the Hellenistic World*;<sup>11</sup> and, finally, in 2022, a slender volume in the Oxford World Classics series, translated with an introduction and explanatory notes.<sup>12</sup>

I see the winged firebrand  
rushing to snatch the dove, the Pephnaian bitch,  
which the aquatic vulture gave birth to,  
encased in a round covering of shell. (86–9)

Rachel Lesser's *Desire in the Iliad. The Force that Moves the Epic and its Audience*<sup>13</sup> 'clarifies how the *Iliad* is fundamentally an epic about human feelings and human relationships rather than spectacular violence' (3). But why 'rather than'? After all, spectacular violence is a widespread and easily recognizable feature of human interactions. Lesser aspires to 'put to rest evolutionary notions of literary history that view Homeric epic as primitive and unrealistic, lacking interior depth and a recognizable concept of intellect' (3), but the results of her analyses seem consistently to yield unconvincing conclusions. Amit Shilo's *Beyond Death in the Oresteia. Poetics, Ethics, and Politics*<sup>14</sup> is more successful. Alexander Kirichenko's *Greek Literature and the Ideal. The Pragmatics of Space from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Age* is in turn more demanding—though not necessarily more informative.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Lykophron: Alexandra. Greek Text, Translation, Commentary, & Introduction*. By Simon Hornblower. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xxi + 617. Hardback £120, ISBN: 978-0-19-957670-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Lykophron's Alexandra, Rome, and the Hellenistic World*. By Simon Hornblower. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xxv + 254. Hardback £60, ISBN: 978-0-19-872368-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Lykophron. Alexandra*. Translated by Simon Hornblower. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xlv + 138. Paperback £8.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-886334-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Desire in the Iliad. The Force that Moves the Epic and its Audience*. By Rachel H. Lesser. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. x + 270. Hardback £75, ISBN: 978-0-19-286651-6.

<sup>14</sup> *Beyond Death in the Oresteia. Poetics, Ethics, and Politics*. By Amit Shilo. New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. x + xii. Hardback £75, ISBN: 978-1-108-83274-8.

<sup>15</sup> *Greek Literature and the Ideal. The Pragmatics of Space from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Age*. By Alexander Kirichenko. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. vii-x + 290. Hardback £75, ISBN: 978-0-19-286670-7.

Meanwhile I shall look forward to a wider range of opportunities—not least, to improve my limited (my very limited!) knowledge of the Byzantine commentaries on ancient Greek texts of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

There is so much more to be learned.<sup>16</sup>

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### *Latin literature*

Let me start with a fascinating volume that Paolo Felice Sacchi and Marco Formisano have edited on *Epitomic Writing in Late Antiquity and Beyond*,<sup>1</sup> the first volume in the new series *sera tela*, devoted to ‘Studies in Late Antique Literature and its Reception’, edited by Marco Formisano. This inaugural volume gets the new series off to a very good start. Sacchi and Formisano offer a new approach to epitomic writing, seen as a typical product of late antique literary culture. The aim of the volume is to focus not so much on what is lost and cut out in the process of condensation, but on the value of the epitomic as a hermeneutic category as well as on its aesthetic value, both textual and visual. The individual contributions follow this editorial lead admirably closely, examining the interplay of repetition, fragmentation, dismemberment and re-composition, cutting and re-uniting, and defamiliarization, and showing how epitomic writing can be playful and entertaining, how it can represent a sophisticated act of interpretation, and serve as a ‘tool for investigating the very borders and paradoxes of language’ (12), even for conveying a spiritual experience.

The juxtaposition of contributions focusing on classical or late antiquity with those studying twentieth-century texts works very well, and the cross-references between individual chapters contribute to a tightly focused discussion. The editors present their volume itself as an ‘epitome’ (12) – yet an exceptionally rich one, and one that just another epitome, that of the reviewer, can hardly do full justice to. I strongly recommend that readers explore this wonderful volume for themselves. All I can do is to briefly hint at a few highlights: Brian Sowers offers an insightful discussion of epitome in Ausonius’ oeuvre, with specific focus on the *Epitaphia Heroum* (‘epitaphs of heroes’) and *Caesares* (‘Caesars’). I was particularly intrigued by his discussion of the *Epitaphia Heroum*, in which he traces Ausonius’ detailed intertextual engagement not only with Homer, but also with Vergil and others. He neatly draws attention to moments where the source text itself has the character of an epitome of sorts (such as Aeneas’ condensed account of the Trojan War and his journey in Books 2 and 3

<sup>16</sup> *Byzantine Commentaries on Ancient Greek Texts, 12th–15th Centuries*. Edited by Baukje van den Berg, Divina Manolova, and Przemyslaw Marciniak. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Pp. x + 386. Hardback £90, ISBN: 978-1-316-51465-8.

<sup>1</sup> *Epitomic Writing in Late Antiquity and Beyond. Forms of Unabridged Writing*. Edited by Paolo F. Sacchi and Marco Formisano. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. 281. 3 black and white figures, 18 colour plates. Hardback £81.00, ISBN: 978-1-35-028193-6.