

Later Epic

A... “Problematic” Epic

Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 25

The Problem With a Lack of Options

- There's only one English translation... ever, and it's from 1940
 - We've talked about translator bias before and how translators can insert their own opinions and ideals into the text
 - This text presents some of the most negative examples we could encounter:
 - Note “a” on p. 274 is a **big red flag**:
“Nonnos seems to imagine that Indians are negroes. Perhaps he is thinking of the two divisions of Ethiopians.”
 - So let's look a little closer at the text...

The Problem With a Lack of Options

- πότε νόστιμος εἰς χθόνα Λυδῶν
ἴξεαι οὐλοκάρηνον αἰστώσας γένος Ἴωδῶν;
οὗ πω ληιδίας κυανόχροας ἔδρακε Πείη

οὐλοκάρηνον:
“curly-haired”

κυανόχροας:
“dark-skinned”

- when will you destroy the

woollyheaded nation of
the Lydian land ? Not yet
blackskin captives (327)

γυρὸς ἐν ὤμοισιν, μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος
“[Eurybates was] round in the shoulders, dark-
skinned, and curly-haired” (*Odyssey* 19.246)

The Problem With a Lack of Options

- Several problems with translations like this:
 - First—they're awful
 - Second—they make it seem like this is what Classics is, and what Classicists are like (we're not...)
 - Third—what did descriptions like this make you think of Nonnus?
 - What did it make you think the point of his epic was?

The Problem With a Lack of Options

- Would an author living in Egypt really confuse India and Ethiopia? Or not distinguish between any of many groups of people with dark skin?
- Memnon not a negative stereotype
 - Remember the equal of Achilles from the epic *Aethiopis* that followed the *Iliad*?

*Memnon (left) vs.
Achilles (right)*



“Baroque” Epic

- Historically the *Dionysiaca* has had a rather dim reputation (from the Introduction to the only English translation of the work):
 - “The mythology of the *Dionysiaca* is... the longest and most elaborate example... of Greek myths in their final stage of degeneracy.” (x)
 - “[Nonnos] gives us... a faded and overcrowded tapestry... as the breath of his sickly and unwholesome fancy stirs it.” (xii)
 - “If Nonnos had been a more consistent poet and... thinker...” (xvi)
 - “But unfortunately, having got his new savior-born god, he has no idea what to do with him, and the poem trails off into a series of... adventures... each more tiring than the last...” (xvii)
 - “Nonnos...furnishes material for the study of Alexandrian mythology in its degenerate forms.” (xix)

Discussion

- So, we know that Nonnus was Greco-Egyptian living in a multicultural society, and also he was Christian. We know that at least some of the negative portrayals of other peoples and myths in the epic are not original to Nonnus himself.
 - How do these ideas change your understanding of Nonnus and the *Dionysiaca*?
 - In light of this information, what do you think he's actually writing about?

Nonnus

- Born in Panopolis, Egypt, lived and worked in Alexandria
 - Little else known with certainty, probably writing 441-470 CE
- Wrote the *Paraphrase of (the Gospel of) St. John* first and then wrote the *Dionysiaca* later in life
 - No indication that he changed religions, so how to reconcile this?

Old idea that the *Paraphrase* was a tongue-in-cheek satire and the *Dionysiaca* was reverent; what if we flip that?



Nonnus

- Education system based on understanding old “classic” texts
 - Pagan and Christian alike educated with these stories
 - Sound familiar?
- The “jeweled style” of literature was popular in Latin, works for Greek too



Narrative: the *Dionysiaca*

- 48 books at 20,426 lines, so in general:
 - Books 1-2: introduction and cosmogony
 - Books 3-7: ancestry and the foundation of D.'s homeland in and around Thebes
 - Books 8-12: tragic birth and education/upbringing, adoption of the vine as a symbol
 - Books 13-40: accomplishments in war and peace—Zeus challenges D. to conquer the Indians to prove he belongs with the gods; D. does this
 - Books 41-48: return to Greece and summary of divine powers

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Structure of a “Royal Encomium”

- An epic-like retelling of a king/queen/emperor’s life, here made into an actual epic

Narrative: Book 25

- Summary (in the second person)
- Invocation to the Muse (singular)
- Heroes of old (aka, why Dionysus is great!!!)
 - Perseus vs. Medusa
 - Minos vs. Nisos and Scylla
 - The labors of Herakles
- Invocations to Homer and “the goddess”
- Dionysus restarts his war vs. Deriades and the Indians
 - Attis brings D. divine armor and orders
 - Description of the armor
 - Europa and the foundation of Thebes
 - Ganymede
 - Tylos in Maionia (a Lydian legend)
 - Rhea-Kybele and Zeus vs. Kronos

Remember: this is not what's being described...

John Collier, *Priestess of Bacchus*, 1885-9



“Jewels” in his
“jeweled” style

The Analysis

- The Narrator's Voice
 - Speaks directly to the reader... kind of (summary/intro)
 - Invocations are odd, syncretic
 - Muse (singular) (1) is from Homer, but also works in a Christian context
 - Homer (253) referenced more as a saint than an author/god
 - “the goddess” (264) works as a convention, especially following Homer
 - Claims authority by being an encyclopedia
 - Mythology and astronomy throughout
 - Dionysus is great because all the other heroes aren't (22-252)

The Analysis

- Language and Performance
 - Modern language an issue in the translation
 - New style emerging—(similar to) the “jeweled style”
 - Lots of descriptive language with adjectives and adverbs

The Analysis

- The Literary Background
 - Stories told at length to show Dionysus is a true hero, the others aren't:
 - Perseus did everything for his own selfish gain, never led men in battle (47 ff.)
 - Dionysus will defeat Perseus in battle (Book 47)
 - Minos won a war because he was pretty (165 ff.)
 - Dionysus conquered India (almost) single-handedly
 - Herakles conquered deer, bulls, and other animals (242 ff.)
 - Dionysus' maenads (women) have done the same or better

The Analysis

- The Literary Background
 - Lots of ancient myths, almost encyclopedic
 - Not just Homer, other myths, even Lydian ones
 - We have epithets and formulas again, but they're part of that jeweled style
 - Type-Scenes
 - Description of Armor kind of used in place of an Arming Scene (384)
- The focus is on how everything ever can somehow relate to Dionysus

The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
 - Whatever Dionysus is, he's not like the heroes of old
 - So what is Dionysus like?
 - Impatient
 - Boastful
 - Disrespectful
 - Destructive
 - Revels in conquest and bloodshed
 - Remember Catullus?

The Analysis

- The Social Background
 - How much does he really believe in the old myths?
 - “if he [Perseus] really did fly” (33)
 - Lots of focus on wine, perhaps to excess
 - Sure “nomorepain” wine is “*like*” medicine, but it’s obviously not medicine
 - Dionysus isn’t a sympathetic character, even by the standards of Greek myths
 - He and his followers do genuinely terrible and reprehensible things in other books

A Product of the Times

- Concentrating all of ancient myth into the story of Dionysus mirrors the concentrating of all of human history into the story of Christ
 - Similar themes of spreading true religion (civilization), death, afterlife/resurrection, the meaning of wine
 - There's power in simplifying complicated stories into easier narratives



A Product of the Times

- Authors like Proba and Nonnus weren't trying to outdo one another, simply relying on important cultural themes of the period
 - Most things written during this period share such similar themes
 - Military expedition to India has obvious references to Alexander the Great, but playing on popular ideas about the *Romance of Alexander*

*Alexander exploring
the sky with griffins*

