Introduction: Becoming A Classic

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I read yesterday in Mr. Joseph Clarke's Sacred Literature, that Nonnus is an author whom few can read, & fewer admire. So that my opinion is nothing outrageous. I do not feel well; & look like a ghost. Mrs. Martin called, & thought so too!—

Elizabeth Berridge (ed.), The Barretts at Hope End: The Early Diary of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In 2002, when the publisher Mondadori undertook to bring out the complete works of Andrea Camilleri in the prestigious series Meridiani (Italian counterpart to the French Pléiade library),¹ some critics had strong reservations. How is it—they wondered—that the inventor of the Inspector Montalbano mysteries, who let his character speak the dialect of Vigàta (a fictional town near Porto Empedocle, Camilleri’s birthplace),² finds a place in a series devoted to classic authors such as Petrarch, Manzoni, Proust, Thomas Mann, Calvino and so on? The coryphaeus of these literary critics was Roberto Cotroneo, for whom labelling Camilleri as a ‘classic writer’ was a rash choice, if not an outrage.³ But Mondadori’s choice to give a popular author classic dignity was defended against its critics by, among others, Diego Gabutti: even Goldoni and Shakespeare—he rightly observed—were reputed in their times to be representatives of low culture.⁴ And ten years later, after the first of two Meridiani editions of Camilleri’s complete works was published, the Sicilian author has been given the honour of seeing a Companion for his Montalbano novels, edited

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² On Montalbano’s language see Vignuzzi (2003).


by Lucia Rinaldi, Teaching Fellow at the Department of Italian at University College London: Andrea Camilleri: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction.5

Evoking Camilleri’s case, therefore, it is very appropriate to present Brill’s Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis, since someone might turn up his nose at the inclusion of a late Greek poet in the series Brill’s Companions in Classical Studies, in the illustrious company of Ovid, Herodotus, Cicero, Propertius, Thucydides, Apollonius Rhodius, Hesiod, Silius Italicus, Callimachus, Lucan, Sophocles, Horace, Seneca, Valerius Flaccus, Statius, and Euripides (forthcoming).

Long gone, however, are the days when the Comte de Marcellus, editor and inspired translator both of the Dionysiaca (1856) and the Paraphrase (1861), spoke of Nonnus as ‘le mieux enfoui des poètes grecs’ and relegated his epic poem to the ancillary role of ‘grand magasin mythologique’:

C’est sans doute une étrange entreprise que de déterrer, en plein dix-neuvième siècle, le mieux enfoui des poètes grecs. Tenter d’intéresser un public français à une mythologie surannée ou aux vers d’un Égyptien du Bas-Empire, n’est-ce pas folie? C’est au moins s’éloigner résolument des sujets qui out à peu près seuls l’habitude de nous toucher; c’est en quelque sorte, j’en conviens, remonter le siècle au plus fort de son courant. … Je suis assurément fort éloigné d’éprouver pour le Panopolitain une sympathie aussi profonde. Je ne prends pas pour génie un amour de rimer; et ce n’est pas mon penchant que je manifeste ici, c’est mon choix que je justifie. Je ne relis pas, quant à moi, les expéditions de Bacchus de façon à amincir sous mes doigts studieux les marges de leurs rares éditions, fort peu portatives du reste. Je les quitte, au contraire, bien souvent pour Pindare, Théocrite, surtout Homère, qu’elles ont tant cherché à imiter. Mais je me persuade que la connaissance de ce poème (et tous ceux qui l’ont lu, à sa renaissance ou depuis, l’ont déclaré comme moi) peut jeter de véritables lumières sur certains points encore obscurs de l’antiquité. Les Dionysiaques doivent être considérées comme un grand magasin mythologique.6

Many years later, and in a similar disdainful tone, Herbert Jennings Rose, in his ‘Mythological Introduction’ to the Loeb edition of the Dionysiaca (1940), belittled Nonnus’ poem as witness to ‘Greek myths in their final stage of degeneracy’, a happy hunting ground for lovers of scholarly mythology:

5 Rinaldi (2012), published as vol. 5 in the series McFarland Companions to Mystery Fiction.
6 Marcellus (1856) i, iii.