CHAPTER 18

Nonnus and the Play of Genres

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1 Introduction

Scholars agree that literary genres each have their own dynamic and are subject to change.\(^1\) Every author composing within the framework of a genre develops and transforms it, creating a work which combines the traditional with the new and unexpected.\(^2\) In this way every instance of a given genre brings it up to date and at the same time redraws its boundaries at the same time. That phenomenon is especially clear in the \textit{Dionysiaca} by Nonnus of Panopolis.\(^3\)

The poem begins (1.1) with a request to the Muses to tell the story of Dionysus, the twice-born god. In the opening lines (1–15) the poet outlines the main subject of his enormous work, as well as announcing that he would sing a many-coloured hymn (ποικίλον ὕμνον, 15)\(^4\) in the honour of the god of wine, and so informs the reader of the manner in which he will present it. That is confirmed by the subsequent lines (16–33), where Nonnus asks the Muses to grant him the god Proteus,\(^5\) a symbol of multiplicity and of unending change.

That penchant for variety,\(^6\) which Nonnus himself indicates, is expressed both in his style (such as in the wealth of synonyms,\(^7\) or in the way the author

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1 English translation by Magdalena Jarczyk.
3 For more information on Nonnus and his work, see Shorrock (2005); Accorinti (2013c). The text of the \textit{Dionysiaca} is according to the Budé edition (Vian et al. 1976–2006). Translations are from Rouse (1940), occasionally slightly modified.
5 Gigli Piccardi (1993); Agosti (1996); Faber (2004).
6 Harries (1994) 63–64 notes that in relation to the \textit{Dionysiaca} the term \textit{variatio} does not carry the meaning known from Greek or Roman poetry, but rather a broader one, being equivalent to the ‘territorial, dynastic, and amatory ambitions of Dionysus himself.’
7 Faber (2004) 251: ‘In a larger context, at the level of literary style, the lexical variations promote the principle of ποικιλία that comprises the poem’s thematic and literary strategy.’
aims to diversify his depictions of characters, situations and objects alike\(^8\) and in the structure of the poem.\(^9\)

While originally Nonnus’ work was not that much appreciated, recent times\(^10\) have seen a distinct shift in those evaluations, resulting in attempts to regard the characteristic features of his style and composition as part of an intended, if not very comprehensible, artistic strategy.

It is worth noting that in the last few decades many outstanding researchers have tried to solve the puzzles of Nonnus’ biography,\(^11\) of his style and composition,\(^12\) as well as of certain detailed problems of his huge work.\(^13\) One of the few things all researchers agree about is the opinion that there is a certain general thematic framework on which Nonnus bases his epic poem,\(^14\) and that is the story of Dionysus’ origins, birth, life and apotheosis. Considering those aspects in more detail, however, it fails to explain the structure of the poem in

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8 String (1966) 33–70 (‘Ποικιλία als Stilprinzip’).
9 Lindsay (1965) 379–395 has some general reflections on the concept of variety in Nonnus. Cf. Shorrock (2001) 21: ‘By containing Proteus within the proem Nonnus makes an open declaration, and demonstration, of his poetic principles: like Proteus, the Dionysiaca will have a transformative, and ποικίλος, nature.’
10 Until recently, appreciation for Nonnus’ epic was in fact rare. Certainly the aforementioned principle of variety has been one of the reasons for the scholarly controversy surrounding it and especially its structure. Thus, one must note, Nonnus has both been called the last of the great Greek poets, and excoriated for his idiom and style. For a review of the evolution of such views on the Dionysiaca, see Gerstinger (1943–1947) 71–74; Krafft (1975) 91–94; Shorrock (2001) 2–3. Keydell (1932) 198 n. 131 calls Nonnus a ‘stets inkonsequenter Dichter’. Hernández de la Fuente (2002–2003) 403 summarizes the evaluations of the poem prevailing in the scholarship by succinctly referring to it as ‘the Dionysiaca, a poem which more recently suffered almost a damnatio memoriae.’
12 It has also been stipulated that the Dionysiaca was composed in the manner of an encomium: Stegemann (1930) 209–230; Lasky (1978); Miguélez Cavero (2010) also demonstrates that the epic contains some elements of invective.