

# The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot

*Alan Cameron*

## I

TWO VERY DIFFERENT POEMS are transmitted under the name of Nonnus of Panopolis: his *Dionysiaca* in 48 books, the longest extant Greek epic; and a hexameter *Paraphrase of St John's Gospel* in the same flamboyant style. Metrical differences have led some (including myself at one time) to doubt whether the same man wrote both poems,<sup>1</sup> but (as we shall see) these doubts are based on the mistaken assumption that the *Dionysiaca* must have come first. Two facts put common authorship beyond reasonable doubt. First, there is conspicuous Dionysiac imagery in the account of the wedding at Cana in the *Paraphrase*.<sup>2</sup> Second, Adrian Hollis has recently pointed out that both poems allude to the same lines of Hellenistic poetry, in one case each to a different part of the same line of Callimachus's *Hecale*.<sup>3</sup>

Nonnus poses a familiar problem in a particularly acute form. Since no specifically Christian higher education replaced the schools of the grammaticus and rhetor, Christian boys (and a few girls) continued not only to study the classics but also to write in a consciously classicizing style throughout the late

<sup>1</sup> For the most recent statement of this case, Lee Sherry, "The *Paraphrase of St John* attributed to Nonnus," *Byzantion* 66 (1996) 409–430.

<sup>2</sup> Morton Smith, "On the Wine God in Palestine (Gen. 18, Jn. 2, and Achilles Tatius)," *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume II* (Jerusalem 1974) 815–829; E. Livrea, *Nonno di Panopoli: Parafrasi del Vangelo di S. Giovanni, Canto B* (Bologna 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Adrian Hollis, "Nonnus and Hellenistic Poetry," in N. Hopkinson, ed., *Studies in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus* (Cambridge 1994) 58–59.

antique and Byzantine period. The old gods and goddesses remain a potent source of imagery and comparison in secular literature of every kind, prose as well as poetry.<sup>4</sup> And mythology continued to be taken seriously as a Hellenized version of local traditions right down into the Byzantine period.<sup>5</sup> The richest and most comprehensive source of such material must have been the 60-book geographical dictionary of Stephanus of Byzantium in the age of Justinian, including as it did a summary account of the mythical past of every city of note.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have long debated whether the authors of certain works of this kind were pagan or Christian. In earlier times references to pagan gods were often assumed to imply pagan convictions, but there must always have been many perfectly sincere Christians who were not interested in theology and preferred the classics to biblical commentaries. Conspicuous examples in the sixth century are Agathias and Paul the Silentiary.

But Nonnus is a special case. In the first place, the *Dionysiaca* is more than just a poem on a mythological subject. P. Chuvin in particular has argued that, with its pervasive sensuality and preoccupation with astrology, the "paganism" of the poem is more than purely literary and decorative.<sup>7</sup> Nor can we take refuge in the more relaxed tastes of a layman. For the *Paraphrase* is a work on a central Christian theme, the life of Christ. Though obviously of literary rather than theological ambitions, its author had clearly studied both Chrysostom's homilies and Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on St John's Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See my own forthcoming *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*.

<sup>5</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor 1990) 41–53; P. Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie dionysiaques: recherches sur l'oeuvre de Nonnos de Panopolis* (Clermont-Ferrand 1991).

<sup>6</sup> What survives, massive as it is (more than 700 pages in Meineke's edition), is no more than an incomplete epitome, but even so preserves much valuable mythological detail.

<sup>7</sup> "Nonnos de Panopolis entre paganisme et christianisme," *BAssBudé* 45 (1986) 387–396.

<sup>8</sup> J. Golega, *Studien über die Evangeliendichtung des Nonnos von Panopolis* (Breslau 1930) 126–132; and Livrea's commentaries (*supra* n.2) on Books 18

The traditional explanation is a conversion between the two works. The man who wrote the *Dionysiaca* in his pagan youth turned to Christianity and adapted his talents to presenting a poetical version of the fourth Gospel. There is at least one case where this does seem to be the explanation: Firmicus Maternus. Of his two surviving works, the *Mathesis*, an astrological work, can be dated to 337 and his *De errore profanarum religionum*, one of the most intemperate surviving attacks on paganism, to ca 346. Over and above its astrological content, the *Mathesis* refers repeatedly to gods in the plural, and even to the arch-pagan Porphyry as *Porphyrius noster*. There can be no serious doubt that its author was a pagan.<sup>9</sup> The later work does not expressly repudiate a pagan past, but conversion to Christianity between the two works seems a reasonable if not absolutely necessary assumption.

More often, however, conversion is simply a hypothesis to explain a work scholars have felt to be too pagan in character for a Christian. The classic case is Synesius. Though he ended his days as bishop of Ptolemais, he is known to have studied philosophy at Alexandria with the undoubtedly pagan Hypatia, and his surviving works are full of references to that Bible of the later neoplatonists, the Chaldaean Oracles. *De providentia* gives a remarkably pagan impression, and *De insomniis* deals with dream divination (and reveals incidental familiarity with various other forms of divination). A recent book was almost entirely devoted to his postulated conversion,<sup>10</sup> despite the fact that there is no hint of it in a reasonably well documented life. Above all, we have a long and fascinating letter in which Synesius explains to his future flock that he is both unworthy and unwilling to become a bishop. If he had been recently converted from a pagan past, this was the place to admit it. Yet not only does he not do so. He makes it clear that he is not

(1989) and 2 (2000).

<sup>9</sup> R. Turcan, *Firmicus Maternus: L'erreur des religions païennes* (Paris 1982) 16–19.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene, Philosopher-Bishop* (Berkeley 1982).

going to give up his philosophy, his beloved wife, or even (if possible) his hunting. There can in fact be little doubt that Synesius was born a Christian.<sup>11</sup>

According to the well-informed ecclesiastical historian Socrates, Heliodorus, author of the longest and most elaborate of the Greek romances, went on to become bishop of Tricca in Thessaly,<sup>12</sup> but that need not entail conversion after a pagan youth. It may be that, like Synesius, he simply devoted his life to secular letters before his elevation. Bishops did not need to be theologians, and by the fifth century they tended increasingly to be drawn from the upper classes. So long as their faith was sound what was often more valuable was the status conferred by high culture, friends in high places, and the ability to exercise influence.

In the case of Nonnus, both the conversion hypothesis and the assumption of a youth devoted to belles-lettres presuppose the priority of the *Dionysiaca*. On the other hand there are grounds for dating the *Paraphrase* first. In the first place, its metrical practice is much less strict than that of the *Dionysiaca*. Of course, allowance can be made for biblical proper names, but

<sup>11</sup> A. Cameron and J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley 1993). W. Hagl, "Das 'officium' des Synesios für Heimat und Reich: ein Leben im Spannungsverhältniss zwischen Heidentum und Christentum," *Klio* 81 (1999) 199–217, and in *Arcadius Apis Imperator: Synesios von Kyrene und sein Beitrag zum Herrscherideal der Spätantike* (Stuttgart 1997), has reasserted the thesis of Synesius as a converted pagan, solely on the basis of a rather vague reference in Evagrius (who wrote *ca* 595), without rebutting the fully documented argument of Cameron and Long (based on contemporary evidence). Hagl's monograph is politely but firmly demolished by Noel Lenski, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 9 (1998) 528–534. Add the fact that Evagrius was poorly informed on events 200 years before his time. Thus the same catalogue of Christian writers that includes Synesius also includes Claudian, regarded by contemporaries as a pagan (P. Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus the Church Historian* [Louvain 1981] 86–90).

<sup>12</sup> Socr. *HE* 5. 22. This testimony is often dismissed as a foolish Christian legend, but Socrates is in fact very knowledgeable about the secular literature of his age. I plan to return to the subject elsewhere. Meanwhile, we can at any rate "rest in the calm and well-documented assurance that the novel of Heliodorus was indeed written at some date after 350 A.D." (G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History* [Berkeley 1994] 149–156).

that is not the only area we find lapses from the high standards (not to mention many additional self-imposed rules of his own) maintained without a single exception throughout the 48 books of the *Dionysiaca*.<sup>13</sup>

Less attention has been paid in this context to the self-repetition that every reader of Nonnus recognizes as one of his most striking and idiosyncratic features.<sup>14</sup> It is here that a recent paper by Francis Vian has made a decisive contribution, in the form of a comprehensive study of μάρτυς and its cognates (μαρτυρή, ἀμάρτυρος, ἐπίμαρτυς) in Nonnus, where they occur no fewer than 153 times.<sup>15</sup> What so attracted Nonnus to this word, unsurprisingly enough never common in earlier poetry of any date or kind? Vian pointed out that in the *Paraphrase* μάρτυς-words regularly carry the standard Christian connotation of actively bearing witness, normally to the word of God or the words and deeds of Jesus. They are never used like this in the *Dionysiaca*, where their sense is often watered down to little more than a mannerism, notably (for example) in formulas where μάρτυς is used adjectivally or in apposition with a series of nouns in the dative: μάρτυρι δέλτω, δέσμω, θύρσω, καπνῶ, μορφῆ, μύθω, νεκρῶ, ποινη, πομπῆ, πυρσῶ, σιγῆ, χαλκῶ, and φωνῆ.<sup>16</sup> These formulas are notoriously difficult to translate, with the exact force of μάρτυρι varying according to noun and context.

It is difficult to see how the “strong” use of these words in the *Paraphrase* (where they are proportionately much commoner)

<sup>13</sup> See Sherry (*supra* n.1) 420–421.

<sup>14</sup> “This speech of Helios is indeed a rhetorical elaboration of a predecessor; the model, however, is not Ovid but Nonnus himself, the poet he is most fond of imitating”: Peter Knox, “Phaethon in Ovid and Nonnus,” *CQ* N.S. 38 (1988) 546.

<sup>15</sup> F. Vian, “μάρτυς chez Nonnos de Panopolis: Étude de sémantique et de chronologie,” *REG* 110 (1997) 143–160.

<sup>16</sup> For the complete list with references, see W. Peek’s invaluable *Lexikon zu den Dionysiaka des Nonnos* (Berlin 1968–75) 966–968.

could derive from their “weak” use in the *Dionysiaca*. In fact no one who has worked his way through Vian’s systematic classification of their use in the two poems could be in any serious doubt about the priority of the *Paraphrase*. Nonnus’s original inspiration was undoubtedly the Gospel he was paraphrasing: μάρτυς-words occur more often in the Gospel of St John than any other New Testament text. He grew so fond of the words and the formulas he had devised for them that he continued to use them in a much weakened sense in the *Dionysiaca*. To cite a single example, the phrases μάρτυς ἀληθείης and μάρτυς ἐτητυμίας occur three times in the *Paraphrase* (18.177, 20.138, 21.140), referring to either Jesus or the author of the Gospel, clearly deriving from the frequent combination of the words in St John.<sup>17</sup> In the *Dionysiaca* we find μάρτυς ἀληθείης once (37.240), of an umpire in a chariot race. The assumption of the priority of the *Paraphrase* would also provide a more natural explanation of its less developed metrical technique.<sup>18</sup> The poet’s practice evolved and became more rigorous over the years.

Confirmation is provided by a detail noticed by J. Golega 70 years ago. One line has always seemed to leap out of its context in the “pagan” *Dionysiaca* (12.171):

Βάκχος ἄναξ δάκρυσε, βροτῶν ἵνα δάκρυα λύσῃ  
 Lord Bacchus has wept tears that he may wipe away man’s tears.

Once upon a time scholars used to read this as a polemical attempt to present Dionysus as a suffering redeemer—or at the very least an attempt to assimilate Dionysus to Christ. Mistakenly, because, as another important recent article of Vian has shown, Nonnus betrays no interest whatever in the afterlife, and

<sup>17</sup> Vian (*supra* n.15) 155.

<sup>18</sup> Vian (*supra* n.15) 157–158; for much more detail, G. Agosti and F. Gonnelli, “Materiali per la storia dell’esametro nei poeti cristiani greci,” in M. Fantuzzi and R. Prefagostini, *Struttura e storia dell’esametro greco* I (Rome 1995) 289–434.

though one or two of Dionysus's favourites win a kind of apotheosis, the general run of mankind has no such expectations. One striking passage proclaims that the only relief for mortals burdened with unbearable suffering is—getting drunk!<sup>19</sup>

More important is Golega's discovery that both thought and formulation were borrowed from Cyril of Alexandria: δακρῦει δὲ ὁ Κύριος ... ἵνα ἡμῶν περιστείλη δάκρυον. The work in question is Cyril's commentary on the Gospel according to St John.<sup>20</sup> It is not easy to believe that a man who so obviously preferred spending his leisure hours reading the poets and mythographers found either time or motive to wade through this immensely long, difficult, and highly polemical work in twelve books<sup>21</sup>—except when composing the *Paraphrase*. This is surely a phrase he remembered from the research he did for the *Paraphrase*.

If the *Paraphrase* came first, then (disallowing the equally simplistic and much less probable hypothesis of apostasy) Nonnus must have been a Christian when he wrote the *Dionysiaca*. This would make him a much more complex and interesting figure than hitherto supposed. But not improbably complex. In the Victorian age as in late antiquity, many of the most passionate and devoted Hellenists were also devout, often evangelical Christians.<sup>22</sup> They were simply able to compartmentalize their lives. Religious beliefs and practice had no necessary bearing on literary interests and enthusiasms.

<sup>19</sup> 12.265–269; in general F. Vian, "Théogamies et sotériologie dans les *Dionysiaques* de Nonnos," *JSav* 1994, 197–233, esp. 222–233.

<sup>20</sup> II pp.281–282 ed. Pusey; Golega (*supra* n.8) 79; for other passages where Nonnus reveals knowledge of this work, Golega 126–132.

<sup>21</sup> The ten that survive complete occupy 1790 tall columns in two volumes of Migne (*PG* 73–74).

<sup>22</sup> Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1980), and Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven 1981).

## II

A fascinating and original article by Enrico Livrea claims to have solved the Nonnian question.<sup>23</sup> According to Livrea, like Synesius Nonnus too became a bishop; he is to be identified with Nonnus bishop of Edessa in the second half of the fifth century. Like Livrea I am against the notion of a “conversion” between *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* and I am happy to agree on a mid-fifth century date (though dubious about the suggestion, based on the use of the term θεητόκος in the *Paraphrase*, that Nonnus wrote before the Council of Chalcedon in 451).<sup>24</sup> Nonnus the poet, like Nonnus the bishop, may well have lived from ca 400 to the 470s. Nonetheless, the poet cannot be identified with the bishop. The key text is a passage in the *Life of St Pelagia the Harlot*, apparently a work of the late fifth or sixth century. The repentance of Pelagia is brought about by a bishop called Nonnus, and the *Life* purports to have been written by his deacon Jacob.<sup>25</sup> Livrea assumes, as Theophanes assumed before him (p.141 Bonn = p.91.27 de Boor), that this Nonnus was Nonnus of Edessa. Then he further identifies this already composite figure as Nonnus of Panopolis the poet.

According to the so-called deacon Jacob, his Nonnus was “brought up in Egypt, for he was from a famous, well-populated monastery called ‘of Tabennesi’, situated in the

<sup>23</sup> “Il poeta ed il vescovo: la questione nonniana e la storia,” *Prometheus* 13 (1987) 97–123 = his *Studia Hellenistica* (Florence 1991) 439–462. Livrea himself thought his thesis “difficilmente confutabile” (113), and takes its conclusions for granted in his edition of Book 2 of the *Paraphrase* (*supra* n.2) 56–66. According to G. D’Ippolito (*Studia classica Iohanni Tarditi oblata*, edd. L. Belloni, G. Milanese, A. Porro [Milan 1995] 215), Livrea has “discovered the identity” of Nonnus.

<sup>24</sup> See my own discussion of Nonnus’s date in “The Empress and the Poet,” *YCS* 27 (1982) 235–239.

<sup>25</sup> Hardly the real name of the author (“le faux Jacques,” according to H. Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques*<sup>4</sup> [Brussels 1955] 191), but a convenient handle.



Thebaid.”<sup>26</sup> At first sight this might seem to square perfectly with the ethnic of Nonnus the poet (confirmed by [Πα]νοπολίτου in the *explicit* to Book 14 in the sixth-century Berlin papyrus). But there are problems. Not only does Jacob nowhere identify his bishop as Nonnus of Edessa or date Pelagia to the fifth century. On the contrary, the small kernel of fact that can be extracted from the *Life* points to the fourth century.

The fact that Pelagia’s Nonnus was bishop of a see within the archdiocese of Antioch<sup>27</sup> allows the *possibility* that he was bishop of Edessa. But it has long been recognized that the story of the repentant actress Pelagia is in essence the story of an unnamed repentant actress told by John Chrysostom in his 67th homily on Matthew, preached at Antioch in the neighbourhood of 390.<sup>28</sup> A number of details in the *Life of Pelagia* recall Chrysostom’s tale, brief though it is. The woman was not just a prostitute, but a star of the stage, renowned “not only in our own city (namely Antioch) but as far as Cilicia and Cappadocia.”<sup>29</sup> In Chrysostom a prefect and some soldiers try to bring her back to the stage once she has seen the light. A promising topic for development, and in the *Life* it is Satan in various disguises who tries to persuade her to give up her new life (§§31–35). Both Pelagia (§39) and Chrysostom’s actress kept out of sight of their former lovers.

Jacob explicitly sets his story in Antioch, carefully identifying two well-known Antiochene landmarks (the shrine of the martyr Julian and the so-called Great Church: §§3 and 39) and claiming that Nonnus and seven other bishops had been summoned there

<sup>26</sup> Sebastian O. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley 1987) 41, §2. For texts in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic, P. Petitmengin *et al.*, edd., *Pélagie la pénitente* I–II (Paris 1981–82).

<sup>27</sup> Brock/Harvey p.68, §46; *cf.* p.41, §2.

<sup>28</sup> *PG* 58.636–637; for the date, J. Quasten, *Patrology* III (Washington 1960) 437.

<sup>29</sup> *PG* 58.636; but Jacob’s actress was born in Antioch (§30), whereas Chrysostom’s came from a city in Phoenice.

by the archbishop of Antioch. No other identifiable person is named, and though twice stating that Nonnus's see was within the archdiocese of Antioch, neither time does he name it—or even the archbishop. If his ultimate source was indeed Chrysostom's brief account of the unnamed actress, then it would be easy to understand this puzzling reticence. Chrysostom gave no names or dates.

Later tradition identifies the saint's day of Pelagia the harlot as 8 October. Chrysostom does not name his actress, but elsewhere he tells the story of a Christian martyr called Pelagia, who threw herself off the roof of a house to preserve her virginity on the same day, 8 October, during the Diocletianic persecution.<sup>30</sup> The same day commemorates the martyrdom of yet another St Pelagia, this time of Tarsus, burned alive in a brazen bull.<sup>31</sup> The obvious assumption is that the anonymous actress was somehow identified with one or the other of these martyrs (presumably Pelagia of Antioch). According to the *Life*, the repentant actress lived out her life in men's clothing under the name of Pelagius.<sup>32</sup> Chrysostom says nothing of this, but transvestite nuns are a favourite motif in early Byzantine hagiography (as least a dozen are known),<sup>33</sup> most relevantly the case of St Margarita of Antioch, a bride who, in order to avoid being forced to marry, left the nuptial chamber in man's clothing under the same name Pelagius.<sup>34</sup> It is surely more than coincidence that Pelagia the harlot was known in Antioch by the

<sup>30</sup> PG 50.579–584; J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom, Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca 1995) 67.

<sup>31</sup> Delehaye (*supra* n.25) 187.

<sup>32</sup> Brock/Harvey pp.58–61, §§41–49.

<sup>33</sup> John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974) 1–32; Evelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisé en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance," *Studi medievali* III 17 (1976) 597–623; the lives of St Mary/Marinos and St Matrona of Perge are included in Alice-Mary Talbot, *Holy Women of Byzantium* (Washington 1996) 1–64, with useful introductions and notes.

<sup>34</sup> Delehaye (*supra* n.25) 188.

name Margarito, “Pearl,” because of all the jewelry she wore.<sup>35</sup> And it may also be more than coincidence that Jacob chose to refer to the week that followed Pelagia’s baptism as “bridal days” (§41).<sup>36</sup> Delehaye long ago remarked on the “évidente parenté” among these legends, both in theme (transvestism) and names (Pelagia/us and Margarita/o).

As for Nonnus, it may be that Jacob found the name in some local Antiochene tradition about the actress (or the martyr), but wherever he found it, he does not seem to have had even the most basic biographical information about him. For example, it must be held significant that he was unable to name a see that he twice remarks lay within the archdiocese of Antioch.

There seems no reason to doubt that Chrysostom’s repentant actress really was a star of the Antiochene stage, presumably some time in the generation or so before his sermon. Among her victims is said to have been the empress’s brother. This is a very specific allegation, and it fits Antioch in the period of Chrysostom’s youth very well—and no later period. Antioch was the principle residence of Constantius II during 337–350 and 360–361, and of Valens during 372–378. Valens’s wife Domnica is not known to have had any brothers, but Constantius’s wife Eusebia had two, both of whom lived for many years in Antioch: Eusebius and Hypatius, joint consuls in 359, when both were still quite young. Both were living at Antioch in 371, and Hypatius at any rate was still there in 379, when he was summoned to the prefecture of Rome.<sup>37</sup> An affair between the empress’s brother and a famous actress was just the sort of scandal to be remembered a generation later.

The assumption that Jacob simply embroidered Chrysostom’s story is not modern. One version of the Greek text (*BHG* 1479g) identifies the bishop of Antioch as Flavianus, that is to say the

<sup>35</sup> Brock/Harvey p.52, §30.

<sup>36</sup> It is not however unusual to compare the white baptismal robes to bridal robes: H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington 1974) 424–425, 430, 439–440.

<sup>37</sup> See their entries in *PLRE* I (1971) 308–309 and 448–449.

man who was bishop during the period Chrysostom was a priest at Antioch (381–404). Theophanes' identification of Pelagia's Nonnus with Nonnus of Edessa is worth little. It might still be argued that Jacob himself thought the man was Nonnus of Edessa. If so, however unhistorical his narrative,<sup>38</sup> it is conceivable that the detail about Tabennesi does describe a stage in the life of Nonnus of Edessa, in which case there would still be a theoretical possibility of identification with the poet. But even so remote a possibility as this can in fact be excluded.

In the first place, the name Nonnus, as Livrea acknowledges, is mainly found in Syria and Palestine.<sup>39</sup> Of the nine clerics called Nonnus listed in the Acta of Chalcedon and Ephesus,<sup>40</sup> eight were deacons or bishops in this part of the world. Despite a handful of prominent exceptions, bishops tended overwhelmingly to be local men. Given the rivalry between Antioch and Alexandria at this period, it would be particularly surprising to find an Egyptian monk appointed bishop of Edessa. Not that Jacob goes so far as to call Nonnus an Egyptian. He says only that he was from a famous monastery in the Thebaid. That does not make him a Panopolitan.<sup>41</sup> A man born in and later bishop of Edessa would never have been known by the ethnic Panopolitan just because he spent a few years in a monastery in the Panopolite nome.

Second, when praising the natural and unadorned eloquence of Pelagia's Nonnus, Jacob remarks that "he had no secular education" (οὐκ ἦν γὰρ μετέχων ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας, §17). Yet Nonnus the poet was above all things a learned poet, familiar with a mass of recondite mythological traditions and the entire

<sup>38</sup> Zoja Pavlovskis, "The Life of St. Pelagia the Harlot: Hagiographic Adaptation of Pagan Romance," *Classical Folia* 30 (1976) 138–149, hardly proves the thesis implied by her title, but does draw attention to a number of "novelistic themes."

<sup>39</sup> Campbell Bonner, "Two Notes: I. The Names Nonnos, Nonna," *JEA* 40 (1954) 15–17.

<sup>40</sup> R. Schieffer, *Index Prosopographicus*, in *ACO* IV.3.2.2 (Berlin 1982) 352.

<sup>41</sup> Livrea (*supra* n.2: 56) improbably has him born in Panopolis "da famiglia di origine siriana."

range of hellenistic and early imperial Greek poetry.<sup>42</sup> He must be ranked high among the most bombastic and rhetorical writers who ever put pen to paper. Furthermore, while it would not be hard to cite parallels for educated Christians writing on mythological or erotic themes as late as the sixth century (Agathias, for example, and Procopius of Gaza), it must be held most unlikely that a monk from a Pachomian monastery wrote a poem like the *Dionysiaca*.

Everything else Jacob says of bishop Nonnus is conventional: holy, chaste, glorious, God-loving, and “perfect in his whole way of life.” It remains a theoretical possibility that the references to the monastery and lack of education do fit a particular Nonnus known to the author of the *Life*. But certainly not the poet Nonnus of Panopolis.

And not Nonnus of Edessa either. There is not the slightest indication that Jacob linked Pelagia’s Nonnus with Edessa. On the contrary, in §32 Satan accuses Nonnus of converting many women who worshipped him in Heliopolis (Baalbek), whence the latest of the three Georgian versions made him bishop of Heliopolis and Jacob proto-deacon of the church of Heliopolis.<sup>43</sup> John of Ephesus records a persecution of pagans at Heliopolis in 580, though led by imperial officials, not a bishop called Nonnus.<sup>44</sup> In the same passage of the *Life* Satan also accuses Nonnus of baptizing thirty thousand Arabs. Though Satan is hardly an unbiased witness and the number of Arabs improbably high, many scholars have thought that some real event lies behind this passage. Shahid assumed that the Arabs in question lived in the neighbourhood of Heliopolis,<sup>45</sup> which is a reasonable inference but not directly stated in the text. No bishop of

<sup>42</sup> See (for example) Hollis (*supra* n.3) 43–62; and Chuvin (*supra* n.5).

<sup>43</sup> M. van Esbroeck in *Pélagie* (*supra* n.26) I 138.

<sup>44</sup> Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.3.27; E. Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches* (Stuttgart 1919) 87.

<sup>45</sup> Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington 1989) 17–19.

Heliopolis called Nonnus is attested, but a Nonnus bishop of Zerabenna in the province of Arabia was present at the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>46</sup> Both Heliopolis (in Phoenice Libanensis) and Zerabenna lay within the archdiocese of Antioch. It is difficult to know what criteria to apply to a speech put in the mouth of Satan in a work of fiction. But if Jacob thought his Nonnus the bishop of Edessa, why would he have invented two achievements in an area far from Edessa? If he identified Pelagia's Nonnus with any historical bishop, the documented bishop of Zerabenna or a postulated bishop of Heliopolis is clearly a better candidate.

Whether or not a real person called Nonnus played any part in the story of the repentance of Pelagia (if that was really the name of the actress from Antioch), not even pseudo-Jacob thought this Nonnus was either the poet from Panopolis or the bishop of Edessa.

*August, 2001*

Department of Classics  
Columbia University  
New York, NY 10027  
adc1@columbia.edu

<sup>46</sup> ACO II.3.2 174 #430; II.1.2 154 #431.