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Full text

This volume by Hayes and Nimis is part of their expanding series of intermediate Greek readers chiefly devoted to making Lucian accessible for students who could otherwise be hesitant to start reading his works. In addition to nine volumes on Lucian, Faenum Publishing (which consists mainly of Hayes and Nimis themselves) has presented attractively priced print-on-demand (POD) readers on Apuleius, Galen, Plutarch and Hippocrates. Their mission of providing inexpensive and easily accessible annotated textbooks thus evidently focuses on Greek prose from the Imperial Period, a nice addition to the predominantly classical orientation of other readers. This volume in particular rounds off the quartet of Lucian’s dialogue collections. As the reader is also available as a free PDF from the publishers, there are no financial obstacles to use this edition, but even the printed volume is relatively inexpensive.

The authors’ approach, underlining the targeted audience of intermediate Greek students, is twofold: to provide easy access to Lucian’s attractive and relatively clear classicizing Greek, and to facilitate students in improving their Greek through one of the more accessible (and one of the more entertaining) authors of Greek prose. Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Gods* indeed make sense as a good choice for readers at this level. Not only are the dialogues relatively straightforward, they are also very brief. It must be said, though, that much of the pleasure derived from reading these dialogues is based on a solid knowledge of mythical lore. For those students less versed in the niceties of Greek myth, these dialogues may turn out to be not so entertaining after all.

The reader’s basic structure: presenting for each dialogue the Greek text (with a few introductory lines), the vocabulary needed, and additional notes on grammatical interpretation. These are all on the same page, the
Greek text presented on top in a (very) large font, with underneath, separated by a double line, the vocabulary needed (presented alphabetically), and underneath that, separated by a single line, the grammatical notes with some (very) brief commentary. In addition to this basic format the reader is presented from time to time with boxed text blocks dedicated to grammar and syntax, in which e.g. result clauses, defective verbs, circumstantial participles, contrafactual conditions, and general conditions are explained. Further aids to the student are, in the back of the reader, an alphabetical list of verbs and a glossary. The list of verbs only lists those that show some irregularity in their conjugation. Entries here consist of the basic simple verb, its basic translation and the forms or endings of its principal parts. Compounds are conveniently listed, indented, below the simple verbs; a good exercise for students to think of verbs lexically in terms of *simplicia*, instead of browsing through the list alphabetically until they come across a form they think they recognize. The inevitable monotony, page after page, of the Greek text with its two apparatuses, is at times broken by an illustration.

When evaluating the validity of a reader, one has to assess whether such a reader has more to offer than the combined tools of an intermediate dictionary, a text (which students can access at the TLG), and a basic grammar. Much does therefore depend on the quality of the notes. These notes are generally quite useful. Sometimes notes (in the lower apparatus) and vocabulary (higher apparatus) are not strictly separated. On p. 11, for instance, ἄπαγε is given in the vocabulary as ‘away! go on!’ instead of being presented in the common first person of the active present in the indicative. If it needs to be explained that this is an imperative, it could have been done in the lower apparatus. One can always find entries that could have explained a little more, or which some might find superfluous. One supposes that an intermediate student of Greek does not need to be given such very rudimentary vocabulary as e.g. γυνή, μακρός or ὅδος (p. 57), but is clear that the editors want to be on the safe side, presenting too much rather than too little. As it is, this is simply a very convenient tool for students reading Lucian, whichever quibbles one might have. There is no progressive curve of offering less vocabulary as the reader works through the book. The same vocabulary is given over and over again, which makes sense if one anticipates that these dialogues do not need to be read in a fixed order.

As stated before, the pleasure in reading Lucian’s dialogues, full of irony, quips and occasional sarcasm, depends on a basic knowledge of Greek myth. Although most myths involved here are not that complicated, the reader does need some assistance if he is going to get most out of reading these texts. This is offered in the brief introduction to each dialogue, but hardly in the notes, which are concerned with grammar, and even more with coming to a translation. Focus on translation, although an important didactic part of working one’s way through the Greek, may be relevant, but understanding Lucian’s jokes and coming to an interpretation of what is meant seem to be given less attention. In general I found many of the notes aimed at providing cut-and-dried translations: easy to use, but with a
focus on the target language, rather than directing the student to making sense of the Greek itself.

Syntactical aid is presented concisely in boxes at well-chosen points. Students of grammar usually have a hard time memorizing all the workings of Greek sentences, but here the general information is given at a point where the student just encountered a particular phenomenon and will want to know the rules as he needs them.

The general introduction is brief (about four pages), and although the authors do not claim to give more than a reading aid for the intermediate student, the introduction could have been used to highlight more of the approaches of modern scholarship on Lucian (although Berdozzo and Nesselrath are very briefly mentioned), and his relation to the Second Sophistic. Of course it would be unfair indeed to stress what is missing in an edition that does not aim to give more than a basic reading aid, but even such a basic edition may be used as a window to further scholarship, if only a small one. The tradition of the dialogue as a playful and literary genre within Greek literature, or the nature of Greek religion viewed from Lucian’s dialogues, in which are gods are plainly mocked, would be of interest as topics of further study for students using this reader. These dialogues could have been compared to the other sets of dialogues within Lucian’s corpus, or to some of his adjacent works. By comparison: many of the Bristol Commentaries, editions with aims not dissimilar to Faenum’s (though admittedly in a different format) tend to provide a little more information in their introductions. But again, one should not criticize the editors for offering less than they could have, if this is beyond their aims. If one considers this volume according to its basic goal – that of an elementary reader – then this volume fulfils its purpose well, and the editors are to be thanked for bringing Lucian a few steps closer to the classroom.

The presentation of the Greek is generally good enough (despite an awkward typo on the very first page of the first dialogue), but it remains a mystery why Hayes and Nimis chose to use a colon, where just about all modern editors use a high point instead. This is an odd choice, which unnecessarily deviates from common practice, and as such will perhaps be confusing to intermediate students. Also confusing, if only slightly, is the authors’ habit of using the indefinite English article for nouns in the vocabulary, while they add the definite article to the Greek.

Editing could have been better (τοιαῦτα on p. 3, Hephaesus on p. 24, undamaged on p. 121, useful for useful on p. 122, καταπέμπω instead of καταπέμπω on p. 134, ἀνέλκω listed twice on p. 130, ἀποφαίνω listed twice on p. 137, prophecize on p. 138), particularly in the Glossary (ἀρτι on p. 143, δεινός, with double comma on p. 143, εὖγε; instead of a colon on p. 144 (being more or less the only potentially misleading typo), grieve for grieve on p. 144, συμπόσιον without a proper upsilon on p. 145, φημι instead of φημί on p. 146) and in the List of verbs, where consistency in punctuation needs some more care. These are just some of the mistakes I
marked, but, as the editors point out, the POD system at least easily allows for ready corrections; working without a professional publishing company has its downsides, but it does keep the costs down. An oddity on p. 60 is τοπαραυτικα, which is indeed an adverb, as the notes state. But no other edition of Lucian maintains the article glued to the adverb.

Much of what has been said here can be found in the BMCR reviews of other volumes by Hayes and Nimis, for instance the lack of attention to particles, which makes this reader not as up-to-date as it could have been. Also the odd reference to e.g. Smyth’s grammar would give the reader a window of opportunity for delving into the grammar more deeply, as is common practice in e.g. the Bryn Mawr Greek Commentaries.

If one is looking for a well-edited commentary on Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Gods*, with an eye for all the details of the Greek on every single page, a thorough and extensive introduction, and ample details on Lucian’s style, rhetoric, and involvement with earlier literature, this just is not that book, nor does it claims to be so. If one is looking for a handy, inexpensive (even free), sympathetic reader, loaded with handy tools for quickly translating some Lucian and working through a lot of Greek in a relatively short time, this is a welcome addition.

Notes:

1. For Faenum’s other volumes on Lucian see previous reviews: BMCR 2012.09.55 on Lucian’s *The Ass*, BMCR 2013.05.21 on Lucian’s *On the Syrian Goddess*, BMCR 2015.05.20 on Lucian’s *A True Story*. Read comments on this review or add a comment on the BMCR blog