

BOOK REVIEW

Diogenes Laertius, Lives of the Eminent Philosophers. Translated by PAMELA MENSCH and edited by JAMES MILLER. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xix + 676. Hardback, \$45.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-086217-6.

I wish to join in praise of Oxford's new English translation of Diogenes' *Lives*, the first in nearly a century. (Not the last: there are at least two others in the works, from Cambridge and from Princeton.) Little remains, of course, to be said about its lavish publication and the clarity of the translation; major journals have already gotten to it: besides [BMCR](#), also [New York Review of Books](#), [Washington Post](#), [Times Literary Supplement](#) and the [Paris Review](#), among others. (It also has amazing blurbage.) In this review I just want to make a few corroborating remarks and additional comments.

1. I am impressed by the distribution of labor across the many parts of this book. There are two introductions, by the editor and by the translator; a beautiful map drawn by a cartographer; the translation; footnotes written by three scholars; 201 credited images chosen by a professional art editor; essays written by thirteen eminent researchers; another translator for the four essays written originally in Italian; a rich and long annotated bibliography by one of the "consulting editors"; a rich and long glossary of ancient sources by a recent Ph.D. recipient; and a valuable index (indexer not credited). There are also two credited copy-editors. Though such collaboration is familiar from reference works and textbooks, and only after a fashion from edited volumes, it allows for high multi-dimensional value.

2. The publisher has rendered the art reproductions beautifully and on great paper, and – maybe for the popular press – does so in more-than-half-page sizes, happily breaking up the blockiness of pages (already broken up by inset quotations). The best feature is the inclusion of modern and even contemporary works, showing the continued reception of the ancient past. Those who use slideshows in class now have a wonderful source of imagery.

3. I found the fifteen-page Glossary of Ancient Sources smartly written and quite helpful, with life dates when available and important locations discussed in the *Lives*. Many names are not to be found in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* – 16 of the first 40, for example.

4. The index includes mainly personal names and their works, and is valuable both as locator and measurement of frequency; most, unfortunately, do not have sub-headings. There are some subject headings, too, again mostly without sub-headings. I noticed a few errors (usually redundant or imprecise headings) and omissions (e.g. Sicily, Syracuse).¹

5. The book has many footnotes, 1715 just for the main text.² They are universally helpful. They also have a number of imprecisions and a few inaccuracies. (I communicated some to a consulting editor, who was very receptive and hopes to make changes for the paperback edition.) A bigger problem is that they are non-scholarly; they lack references to sources, and thus do not point to avenues for further information or confirmation of claims. Perhaps this is to avoid clutter or intimidation of non-scholarly readers; but even students would benefit from citations. The editor justifies the absence of footnote scholarship by directing readers to Dorandi's critical edition, Goulet-Cazé's French translation or Gigante's Italian translation, but these are hardly realistic as aids for the intended audience.

6. On each left-hand header is the Greek spelling of the present subject's name, which is just about the book's only use of Greek script; this strikes me as a waste of space.

7. The concluding essays, sixteen in number, over 75 double-columned small-font pages, hereby constitute the best collection of studies of Diogenes Laertius there is. They make this just about the best-value book in ancient philosophy I know of. Tiziano Dorandi supplies three definitive essays on the pre-Renaissance history of the *Lives*: (i) a most thrilling, or anyway effective, analysis of the manuscript tradition, (ii) a complete study of the place of the *Lives* in Byzantine scholarship, especially as it was excerpted and as it was related to the *Suda*, and (iii) a survey of the

¹Examples of indexing errors: "Thirty Tyrants (the Thirty)" should be "The Thirty (Tyrants)" (since all references are to "The Thirty"); "Phaedon of Elis" should be included with "Phaedo"; "Philosophy, sects of," should be included in "Philosophy, schools of."

²Book 1: 204; 2: 293; 3: 176; 4: 126; 5: 150; 6: 173; 7: 178; 8: 148; 9: 180; 10: 87.

earliest Latin translations. There are helpful analytic and contextualizing essays on each of the major authors/schools: Plato, the Cynics, Zeno the Stoic, the Skeptics and Epicurus. Several address modern reception: Anthony Grafton's impressive overview from the Renaissance through Nietzsche, and then two closer studies: Ingrid Rowland's focus just on the Renaissance and Glenn Most's focus just on Nietzsche. André Laks provokes important thinking about Diogenes' "alternative" history of philosophy, one that situates the thinkers written about in Aristotle and now thought of as "Pre-Socratics" in a distinctive way. There is good and searching coverage of the epigrams (Kathryn Gutzwiller) and the political careers of those addressed in the *Lives* (Malcolm Schofield).

8. Pamela Mensch's translation is limpid and direct. We finally have something to assign to students. Nevertheless, I take issue with several choices. For example, at 1.12 (where Pythagoras is said to have called himself a "philosopher"), θᾶπτον δέ [*thatton de*] is translated "Before very long" (which hardly makes sense in the passage; similarly Hicks' "All too quickly") rather than "Previously" (for which Dorandi could have been helpful); and the temporality of the remainder of the sentence seems misleading. The title of Heraclides Ponticus' book, Περὶ τῆς ἀπνοῦ [*Peri tēs apnou*], is given as *On the Inanimate* rather than the universally more familiar *On the Woman Not Breathing* (or similar). Another Heraclides reference, at 8.61, describes the reason he called Empedocles "both a doctor and a prophet," but the logic of the sentence, which is that he had two reasons for doing so, is obscured. Such misleading renderings in the main text, however, seem to be rare.

Yet there is a bigger problem, which I discovered as I followed up on translations related to Heraclides.³ The editor says that Mensch followed Dorandi's 2013 critical edition (xix), but this appears not to be so. So, at any rate, in the list of works by Heraclides (5.86–88, pages 254–55):

- *On Piety* is in one, not five books as Mensch writes. Only Hicks' Loeb (of recent editions) has "five," and I think there it is some kind of typo or mistake, since it does not appear in the apparatus of Dorandi. (I noticed related divergences from Dorandi in Mensch's rendering of the list of Strato's books: "*On First Principles*,

³Diogenes' epigram about Heraclides includes, as rendered by Mensch, the lines "But you were deceived, sophist [σεσοφισμένε {*sesophismene*}]". For the snake was indeed a beast, | But *you* were detected as a beast, not a sage [σοφὸς ὄν {*sophos on*}]" (5.90, p. 256); I would have preferred not to find "sophist," rather a loaded term, where σοφιστής [*sophistēs*] is not to be found.

three books” should be “... three books or two”; “*On the Philosopher-King*” should be “*On Philosophical Kingship*”; she misses the *Περὶ τῶν μεταλλικῶν* [*Peri tōn metallikōn*] before “*On Mechanics*.”)

- “Combined in one volume: *On Virtue*, one book and another work” should probably be: “And one book on virtue generally [four specific virtues having just been mentioned], and another such book.”
- *On Nature* and *On Contemplation* do not, like many other titles starting in *On* in this translation, begin with a *Περὶ* [*Peri*], and thus they suggest a parallelism that is not there.
- *On Celestial Bodies* and *On Those in Hades* should have parallel titles, given the Greek parallel, and the important contrast between that which is above and below the earth.
- *Against the Doctrines of Zeno* perhaps over-translates *Πρὸς τὰ Ζήνωνος α'* [*Pros ta Zēnōnos a'*], in case Zeno did not have “doctrines.”
- *The Causes of Diseases* (*Αἰτίαι περὶ νόσων α'* [*Aitiai peri nosōn a'*]) should not have the article and should have a different preposition: *Causes relating to Diseases* would be better.
- “Works on the Arts” would be an okay translation for *μουσικά* [*mousika*] as a general category of some books, even if confusing to modern readers since it includes works apparently in logic, but since Mensch also renders *Περὶ μουσικῆς* [*Peri mousikēs*] as *On Music*, there seems to be some inconsistency.
- A number of *kai*s [*kai*'s] linking entries in the catalogue are dropped in the translation, but probably should not have been, given their distinctiveness in this book-list (compared at least to the immediately preceding, of Demetrius and Theophrastus, which contain none). An important one to keep would be *Ἐρωτικός καὶ Κλεινίας α'* [*Erōtikos kai Kleinias a'*], which some (e.g., Schütrumpf, Gigante, Hicks) but not other editors (e.g., Dorandi) think is a single title.

Elsewhere in the *Lives* I found a range of inconsistencies in the rendering of book titles. Naturally, those who care about such things will refer to the Greek, but

if the *Lives* is supposed to appeal and inform a greater audience, it should allow easier comparisons.

9. I note that there is a convenient and inexpensive audio version of the complete work – main text and scholarly essays, though without footnotes or apparatus. I enjoyed listening to the essays. But I struggled to understand the imagined appeal of listening to the main text (as I also struggled while reading it). For all the scholarly value and fascination of the *Lives*, both in its details and as an overall project, it makes for a pretty arid text, with almost no biographical realism, interesting arguments or coherent narrative. The editor, James Miller, tries to acknowledge and redeem this fact. Recognizing that most readers have treated the *Lives* as a reference text,

if instead one reads the entire text straight through (as there is some evidence the author intended), a not unwelcome bewilderment descends. Despite some rough parts and missing passages, we behold a meticulously codified panorama of the ancient philosophers. Through the eyes of Diogenes, we watch them as a group living lives of sometimes extraordinary oddity while ardently advancing sometimes incredible, occasionally cogent, often contradictory views that (to borrow a phrase from Borges) “constantly threaten to transmogrify into others, so that they affirm all things, deny all things, and confound and confuse all things”—as if this parade of pagan philosophers could only testify to the existence of “some mad and hallucinating deity” (x).

But still – would I recommend any non-classicist to buy and read through the *Lives*, however lush this edition? I wish I could, but I just don’t think so. The *Lives* is simply too bibliographical, with tediously long spans of doxography disconnected from the texts and ideas that make the subject philosophers currently worthwhile, and lists of *gnomai* that do not readily differentiate one thinker from another. Of course, there are the amusing and – maybe – the telling anecdotes, and the sweep of intellectual history, and the implied honesty about the challenges in reconstructing the past. And, of course, there is nothing wrong, and perhaps everything right, with making more broadly available one of the fundamental works of ancient Greek thought. I just wish there were more discussion of the way the *Lives* is supposed to “convey some of the essential strangeness of what philosophy

once was, in hopes that readers may wonder anew at what philosophy might yet become" (xviii).

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