

Innovation in Recent Intermediate Greek Textbooks?

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews new intermediate Greek readers published between 2009-2011. The article examines the extent to which advances in language pedagogy (e.g., pre-reading activities, adapted texts, types of grammatical and cultural notes), technology (e.g., formatting texts and vocabulary frequency), and publisher (traditional publishing vs. print on demand [POD]) affect the content, format, and delivery of these new textbooks. The nascent innovation in these textbooks tends to be either pedagogical or technological, but not both.

KEYWORDS

ancient Greek pedagogy, intermediate Greek, Greek readers, Greek literature, ancient Greek, Print On Demand (POD)

WORKS REVIEWED

- Major, Wilfred E., and Abigail Roberts. *Plato: A Transitional Reader* (Ancient Greek Transitional Reader Series). Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010. ISBN 0865167214, \$36.00.
- Nagy, Blaise, ed. *Herodotus Reader: Annotated Passages from Books I–IX of the Histories*. Newburyport: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, Inc., 2010. ISBN 1585103047, \$26.95.
- Nimis, Stephen, and Edgar Evan Hayes, eds. 2011. *Lucian's A True Story: An Intermediate Greek Reader*. Self-published. ISBN 0983222800, \$13.95.
- Pratt, Louise, ed. *Eros at the Banquet: Reviewing Greek with Plato's Symposium* (Oklahoma Series in Classical Cultures). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011. ISBN 0806141425, \$29.95.
- Steadman, Geoffrey, ed. *Herodotus' Histories Book 1: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Self-published, 2009. ISBN 0984306501, \$14.95.
- *Plato's Symposium: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Self-published, 2009. ISBN 098430651X, \$13.95.
- *Homer's Odyssey 6–8: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Self-published, 2010. ISBN 0984306528, \$10.95.

———*Homer's Odyssey 9–12: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Self-published, 2010. ISBN 0984306536, \$13.95.

———*Plato's Republic I: Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Self-published, 2011. ISBN 0984306544, \$10.95.

Winters, Timothy F., and John H. O'Neil, eds. *Homer: A Transitional Reader* (Ancient Greek Transitional Reader Series). Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2010. ISBN 0865167206, \$36.00.

Byrne's Standard Book of Pool and Billiards, a reference work that all readers of *Teaching Classical Languages* no doubt have close at hand, provides us with the following pearl, merely one of its many treasures: “Give a pro player a broomstick with a good tip on it and he’ll not only make some remarkable shots, he’ll sweep the joint out afterward.” This rises unbidden to my mind whenever I evaluate a new Greek or Latin textbook. It is not just a matter of theory. Danny “Kid Delicious” Basavich is said once to have actually won \$200 in a game of nine-ball using a broomstick in lieu of a cue. Likewise, every day talented instructors of classical languages in the real world, employing outdated and flawed books that contain faulty details, ugly formatting, wrongheaded generalizations, egregious typographical errors, and linguistically suspect sentences no Greek or Roman would ever have written, nevertheless manage to teach students and teach them successfully—and even to make virtues of the books’ vices in “teachable moments” when students notice the shortcomings. The difference is that, allowing for personal preference on some matters, experienced pool players can come reasonably close to consensus concerning the virtues of a “good” cue and will use one when they have the option. Teachers of classical languages, by contrast, have fundamental disagreements about what makes a good textbook.

This is most obvious in first-year texts, where methodological differences are often quite distinct and teachers’ intellectual and emotional commitments to them most on display. Still, the flurry of recent intermediate Greek textbooks proves that we can see differences even at that level. To take one point of contention, Geoffrey Steadman in his volume on Plato’s *Symposium* announces that, “One of the virtues of this commentary is that it eliminates time-consuming dictionary work.” (Steadman’s other volumes likewise promise that students will “not need to turn a page or consult outside dictionaries.”) Blaise Nagy, on the other hand, includes no glossary in his Herodotus reader, explaining, “I very much believe in the value of having students look up words in a standard Greek-English dictionary. Only by consulting a lexicon...can they be made aware of the full range of the meanings of the Greek words.” A reviewer or instructor will simply measure these books based on preconception, consciously or unconsciously creating a matrix of shibboleths and tallying up the score—Attic author or not? introduction to dialect or let the students learn it as they go along? unadapted or modified? core vocabulary or not? glossary or running vocabulary? one of those or an outside dictionary? excerpts or complete section/whole work? notes in back or with text? text broken up in small bits or presented continuously? large font or small? notes offering translations or merely information about morphology and syntax? emphasis on rhetorical and poetic figures or not? interpretive introduction or just the facts? naming every genitive-of-whatever or not? references to Smyth and LSJ or not? plenty of cultural context or a strong focus on the text itself? etc. For the most part, this is how we decide: cue stick or broomstick? There is no proven

objective advantage to one option from each set, and certainly no demonstrably better combination of such features, but we feel strongly about them anyway.

Well, no matter. Each of us can divide the books on the market into “broomsticks” and “cues” as we prefer, and in the unfortunate circumstance of our being obliged by colleagues, institutional customs, or administrative commandments to use a book that we think belongs to the former category, most of us will find ways to neutralize its worst defects and get on about our business. To a large extent this is because intermediate textbooks from the last century and more, despite the various either/or alternatives listed above, exist along a continuum of approaches rather than falling naturally into two or three broad categories, and most of them resemble each other to a fair degree.

In itself this is rather surprising when one considers how many changes have been wrought by and upon society and the academy in the intervening years. John Gruber-Miller outlined the new circumstances facing us this way: “Many changes, both in and out of the classroom, are challenging us to reexamine how we teach Latin and Greek: the rapid pace of communication, new technologies, the explosion of new knowledge, the growing diversity in our schools and communities. Educators and employers recognize the need for graduates who have good communication skills, who understand diverse cultures, who can work with people from different backgrounds, who can solve problems, who can work collaboratively”(3). He was writing about the role of first-year language courses in answering these challenges, but we can legitimately transfer the thought over to intermediate courses as well.

My own introduction to Greek a few decades ago came from Chase and Phillips (the 1961 3rd edition of a textbook twenty years older than that date), which was followed up by Plato’s *Apology* in Burnet’s edition with commentary (published 1924) and Sophocles’ *Antigone* through the abridged Jebb (published 1902). As an instructor, as recently as three years ago I read Lucian’s *Vera Historia* with students from the hoary Jerram edition (reprinted by Bolchazy-Carducci, but essentially unchanged from the 1879 edition). If I were to look for justification for the last, I might cite a review of the reprint that called it a “republication of a fine old school text” that was also “a good bargain” (Fredericks 365), but to be honest, I’m more sympathetic to the views expressed in the refreshingly eviscerating review of the original publication in the August, 1, 1879 *The Educational Times*: “One can only rub one’s eyes in wonder, and ask whether Mr. Jerram has read Lucian...” Still, I used it, fully cognizant of the vacuous horrors that awaited my students, and they came to read Lucian quite well.

Looking back over that selective curriculum vitae, I see that I have apparently moved ever back in time, from the mid 20th century to the late 19th. My concern here is to establish some sort of baseline: Novelty has charms that my mind can easily withstand, to misquote Thackeray. So, it was something of a revelation that, having been asked to consider to what extent we could see “new directions” in the methodologies of intermediate Greek readers by examining no fewer than ten of them on short notice, I found myself actually disappointed at how little truly new we can find in them. This does not mean that I would not use at least some of them. It does not mean that I do not like most of them on some level. What I do mean is that most of these are essentially of a kind with Jerram (actually, the much better Pharr edition of the *Aeneid* is a closer ancestor in spirit and design) and the other school editions we have known and loved and hated over the years. They are universally better than Jerram, it can be happily reported, and there are many teachers out there who could make good use of the strengths and remedy the weaknesses of any of them. Do they embody a fundamentally new response to the rapid pace of modern communication, or the tech-

nological revolution happening around us, or the demands for diversity—or even the increasingly sophisticated research on and discussion of the pedagogy of classical languages? No, or, at least, not really, and even an old fuddy-duddy like me would like to see progress in these areas. Taken as a group, these texts reveal some trends about how these sorts of books are being produced in new ways and with new emphases, but only two of them—Bolchazy-Carducci’s two “transitional readers”—could not have been written twenty years ago, in the sense that no one *would* have written them; there were no technical hurdles to doing so—they simply would not have been in fashion.

Both O’Neil and Winters’ *Homer: A Transitional Reader* and Major & Roberts’ *Plato: A Transitional Reader* will not hold many surprises for anyone familiar with the *Legamus* Latin readers that are their model. The basic idea is attractive: take a few select passages of increasing difficulty from an important author, provide students with pre-reading exercises for each passage and a simplified version of the same to digest before they get to the unadulterated original. Even given the family resemblance, though, the two books are hardly identical in approach. The two sets of editors go about constructing the pre-readings and simplifying the passages in very divergent ways. O’Neil and Winters give the students a bit of a grammar or a syntax lesson, then present a passage from the *Iliad* that has been sparingly modified. Elisions are written out, pronouns and names inserted, and typographical adjustments are made to words that agree with each other. For instance, a noun and an adjective modifying it might both be printed in bold, especially when they use different declensional endings and so may not appear to the novice as related words. This is done with a light hand in the pre-readings and, although the repertoire of typographical conventions is limited,¹ instructors who already use a similar method of marking up a text will be pleased with the effort. A facing vocabulary and notes with basic information help students read the passage. Then the students are meant to read it again, this time without the typographical help, but with the same facing vocabulary (literally—it is simply repeated in identical form once again with the second printing of the passage). A second set of notes introduces more advanced stylistic, literary, and linguistic information than is found in those accompanying the pre-reading, so there is an implicit sense of progression of understanding.

The emphasis on pre-reading reflects contemporary concern for such activities, but the pre-reading passages (“Making Sense of It”) are so essentially identical to the actual passages (“What Homer Actually Composed”) that there’s an immediate sense of *déjà vu* all over again when you flip the page. Grammar review provides a bit of pre-reading as well, but on the whole this is really reading and re-reading, not pre-reading and reading. The editors do manage to cover a lot of ground in their notes and introductory materials, which are both germane and accurate, and the impression is that this could be an excellent way to—what else?—transition students to another student edition of the *Iliad*. They also in welcome fashion push heartily for the students to consider the texts as literary products. But one needs to move through the book as quickly as possible. There are only 271 lines of Homer in the whole, and although the last two readings skip the pre-reading, the students have gotten all they are going to get out of the book by then.

Major and Roberts, by contrast, layer on pre-reading activities. The first two passages (from the *Republic*, as most of them are) both have no less than *three* pre-reading versions before you get to the “real” one, with grammar review and “practice” between each. It seems a slow way to start off, even though—I sincerely hope—I was able to read through these early chapters more

¹ Limited, I mean, in comparison with fuller systems such as the one we find illustrated in Markus, which utilizes multiple font sizes as well as bold face, and the method shown by Harrison, which employs indentation and line-breaks to display the structural and syntactical relationships between different parts of sentences.

quickly and easily than the average student. Mercifully, they cut this down to one pre-reading in subsequent chapters (and none in the last). As the book moves along, the editors pack in quite a bit of review and provide useful guidance. There are more problems here than in the Homer reader with errors and omissions but these are mostly merely annoying.²

Despite these issues and my feeling that the number of pre-reading passages in the early chapters is too high, it must be said that these passages here are truly pre-readings—heavily simplified preparatory versions of the actual readings through which students are introduced to the overall movement of the upcoming passage, see and learn key vocabulary, and have enough of the content to provide a basis for predicting, when they do come to the full passage, what it will contain. So both content—the argument Plato will be making—and language—the major constructions and vocabulary—are prominently stressed, and yet there remains significant work for the students when they get to the unaltered Plato. This combination is just what one wants. Once again, because the total amount of actual Greek is on the low side, the order of the day is to move through this transitional reader as quickly as possible. Whether one uses the Homer or the Plato version, the most difficult part may be explaining to students why the transitional reader they use only for a short time costs \$36.00. Of the books I was asked to look at, these are the shortest, contain the least amount of Greek, and cost the most.

Price, by contrast, is one of the great virtues of Geoffrey Steadman's series of commentaries. Each of these books contains a complete work or large section of an important piece of literature (we have volumes now on *Odyssey* 6–8, *Odyssey* 9–12, Herodotus Book 1, Plato's *Symposium*, and Plato's *Republic*, and I expect we'll see more of them) in a clean text from an older critical edition with facing vocabulary and explanatory notes. Each volume is built around the acquisition and utilization of a core vocabulary for the work being read. Pharr's *Aeneid* is the obvious model. The innovation here is not in method of design, but in the publication model, which is "print on demand." This keeps the cost down for the individual volumes (one could buy two or three of them for the cost of one of Bolchazy-Carducci's readers), makes ordering them easy for anyone with internet access, and allows for constant updating. The last advantage depends upon the apparently boundless energies of Steadman, who is obviously something of a one-man factory for intermediate Greek textbooks. The downside, as Steadman himself acknowledges in his prefaces, is that they initially contain more errors than most books that go through a peer-reviewed process. Another limitation is that to some degree Steadman is dependent upon the good will of his readers, inasmuch as errors cannot be corrected unless they are pointed out to him.³

Steadman's project is so appealing and so democratizing that it seems churlish to mention that readers will have plenty of errors to point out. The version of the *Symposium* volume I looked at has six incorrect accents on its first page of vocabulary and notes (plus an error of syntax), seven more incorrect accents on its second page of vocabulary and notes, two more on its third, and so on.⁴ Constructions are sometimes wrongly identified, idioms are often passed over, and a great deal of baffling Greek can go unexplained. The last matter is partly due to an initial formatting choice: whatever space was left over after the vocabulary was added was devoted to notes,

² There are occasionally real blunders: for instance, their comments on subjunctives appearing in relative clauses in indirect statement (p. 54) or of their attempt to make students their accomplices in using the accusative and infinitive construction after the active of $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega$ (pp. 24–25).

³ The constant stream of updates referenced at <http://geoffreysteadman.com> make it clear that many of his readers do, in fact, take the time to communicate suggestions to Steadman and that he responds regularly and quickly to them.

⁴ This is a happy difficulty in reviewing such books. By the time the reader sees this review, these errors might no longer be there.

and not a fraction of an inch more. So most notes do not extend beyond a single short line, and it is quite uncommon to find one longer than two lines. Steadman has since altered the format of his Herodotus Book 1 reader and moved to a looser format of text, vocabulary, and notes on one page, but at the time of this writing the notes have not yet been extensively elaborated. That such a radical change can be made to a “finished” commentary is testament to the advantages of having electronic content that exists independently from fixed forms of presentation. It will now, for instance, be possible for Steadman to add or extend notes to the first book of Herodotus without worrying about considerations of space.

The most serious problem Steadman needs to work on, as I see it, are the volumes’ vocabularies, which with irksome frequency fail to give a definition that makes any sense in the specific passage the students are reading at that moment—a fault not restricted to Steadman’s volumes but most problematic here. Computers allow these volumes to be produced quickly, disseminated efficiently (and inexpensively), and incrementally improved over time. They likewise allow Steadman to make good use of word frequency data in constructing running and core vocabularies. In the end, the electronic production means that the definitions in those vocabularies can be improved more readily than in a traditional book. So despite my criticisms here, there is much to praise, and I think students who are beyond the initial intermediate phase could find these books extremely helpful in accelerating the pace of their reading since they could often compensate for the shortcomings of the editorial apparatus from their own storehouse of knowledge without being overly slowed.

Evan Hayes and Stephen Nimis have taken conceptual and technical inspiration from Steadman—proof that he is really onto something—in producing their own print-on-demand edition of Lucian’s *Vera Historia*, which I will certainly use instead of Jerram the next time I teach this text. Furthermore, an apparently simple change from Steadman’s earlier practice means that their commentary is a more flexible vehicle for the material presented and this goes a long way toward proving the central utility of Steadman’s idea. Instead of having a set amount of text on one page and then the vocabulary and notes on the facing page, Hayes and Nimis divide each page into three sections of text, vocabulary, and notes (back to Pharr again!).⁵ Because the ratio between the three sections can be altered from page to page, one rarely gets the sense, as one does with Steadman’s current volumes, that they stop explaining because they have run out of room. Their vocabulary is also much more closely fitted to the text it accompanies and their error rate is significantly lower. Again, the innovation here lies not in what’s on the page, or precisely how it appears there, but how it got there, namely by leveraging available technology thoroughly: scanning a public-domain text, that of the old Loeb, and then using computers to analyze the vocabulary and morphology as a rough pass before human intervention tweaks it for a real audience which accesses it through print-on-demand. Low price, easy accessibility, and a (theoretically) continuous flow of improvements are the chief advantages, and it will be only to the good for our discipline if more works from antiquity become available in this way.⁶

The last two books I was asked to look over are the most traditional of the lot. Blaise Nagy has given us a well-produced selection of passages taken from the whole of Herodotus and presented in order. These are broken into manageably sized pieces ranging from a sentence (Herodotus’ opening sentence is the first reading) to full paragraphs, with longer stories divided into multiple

⁵ As I mentioned above, Steadman has now, in turn, imitated Hayes and Nimis by adopting their layout in his new version of Herodotus Book 1.

⁶ In fact, the appearance of new editions of other texts from Steadman (Herodotus 7) and from Hayes and Nimis (Plutarch’s *Dialogue on Love [Eroticus]* and Lucian’s *The Ass*) is imminent.

sections. The Gyges story, for instance, is presented in five parts. All passages are provided with helpful short introductions and somewhat minimalist notes that usually provide a translation (e.g., ἀκούσω “May I hear”), parsing information or syntactical hints, or a reminder of information about dialect (e.g., κως = πως). The volume is designed to be used ideally with the translation, maps, and other materials found in the *Landmark Herodotus* (ed. R. Strassler 2007), and so does not contain material, mostly historical and cultural, that would duplicate what is there. The selections are intelligently made, and an excellent syllabus on this important author could be constructed out of them. If you like your students to get constant support and have access to copious help, this is not the book for you. For myself, I could easily see this text working well with more experienced intermediate students, or even those who are just beginning advanced study of the language. It is certainly a far cry from the notion of a transitional reader.

Louise Pratt’s *Eros at the Banquet* is in many ways the most ambitious project of the lot and the one best carried through. Its ambitions, however, are really quite traditional. Anyone looking for major conceptual innovation will be disappointed, but those looking for a conscientiously produced text of Plato’s *Symposium*—one with tailored vocabulary and detailed notes presented in a supportive voice that nonetheless urges and provokes students to think for themselves—will find it here. Instructors will need to reconcile themselves to several of Pratt’s editorial decisions. First, she has adapted the early readings. For truly intermediate students, this seems sensible enough to me, and the vast majority of the *Symposium* is presented in unadapted form, but I know of colleagues who will not touch such an abomination. (But why not go back over an unaltered text of the dialogue’s opening with the students when they are more comfortable?) Second, a great deal of the grammatical explanations are keyed to Pratt’s own *Essentials of Greek Grammar* (and another traditionally oriented grammar, the old standby Smyth, when *Essentials* does not cover a topic). This allows for economy of exegesis, but the amount of such “offloading” makes it in my view impractical to use *Eros at the Banquet* without also assigning *Essentials*, which is something not all instructors in all programs will wish or have the freedom to do.

Looking over these books as a group, I do not think we have justification to be dismayed by the lack of innovation, even if this is in short supply. The books of Steadman and Hayes/Nimis may well be better when this review appears than when it was written. If that potential for continual improvement—and with so many emerging technologies it need not merely be print on demand that allows it—can be profitably harnessed and becomes a widespread model, texts such as Jerram’s Lucian will truly and thankfully be things of the past. Certainly, almost all of the editors of the works reviewed here have taken some advantage of other technologies in the creation of the content (most notably, the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and Perseus), and further computer-assisted work on the corpus of Greek literature should filter into intermediate texts in the future.

For the moment, it seems, we are tentatively leveraging these new technologies mostly to do what we’ve been doing all along, only with greater agility. Where there is updated pedagogy, it is often divorced from these technological advances. It is no accident, I think, that the Bolchazy readers, which show the most interest in novel presentation, have very modest technological aspirations, while the volumes of Steadman and of Evans and Nimis are quite old-fashioned at heart even as they are produced and distributed in inventive ways. True methodological and pedagogical innovation still elude us. These textbooks, for instance, show little interest in having students engage with electronic resources and scant opportunities for communicative approaches. There is nothing radical about presentation of the language; in fact, they are staunchly traditional. Recent

scholarship on word order is essentially ignored.⁷ Even so common a notion as verbal aspect, which some students now get in their first-year book,⁸ is hardly mentioned across the group despite its being one of the most prominent features of Greek. Sophisticated notions of discourse and particle usage are generally absent. The language of grammatical description is firmly 19th-century, and too often merely to label something with that traditional terminology is seen as sufficient exegesis. These books, in other words, are not as a rule deeply innovative. On the other hand, we might accurately call the group “transitional”—not because of the audience to which they are addressed, but because they show the beginnings of intriguing shifts that could eventually lead to very different ways of producing intermediate texts in the future. When we can combine the pedagogical inventiveness of some of them with the technological innovation on display in others, we will really be getting somewhere.

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⁷ For instance, that of Dik in *Word Order in Ancient Greek* and *Word Order in Greek Tragic Dialogue*. Her conclusions are by no means universally accepted, but it would be nice to see the less controversial parts of her analysis make their way at some basic level into language pedagogy.

⁸ Mastrorarde, *Introduction to Attic Greek*, for example, treats aspect well, though it does so only from its twentieth chapter on.