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## Commentaries and post-beginners' language teaching

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## **Commentaries and Post-Beginners' Language Learning** **James Robson**

In this paper I shall suggest an approach to, and some of the potential benefits of, introducing work with commentaries into a post-beginners' language course. Since the circumstances in which I have had cause to consider the use of commentaries in teaching are somewhat different from those faced by most involved in the teaching of classical languages, I shall first briefly outline the Open University context and highlight how it differs from that of more conventional institutions. I shall then go on to consider the ways in which working with commentaries can usefully enrich the students' curriculum and to articulate the way in which I introduce students to commentaries before making some concluding remarks.

### ***The Open University Context***

At the Open University we are in the process of developing a post-beginners' Greek course which will be presented for the first time in 2003. *Continuing Classical Greek* (course code: A396) follows on from our beginners' course, *Reading Classical Greek* (course code: A296) and is designated as a third-level course.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it has been planned so as to require the same intellectual demands as a course which students at other institutions would take in their final year and the student's overall grade can potentially be of great importance in determining their final degree classification.

Given this context, the members of the course team were conscious of the need to develop a course that tests a variety of skills – not just a student's ability to memorize vocabulary and syntax. What is more, we were keen, if possible, for the course to be an end in itself (especially given that no follow-on course from *Continuing Classical Greek* is yet in prospect – although there are opportunities for study which students may pursue at other institutions through collaborative schemes). In addition, we were also eager to integrate our language teaching and non-language teaching courses more fully and so to develop a course with practical applications for students in other areas of their study – including those engaged in, or looking to do, research.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reading Classical Greek* makes use of the JACT *Reading Greek* course; *Reading Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978). Students are required to reach section 8 and both the assignments and the final examination comprise translation and, to a lesser extent, comprehension exercises based on unprepared passages as well as grammar exercises where students are tested on their knowledge of common accidence. Both *Reading Classical Greek* and *Continuing Classical Greek* are worth 30 CATS points.

This is a rather long wish list, to be sure, but one of the decisions taken early on was to have students study a substantial set text – partly in Greek, partly in translation – and to have them engage critically with modern scholarship on that text, including a commentary. The text chosen was Plato’s *Symposium*, and students will be studying using Rowe’s bilingual Aris and Phillips edition,<sup>2</sup> complete, of course, with commentary. A problem – or opportunity – thrown up by our choice of Rowe’s edition as a set text is that we would have to teach students ways of approaching both translations and commentaries critically – and this is what we have sought to do. And of course, the need to tackle these areas fits in well with our desire to broaden the range of skills that the course teaches and tests.

Perhaps I should add an aside at this stage. That is, that one generally has a limited amount of time in which to teach a language course and that the course team of *Continuing Classical Greek* has taken the deliberate decision not to progress as far as we might with the learning of syntax, accidence and especially vocabulary in order to allow skills such as that of using commentaries to be introduced and practised fully. For anyone inspired to introduce new skills to a pre-existing course, it is important to consider the impact on students’ workload.

### ***Institutional Differences***

It will be clear from this brief outline of the context in which I have developed my commentary exercises, that I have been faced with a special set of challenges. The most fundamental difference between the Open University context and that of other institutions, no doubt, is that *Continuing Classical Greek* is a distance learning course. What I am outlining here, then, is my attempt to tackle introducing commentaries into a language course, but those involved in face-to-face tuition would, I am sure, look to present the material in a different way. This said, I shall also make suggestions as to how aspects of my approach may be adapted to a traditional learning environment.

### ***Benefits of Working with Commentaries***

Before going on to outline briefly the way in which I have approached introducing students to commentaries, perhaps I should say what I perceive to be the benefits of so doing. A selection

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<sup>2</sup> C. J. Rowe (ed.), *Plato: Symposium* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1998).

of these include:

- *Extending a student's potential for independent study.* Without a formal introduction, students may not know of the existence of commentaries (the first ever 'real' text I worked with, for example, was the OCT of Aeschylus and the summer I spent at home trying to translate the *Oresteia* would no doubt have been spent a little more profitably if I had had a commentary to hand). Furthermore, students may not think to use commentaries when engaging in research for essays and dissertations, simply because they are unused to working with them or unused to the kind of information they contain.
- *Extending a student's critical awareness.* When students do use commentaries for research they may not use them critically. It is a common enough complaint that undergraduates do not, as a rule, approach modern scholarship as critically as they might, but I think the situation with commentaries is potentially worse since commentaries tend to be written in a more 'authoritative' way than many books and articles (they certainly contain less transparent argument, for example). There is a danger, then, that even the more critical student will be inclined to take what a commentator has to say as the last word on a subject.
- *Variety and improved class dynamic.* The introduction of a range of skills into a language course stretches students, helps provide relief from what can be the monolithic slog of vocabulary and syntax learning and provides an important opportunity to bring out new dynamics in a class. By this I mean that there can easily develop a pecking order in a language class – one student will be good at memorizing vocabulary and accidence, another less good. However, the good student might not necessarily be the best at wrestling with other concepts and *vice versa*. The introduction of diverse skills and concepts may, then, be educationally and psychologically important for the whole range of students in a class.
- *Better coherence of the student's curriculum.* Lastly, I would argue that doing work with commentaries suggests to students a practical application for their language skills, making a clear connection for a Classical Studies student, say, between their work on the language and the rest of their studies. (The same can be said for exercises where such students are asked to engage with translations critically).

### **Progression**

As far as commentaries are concerned, the learning curve for students is fairly straightforward in *Continuing Classical Greek*. Students first have the opportunity to get accustomed to the layout of a commentary and are then given simple exercises to do which require them to extract information from a commentary entry. In later exercises they are asked to determine a given commentator's interests in a specific passage; to compare different commentary entries, and to think critically about what commentators say. In the final stages of a course, students get to use a text with a commentary – Rowe's edition of the *Symposium* – and are encouraged to use this edition critically. For example, students will be asked to compare some of Rowe's comments with those of Dover from his 1980 edition of the text,<sup>3</sup> and to compare Rowe's views with those of other scholars through reading modern scholarship and listening to specially prepared audio lectures.<sup>4</sup>

### **Orientation**

Most of the rest of this paper will be spent outlining the first exercise which students undertake on commentaries. As I mentioned earlier, the first task is to introduce students to the concept of a commentary and the way in which they are laid out. In a classroom situation, students can be introduced to the physical objects themselves – an option which does not exist in the context of a distance-learning course.<sup>5</sup> As can be seen from the extract from the study materials in the Appendix to this paper, I have kept my definition of a commentary as simple as possible, calling it:

[A] scholarly edition of a text which typically contains an introduction to the work in question, an edited version of the Greek text itself and a series of notes on this text.

I also note that some commentaries include a translation of the Greek as well.

At this stage I outline some of the basic objectives of undertaking exercises with commentaries and some of the benefits that being familiar with commentaries may bring. Students are told, for

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<sup>3</sup> K. J. Dover (ed.), *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> The modern scholarship students are asked to read includes a purpose written essay by Chris Emlyn-Jones on 'Plato's *Symposium* in Context'; the introduction to Christopher Gill's Penguin edition of the text (C. J. Gill, *Plato: The Symposium* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1999)) and Peter von Blanckenhagen's 'Stage and Actors in Plato's *Symposium*, *Greek Roman Byzantine Studies* 33 (1994) 51-68. There are audio lectures by Robin Osborne on the institution of the symposium and the way in which Plato has used the sympotic context and by Tania Gergel on ways of reading the *Symposium* and the relationship of the various speeches to Plato's philosophical project.

<sup>5</sup> This said, tutors may well take the opportunity to bring commentaries to the (optional) tutorials to give students an opportunity to handle them.

example, that they will become familiar with the kind of information commentaries tend to provide and that by working with commentaries they will eventually be able to place the edition of the *Symposium* that they will be using in the set text stage of the course in a wider scholarly context.

For their first commentary exercise, students are given extracts from Carey and Reid's commentary on Demosthenes' *Against Conon*.<sup>6</sup> Students read sections 3-6 of this speech in Greek and are then asked to look at certain sections of Carey and Reid's edition. First, they are asked to read Carey and Reid's introduction to the speech and are then invited to look at the (Greek) text of sections 3-6 as it is set out in their edition and the accompanying commentary entries. Students are given a few notes to help orientate them, such as that '[t]he numbers in bold refer to divisions in the original text (section 3, section 4, and so on)' (after all, students may not necessarily be familiar with the various ways in which ancient texts are divided and referred to).<sup>7</sup> I also warn students that 'the notes on the text are densely written' and that 'within the notes themselves, the names of various works – both ancient and modern – are given in abbreviated form.' For example, in the fifth line of the first entry relating to section 3, students are faced with references to *Arist. Ath. Pol. 53.7* and *Ar. Birds 450*. I tell students what these abbreviations mean and the course materials also contain a key to all the abbreviations that will be met in the various commentary entries worked on. In a classroom situation, there is, of course, the opportunity to exercise the students' minds by having them guess what each of the abbreviations stands for.

To allow students to engage with the commentary more fully, I set a number of questions for them to answer. In setting these questions I have attempted to cover a range of different points from throughout the extract. A sample range of these questions is included in the Appendix to this paper which is an extract from the Study Guide for *Continuing Classical Greek*; and these questions are based on part of Carey and Reid's commentary on Demosthenes' *Against Conon*. Once students have engaged with the commentary entries on a close level, they are in a position to articulate the kind of information this particular commentary – and to a large extent,

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<sup>6</sup> C. Carey and R. A. Reid (eds.), *Demosthenes: Selected Private Speeches* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). All subsequent references to the Carey and Reid commentary in the context of this exercise refer to pages 78-81.

<sup>7</sup> An advantage of having students look at the Greek text as it is reproduced in various commentaries is that they may also, in time, be introduced to various orthographic conventions such as the lunate sigma and iota adscript as and when they occur.

commentaries in general – are wont to provide. Again, in a classroom situation, a useful exercise might be for the class as a whole, or for students working in groups, to try to categorize the comments made by Carey and Reid – or indeed any representative commentator. The six categories which I discerned in the commentary are as follows:

- Comments which aid translation
- Comments on points of grammar and vocabulary
- Comments on style
- Cultural and historical context
- Engagement with scholarship
- Discussion of variant readings of the text

In the extract from the Study Guide, I have elaborated on each of these categories. I also stress, of course, that this list of categories may not be exhaustive and is doubtless more helpful for looking at some commentaries than others. When students look at different commentaries in future weeks, I have them refer back to these categories to see whether they can find comments belonging to these six categories in various scholars' work. One way in which I have the students use these categories, then, is as a crude tool to determine a given commentator's interests – an important step on the way to being able to examine commentaries with a critical eye. I also ask students constantly to reassess the usefulness and appropriateness of the categories for each different commentator and genre that they meet. Naturally, broad conclusions must also be tempered by the *caveats* that in each exercise only a fraction of a given commentary is read and that the kind of comments a commentator makes will vary from passage to passage.

### ***Further Work***

In broad terms, these are the kind of exercises students are asked to perform. The work is extended in various ways in later weeks, such as by comparing different commentators' remarks on the same passage (e.g. Hornblower and Rhodes on Thucydides 3.36.2-37.2)<sup>8</sup> and looking at different translations of a given in the light of a commentary entry to see how scholarship shapes (or indeed fails to shape) the work of translators (such an exercise is set on *Antigone* 441-61).

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<sup>8</sup> S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides, Vol. 1, Books 1-3* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); P. J. Rhodes, *Thucydides History 3* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1994).

In the final stages of the course, students will use Rowe's edition of the *Symposium*. We hope that by then not only will they be used to working with a commentary and using it to inform their reading of the text, but also to looking for and identifying a commentator's interests. Where possible, we hope that they will be able to look at Rowe's comments with a critical eye.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Such are ways in which we hope to use commentary exercises in our new course. If the exercises on commentaries prove successful with students at this level of learning, I shall look forward to thinking about how such work might be extended in a future advanced course – perhaps students could be asked to engage with the *apparatus criticus* and how variant readings affect our understanding of the text (such work would also challenge the idea of a 'fixed' text). Perhaps students could be asked to write their own commentary entries and to consider more deeply the way in which commentaries are compiled along with all the various virtues and vices that different commentators display. There is much potential here, after all, for students at an advanced stage of study to consider a number of concepts and orthodoxies which many of us have had little formal opportunity to consider ourselves. And this, certainly, is an exciting prospect for both students and teachers of ancient languages.

## **Appendix**

### ***Extract from Study Guide for A396, Continuing Classical Greek***

Please note that this extract contains internal references to the Study Guide and that all such references have been rendered as pp.000-000.

When you are reading with a Greek text in the original, you will be often be working with a commentary. A commentary is a scholarly edition of a text which typically contains an introduction to the work in question, an edited version of the Greek text itself and a series of notes on this text. Some commentaries also include a translation of the Greek – this is the case, for example, with the edition of Plato's *Symposium* you will use towards the end of this course.

Before you begin working with your edition of the *Symposium*, it will be valuable for you to gain some practice using commentaries. In this way, you will become familiar with practical details such as how commentaries are laid out and the kind of information commentaries tend to provide. Familiarity with other commentaries means you will also be able to place the edition of the *Symposium* you are using in a wider scholarly context.



In your *Resources* folder, you will find an introduction from the commentary on Demosthenes' *Against Conon* by Carey and Reid, the extract of the Greek text you have just read, plus their notes accompanying the extract you have read from this speech. Read the Carey and Reid's *Introduction* (p.000-000) and then turn to the text and notes to gain an impression of the layout (pp.000-000).

As you can see, the notes on the text are densely written. The numbers in bold refer to divisions in the original text (section 3, section 4, and so on). Within the notes themselves, the names of various works – both ancient and modern – are given in abbreviated form. In the fifth line down, for instance, references are given to Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 53.7 and Ar. *Birds* 450 (= Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*; Aristophanes, *Birds*).

To help you engage with this commentary entry more fully, use pp.000-000 to help you answer the following questions.

1. εἴτ' οὐτὶ τριτόν: What does this phrase mean? How is Demosthenes' expression unusual here?
2. What kind of duty was obligatory for *ephebes* (young men of 17-18 years old)?
3. What comment is made about the optative form ἀρισθῆσαι? What other optative receives the same comment in section 4?
4. What does the commentary say is unusual about the time when Conon's sons drink?
5. With what phrase is the speaker said subtly to draw attention to his virtuous behaviour?
6. The commentators argue that φησάντε ... ὅτι τυχοῖεν should be taken to mean 'claiming ... whatever they said'. Which word's absence dissuades them of the interpretation 'uttering any excuse which came into their heads'?
7. Which words do the commentators say are added to 'stress that Ariston was no prig'?
8. How many taxiarchs were there? Whom did they command?
9. Which word is only rarely found after κωλύω?

### Answers

1. Two years ago; 'the more usual word order is τριτόν εἴτ' οὐτὶν 2. Garrison duty. 3. It is an 'optative of indefinite frequency'; συμβαίνοι. 4. 'The normal time for such heavy drinking would be at a symposium after the evening meal', 'Conon's sons begin drinking after lunch, and drink all day every day'. 5. ὡς περ ἐπαδὲν βίβωμεν. 6. καὶ 7. οὐκ ἐγώ; τῶν ἀλλῶν ἐκώ. 8. 10; the hoplites. 9. μηδέν (i.e. a negative).

By framing and answering detailed questions about the commentary we become better equipped to ask more general questions about the kind of information the commentary provides. We may already distinguish various (overlapping) categories of comment:

1. Comments which aid translation. There are a number of these in the notes, such as the comments on εἴτ' οὐτὶ τριτόν and ὅτι τυχοῖεν noted above.
2. Comments on points of grammar and vocabulary. In section 3, for instance, there is discussion of the word προγραφεῖσθαι and the phrase ὡς οὐκ ἀπὸ βούλου ὄμνην. Commentators will often attempt to distinguish usual from unusual expression: see, for example, the comments on εἰς ἐπεφθῆσαν and κωλύω in section 5.
3. Comments on style ranging from notes on word order (e.g. the note on εἴτ' οὐτὶ τριτόν) to the devices Demosthenes uses to make his speech more persuasive (such as the comments on the phrases ὡς περ ἐπαδὲν βίβωμεν and οὐκ ἐγώ; τῶν ἀλλῶν ἐκώ in sections 3 and 4 respectively).

4. Cultural and historical context. The commentary discusses such matters as ancient attitudes towards drunkenness and the function of taxiarchs, for instance.
5. Engagement with scholarship. This ranges from challenging other scholars' views to citing bibliography relating to matters in the text. See, for example, the bibliography cited in the context of the discussion of drunkenness in section 3 and the discussion of **o{ti tucoien** in section 4.
6. Discussion of variant readings of the text. The way in which texts have been transmitted (be it in manuscripts, papyri or inscriptions) usually leaves a good deal of room for discussion about what the original words of a given text were. Commentators will often discuss other scholars' readings of, or emendations to, a text. For an example of this, see the discussion of **ajepemyameqa** towards the end of section 4.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the types of comments you will find in commentary entries. It may prove fruitful for you now to consider whether these categories adequately cover the range of points made by the commentators in the extract. How might the categories I have sketched be added to or combined? How might they be refined? You should bear these questions in mind as you do further work on commentaries in later weeks.

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