

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

LaVALLE NORMAN (D.) **The Aesthetics of Hope in Late Greek Imperial Literature: Methodius of Olympus' *Symposium* and the Crisis of the Third Century.** Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. [viii] + 287. 9781108657389.
doi:10.1017/S0075426924000181

Dawn LaValle Norman's book is timely, given the plan for new editions and translations of Methodius' Slavonic corpus (13), as well as a recently published first-ever collection dedicated to Methodius; these efforts are poised to create a 'new era of Methodius scholarship' (25).

The introduction helpfully maps out the plan of the work through a series of descriptively titled subsections that anticipate the contents of the book. The work begins with an extended discussion of the so-called literary gap during the third century CE, which Methodius occupies with few others.

The second chapter argues that the form of dialogue did not die with Christian literature (*pace*, primarily, S. Goldhill, *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* (Cambridge 2008)), and that Methodius' *Symposium* desires to bring his audience to a 'Christian philosophical life', a topic LaValle Norman briefly discusses in her conclusion.

The third chapter contextualizes Methodius' work as engaging only with the Platonic model of sympotic dialogue, and not with the Plutarchian and Athenian 'second wave' (132–36), which itself compiles 'encyclopedic learning'; Methodius has his sights on the coming Christian future, and 'epitomizes' what LaValle Norman calls the 'third wave' of sympotic dialoguing (120).

The fourth chapter, on epideictic oratory, discusses the competitive nature of the *Symposium*, which seems at odds with assumptions about early Christianity; however, LaValle Norman considers the speeches delivered by the women to be thematically complementary, thus allowing a competitive Christian reading of the work.

The fifth chapter discusses the final hymn of the *Symposium* as reflecting a fundamental unity, thereby sealing the work. This chapter has two parts: first, LaValle Norman very closely analyses the hymn; second, she reads it through a comparative lens, alongside works of Philostratus ('Hymn to Echo') and Lucian ('Island of the Blessed'), arguing that the hymn provides closure in the name of continued progress.

In her conclusion, LaValle Norman reiterates her desire to bring more attention to late antique literature, especially alongside greater incorporation of 'Christian evidence', and to Methodius in particular (241). She ends the book by reifying her division between Second Sophistic literature, driven by nostalgia of the past, and late antiquity, which, while also 'develop[ing] its own deep interest in the past' (245), was reorienting readers towards the future, due partly to Methodius' 'new aesthetics of hope' (244).

Aesthetics of Hope is logically organized, and the subsections and frequent signposting, though at times nearly as long as the actual sections, do in fact often allow the reader to keep her place in the different chapters and discussions.

The topics explored by LaValle Norman are interesting but are frequently hindered by her approach. Terms key to her view of Methodius like 'hope' (for instance 4, 19), 'aesthetics' (for instance 4, 19, 21) and 'nostalgia' (for instance 4, 18, 20, 60) never seem truly pinned down *in context*, so readers are at times left on their own to fill in their meanings in the different situations in which they are deployed.

Yet less precise use of relevant terms can also be perceived in the structure of the book. LaValle Norman seems to attribute to Methodius the creation, appropriation and privatization of an ‘aesthetics of hope’ that would symbolize the literary and political Zeitgeist. This seems a bold claim, since she focuses on a single work of one author for the majority of book (in fact, a reversal of the title and subtitle might better describe the result).

Additionally, we can sense throughout the book an eagerness for contextualizing Methodius’ work that effectively results in two somewhat unbalanced studies inconsistently connected. For example, the literary discussion (123–46) compiles information which does not seem to relate to the rest of the book (especially the somewhat confusing addition of Latin literature, which seems to have no place in her study at all), leading one to wonder whether this chapter is necessary to contextualize Methodius’ oeuvre. Relatedly, the *very* close reading of the final hymn in ch. 5 would make for a cohesive study unto itself, alongside the few references in that section that work to connect it with the rest of the book.

On the other hand, we also find some instances of slightly surreptitious controversial information. For instance, LaValle Norman goes from underlining the serious doubts about Methodius’ biographical details (10–11) to devoting pages 51–56 to ‘his Lycia’ (the hypothetical bishopric of Methodius). (Similarly, the entire biography of Alciphron shifts from ‘contested’ (189 n.53) to his being Methodius’ contemporary (189).)

Ultimately, we do not want to directly contradict LaValle Norman’s conclusions, we only wish to point out that a more nuanced method of argumentation might take into account a complicating, even contrary, bibliography, or at the very least soften pronouncements. To our minds, a more moderate and open mode of argumentation is more, rather than less, persuasive.

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