

Conference Report

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HIGH AND LOW LITERATURE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The second annual meeting of the International Society for Late Antique Literary Studies gathered scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds and places for a stimulating two days of papers and friendly discussion. Organisers **Scott McGill**, **David Bright**, and **Joseph Pucci** sought papers which examined how the categories of 'high' and 'low' literature were used, considered, or made problematic by late antique authors. Participants were also encouraged to address the ways in these categories of 'high' and 'low' have framed the reception of late antique literature. In what follows I will briefly summarise each paper and the subsequent discussion. I conclude with a review of common themes and points of interest.

FRIDAY, 14 NOVEMBER

SESSION ONE

The conference began with a paper on 'Juvencus and Epic' by Scott McGill. After referring to the reception of biblical epic by literary scholars, Scott discussed Juvencus' own view of his literary en-

deavour. While acknowledging the immortality of previous epic poets, Juvencus set his own work above theirs. His audience wanted a high literary version of the Gospels, and the poet saw Virgil and Homer as worthy models which could be purified by Christian truth. Juvencus created a combination of Christianity and epic which promoted a new form of heroism, appropriate to his time and offering the promise of immortality. Discussion focused on ideas of immortality, epic, and audience, as well as Juvencus' use and treatment of poetic passages in the Bible. Juvencus' description of and relationship to Constantine were also explored.

The second paper of the session was by **Stevie Hull**. In a paper called, 'Ordered Content, Ordered Form: Letters and a Christian Poetic in the Hands of Augustine and Friends', Stevie offered an interpretation of Augustine's reply to his friend Licentius. Rather than Licentius' verse epistle, it was his lifestyle to which Augustine objected. The correspondence between the two men engages deeply with Augustine's *Cassiacum Dialogues* and can be seen as a continuation of this conversation. Discussion began by considering the historical Licentius, before focusing on references to earlier literature and imagery within the correspondence. Reading communities and the obligations of *amicitia* were also discussed – friends had a duty to share, correct, and emend texts.

SESSION TWO

The second session of the day paired **Byron MacDougall's** paper, 'Callimachus and the Bishops: Gregory of Nazianzus' Second Oration' and **Olivier Dufault's** 'The Professionalization of Greek Curse Writing in Late Antiquity.' Byron began by discussing Gregory of Nazianzus' deep appreciation for Callimachus, whose works he used in his orations, and which spread into other literatures through translation of Gregory's works. The Second Oration had a long afterlife in Christian literature and draws on the images of Greek bucolic ideas, especially that of the shepherd's staff and pipe. Discussion explored further details of Gregory's use of Callimachus and his reasons for using the poet as an interpretive lens. Use of Callimachus showed off Gregory's rhetorical skills and supported his authority as bishop.

Olivier's paper considered issues of social status and curse writing, a popular act performed at all levels of society. Though curse tablets mention professions rarely described in other late antique literature, these references to obscure employments are actually extremely infrequent. The relationship between curse tablets and descriptions of curses in literature shows that these derive from widespread practices rather than following each other. Although writing down a curse was not the only way to curse someone, over time a written curse came to be seen as more powerful. Although some curse writers seem to have freely adapted formulas, our evidence of curses written by professional scribes comes from tablets found in Athens and on the Via Appia. These texts may have been written by civic scribes during the course of legal cases. It is unclear whether being composed by a professional raised or lowered the status of a written curse but the writers were members of the Greco-Roman middle class. A lively discussion followed, with particular interest in the features of the magi-

cal drawings found on some curse tablets. The proliferation of writing and literacy in Late Antiquity was also mentioned.

SESSION THREE

Linda Hall's paper, '*Mirum opus est... tales edere versus*: the polished poetry of Pubilius Optatianus Porfyrius', demonstrated how Optatianus' figure poems could be read as both high and low literature. Optatianus had a large library and employed an extensive range of quotations. Figures on the poems include the letters x, v, c, and chi rho, as well as more complicated figures like ships. The poems were presented as a gift to Constantine but the images used would have been familiar to Constantine's soldiers, who would have recognized the images from Constantine's coinage, which circulated empire-wide. Questions afterwards focused on Optatianus' use of the tradition of Greek figure-poems and the inspiration he provided for later writers such as Hrabanus Maurus. The manuscript tradition of the poems was also raised, and how they would have appeared to readers – the figures would have been clearly highlighted in different colours, so no third level of reading was possible.

The second paper of this session was '*Merae Nugae*: Ausonian Self-Evaluation and its context', by **Joshua Hartman**. Joshua began by introducing the critical reception of Ausonius' work and its treatment by editors (who have sometimes rearranged the collection to suit their own ideas). Ausonius used the word *nuga* multiple times in his work, in a variety of contexts including an argument about Gallic literary excellence and a dispute over literary control. His use of the word *nuga* should be taken as a sign of confidence not insecurity. Questions after this paper focused on Ausonius' dispute with Symmachus over control of his work and Ausonius' use of Catullus and other Latin authors. The position of those allowed to give judgement on literary works was also discussed – people who were not friends of the writer could not engage with his work in the same way.

SESSION FOUR

The final paper of the day, 'The *Sententiae Sextae*: A Case Study of the Function, Popularity, and Reception of Christian Low Literature in Late Antiquity' was given by **Zachary Domach**. Popular literature, both high and low, was fascinated with wise sayings (gnomes). One collection of these gnomes was the so-called *Sententiae Sextae*, a collection of mildly ascetic Christian sayings found in multiple languages. The collection seems not to have been made for purposes of Christian apologetic but may rather have been a school text or a guide to Christian wisdom and daily living. Though we have no idea who Sextus was, the sayings were used in multiple contexts – they appear in Origen and the Origenist controversy, and in the dispute between Augustine and Rufinus. The sayings are also found in monastic rules and operated on multiple intellectual levels. In the discussion, Zachary was asked to say a bit more about the collection's connection to Evagrius and its Coptic translation. Further questions focused on the possibility that the collection may have been used to catechise uneducated people or household slaves. In terms of the collection's educational purpose, Zachary noted

that it has not been found in classroom papyri. Jerome's use of the *Sententiae* was also discussed as well as comparison to other collections of sayings.

SATURDAY, 15 NOVEMBER

SESSION FIVE

The fifth session began with **Christopher van der Berg's** paper, 'Surface, Depth, and Sensualism in Minucius Felix's *Octavius*'. The *Octavius* is a philosophical text, perhaps from the third century, which promotes conversion to Christianity. It draws on the Roman dialogue tradition and focuses heavily on sensory perception. The primary speaker, Minucius, emphasises memory, uses verbs of movement to describe the passage of time. The dialogue focuses on horizontality as part of its epistemological vision. Minucius argues that the tradition of academic scepticism relies on trust that perceptions are probably right; the fact that we only have sensory perceptions reinforces the existence of the divine. This argument creates an opposition between reason and feeling. The word *sensus* has a range of meanings. Participants discussed the similarities between Minucius' and Plotinus' epistemologies. The conversation then turned to a discussion of the significance of the dialogue's setting (it occurs on a beach), as well as the meaning of travel by sea as a metaphor.

The second paper of the session was 'Traditions of Popular Performance in Paulinus of Nola's *Natalicia*' by **Ian Fielding**. Ian began with modern-day performances of Paulinus' poetry, and used this to wonder about the performances which occurred in Cimitile during late antiquity. Paulinus evokes traditions of popular performance in his poems – it has been assumed that only the educated elite would have understood his allusions but since texts such as Virgil's *Eclogues* were dramatized for the stage, these allusions may have extended their reach far down the social ladder. Both Augustine and Jerome assumed their audiences would know Virgil from the theatre. Paulinus, writing in an area famous for its popular performances, incorporated elements of such spectacles into his poem. Ian focused on Paulinus' depiction of the herdsman whose animals had gone missing as a good example of this. Similar scenes may have appeared on stage, and Paulinus clearly drew on Virgil in his recounting of the story. Paulinus' cowherd was thus a seemingly substitute for the spectacles of the stage. A lively and interesting discussion ensued: participants wondered about Paulinus' connections to school authors like Terence, and Christian bucolic. Ian replied that the connection with bucolic is not clear, and that some tropes may have been familiar from school authors but intertextuality can operate outside of a written text, for example in theatre. Further discussion centred on the applicability of categories of high and low literature to Paulinus' project, with the conclusion that these categories need to be complicated since reception of high literary works (such as Virgil) was not confined to the elite classes.

SESSION SIX

Sidonius Apollinaris was the subject of the sixth session. **Michael Hanaghan's** paper 'Locating "Low" Literature in Sidonius: Alterity in Action', opened with the question of why Sidonius chose to

write the way he did. Sidonius is presented as an author of inferior quality, but in his work he frequently asserts the importance of education. This importance increases in a time of transition, as can be seen from the way Sidonius refers to groups outside his audience, and the way he did not adopt a simpler style after joining the church. Sidonius saw himself as writing for ‘the right people’, a group whose small numbers increased their significance. Sidonius claimed he had adopted a less complicated style and ceased to write poetry; yet continued to produce complicated poetry and prose. Sidonius’ use of Scripture fits into this debate over style and the frequency of his concern about his audience’s opinion of his style suggests disagreement with his choices. Michael concluded by emphasising Sidonius’ consistent use of a high style – he did not use Christian literature to exclude others and after his new career in the church used Christian writings to defend his style. Questions focused on defence of a complex or high style after Augustine – Michael argued that this is done by example but Sidonius’ statements are unique. The discussion also examined Sidonius’ use of a high style to make political comments. This introduced the subjects of orality and *otium*.

The next paper, **Hope Williard’s**, ‘History and Satire in Late Antiquity’, discussed the connections between Sidonius’ conceptions of history and satire. After an overview of the transformation of satire in Late Antiquity, Hope discussed the instances in Sidonius’ poetry and prose where he refers to the writing of satire. Most frequently discussed is the scene in the eleventh letter of the first book of his letters, in which Sidonius successfully defended himself before the emperor Majorian against the accusation that he had composed a satire about the citizens of Arles. This incident is usually interpreted as a cautionary experience which warned Sidonius against writing satire later in his career and influenced his refusal to write historical narrative. Hope argued that this refusal should be balanced by the times in his poetry and prose where Sidonius praises his friends’ skill at satirical and historical composition. Furthermore, in a letter which may postdate his ordination, Sidonius himself threatened that he would write satire about a friend who failed to fulfil his promise to visit. The conclusion of the paper looked ahead to the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours and whether this work mixes satire and history. Discussion afterwards debated the question of the applicability of the term satire to Gregory’s work, as well as bringing up other late antique uses of the word. The various terms for a writer of satire and their use were discussed, as well as the use of the word *intrepidus*.

SESSION SEVEN

Saskia Dirkse’s paper, ‘Come Hell or High Style: An Early Byzantine Version of the Inferno in Two Registers’, opened the seventh session. In this paper, Saskia discussed a homily entitled ‘On the Soul’s Exit and the Second Coming’. The homily was attributed to Cyril of Alexandria but written about two centuries after he died, and it describes the series of toll-houses a soul must pass through on its way to the afterlife. At the gate of fornication, for example, the soul was required to recount all his or her bodily sins since the age of twelve. The text has a number of parallels to Theophilus’ *Apotheigma*. The use of repeated questions would have made the sermon particularly effective in the hands of a skilled speaker. Through his use of high-style techniques, the homilist raises the style of the tradition. The discussion afterwards included questions about the presence of satire in the text –

Byzantine writers clearly found humour in poking fun at bureaucrats. The *Apothegma* was discussed in further detail and the uniqueness of the author's use of the text was emphasised. Links to Plato and the neoplatonic tradition were also discussed, as well as the use of the tollhouse image in later Byzantine texts.

The second paper of this session was **Nicholas Marinides'** 'Anastasius of Siani and the Deployment of Demotic Greek in Late Seventh-Century Texts'. Despite Anastasius' stature as a prolific and imaginative theologian, a modern edition of his works is not yet available. After a helpful outline of Anastasius' life – he was a circuit preacher and debater who spent most of his career as a monk in Siani – Nicholas moved on to discuss Anastasius' use of different levels of style at various points in his writings. In edifying tales designed to strengthen his audience's faith against syncretism and apostasy, Anastasius used many words from demotic Greek and copied vernacular speech. These features made his stories come alive and allowed them to entertain and charm his audience. Anastasius' language made high ascetic ideals available to the laity. The discussion dwelt on the significance of using demotic and where else it appears, as well as the relationship between words and good living.

SESSION EIGHT

The final paper of the conference was 'Prosaic Poetry: the High, the Low, and Eugenius II of Toledo' by **Mark Tizzoni**. After a concise biography of Eugenius, Mark discussed levels of style in his writings. Issue of high and low in Eugenius are complicated by his choice of subject matter; different levels of register can also be seen in his letter-writing. In verse, varying register is even more apparent, since metre is a sign of high-style poetry and rhythm and rhyme a sign of low-style poetry. In a series of examples from Eugenius' work, Mark showed the range of his subject matter – the *Hexameron* written for the Visigothic king, a lament for old age, etc., which showed the range and levels of his style. Though Eugenius often falls short of the rules of classical prosody, according to the pronunciation of his own day he may have been more correct than now he appears. Mark concluded by examining Eugenius' use of rhyme and emphasised the educational impulse driving Eugenius' work. Questions afterwards focused on Eugenius' knowledge of late antique authors and his redaction of Dracontius. Participants also discussed Dracontius' role in helping scholars to determine the nature of Visigothic Latin and his uniqueness in the seventh century.

SUMMARY

The papers presented covered a wide range of authors, places, genres, and centuries. One of the themes which emerged in the very first paper (McGill) and continued to be touched on (Hartman, Hannaghan, Tizzoni, and others) was the harsh reception certain authors and genres have received from modern critics. Some of the texts studied (Dirske, Marinides) do not yet have modern editions. It seems clear that past judgements of literary merit no longer hold true, and that modern scholars are interested in late antique author's own intentions and innovations.

Several papers examined authors' purposes for choosing to write as they did. Authors from Gregory of Nazianzus to Sidonius Apollinaris employed or defended an elevated style in order to appeal to their audience (McDougall and Hanghan). They used the language, imagery, and generic conventions of classical literature for new purposes (Fielding and McGill). As well as appealing to an elite audience, writers deployed language and style to appeal to persons from all ranges of society (Domach, Marinides, Dirske). The visual appeal of late antique literature could be seen in the magic drawings on curse tablets and the coloured figures of elegant poems (Hall and Dufualt).

The vibrancy and dynamism of late antique religion greatly affected late antique literature. Almost all of the fourteen papers touched in some way on the impact of Christianity on late antique literature. This could be in the redevelopment of old genres, such as epic (McGill) or in the continued use of classical literature in a Christian setting, such as the sermons of Gregory of Nazianus or the poetry of Paulinus of Nola (McDougall and Fielding). Authors combined the concerns of old and new to debate conversion to Christianity (van der Berg) and to discuss a good Christian lifestyle (Domach, Dirske) and even how and when a good Christian ought to write (Hills, Hannaghan, Williard).

Participants would like to thank the organisers, as well as our host, Professor **James Uden** and Boston University, for an excellent and enjoyable meeting. We look forward to the next meeting in Oxford this July. The theme will be 'Local Connections in the Literature of Late Antiquity' and abstracts are due to the steering committee (Scott McGill, Joseph Pucci, and David Bright) by 1 March 2015.