

Robert Shorrock, *The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 181. ISBN 9780715636688. £19.99 (pb).

A study like the one offered in this recent book by Robert Shorrock, published in 2011 after a seven-year research (as the author himself acknowledges in the preface), was much needed in Late Antique literature studies. Moreover, in general studies about Late Antiquity, *The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity* is a very valuable piece of scholarship.

The title, in fact, clearly illustrates the way in which the work aims to cover two key questions that were solidly intertwined in late antiquity: literature and religion. Both topics are discussed from the viewpoint that Shorrock terms “the myth of paganism”. This is a very clear way of formulating the position that the vast majority of scholars have adopted in their approaches to late antique literature, in which the idea of a barely surviving and combative paganism has been typified and even mystified. Shorrock aims to break with the conception of paganism and Christianity as watertight compartments throughout Late Antiquity, a position that is not as obsolete as it might appear *a priori*.

Nonnus of Panopolis and Dionysus are the two main pillars in Shorrock’s book. The author of *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase of Saint John’s Gospel* represents, as no other does, the features of an ambiguous era: on the one hand, he followed the classical tradition in the largest poem that has reached us from Greco-Latin literature; and, on the other hand, he undertook the composition of a poem encompassed within the tradition of paraphrasing and versifying biblical subjects.

The content is distributed into five parts, in which the subject matter progresses from the most general questions to the particular case of Nonnus. However, the author from Panopolis is not the only source studied or the scholar’s only subject; rather, Shorrock includes evidence from other authors to illustrate his interesting proposals.

The first section, or chapter, is a general introduction to the topic. After a few lines on the reevaluation of Late Antique studies, neglected during most of the twentieth century¹, the author subtly directs his efforts to demystifying the common idea of a rigid separation between Christianity and paganism, which is thought to affect the whole society and culture in Late Antiquity². As for the chronology, Shorrock includes a section entitled “Periodisation”, which establishes the dates of Late Antiquity between the fourth and sixth century A.D.³

¹ As in M. Grant, *From Rome to Byzantium: the Fifth Century AD* (London, 1998).

² A series of international conferences during the last couple of years has attempted to break with this conception from the combined point of view of literature, philosophy and history. Cf. the first volume of a forthcoming collection, D. Hernández de la Fuente, ed., *New Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); also R. García-Gasco and D. Hernández de la Fuente, eds., (forthcoming).

³ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (London, 1971); P. Brown, *The making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1976); F.M. Clover & R.S. Humphreys, *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity* (Madison, 1989).

The division between Christians and pagans is not a reality and is, in fact, very far from real, even in the political arena: the same cultural environment nourishes both Christians and pagans, although the authors from both “sides” are determined to reinforce their antagonism and their struggle for power. The atmosphere is accurately described by Shorrock as one in which all the old certainties have begun to crumble and the boundaries are no longer clear. Christian and pagan rhetoric are more alike than those authors who were most committed to the rejection of the classic worldview would have liked.

All these are crucial concepts in understanding the whole work, and many of them are expanded and exemplified throughout the remaining chapters. Undoubtedly, one of the most revolutionary ideas is the replacement of the concept of *secular*, as opposed to *religious* (both can be applied not only to literature but also to architecture), which creates a dichotomy that is as rigid as the Christian–pagan opposition. This is introduced by Shorrock as the *poet of Christ* and *poet of the Muses* dichotomy (pp. 13–48).

This concept is further developed in the following chapter, dedicated to the inspiration and authority—*authorship* and *moral impact*—of the poet in Late Antiquity. In this section, Shorrock reviews an interesting selection of texts—in Latin and in Greek—to show how the late antique poet adopted a mask, a character, which Shorrock calls the *poetic persona*. The new Christian poetic identity explicitly rejects the traditional muse of classical poetry by replacing symbols like the Castalian Spring (the ancient inspirational font) with the true fountain, that is to say, Christ. Shorrock presents the poetic confrontation between Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola as a clear example of this confrontation. The latter, who decided to reject the classics, is deeply offended when his teacher inquires by correspondence about his reason for abandoning the Muses (pp. 10–13).

Chapters Three and Four are dedicated to Nonnus of Panopolis, who combines in one person the two types of *poetic personae*: *Paraphrase* will have been composed under the characteristic inspiration of a *poet of Christ*, while *Dionysiaca* follows the classical tradition in terms of issues and genre. The discussion of the chronology of the works attributed to the author from Panopolis, an important part of the “Nonnian question”, is addressed in detail, but not excessively so: the reader who does not know the scholarship well learns the essential questions and answers; those who know more about Nonnus and his work are briefly and conveniently reminded of some key issues.

After quoting the various solutions to the “Nonnian question” (mainly the solutions provided by scholars such as Garnett and Vian), the third chapter focuses on the study of *Paraphrase* from the point of view of the similarities in language and symbols, and is mainly centered on the closeness of the figures of Christ and Dionysus. There is also an opportunity to highlight the reason why Nonnus paraphrases the *Gospel according to St. John* and not a different one: it is none other than the symbolic interest of wine. The intensity and quality achieved in this chapter, and the following, by the philological analysis of Nonnus’ literary works, should be highlighted. The study of the ambivalence of wine, capable of positive changes—as in

the wedding at Cana—and negative changes—according to Nonnus, Judas would have betrayed Christ under the effects of drunkenness—is particularly interesting.

As for *Dionysiaca*, which is treated in the fourth chapter, Shorrock includes the poem in the late antique debate about poetic inspiration (cf. chapter 2). After that, the author discusses the most evident signs of a common background for Nonnus' two works: from the salutation formulas to the famous scenes in which Christ and Dionysus cry, as an allusion to human salvation through divine sacrifice.

The fifth chapter, *Poetics on Late Antiquity*, is perfectly integrated into the whole, as the conclusion and synthesis of the ideas formulated throughout the book. Shorrock presents a very brief study of Nonnus' influence on other authors, readers and reviewers (pp. 125ff.). In general, the topics are treated from a perspective that is far from being purely philological, but this should not be taken as negative criticism: the book is easy to read and does not require a deep knowledge of the period studied, although, naturally, that would be beneficial.

Studies on Nonnus of Panopolis and Late Antiquity are now going through an unprecedented revival, as Shorrock notes at the very beginning of the book. The recently inaugurated series of conferences on Late Antiquity and poetry of the so-called “Nonian school”, a good number of scientific publications on this topic, as well as the encounters between all the emerging researchers in this field, allows for a continual process of reciprocal enrichment. Shorrock's work, although not definitive, is a very useful tool for many scholars and it is a very interesting work for laymen who are interested in the topic, as should be evident from this review.

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