Introduction
Christians among Imperial Greek Writers in the Third Century

Looking Back and Looking Forward

As driving instructors and philosophers alike tell us, where you look has a lot to do with where you end up going. Focusing on a billboard may result with you and your car in a ditch. And where your imagination lovingly lingers forms who you become.[1] This book examines a moment when authors were struggling to redirect the gaze, and thereby the path, of a generation during the period of the "Crisis of the Third Century," the tipping-point between the period typically referred to as the "Second Sophistic" and the period that has come to be known as "Late Antiquity." Through the prism of a particularly creative author of the late third century, I will argue in this book that Greek Imperial literature can be read with more depth and subtlety when read as an aesthetic battle between a rhetoric of the old and a rhetoric of the new. The early third century saw a revival of Greek literature under the Severan dynasty, the literature of the "Second Sophistic," which was often concerned primarily with connecting the present to the glorious Greek past. But there were other voices rising with ever-greater frequency in this period, claiming that it was not the past that should be looked at longingly, but rather a future that would bring an end to life in this world as we know it. These were the voices of Christians who saw themselves as faced with a difficult rhetorical question: in order to gain legitimacy, they needed to anchor themselves to this long Hellenic tradition, but at the same time, they wanted to emphasize that something radically new had entered history with the coming of God as man. The way that they negotiated this tension is a fascinating moment in the turning of an era. The late third century was not only a period of great political

[1] I have been deeply influenced here (and in countless other ways) by Robert Germany's concept of "mimetic contagion," the pattern seen in both philosophy and literature to explain how we are drawn to imitate what we see (Germany 2016).

transition from the High Empire to the reign of Constantine. It was also a period of literary transition, with new solutions to old problems being proposed and developed.

But this debate about the reorientations of the imagination is often missed when scholars of this period fail to look at Christian and non-Christian material together. I hope further to persuade Classicists of the value of including Christian material in their work on Imperial literature, to reveal what this material has to offer scholars interested in literary transformation in the Imperial Period. I will center my argument around Methodius of Olympus and his dialogic *Symposium*. Born in a period of political turmoil in the mid-third century CE and living his literary life before the establishment of Constantine as sole Emperor, Methodius carved out a place for a distinct Christian aesthetic that took over many of the trends in third-century literature, both Christian and non-Christian, and experimented with a reorientation of focus away from the past and towards a more real reality to come. He experimented with an eschatological imagination, but one that avoided the genre of the apocalypse. He experimented with creating an aesthetics of hope.

To show what I mean more concretely, consider a small moment in the opening of Methodius' dialogue that can stand as a synecdoche for the rest of the work. Respectable women were not meant to be present at the raucous drinking parties known in ancient Greece as symposia. Yet, Methodius decided to write a Symposium where there were *only* women present.[2] They gather, eat and drink, and then debate with each other about the correct way to praise chastity. Surface Christianizations strike even a casual reader: not only are all the characters women, but they are talking on a radically out-of-place topic for a traditional drinking party: chastity. Such surprises have led some scholars to throw up their hands in despair. Alexander Bril asserts that the resulting dialogue is "rather absurdly incongruous. Something akin to this would happen if a modern writer were to set a religious convention not of magdalens, but of sexually naïve Carmelite nuns in a brothel or a gay bar" (Bril 2006: 300). But in his disgust at Methodius' surface innovations, Bril fails to realize that Methodius smuggles in even more radical changes into his literary form that are all about the *redirection of gaze*.

[2] Throughout this book, I will use symposium to refer to the cultural institution, Symposium to refer to a work of literature set at this Institution and *Symposium* to refer to a particular work carrying that title.

Methodius opens his description of the party with a Homeric quotation, but a Homeric quotation that has been importantly modified. He quotes the first lines of *Iliad* 4, when all the gods join together to have a feast and look down upon the mortals toiling away at war in front of the Trojan walls.[3] As they look down, they drink, with the goddess Hebe pouring their wine (one of the only examples of a female wine-pourer in ancient literature before Methodius' own all-female party, I might add).[4] The Homeric source-passage runs like this:

> Οἳ δὲ θεοὶ πὰρ Ζηνὶ καθήμενοι ἠγορόωντο
> χρυσέῳ ἐν δαπέδῳ, μετὰ δέ σφισι πότνια Ἥβη
> νέκταρ ἐοινοχόει· τοὶ δὲ χρυσείοις δεπάεσσι
> δειδέχατ' ἀλλήλους, Τρώων πόλιν εἰσορόωντες·
>
> (*Iliad* 4.1–4)

> Now the gods at the side of Zeus were sitting in council
> Over the golden floor, and among the gods Hebe
> Poured them nectar as wine, while they in the golden drinking-cups
> Drank to each other, gazing down on the city of the Trojans.
>
> (Trans. Lattimore 1951: 113)

When he reuses this passage, Methodius makes the obvious modifications that Bril noticed based on the new gender of the symposiasts (αἱ for τοὶ; ἀλλήλας for ἀλλήλους; εἰσορόωσαι for εἰσορόωντες). But he goes on to make a change that at first glance might appear unremarkable. Instead of gods who look down upon the city of Troy (Τρώων πόλιν εἰσορόωντες), Methodius instead writes that the symposiasts were looking *upwards*, into the heavens, as they drink (μέγαν οὐρανὸν εἰσορόωσαι). He does not even need to change the verb to change the direction: the change from immortal to mortal actors carries along with it a change in the entire orientation of space.

> Οὔπω πάντως, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἡμῖν, ὦ Γρηγόριον,
> πρῶτον εἰσήγησαι τήν τε συνέλευσιν ἔνθα ἐγενήθη καὶ τῶν
> ἐδεσμάτων τὰς παρασκευάς, σεαυτήν τε πῶς ᾠνοχόησας·
> …αἱ δὲ χρυσέοις δεπάεσσιν
> δειδέχατ' ἀλλήλας μέγαν οὐρανὸν εἰσορόωσαι.
>
> (*symp*. Prologue 3–4)

[3] As will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, Methodius makes a move similar to Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, which goes behind the *Symposia* of Plato and Xenophon to Homer as the ur-sympotic text.

[4] Bremmer 1990: 140 believes that an Archaic tradition of using female wine-pourers was superseded by the use of adolescent boys as the "passion for boys" grew.

> No, please! But tell us from the beginning, Gregorion, first how their gathering there came about, then the preparations for the food, and how you yourself were the wine-pourer:
> "… while the women in the golden drinking-cups
> Drank to each other, gazing up into the great heaven."

When Methodius chooses to redirect the gaze of his symposiasts, he likewise redirects the gaze of his readers away from the city of Troy, and away from the endless repetitions of the Trojan cycles in literature, which were still popular to write in the third century CE,[5] and towards the heavens from which the symposiasts expect Christ to arrive soon in order to lead them once and only once into an even better symposium – the wedding banquet of the Lamb. However, Methodius can only make this change carry a punch because he trusts his readers to know the Homeric passage. By linking his innovations to the secure anchor of a long literary tradition, his redirection stands out. He too looks back, but only with a glance, not a gaze. He does so in order to drag his reader out of concern with the past, with the toil for Troy, and into concern with the future. This is a different type of symposium indeed.

The terminology that I use to define the aesthetic that I will explore in this book is the "aesthetics of hope." "Aesthetics" marks this out as a literary history: I care about literary styling and how it morphs under the influence of a creative practitioner at a particular historical moment. "Hope" carries with it an expectation of things not yet fully known, but only intimated. Methodius' name has often been associated with various types of eschatological thinking: either as one of the last of the early Christian "millenarists"[6] or as the pseudonymous author of an influential and often-translated seventh-century apocalypse.[7] But it is not his particular view of the end of the world that is my primary interest. Rather, it is how a sense of futurity influences his writerly innovations in a literary period that has often been labeled "nostalgic."[8]

[5] The preference of Imperial epicists for Trojan timescapes is a focus of Greensmith 2018.
[6] Mejzner 2011.
[7] Originally written in Syriac in the seventh century, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was translated into many languages and was important throughout the Byzantine and Medieval periods. For a recent edition and translation of the Greek and Latin traditions, see Garstad 2012, along with the analysis in Reinick 1992.
[8] "Wilamovitz's argument thus fell in line with what was to become the standard view of the Second Sophistic in the twentieth century: a society caught in the grip of the past, inspired to 'imitate' the great classical writers in a fossilized and lifeless Attic dialect rather than to employ the naturally developing language to create a truly contemporary literature" (Kim 2017: 42).

Positioning the Third Century between the Second Sophistic and Late Antiquity

The literature treated in this book falls between two equally unstable categories, the "Second Sophistic" and "Late Antiquity," in a gap that gets little mention or notice in literary studies. Usually the "Second Sophistic" ends with the Severans and "Late Antiquity" begins with Diocletian, which leaves 235–294 CE an unaccounted-for wasteland.[9] This is precisely the time when the Roman Empire experienced a breakdown of dynastic continuity, the "Crisis of the Third Century." I will spend the first chapter of this book exploring this "gap period," showing both that more was being written during this time than we typically think, and that Methodius fits into larger trends that were in some ways responding to the political instability. But here, let me explain briefly the scholarly fields that have developed on either side of this period.

The mid-to-late third century is more often used as the end-point or starting point rather than being looked at in its own right, and scholars of this period tend to restrict their corpus depending on whether they care more about what came before or what came after. As a result, the second and third centuries CE are full of scholars who frequently talk past each other; too often there are two distinct fields of study running parallel through the Greek literature of the Roman Empire, with the impassable yellow double-line being religious allegiance instead of time period or literary context.[10] On one side, the study of Christian writers of this period has predominantly found its home in the field of the history of theology, which looks

[9] For example, falling between the literature included in *The Oxford Handbook of the Second Sophistic*, which uses "the period of the late first to early third centuries" as a basic although imperfect guideline for its periodization (Richter and Johnson 2017: 4) and *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, which gave to its writers the basic time span of "from Constantine to Muhammed," but at the same time asked them to problematize it (Johnson 2017: 4). Other important works on Late Antiquity more readily accept the 284 date as their starting point. See note 4 of Chapter 1 for more bibliography on the importance of 284.

[10] The division is scripted into that most important tool, the lexicon. Jones' 1925 introduction to the *Liddell and Scott* explains that it will not include any post-biblical Christian texts: "After due consideration it has been decided to exclude both Patristic and Byzantine literature from the purview of the present edition. It would have manifestly been impossible to include more than a small and haphazard selection of words and quotations from these literatures, which would therefore have had to be treated quite differently from the remains of Classical Greek" (quoted in Lampe 1961: v). Such considerations did not, however, keep him from including citations from third- and even fourth-century CE pagans, such as Porphyry and Libanius. Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, in its turn, makes a similar exclusion of contemporary pagan authors: "Nor can this lexicon find room for the contributions which contemporary pagan authors, especially in the field of philosophy, would sometimes make to the study of Christian thought, or for reference to the writings of Philo, of which the Fathers, particularly at Alexandria, made so much use" (Lampe 1961: ix).

to them as predecessors to the more mature theological developments of the fourth century – "Patristics" or "Early Christian Studies."[11] On the other side, the flowering of pagan Greek literature under Roman rule, and more specifically the field known as the Second Sophistic, has come to be a major subject of inquiry among Classicists as a movement uniquely concerned with elite rhetorical display and imitation of the past. Much of the latter scholarship is deafening in its absence of Christian writers, while the former has a certain teleological interest in the period that sometimes obscures the view of what came before. Two narratives, one looking backward, and one looking forward, fail to notice that they are occupying the same space.

The first period, the "Second Sophistic" gets its modern name from a term coined by Philostratus (170–250), who wrote a series of short biographies in the mid-third century called *The Lives of the Sophists* and who refers most concretely to the flourishing of Greek rhetorical practice under Roman rule. While few scholars of the period wish to restrict the "Second Sophistic" only to those practitioners of rhetoric enumerated by Philostratus, nevertheless there is no agreement on precisely how far the net should be thrown, each scholar left to make their own uneasy definition, leading to the "considerable fogginess" of the term (Richter and Johnson 2017: 4). Philostratus' catalogue does not put an end to the cultural forces that are typically invoked with the title Second Sophistic, nor does his focus on rhetorical practitioners mean that other types of literature had decreased in importance during this period. One of the most prominent scholars of the field, Tim Whitmarsh, rightly cautions that there is "no strong consensus among modern scholars as to what the Second Sophistic is, beyond a vague sense that it is localized in the Greek culture of the first three centuries CE" (Whitmarsh 2005: 4). He himself varies in his definition of the movement, in places seeming to say that it covers (or at least influences) anything in the first three centuries of Greek literature under Roman rule,[12] while at other times limiting it to more

[11] See the patrology handbooks of, for example, Quasten 1950, Altaner 1958 and Moreschini and Norelli 2005. "Early Christian Studies" does not carry with it quite the level of teleology that "Patristics" does, hence the recent discussions around renaming the "North American Patristics Society" as the "Society of Early Christian Studies." The editor's note on the first volume of *The Journal of Early Christian Studies* (published by the North American Patristics Society) explains that the name was meant to indicate its incorporation of broader methodologies than were traditional in the field of Patristics (Clark and Ferguson 1993: vi).

[12] "This is a book about the Greek literary culture of the period from the mid-first to the early third century of the common era (CE), the revival of Classicizing ideals that modern scholars often call the 'Second Sophistic'" (Whitmarsh 2001: 1).

specific rhetorical contexts.[13] Yet despite admitting the Second Sophistic's nebulous nature, Whitmarsh does not include a single Christian author in either of his fundamental works on the period, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire* (2001) and *The Second Sophistic: An Introduction* (2005). Similarly, in his recent contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of the Second Sophistic*, he continues to posit a divide between literature of the Second Sophistic and Christian literature, at times implying that this divide is a chronological one.[14] Another important author in the field, Graham Anderson, seems to have a wider purview, showing some interest in including Christians.[15] However, Christian authors receive only 10 of the 250 pages of his *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (1993), relegated to a sub-section of the chapter called "Piety and Paideia: the Sophist and his Gods," instead of being integrated throughout the work. While *The Oxford Handbook of the Second Sophistic* in some ways attempts to overcome this bias,[16] it reinscribes it by placing all discussions of Christian writers in a section on "Religion" at the end of the collection, implying that these writers are far from central to the movements of the time, and point instead to the next period of history.[17]

[13] "What this book hopes to show, however, is the absolute centrality of display oratory to elite Greek culture in the first centuries of our era … Although my scope is focused more sharply on oratory, then, I hope that the sweep-shots will be satisfyingly panoramic" (Whitmarsh 2005: 1).

[14] "The Second Sophistic as conventionally defined covers the period from the establishment of the principate through to the third-century crisis; and given the limited amount of extant material from the second half of the third century (which may or may not be an accident of survival), it in effect covers all the material up until Constantine and the advent of Christianity [sic]. With a little elasticity, then, the Second Sophistic can be thought of as coterminous with 'non-Christian Greek cultural production of the principate' " (Whitmarsh 2017: 13). He does not justify this exclusion of Christian material here.

[15] "In the course of rehearsing the lives of these men, [Philostratus] concentrates on the period of the Early Roman Empire; and it is the one and a half centuries before his own time, from the end of the first century AD to that of the early third, that has most commonly come to bear the title 'Second Sophistic'. In practice Philostratus begins his gallery of sophists far too late, and the Second Sophistic as he conceives it continued long after his own time. But he has given an identity, perhaps an arbitrary or even spurious one, to *something* that flourished, notably in the Greek world, in the early Roman Empire, and it is that something which we must try to characterize" (Anderson 1993: 13).

[16] "… the *Handbook* represents a somewhat new approach to the Second Sophistic, one that attempts to integrate Greek literature of the Roman period into the wider world of early imperial Greek, Latin, Jewish, and Christian cultural production" (Richter and Johnson 2017: 7).

[17] A. Johnson 2017 points this out in his contribution to the volume: "The Christians who are the focus of the following discussion probably would have been dismayed to see that they were limited to a section entitled 'Religion and Religious Literature' in the present *Handbook* … It is thus something of a modern scholarly oddity that intellectuals such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, or Athenagoras are often omitted from studies of the Second Sophistic (whatever cultural and literary phenomena might be subsumed under that problematic label) and limited to treatments of the 'rise' of Christianity, as though cultured men, *pepaideumenoi*, who self-identified as Christians

However, there are signs that this trend has begun to change, especially within the last handful of years. For instance, Tim Whitmarsh, in his 2013 book *Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Postclassicism,* acknowledges the frequent gaps in the comprehensiveness of past Second Sophistic scholarship, including his own.[18] But while he begins to address the Jewish material in his most recent work, he has not yet delved into the Christian material. Two recent publications are excellent examples of the new trend to fill in this gap: Kendra Eshleman's 2012 *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers and Christians* and Jason König's 2012 *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture*, both published in this series. These two books are excellent witnesses to how enhanced the conversation becomes when the two groups of literature are looked at side-by-side. For instance, Eshleman's book reveals the similar mechanisms of community-formation used by both sophists and bishops in their respective intellectual communities: not only does Philostratus illuminate Polycarp, but the added evidence from the Christian material also serves to thicken our knowledge about the social world traditionally thought of as the sole possession of the pagan members of the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. König's work on the literary symposium shows how enriching it can be to look at Christian and non-Christian feasting literature of the Imperial period together, rather than segregating discussions of the eucharist from the symposium. As Graeme Clarke has said: "The Christian literary output of the third century ought to be regarded, therefore, not so much as separable from the mainstream of the contemporary Graeco-Roman rhetorical culture but rather as a significant constituent of that third-century culture, itself in the process of transformation" (Clarke 2005: 667). The time has clearly come for a more through integration of Christian material into the wider studies of Imperial Greek literature.

(or as adherents of Hebrew philosophy) were somehow inhabiting different discursive traditions or cultural sites of performance than those of Lucian or Aelius Aristides" (A. Johnson 2017: 625).

[18] "Standard accounts of postclassical Greek literature (I include my own earlier work) have, for example, little room for Jewish or Christian literature (although here the tide is beginning to turn). They scarcely acknowledge the competitor traditions that were contemporaneously devising, reimagining, and commentating on literary canons (viz. rabbinical Hebrew or Christian Syriac). They present the Hellenistic era as dominated by poetry and the imperial era by prose, usually by simply failing to refer to the full range of surviving material … No wonder the stereotype of imperial Greeks as flouncy, elitist orators persists, when texts that present an alternative image are not pictured. How different our conception of the period would be had Philostratus not survived" (Whitmarsh 2013: 4–5).

Late Antiquity, the other uneasy side of this tug-o-war, has had an equally meteoric rise in the past forty years of scholarship. But while studies of the Second Sophistic have tended towards the literary (with important social-historical exceptions like Bowersock 1969), Late Antiquity came of age first within history, especially in conversation with art history.[19] Andrea Giardina has put forth a cautionary note about the recent expansion of this concept both in time and space, due especially to the inspiring work of Peter Brown. On the early side of the "explosion of Late Antiquity," Giardina resists the trend to include the third century in Late Antiquity, even if he agrees that it shows certain aspects of an "epoca in potenza" (Giardina 1999: 166). And on the later side, he warns against some trends for Late Antiquity to muscle its way into periods that are properly considered Early Medieal or Byzantine (Giardina 1999: 169). The debate is far from over, with new interventions being made on either side.[20]

In addition to the problems of temporal spread is one of topical spread. Because the initial impetus was cultural and historical studies, literary studies of the period have been slower in coming.[21] This is in contrast to the Second Sophistic, which is primarily a field of literary studies. By looking more carefully into the interstices between these two periods, I hope both to help correct the bias in Second Sophistic scholarship against integrating Christian products, and also contribute to the growth in distinctly *literary* studies of Late Antiquity.

Methodius of Olympus and his *Symposium*

I take as my main example in this book a Christian writer whose work sits squarely within the Crisis of the Third Century: Methodius of Olympus. Methodius' deep interest in literary stylistics across a number of genres makes him an ideal author to speak to the concerns of both the Second Sophistic and the literary world of Late Antiquity. But although he gives

[19] For an in-depth look into the origins of "Late Antiquity" in the field of art history starting with Riegl 1901 and Strzygowski 1901, see Elsner 2002, likewise Elsner 2004 for a broader overview of the history of the study of Late Antique art. In the second half of the twentieth century, Peter Brown and his followers popularized the term in the field of cultural history.

[20] For helpful overviews of the current state of the question, see the inaugural essays of the *Journal of Late Antiquity*, especially Marcone 2008 and James 2008.

[21] S. F. Johnson 2006a is dedicated to overcoming this bias and developing a discourse specifically about the literature of Late Antiquity. From that volume, see especially Cameron 2006 for a programmatic essay, cf. Cameron 2016a. "It is much rarer that we see the literary aesthetics of Late Antiquity made the real object of scholarly inquiry, and when this does occur there is usually only passing and cursory reference to very general aspects" (Formisano 2007: 279). The aesthetic evaluation of Late Antiquity will be addressed more thoroughly in Chapter 1.

us excellent literary evidence, our biographical evidence is less compelling. Perhaps because of Eusebius' complete, and probably pointed, silence about his near-contemporary (they fell on opposite sides of the Origen question), we are still a bit shaky about almost all major aspects of Methodius' life: where he lived, where his bishopric was (if he was indeed a bishop), and if and when he was martyred. Our earliest evidence is preserved by Jerome. As a protreptic to encourage Rufinus to change his attitude towards Origen, Jerome quotes a statement from the *Apology for Origen*, a mostly-lost work by Pamphilus, to the effect that Methodius had formerly been a supporter of Origen, who had come later in life to realize his error and to write against him.[22] If Methodius has managed to break free of Origen's grip, so too can Rufinus, claims Jerome. But of course, in its original context, the *Apology for Origen* was less than enthusiastic about Methodius' change of heart. Since Pamphilus' death was witnessed and recorded by Eusebius in 309, Methodius must already have been an established author by that time.

In addition to this piece of evidence, Jerome also preserves our lengthiest ancient mention of Methodius in *De Viris Illustribus,* section 83.

> Methodius, Bishop of Olympus in Lycia, and later of Tyre, in a limpid and elegant style composed works, *Against Porphyry* and *The Symposium of the Ten Virgins*; an important work, *On the Resurrection* against Origen, and another against the same author, *On the Pythoness*; a work, *On Freewill*; also a *Commentary on Genesis*; one *On the Song of Songs*, and many other works which are read eagerly by a wide public. Towards the end of the last persecution, or, as others assert, under Decius and Valerian, he received the crown of martyrdom in Chalcis in Greece. (Trans. Halton 1999: 116)[23]

In addition to Olympus and Tyre, other attested bishoprics are Patara and Phillipi.[24] Methodius himself mentions Lycian Olympus and Patara in his works,[25] so one could imagine that later biographers adduced his origin

[22] *Contra Rufinum* 1.11. For a discussion of this evidence, see Patterson 1997: 15–16. In addition to the two works that Jerome mentions that Methodius wrote explicitly against Origen, one also wonders about the content of the lost *On the Song of Songs* and how that would relate to Origen's famous commentary on the Old Testament book.

[23] *Methodius, Olympi Lyciae, et postea Tyri episcopus, nitidi compositique sermonis, adversum Porphyrium confecit libros, et Symposium decem virginum, de resurrectione opus egregium contra Origenem, et adversus eumdem de Pythonissa, et de Autexusio; in Genesim quoque et in Cantica canticorum commentarios; et multa alia, quae vulgo lectitantur. Et ad extremum novissimae persecutionis, sive, ut alii affirmant, sub Decio et Valeriano in Chalcide Graeciae, martyrio coronatus est.*

[24] Bracht 2001.

[25] *De Resurrectione* II.23.1–5 for Olympus, *De Resurrectione* I.1.1 for Patara.