

## THE RHETORIC OF CREDIBILITY IN THE *LIFE OF PAUL THE HERMIT*

### LA RETORICA DELLA CREDIBILITÀ NELLA *VITA DI PAOLO DI TEBE*

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#### Abstract

From the beginning of the *Life of Paul the Hermit*, Jerome depicts credibility as the key issue in writing hagiographies. Despite a plethora of unbelievable accounts about men “living in an underground cave with flowing hair down to their feet”, Paul’s biography is intended to be a trustworthy narrative, concerning the true first Christian monk. Such a work necessarily comes into conflict with Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*: as Jerome partially suggests in the prologue, his account will call into question the truthfulness of a venerable model. In this paper, I provide a rhetorical analysis of some passages of Jerome’s *Life of Paul the Hermit*. My aim is to explore the links between Late Antique *paideia* and credibility, showing how the biographer employs persuasive techniques even in the narration of unbelievable episodes. In the final section, I share some reflections on the author’s and his audience’s concept of credibility.

**Keywords:** Jerome, Paul of Thebes, credibility, rhetoric, hagiography.

#### Riassunto

Sin dall’inizio della *Vita di Paolo di Tebe*, Girolamo fa della credibilità la questione fondamentale da affrontare nella redazione di un’opera agiografica: nonostante una pletora di racconti incredibili, che trattano di uomini vissuti in grotte sotterranee e coperti di peli fino al calcagno, la biografia di Paolo è da intendersi

come un resoconto fededegno della vita del primo vero monaco cristiano. Un'opera del genere non può che entrare in conflitto con la *Vita di Antonio* di Atanasio; come suggerito in parte da Girolamo stesso nel prologo, la nuova biografia monastica metterà, dunque, in dubbio la veridicità di un modello venerabile. Il presente contributo offre un'analisi retorica di alcuni passi della *Vita di Paolo di Tebe*. L'obiettivo è esplorare i legami tra *paideia* tardoantica e credibilità, mostrando come il biografo sfrutti le sue tecniche di persuasione anche nella narrazione di episodi incredibili. Nella sezione finale, trovano posto alcune riflessioni sull'idea di credibilità dell'autore e del suo pubblico.

**Parole chiave:** Girolamo, Paolo di Tebe, credibilità, retorica, agiografia.

The first hagiography written in Latin takes place in a desert populated by mythological creatures. This could be enough to introduce intriguing questions about the credibility of Jerome's *Life of Paul the Hermit*, through an accurate study of passages which, in order of appearance, involve a centaur, a satyr and various divinely inspired animals. But there is more. According to what the author states in the prologue,<sup>1</sup> Paul's biography is intended to be a trustworthy narrative, concerning the true first Christian monk living in the desert. Such a work necessarily comes into conflict with Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, thus calling into question the truthfulness of the monastic biography *par excellence*.<sup>2</sup>

In the last decades, scholars devoted particular attention to the symbolic meaning of the fantastic beasts described in the *Life* and to the relationship between them and Jerome's concept of Christianized desert. The seminal

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<sup>1</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1. The edition which I will quote and discuss in the following pages is Degòrski 1987 (*apud* Leclerc 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Athanasius admits the existence of monastic experiences before Antony, but only in the form of an urban monasticism: "There were not yet monasteries in Egypt neighboring on one another, and no monk at all knew the remote desert; each one who wished to watch over himself spiritually would practice ascetic discipline by himself not far from his own village. Now there was at that time an old man in the neighboring village. From his youth he had practiced the solitary life of an ascetic. When Antony saw him, he emulated him in goodness" (*Vit. Ant.* 3.2-3: Οὕτω γὰρ ἦν οὕτως ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ συνεχῇ μοναστήρια οὐδ' ὅλως ἤδει μοναχὸς τὴν μακρὰν ἔρημον. Ἐκαστος δὲ τῶν βουλομένων ἑαυτῷ προσέχειν οὐ μακρὰν τῆς ἰδίας κώμης καταμόνας ἡσκεῖτο. Ἦν τοίνυν ἐν τῇ πλησίον κώμῃ τότε γέρων, ἐκ νεότητος τὸν μονήρη βίον ἀσκήσας · τοῦτον ἰδὼν Ἀντώνιος ἐζήλωσεν ἐν καλῷ; transl. Vivian – Athanassakis 2003: 61). At any rate, this testimony somehow validates any attempt to find forerunners for Antonian asceticism.

studies of Patricia Cox Miller<sup>3</sup> and Robert Wiśniewski<sup>4</sup> brilliantly showed how these bizarre figures, based on classical and Jewish traditions, here become the ambassadors of the new ascetic ideals. However, the richness of this allegorical dimension must not make us forget that the *Life* offers multiple levels of interpretation, starting with the literal one:<sup>5</sup> Jerome actually tries to demonstrate that what he narrates is true and credible, displaying all the persuasive techniques offered by Late Antique schools of rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

There are indeed several reasons to analyse the *Life of Paul the Hermit* through the lens of *paideia*. First of all, Jerome's style is clearly influenced by his formation, based on grammar and rhetoric: since this hagiography is his earliest work<sup>7</sup>, one can easily assume that it reflects what he studied during his younger years, especially those *progymnasmata* (or *praeexercitamina*) which played a major role in Late Antique school programs.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, even though in his letter to Paul of Concordia the author claims that the *Life* is intended for the *simpliciores*<sup>9</sup>, the real addressees should be the cultured members of the Western upper class, namely the readership

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<sup>3</sup> Cox Miller 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Wiśniewski 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Grandi 2010: 135: "Avviene così che i due principali elementi, utili ed allo stesso tempo inutilizzabili per una classificazione di genere della *Vita Pauli*, la storia e la fiaba si intrecciano ad una serie di altri ingredienti – motivi ripresi dai παρακλαυσίθυρα elegiaci, dalle odi più lievi e dalle epistole più polemiche di Orazio, dalle tecniche retoriche, filologiche, ermeneutiche – per creare un testo omogeneo e profondo all'insegna delle tecniche esegetiche origeniane e dell'allegoria. Un'opera a più livelli dove l'affascinante scenario romanzesco, comunque intrigante anche per i 'simpliciores', si trasforma, per chi può penetrare l'allegoria del testo, in una ricognizione dei caratteri e del comportamento dei monaci, nonché in una rampogna della dissolutezza delle città rappresentanti del clero costituito, uno degli scopi primari di Gerolamo nelle *Vite*".

<sup>6</sup> This need for demonstrating that the account is true and credible must necessarily be related to the total lack of testimonies about Paul: the first source concerning the monk is, indeed, Jerome's *Life* itself – and Rebenich 2009, starting with the title, suggests that the character might be an invention of the Stridonian (on this regard, see also Wipszycka 2009: 22 and 198-199). Weingarten 2005 argues, instead, that the biographer drew on oral traditions concerning a rabbi.

<sup>7</sup> On the dating of the *Life of Paul* cf. Vogüé 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Although we do not know the identity of Jerome's teacher in rhetoric (cf. Graves 2007: 14), the testimonies of Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.9; 2.4-5) and Suetonius (*Gram. et rhet.* 4.7; 25.8-9) allow us to reconstruct a standardised school program (see Patillon e Bolognesi 1997: XII-XIV).

<sup>9</sup> Hier. *Epist.* 10.3.3.

of Evagrius' Latin translation of the *Life of Antony*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, as it usually happens in Late Antique biography, the art of rhetoric becomes a common ground between the author and his audience, acquiring a social meaning which is far more relevant than any aim at persuasion. Finally, *paideia* makes a clear distinction between Paul and Antony: unlike Athanasius' hero,<sup>11</sup> the true first Christian monk is described as "highly educated not only in Greek but also in Egyptian letters".<sup>12</sup>

As I said earlier, a study focused on the problem of credibility in the *Life of Paul the Hermit* cannot ignore what Jerome states in the prologue. The hagiography opens with a meaningful sentence, which immediately defines the author's purpose:

Inter multos saepe dubitatum est a quo potissimum monachorum eremus habitari coepta sit.<sup>13</sup>

Many have often questioned exactly who was the first monk to take up his abode in the desert.<sup>14</sup>

This is a well-defined theme of discussion, which gave rise to various hypotheses, involving biblical figures such as Elijah and John the Baptist. However, these opinions are only cursorily mentioned, since Jerome's true aim is to demolish another theory:

Alii autem, in quam opinionem uulgus omne consentit, adserunt Antonium huius propositi caput, quod ex parte uerum est. Non enim tam ipse ante omnes fuit, quam ab eo omnium incitata sunt studia.<sup>15</sup>

Others, on the contrary, claim that Anthony was the founder of this mode of life – an opinion in which the generality of mankind agrees. They are right

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rebenich 2009: 22: "It is quite likely that the example of Evagrius impelled Jerome to write the *Vita Pauli*. At least this instance showed him that there was no lack of an interested audience for such edifying *Lives* on a high literary level. It is not surprising, therefore, that numerous borrowings from Evagrius' translation could be detected in Jerome's text".

<sup>11</sup> Ath. *Vit. Ant.* 1.2.

<sup>12</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 4.1: *litteris tam Graecis quam Aegyptiacis adprime eruditus* (transl. Ewald 1952: 227).

<sup>13</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1.1.

<sup>14</sup> Transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 225.

<sup>15</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1.2.

in part; not so much that he holds precedence in time as that all others were inspired by him.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Jerome demonstrates his complete mastery of rhetorical tools. The precept included in Aphthonius' handbook, according to which "those engaged in refutation should first state the false claim of those who advance it",<sup>17</sup> is only partially followed, since the biographer cannot categorically contradict what is believed to be true by the generality of mankind – it is a matter of credibility! The refutation slowly turns into its opposite: Jerome develops a partial confirmation, admitting that Antony played a prominent role in the spread of monasticism<sup>18</sup>. Rhetorical handbooks commonly relate these two exercises (styled *anaskeue* and *kataskеue*) to mythological narratives. On this point, however, Quintilian begs to differ: "This [*scil.* the task of refuting and confirming narratives] too can be applied not only to mythical and poetic traditions, but also to the records of history"<sup>19</sup>. Thus, since the author and his audience probably learned the art of refuting and confirming accounts by calling into question the credibility of ancient historical narratives, I think that here Jerome's purpose is easy to understand: he is playing the role of the trustworthy historian, an impartial scholar who raises a fundamental question and discusses generally accepted opinions. His theory seems to be confirmed by the immediately following double testimony:

Amathas uero et Macarius, discipuli Antonii, e quibus superior corpus magistri sepeliuit, etiam nunc adfirmant, Paulum quemdam Thebaeum principem rei istius fuisse, non nominis, quam opinionem nos quoque probamus.<sup>20</sup>

In truth, Amathas and Macarius, disciples of Anthony, the former of whom buried his master, affirm even to this day that a certain Paul of Thebes was the originator of the practice – though not of the name – of solitary living. I, too, hold this opinion.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 225.

<sup>17</sup> Aphth. *Prog.* 5.2 (ed. Patillon 2008: 121): Δεῖ δὲ ἀνασκευάζοντας πρῶτον μὲν εἰπεῖν τὴν τῶν φησάντων διαβολήν (transl. Kennedy 2003: 101).

<sup>18</sup> See also Jerome's remarkably similar treatment of the figure of Antony in *Vit. Hil.* 2.4-6. On the contrasting portraits of Paul and Antony cf. Leclerc 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 2.4.18: *Id porro non tantum in fabulosis et carmine traditis fieri potest, verum etiam in ipsis annalium monumentis* (transl. Russell 2002: I vol., 289).

<sup>20</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1.2.

<sup>21</sup> Transl. Ewald 1952: 225.

An avid reader of Athanasius' *Life of Antony* (or, what seems more plausible, of its Latin translation), would in vain search these names in that biography. While offering the proofs of what he asserts, Jerome adds credible elements to the famous narration of Antony's death<sup>22</sup>, showing himself a better historian than his illustrious predecessor. Furthermore, the point of view of two still living eye-witnesses is far more valuable than what is generally assumed on the basis of written accounts. When Jerome finally subtly invites his audience to share his opinion, it is not simply an arguable opinion anymore. A meaningful silence completes the picture. Despite any evidence, the reader could consider Athanasius an authoritative source. Carefully, the biographer prefers not to mention his name.

Just before declaring his intention to narrate the otherwise unknown story of Paul, Jerome declines to report some incredible tales which would deserve an even harsher refutation:

Nonnulli et haec et alia, prout uoluntas tulit, iactitant: subterraneo specu crinitum calcaneo tenus hominem, et multa quae persequi otiosum est incredibilia fingentes. Quorum quia impudens mendacium fuit, ne refellenda quidem sententia uidetur.<sup>23</sup>

Some, according to their whims, toss out one absurdity after the other: in an underground cave, for instance, there was a man with hair hanging down to his heels; and they go on to invent many incredible tales which it is useless to recount. Because theirs is an impudent lie, their opinion does not seem worth refuting.<sup>24</sup>

Why are those stories so unbelievable? Actually, the reader will soon become familiar with far more incredible descriptions. However, Jerome is here refusing any folktale about the first hermit, thus inviting his audience to do the same. The *pars destruens* of the prologue ends with a clear declaration of intent: the *Life of Paul* will be a credible account, which will completely differ from both the incorrect narrative written by Athanasius and the deliberately false stories circulating among simple folk.

The story of Paul is tellingly introduced by a long passage dedicated to Pagan persecutions. Since the protagonist's ascetic experience originates

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<sup>22</sup> Ath. *Vit. Ant.* 92.1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1.3.

<sup>24</sup> Ewald (Transl.) 1952: 225.

from an attempt to escape martyrdom, Jerome buttresses his account with a detailed description of what happened in Egypt during the reigns of Decius and Valerian and with two anecdotes concerning the sacrifice of two heroic Christians. While the first *passio* simply describes a series of corporeal tortures, the second one is an elaborated *narratio* not devoid of rhetorical amplification: the protagonist of this brief tale is held captive in a beautiful garden, where, facing the erotic temptations of a harlot, bites off a piece of his tongue and spits it into his temptress' face, thus letting pain prevail over lustful passion. Such an extremely unambiguous tale, which seems inspired by many *exempla* drawn from Classical literature<sup>25</sup>, has been considered hardly credible by scholars<sup>26</sup>. However, within the context of Jerome's narrative, it can be seen as a highly detailed account which simply aims at introducing the reader to a gloomy martyrdom atmosphere.

Moreover, *passiones* are rarely devoid of incredible particulars: this story is no exception and offers a nice example of what Giorgia Grandi rightly describes as an intriguing coexistence of pure fiction and historical data<sup>27</sup>. Before starting to narrate Paul's story, the biographer clarifies the double nature of his work by the insertion of two accounts which mix fable and historiography<sup>28</sup>. From this point forward, the distinction between what is credible and what is incredible is sensibly blurred. In such desperate conditions, the reader has to wholeheartedly accept the guidance of Jerome's rhetoric.

Paul's ascetic experience begins in a geographically and historically defined framework. When the young and rich protagonist realises that his brother-in-law is plotting to denounce him as a Christian, he flees into the desert and seeks refuge in a cave. Throughout the hollowed mountain there are many small chambers, in which Paul finds rusty forges and mallets of the kind used in coining money: as Jerome immediately explains, according to Egyptian sources that place was a secret mint during Antony's stay with Cleopatra<sup>29</sup>. This historically accurate detail is followed by a description

<sup>25</sup> In this regard, see the passages apud Leclerc et al. 2007: 150, n. 1 and 151, n. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Rebenich 2009: 19, who attributes these invented episodes to the "purpose of brightening up the pious story and additionally providing the reader with voyeuristic pleasure". Bauer 1961: 135 has convincingly rejected the attempt by Coleiro 1957: 178 to demonstrate the historical value of these accounts.

<sup>27</sup> Grandi 2010: 133-135.

<sup>28</sup> On Late Antique concept of historiography and its relationship with historical truth cf. Rebenich 2009: 25.

<sup>29</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 5.2.

of Paul's ascetic practice. Since, as the biographer stated in the ending of the prologue, "no one has yet discovered how he [*scil.* Paul] lived during his middle life and what snares of Satan he endured"<sup>30</sup>, this passage has necessarily to be brief. However, this extraordinary experience is the core of the whole narrative and Jerome knows that its credibility cannot be simply based on historical data:

Quod ne cui impossibile uideatur, Iesum testor et sanctos angelos eius in ea parte eremi, quae iuxta Syriam Saracenis iungitur, et uidisse me monachos, et uidere, e quibus unus triginta iam per annos clausus hordeaceo pane et lutulenta aqua uiuit. Alter in cisterna ueteri – quam gentili sermone Syri 'gubbam' uocant – quinque caricis per singulos dies sustentatur. Haec incredibilia uidebuntur eis, qui non crediderint omnia possibilia esse credentibus.<sup>31</sup>

Lest anyone should question the possibility of such an existence, I call upon Christ and His holy angels to witness that I have seen, and still see, monks living in that part of the desert which lies between Syria and the land of the Saracens. One monk, in fact, lived in seclusion in that wilderness for thirty years, subsisting on barley bread and muddy water, while another, sustained by five dry figs a day, inhabited an old cistern (which they call 'kubba' in the Gentile language of Syria). I know, of course, that all this will seem incredible to those who will not admit that 'all things are possible to them that believeth'.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, a turning point in the narrative is introduced by the pious deeds of two Christian heroes, who tellingly mark the transition from a corporeal martyrdom to a spiritual one. This time, the author shows his mastery of what Classical and Late Antique rhetoricians called *exempla*, namely "the mention of an event which either took place or is treated as having taken place, in order to make your point convincing"<sup>33</sup>. Quintilian's definition, however, despite being the refined summary of a long-lasting theoretical discussion<sup>34</sup>, cannot involve such a powerful opening: before

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<sup>30</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 1.4: *Quomodo autem in media aetate uixerit, aut quas Satanae pertulerit insidias, nulli hominum compertum habetur* (transl. Ewald 1952: 226).

<sup>31</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 6.2.

<sup>32</sup> Transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 228-229.

<sup>33</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 5.11.6: *rei gestae aut ut gestae utilis ad persuadendum id quod intenderis commemoratio* (transl. Russell 2002: II vol., 433).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Moeser 2002: 57-60.



bringing into play the two monks, Jerome calls upon Christ and His angels to witness that his account is absolutely true. The actual meaning of these words will be completely clear only at the end of this passage. In the meantime, the biographer offers a parade of details which contribute to making his narrative more credible: he explains where the monks dwell by accurately referring to the geographical position of that part of desert and, then, presents a brief but detailed description of the regimen followed by the two monks, even quoting a Syriac word. Such persuasive *exempla* are not completely in accordance with what Quintilian theorises: here Jerome does not simply adduce “some past action”, but adds the much-debated expression *et uidere*, thus letting the reader infer that those kinds of monks are still the norm in the Western deserts<sup>35</sup>. *Dulcis in fundo*, the final sentence directly addresses the issue of credibility. The last words develop what the biographer said before, through the testimony of Jesus himself, whose *ipsissima verba* reported by Mark<sup>36</sup> (*Omnia possibilia credenti*) are here re-elaborated in a nice-sounding *adnominatio*. However, this final section strikes the reader, who is faced with a dualistic decision. Even though Jerome provided detailed evidence for his account in order to avoid his audience’s scepticism, he perfectly knows that some impious people will consider his words incredible, since they can refuse even the words of Jesus. A true Christian reader should observe the teachings of the Son of God, thus demonstrating his faith in Him and admitting that the apparently incredible deeds narrated in Paul’s biography are entirely possible, since they were divinely inspired: Jesus’ message becomes part of Jerome’s rhetoric of credibility, compelling the reader to recognise that, however unbelievable, his narrative is undeniably true. The biographer opens and concludes this passage by mentioning Christ, thus creating a sort of *Ringkomposition* which underlines the power of His testimony. Furthermore, the author establishes a hierarchical order between three different categories of witnesses: following the steps of this rhetorical *anticlimax*, the reader is firstly asked to accept the absolutely credible testimony of Christ and His angels, then to trust the narrator’s words and, finally, to believe the miraculous lives of the monks, who are spiritual ‘martyrs’ (namely ‘witnesses’) of Jesus himself. Under the guidance of Jerome’s rhetoric, the audience gradually abandons any scepticism.

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<sup>35</sup> On the debate around this expression, see Vogüé 1991.

<sup>36</sup> *Mc* 9.23.

As I said earlier, this passage introduces a turning point in the narrative, since a new player enters the stage. When a dream announces to Antony that he must pay a visit to another holy monk who lives in the Thebaid desert, he cannot imagine how God will guide his steps. After a half-day's walk, the ninety-year-old hermit encounters a prodigious creature:

Nec plura his, conspicatur hominem equo mixtum, cui opinio poetarum Centauro uocabulum indidit. Quo uiso, salutaris impressione signi armat frontem, et "heus tu, inquit, quanam in parte Dei seruus hic habitat?". At ille barbarum nescio quid infrendens, et frangens potius uerba quam proloquens inter horrentia ora, satis blandum quaesiuit adloquium. Et cum dexterae manus protensione cupitum indicat iter, ac sic patentes campos uolucris transmittens fuga, ex oculis mirantis euanuit. Verum hoc utrum diabolus ad terrendum eum simulauerit, an, ut solet, eremus monstruosorum ferax animalium istam quoque gignat bestiam, incertum habemus.<sup>37</sup>

His prayer barely finished, he became aware of a creature, half man and half horse, which the poets call a centaur. Arming himself with the sign of the Cross on his forehead, Anthony cried: 'Ho, there, where does the servant of God live?' The creature, barbarously gnashing its teeth, and mouthing rather than uttering words with its shaggy lips, attempted to answer him respectfully. Then, indicating the proper direction with its right hand, it stretched over the open fields in swift flight and vanished from the sight of the astonished hermit. Whether, indeed, it was the Devil who assumed this form to frighten him or whether the desert productive of monstrous animals, brought forth this beast, too, we do not know for certain.<sup>38</sup>

In her article dedicated to the fantastic beasts in the *Life of Paul*, Patricia Cox Miller states that Jerome's use of the centaur is "a clear indication that his presentation of the desert is not an imitation of reality"<sup>39</sup>, thus underlining the allegorical meaning of this episode. But how can this passage match the previous references to the credibility of the account? Actually, some details allow me to briefly analyse the literal level of interpretation. First of all, just before narrating the anecdote of the centaur, Jerome explains that the whole tale is witnessed by Antony himself<sup>40</sup>, who, as it will be clear

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<sup>37</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 7.4-6.

<sup>38</sup> Transl. Ewald 1952: 229-230.

<sup>39</sup> Cox Miller 1996: 220.

<sup>40</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 7.1-3.

at the ending of the *Life*, will recount it to his disciples<sup>41</sup>. However, the biographer knows that this is not enough and, thus, offers the description of an incredible figure, to whom he attributes credible characteristics. Therefore, the centaur speaks a barbarous and incomprehensible tongue, attempts to answer the venerable Antony respectfully, quickly runs away: to put it briefly, it is not different from the beast described by ancient poets. Furthermore, it is similar to the beast described by Athanasius, who actually narrates Antony's encounter with a strange creature, half man and half donkey<sup>42</sup>. Since, as it is widely accepted<sup>43</sup>, the readers of the *Life of Paul* belonged to the educated Christian upper classes of the Western part of the Empire, in all probability they knew Athanasius' work (at least thanks to Evagrius' exquisite Latin translation) and expected to find such episodes in a hagiographical tale concerning Antony. In order to meet his readership's horizon of expectation, Jerome resorts to ekphrastic language, portraying an image which is both vivid and palpably present, according to the ancient precepts about *enargeia*. In particular, it is worth quoting the words of the first-century rhetorician Aelius Theon: "one should not recollect all useless details and should make the style reflect the subject, so that if what it describes is colorful, the word choice should be colorful, but if it is rough or frightening or something like that, features of the style

<sup>41</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 16.8: *ac sic ad monasterium reuersus, discipulis ex ordine cuncta replicauit* ("He returned to his monastery with his relic and related to his disciples all that had happened", transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 237).

<sup>42</sup> Ath. *Vit. Ant.* 53: Εἴτα μετ' ὀλίγας ἡμέρας, ὡς εἰργάζετο (ἔμελε γὰρ αὐτῷ καὶ κοπιᾶν), ἐπιστάς τις τῇ θύρᾳ, εἴλκε τὴν σειρᾶν τοῦ ἔργου. Σπυρίδας γὰρ ἔρραπε καὶ ταύτας τοῖς εἰσερχομένοις ἀντὶ τῶν κομιζομένων αὐτῷ ἐδίδου. Ἀναστὰς δέ, εἶδε θηρίον, ἀνθρώπῳ μὲν ὅμοιον ἕως τῶν μηρῶν, τὰ δὲ σκέλη καὶ τοὺς πόδας ὁμοίους ἔχον ὄνῳ. Καὶ ὁ μὲν Ἀντώνιος μόνον ἑαυτὸν ἐσφράγισε καὶ εἶπεν· Χριστοῦ δοῦλός εἰμι· εἰ ἀπεστάλης κατ' ἐμοῦ, ἰδοὺ πάρεμι. Τὸ δὲ θηρίον σὺν τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ δαίμοσιν οὕτως ἔφυγεν, ὡς ὑπὸ τῆς ὀξύτητος πεσεῖν καὶ ἀποθανεῖν. Ὁ δὲ τοῦ θηρίου θάνατος πτόμα τῶν δαιμόνων ἦν. Πάντα γὰρ ἐσπούδαζον ποιεῖν, ἵνα καταγάγῃσιν αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς ἐρήμου καὶ οὐκ ἴσχυσαν ("Then a few days later while he was working (he was accustomed to working hard), someone stood at the door and pulled the plait he was working (he was weaving baskets that he would give to those who came to see him in exchange for supplies). Standing up, he saw a beast like a man down to his thighs with legs and feet like those of an ass. But Antony merely crossed himself and said, 'I am a servant of Christ; if you have been sent against me, look, here I am!' The beast, along with the demons that were with him, fled so fast that in his haste he fell down and died. The death of the beast was the downfall of the demons, for they had tried everything to drive Antony out of the desert and had failed", transl. Vivian – Athanassakis 2003: 171).

<sup>43</sup> See footnote 8.

should not strike a discordant note with the nature of the subject”<sup>44</sup>. Thus, the biographer adopts a fragmented style, with the alliteration of voiceless consonants, which contribute to reconstructing the sounds produced by the centaur<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, playing again the role of the trustworthy historian, he concludes the anecdote by raising questions about the true nature of the beast (whereas there is no doubt about the truthfulness of the account). Jerome cannot answer with certainty, but makes two reasonable hypotheses: a reader who knows the *Life of Antony* should be accustomed to the idea that the Devil can assume the form of horrible creatures or that the desert is usually (*ut solet*) populated by such monsters. However, the first explanation is extremely weak, as the reader will soon discover. The centaur’s advice proves to be very helpful and, thus, it cannot come from the Devil. And, as Sherlock Holmes said in the famous novels by Arthur Conan Doyle, “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth”: if the centaur is not a diabolic incarnation, he must be a product of the desert. However, in a desert which, as Cox Miller has amply demonstrated<sup>46</sup>, is now Christianized, the mythological creature must act as an agent of Christ, showing the saint the right path to take. This rhetorical opposition conceals a new reference to the credibility of Jerome’s account: in stark contrast with the Devil, the centaur totally changes its disposition, becoming a divinely inspired creature. Such a prodigious conversion proves once again that “all things are possible to them that believeth”.

Some of these observations can be applied also to the immediately following passage. While hastening on his way, Antony meets another desert demon: an accurate *ekphrasis* clarifies that it is a goat-man, namely what a Western educated reader would call a ‘satyr’<sup>47</sup>. As a pledge of peace, the beast offers

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<sup>44</sup> Aelius Theon *Prog.* (ed. Patillon – Bolognesi 1997: 119-120): τὸ μὴ τελέως ἀπομηκύνειν περὶ τὰ ἄχρηστα· τὸ δὲ ὅλον συνεξομοιοῦσθαι χρὴ τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις τὴν ἀπαγγελίαν, ὥστε εἰ μὲν εὐανθές τι εἴη τὸ δηλούμενον, εὐανθῇ καὶ τὴν φράσιν εἶναι, εἰ δὲ αὐχμηρὸν ἢ φοβερὸν ἢ ὁποῖον δὴ ποτε, μηδὲ τὰ τῆς ἐρμηνείας ἀπάδειν τῆς φύσεως αὐτῶν (transl. Kennedy 2003: 47). On the concept of *enargeia*, see also Quint. *Inst.* 6.2.32.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Grandi 2015: 286-287: “inoltre [*scil.* Jerome] utilizza, come componente dell’elegante tessuto stilistico, alcuni virtuosismi fonosimbolici che aiutano a ricreare per il lettore i suoni prodotti dagli animali (a partire dal sibilo del serpente [...] fino all’onomatopea che ci permette di sentire il linguaggio spezzato, il balbettio appunto, del centauro: *barbarum [...] infrendens frangens e horrentia ora* [...]). Tali artifici vengono quindi utilizzati come *escamotage* sonoro per rendere il linguaggio con cui gli animali esprimono Cristo”.

<sup>46</sup> Cox Miller 1996: 214-216.

<sup>47</sup> On this figure in the *Life of Paul*, see Harvey 1998.

the hermit some fruits from a palm tree for refreshment on his journey<sup>48</sup> and, when asked about its identity, proves to be more loquacious than the centaur:

Mortalis ego sum, et unus ex accolis eremi, quos uario delusa errore gentilitas Faunos, Satyrosque et Incubos colit. Legatione fungor gregis mei. Precamur ut pro nobis communem Dominum deprecetur; salutem mundi olim uenisse cognouimus, et in uniuersam terram exiit sonus eius.<sup>49</sup>

I am a mortal and one of the inhabitants of the desert whom the pagans, deluded by all manner of error, worship under the names of fauns, satyrs, and incubi. I serve as the ambassador of my flock. We beseech you to intercede for us with Him who is Lord over all, for we know that He came at one time for the salvation of the world and that His sound hath gone forth into all the earth.<sup>50</sup>

The monster fully explains its condition, allowing the reader to place its nature in a well-known mythological context and portraying a vivid picture of an organised society which is now submitted to Christ. Furthermore, it acts as a credible ambassador: its refined speech opens with an *exordium* which makes the audience attentive<sup>51</sup> and concludes with an educated request<sup>52</sup>. However, Jerome knows that the *climax* reached its *apex* and that further evidence is needed to dispel any doubt:

Hoc ne cui ad incredulitatem scrupulum moueat, sub rege Constantio, uniuerso mundo teste, defenditur. Nam Alexandriam istiusmodi homo uiuus perductus magnum populo spectaculum prae-buit, et postea cadauer exanime, ne calore aestatis dissiparetur, sale infusum, et Antiochiam, ut ab imperatore uideretur, adlatum est.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The reader knows that the palm tree supplies Paul's needs of food and clothing (Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 6.1).

<sup>49</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 8.3.

<sup>50</sup> Transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 230.

<sup>51</sup> According to Quintilian (*Inst.* 4.1.5), "The reason for a Proemium is simply to prepare the hearer to be more favourably inclined towards us for the rest of the proceedings" (*Causa principii nulla alia est quam ut auditorem quo sit nobis in ceteris partibus accommodatior praeparemus*; transl. Russell 2002: II vol., 181-183).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Grandi 2010: 133, n. 19: "soltanto il satiro, definito comunque 'animal petulcum' (nonostante la perfetta organizzazione sociale – segno di civiltà nel mondo classico – che sembra propria del suo gruppo di appartenenza), articola un perfetto discorso, secondo i canoni retorici: *captatio benevolentiae*, richiesta di essere ricordato".

<sup>53</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 8.6.

If anyone should find it difficult to believe this incident, let him heed the testimony of the whole world under the rule of Constantius, for just such a creature was brought to Alexandria alive and exposed to public view as a great spectacle. Later, they preserved the dead body of the brute from decaying in the summer heat by salting it, and then sent it on to Antioch for the emperor to see.<sup>54</sup>

Once again, Jerome offers no evidence that his account is true, but simply tries to demonstrate that the beast really exists: at this point, the *incredulitas* mentioned in the beginning of this anecdote can only involve the mythological monster. However, this time he does not need to make reasonable hypotheses, since he can resort to a world-widely accepted proof. The passage is artfully structured: even though Jerome deals with thaumatology, he continues to behave as a trustworthy historian by reconstructing these murky events in full detail. According to ancient rhetoricians<sup>55</sup>, all action consists of six elements: person, action, place, time, manner, and cause. Here, the author accurately describes them all, making what should be a fable a credible account, at least if seen through the lens of rhetoric. Furthermore, this bizarre anecdote is not a *unicum* in Latin literature: in his

<sup>54</sup> Transl. Liguori Ewald 1952: 231, with adjustments.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Aelius Theon *Prog.* (ed. Patillon – Bolognesi 1997: 78): Διήγημά ἐστι λόγος ἐκθετικὸς πραγμάτων γεγονότων ἢ ὡς γεγονότων. Στοιχεῖα δὲ τῆς διηγήσεως εἰσιν ἕξ, τό τε πρόσωπον (εἴτε ἓν εἴη εἴτε πλείω) καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα τὸ πραχθὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ προσώπου, καὶ ὁ τόπος ἐν ᾧ ἢ πρᾶξις, καὶ ὁ χρόνος καθ' ὃν ἢ πρᾶξις, καὶ ὁ τρόπος τῆς πράξεως, καὶ ἕκτον ἢ τούτων αἰτία. Τούτων δὲ ὄντων τῶν ἀνωτάτω στοιχείων ἕξ ὧν συμπληροῦται, ἡ τελεία διήγησις ἐξ ἀπάντων αὐτῶν συνέστηκεν καὶ τῶν συνεδρευόντων αὐτοῖς, ἑλλειπὴς δὲ ἐστὶν ἢ τίνος τούτων ἐπιδέουσα (“Narrative (*diêgêma*) is language descriptive of things that have happened or as though they had happened. Elements (*stoikheia*) of narration (*diêgêsis*) are six: the person (*prosôpon*), whether that be one or many; and the action done by the person; and the place where the action was done; and the time at which it was done; and the manner of the action; and sixth, the cause of these things. Since these are the most comprehensive elements from which it is composed, a complete narration (*diêgêsis*) consists of all of them and of things related to them and one lacking any of these is deficient”, transl. Kennedy 2003: 28) and Aelius Theon *Prog.* (ed. Patillon – Bolognesi 1997: 94): Ῥαδίως δὲ καὶ πλείονων εὐπορήσομεν ἐπιχειρημάτων, ἂν καθ' ἕκαστον τῶν παραδεδομένων τόπων ἐπιχειροῦντες χρώμεθα καὶ τοῖς καλουμένοις στοιχείοις, ἐξ ὧν ἅπανα πρᾶξις ὑφίσταται· ἐστὶ δὲ ταῦτα ἕξ, ὡς προείπομεν, πρόσωπον, πρᾶγμα, τόπος, χρόνος, τρόπος, αἰτία (“We shall easily have a supply of arguments if in each of the topics mentioned we use what are called the ‘elements’ of which all action consists. These are, as we said earlier, person, action, place, time, manner, cause”, transl. Kennedy 2003: 41).

*Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (who, in another passage<sup>56</sup>, already stated that the satyrs can be found in Africa), testifies that he saw a hippocentaur, brought for the emperor Claudius from Egypt preserved in honey<sup>57</sup>. How many of Jerome's educated readers would be able to recognise this allusion? Presumably a few. However, by tacitly quoting Pliny in the final section, the author lends further credibility to the account, which gradually loses the traits of the fable and becomes a somewhat 'scientific' description. The existence of the mythological creature (and, indirectly, the truthfulness of the tale which features it) is confirmed by the most illustrious Pagan naturalist.

Antony will finally encounter Paul thanks to the help of a she-wolf<sup>58</sup>. Then, the two old hermits will share a loaf of bread deposited by a raven<sup>59</sup>. In the ending, the first Christian monk will visibly ascend into heaven<sup>60</sup> and his body will be buried by two lions<sup>61</sup>. In a word, the rest of the *Life* does not lack incredible details which would deserve further comment. However, it is time to try to answer those spontaneous questions which I escaped until now: does Jerome really believe what he narrates? And are his readers really expected to believe such unbelievable episodes? In an already mentioned paper, meaningfully titled "Inventing an Ascetic Hero"<sup>62</sup>, Stefan Rebenich expresses a severe judgement on the literary genre of the *Life of Paul*: in accordance with the ancient theory of historiography, the primary task of Jerome's work would not be to establish historical truth, but to edify and entertain the reader.<sup>63</sup> This stimulating opinion can be supplemented by

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<sup>56</sup> Plin. *Nat.* 5.1.7.

<sup>57</sup> Plin. *Nat.* 7.3.35: *Claudius Caesar scribit hippocentaurum in Thessalia natum eodem die interisse, et nos principatu eius allatum illi ex Aegypto in melle vidimus* ("Claudius Caesar writes that a hippo-centaur was born in Thessaly and died the same day; and in his reign we actually saw one that was brought here for him from Egypt preserved in honey", transl. Rackham 1942: 529).

<sup>58</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 9.2.

<sup>59</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 10.2.

<sup>60</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 14.2.

<sup>61</sup> Hier. *Vit. Paul.* 16.2-5.

<sup>62</sup> Rebenich 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Rebenich 2009: 25-26: "According to his own account, at the time of writing the *Vita Pauli* Jerome presented the merits of monastic life corresponding to the *studia atque doctrinae rhetorum*. His *Vita* was meant to provide both religious-ascetic edification (*aedificatio*) and sophisticated entertainment (*delectatio*). On that occasion the question of the historicity of Paul of Thebes, which has fascinated so many modern scholars, was less



my brief rhetorical analysis. Whether convinced or not of the historicity of what he narrates, Jerome, as we have seen, displays all sorts of literary tools in order to demonstrate the credibility of his account. Thus, since, as Rebenich states, his final aims are edification (*aedificatio*) and entertainment (*delectatio*), I can easily re-determine the abovementioned questions about the author's and his audience's beliefs and draw a further conclusion: the biographer's various and increasingly pronounced attempts to persuade the reader are indeed an integral part of the entertainment. The rhetorically educated members of the Western upper class who constitute Jerome's audience can surely recognise his techniques, analysing them in detail and appreciating similarities and variations in the use of school exercises. Above all, they can relate the *Life of Paul* to the main features of historiography, which they perhaps had the chance to read in the same rhetorical writings quoted by Rebenich.<sup>64</sup> Thus, they do not expect to find historical truth in every passage of the work. Furthermore, they expect to read about incredible marvels and, when they face accurate statements about credibility and persuasive rhetorical techniques, are pushed to take part in a refined game: the biographer tries to demonstrate the indemonstrable, the reader tries to believe the unbelievable. On the common ground of *paideia*, both players challenge themselves, experiencing an inner tension between what they, as educated Christians, are led to believe and what is truly incredible.<sup>65</sup>

My brief and incomplete analysis clearly deserves further development. However, I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating how much an accurate study of Late Antique rhetoric can allow us to better understand hagiography and its complex relationship with historiography. Since credibility is a key issue in both these forms of literature, we need to try, as far as possible, to see them through the eyes of their contemporary readers, without ignoring the literal level of interpretation, however unbelievable it could be. Before

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important. Jerome wanted only to portray a convincing *exemplum* of a monastic lifestyle, if necessary with the help of rhetorical *inventio*. In other words, Jerome stylized the life of the 'proto-hermit' Paul of Thebes according to the rules of classical rhetoric in order to produce a piece of Christian devotional literature".

<sup>64</sup> Rebenich 2009: 25 refers to Cic. *Leg.* 1.5 and Cic. *de Orat.* 2.62-4. Furthermore, he directly quotes Cic. *Brut.* 42 (*Concessum est rhetoribus ementiri in historiis, ut aliquid dicere possint argutius*, "It is the privilege of rhetoricians to distort history in order to give more point to their narrative", transl. *ibid.*).

<sup>65</sup> On this intellectual game, which in Late Antiquity is common to the biographies both of Christian saints and pagan philosophers, see Petorella 2023: 297-298.



being the sophisticated symbols of the new ascetic spirituality, the centaur and the satyr are the monstrous inhabitants of a prodigious desert.

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