

# Propaganda in Hagiography

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The *Life of Antony* and *Life of Martin of Tours*, written by Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus, respectively, helped in the establishment of a long tradition of Hagiography that would resonate throughout the Middle-Ages. The two follow a standard formula: beginning of life, often showing signs of holiness, revelation, deeds and miracles, heavenly death and post-mortem miracles. Both Antony and Martin were born to wealthy parents; both of them renounced their wealth and property to seek solitude and prayer but had trouble achieving it due to the divine favors it brought. Both were also deeply concerned with maintaining or establishing Orthodoxy in their own time and served as a way for their writers to challenge or attack their particular enemies.

For Athanasius, the *Life of Antony* served to blacken the name of the Arian “clan” that was responsible for the loss of his cherished seat as Bishop of Alexandria, and to make sure these heretics did not claim this holy man's legacy; at the same time Sulpicius used Martin as an example for the many bishops who he accused of “revolting sycophancy...towards the emperor” (Severus.20) and who “hated in [Martin] what they did not see in themselves.” (Sev.27) Yet the nature of the *Lives* also present differences in the struggle: Antony was an utter isolationist, something that best suits Athanasius since the last thing he wished for Antony was a possible association with the heretical – and more urban – Arians or other such groups; while Martin is presented by Sulpicius as a perfect mixture between the more worldly Bishop and the ascetic monk (Hunter 412). While the characteristics of holiness embodied in Martin and Antony are essentially the same, it is the position and goal of the author that changes the persona and life of the saint. Sulpicius portrayed St. Martin as a man who sought solitude but in the end settled with a more public career since he was the perfect model of a holy man, thus exemplifying the role of a bishop in a world filled with corrupt ones. This fits well with Sulpicius, who is both a follower of strict asceticism and a heavy critic of the Gallic clergy, as already mentioned. On Athanasius' side, in his own exile, Athanasius isolates Antony from the heretical world he himself fell victim to, making him a hero of Orthodoxy and a follower of radical ascetic virtues.

Perhaps the most glaring contrast between *Life of Antony* and *Life of Martin* is the worldliness of the latter in comparison to the former. Antony never held any significant posts in the church hierarchy; rather, “he is portrayed as creating a type of anti-society in the desert” (Brennan 216). He associated himself almost entirely with the ascetic movement and the only authority he attained was from the mass of Copts he was able to attract through his charisma. He utterly rejected the ordered world and instead concentrated entirely on achieving perfect asceticism and solitude. In one part of the bio, Athanasius writes: “he feared that all the miracles granted to him might make him proud or induce others to have a higher estimation of him than was warranted, and so he decided to move to the upper Thebaid where no one would know him”(Athanasius.49). As society creeps closer towards Antony, Athanasius separates him even further, Antony flees and searches for greater isolation. This ultimately falls into Athanasius' goal since, as Brennan writes, “Athanasius pictures the desert as becoming a pleasant land of wooded valleys and watered gardens when it is populated by monks” (216). If Antony entered the status of an urban clergyman it would have stood in the way of such a paradise. More importantly for Athanasius, Antony needed to stay outside of the clerical order to escape any possible association with the heretical Arians, who dominated it at that time. The two hagiographers portray their saints as the ideal clergyman; thus Athanasius pictures Antony as a powerful figure outside the church. This stands in contrast to Martin, who – while also seeking solitude and perfect asceticism – allowed himself to be drawn into the church hierarchy – though unwilling.

This works well for Severus, who “was openly antagonistic towards most of the Gallic clergy of his day”, and portrayed in his writings “a world deeply divided on the issue of asceticism”. That Martin “fulfilled the high office of bishop without abandoning his monastic commitment and virtue” makes him the perfect Bishop for Severus and an example for the rest of the Gallic clergy (Hunter 412). Severus needed to create an ideal bishop, one who held deeply ascetic values and could be part of the clerical hierarchy; thus, in writing *Martin*, he is propagating his own views on the type of figure best suited to run the church of Gaul. Severus then pictures a world where Bishops would abandon the wealth that they seem to accumulate in his own time and follow an ascetic path while at the same time maintaining their official status.

Yet another differentiation between the two lives is the way their powers are portrayed. Throughout the *Life of Antony* we are reminded that he does not have any powers, all that he can do is pray and what occurs is the product of God. In Antony’s own words: “No one should come to me, insignificant creature as I am, for the bestowal of cures is not a matter for human wretchedness, but for the mercy of Jesus Christ who always gives assistance to those who believe in Him wherever they are” (Athan.58); on a number of occasions throughout the *Life*, miracles happen even when Antony does not intercede. What is emphasized is Antony’s wisdom and knowledge (Athan.72); and Athanasius gives us a number of lengthy speeches to illustrate these characteristics. The heaviest part of these speeches is based on the propagation of Orthodoxy and the attack against Arians. Athanasius uses this god-given wisdom so that Antony can defeat his opponents in reasoning, and so as to speak through Antony, who adds great authority to the speeches. On the contrary, the powers of Martin are his own. While Antony chides those who believe that he has special healing powers, Severus states that “[Martin] possessed such a powerful gift of healing that there was hardly a sick person who came to him who was not restored to health on the spot.” (Sev.15) Martin used his powers throughout his life to resurrect people, heal, discover the lies of the devil and, on occasion, provide entertainment for beggars by shattering glass with the sign of the cross; and while they were handed down from God, Martin has them in a far more direct manner, without the intercession of God; his powers are a direct result of his virtues and are seen by Severus as a sign of Martin’s sanctity. (Harper 376) Martin receives these gifts due to the righteousness of his ways, once again, this suits Severus’ objective: in a time when the issue of asceticism was so controversial in Gaul, that Martin, who is deeply ascetic, is rewarded by God shows the divine preference that he has received. Martin, then, is a true follower of the faith.

Nevertheless, these saintly men both exhibited the same concerns. For one thing, both they and their hagiographers were confronted with the question of how to prove their faith like the martyrs of the pre-Constantine era – when Christianity was still illegal – in a world where Christianity had gained a status of a favored religion, a new world that bred “a Christianity that could coexist with traditional civic and social duties” (Robins 535). Martin rejected such notions by rejecting the social proprieties that were so important to the aristocracy and the clergy who “wildly rejected him, saying he was despicable” (Sev.19) Antony sought out martyrdom when that rare chance did come; however, having failed in that quest “[he] returned to his former cell and achieved a daily martyrdom of faith and conscience, wearing himself out by means of more rigorous fasting and nightly devotion” (Athan.47). Like Martin, Antony did not maintain himself and kept an unkempt appearance, so that those bishops who so criticized Martin would say the same for Antony. For them, a “protracted period of suffering for the sake of the truth” was the substitution for death in the arena. (Robins 534) In their quest for such “martyrdom”, their culture was based on the anti-culture (Kirschner 109): they avoided nearly everything that ordinary man enjoyed (including society itself) and made sure that nothing they had was beyond necessity. This is a typical ascetic characteristic and it serve the purpose of allowing the writer to point out the particular monks apathy towards the – dirty and sinful – physical world; for Severus, this is a way for him to chide those well maintaining monks in Gaul.

The saints also had a deep longing for Orthodoxy and defended it against Arianism, Martin “was the

only one to fight most strenuously against the heretical beliefs of the priests" (Severus. VI); while Athanasius tells us that Antony never associated with the Arians (Athanasius.68). Both Severus and Athanasius are champions of Orthodoxy and have to make sure that these figures are far from the hands of the Arians. In the two Lives the struggle is embodied in persons, usually of power. For Severus this is topped by the need to exemplify Martin's asceticism and virtues so as to be a model for the clergy; thus it gets far less attention. But for Athanasius it takes precedent considering his great struggle against the Arians; thus he attributes Antony with a great speech that is supposed to out-reason them and counter any possible claims over him. In both narratives the struggle against the Arian is embodied in persons of power: thus Antony faces Balacius, commander of Egypt (Athanasius.86); while Martin faces Auxentius. That these figures are men of power shows the worldliness of the heretic in comparison to the ascetic Catholic, it serves the purpose of denying these figures any spiritual authority. In contrast to these heretics and other "false" Christians, the two saints do not grovel at the feet of emperors when confronted by them.

Having received a letter from the Constantinian dynasts, it was only with difficulty that Antony was finally induced to respond: "Why should I receive letters, to which I do not know how to reply with customary formalities? But when all the brothers asked him to bring comfort to the Christian rulers by writing to them, he wrote a suitable reply to the letters he had received" (Athanasius.81). The reply was cold and authoritative, reminding the emperor that in the end it is God who is the real king. Martin followed a similar line when he was visited by the emperor Maximus: "in Martin alone did the apostolic authority remain intact." (Severus.20) Severus once again uses this chance to attack the clergy of Gaul and exemplify Martin's virtues. Following this, after having drunk from the libation bowl, Martin makes sure pass it on to the other clergy before he gives it to the emperor, to the shock of everyone around him. In all these occasions the two monks fit into the "description of the archetypal charismatic figure who thrives outside the normal institutions of social organization." (Brennan 210)

If we are to look at this through the eyes of the authors, both Severus and Athanasius gained from this exchange. For the latter, the Constantinians are known to have been sympathetic to the Arian cause, if Antony had indeed chosen to meet with the emperor, it would have worked against the interests of the author. Not to mention the fact that Antony was a figure outside of the church hierarchy, he had no official authority; and therefore had no reason to meet the highest state official. Contrary to this, the meeting with the Emperor and Martin is symbolic since we have two officials meeting together and coming to a head over the control of the church. Severus makes sure to give the victory to the church: the libation bowl is passed to the other clergyman before the emperor.

St. Antony lived in Egypt, where urban centers were divided by large uninhabitable desert. The dry environment that could preserve tombs and other structures of millennia's on end. It should therefore be little surprise to us that he achieved the level of solitude that he did. St. Martin, on the other hand, lived in Gaul, a zone where the far smaller cities were surrounded by a sea of peasant and village life. This reflects the nature of his life: Martin wandered around from place to place so as to escape the world around him and to achieve an inner peace. He wandered through the Alps, where he was attacked by bandits, through numerous villages, correcting the ways of Christian peasants and converting pagan ones, and through the cities and the countryside, showing his powers and his ascetic values. In order to isolate himself, Martin built cells where he could and in tight defiles where the smallest number of people possible could reach him. At one point finding a spot that "was so remote and secluded that it was equal to the solitude of the desert." (Severus.10) This was done in spite of the fact that Martin was now a Bishop, a title he undertook very much against his will. Throughout these times he surrounded himself with men who sought the same things as him: solitude, prayer and ascetic values. With these "monasteries" he was able to isolate himself from the world in a way similar to Antony, although with certain compromises.

St. Martin and St. Antony both gave birth to, or, if not entirely birthed, greatly influenced and

popularized, the ascetic movements in their own land. For all their differences, the two follow in the same tradition and are considered holy because of the same reasons: their devotion to God, their charitable qualities, their miraculous abilities and ascetic virtues. As White in the intro to the *Life of Antony*: "...later readers were less concerned with the niceties of Nicene theology than with the spiritual themes which are relevant to all those seeking to draw near to God by means of a life of asceticism." (White 4) The propaganda of the particular hagiographers then went unnoticed, since it was irrelevant to the general reader of the life; it was only the spirituality and self-sacrifice that was considered important.

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