

The Vita of St. Anthony presents itself less as a biography and more as a collection of miracle stories surrounding the figure and the cult of St. Anthony of Padua. This shift in focus from the saint to his miracles reveals, upon reflective consideration, an unmistakably mendicant apologetic agenda. While tremendous emphasis is placed on the many miracles of St. Anthony, as miracle story after miracle story command the narrative throughout the Vita, these each act as subservient elements to the subtler motif of undermining heresy. Thus, the entire Vita is written as a treatise against heresy, intended to present the story of St. Anthony itself as a powerful rhetorical argument against heresy and for the orthodox Catholic faith. All other thematic elements, such as the worthlessness of noble birth, Anthony's intellectual propensity, or the ability of Anthony's sermons to call his audience to conversion, do not obscure the deeper agenda, but serve in various ways to highlight it.

St. Anthony of Padua is remembered in popular imagination for various things, including his being the patron saint of finding lost objects. However, rarely is he appreciated for the one thing his life was most remembered for; namely, for combating heresy, and for being “a Christian, who should with his miracles... illustrate Christianity.”¹ He is one of the best examples in Catholic tradition of a Thaumaturgus, or one who has the ‘gift of miracles’ expressed in scripture by St. Paul.² As such the Vita is so replete with miracles that one is left with the impression that St. Anthony alone³ would have made Christ's statement true that “you... will do greater works than these.”⁴ This collage of miracle stories introduces a special preliminary challenge to the academic endeavour of discovering what themes most motivated the author of the Vita. Operating on the assumption that the miracles recounted in the Vita are not historically informative, one might be tempted to read into every miracle narrative a hidden agenda behind the author's pen. This assumption is also, it must be admitted, commonplace in scholarship today, and is often proposed as an axiom. The justification deserves sympathy; since historical scholarship has the responsibility to report what most likely occurred, it can never legitimately, so the logic goes, operate on the conclusion that a miracle has occurred, since these are

¹ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.5.

² 1 Corinthians 12:9-10.

³ Meaning ‘On his own’ and not ‘only.’

⁴ John 14:12 NRSV.

incredibly improbable events.⁵ Philosophical or academic critiques of this axiom notwithstanding, it is at least more complicated when approached from the perspective of theology. A theologian cannot afford to be so dismissive,⁶ and yet must be as critical of miracle stories as she must be of any other element in the Vita. She must in principle be allowed to consider history to inform even the miraculous elements of a Vita. This suggestion does not, however, cut the theologian off in principle from suggesting additional, rather than alternative, motivations of the author. For instance, when considering the selection, presentation, and order of the narrative the theologian can glimpse the project of the narrative, and thus tease out the author's agenda. Therefore the theologian can and ought to recognize that behind the narrative lies an agenda and motivation in the mind of the author, such that even if the author did not take such liberties as inventing miracle stories, still the author took liberties perhaps in the selection of relevant stories, their organization, and their narrative orientation. Regardless of whether one is dismissive of miracles or not, the axiom must be affirmed that "these works tell us at least as much about the author and about those who used the text--their ideals and practices, their concerns and aspirations--as it does about the saints who are their subjects."⁷ This is perhaps especially true of the Vita of St. Anthony, as the author's concerns are not principally to inform his audience about a great Franciscan saint, so much as to use the saint's stature in the Catholic imagination to advance the mendicant agenda of combating heresies and confirming people in the orthodox Catholic faith.

The thirteenth century context, in which the Vita was composed, saw the rise of the mendicant orders as a response to widespread heresies. This is true not only of the Dominican order, but also of the Franciscans; "Francis's ministry was not designed, as Dominic's was, for the fight against heresy, but it served the purpose well, with its commitment to popular teaching and its insistence on obedience to the pope and bishops."⁸ The original Vita was composed in the earlier part of the thirteenth century, though there is some disagreement about the exact date, as the work bears no clear indications of a date of composition. However, scholars are generally in agreement with the conclusion advanced by Mandach: "cette legend fut composée, selon

⁵Ehman, *The New Testament: An Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, p.228-9.

⁶ Or else minimally they ought not be, and I think they have a duty not to be given their particular field.

⁷<http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/hagio.htm>

⁸ Morris, Colin. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* Edited by John McManners. p.214.

l'opinion de M. de Mandach (I) peu après le 30 mai 1232; probablement avant 1245, sûrement avant 1249.”⁹ Although the original author chose to remain anonymous,¹⁰ the date of composition, together with the nature of the content clearly implies that the author was a Franciscan. Further, scholars speculate, not only was he probably writing in Italy, but possibly lived in or around Padua, as this would explain the level of detail the author communicates about those places, indicating that he was personally familiar with them.¹¹ Moreover it helps make sense of the author's apparent concern for orthodoxy in Italy and his choice of St. Anthony, whose vocation it was to cure Italy of heresy and of whom it is said “a greater man than which was never seen in Italy.”¹² This implies that the motives of the author are likely to have been the concerns shared in common with all Franciscans, Dominicans, and sympathisers of the day.

The English version of the Vita composed by one John Burbury, upon which my study will be primarily based, was translated or composed for similar reasons: to advance the agenda of promoting Catholic orthodoxy. John Burbury is a name almost entirely lost to the pages of history, but it seems he was an Englishman writing for English nobility, as is evidenced in his preface.¹³ He seems to have translated from an intermediary Italian source and it is not clear how closely he follows it. What is sure is that this Vita involves so much by way of addition that it is impossible to distinguish what in the Vita is original, and what is attributable to immodest contributions. Much of the content must trace back to the original, such as the episode of St. Anthony preaching to the Fish in Rimini, but other episodes cannot possibly be original to the thirteenth century, such as one incident recounted in Padua where villagers were brought back to life at Anthony's shrine in 1617.¹⁴ This certainly poses itself as a problem for any endeavour to tease out from the text the original author's concerns, interests, and agenda. This problem is also not indissoluble; a careful view to a consistent theme, which cannot be reduced in principle to the seventeenth century concerns of our English translator, suggests an authentic and original agenda, and thus serves as a starting point. Burbury clearly could not have been concerned, as an English man writing for English nobility, about the spread of heresy in Italy, much less about

⁹ Saint Antoine de Padoue, Léopold de Chérancé, Paris, 1906. P.15.

¹⁰ Saint Antoine de Padoue, Léopold de Chérancé, Paris, 1906. P.14.

¹¹ Saint Antoine de Padoue, Léopold de Chérancé, Paris, 1906. P.15.

¹² John Burbury, The life of St. Anthony of Padoua, p.122.

¹³ John Burbury, The life of St. Anthony of Padoua, Preface.

¹⁴ John Burbury, The life of St. Anthony of Padoua, p.224.

heresies in Italy in the thirteenth century. This seems to push the question back to the Italian version, as there is no guarantee that it was not the innovation of Burbury's intermediary source. When the English Vita of John Burbury is compared, however, with a French version titled "Vie admirable de St. Antoine de Padoue"¹⁵ published in Montreal in 1699, the comparison reveals clear thematic and literary contrasts, and yet serves to highlight the combat of heresy as a common central theme. When compared we find that the shorter French version even more strictly recounts only the events which seem immediately and clearly to present Anthony's triumph over heresy. The theme is so clearly bound up with the entirety of the Vita that it cannot be thought the product of the translator. The comparison also serves to draw attention to those thematic elements, which are clearly the peculiar concerns of John Burbury, such as undermining the nobility. Although much more could be said about the revealing similarities and differences between these Vita's, my argument for the moment will proceed more from an examination and treatment of the English than any other.¹⁶

Having solved preliminary difficulties, an analysis of the Vita, with appropriate attention to the tenuousness with which a theologian must be careful to proceed, is now possible. Before a thematic analysis of the Vita is achievable a discussion about its content is inevitable. The Vita can be broken down broadly into three parts; the beginning of the Vita provides biographical information about Fernandus¹⁷ and describes his history and character, the subsequent part deals with the miracles he wrought while alive, and the final part deals with the miracles he accomplished after death.

The Vita begins, setting the tone immediately, by praising the parents of this miracle-child who are both described as intelligent, comely, orthodox, and the nobility of Lisbon. This combination of features introduces a theme which will continue to run throughout the Vita of St. Anthony; that St. Anthony is intelligent, physically gorgeous, orthodox, and not insignificantly of noble birth. His Father, Sir Martin Buglione, is described as "a gentleman... [who] was favour'd by nature with all the endowments of the mind and the body, to make him most

¹⁵ This title is from Early Canadian Online, produced by Canadian.org at <http://canadiana.org/record/46385>

¹⁷ Who will only later take his new name 'Anthony' when becoming a Franciscan.

accomplish.”¹⁸ His mother, Mary of Taveri of Lisbon, is described as “gorgeously clad in appearance.”¹⁹ Together they gave birth to their dear son, Fernandus, whom they raised in orthodox fashion. The author²⁰ here introduces a literary device he will employ again and again throughout the work: that of asking the reader to imagine some hypothetical scenario in order to better incite the religious affections of his audience. In this first instance the reader is asked to imagine Mary, Fernandus’ mother, praying that God kill her child Fernandus in her arms if he is later to grow impious. This episode serves to illustrate how pious his parents are, and piety is, throughout the Vita, associated with orthodoxy. His mother being thus devout also transported her son to Daily Mass at St. Mary’s Cathedral, where at the age of seven Fernandus began his Christian education. By the age of fifteen he was found to be so capable that he was enrolled in courses of rhetoric, logic, philosophy and theology. It was later in his life that he decided to adopt a monk’s habit and enrolled himself into the order of St. Augustine, wishing to devote himself always to the contemplation of Christian truth and to study “more for the love of God than of learning.”²¹ From the beginning the author spares no opportunity to highlight St. Anthony’s great learning and intellectual proficiency, and seems intent to communicate to the reader what a great orator and disputer Anthony was and with what skill he advanced arguments for the Catholic faith. In one scene, for instance, the author imagines Anthony as a child pacing in a pulpit; “what joyes his Angel guardian would not feel, while he saw him so early to begin, to tread in that pulpit, in which he was to walk like a Giant.”²² Later the author reflects on this by asking “can an angel in behaviour be otherwise than an angel in wit?”²³ Though this theme will be carried in later chapters, in the first chapter the author asks us to imagine Anthony’s disputation with the Devil himself.

The Devil figures into the narrative not prominently but often, and is continually dismayed at St. Anthony’s victories. The Devil laments thus: “shall heaven, depriving an Angel of its favour, capacitate a Man to surpass him in merit and condition?”²⁴ In the first episode of

¹⁸ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.2.

¹⁹ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.3.

²⁰ Likely John Burbury.

²¹ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.35.

²² John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.7.

²³ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.9.

²⁴ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.51-52.

the Devil dealing directly with Fernandus, the Devil simply assails him with as many temptations as can be conceived. These temptations are imagined to come wrapped in clever arguments. For instance, concerning lust, the Devil invites Anthony to consider “how proper for one of his age, to swim in those pleasures whose unconquerable force, neither Sampson, nor Solomon could withstand... [and] that finally the sin of the flesh, because most agreeable to humanity, was most of all practised, and most of all pardonable.”²⁵ These temptations also take on supernatural elements, for instance as Satan makes each woman Fernandus greets look more comely to him, or the fact that the Devil would not rest even while Fernandus slept, so as “at least, while he took his rest, to make him a sinner.”²⁶ Anthony withstands such attacks with intense fasting, “and reduced by fasting to the form of pure spirit, made the axiome most true, that every light thing tends upward.”²⁷ The Devil also tempts Fernandus to disengage from the monastic life by arguing “that if God had desired he should have been born, to serve him in the humbleness of religion, he would not have made him descend, from a family so noble in his country, nor have given him such abundance of wealth”²⁸ and urging him to recognize “how much better a sword would appear in his hand then a book.”²⁹ However, Fernandus’ response to the Devil expresses the extent to which his intellect is a central feature of his character, and coupled with his piety, the pillar of his orthodoxy. Thus, struggling through these temptations valiantly, the author imagines Fernandus to have responded: “Ah, my Christ, how weak are the arguments of the Devil... Suffer him not O Lord to darken my intellect.”³⁰ Although this elaborate story of temptation and Anthony’s response is not found in the French Vita, and thus seems to be the product of John Burbury³¹ taking liberties with the narrative, both versions clearly emphasise Anthony’s outstanding intellectual aptitude. For instance the French Vita at one point compares Anthony with St. Thomas Aquinas arguing that Anthony is intellectually superior to the angelic doctor.³² However, both narratives highlight Anthony’s intellect and great learning for the same purposes: to better portray Anthony as a champion of orthodoxy against heresy. His education is thus seen

²⁵ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.10.

²⁶ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.11.

²⁷ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.35.

²⁸ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.10.

²⁹ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.10.

³⁰ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.13.

³¹ Or at least a later addition.

³² *Vie Admirable de St. Antoine de Padoue*, p.22.

as having one purpose: “pour triompher dans ses prédications de toutes les hérésies.”³³ Having overcome the temptations of the Devil and having resolved that he would continue living the pious monastic life, a new episode begins.

Fernandus, having triumphed against these temptations and solidified in his convictions, becomes an already exemplar Christian monk. Such he remained until he was to discover the glory of the Franciscans. Upon one day witnessing a procession in celebration of Franciscan Martyrs from Morocco, who had died preaching the faith to Muslims there, Fernandus sought with all earnest both the same habit and the same end. When he received the habit he took the name Anthony, as though to indicate a new birth, and made his way to Morocco with the intention to preach to the Muslims there and to die a martyr's death. However, upon arriving in Morocco he fell ill and was unable to leave his bed until finally he made the decision to travel back to his home. On the way, by boat, a storm hit and Anthony along with the crew landed in Sicily instead. Here Anthony remained, unnoticed and unappreciated, consigning himself to the humblest forms of service. This continued until one day St. Anthony was asked to preach, and though he declined continually the invitation, to the point “that it looked like disobedience”³⁴ to his superior, he eventually began to preach. As soon as this happened, everyone immediately recognized with what beauty and eloquence he spoke and expounded the mysteries of the Catholic faith. He was immediately recognized by his superiors as a great preacher and received holy orders. At this time, according to the narrative, Anthony became repulsed at the thought that there were heretics in Italy and this thought “imprinted in his minde such troubled imaginations, as represented Italy to him more monstrous and barbarous than Afrik.”³⁵ Anthony resolves to dedicate his life to the eradication of heresies, but before he does he decides to take one more course in theological studies, in order to better prepare himself: “whereupon before he would prepare himself for so high an undertaking, as that to preach to people infected with heresie, he desired... to make a new course in Theology in Vercelli, under the Abbot of Saint Andrew, a very

³³ Vie Admirable de St. Antoine de Padoue, p.8.

³⁴ John Burbury, The life of St. Anthony of Padoua, p.33.

³⁵ John Burbury, The life of St. Anthony of Padoua, p.34.

famous doctor.”³⁶Successfully graduating, having advanced beyond his peers and his professor, St. Anthony puts himself to the task of preaching to the heretics, beginning in France.

From this point on the Vita is a collection of miracle story after miracle story, interrupted only by the prayers and praises of the author.³⁷ To survey all of them would be an unmanageable task, but the succession of miracle stories leads to a climax where the pope requests Anthony’s presence in Rome. Eventually St. Anthony’s fame, because of his eloquence and his propensity for miracles, receives the attention of the Pope who calls him to Rome to hear him preach. Here, Anthony realizes the Pentecostal miracle of tongues where his audience, assembled for the purposes of the crusades, hear him each in their own native tongue. The Pope, sufficiently satisfied with Anthony, gives him a mission to convert the heretics in Italy.

The miracle accounts are many and varied, and they most often involve Anthony converting heretics. There are, however, a number of episodes which curiously seem to have little or nothing to do with heresy. These include St. Anthony’s miracle of commanding a newborn to bear witness to his mother’s marital fidelity in order to stop his father, suspicious of his wife’s infidelity, from killing her as soon as she had given birth, or Anthony saving his father from being falsely convicted of a crime by allowing God to transport him, mid sermon, to the aid of his father in Lisbon. Such episodes, while not immediately related to the theme, also do not challenge to obscure the theme. These episodes can be explained to belong to the logic of the Vita in two ways, first because they may simply be historical events and by reason of that they are recalled in the Vita as part of the makeup of this saintly character. It is interesting that the events in the English Vita, as opposed, say, to the French Vita, are organized according to chronology, which ultimately adds to the plausibility that history lies ultimately behind these narratives. This implies that it is less likely the author saw in them an alternative theme. Second, each of these accounts does involve a miracle, and insofar as miracles contribute to demonstrate how powerful and rhetorical St. Anthony’s example serves as an argument against heresy, these accounts contribute to the theme. In any case, as these episodes are not found in the French Vita, and thus presumably not original, they are less likely to pose a challenge for the thesis that the original author was concerned principally with heresy.

³⁶John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.34-35.

³⁷Or translator.

Other themes may, at first blush, seem to pose difficulties for the thesis that the *Vita* is principally concerned with promoting orthodoxy over heresy, but upon closer examination one finds that they can be construed to support the thesis. For example, the theme of nobility, which seems to exist only in the English version, bears an interesting connection to the central theme of the *Vita*. All of the heretics throughout the entire *Vita* are pictured as nobility; rich and well educated scoffers. This explains in part why the author is so insistent on Anthony's noble lineage, so as to defend him against the charge of being in any way inferior to the heretics. Anthony is physically beautiful, his family is rich and noble, his education and intelligence are second to none, and yet this combination of features is not a concomitant of heresy. The author of the *Vita* seems intent on never juxtaposing these qualities, especially intelligence, with orthodoxy, even while it is impossible not to notice that all the heretics seem to have these same features. Burbury's audience was, of course, nobility, and thus it is not unreasonable to assume that this is his contribution. However, even the way this theme presents itself implies the priority of the general theme against heresy, as this new theme supervenes on the former.

Another theme worth taking note of is Anthony's ability to preach sermons persuasively, with an acute intellect able to call sinners and heretics to conversion and repentance. It is worthy to note that almost all of Anthony's miracles throughout the *Vita* are accompanied by such sermons or arguments, along with the reduction of the orthodox to piety. This theme is curious because, though the author puts great stress on Anthony's rhetorical skill as an orator and his ability to persuade his listeners, the *Vita* also does not record a single line from any of Anthony's sermons, indicating that this stress is present for some deeper motive. There is only one curious exception, where one sermon is recorded in its entirety, and this serves both to reveal this motivation, and act as a paradigmatic example of the theme. This is the famous episode at Rimini, in Italy, where Anthony being ignored by the heretics, preaches instead to the fish. This sermon and miracle are, without doubt, the crowning jewel of the life of St. Anthony, and it is this chapter which best represents the extent to which the *Vita* is intended to be rhetorical. In it, St. Anthony decides at first to preach to the heretics and dispute with them. However, after having engaged him in disputations, and being unable to respond to him, they began to leave him be. Anthony, so frustrated by their incredulity turns instead to preach to the fish. As he preaches to the fish on the banks towards the water, the people begin to gather out of curiosity, and as he

addresses the fish to testify to the glory of God and the truth of the Catholic religion, the fish swim onto the shore in droves. St. Anthony, when finished his sermon, has attracted many fish along the banks of the river, and has captivated those heretics who were still present. At this, Anthony invites the heretics to argue with the fish about the truth of the Catholic faith, since they will not be persuaded by him. This is perhaps the single best illustration of what lies at the heart of the narrative of the Vita; it is intended to be unanswerable and persuasive. The sermon is only recorded here because it is completely rhetorical in style. This example demonstrates excellently the tone of the Vita, as every miracle is intended, along with it, to contribute to a cumulative rhetorical argument against heretics.

Finally the third and final section of the Vita is a collage of miracle stories which occurred after St. Anthony has died. The beginning contained a translation account, and a canonization account where Burbury reproduces the entire bull of Pope Gregory IX. Following this, the miracles which surround and vindicate the cult of St. Anthony become the focal point of the narrative. These are entirely missing from the French version,³⁸ and thus likely do not contribute much to what can be discovered about the original author. However, the episodes continue to preponderantly present miracle events in which heretics figure as antagonists. For example, in one of the first episodes after Anthony's translation, a group of heretics deride the faithful Catholics for foolishly believing in Anthony's miracles, and belonging to his cult, exclaiming:

'tis a great shame... that Christians both learned and discreet in other things, should loose themselves by crediting trifles, which the most severe stoicks would laugh at, and not see, that what is spoken of Miracles, is an artifice and trick of leud men, who maintain themselves by cozening of others.³⁹

This same group decides to stage a miracle before the people, and then demonstrate to the people how naive they are to foolishly believe so easily such preposterous miracles. One of the heretics bandaged up his eyes as though he had lost them, and he was thus carried by his colleges to St. Anthony's shrine. Making much boisterous noise of their prayers and supplications they intended, with success, to attract people in the streets to follow them and pray with them to St.

³⁸ With the possible exception of the vision that a cardinal received who was opposed to Anthony's canonization, and then changed his mind. However, this is part of the translation and canonization account.

³⁹ John Burbury, *The life of St. Anthony of Padoua*, p.176.

Anthony for this blind man's sight to return. However, when they arrived at the shrine and intended to expose the folly of the multitude gathered, they were themselves shocked to find that their college had lost his eyes! St. Anthony thus exposed the heretics as blind, and vindicated his cult. This and suchlike stories persist in the third part, indicating clearly that this theme is so inseparably bound up with the figure of St. Anthony that later compilers and translators could not possibly avoid it. Although this third part contains minimal overlap with the shorter French Vita, it serves to highlight how profoundly the association of Anthony with the project of undermining heresy persists, and thus evidences how fundamental this mood is to the original Vita.

In recapitulation, it seems clear that the primary motivating theme of the original Vita was to use St. Anthony's life as a rhetorical argument against heresy. This theme is not plausibly introduced by John Burbury, not only because he could not have been concerned with heresy in Italy, but also because the theme is also found in other versions of the Vita, or other hagiographical accounts. Furthermore, the theme against heresy provides the central narrative, and all other thematic elements act to highlight this central theme. Thus the stress placed on Anthony's intellect, the power and beauty of his sermons, and even his nobility, are present in such a way that they variously highlight the more basic thesis. This Vita is a mendicant hagiography which aims, not first of all to inform the reader of a pious monk, an unconquerable genius, a brilliant orator, but first of all a saint who serves, by the example of his life, to further the mendicant project of combating heresy.

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