

Queer Lives of Saints: Jerome's Hagiography

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HAGIOGRAPHICAL INCITEMENTS

“HOW OFTEN, when I was living in the desert, in the vast solitude which gives to hermits a savage dwelling-place, parched by the flames of the sun, how often did I fancy myself among the pleasures of Rome [*putavi me Romanis interesse deliciis!*]” (*Epistula* 22.7). Thus begins Jerome's account of his own brief career as a hermit, intruded into a letter written to the Roman virgin Eustochium circa 384, some eight years after Jerome had decisively fled the Syrian desert. In this passage, ascetic “fancy” quickly overwhelms historical description. Still inventing himself in the present, Jerome's interest in his own past lies largely with the power of fantasy to shape—and reshape—a human life.¹ His autobiographical confession unfolds in a series of dreamily shifting scenes, as vibrant in emotional tone as they are rich in sensory detail. The remembered landscape conveys the tenor of the former life, even as the terrain of memory itself buckles and folds: Jerome's vivid depictions of locale, written with the eyes of his imagination wide open, dramatically undermine the stability of place and time. In the desert he once fancied Roman allurements; in Rome he now fancies

¹As Stefan Rebenich (*Hieronimus und sein Kreis: Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* [Stuttgart, 1992], 93–98) points out, *Epistula* (hereafter cited as *Ep.*) 22.7 appears largely responsible for the now-traditional account of Jerome's heroic exploits in the desert of Chalcis, an account dominated by descriptions of physical suffering, solitude, and struggle against the passions (see also *Ep.* 125.12); other evidence (e.g., Jerome's desert correspondence) hints that the two or three years he spent in Chalcis (equipped with library and copyists) may have more closely matched the conditions and comforts experienced by many contemporary academics enjoying sabbatical leaves. Of course, the desert correspondence itself consists of a carefully selected corpus of letters published around the same time as *Ep.* 22 and likewise implicated in Jerome's “fanciful” postdesert self-fashioning as a *literary* ascetic.

desert delights. Mobile displacements of pleasures in the text thus make space for desire while transforming both topography and chronology.² Defined by mutual lack, desert and Rome, past and present become (by mutual attraction) almost one topos, a savage habitation that is also the no-place where Christian eros burns bright.³

As Jerome rewrites his past, he reinscribes the desert on his body, roughly effacing the soft pallor of Rome: "my skin from long neglect had become like Ethiopian flesh" [*squalida cutis situm Aethiopiae carnis adduxerat*]. The scene bends back on itself, as his savagely "burning mind"—itself a desert product—in turn converts the almost intolerably bleak solitude of sandy wastes into a stage crowded with foregone delights: "I often found myself amidst bebies of girls [*choris . . . puellarum*]," he reminisces boldly. In this fantastic desert that is also the site of Roman pleasures, Jerome appears indistinguishable from the voluptuous bands of chorus girls, a confusion not repressed but intensified by the text. His skin weathered in the sun-scorched desert, the hermit has become as dark—and perhaps thereby as beautiful—as the sun-scorched bride of the Song of Songs (see Song of Sol. 1:6),⁴ whose naked desire he will, later in this same letter, commend to the girl Eustochium in terms exceeding even the Song's abundant eroticism (*Ep.* 22.25).⁵ First, however, he abandons himself fleetingly to a still more exuberant identification with another sensuously (indeed, sinfully) female biblical figure: "Helpless, I cast myself at the feet of Jesus, I watered them with my tears, I wiped them with my hair, and then I subdued my rebellious body with weeks of abstinence" (see Luke 7:38). Beating his breast and weeping copiously in the queerly feminized and

²Thus Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton, 1994): "Dismissive of the passing of time, the images of Jerome's tormenting fantasies continued to operate in the inner space of his mind" (205).

³For a nuanced consideration of how Jerome's letter itself becomes the site of displaced desire, see Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993): 21–45, and Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 205–31.

⁴The "Ethiopian" whose skin Jerome has stolen was by this time a conventional figure of ascetic paradox, representing the tension and contrast between the "inner" and "outer man," where the "blackness" of carnality was understood to be "whitewashed" by the practice of spiritual virtue. As sinners, "we are naturally black," Jerome writes at the beginning of this letter, citing Song of Songs 1:5: "I am black but comely," a passage that he seams with Numbers 12:1, "He [i.e., Christ the Bridegroom] has married an Ethiopian woman," concluding with the assurance that Christ will "miraculously change your complexion" (*Ep.* 22.1). Jerome's retranslation of the ambiguous Hebrew conjunction in Song of Songs 1:5, shifting from the septuagintal "black and beautiful" to "black but beautiful," is implicated in the history of this problematically racialized trope. Here in *Ep.* 22.7, however, it is the figural *identification* of "black" with "beautiful" that is not only accomplished with fluid ease but is (I am arguing) crucial to Jerome's textual self-construction.

⁵Miller, "The Blazing Body," 27–29.

darkly exoticized literary persona of his own construction,⁶ Jerome quickly returns to the opening verses of the Song of Songs, now with an explicit citation, as he sings joyously to his Lord: “because of the scent of thy ointments we will run after thee” (Song of Sol. 1:3). The words of the Song’s lover and her maidens, directly voiced by Jerome, thus supplement the account of foot washing. The fragrant oils initially elided in his abstinent citation of the Lukan text mingle again with the foot washer’s tears, and the mutely weeping woman is fractured, pluralized, and dispersed in dancing choruses of maidenly celebration—“beviess of girls” fit to accompany the Savior’s bride, none other than Jerome himself, now more than ever one of the girls.⁷ Authorial “fancy” is no longer worldly but rather densely biblical, as Jerome refashions his desire ascetically by rewriting the desert as a voluptuous scriptural text, thereby also reinscribing scripture as a teeming desert of delights. Fact or fantasy? History or romance? In the text of his own recollected life, Jerome dissolves such distinctions.

What of Jerome’s other Lives—the holy biographies of Paul, Malchus, and Hilarion? “Are the Lives romances?” queried Coleiro in 1957, wondering aloud “whether Jerome meant the Lives to be considered as history or fiction.” Skittishly, Coleiro concludes that, although Jerome certainly cannot have intended that his saintly biographies be read as novels, they do make for rather bad history while exuding considerable “romantic charm.”⁸ Coleiro stands in a tradition of scholarship that has attempted to discipline Jerome’s disturbingly labile hagiographic compositions by giving them a respectable place within literary history, identifying them as variations on conventional genres of history, biography, or aretalogy, and keeping the romance’s troubling fictionality (not to mention its seemingly unmentionable eroticism) at arm’s length wherever possible.⁹ His sensitive reading of the Hieronymian Lives, however, partly subverts his own

⁶Jerome not infrequently represents himself as weeping, for example, *Ep.* 14.1, in which he enthusiastically recalls “the lamentation and weeping with which I accompanied your [i.e., Heliodorus’s] departure.”

⁷Note that my reading at this point differs slightly from Miller’s (persuasive!) reading regarding what she describes as Jerome’s “failed attempt at ‘feminizing’ his body” (“The Blazing Body,” 32–33).

⁸E. Coleiro, “St. Jerome’s Lives of the Hermits,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 11 (1957): 161–78, at 177–78. Hereafter cited in text.

⁹Exemplary of the tendency to place Jerome’s *Lives* within a differentiated history of classical biographical genres and to make sharp distinctions between biography and romance is Julius Plesch, *Die Originalität und literarische Form der Mönchsbiographien des hl. Hieronymus* (Munich, 1910). Herbert Kech (*Hagiographie als christliche Unterhaltungsliteratur: Studien zum Phänomen des erbaulichen Anhand der Mönchsviten des hl. Hieronymus* [Göttingen, 1977], 1–10) offers a critical reading of the history of scholarship predating his own work, highlighting the degree to which questions of “genre” have been shaped by modern preoccupations with historical veracity (preoccupations in turn frequently pressured by confessional apologetics).

conclusion. In order to classify Jerome's Lives as "history"—or, more specifically, "biography"—Coleiro must demonstrate the (lamentable?) compatibility of "the more fanciful methods of Jerome" with contemporary historiography, which seemingly admitted "the possibility of non-historical additions," blurring the "line between reality and legend," introducing details that served a prurient curiosity more than a desire for accuracy, and frequently sacrificing narrative coherence for the vividness of swiftly shifting scenes that remained loosely linked, at best, not only with one another but also with the broader trajectory of "contemporary history" (163–66). "It is like the disconnected glimpses of a hidden sky that one would get if a cloud covering the whole length and breadth of it were to break up in parts and let one see a few patches of what is beyond," muses Coleiro (166). Idealized "heroes" are dramatically depicted, and "overstress is conspicuous," he continues (167). Indeed, Jerome's Lives, with "their appeal to the imagination and their romantic associations," are (he admits) "delightful works of art." If not quite granting them the status of "romances," Coleiro is willing to catalog their distinctly "romantic" aspects: "the use of the weird," the delight in presenting "the reader continually with unexpected situations," "the spirit of adventure," and above all the "taste for description" (171–74). Jerome is especially adept, as Coleiro reads him (reading him well), at using description to convey a particular *feeling*: "the reader sees the scene under the influence of that sentiment" (176). Nonetheless, "there is no doubt that [Jerome] intended the Lives to be considered as history." "Such considerations lead us to reject the opinion that the Lives are romances," intones Coleiro; "fundamentally, they represent historical truth" (177–78).

As a hagiographer, Jerome is, then, a master of romance but a lousy historian; all the same, we must read him for his history and resist the lure of his romance, eschewing "entertainment" in favor of "information," insists Coleiro. A dauntingly ascetic interpretive practice is here recommended! And perhaps we would do well to take the advice, even to take it to excess. Reading "romance" as "history" and writing "history" as "romance" may indeed be the genre-bending technique by which Jerome not merely "blurs" but effectively dissolves the distinction between "reality and legend" (or even fantasy!), thereby rendering the concept of an extratextual "historical truth" virtually irrelevant. Ascetic "(in)formation," grounded in refusing the tempting reduction of "imagination and feeling" to a merely "entertaining" superficiality, may be exactly what Jerome intends for his readers.¹⁰

¹⁰The "double appeal to imagination and feeling" is, according to Coleiro, a defining characteristic of romantic writing (172). I am here exploring (and exploiting) the way in which Coleiro's clear appreciation of Jerome as a romantic author is in tension with his

But what clues does Jerome himself offer us concerning his hagiographic intentions? As it happens, the three canonical Hieronymian Lives are all mentioned in the self-entry with which Jerome immodestly concludes his catalog of Christian writers, entitled *De viris inlustribus* (*On Famous Men*). Why not, then, begin there in re-posing the question of the hagiographer's generic purposes? Jerome's interest in this innovative literary-historical composition does not lie in correlating Christian writings with "Gentile" genres but rather in delineating the emerging corpus of distinctly Christian literature (preface, *De viris inlustribus*) and the rise of a new class of Christian men of letters—best represented by Jerome himself.¹¹ This overt authorial "agenda," however, is not necessarily a problem. It may even offer valuable clues for students of Jerome's hagiography, inciting fresh interpretations of what is perhaps after all best read as a "new" kind of writing, created not *ex nihilo* but through inventive recyclings of materials borrowed from already overlapped traditions of historical, biographical, aretalogical, martyrological, and novelistic literature. Jerome's list of his own written works—presumably chronological—begins with the *Life of Paul the Monk* and concludes (apart from a final, looser reference to his Bible translations, countless unpublished letters to Paula and Eustochium, and work-in-progress) with the works *On the Captive Monk* and *The Life of the Blessed Hilarion* (*De viris inlustribus* 135). Two of his conventionally identified hagiographies are, then, also designated by their author as Lives. Taking the form of a rhetorical *inclusio*, they neatly bracket the list of Jerome's polemical treatises, published letters, and historical, exegetical, and homiletic writings. If the Lives seem thus to claim a certain prominence in his own oeuvre, it is striking that Jerome credits only one among his Christian literary predecessors, namely, Athanasius of Alexandria, with authorship of a Life—the *Life of Antony the Monk* (*De viris inlustribus* 87).¹² Does Jerome understand the monastic Life as a distinctive Christian

tendency to construct an unfavorable contrast of "entertainment" (trivialized as a spurious romantic accretion) with the historical "information" presented in Jerome's *Lives* (e.g., 163). Note that both Kech and Manfred Fuhrmann ("Die Mönchsgeschichten des Hieronymus: Formexperimente in erzählender Literatur," in *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann [Geneva, 1977], 41–99) in some respects go farther than Coleiro in acknowledging the generic hybridity and innovative character of Hieronymian hagiography while also emphasizing the overriding concern with "edification" or "imitation" that imbues the nascent genre with both aesthetic coherence and religious seriousness. I am not inclined to dispute either the centrality of edification or the pious sincerity of Jerome's *Lives*; nonetheless, there is a danger that emphasis of such aspects may lead to a virtual reinscription of the dichotomy of history/biography versus romance. For this reason, I find that Coleiro's thematized ambivalence regarding the romance in Jerome's hagiography offers a more promising starting point for readings that would effectively deconstruct such a dichotomy.

¹¹On this topic, see the forthcoming work of Mark Vessey.

¹²To Evagrius of Antioch is also attributed the translation of the *Life of the Blessed Antony* from Athanasius's Greek into Latin (*De viris inlustribus* 125).

literary "genre," and, if so, where does this "genre" originate, what does it include, and how does he intend it to be read?

The hints supplied by *On Famous Men* draw us into the hagiographic texts themselves. In introducing the earliest of his Lives, the *Life of Paul* (written circa 374), Jerome acknowledges that it is "partly true" that Antony was the "originator" or "head" (*caput*) of eremitic asceticism. "Partly I say," he clarifies, "for the fact is not so much that Antony preceded the rest as that they all derived from him the necessary stimulus [*ab eo omnium incitata sunt studia*]." ¹³ Jerome goes on to make it abundantly clear that Paul of Thebes, the hero of his own *Life*, did, in his view, precede Antony as the "leader" or "first" (*princeps*) in the eremitic venture. In what sense, then, can Antony be understood as the "originator" or the "stimulus" for the ascetic endeavors of "all"? Jerome, I would suggest, has here deliberately confused the "*Life*" with the "life": his subtly displaced but easily recognizable claim is that it is the textual *Life of Antony* (transmitted by "both Greek and Roman writers," as he goes on to note), ¹⁴ rather than the hermit Antony's living example, that provides the "stimulus" or "incitement" not to asceticism per se but, more importantly, to *hagiography*. We should not miss the payoff of this rhetorical sleight of hand. In the *Life of Paul*, Jerome implicitly inscribes the *Life of Antony* as a "source" (a reading that will prove extraordinarily influential) ¹⁵ only so that he—thus incited—may make himself the "first" author of holy Lives. ¹⁶ His seeming compliment to Athanasius, who remains unnamed here and elsewhere in Jerome's Lives (if not in his catalog of Christian writers), is thus written with the left hand. If hagiography is a genre, from Jerome's perspective it is a genre of his own imaginative invention. Athanasius's work is merely the provocation—the pretext, one might say. ¹⁷

¹³ *Vita Pauli* 1. Hereafter cited in text as *VP*. Translations of the *Life of Paul* are based on Paul Harvey, "Jerome, Life of Paul, the First Hermit," in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis, 1990), 357–69.

¹⁴ I shall refer throughout this essay to the Athanasian *Life of Antony*; it is, however, the Evagrian Latin "translation" of this text that mediates Jerome's interpretation and shapes the competitive context of his own, self-consciously "original" Latin writing project.

¹⁵ The positioning of the Athanasian text as the "source" of Western asceticism and hagiographical literature is not only a commonplace among patristic scholars. Thus Geoffrey Galt Harpham (*The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* [Chicago, 1987]) begins: "The master text of Western asceticism is *The Life of Anthony*" (3).

¹⁶ Cf. *Ep.* 22.36: "Huius vitae auctor Paulus, inlustrator Antonius et, ut ad superiora conscendam, princeps Iohannes baptista fuit." Jerome, like Paul, is the *auctor*.

¹⁷ Note that by surfacing and intensifying Jerome's claims for priority I am not only repeating but also exceeding the more common literary-historiographic representation of Jerome as the father of *Latin* hagiography. Thus Fuhrmann: "The last decades of the fourth century were a time of extreme love of experimentation: the Christian Latin writers attempted then to empower themselves with almost all forms of the ancient literary tradition and to reinscribe them with the meaning of the new religion. Jerome contributed to this process among others his three monks' histories—they are no small contribution, when one considers that with them Latin hagiography was founded. . . . The overlapping contexts [of

Indeed, if Hieronymian hagiography is a genre, it is a genre always being invented. The Lives of Paul and Hilarion are intertextually linked through their common (if also strategically differentiated) construal of the *Life of Antony* as their literary point of departure—a linkage further strengthened by the explicit reference to the *Life of Paul* in the *Life of Hilarion*. The same is not true of *On the Captive Monk*. Yet this not-quite-*Life of Malchus* sidles up cosily enough to the *Life of Hilarion* in Jerome's *On Famous Men*, and indeed the oriental setting and overt historicism of *On the Captive Monk* (described by Jerome as a warm-up exercise for a future church-historical narrative) may be seen to anticipate the *Life of Hilarion's* ambition to convey a broad history of eastern monasticism in which Syria-Palestine takes its rightful place. At the same time, *On the Captive Monk* is arguably the least “metahistorical” and most explicitly “romantic” of Jerome's three saintly biographies, reproducing the plotline and rhetorical style of the ancient novel with parodic near-exactitude. In these respects, it draws closer to the *Life of Paul*, while also sharply distancing itself from the latter's mythical flights of fancy, as well as from the focus on the miraculous characteristic of the *Life of Hilarion*. The point is that Jerome's hagiographic writings exceed and contradict even his own lightly insinuated “generic” definitions and refuse, collectively, to stabilize into a single literary form. Previous scholarly studies strongly suggest (not least where failing to achieve consensus) that the Lives are each generic hybrids, emerging in the interplay of already distinctly hybridized literary genres. Beyond that, I am suggesting, these ambiguously overlapped texts are also remarkably dissimilar to one another, to put it simply. Nor can their differences be easily smoothed away by plotting a linear development toward a single, culminating “end.”¹⁸ The reader of Jerome's three

Christian and pagan Greek literary practices on which Jerome's hagiographies draw] are patterned in turn on the romance and the biography, in their methods and forms” (82). More recently, William Robins (“Romance and Renunciation at the Turn of the Fifth Century,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8 [2000]: 531–57) has explored the “remarkable period of experimentation in hagiographic writing” in the century after Constantine, commenting that “a generation of Latin writers in the late fourth and early fifth centuries re-evaluated the narrative models available to the spiritual imagination, and among these models was the mode of romance” (531).

¹⁸Attempts have, of course, been made. See, for example, the responses of Yves-Marie Duval and Jacques Fontaine to Fuhrmann's essay (94–96), which project a clean trajectory leading from Jerome's rhetorically excessive and self-consciously artful hagiographical juvenalia (*Ep.* 1 as well as the *Life of Paul*) to his more mature *Lives*, reflecting an overall increase in stylistic decorum, religious depth, and seriousness of historical purpose and progressing steadily from the more modest essay into historiographic writing represented by the *Life of Malchus* to the more ambitious *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome's culminating effort to put Palestinian and Syrian monasticism on the map for Western readers. Such developmental accounts are plausible but not, I am suggesting, inevitable or necessary; indeed, they impose extremely strong readings of the texts that suppress both complexity and difference at many points.

hagiographic compositions is, rather, left with the impression of an ongoing, even restless experimentation at work in these texts.

Hieronymian hagiography is thus a remarkably plastic genre. Possibly it is even a genre defined by its irreducible plasticity, which (by effectively refusing the contrast with “real life”) exposes and exploits the promising fictiveness and malleability of *any* “life,” remaining stubbornly resistant even to literary devices of normalization. Fact or fantasy? History or romance? What *is* a true story, who *is* a holy man? These are questions that Jerome’s saintly Lives continue to incite while successfully deferring conclusive answers. At this point, a “deferential” (which is also to say a “differential”) reading of Hieronymian hagiography may be just what is required for would-be saints and other shifty subjects of fantasmatic desire. There is, there can be, no end to the incitement to write and read holiness, to discover new “queerings” of romance.¹⁹ From Jerome’s perspective (as I here imagine it), there are always more Lives to be found and lost—multiplied, fractured, and destroyed—in the savage (dis)habitation, the prolific specula(riza)tions, of hagiography’s fluid literary imaginary.

THE QUEER LIFE OF PAUL THE HERMIT

Both art and criticism compensate for the surrender of physical sexuality by providing imaginative gratifications that have their own attractiveness. Freud argued that beauty . . . represented a sublimation of sexuality, a rerouting of transgressive energies along socially acceptable lines; and while this seems a decidedly modern view of the matter, I would argue that we can in fact locate the germ of sublimation, the beginnings of a modern understanding, in ascetic art and its cultural interpretation. As one among countless examples, I want to focus on a picture by Sassetta (c. 1400–1450) . . . depicting the meeting between Antony and Paul the Hermit. The compensation I am hunting for does not withhold itself, for the meeting between the two saints represents a momentary relief from the intense solitude suffered by each; their holy embrace provides, in fact, not only an affirmation of the worthiness of the ascetic life, but an astonishing interval of sensation, an unrepeatable break amid the unrelieved decades of self, or rather the denial of self . . .

The dominant form of the painting is surely the arch; and it is replicated everywhere . . . as if their embrace replicated and brought into the human world not only a principle of affection, but also a

¹⁹In what sense “queering”? Here I use the term “queer” to designate (literary) practices of eroticism that actively resist and/or put into question the very category of the “normal,” the “conventional,” or the “natural” in a context in which resistance intensifies, critiques, and partly subverts the violence of both *domus* and *dominus*. Implicit in the juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary texts and contexts—conveyed, for example, in the

principle of natural form . . . Still, one cannot help noticing that the position of the embrace itself is highly unnatural in the sense that it is clumsy, almost impossibly awkward, bad for ageing backs. Why do they assume this queer posture?²⁰

While setting the scene for the *Life of Paul* (the “original” behind Sassetta’s painting), Jerome reflects—with seeming inconsequentiality—on those techniques of torture designed “to destroy not bodies, but souls” (*VP* 2). He supplies two exemplary anecdotes, each guaranteed to make the malice of Satan memorable. The first involves an already well tested martyr whom “the devil ordered to be covered in honey and set out in the heat of the sun, with his hands tied behind his back,” his cruel intent that “one who had survived fiery plates yield to the stinging bites of flies.” The reader is left to wonder about the fate of the honey-dipped sufferer,²¹ as Jerome rushes on to recount a still more titillating tale of diabolical torture and Christian witness. Although the second victim (described as being “in the flower of his manhood”) is set in the shade of a lovely garden, this young man, we quickly learn, is destined to burn as well. “There, among the radiant lilies and blushing roses, next to a gently murmuring stream, while the wind softly whispered among the leaves of the trees, the youth was placed upon a bed of feathers and, so that he might not escape, bound with caressing garlands and then left alone.” Attracted like a fly to honey, a beautiful prostitute soon arrives on the scene of Jerome’s artful confabulation. Binding the youth more tightly than ever with her twining embraces, the *meretrix* goes so far as to stroke his virile member with her hands, explains Jerome (surrendering shudderingly to his own vulgarity as he naughtily voices “what is wicked even to say”). Having palpably excited the young man’s desire, the woman throws herself on top of him, and the “wanton *vixtrix*” is thereby on the verge of overthrowing his virtue. Not surprisingly, Jerome’s martyr—Christ’s soldier—“knows not what to do and where to turn.” (Bound and mounted, he does not have much room to maneuver.) In the

“anachronistic” depiction of ancient ascetic figures as “homosexual,” “bisexual,” or “just friends”—is an argument not only for the similarity or comparability of late (or post-) antiquity and late (or post-) modernity but also for a historical relation between the two: to retell the story of the asceticization of eros is to plot the genealogy of the contemporary “counterpleasures”; see Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany, 1999).

²⁰Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Asceticism and the Compensations of Art,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York, 1995), 360–61.

²¹A parallel passage in Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 8.22) may, however, allow us to hazard a guess: “Then he had the man stripped, smeared all over with honey, and bound fast to a fig-tree, where a countless horde of ants (hurrying trickles of quick-life) had built their nests in the rotten trunk. As soon as the ants smelt the honey sweating out of the man’s body, they swarmed upon him; and with tiny multitudinous nips they shred by shred pincered out all his flesh and entrails. The man hung on this cross of slow torture till he was picked quite clean.”

nick of time divine inspiration strikes: the resourceful youth bites off his own tongue and spits it into the face of the woman as she kisses him. Pain surmounts lust, as Jerome remarks briefly, and thus we arrive at the bitter-sweet conclusion deferred in the first tale of bondage and biting—or so it seems (*VP* 3). (It must be noted, however, that neither of these “martyrs” has managed to die.) Having diverted his readers long enough with such apparently digressive narratives, Jerome can now make a brisk transition to his main plot, explaining how the young Paul of Thebes—a contemporary of the two martyrs—came to invent asceticism while fleeing the temptations of persecution (*VP* 4–5).²²

It is a queer way to begin a saintly *Life*—more than that, a queer way to launch a competitive writing career, which is what Jerome is doing in this first, overt attempt to upstage the Athanasian *Life of Antony*.²³ The author is baiting his reader, but what kind of bait is he dangling, and what is to be delivered in its place? Jerome's *Life of Paul* is pervaded throughout by a “bait-and-switch” dynamic, and the deliciously teasing opening vignettes are, I would argue, more crucial to the text's constitutive mobilities than is commonly acknowledged by commentators apparently embarrassed to find themselves so easily seduced.²⁴ Despite the note of triumph on which he seems to end, Jerome's preliminary tales of torture are neither climactic nor anticlimactic but, rather, disturbingly open-ended and thus—having failed to demarcate their own limits—not, strictly speaking, “pre-liminary” at all. The first, incomplete narrative of martyrdom has already given way to the second, acquiring a supplement rather than coming to a conclusion. Similarly, as the hard-bitten tongue of a mute renunciation is offered in place of manhood's more exuberant ejaculations (as a painful pleasure is exchanged for a pleasurable pain), the ascetic life of Paul emerges as both a prolongation and a disruptive repetition of the martyr's tantalizingly arrested desire. In addition, Jerome has already warned that the account of Paul's career

²²We should not miss the skill with which Jerome has turned a potential embarrassment—Paul's flight from martyrdom—into an advantage. As Pierre Leclerc (“Antoine et Paul: Métamorphose d'un héros,” in *Jérôme entre l'occident et l'orient*, ed. Yves-Marie Duval [Paris, 1988], 260) points out, whereas the *Life of Antony* positions asceticism as a compensatory substitute for the still much desired martyrdom of blood, Jerome's *Life of Paul* more aggressively displaces martyrdom by inscribing asceticism as Paul's active choice. I would also suggest that Jerome's withholding of death from his “martyrs” already begins to effect their conversion to asceticism, thereby anticipating the appearance of Paul.

²³Leclerc gives a nuanced account of the literary techniques by which Jerome's *Life of Paul* “metamorphizes” the image of the hermit by repeatedly demoting the Antony of the Athanasian *Life* to the place of second best, in relation to Jerome's distinctly “Roman” (as well as romantic) hero Paul.

²⁴For example, J. N. D. Kelly (*Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* [London, 1975], 61), who finds the second martyr's tale “quite unnecessarily introduced” into the *Life of Paul*, suggesting that its presence is accounted for by Jerome's “obsession with sex”—an “obsession” that Kelly is seemingly able to distinguish clearly from “the ecstatic nature of his piety” evidenced in other parts of the text.

will itself be fragmentary, interrupted by a telling lacuna—the huge expanse of Paul’s middle years, declared definitively inaccessible. Proceeding thus by fits and starts, shifting across gaps and intervals and yet never really leaving anything behind, this nearly trackless narrative seems to consist solely in a series of switchbacks. In fact, I would go further still: Jerome’s *Life of Paul* is a purposefully torturous text that intends to destroy souls, again and again. Its interruptive and repetitive narrativity contributes to the (paradoxical) work of psychic deformation, restlessly resisting the fixation of “identity.”²⁵ It contributes thereby to the purification of desire, to the production of a queerly pure desire—a desire whose end of self-dissolution turns out to be no end at all.

If we take the risk and read this *Life*, we must start by backtracking to the garden, for only when we have taken *that* bait can we make the switch to another fantastically paradisaic scene, where we will eventually (and repeatedly) find (and lose) Paul. Lingering a bit longer with the enticing youth of Jerome’s second martyrial exemplum, we might now note that he has, by the end, swapped tongues with the prostitute: Tertullian, for one, is familiar with the famous case of the “Athenian courtesan” convicted of conspiracy who, “subjected to torture by the tyrant,” “still making no betrayal,” “at last bit off her own tongue and spat it in the tyrant’s face, that he might be convinced of the uselessness of his torments, however long they should be continued.”²⁶ The heroic tongue biting is thus not *merely* a euphemism for self-castration—a reading so teasingly available, so nearly literal, that it is almost thereby disabled, for the martyr does *not* after all give up his manly parts. Nor is the tongue biting *merely* a reinscription of the seductress as the castrating agent, encased in a fantasy in which a man may take matters into his own teeth, thereby regaining a position of control. As the tale of the Athenian courtesan (not to mention the still more notorious case of Philomela)²⁷ reminds us, the youth’s tongue biting (upon which Jerome’s readers hang with baited breath) is crucially *also* an act of gender switching, for only a female can truly lose her tongue, in the terms of cultural codes already ancient by Jerome’s day.²⁸ A real man minds his tongue, able both to

²⁵Kech refers to this pervasive narrative technique as the “Hang zur Vereinzelung,” that is, the tendency to isolation or fragmentation, characterized by “concentration, selection, concretization and objectification,” aiming for an effect of “urgent immediacy” (33).

²⁶Tertullian *Ad martyras* 4; see also Tertullian *Apologia* 50.7–8, and Ambrose *De virginitate* 1.4.17, in which the woman is identified as a Pythagorean. Fuhrmann (72, n. 1) notes that an account of the tyrant-resisting, tongue-biting woman is also preserved in Iamblichus (*De vita Pythagorica* 194), and Brent D. Shaw (“Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 [1996]: 276, n. 19) records the parallel case of Leaena the *meretrix* in Pliny (*Natural History* 7.23.87).

²⁷Philomela, it will be recalled, was raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus, who severed her tongue to prevent her telling of his deed; she wove a tapestry depicting the rape (and thereby bringing about Tereus’s discovery and punishment) and was later transformed into either a swallow or a nightingale.

²⁸Although they do not include accounts of tongue biting, there are parallels in accounts of men sexually threatened by women in the Testament of Joseph, discussed by

speak freely and to sustain a noble silence, whereas a woman, never in full possession of language (never fully possessed by language), can only finally control her tongue by destroying it—and thereby attaining an almost absolute eloquence in perfect silence. If it is, then, a woman's tongue that sprouts in the youth's mouth in the ecstatic moment of its own leaping death, what of his *virilia*?²⁹ In Jerome's garden the flowering member of manhood can, like its feminized lingual counterpart, be forced to betray truths better choked back—and therefore perhaps better bitten off and spat out once and for all, after all (after all is said and done). But what might that mean? From the youth to the prostitute, from the womanly tongue to the manly "tongue" and back again, along the series of switchbacks, we are invited to traverse the imagined scene. By the time we take the bait, by the time we *bite*, Jerome's martyr is neither intact in his manhood nor simply emasculated (the exchanges enacted in this text already result in something more complex than "feminization"); he is no longer the bottom or the top; his triumph is also his surrender. This witness is located in the gaps, in the fragments, in the very mobility of his shifting desire. And if he has become mute, perhaps he is also, like Philomela, a weaver of a secret text, bearer of desire, carrying us . . . where? Well, for the moment, toward the young Paul.

It seems almost by accident that Paul—"proceeding step by step, sometimes advancing, sometimes retreating, sometimes retracing his steps" (*VP* 5)—discovers the secret cave that was to become the permanent home of the man who thereby fashioned himself as "the first hermit" (*VP* 1). "It is human desire to discover what is hidden," observes Jerome as he describes Paul's removal of the stone and avid exploration of the cave's interior—which expands wondrously, as if to accommodate Paul's desire, opening to the sky, extending with the reaching branches of a palm tree, encircling a neatly contained stream. We are back in a garden, then. This time, it is a garden seemingly safely enclosed, the site of Paul's future self-sufficiency—and yet it also contains a few untidy nooks and crannies and is littered with a strange debris of ancient parts, rusted tools. "Egyptian records report that this place was a clandestine mint dating from the time Antony was joined to Cleopatra," Jerome intones authoritatively (*VP* 5). What is intruded with this fragment of detailed "realism"?³⁰ By means of another

Shaw (280), and the Acts of John, discussed by Tamas Adamik ("The Influence of the Apocryphal Acts in Jerome's *Lives of Saints*," in *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 1, ed. Jan N. Bremmer [Kampen, 1995], 171–82, at 177).

²⁹See J. N. Adams (*The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* [Baltimore, 1982], 69–70) on the term's association with castration.

³⁰Compare Kech: "For the information concerning the condition of the tools as well as the dating to Cleopatra's time must be evaluated as an understandable attempt on the part of the author to anchor the idyll in the realm of the real with characteristic embellishments" (35). "Realism" itself, although crucial to Jerome's generic disruptions as well as his competitive claims for Paul, cannot, I think, adequately account for all the queer particularities of this passage.

narrative break and twist, the presence of “Antony” will soon be explained, but how are we to read the “Cleopatra” with whom he is, or will be, “joined”? Retreating, we discover the Egyptian prostitute who threatens to unman the martyr with the force of his own desire. Advancing, we encounter Paul, approached step by step, along the path of Antony’s desire. Martyr and *meretrix*, Antony and Cleopatra,³¹ Antony and Paul—so many switchbacks, both connective and disruptive, along the tortuous track of this tale.

Creating yet another small diversion by introducing comparative corroboration of Paul’s miraculously restricted diet, consisting at this point solely of dates (*VP* 6), Jerome can then pretend to resume his account of Paul’s life. In the meantime, he has opened and leaped yet another gap in his text. Now Paul—last sighted in adolescence—is 113 years old, and it is the relatively youthful Antony (a mere 90) who is roaming the sun-baked desert in pursuit of hidden things (*VP* 7). Having been summoned by a dream to seek one who is a better monk than he, Jerome’s Antony seems still, in his waking state, to traverse a dreamscape, “mother” of mythical figures that become literalized as signifiers while remaining oversaturated with sense—“hyper-icons,”³² black holes of density in the text that threaten to suck the reader into their unplumbable depths, even as they also propel the narrative forward, luring us on, with Antony.

The first such figure that Antony encounters is a “human mixed with horse,” to which “the fancy of poets assigns the name ‘hippocentaur,’” notes Jerome (*VP* 7). Patricia Cox Miller glosses the text further, pointing out that centaurs were “noted for two traits in particular: their hyper-masculine and violent sexuality, and their hostility to what the Greeks saw as foundational norms of culture.”³³ Antedating not only marriage but also sexual difference itself, as Miller further reminds us, the centaur belongs to an ancient, all-male realm of pure and undifferentiated “nature” while simultaneously functioning as the guardian of divinely transmitted arts of healing, music, and prophecy.³⁴ With a gestured sign of his own sealed salvation, Antony protects himself from the portentous implications of such an alarming encounter; addressing the beast sternly, he demands to know where the “servant of God” dwells. The hybrid creature is as mute as the tongueless martyr: “The beast gnashed its teeth and tried to speak clearly, but only ground out from a mouth shaking with bristles some kind of barbarous sounds rather than lucid speech.” Before it vanishes from the text, however, it extends its right hand in a telling gesture

³¹Aeneas and Dido—another couple in a cave—may also be invoked. Antony will quote Virgil to Paul later in this text.

³²Patricia Cox Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur: A Hyper-Icon of the Desert,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1996): 227, borrowing the language of W. J. T. Mitchell.

³³*Ibid.*, 217.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 218.

of its own, thereby indicating unerringly to Antony “the sought-for route.” Here Jerome pauses briefly to raise the question of “whether the devil himself took on the shape of this creature, thus to terrify Antony, or whether the desert, typically capable of engendering monsters [*monstruosorum animalium ferax*], also gave birth [*gignat*] to this beast.” He concludes lightly: “we are uncertain” (VP 7). Jerome’s deceptively casual tone partly masks the shocking effects of his interjected “uncertainty.”³⁵ Insinuating indifference, he blurs the line between demonic perversion and desert fecundity. With a shrug of his writerly shoulders, he simultaneously creates an interval of difference between the disseminator of illusion and the matrix of myth (between lies and fiction), even as he potentially narrows the gap between the materialized earth and the father’s cave.

At this point, Jerome’s text—which is to say, Jerome’s expansively intertextual desert—swiftly perpetuates itself by yet another inexact repetition.³⁶ No sooner has Anthony resumed his journey than he encounters a dwarf, a homunculus, “whose nostrils were joined together, with horns growing out of his forehead, and with the legs and feet of a goat” (VP 8). As Miller points out, this figure, who confesses himself a member of a race commonly identified as “fauns, satyrs, and incubi,” “reduplicate[s] the centaur” in such a way as to highlight the “hybrid character of the inhabitants indigenous to the desert” while also underlining their hypermasculine sexuality, “by definition nonfamilial and wild.”³⁷ “Stepping forward,” Antony finds himself drawn a step closer to the uncanny creature, who offers him dates and identifies himself as a “mortal being”—that is, a virtual human—and also a fellow follower of Christ, leaving Antony both to weep with joy and to “marvel that he could comprehend the dwarf’s speech.” Do Antony and the homunculus, then, speak with the same tongue? Are they “brothers”? If the appearance of the stereotypically randy figure of the satyr in an ascetic text is itself sufficiently astonishing, the implications of this friendly exchange are almost unthinkable. Indeed, Jerome again expertly interrupts the narrative line before the thought can be completed: the satyr is gone in a flash, disappearing from sight as quickly as the centaur (VP 8). Facing a flickeringly specular desert that has grown “vast” indeed, Antony, like the martyr overwhelmed by his wanton seducer, “knows not what he should do and in what direction he should turn” (VP 9).

³⁵As Kech points out, the phrase also serves to diffuse the contradiction between Jerome’s repeated insistence on historical veracity, on the one hand, and his introduction of recognizably “poetic” figures, on the other (24). This reading does not, however, go far enough, failing to acknowledge either Jerome’s interest in actively problematizing “the real” or the disruptive effects of his refusal to clarify the status of the centaur.

³⁶Jerome’s desert exceeds the dimensions of its Athanasian prototype in large part by gorging itself on other literary bodies, both classical and biblical; see the fine study of Paul B. Harvey, “Saints and Satyrs: Jerome the Scholar at Work,” *Estratto da Athenaeum: Studi di Letteratura e Storia dell’Antichità* 86 (1998): 35–56.

³⁷Miller, “Jerome’s Centaur,” 222–23.

A third guide appears, “a she-wolf, panting with thirst,” who crawls toward the foot of a mountain, where she enters a cave. Antony, perhaps panting too, follows her first with his eyes and then with his feet, his curiosity unsatisfied by his initial glimpse of the dim interior. “Truly, as the Scripture says, ‘Perfect love drives out fear,’” comments Jerome: where pain displaced the martyr’s lust, love now displaces the hermit’s fear, and Antony advances “step by step” in the darkness, “sometimes standing still.” He hears a sound, he perceives a light; stumbling, he creates a sound, and shy Paul (who, of course, waits at the heart of this cave), hearing a sound too, shuts and bolts his door. Performing his role flamingly in this almost parodically groping rite of courtship, Antony prays for hours on end for entrance, pronouncing himself “known” by Paul, acknowledging his unworthiness, and threatening nonetheless not to leave until he has seen his beloved. “You who receive wild beasts, why do you turn down a man?” he cries, and the distinction between man and beast, already doubly disrupted by centaur and satyr, dissolves further, even as Antony attempts flailingly to reassert his difference—now seemingly inscribed as a *sexual* difference (for it is presumably the she-wolf whom Paul has admitted). But if Antony is here (as Pierre Leclerc whimsically proposes) playing Romeo to Paul’s Juliet, does his perversely ardent love—inverting the logic of pederasty—not make the younger man “a little more ridiculous”?³⁸ “I have sought and I have found; I knock that it may be opened,” he proclaims.³⁹ “If I do not obtain my request, I shall die right here in front of your door. Then surely you will at least bury my corpse.” Antony’s final, nearly prophetic vow is, as we shall

³⁸“Paul is at his window and, below, Antony plays the role of the transfixed lover” (Leclerc, 263). The phrase “a little more ridiculous” actually occurs in Leclerc’s description of Antony’s noisy stumbling in the cave (262). Jerome’s own address to Heliodorus in *Ep.* 14.1–2 (contemporaneous with the *Life of Paul*) is perhaps more conventional in its erotic tropes. He represents himself (less ridiculously?) as the active pursuer of an appropriately hesitant “younger” man: “With the pretty ways of a child you then softened your refusal by soothing words, and I, being off my guard, knew not what to do . . . I could not conceal my eagerness by a show of indifference.” Continuing to represent Heliodorus as youthful, he remonstrates: “What keeps you, effeminate soldier, in your father’s house?” Jerome’s lover’s appeal to Rufinus in *Ep.* 3 (also contemporaneous) is somewhat more complex, turning on his own passively eroticized immobility and his desire to lure Rufinus into the role of pursuer: “Oh, if only the Lord Jesus Christ would suddenly transport me to you . . . with what a close embrace would I clasp your neck, how fondly would I press kisses upon that mouth. . . . But as I am unworthy (not that you should so come to me but) that I should so come to you . . . I send this letter to meet you instead of coming myself, in the hope that it may bring you hither to me caught in the meshes of love’s net.” By the end of the letter, the two men are represented in the more egalitarian terms of “friendship”: “Love is not to be purchased, and affection has no price. The friendship which can cease has never been real.”

³⁹The immediate reference is to Matthew 7:7/Luke 11:9. However, Song of Songs 5:2 (“Hark! my beloved is knocking”) and Revelation 30:20 (“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me”) also hover in the background.

see, perhaps as much his desire as his threat. He begs Paul to open his cave, even if only to receive his death, to bury his corpse (*VP* 9).⁴⁰

Paul, teasing and laughing more like a courtesan than a hermit, finally opens. "Do you wonder that I do not let you in, when you threaten to die?" he quips merrily (*VP* 9). The two embrace, call each other by name, and fervently offer thanks to God. Giving Antony a "sacred kiss," Paul displays his body—the body, as Miller suggests, of a desert "wild man,"⁴¹ covered with unkempt hair, and also the body of a hybrid creature, straddling the boundary between life and death, nearly a corpse, shortly to be in need of burial. "You see before you a man soon to become dirt," he declares. Antony apparently likes what he sees. The two gossip sweetly. Unlike (and thus also like) the satyr, Paul serves no dates from his palm. Instead, a raven drops a fat loaf of bread into their laps and flies quickly away again—another fragment, or figment, in Jerome's prolific desert imaginary (*VP* 10). Sitting by the spring, the two men argue for a full day over who will be the first to break the bread. Finally, in yet another comical moment, they determine to pull at the loaf simultaneously (neither will be first, neither will top), and then, after eating, they drink companionably from the spring.⁴² Once again offering thanks to God, they spend the night together—"in watchful prayer," of course. The morning after, Paul delivers his painful news: the time of his death has arrived. "You have been sent by the Lord to cover my wretched body with soil, returning earth to earth," he informs his new friend (*VP* 11). Antony—whose words at the cave's entrance have been returned to him in reverse, along another of the shifty switchbacks of Jerome's text—weeps and begs Paul not to leave him "but to welcome him, Antony, as a companion for the great journey." In reply, Paul merely asks that Antony go back to fetch the cloak Athanasius has given him,⁴³ "to serve as a shroud for my body." Jerome

⁴⁰Harpham's reading of the play between the human body and the "natural setting" in Sasetta's painting surfaces the eroticism in this encounter: "Life in a cave also represents a renunciation of natural desire, the very type of which is anal intercourse. The cave—or anus—is the natural and human site of gender conversion or transformation" (Harpham, "Asceticism," 364).

⁴¹Miller, "Jerome's Centaur," 229.

⁴²Kech provides a nuanced reading of the complex power dynamics at work in Jerome's presentation of the encounter between Antony and Paul (40–46). If Paul's superiority is repeatedly asserted, Jerome's poetics effectively exonerate his polemics: the stylized speech, the disruptive, episodic mode of narration, and the idyllic scenography diffuse—without actually undoing—the hierarchically structured relationship of the two ascetics. By no means contesting but perhaps further complicating this reading, I might ask whether the highly charged and problematized (as well as fragmented) presentation of the inferior Antony in the conventionally superior role of the active lover, in relation to a (more or less) receptive Paul, does not partly destabilize the hierarchical positioning of the two men.

⁴³Compare *Vita Antonii* (hereafter cited as *VA*) 91, where the cloak is returned to Athanasius at Antony's death. Jerome is here quite pointedly redirecting the transmission of the Athanasian mantle of authority.

explains Paul's real motivation: "he wanted Antony to leave him" so that he could "lighten the burden of grief Antony would bear at his death" (*VP* 12). But perhaps Jerome's account is not as "straight" as it seems: the anticipated death and burial have the makings of a marriage, as we shall see, and Antony's temporary banishment will allow him to replicate the expectant motions of his journey. Desire will once more be prolonged, while Paul, simultaneously coy and welcoming, prepares (again) to celebrate his meeting with Antony in the desert that has become a queer kind of Paradise. ("Truly have I seen Paul in Paradise," Antony will explain to his brethren back home [*VP* 13].)

Driving his body to the limits of its strength, Antony returns quickly with the cloak. "He thirsted for Paul, he longed to see Paul, he concentrated his entire attention on Paul." (We recall the she-wolf, thirsting, crawling forward.) Just a few short hours from his goal, he receives a vision of Paul ascending to heaven. Grieving, Antony cries out in the unmistakable language of a lover, "Paul! Why do you abandon me? Why do you leave without saying good-bye? So late in my life I met you; so soon do you depart?" (*VP* 14). Paul still has a surprise or two up his tattered sleeve, however. Antony reaches the cave to find the hermit's body erect, in prayer. Thinking him still alive, he attempts to join him in mutual devotions. But Paul is indeed dead, and Antony, now accepting that death, embraces and kisses a corpse that still knows the appropriate posture for thanksgiving (*VP* 15). Wrapping Paul's body in the cloak and carrying it outside to the accompaniment of his own hymns and psalms (thereby taking on a traditionally feminine role in the rites for the dead—and perhaps also in the preparation of a bride for her marriage), Antony remembers that he does not have the necessary tool for digging a grave. Fresh grief at this lack gives way to wonder, as Jerome performs another breathtakingly mobile multiplication and shift between portentous signs. "From out of the deep desert came running two lions with their manes streaming back from their shoulders." Lion (or lioness) to the rescue is already a stock motif in Christian as well as non-Christian tales (and this is not the last time Jerome himself will turn the trick), but two such splendidly masculine creatures, racing together in such perfect coordination, thrashing their tails, and roaring their lamentations in tandem, is almost more than a man could ask for. "Competing with each other to excavate the sand" (like Paul and Antony arguing and tugging at the bread), this odd couple neatly dig Paul's grave and then humbly gesture their desire to receive Antony's blessing, which he joyfully grants (*VP* 16).

Alone again with Paul, Antony buries the corpse, covering it with desert sand, with which it will mingle, according to Paul's prediction: "You see before you a man soon to become dirt" (*VP* 10). Having wrapped Paul in the cloak of Athanasius, Antony takes Paul's tunic, so that he may wrap his own body in the garment woven from the leaves of the paradisaal palm—

more shroud or wedding garment? "On the holy days of Easter and Pentecost, Antony always wore Paul's tunic" (VP 16). Jerome, in closing *The Life of Paul*, makes his *own* desire clear, addressing his reader directly while naming himself (as so often in this text) in the third person: "If the Lord should give him the choice, he would rather have the tunic of Paul" (VP 18). Shrouding Paul in the Athanasian text of Antony, Jerome (like *his* Antony) chooses the tunic of Paul for himself—the sign of Paul's always dissolving "presence," the veil of "death" that extends desire by thwarting possession. And what is the tunic if not the fabric of *this* text?

It is, after all, queer bait that Jerome has offered his readers, and his repeated switches are still more unsettlingly queer. My point is not merely that this highly innovative hagiographic romance draws us out of the compulsory regime of "civilized" desire and into a realm in which nature and culture collapse around shifting and shiftily gendered figures of male homoeroticism (though that must also be said).⁴⁴ Equally significant is the fact that the text will not, finally, *settle* at all, will not settle upon an *object of desire*. Resisting the temptation of objectification to the end by dissolving Paul into the desert sands (having already elided the narrative of the "life" of one represented as always ready "to become dirt"), a literary decomposition that might be well renamed *The Corruption of Antony* thereby also seeks the destruction of the subject, giving tongue-tied witness to the perpetuation of a "pure" desire that shatters both language and selfhood. (Ever open to desire's corruption, Jerome represents his

⁴⁴Interestingly, erotic interest is not among those "romantic" features of the text acknowledged by Coleiro, although he does mention the "sense of seduction [that] pervades the beauties of the garden of P.3," in the context of his discussion of Jerome's skill in imbuing "situations" and "scenes" with "feeling" (177). Episodes in the *Life of Paul* that I have read as erotic tend to be categorized by Coleiro as instances of a general, nonerotic "romantic" tendency to "present the reader continually with unexpected situations," for example, Paul's initial refusal to admit Antony into his cave, the two men's bickering over the breaking of the bread, Antony's encounter with Paul's praying corpse, and the miraculous arrival of the pair of leonine gravediggers. Concerning all these, Coleiro remarks tellingly, "The behaviour of characters is often too deep to be easily understood and they act in a wholly unexpected way" (173–74). Among recent studies focusing specifically on the *Life of Paul*, Harvey suggests that Jerome adds "romantic coloring . . . to a didactic work to render it attractive to a broad audience," highlighting Jerome's mining of sources both classical and biblical and locating his self-consciously "scholarly" endeavors as a hagiographer in the context of his larger, innovative project "to create a Christian literature" ("Saints and Satyrs," 39–40). Jerome's *Life of Paul* is, however, innovative not least *as a romance*, I am arguing; it is, borrowing Leo Bersani's term, an anti-"pastoral" (and thus perhaps an anti-"romantic?") romance (Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp [Cambridge, MA, 1988], 215, 221). Note that Miller ("Jerome's Centaur," 216) resists the "romanticizing" interpretation not in order to reinscribe the historicity of the *Life of Paul* with Coleiro but rather to affirm its mythopoetic seriousness and complexity, an impulse with which I am in full sympathy. This is *not* a conventional "romance."

own body as “shattered” by his beloved Rufinus’s departure—swiftly augmenting this representation with accounts of other loves found and lost in the Syrian desert [*Ep.* 3.1, 3].) The constitutive textual practice of Jerome’s hagiography is, to borrow Leo Bersani’s phrasing, “the discursive exemplification of desire’s mobile repetitions”;⁴⁵ the disjunctions and repetitions marking its apparent narrative failures (its proliferating resistances to closure) are the sources of its critical and critically erotic power. If “sublimation” here begins to seem “co-extensive with (rather than ‘beyond’) sexuality,”⁴⁶ it may also prove conceptually superfluous—at least for the reading of *this* text.⁴⁷

THE QUEER WIFE OF MALCHUS, THE CAPTIVE MONK

Try to talk about friendship between the sexes, and the conversation always becomes about something else. The inevitable shift is part of what marks the topic as interesting—that it immediately summons a whole range of associations about the way people interact—and is also what defines it as an *idiomatic* problem: friendship between men and women, no matter how intensely it may be valued by how many people, is scarcely nameable as a thing unto itself. Contemporary phrasings, like their predecessors in earlier times, define male/female friendship according to what it is not. “Just friends,” “only friends,” “not lovers,” and similar combinations all in effect describe friendship negatively; all insist that what friendship is not is sexual union or attraction; and all, in the process of making that negative declaration, invite the suspicion that what is being talked about is in fact not friendship but sex, whether unacknowledged, unrealized, or unrevealed.⁴⁸

If the *Life of Paul the Hermit* experimented with a radical disruption of the genre of romance, Jerome’s next—and much later—hagiography, *On the Captive Monk*, seems to follow a “straighter” course, eschewing the world of mythical beasts in favor of the plausibly realistic (even quasi-“historical”) realm of novelistic discourse while also cleaving more closely to the conventional plotline of ancient fiction.⁴⁹ Indeed, although elsewhere a severe (and defensive) critic of the practice of “syneisaktism,” or spiritual marriage, Jerome (also famously the “friend” of the Roman lady Paula) unexpectedly gives us a *married* monk in this almost parodically “romantic”

⁴⁵Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York, 1986), 102.

⁴⁶Ibid., 110.

⁴⁷Ibid., 115–16, on “Freud’s failure to develop a theory of sublimation.”

⁴⁸Victor Luftig, *Seeing Together: Friendship Between the Sexes in English Writing, from Mill to Woolf* (Stanford, 1993), 1.

⁴⁹See Fuhrmann, 64; Robins, 534.

Life. In the end, however, the particular emplotment of a captivatingly ascetic coupling puts "marriage" in question while refusing to offer sexual repression (or its kissing cousin, sublimation) as an easy answer, thereby opening up a strangely empty zone—a portentous "idiomatic" gap?

The tale is an old man's tale, related to Jerome in his inquisitive youth (or so he claims) and now retold via the device of reported speech in his own more settled senectitude. The beginning is familiar enough to readers of other christianized novels: a young man whose desire is all for God is pressured by his family to marry a mere girl. The youth flees and eventually—indeed, all too quickly and easily, given the voracious novelistic appetite for adventure—finds true love among the monks of the Syrian desert.⁵⁰ This first miniplot is thus a failed romance, having neglected to defer its conclusion, and the narrator must begin again.⁵¹

Now the problem is framed in terms of the young monk's desire to visit his widowed mother and attend to his family estate. The old man recalls the thoughts that belonged to his own youth: "After her death, I would sell what little property there was, give part of the proceeds to the poor, erect a monastery with part, and—why do I blush to admit my infidelity?—put aside the remainder to pay for my own comfort." His abbot sees through the demonically inspired ruse and begs him to desist from his plans. "And when my abbot failed to persuade me, he fell on his knees and begged that I not desert him, that I not destroy myself." For a second time, the man—who is both our hero and our narrator, Malchus—resists paternal coercion and sets off (*VM* 3). At this point, he will meet with the adventures he needs, and the story will become a real *story*.

Traversing a barren wasteland with about seventy others banded together for protection against marauding Saracens, he and his party are beset by an exotic troop of "Ishmaelites," and Malchus, who had hoped to regain his home and inheritance, instead loses his very freedom. One other of his fellow travelers, a woman, is assigned as a slave to the same owner, and the two are carried by camels to their master's familial encampment in the heart of the harsh desert (*VM* 4). Like a prisoner, as he comments, Malchus is stripped of his former identity: "I learned to go about naked, for the heat allowed no covering except of one's private parts." Dressed in only a loincloth, Malchus goes native—and thereby

⁵⁰*Vita Malchi* 3. Hereafter cited in text as *VM*. Translations of *On the Captive Monk (Life of Malchus)* are based on W. H. Fremantle, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, ser. 2, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), 315–18. I also had the benefit of consulting an unpublished translation by Paul Harvey, whose generosity should be acknowledged.

⁵¹Kech (162–63) understands the prolongation of the romance in terms of a "classical" three-stage narration of ascent, fall, reascent, in which Malchus may also serve as a "type" of the church.

unexpectedly recovers the archaic purity of the desert shepherd. "It seemed to me that the holy Jacob and I had something in common; Moses also came to mind" (*VM* 5). Fleeing the monastery, the slave Malchus is finally beginning to be a real monk by becoming a wild man. Captivity becomes his desire and his pleasure.

But, of course, more trials await the hero. His master, pleased with the slave's performance, desires to reward him so as further to secure his loyalty. The hitch is that Malchus is none too pleased with his prize. "He handed over to me a fellow-slave, the very woman taken captive with me." Malchus attempts to decline politely ("thanks, but no thanks") on the basis of religious values, invoking not, as we might expect, a monastic but a marital morality. "I . . . stated that I was a Christian and not permitted to accept as a wife a married woman whose husband was still alive." Why this subtle displacement of his resistance? Malchus, the narrator, fails to comment, and we are left to draw our own conclusions. At any rate, the strategy, if that is what it is, backfires. The master is not merely surprised but surprisingly enraged. "He lost his temper and started to chase me with sword drawn." Clearly, Malchus is expected to draw a "sword" of his own in self-defense. Does he? "Had I not immediately grabbed the woman and embraced her, he would have drained me of my blood on the spot," he declares (*VM* 6). The defense seems a bit shaky for a monk well practiced in daily martyrdom. But Malchus, as we shall see, prefers to perform his witness before a more private audience.

"Well, then," he continues, "night came, darker than usual and all too quickly, as far as I was concerned. I led my new wife, with misery our bridesmaid, into a half-collapsed cave." Malchus is just about "half-collapsed" himself by this point. Now, for the first time, he knows himself truly a captive. A prisoner in marriage, he resorts to playing the virgin. Throwing himself on the ground in lamentation, he waxes histrionic, bewailing the anticipated loss of his chastity, so long preserved. His concluding speech is that of any maidenly heroine—or martyr—worth her salt, ready to take matters into her own hands, if need be.⁵² "Turn the sword against yourself: death of the soul is more to be feared than the body's demise," he proclaims in self-address. "Sexual purity preserved also has its martyrdom. Let the witness for Christ lie unburied in the desert. I shall play both roles: persecutor and martyr." With these words, Malchus finally draws his sword, "which gleamed in the darkness." At this point, the woman finds her tongue and uses it to expose and explore a few gaps in Malchus's hysterically feminized discourse. Who is forcing him now, anyway? His "bride" may not be

⁵²Fuhrmann (66) notes parallels in romance literature. The tales of Christian virgin martyrs are perhaps a still closer parallel. See Virginia Burrus, "Reading Agnes: The Rhetoric of Gender in Ambrose and Prudentius," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 25–46.

a virgin or even “single” (as Malchus has chosen to point out to his master), but this is *not* the opening scene of the *Life of Paul* and, thus, if the master has sheathed his sword without having violated Malchus’s virginity, why is Malchus now waving his own sword about? (And what is a slave doing with a sword? Or is it something else that gleams in the dark?) “Why should you die in order to avoid being joined to me?” queries the woman. (Or why not have died earlier, impaled on the master’s sword, rather than making a grab at me?) “I would die, if you intended to take me as wife,” she proclaims, succinctly clarifying the situation. Having straightened out their roles, the woman—likely tiring of Malchus’s alarmingly queer contradictions—makes a practical proposition. “Have me, then, as a partner in sexual purity and love the bond of the soul instead of that of the body. Our masters may presume that you are my husband; Christ will know that you are my brother. We shall easily convince them of our marriage when they see us act in a loving way.” Malchus, not surprisingly, is “dumbfounded” (perhaps he has suddenly bitten his tongue). Impressed by the woman’s strength, he suddenly “loved her as a wife all the more.” More than what? More than when he first drew his sword, perhaps? At any rate, he now loves her “as a wife”—and that is *not* to imply that they are lovers (rather, “just friends”). “Never did I look upon her naked body. Never did I touch her flesh.” The strategy is successful: the queer couple is happy, and so are their masters (*VM* 6).

Actually, it seems that Malchus is not completely happy—or at least not for long. Observing a colony of ants, he finds himself missing life with the brethren. “I began to tire of my captivity, to yearn for the cells of the monastery, and to feel a need for the sense of purpose of those ants—where everyone works for the community,” he recalls (*VM* 7). Married, he again experiences himself as a captive in his less-than-monkish servitude. Longing restlessly for the monastery, he nonetheless still clings to his soul’s mate: “I couldn’t hide my melancholy; she asked why I was so troubled.” Bound together in a pledge of secrecy, the two whisper intimately into their pillows, plotting their joint escape (*VM* 8). But where will it end, for such a pair?

Fleeing by night, the couple hike ten miles to a river, hoping to put their masters off their trail by paddling across the water, supported on inflated sheeps’ bladders (supplied, with Odyssean effort, by Malchus). Losing most of their provisions in the crossing, they are now threatened by hunger and thirst as well as the dangers of overexposure to the sun, the bites of poisonous creatures that lurk in the sheltering shade of rocks, possible roaming bands of Saracens, and the wrath of their masters, who are certain to be soon in hot pursuit. “Even now, as I tell you this,” recalls Malchus, “I begin to tremble in fear; even though I know in my mind I am safe, my whole body shudders” (*VM* 8). (It is not hard to believe him.) On the third day, sure enough, they see two riders mounted on camels in

the distance. They also see an underground cavern, extending to their right. Even more afraid of their master than of the possible dangers awaiting them in the shadows (“vipers, basilisks, scorpions”), they duck into a crevice just inside the cavern’s entrance. There is good reason to think this might turn out to be their tomb, as Malchus tells it. Breathless with fear, they see their master and a slave appear at the entrance (*VM* 9).

A wondrously gruesome theater unfolds before their eyes. The master sends his slave into the cave. The slave enters, shouting to the runaways to give themselves up. “He was still crying out to us when lo! we watched in the darkness as a lioness attacked the man, ripped open his throat and dragged his bloody body into the cave.” Torn between terror and joy, the two scarcely have time to recover before their master, impatient with the delay, bursts into the cave, sword drawn once again. “Before he reached our hiding place, he was caught by the wild beast. Who would ever believe that before our eyes a wild creature would fight for us!” enthuses Malchus. It is clear, however, that the lioness’s defense of Malchus and his companion is understood as incidental to her own purposes, for Malchus is well aware that “death of a similar sort” is their likely fate. “We were armed solely with our knowledge that our chastity protected us as if by a wall,” he adds. However, it is the lioness’s own instinct for defense of herself and her cub to which he continues to attribute their safety, in the event. “When morning came, the lioness, fearing a trap and aware that she had been seen, picked up her cub by her teeth and carried it off, thus surrendering her refuge to us.” Even then, the couple wait until evening before they dare move from their hiding place (*VM* 9). Mounting the two camels conveniently positioned outside the cave and equally conveniently laden with provisions, Malchus and his woman slowly but steadily make their way back to civilization. Once safely home, they are even able to sell the camels (*VM* 10).

Relating this story of salvation occurring “in the presence of violence, in the midst of the desert, and in the company of wild beasts,” as Jerome glosses it in his own notably concise (indeed almost cautiously pat) conclusion (*VM* 10), Malchus takes us neither to the dreamlike desert of Paul nor to the demonic sandscape of the Athanasian Antony. His desert is uncompromisingly “natural”: the fierce lioness is no close kin of Paul’s courtly grave-diggers; the poison of vipers and scorpions needs no help from Satan; and miracles seem a matter of chance and interpretation.⁵³ But what of the final outcome? Here is Malchus’s own report: “When I returned here, I handed myself over once again to the monks. . . . And as for this woman, whom I cherished as a sister, but did not commit myself to her as a sister, I turned her over to the virgins” (*VM* 10). *What?* “Did not commit”? That is all; again, we are left to draw our own conclusions. She: no longer a “wife.” He: no longer answering to her call of “brother.” He: once again brother to his brothers. She: well, it is possible to hope that “the woman” fares better with her sisters—and why should she not?

⁵³See Fuhrmann, 63.

Borrowing Malchus's voice, Jerome has here sustained a continuous plot and, in so doing, has risked running the romance into the ground. Closure is deadening without the shattering presence of a disintegrating corpse; sexuality withers without the deferrals of sublimation; freedom loses its sweetness when utterly released from constraint. Or perhaps the problem could be better stated otherwise: "the woman" who is here at the end so casually "turned over to the virgins" has a voice but never acquires a name. Could it be that Malchus, if he does not even remember what she is called, has long since ceased to hear her clearly, just as he refuses to look at her body or touch her flesh? Sleeping next to her night after night, has he eradicated even temptation? The first, truncated tale of true love in the monastery threatens to subsume and displace the second, more richly developed tale of a queer marriage: however promisingly they begin, this ascetic couple is, by Malchus's own account, an erotic failure, their story leeching of desire.

Brought under the spell of Malchus's discourse, readers of this Life should not therefore cease to resist, here at the end: this is, after all, still *Jerome's romance* and thus crucially *not* a seamlessly woven text.⁵⁴ Surely we may be expected to notice that the history that Malchus brings to such a calm conclusion not only fails to address the curious query that prompts its original telling but furthermore subtly contradicts what Jerome himself claims to have *seen*—that is, an ancient and pious *couple* living companionably whom (but for their apparent childlessness) he might have mistaken for "Zacharias and Elizabeth of the Gospel" (*VM 2*).⁵⁵ (Manfred Fuhrmann tucks his embarrassment at the contradiction into a squirming footnote: "One difficulty remains: according to chapter 2 Malchus lives with the *anus* in *contubernium*; in chapter 10 in contrast he affirms that 'I gave myself again to the monks and handed her over to the virgins.' One should thus assume that the two initiated the *contubernium* at an advanced age.")⁵⁶ In the gap between the young Jerome's initial, burning question concerning the character of this coupling ("what was the bond: matrimony, blood, or the Spirit?" [*VM 2*]) and the elderly Malchus's elusively narrated answer, we can locate the "idiomatic problem" that is also a matrix of unmentionable desire. Perhaps it is the case (as the now-mature Jerome intones in closing) that "sexual purity is never a prisoner and that the person dedicated to Christ can die but cannot be overcome" (*VM 10*). Nonetheless, the monk Malchus (so Jerome also insinuates) never ceases to be captivated by his queer wife, as long as he lives.

⁵⁴Indeed, as Paul Harvey points out, it most likely has a quite specific apologetic occasion, namely, the defense of his "romance" with Paula.

⁵⁵Kech (159–61) notes the allusion to the "curiosity" that evokes the first-person narrative in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*.

⁵⁶Fuhrmann, 63, n. 1.

HILARION'S LAST LAUGH

What is peculiarly postmodern about these celebrity biographies is the way in which bisexuality, though it appears at first to be everywhere—on the jacket blurb, in the headlines, in the index—is ultimately, not nowhere, but elsewhere. Like postmodernism itself, it resists a stable referentiality. It performs.⁵⁷

When Jerome takes to writing hagiography for the last time, he reverts once more to the affair of Paul, with which he had begun: “We despise voices of abuse of some who, as they once disparaged my Paul, will now perhaps disparage Hilarion.” Soon to be companions in abuse (if not literal martyrdom), Paul and Hilarion are nonetheless positioned antithetically in the discourse of their detractors, as Jerome anticipates it: “Censuring the former for his solitude, they may find fault with the latter for his sociability; as the one who was always hidden did not exist, the other who was seen by many is deemed of no account.” Rising to the rhetorical occasion with characteristic vigor, Jerome hurls his own voice of praise combatively at an audience determined (as he suggests, with heavy irony) neither to give nor to take any satisfaction. Paul’s smilingly elusive solitude will be augmented by a more robust hilarity, his closeted lifestyle complemented by the exhibitionism of a holy man who is “out” to the world. If Paul was like John the Baptist, suggests Jerome, Hilarion is like Jesus, “in the busy throng, eating and drinking.” In authoring the *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome is thus saucily turning the other cheek to the lashing tongues of his critics, whether real or fantasized. His muse is none less than the Holy Spirit, and once again inspiration propels him in startlingly new directions.⁵⁸ Having recently, with the *Life of Malchus*, attempted a “straighter” romance, he now attempts a “straighter” hagiography,⁵⁹ sweeping the monsters from his Pauline closet and sorting out the dualisms of his desert according to (more or less) Athanasian standards of demonizing decency. But here, as in the *On the Captive Monk*, it is precisely by playing at generic conventionality that Jerome achieves his queer results.

As in the *Life of Paul*, the emaciated figure of Antony is the pivot around which the tale of a holy man turns. If, in the bold rescripting of Jerome’s first saintly Life, Antony’s desire for Paul proves all-consuming, now it is Hilarion who “is fired with a desire to see” Antony. In hot pursuit of a Desert Father, Hilarion at first seems to repeat the journey of the

⁵⁷Marjorie Garber, “Bisexuality and Celebrity,” in *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York, 1996), 27.

⁵⁸*Vita Hilarionis* I. Hereafter cited in text as *VH*. Translations of the *Life of Hilarion* are based on W. H. Fremantle, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, ser. 2, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI, 1989), 303–15.

⁵⁹Fuhrmann, 48.

Hieronymian lover of Paul, an Antony now repositioned as the object of Hilarion's desire. However, Hilarion also crucially replays the mimetic discipleship of *Athanasius's* Antony—a doubled act of homage that likewise places Antony in the role of master, even as Jerome allows himself (temporarily, as we shall see) to be mastered by the Athanasian Life. In the tactically citational *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome's eagerly imitative hero initially observes Antony as closely as Athanasius's Antony once observed the ascetics on the outskirts of his own village (cf. *VA* 4), "contemplating the method of his life and the gravity of his conduct, his assiduity in prayer, his humility in his dealings with the brethren, his severity in rebuke, his eagerness in exhortation." Where Jerome's Paul challenges Antony on the basis of seniority, his Hilarion—a younger man—seems determined to beat the Athanasian ascetic at his own game, matching him move for move. Although Athanasius's Antony has already made a city of the desert (*VA* 14), Hilarion, "deeming it a strange anomaly that he should have to bear in the desert the crowds of the cities," stubbornly retraces Antony's first, "pre-civilized" steps, backtracking to his own home to renounce his familial inheritance before plunging alone and defenseless into the perilous (and still monastically pristine) wilderness not of Egypt but of Palestine (*VH* 3; cf. *VA* 2–3).

There it is that the ostensibly sociable Hilarion accomplishes his foundationally eremitic self-refashioning. At fifteen, "stripped bare" of all but "the weapons of Christ" (*VH* 3), he can be seen (through Jerome's ever-keen vision) to possess not only bright eyes and smooth cheeks but also a "body thin and delicate" (*VH* 4). (Athanasius, perhaps a man of dim eyesight, never drops a hint concerning Antony's looks.)⁶⁰ Outfitted like the corpse of Paul in a rough cloak from Antony's swelling closet of monkish garments, and wearing no more than a regulation sackcloth shirt under that, Hilarion practices an asceticism so stringent that his physique grows yet more frail, premature aging prolonging and intensifying the appealing fragility of his youth: "he became so feeble and his frame so wasted that his bones scarcely held together" (*VH* 5).⁶¹ Like the Athanasian Antony, he finds himself in a bracingly hostile wilderness populated not by mythical guides but rather by malevolent demons (*VH* 6–8), and he inhabits a distinctly nonparadisaic cell, "more like a tomb than a house" (*VH* 9).⁶² When, at the end of twenty-two years of punishing solitude,⁶³ a woman suffering from sterility is "bold enough to break into the presence of the

⁶⁰As Derek Krueger reminds me, this is not quite true: *VA* 14, depicting Antony's emergence from the fortress, virtually fetishizes the holy man's body, yet it remains the case that the only visual detail provided is rather abstract, namely, that Antony was neither fat nor thin.

⁶¹Compare Jerome's self-descriptions, for example, in *Ep.* 3 and 22.

⁶²Antony, of course, has done time in a tomb (*VA* 8).

⁶³Compare *VA* 14, where Antony emerges dramatically into public view after almost twenty years of solitude.

blessed Hilarion" (VH 13), the holy man emerges ripe with the miracles demanded by visitors who beset him in ever greater numbers, when his fame begins to rival even Antony's—as the master himself acknowledges. ("And if ever the sick from Syria came to him, [Antony] would say to them, 'Why have you taken the trouble to come so far, when you have there my son, Hilarion?'" [VH 24].)

If Jerome's renditions of Hilarion's demonic temptations and holy disciplines do not quite add up to the tale of ascetic progress that he pretends to offer (he confesses it "tedious to narrate singly the successive steps of his spiritual ascent" [VH 10]), his representation of Hilarion's more mature Antonine career as miracle worker and semi-itinerant monastic leader is likewise marked by a strikingly disjunctive and oddly "distant" style.⁶⁴ The result is perhaps another kind of tedium,⁶⁵ at least for a reader seeking the satisfaction of a clearly drawn plot or sustained characterization, as Jerome loosely strings one miracle story after another in a sequence that, however artfully constructed,⁶⁶ nonetheless builds toward no particular climax. Here we may sense him leaning (perhaps a bit lazily) on the prop of the Athanasian *Life*, whose progressions are clearly mapped across the terrain of the desert and punctuated by the well-rounded discourses of the ascetic sage. Here we may *also* observe Jerome beginning to explode the master text in which he has initially planted his own deliberately "primitive" hagiography (with the help of the Holy Spirit): immodestly making himself over as Antony, Jerome's Hilarion has silently shed the Athanasian monk's cloak of restraint. Forgetting to mutter nervously that he derives all his power from God, Hilarion confidently cures illnesses (VH 13–17, 19), engages in wrestling matches with demonically possessed strongmen (VH 18), and casts counterspells to protect the victories of charioteers (VH 20) and the virtues of maidens (VH 21). No wonder this holy man is easily taken for a magician (VH 20).⁶⁷

It is the death of Antony that releases the romance in the *Life of Hilarion*. It releases Hilarion first of all from the tedium of his placement "at the head of a grand monastery and a multitude of resident brethren," for it is shortly after apprehending Antony's passing (miraculously, of course [VH 29])—and with reference not only to the Athanasian Antony's knowledge of Amun's death [VA 60] but also to the Hieronymian Antony's vision of Paul's death [VP 14]) that Hilarion makes his break for freedom. Unfortunately, his getaway ass is not quite

⁶⁴Fuhrmann, 43.

⁶⁵A threat acknowledged by Kech, who refers to Jerome's need to counteract the fragmentation and lack of coherence of "a series of miracles that perhaps grows boring" (62).

⁶⁶Fuhrmann, 44.

⁶⁷Fuhrmann suggests that Jerome competes successfully with the Athanasian *Life* in part by dipping more deeply into traditional (non-Christian) biographical representations of holy men as miracle workers (50–54). But see also Kech's analysis of the numerous biblical allusions woven into the fabric of Jerome's representation of the holy man as miracle worker (74–78).

quick enough: "ten thousand people of various ages and both sexes came together to prevent his departure." Literally made the captive of his devotees, Hilarion stages a seven-day hunger strike before he is finally liberated to undertake a journey in the company of forty hand-picked monks, eventually arriving (following a few teasingly tedious detours) at Antony's former desert abode. There he is determined to spend the night of the anniversary of his master's death "in vigil in the very place where the saint had died" (VH 30). At this point, and perhaps for the first time, glimmers of a fertile Paradise known to Jerome's Paul and *his* Antony seem to shine through the text. "There is a high and rocky mountain extending for about a mile, with gushing springs amongst its spurs, the waters of which are partly absorbed by the sand, partly flow towards the plain and gradually form a stream shaded on either side by countless palms which lend much pleasantness and charm to the place," writes Jerome, once again at his descriptive best, as he expertly invokes the classical topos of the *locus amoenus*. Pacing in Antony's footsteps, gazing on the garden of his design and planting, touching the hoe so often held by Antony's own hands, "Hilarion would lie upon the saint's bed and as though it were still warm would affectionately kiss it." Antony's cell cradles him as closely as a tomb (or rather a womb?), "its sides measuring no more than the length of a sleeping man." But there is more. "On the lofty mountain-top, the ascent of which was by a zig-zag path very difficult, were to be seen two cells of the same dimensions. . . . These were cut out of the live rock and were only furnished with doors." Why *two* cells, *two* living caves? Has Antony been awaiting his partner? Hilarion, who seems to sense that he has arrived very close to some destination, "further asked to be shown his burial place." Readers of the queer *Life of Paul*, perhaps beginning to feel at home in this text, should not be surprised by Jerome's next slippery switch: "but whether they showed him the tomb or not is unknown" (VH 31).

For we are by no means at the end of this *Life*. Antony's death sets Hilarion in motion without giving him a clear orientation, it would seem; his restlessness, the counterpart of Malchus's, propels him not toward but away from his monastic brothers. The tale, with Hilarion, meanders farther and then nearly calms itself again on its own stagnant waters before first a persecution (VH 33) and then the still greater threat of recall to his monastery (VH 34) gradually propel the reluctant hero away from the Egyptian and Palestinian cradles of asceticism. "The old man accompanied by Gazanus went on board a ship which was sailing to Sicily" (VH 35). Again, the saint is at the mercy of his gift: working more wonders, he finds himself besieged by the crowds he ostensibly seeks to avoid, in a series of hyperbolic repetitions of the movement of social withdrawal and subsequent pursuit already established by the Athanasian *Life of Antony*.⁶⁸

⁶⁸And also by prior traditions of representing miracle workers; see Fuhrmann, 49.

But there is also a repetition of the more intimately coy withdrawal of Jerome's own Paul, in the face of a lover's pursuit. Hilarion will have (and also be) his Antony both ways—and then some, as we shall see. “While this was going on in Sicily, Hesychius his disciple was searching the world over for the old man, traversing the coast, penetrating deserts, clinging all the while to the belief that wherever he was he could not long be hidden” (VH 38). Hesychius, Jerome has informed his readers earlier, is a monk “to whom Hilarion is most powerfully attracted” [*quo ille vehementissime delectabatur*] (VH 28). He also shares with Hilarion the nearly martyrial honor of having been singled out for imperial persecution during the reign of Julian (VH 33). At some point, however, Hilarion has seemingly given his attractive friend the slip, sneaking away on a ship (like that equally slippery hero Aeneas, cutting out on the also unquestionably attractive Dido). The hapless Hesychius meets with no centaur or satyr, but after three years of searching he does encounter another queer guide: “a certain Jew, who dealt in old clothes” (perhaps used cloaks for would-be ascetic gents?), informs him of the presence in Sicily of “a Christian prophet” who “was working such miracles and signs one might think him one of the ancient saints.” Hopping a ship, Hesychius closes in on his quarry. “And, to cut my story short, the holy man Hesychius fell down at his master's knees and bedewed his feet with tears; at length he was gently raised by him,” reports Jerome. Hesychius arrives in the nick of time, as it happens. Although Hilarion remains mysteriously uncommunicative of his intentions with this purportedly delectable monk, his servant Gazanus informs Hesychius “that Hilarion no longer felt himself able to live in those parts, but wanted to go to certain barbarous races where his name and fame were unknown” (VH 38).

By now a wanderer of Odyssean (or perhaps rather Aenean) proportions, Hilarion travels to Dalmatia and thence to Cyprus, working wonders and attracting troublesome crowds wherever he goes, always holding over their heads the magnificent threat of his imminent departure (upon which he acts just often enough) (VH 39–42). Hesychius, sent back to Palestine, returns to Cyprus to find his master not yet ascending to heaven but instead plotting his departure for Egypt. At this point, the disciple—seemingly unable to face another of Hilarion's sly slips—takes on the role of guide himself, cleverly locating a piece of nearly inaccessible Paradise for Hilarion in the mountainous interior of Cyprus.⁶⁹ As it turns out, it is Paradise with a serpentine twist that will finally outdo—and thus perhaps

⁶⁹Kech comments: “If one looks more closely at this place (ch. 43) and compares it with the Antonine mountain in Egypt, one makes an astonishing identification: the place where Hilarion ends his ascetic existence resembles that described in ch. 31 to such a degree that one glimpses in it a copy of the Antonine mountain; this not without irony, since Hilarion

undo—even the demonically infested Athanasian *Life*. “It was indeed a lonely and terrible place; for though surrounded by trees on every side, with water streaming from the brow of the hill, a delightful bit of garden, and fruit-trees in abundance (of which, however, he never ate), yet it had close by the ruins of an ancient temple from which, as he himself was wont to relate and his disciples testify, the voices of such countless demons re-echoed night and day, that you might have thought there was an army of them.” Hilarion is “highly pleased” [*valde delectatus*] with his new digs, and his spirits are revived by the frequent visits of Hesychius during his last years. Inevitably, a few others also manage to make the tortuous climb to his lofty peak, their desire to seek out Hilarion only intensified by the seemingly well founded rumor “that he could not stay long in the same place.” (“This habit of his was not due to levity or childishness,” notes Jerome somewhat defensively, “but to the fact that he shunned the worry of publicity and praise” [*VH 43*].) One among the visitors is, evidently, worth naming: “There came also Constantia, a holy woman whose son-in-law and daughter he had anointed with oil and saved from death.” Having written a will with his own hand leaving all that he owns (“that is to say, a copy of the gospels, and his sack-cloth tunic, cowl and cloak”) to the absent Hesychius, and having also instructed Constantia and his other visitors to bury him in his garden immediately, the aged saint draws his last breath (*VH 44–45*).

Death does not, however, put an end either to Hilarion’s restless travels or to his wondrously seductive appeal. Hesychius, having frustratingly failed to be present at the holy man’s demise and burial, hastily returns to Cyprus and takes up residence on his master’s mountaintop perch. If the tale seems here to double back on itself once more, with Hesychius playing Hilarion to Hilarion’s Antonine corpse (and behind that, playing Antony to Hilarion’s Pauline corpse), the repetition plotted by Jerome is (yet again) strategically inexact. Hesychius’s mimesis turns out to be a clever ruse, and this time (it seems) the corpse will not elude its lover: “in the course of about ten months, though at great peril to his life, [Hesychius] stole the saint’s body.” And what a corpse it is, once triumphantly laid to rest in the Palestinian monastery that Hilarion has decisively and repeatedly (even tediously) fled: “His tunic, cowl and cloak, were uninjured; the whole body as perfect as if alive, and so fragrant with sweet odours that one might suppose it to have been embalmed” (*VH 46*). The *tale* cannot, however, quite be laid to rest in Palestine. Jerome deems it inappropriate

communicated to his disciple Hesychius his intention to leave Cyprus again and choose as the resting place of his old age one of the regions in Egypt inhabited by barbarians” (85, see also 90–95). For Kech it is pilgrimage and the cult of the saints that links these two idyllic “places” with the themes of both wandering and miracle working.

not to mention in closing “the devotion of the holy woman Constantia who, when a message was brought her that Hilarion’s body was in Palestine, immediately died, proving even by death the sincerity of her love for the servant of God.” He continues his brief account, apparently unperturbed by its tragic dimensions: “For she was accustomed to spend whole nights in vigil at his tomb and to converse with him as if he were present in order to stimulate her prayers” (VH 47).

Leaving the jilted woman in the dust, Hesychius seems to have the fragrant object of his desire in his snuffling grasp at last. But does he really? Hilarion, after all, only intended to leave him his clothes and a self-inscribed volume of scripture that he had once tried, without success, to give away to a ship’s captain, having already memorized its contents. “Even at the present day one may see a strange dispute between the people of Palestine and the Cypriotes, the one contending that they have the body, the other the spirit of Hilarion,” remarks Jerome, sustaining the ambiguity introduced into his text at the penultimate moment. Where *is* Hilarion, anyway? the reader wonders. “In both places great miracles are wrought daily, but to a greater extent in the garden of Cyprus, perhaps because that spot was dearest to him,” Jerome concludes (VH 47). What? “Dearer” (more delectable) than the spot subsequently selected by the (also delectable) Hesychius?

Being both here and there, Jerome’s Hilarion is, in the end, neither here nor there as either subject or object of desire (yet he is “ultimately, not nowhere, but elsewhere”). And if this hilarious holy man has the last laugh,⁷⁰ proving as elusive in his publicized mobility as Paul in his concealed stability, does Jerome’s closing statement not hint that Hesychius is the butt of Hilarion’s best joke? Perhaps there are two holes carved out of living rock on a mountaintop not in Egypt or Palestine but rather in Cyprus, where a zigzagging path dodges the devious misguidance of an overly literal minded disciple. And what could be queerer, in the context of the incipient “homo-normativity” of ascetic sociality, than to imagine that it is the hol(e)y *woman* who still holds ghostly converse with the monk Hilarion, in the garden of untasted fruit trees where he asked to be buried, near the haunted ruins of a temple—might it even be a temple of the Cyprian Venus?⁷¹ (And might it even be Paula, Jerome’s oh-so-“constant” companion, who disrupts the tedium of a desert of renunciation with her juicy hilarity?) Ah, but perhaps Jerome has let more out of the closet, here at the end of this last *Life*, than he quite intended.

⁷⁰Note references to Hilarion’s “smiling” at 18, 20, 26, and 41. See Kech (108–12) for a more soberly “edifying” reading of Hilarion’s “laugh” or “smiling.”

⁷¹Fuhrmann notes: “With the temple Jerome may have thought of a Venus-shrine, as then with the words *Paphum urbem Cypri nobilem carminibus poetarum* (ch. 42) he presumably had in mind first of all Hor[ace,] *Carm[ina]* I.30, 1–2; III 28, 13–15, and Verg[il,] *Aen[eid]* I 415” (48, n. 1).

"In the beginning, there can be only dying, the abyss, the first laugh. After that, you don't know. It's life that decides. Its terrible power of invention, which surpasses us. . . . Write! What? Take to the wind, take to writing, form one body with the letters. Live!"⁷² Jerome is always beginning his Life, writing, writing all the beginnings.

PROLONGATIONS: ROMANCING THE FAUN

But, enough. Such a secret chose for confident
The vast and twin reed on which one plays under the blue sky:
Which, diverting to itself the cheek's disturbance,
Dreams, in a long solo, that we are beguiling
The surrounding beauty by fictive
Confusions between itself and our credulous song;
And (dreams) of making—as high as love modulates—
Vanish from the everyday dream of a back
Or of a pure side followed by my closed eyes,
A sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line.⁷³

This passage from a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé about an artfully dreamy faun engages Leo Bersani's revisionary reading of Freudian theories of "artistic sublimation." In these verses Bersani finds "the suggestion that sublimation is not a transcendence of desire, but rather a kind of extending of desire which has taken the form of a productive receding of consciousness" (47). The faun's physicalized sensuality—"the cheek's disturbance"—is "diverted to," replicated, supplemented, and modulated by the reed. The reed's song is not, however, "the esthetic distillation of his sensual fantasies of a nymph's back or thigh" (48), which would, in translating the body's lines into an equivalent line of music, disguise or repress the sensual impulse. Rather, it is an anticipatory dream of such a translation, a dream that effectively extends and suspends desire by an ironically dismissive deferment that finally eludes the "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line" and thereby retrieves the "songe ordinaire" as free-floating "reverie" (played on an instrument "vast and twin"). The faun wonders if he has really seen the nymphs or merely imagined them, seduced by his own art. And yet what is reality if (as he dreams it) nature herself is "beguiled" by the confusions between himself and his song? Balancing a "credulous" fiction against a nature imagined as equally credulous, the faun's self-irony unsettles the "real." "To remember [the nymphs] is to wonder

⁷²Hélène Cixous, "Coming to Writing," in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 41.

⁷³Stéphane Mallarmé, "Afternoon of a Faun," trans. Leo Bersani, in Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, 47–48. Hereafter cited in text.

if he really saw them. Yet to doubt their reality is to wish to paint them, and to paint them is to return to his desires, and to confuse, once again, what he desires with what may really be there." Thus, the faun moves from "an art of entrapped realism to an art of happily mobile ironies" (49). On Bersani's reading, the poem "encourages us to view sublimation not as a mechanism by which desire is denied, but rather as a self-reflexive activity by which desire multiplies and diversifies its representations." He adds, "There is, to be sure, a certain purification of the desiring impulse, but purification should be understood here as an abstracting process which is not necessarily desexualizing" (49). In fact, Bersani suggests that sublimation—understood as the mechanism of desire's prolongation—is the essence of sexuality. Its effect, exemplified by Mallarmé's poem, is to make "the objects of desire productively unlocatable" (49) and thereby also to dislocate, if not annihilate, the subject. "In his willful recreation of scenes which may never have taken place" (that is, the faun's subsequent [fantasized?] sexual assault on the nymphs), "the faun narcissistically indulges a self already burned away. Desire purifies the faun of his identity" (50).

Reading Mallarmé's textual faun over Bersani's shoulder, I am not only interrupting but also thereby prolonging my own reading of Jerome. Slipping and sliding between fantasies of fauns, returning once again to Jerome's improbable homunculus, I privilege certain aspects of the *Life of Paul* for the purpose of proposing an interpretation of Hieronymian "sublimation," the movements of which are replicated, supplemented, and modulated in his subsequent hagiographies. In the already elaborately ironized persona of Antony, Jerome "dreams" a centaur, a faun, a she-wolf, a raven, twinned lions—and thereby also dreams a holy man in the desert. Are these demonic illusions or the offspring of the desert itself? he queries. (Is the author himself mastered by his own fantasy? Is the desert—that "surrounding beauty" so frequently and artfully depicted in Hieronymian ekphrasis—itsself "beguiled," seduced by his "credulous song"?) "We are uncertain" is his own answer. Indeed, as readers we are destined to remain uncertain. The objects of desire and identification, already fantasmatically multiplied and diversified within the *Life of Paul*, are "productively unlocatable." "To remember is to wonder if he really saw them. Yet to doubt their reality is to wish to paint them, and to paint them is to return to his desires, and to confuse, once again, what he desires with what may really be there." Is it possible that the quintessentially elusive, ever dissolving Paul himself, "one who was always hidden," "did not exist" (as the *Life's* detractors claimed)? We remain uncertain. And thus, as the anticipated "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line" of the song eludes us (as we elude it), through the artful interruptions and inexact repetitions by which Jerome's narrative is left ever incomplete, our own desire is purified, made sublime, reaching "as high as love modulates." In the process, we are purified of

“identity” itself: where the object of desire is infinitely dispersed, so too is the subject. Jerome’s “edifying” hagiography does not so much fashion an ascetic self by suppressing desire as intensify desire to the point that the ego itself is shattered.

But the peculiar purity of the *Life of Paul*, marking the beginning of Jerome’s sublimely sensual writing career, gives way to further genre-shattering repetitions. Conceived much later (and in practically the same breath), the strikingly different accounts of Malchus and Hilarion significantly supplement not only the *Life of Paul* but also each other. In *On the Captive Monk*, strategic gaps between the first-person accounts of “Jerome” and “Malchus”—both represented in the act of recollecting their past—crucially disrupt the narrative line of the not-quite-*Life*. Malchus seems to wish to be seen from the perspective of his desire for his faceless “brethren,” configuring “captivity” as that which alienates him from the male monastic collective. And yet his own account already produces a fracturing of both the subject and object of desire. It is his virtual “wife,” partner of his captivity, who acquires a “face”—who attains a nearly recognizable persona—in Malchus’s narrative, yet she remains not only nameless but also seemingly unmentionable as an object of desire in the inconclusive moment of her studiedly casual dismissal. Malchus’s imperfectly sublimated love for the woman who threatens (or promises) to captivate him is gapingly unresolved, the incompleteness of his narrative intensified by its unacknowledged inconsistency with Jerome’s own narrative of a cohabiting “couple” who had survived captivity through the liberative power of their collusive virginity. In the same stroke, Malchus’s love for his shadowy monastic brothers is also rendered tantalizingly incomplete—a barely imaginable figment in the text, Malchus’s insistences notwithstanding. One who attempts to identify Malchus’s desire, to identify with Malchus’s desire, is thwarted. This seemingly satisfying romance is finally profoundly unsettling. Painfully suspended in the fracturing moment of interruption, the reader is pushed into “a self-reflexive activity” in which self itself recedes in the face of the abysmal uncertainty regarding desire’s proper object.

With the *Life of Hilarion*, Jerome’s “happily mobile ironies” are in full play. Indeed, his lightly ironized laughing holy man is an icon of the mobility of desire itself. Constantly on the run, Hilarion is always thereby prolonging his longing; the goal of his journey is ever-shifting, frequently indeterminate. Miracles proliferate as so many replicating signs of excess, saturating nature’s credulity with holy power and propelling him onward. A slippery subject, he is also a frustratingly unlocatable object of desire, as his devoted follower Hesychius discovers repeatedly. Ironically represented as Hilarion’s beloved, Hesychius takes the part of the active lover, incited to imitate his master’s mobility in his vigorous pursuit of Hilarion. But does he become a worthy disciple? Does he master the supple arts of sublimation, under

Hilarion's sly tutelage? We are uncertain. Now a trickster himself, Hesychius thwarts Hilarion's return to Egypt—site of Antony's holy mount—by replicating the Antonine Paradise in Cyprus. Subsequently, he steals away with Hilarion's relics, restoring them to their proper place, so as to restore to Palestine its proper holy man. Hesychius's doubled duplicities produce unexpected and ambiguous results. The Cypriot garden, perhaps still haunted by the goddess of love (and clearly marked by a holy woman's constancy of desire), continues to divert the holy man, exceeding and thereby escaping Hesychius's (mis)direction. A third place, of productive indeterminacy, neither Egypt nor Palestine (and thus "off the map" of ascetic practice and pilgrimage), Cyprus effectively disturbs, without decisively canceling, Palestine's claims on Hilarion. A contested object of desire, Hilarion, "who was seen by many," is in the end quite literally unlocatable, and thus he reclaims the trickster's role for himself, giving the final slip that makes this endpoint of Hieronymian hagiography another beginning for ascetic dissolution. Disrupting (yet again) the "sonorous, illusory, and monotonous line," withdrawing even the disintegrating not-quite-presence of a corpse, Jerome shatters his readers with the purity of sublime desire.

READING (AS) ANOTHER, WOMAN

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible; the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of "matter," but also of "sexual pleasure."⁷⁴

The "hom(m)o-sexuality"⁷⁵ (re)produced by the *Life of Paul*—differently, partially, and ambiguously disrupted by both *On the Captive Monk* and the *Life of Hilarion*—raises particular challenges and creates distinctive opportunities for one who would read for the "woman" in Jerome's

⁷⁴Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, 1985), 76.

⁷⁵Ibid., 171.

hagiographies, for one who would read *as* a “woman”—even if only to lose “her(self)” in the process. Bersani has suggested that male homoeroticism may serve as a potent figure for the disruptive potentialities of sexuality, in the context of the long and violent discursive reign of a phallic subjectivity. Writing boldly into the storm of the contemporary AIDS crisis, he proposes that “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.” He continues: “If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence. . . . Male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of *losing sight* of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of asceticism.”⁷⁶

At this point, my reading of Bersani must become explicitly supplementary, extending consideration of the sexual difference that is so swiftly marked as to be partly elided in his (awkwardly positioned parenthetical) text. If the “ideal of proud subjectivity” is undeniably “shared . . . by men *and* women,” what are the limits to the commonality so forcefully underlined by the conjunctive “*and*,” limits nonetheless signaled by the acknowledgment that the ideal, and thus presumably also its erotic shattering, is “shared—differently”? Does the death of “man” still leave “woman” “elsewhere” in relation to even a distinctly queered discourse? Is our theory of sexuality “queer” enough, is it sufficiently “ascetic,” if it does not also unveil “the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language”?⁷⁷

Reading the *Life of Paul* yet again, assuming the feminine role deliberately through mimetic play, it is my desire to begin with, to begin as, the garlanded subject in the garden of delight, the subject of garlands’ constraint, given over to the torture of stream’s murmur, wind’s whisper, feathers’ softness, petals’ caress, and (finally!) of a lover’s rousing fondling of nakedly bared skin—and then (when I can bear it no longer) to find myself just barely restored to power, by the skin of my teeth. (But, one might object, teeth have no skin, no softness, and, yes, the bite of my skin *is* my womanly hardness.) Reading as a woman, am I not, however, also the seducer and the torturer in this text? At the same time, am I not the one tormented by my own desire, my own tantalizingly thwarted desire, spat back chokingly into my kisses, like a disavowed tongue? The tongue, however, was mine to start with, its potentially injurious disavowal stolen from

⁷⁶Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 222.

⁷⁷Lynda Hart (*Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadoomasochism* [New York, 1998], 87–90) offers a critical discussion of both Bersani’s tendency to masculinize sexuality itself and his biological/anatomical essentialism.

me: now I claim it again. But what do I claim, the tongue's integrity or its articulate dismemberment? Where does the biting frustration of bodily longing lead, what is lost, what is gained (what is prolonged) in the conversion desired in the *Life of Paul*, produced by the desire of this text, provoked by my desire to read this text, from within, and also from elsewhere?

Having temporarily lost my tongue (along with my bearings), I find myself again where Jerome would have me, wandering through the desert, tracking my bittersweet, hard-bitten longing. I am Antony. (But how can this be? Where is the place for a woman in Antony's desert, in his city of men, and is Paul's desert any different? Is she a mother?) Ah: there it is, the monstrous mute signifier, horse-man, so excessively male as to be almost something more . . . something *less* . . . than a man. Tracking the signs, dreamily traversing the signs, slipping from one to the next, centaur—satyr—she-wolf (!), I am drawn into another Paradise. The gain (following upon the huge loss) is another garden (with a single, spreading tree), another spring of well-contained wetness, other shadows and other light, another cave (but whose?), other delights in a cave. Banished again (my lover is stern and sharply demanding), I will again be restored: I am now purposefully in pursuit of my desire. Recovering the lover finally, embracing, kissing once more, in my arms I find . . . a corpse. The lover has eluded me; the lover is mine. Yes, we are twinned like the long-maned lions who help me dig this grave. I give the lover my cloak; I take the lover's tunic for my own (I will never take it off again!); we wear one another's clothes. Covering the body with dirt, I know my own corruptibility: I am the dirt that clothes my lover, the decaying corpse is my threadbare garment. We mingle and are dissolved in one another, like the desert sand. Tasting Paradise in the grit on my tongue, I no longer know myself as woman, or man.

Sliding into the tale of a captive monk, I have indeed found my tongue again, now a woman's tongue unambiguously interpellated into the text, a sharp tongue of direct address, hailing a hesitant desire, attempting to give rise to a man who can only speak of swords and wives, who can only see his own captivity when confronted (in a cave) by my unvirginal singularity. Malchus! I call him. He mumbles my name inaudibly, but I imagine I can hear it, even if no one else can. Together we face the master's sword; together we elude the sword; together we are saved from the violence of the sword by a mother's incidental intervention. Emerging from the lioness's cave, we are like twinned cubs. And yet, where the path leads from there, I cannot say. I see only the doublings of duplicity, a multiplication of possibilities that may or may not cancel each other out. A sister who is not a sister, a wife who is not a wife, I tease at the cords of my constraint and my freedom; my tongue teases this text, explores its potential worlds—life with the sisters, life with the brother, life with the brethren. Shattered by so much freedom,

so much constraint, I am swallowed up by a text that can scarcely hold a place for me, can scarcely hold me in place. It is from elsewhere that I will return, again and again.

Hailed now by name, by the name of Constance, I assume a role once more. I extend myself into the *Life of Hilarion*. Easily recognizable are the holy man's laugh, his constant motion, the felicitous ironies that provide for a provisional constancy of desire, that make provisionality the only basis for desire's mobile constancy. But I, Constantia, am the true trickster in this tale, Hilarion my happy conspirator (or so I fancy it). Playing at my womanly devotionals, I find myself haunted by this garden, at home in this haunted garden, where Venus's gloriously terrifying fruits delight most when not consumed. I know how to taste without devouring, and I desire to be tasted but not devoured (not put to the sword). I live alongside the fruits of the garden, I am among the fruits of the garden. Indeed, there is no God who will banish me. With veils of tears, I cover up my fruity laughter. Playing at tragedy, it is I who give the last slip in this comedy of Hesychian error (and if Hilarion wants to slip back into this grave with me, dying another death, let him come). Ha! Dying to desire, dying of desire, dying for desire, we are only beginning to unwrite our lives.

Already fractured, shattered, disappearing from (her own) sight, is it not (also, differently) another, "woman," who "proposes and dangerously represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis"?