University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Cox, Patricia (Patricia L.)
Biography in late antiquity.
(The Transformation of the classical heritage; 5)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Biography (as a literary form) 2. Classical literature—History and criticism. I. Title.
II. Series.
PA3043.C6 808'.06692 82-4946
ISBN 0-520-04612-9 AACR2

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

For my mother, and in memory of my father:
Each a "hidden person of the heart."

1 Peter 3:4

Contents

Acknowledgments

Several friends and colleagues have graciously given helpful suggestions during the years when this study was written and rewritten, and to all of them I owe true gratitude. However, there are a few to whom I would like to offer special thanks.

Robert M. Grant, Professor in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, presided genially and with scholarly acumen over the first version of this work.

Jonathan Z. Smith, Professor in the University of Chicago, convened an informal seminar on the holy man during an important year. Gene Gallagher, Jim Tabor, and Bruce Woll, fellow-members of the seminar, infused the sharing of ideas with "spirits."

Professor Peter Brown of the University of California, Berkeley and Ms. Doris Kretschmer, editor at the University of California Press, gave hearty and consistent encouragement.

Finally, in the spirit of "The Comedian as the Letter C," I thank my colleague and friend, David L. Miller: he helped me "round my rude aesthetic out." The "jagged lops of green" which remain are mine alone.

Introduction

"A slight thing like a phrase or jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall."[1]

So Plutarch remarked about the telling ways in which we speak in spite of ourselves. As he goes on to say, it is precisely this kind of speaking—the mute eloquence of our quirks and gestures—that interests the biographer and distinguishes his vision from history's focus on the grand and illustrious sweep of events. For Plutarch and the ancient biographical tradition generally, a man's actions, whether illustrious or ignominious, were significant insofar as they revealed his character; as Plutarch says, biography was revelatory discourse, aimed at disclosing a man's inner self. The biographer's task was to capture the gesture which laid bare the soul.

The art of biographical narrative reflected this task. Ancient biographies are constellations of such gestures, carefully selected and assembled not to chronicle a life's history but to suggest its character. These character-revealing gestures are presented in the biographies primarily by means of images and anecdotes, and they show the free play of the biographical imagination as it works in the service of history's "meaning." If the facts of history form the "landscape" of a man's life, character is its "inscape," the contours and hollows which give a landscape its individuality. Biographies are like caricatures, bringing landscape and inscape, event and character, together in a single moment of evocative expression.

This is the overriding perspective guiding the present study: that ancient biographies of holy men were caricatures whose aim was to evoke, and thus to reveal, the interior geography of the hero's life. Baldly stated, this seems quite simple. Yet for the group of Graeco-Roman biographies with which this book is primarily concerned, capturing the gesture that reveals the soul entailed a complicated act of the biographical imagination. As a glance at

1. Plutarch *Alexander* 1.1–2.

any political cartoon will show, caricatures speak their truth by lying, that is, by exaggerating, typifying, stylizing, idealizing, and so on. One could discuss ancient biographies as sustained narrative series of such pictures. Biographers like Porphyry and Eusebius, however, had something more to contend with, for they saw God at work in their heroes' lives. Thus when they set about to "capture the gesture," they were negotiating the intersection of the human and the divine. Their caricatures speak, not with the voice of buffoonery or satire, but with the voice of myth. That mythic voice is the central concern in what follows.

"Holy man" names the mythic perspective which this study engages, and that mythic perspective has its locus in what I have called the free play of the biographical imagination. The myth of the holy man is here considered to be an imaginal[2] "place between" where the history of a man's life and his biographer's vision of human divinity meet and mingle. Biographies of holy men are the literary expressions of this play between fact and fantasy; they are the "place between" come to life as embodied ideal, imaginal history.

As we explore these biographies, we will emphasize a style of thinking—even a style of consciousness—rather than a method of composition. This style seeks images of character that give a man's history an abiding significance while taking care not to divorce the imagistic from the historical. *Style* is used here in its root sense of "stigma": the way one chooses to construct reality betrays how and where one has been struck and deeply touched by the world.

Our authors had been struck by an affinity between the mundane world of everyday life and the unseen but equally real realm of the spirit. This affinity is, of course, difficult to express directly. As Plutarch noted,[3] the gods speak to man in poetic circumlocutions—in image and metaphor—and, conversely, as Plotinus said, human speech about the divine world must always carry within it a metaphoric "so to speak."[4] Thus it is not surprising to find Eusebius, Porphyry, and other biographers expressing a willingness to read poetic truth as historical fact, and vice versa.[5] Indeed, that willingness is at

2. In this book, I have used the word "imaginal" not only as the adjectival form of "image" but also to avoid the pejorative connotation of the words "imaginary" or "imaginative." For a discussion of this word, see Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste* (Paris: Éditions Buchet/Chastel, 1979), pp. 7–19.

3. Plutarch *Pyth. orac.* 26, 407e.

4. Plotinus *Enn.* 6.8.13: "Everywhere we must read 'so to speak'."

5. See chapter 3 for a discussion of this issue.

the heart of the biographical style to which this study is devoted. Biographers of holy men did not "translate" or "represent" their heroes' lives; like Plutarch, they were engaged in revelation. Their biographies succeed in exposing the inner radiance of the lives of their heroes precisely because biographical writing is evocative, not descriptive.

The voice of myth is supremely indirect; in ancient biographies of holy men, the heroes come alive in the biography's allusions, images, patterns, and themes. These are the interpretative "gestures" of the biographer himself, and they make possible that interplay between the mundane and the ideal, the earthly and the heavenly, by which the soul-revealing gestures of the hero are captured. In keeping with the evocative, allusive working of biographies of holy men, I often employ images of light to describe how the biographers proceed in their delicate task of "laying bare the soul." Yet, because of the idea of mythic indirection, which I think to be crucial for an understanding of these ancient writings, the imagery is not that of brilliant sunlight, but rather of shadows, shadings, and reflections.

Especially in chapters 4 and 5, which explore biographies by Eusebius and Porphyry in detail, I will refer to particular characterizations of Origen and Plotinus as, for example, "reflected images" or "shadowed distortions." Such images have been used to describe both how the biographer thinks and what he has written. Our interest lies not only in the enigmatic holy man but also in his enigmatic biographer. We are looking for the inner radiance of the biographical process itself, an inner radiance which, in honor of the free—and mischievous—play of mythic discourse, I will finally characterize as a "law of shadowing."

Various perspectives will help us understand how ancient biographers went about making imaginative worlds out of the lives of their heroes. Part I considers Graeco-Roman biographies from the standpoints of generic tradition and literary analysis and attempts to account for continuities and discontinuities within the biographical tradition. Basically, the argument of this section is that in the course of its long history, dating from the fifth century B.C., Greek biography developed characteristics that continued as hallmarks of the genre in Late Antiquity and made possible the kind of interplay between the mundane and the ideal that later biographers utilized.

Biography was unique in concentrating on the life of a single personality and in its panegyrical tendencies to exaggerate the account of that person's achievements. History, by comparison, spurned idealized narratives, concentrating instead on chronological reports of political and military events.

Biography was thus a halfway house between history and oratory, and biographers often consciously set themselves against the historians.[6] Biography was also unique in its interest in types of individuals. Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman biographers wrote systematic series of lives of politicians, emperors, generals, philosophers, and so on. Lives of politicians and military men, however, tended to remain close to political history, whereas lives of philosophers were idealized and often used by one school of philosophy as propaganda against competing schools.[7]

In the Graeco-Roman era, biographers sustained the idealized, contrahistorical mood of the genre, strongly emphasizing the achievements and personalities of the various philosophical masters and putting forth their lives not only as models to be used for the perpetuation of particular philosophical schools but also as polemics to be employed in furthering one tradition at the expense of others. In the third and fourth centuries, when the pagan philosophical schools and Christianity were vying with each other for recognition as the reigning spiritual guardian of the empire, biographies assumed the character of cultic hagiographies.

Biographies like Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Porphyry's *Lives* of Pythagoras and Plotinus, and Eusebius' "Life of Origen" all serve an old typological interest, the traditional sage of philosophy. But this venerable figure had been transformed by the religious temper of the times and was endowed with specific qualities and talents linking him to divinity. A mythology of the holy man could be used by the philosophical schools because philosophy itself, which had once resisted the incursions of religious speculation, came increasingly to denote the search for God.[8] Thus while biography had formerly been used in the battle of school against school, it was now used by cult against cult in the rivalry between paganism and Christianity, a rivalry whose intensity had reached a feverish pitch by the time these biographers were writing. Scrambling to gain adherents,

6. See the comments of Plutarch *Alexander* 1.1–2.

7. The earliest known practitioner of propagandistic biography was Aristoxenus of Tarentum, a fourth-century B.C. Pythagorean whose life of Pythagoras, accompanied by a description of the Pythagorean community's lifestyle and school, was written in conscious opposition to the Platonists.

8. On the equation of philosophy with religion, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 92, who quotes the Hermetic *Asclepius* 12: "Philosophy consists solely in learning to know the deity by habitual contemplation and pious devotion."

each side produced biographies of its "patron saints" in an endeavor to crystallize belief and so win converts. One has only to consider the amount of space given over to discussions of disciples, teaching methods, and publications in biographies like Eusebius' of Origen and Porphyry's of Plotinus to understand that they are a form of propaganda for a way of life and a body of beliefs.

Part II is devoted to intensive studies of two biographies, Eusebius' "Life of Origen," and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Both characterize the hero as "godlike" rather than as a "son of god" (see chapter 2 for a discussion of this typology). They have been chosen for intensive analysis because they were written by men close in time and philosophical sympathy to their heroes and so show more clearly than other biographies an interaction between fact and fantasy that I think is the major characteristic of ancient biographies of holy men.

While chapters 4 and 5 both focus on the mythic world created by biographies of holy men, they provide two distinct ways of entering that world—two different approaches to the myth-making of ancient biographies. Both, however, attempt to imagine exactly how biographers went about "capturing the gesture."

The difference between the readings in these two chapters reflects the tension in the biographical tradition generally between *praxeis* (acts) and *ēthos* (character) which, in the context of biographies of holy men, we have called "fact and fantasy," or "the historical and the divine." Chapter 4 emphasizes the biographer's ability to evoke character from a reconstruction of his hero's acts or history. By showing how Eusebius "patterns" the various aspects of Origen's career, one can see how Eusebius' thematic structuring of history carries his vision of Origen's holiness. The focus in this chapter is on the biographer's historical imagination in order to show that one way to read an ancient biography is to investigate how the author has read character *as* history.

In chapter 5 the emphasis is reversed. Here we suggest that another way to read an ancient biography is to examine how the author has read history *as* character. Whereas in chapter 4 emphasis is placed on the thematic concerns of the biographer as historian, in this chapter the imagistic concerns of the biographer as poet are stressed. Again, whereas in the study of Eusebius' biography the "mystery" of historical reconstruction occupies center stage, in the study of Porphyry's work the mysterious process of embodying ideals of character is highlighted. The perspective developed in

chapter 5 entails a more poetic, allusive approach to the material, since fantasies about a man's character cannot, after all, be reconstructed from sources in the way that his historical activities can.

Both chapters take the anecdotal mode of biographical narration seriously; but chapter 4 shows how anecdotes come together to give a biography thematic coherence, while chapter 5 takes anecdotes singly as evocative poetic images. Perhaps the difference can be stated quite simply. If, as we remarked earlier, biographies of holy men occupy a mythic "place between" fact and fantasy, then they can be viewed either as imaginal histories or as historicized mythic ideals. Chapter 4 is a reading of Eusebius' "Life of Origen" as imaginal history, while chapter 5 is a reading of Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* as embodied poetry.

Finally, whether the entrée is by way of historical theme or poetic trope, both studies aim to show that the biographical portraits of holy men are neither solely fact nor solely fancy: they are, rather, both fact and fancy at once. Therein lies the persuasive power of their mythic appeal. As Porphyry said of the Delphic oracle's interpretation of the life of Plotinus, "We knew ourselves that he was like this."

PART I

Biography and Tradition: The Myth of Genre

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE
CLASSICAL HERITAGE
Peter Brown, General Editor

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PATRICIA COX

Biography in Late Antiquity

A QUEST FOR THE HOLY MAN

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