

PRAISING THE SELF WHILE PRAISING THE SAINTS: BEHIND THE SCENES OF
HUMANIST EPIDEICTIC ORATIONS TO SAINTS

Introduction

Commenting on the contemporary practice of epideictic oratory in praise of civil or ecclesiastical governors, Desiderius Erasmus exclaimed: “Nobody remains unaware that panegyrics reflect not their subjects' merits, but their author's own ingenuity.” To what extent does this comment mirror the production of humanists' classicizing panegyrics to Christian saints?

The earliest example of a classicizing epideictic oration (panegyric) to a Christian saint is Pier Paolo Vergerio's *Sermones pro Sancto Hieronymo* (1390–1410). His praise of St. Jerome is expressed in descriptive orations, containing frequent digressions, lively narrations and rhetorical appeals. Vergerio explains his inspiration to praise Jerome by claiming that there was a local cult of the saint in his hometown of Capodistria and justifies it by an appeal to an ancient family tradition. Moreover, as a token of Jerome's sanctity Vergerio offers his own personal experience, construing St. Jerome as his family's and his personal patron saint.

Vergerio's orations are considered as the new and influential model for the epideictic oratory. They closely follow the classical precepts of epideictic rhetoric, de-emphasizing the didactic purpose of the orations, and aiming rather to move and please the audience. However, not all of the subsequent classicizing orations in praise of St. Jerome correspond to this model in the same way. Since the attention of previous scholarship has focused mostly on the stylistic features of the orations, the difference in their content has not always emerged with sufficient clarity. The proposed research aims to offer a more comprehensive characterization of the orations, focusing on the variety of the saint's representations and the various factors that motivated them.

Overview of previous scholarship

Considerable research has been done on the stylistic features of the humanists' classicizing practice in epideictic rhetoric. Recently, much attention has been paid to sacred rhetoric, especially from the perspective of its form and value in political or ecclesiastical contexts. Humanists' innovative adaptation of epideictic rhetoric and classical theory of pathos were thoroughly examined in John McManamon's monographs on Pier Paolo Vergerio's speeches in praise of St. Jerome, and his oratory in general. However, studies devoted to the humanist self-fashioning through epideictic oratory usually focus on the classicizing funerary oratory of papal and other courts. Outside this context, other contemporary and subsequent classical panegyrics have been addressed only sporadically.

The otherwise thorough study by John W. O'Malley *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court* excellently demonstrated the development from the 'traditional' thematic structure of scholastic sacred rhetoric to the newly emerging 'classical' form. It builds on a case study of Renaissance preachers from the second half of the fifteenth century, and offers a useful methodology for analysing epideictic orations. Nevertheless, O'Malley mainly concentrates on speeches delivered *a capelle* at the papal court or in the presence of higher ecclesiastical dignitaries. Moreover, he dealt primarily with orations addressed to ecclesiastics or treating a specific doctrinal topic. On the contrary, other public occasions, e. g., religious or secular feasts such as the saints' name days in particular, provided the ideal circumstances for epideictic orations dedicated to them, therefore these need to be observed as well.

Works addressed to saints are the focus of a recent study by Alison Knowles Frazier *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy*. This offers a profitable scholarly treatment of the contemporary perception of saints according to their *vitae* and legends. Nevertheless, Knowles Frazier's study remains focused on the rhetorical technique and devices of humanist hagiographers, while epideictic orations are considered either as a direct source for biographical information about the saints or as a useful lead to trace the original sources of such material.

Epideictic orations to the saints are also often referred to in studies of cults of individual saints. For the proposed research these provide useful but, unfortunately, limited and unsystematically presented information. The cult of St. Jerome is treated in detail in Eugene Rice's book *Saint Jerome in Renaissance*. This illustrates the development of his cult and, in spite of its primary focus on the cult's manifestations in art, it also devotes some attention to the epideictic oratory. Yet, Rice's book chiefly deals with individual attributes of St. Jerome signalled for praise as part of the saint's cult among the humanist authors, and does not analyse the content of individual speeches in any depth. His allusions of the panegyrics to St. Jerome is limited to three items in addition to those composed by Vergerio.

Sources

The starting point of the proposed research will be Pier Paolo Vergerio's *Sermones pro Sancto Hieronymo* (1390–1408) as the earliest example of the genre. In Vergerio's orations, St. Jerome is praised as the patron saint of Vergerio's family and as the main figure of the local cult in Capodistria. Two subsequent orations to St. Jerome offer a contrast to Vergerio's earlier work. The first of these was delivered in 1410 in Padua by Nicolaus (Niccolò) Bonavia of Lucca, a student at the University of Padua. Describing St. Jerome's virtues, Bonavia employs the Platonic doctrine of the four cardinal virtues. His oration is extremely detailed and Jerome's wisdom in all things serves as an opening for Bonavia's demonstration of his own knowledge and skills.

A similar example is Agostino Dati's oration in praise of St. Jerome. This was delivered in Siena no later than 1447. Dati's oration turns into a catalogue of less known classical parallels. He ventures into an educated interpretation of St. Jerome's virtues by means of Platonic arguments similar to Bonavia's. Dati delivered also orations in honour of Siena's patrons SS Bernardino and Catherine of Siena, the early martyr Callixtus, and Andrew the Apostle. These orations will be included in the research to illustrate a different approach by the same author. Thus Dati's praise of the local saints will be examined as opposed to St. Jerome as a universal saint.

Another oration to St. Jerome which I will consider was delivered in Verona in 1453 by Isotta Nogarola. Going against Jerome's own emphasis in his famous letter to Eustochium, Nogarola promotes his learning over the virtue of virginity, thus justifying her own pursuit of knowledge. Nevertheless, it is formulated with far less detachment than Dati's or Bonavia's learned meditations. Using the oration as a personal apology, she clearly introduces St. Jerome as her own personal model. Even though she does not offer her audience any explicit incentive to imitate the saint, the human quality of her portrait of St. Jerome recalls the personal patron of Vergerio's orations.

More classicizing epideictic orations to St. Jerome were composed throughout the fifteenth century. For example, Giovanni Lamola gave a panegyric in Bologna in 1442 and Angelus Pergulensis (Angelo Dalla Pergola) delivered two panegyrics in Fermo in 1473 and 1474. A vernacular panegyric addressed to St. Jerome that combines the elements of classicizing oration and a thematic sermon was produced by the famous Mariano da Genazzano before 1498. These orations are not currently available in digital format; although I have not yet been able to consult them, I intend to examine them in the manuscript in the course of the proposed research.

The main contribution of my dissertation will be to offer a consistent and complex characterization of humanist epideictic orations in praise of Christian saints. First of all, I intend to produce a systematic and comprehensive overview of data that has been so far available only in part and unsystematically. This will be greatly enhanced by my previous MA study in the department in source languages. This is to be followed by a reinterpretation in the context of humanists' representation of the saints and through them authors' formulation of self-identities. Thus, this research aims at providing a clearer image of a productive genre usually overlooked in the vast amount of hagiographic material.

With a focus on the first half of the fifteenth century, the proposed research will bridge a considerable gap in the previous studies, which concentrated more on the later Renaissance period. My focus on orations addressed exclusively to saints will emphasize the need for distinguishing them from other

forms of epideictic oratory, such as funerary oratory or panegyrics of papal or stately courts, or other orations delivered in an ecclesiastical context. Focused on orations to St. Jerome, my research will supply information on the dissemination of his cult among the humanists and also in the context of lesser Italian urban centres. In addition to this, the proposed research is intended to bring into focus the material of some of the less known authors, such as Angelus Pergulensis or Ioannes de Montenigrio, who until now have not benefitted from any scholarly attention.

In contrast to previous studies on this topic, this project will have a different framework. It will examine the selected orations by taking into account not just their formal characteristics, but also their political, cultural, and artistic contexts. I believe that, by doing so, this approach will ultimately reveal that the generally accepted perception of epideictic oratory in praise of saints as mere imitation of classical rhetoric is both misleading and oversimplifying.

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