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JEROME'S *EPISTULA PRIMA*: HOW CAN WE READ IT?

ABSTRACT: Jerome wrote *Epistula prima* probably during the decade of 366–376. Little is known about this stage in his life, but it was apparently then that as a young man he became interested in asceticism and at the end of this period of time finally decided to become a monk. However, the ascetic ideas are not the main theme of *Ep.* 1. The letter tells the story of a falsely accused woman who was subjected to torture and survived seven strokes of the executioner's sword. The way in which Jerome interprets and presents these events reflects his spiritual profile and aesthetic preferences. The text can be interpreted both as a letter (a 'real' or a 'fictional' one) with an embedded narrative and as a non-epistolary work with a dedicatory preface. This affects the way in which the reader responds to the introduction (where Jerome's anxiety concerning the imperfection of his style is expressed) as well as his or her right to assess the subsequent narrative. None of these approaches eliminates the duality in the text's structure. Therefore, it should be interpreted on the two following levels: as an epistolary *speculum animi*, which shows Jerome in the situation of undertaking the task of writing the narrative, and as another, literary *speculum*, which reflects the author's soul by means of artistic expression.

KEYWORDS: Jerome, *Epistula prima*, epistolary form, fictional letter, artistic expression, asceticism, Christian epistolography

While it is commonly acknowledged that Jerome's correspondence is highly varied in respect to form and subject matter,¹ the first piece in the collection of his letters still seems to constitute an exceptional case.² One of the reasons behind this is that *Epistula prima*, though bearing some characteristics of a private letter, can also be interpreted as an independent, non-epistolary literary work, which does not have to be viewed through the prism of a specific sender-addressee relationship (in this case, the one between Jerome and Innocentius). In fact, had it not been included in the collection of Jerome's letters, one would not so unhesitatingly classify it as an epistle. However, as the term 'epistolography' encompasses a very broad range of writings and its boundaries cannot be strictly defined,³ the question whether *Ep.* 1 should be excluded from the corpus of Jerome's letters and assigned to some other literary genre does not seem to hold crucial importance. The aim of the following analysis is rather to consider the possibility that the author of this work might not have intended it as a letter and to demonstrate how its potentially epistolary characteristics can function as literary devices employed with purely artistic purposes. The results should provide a valuable insight into the various approaches that can be taken while reading *Ep.* 1.

¹ There are 123 extant letters attributed to Jerome that are regarded as genuine (Cain 2009: 207). They have been variously classified according to their contents, purpose, place where they were written, length, structure and the level of formality (see Trapp 2003: 20; Degórski 2004: 58–59; Ožóg 2010: xiii–xiv). In his extensive study on Jerome's epistolography, Cain (2009: 207–219) has proposed a new taxonomy based on the epistolary types distinguished in two ancient letter-writing handbooks (pseudo-Demetrius' *Typoi epistolikoi* and pseudo-Libanius' *Epistolimaioi characteres*). He assigned Jerome's letters to seventeen categories (one of them, 'exegetical letters,' had to be invented by Cain himself), which are supposed to highlight Jerome's mastery of different epistolary genres. Cain's taxonomy has been criticised by Scourfield (2011: 331) as 'distortingly reductive,' the main objections being that the categories do not reflect the richness and complexity that characterises many of Jerome's letters and that the pieces have been assigned to these types arbitrarily.

² A similar constation has been formulated by Scourfield (1983: 45): 'Among J's own works there is nothing which is directly comparable with this letter'.

³ The difficulties in defining and classifying ancient epistolography are summarised by Trapp (2003: 1–5) and Gibson, Morrison (2007).

THE DATE OF *EP. 1*

In order to formulate some hypotheses concerning the purposes with which *Ep. 1* was written, one should begin with reconstructing the circumstances that surrounded its creation. However, this involves many obstacles, and the major one concerns the date of *Ep. 1*.⁴ The miraculous events that took place at the Italian town of Vercellae and inspired the narrative in the main body of the text are not precisely dated by the author; Jerome states only that they happened during his and Innocentius' life (*Ep. 1, 1: in nostram aetatem inciderat*). What is more, almost all characters in the story are anonymous, with the sole exception of Evagrius of Antioch, who appears in the last paragraph as a person whose intervention at the imperial court brought the dangerous situation to the happy end. Therefore, if the story of a woman from Vercellae were to provide a *terminus post quem* for *Ep. 1*, the only indication for the more precise date would be Evagrius' arrival in Italy,⁵ which is thought to have taken place between 362 and 365.⁶ However, a later date can

⁴ Various dates have been proposed in the previous scholarly discussion on the topic, some of them only approximate, some based on unnecessary assumptions. References to specific studies shall be provided in the course of the following discussion.

⁵ Nevertheless, some scholars have attempted to date the events at Vercellae on some other basis. According to Scourfield (1983: 39), the trial of the woman 'should probably be dated no earlier than 370,' when the emperor Valentinian I gave to the *praefectus annonae* Maximinus a directive allowing him to use torture in trials for magic (*Amm. Rer. gest. lib. 28.1.11–12*). The cases of adultery were probably regarded as belonging to the same category (as inferred from *Amm. Rer. gest. lib. 28.1.16* and 28). On Valentinian's directive and its possible consequences for the case of Jerome's heroine see Sivan 1998 (esp. 237–239). However, Müller (1998: 193, n. 6) rightly notices that there does not have to be a direct connection between the trials described by Ammianus and the events recorded by Jerome; what the passage from *Res gestae* bears witness to is that the Roman legal system could allow for using torture and passing death sentences in trials for adultery. It can be added that according to Shanzer (2018: 145, n. 2), the incident 'seems to have taken place in ca. 374/375, namely under Valentinian I,' but the arguments she provides refer rather to the date of the letter's composition and even as such remain disputable.

⁶ According to Kelly (1975: 33), Evagrius accompanied Eusebius of Vercellae in 362 on his return journey from banishment in the East. Kelly provides no references to the sources at this place, but the information is probably based on Jerome's *Chronicon* (s.a. 362: *Eusebius et Lucifer de exilio regrediuntur*) and *Bas. Ep. 138, 2*

be established basing on two other achievements accomplished by Evagrius during his stay in the West that are praised by Jerome in the same final section of the letter: contribution to the ‘nearly burying alive’ of the Arian bishop of Milan Auxentius (*Ep.* 1, 15.2: *Auxentium Mediolani incubantem huius excubiis sepultum paene ante quam mortuum*), and help given to Pope Damasus in overcoming his opponents (*Romanum episcopum iam paene factionis laqueis inretitum et uicisse aduersarios et non nocuisse superatis*). The metaphor of a burial before death refers probably to the condemnation of Auxentius for heresy at the synod of Rome.⁷ There is no certainty as to the date of this council, but it seems to have met in 368, 369 or 372.⁸ The second matter touched upon by

(Ὁ πρεσβύτερος Εὐάγριος, ὁ υἱὸς Πομπηϊανοῦ τοῦ Ἀντιοχείως, ὁ συναπάρας ποτὲ ἐπὶ τὴν Δύσιν τῷ μακαρίῳ ἀνδρὶ Εὐσεβίῳ, ἐπανάκει νῦν ἐκ τῆς Ῥώμης). Rebenich (1992: 56–59) takes into account one further testimony. It comes from the letters of Libanius concerning events from Evagrius’ life in Antioch, which are dated to 363–365 (or the end of 364). On this basis Rebenich argues for 365 (or late 364) as the date of Evagrius’ departure from Antioch.

⁷ A wordplay *sepultum paene ante quam mortuum* has been already interpreted in this way by Grützmacher (1901: 54). Rebenich (1992: 70) also does not read this phrase literally and explains it as ‘disappeared completely into oblivion during his lifetime’ (‘verschwand ... noch zu seinen Lebzeiten völlig in der Versenkung’). However, he understands it as an allusion not to Auxentius’ condemnation, but to his removal from the office of bishop (the alleged objective of Evagrius’ mission against Auxentius). As it had never happened (Auxentius remained the bishop of Milan until his death), Rebenich concludes that Jerome praised his patron for a success that had not been achieved (probably assuming that for Jerome even sincere efforts are praiseworthy). It can be added that Rebenich’s view could be supported by a different translation of the word *paene* (‘has almost succeeded in’). Contrarily, some scholars suggested that the wording of the phrase under discussion implies that Auxentius was already dead at the moment when Jerome was writing the letter. Based on this assumption, the *terminus post quem* for *Ep.* 1 would be October 374 (Scourfield 1983: 33–34; a similar view has been expressed by many other scholars, beginning with Cavallera 1922: II 12–14). According to Schwind (1997: 179–180, n. 32), Jerome must have composed his ‘panegyric’ for Evagrius after Auxentius’ death, because the praise could easily become ridiculous if the enemy ever returned to power; and this was highly probable as long as he held the episcopal throne of Milan. Schwind’s argumentation has been opposed by Müller (1998: 193–194, n. 7), who remarked that this being the case, panegyrics would be forbidden or written only posthumously.

⁸ Barnes 2002: 228, n. 5; cf. Scourfield 1983: 33. If one follows Rebenich’s interpretation (1992: 61–62; see n. 7 above), it is possible to argue for an earlier date for the

Jerome is a prolonged conflict between Damasus and Ursinus, who were both consecrated as bishops of Rome on the same day in autumn 366.⁹ The strife did not finish until the condemnation of Ursinus at a synod in 378,¹⁰ and Evagrius had long left Italy by the time (he probably reached Antioch in 373–374).¹¹ By *factionis laquei*, Jerome may have meant the renewed attempts to overthrow Damasus after Ursinus' return from exile to Milan in 371,¹² but one can only hypothesise which incident is being alluded to here. Thus, the only unquestionable *terminus post quem* for *Ep.* 1 is autumn 366, but it is probable that the events mentioned in it took place a few years later (but certainly before 373–374).¹³

As regards the *terminus ante quem*, the most important indication is that in *Ep.* 3 we find Jerome deploring the death of his friend Innocentius, who is identical with the addressee of our letter. *Ep.* 3 was undoubtedly written during the author's stay in Antioch, when he was convalescing after numerous illnesses in the house of Evagrius.¹⁴ It can be dated

episode with Auxentius, ca. 365/366 (Rebenich supposes that Evagrius joined Eusebius and Hilary of Poitiers in their efforts to depose Auxentius immediately upon his arrival in Italy; as has been mentioned above, the action proved unsuccessful). In this case the *terminus post quem* for Jerome's letter would not be dependent on these events, because another fact mentioned in *Ep.* 1 (the episode with Damasus; see further in the main text) sets it in 366 at the earliest.

⁹ Scourfield 1983: 135; Kelly 1975: 23.

¹⁰ According to Rebenich (1992: 65), Damasus had to defend himself against his opponents' accusations even at the Council of Aquileia in 381. The conflict probably continued in some form until his death in 384.

¹¹ This is only one of the dates advanced by scholars, another being 369. Cf. Rebenich 1992: 71.

¹² Scourfield 1983: 136.

¹³ Rebenich (1992: 63–67) conjectures that Evagrius intervened in all three cases at the imperial court, but simultaneously expresses scepticism about the possibility of dating these interventions more precisely than just the period of Evagrius' stay in Italy: 'Es kann einzig festgestellt werden, daß Evagrius während seines Aufenthaltes im Westen, d.h. zwischen 364/365 und 373/374, bei Valentinian vorsprach; ob ihm eine, zwei oder gar drei Audienzen gewährt wurden, ob er in Mailand, wo Valentinian auch 368 weilte, seine Anliegen vortrug oder nach Trier reiste, muß – trotz aller gelehrten Kombinationen – offenbleiben' (quotation on p. 67).

¹⁴ *Ep.* 3, 3.1–2: *Syria mihi uelut fidissimus naufrago portus occurrit. ubi ego quidquid morborum esse poterat expertus e duobus oculis unum perdidit; Innocentium enim, partem animae meae, repentinus febrium ardor abstraxit. nunc uno et toto mihi*

no earlier than the summer of 373 and probably not later than 376.¹⁵ It has also been suggested that Jerome must have written *Ep.* 1 before his journey to the East, because when he arrived in Antioch he was already seriously ill and Innocentius died shortly thereafter.¹⁶ However, these premises are by no means certain and can be safely omitted in the context of the present investigation, as the date of Jerome's departure from Italy cannot be established on any other grounds than that of *Ep.* 3 (with

lumine Euagrii nostro fruor, cui ego semper infirmus quidam ad laborem cumulus accessi.

¹⁵ Müller 1998: 194, n. 10. Cf. also Kelly 1975: 36. In *Ep.* 3, 2 Jerome writes that the news had reached him concerning Rufinus' presence in Nitria, which must have succeeded the latter's stay in Alexandria in May 373. The date of Jerome's departure from Antioch for the desert of Chalcis is difficult to establish; Cavallera (1922: II 14–15) assumed the second half of 375, Scourfield (1983: 36) suggested more cautiously 'by mid-376'. According to the latter, *Ep.* 3 should be dated no later than the summer of 375. This conclusion is based on his interpretation of the phrase *mediae fervor aestatis*, namely that it 'sets the piece in summer'. However, it seems that it is not an indication of a season in which Jerome wrote the letter, but rather a part of the description of his reaction to the above mentioned news concerning Rufinus. He recalls how much he regretted that he was not able to go to Egypt and meet his old friend because of a serious illness (2.3: *tunc uero aegrotum esse me dolui*). We do not know how much time had elapsed before Jerome finally gave up the plan of undertaking a journey himself and decided to ask Rufinus to visit him in Antioch instead (1.2: *has mei vicarias et tibi obvia mitto, quae te copula amoris innexum ad me usque perducant* and earlier in the same paragraph, partly omitted by Hilberg: *quia [non tam te sic ad me venire, quam ego ad te sic ire] non mereor*). Although at the moment of writing the letter Jerome still complains about his weakness (3.2: *cui semper infirmus quidam ad laborem cumulus accessi*; cf. also *Ep.* 4, written probably at the same time, 1.2: *quoniam intolerabilis languor* and 2.2: *catena languioris innector*), one could have an impression that his health has already, to some degree, improved. This seems to be confirmed by the use of the perfect tense (indicative or participle) when writing about maladies (*Ep.* 3, 1.2: *et inuailidum, etiam quum sanum est, corpusculum crebri fregere morbi* and 3.1: *quidquid morborum esse poterat expertus*). Accordingly, Scourfield's conclusion can be slightly modified: the letter must have been written during or after a summer that Jerome spent in Antioch. It can be added that the frequently formulated belief that in *Ep.* 4 Jerome asks Florentinus to hand *Ep.* 3 to Rufinus, who was supposed to stay in Jerusalem at that time, is impossible to prove. Jerome might have meant another letter written to Rufinus, but if he meant *Ep.* 3 indeed, then this is a further argument in support of the possibility of its slightly later dating.

¹⁶ Rebenich 1992: 71.

the obvious subtracting of several months that the journey itself must have demanded).

The validity of Innocentius' death as *terminus ante quem* for *Ep.* 1 can be questioned on the grounds that Jerome may have conceived it as a homage to a dead friend.¹⁷ One of the arguments in support of this view rests on the fact that there is at least one case of posthumous dedication in Jerome's literary output.¹⁸ In *Ep.* 77, which is addressed to Oceanus and constitutes a eulogy for Fabiola, Jerome recalls that he had once promised her to write a commentary on the halting-places of the Israelites on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land (Numbers 33), but it is only now, after her death, that he has completed his task.¹⁹ The treatise has been preserved until our times and is edited as the next piece (*Ep.* 78) in the modern collections of Jerome's letters. However, it does not exhibit virtually any epistolary features; verbs used in the second person do not refer specifically to Fabiola, but to any imagined reader.²⁰ Her name appears only in the title and it is not inconceivable that it could have been added later at some point during the transmission of the text. In fact, one could suppose that the commentary has found its place among epistles mainly because it has been mentioned in *Ep.* 77, which functions as

¹⁷ Cain 2009: 14. Cf. Schwind 1997: 183–184, n. 45. It should be noted here that as far as Innocentius is concerned, Schwind builds his argumentation in support of the later date of *Ep.* 1 mainly around the notion of a fictional letter and the 'speaking name' of the addressee. He perceives 'a dedication on the anniversary of death' only as another possibility worth consideration.

¹⁸ Schwind 1997: 182.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 77, 7.3 [*Fabiola*] *extorsit mihi negandi uerecundia, ut proprium ei opus huiusce modi disputatiunculae pollicerer, quod usque in praesens tempus, ut nunc intellego, domini uoluntate dilatum redditur memoriae illius.*

²⁰ Cf. for example *Ep.* 78, 2.4: *quod autem in manu Moysi et Aaron egressus scribitur, intellege legem et sacerdotium, opera et cultum dei, quorum alteram altero indiget. nihil enim prodest exercere uirtutes, nisi noueris creatorem, nec dei ueneratio proficiet ad salutem, nisi praecepta conditoris inpleueris.* Müller (1998: 205, n. 29) gives another argument against the epistolary character of *Ep.* 78, namely that instead of Fabiola the writer addresses an unspecified *lector*, for example in the phrases *quod lectorem turbare non debet* (11.1), *prudentem studiosumque lectorem rogatum uelim* (11.2), *et hoc, prudens lector, attende* (16.2). Cain (2009: 176) characterises the *Ep.* 78 as 'impersonal'.

a preface to it.²¹ Another factor must have been the existence of an earlier treatise written at Fabiola's request (*Ep.* 64), where epistolary characteristics are more evident (it contains two paragraphs in which Jerome addresses Fabiola explicitly).²² A comparison between *Epp.* 64 and 78 turns out to be especially informative in the present context. Both of them belong to the genre of *quaestiones et responsiones*, in which the boundaries between a letter and a treatise are naturally blurred.²³ However, when the dedicatee was alive, Jerome wrote an 'epistolary treatise' for her; after her death he chose a form devoid of such features and transferred a usual request-motive (serving as a dedication) to a eulogy contained in a letter to their mutual friend. Therefore, the significance of *Ep.* 78 as a parallel case for *Ep.* 1 should not be overestimated, since the latter resembles rather *Ep.* 64, which was surely composed during addressee's lifetime.²⁴

There remain a couple of other issues which should be considered in order to assess the possibility of dating *Ep.* 1 to a later period in Jerome's life. The exuberant rhetorical style of the letter has been frequently criticised and looked down upon as a typical characteristic of a juvenile work.²⁵ However, this opinion has been challenged in more recent scholarship.²⁶ It is rightly argued that Jerome could employ declamatory style irrespective of his age, whenever he found it useful for the purposes of

²¹ Cain 2009: 176–178. That the pieces were conceived as a pair (or as 'a tight unit,' in Cain's words) is also confirmed by a mention of the promise in *Ep.* 78, 1.6 (*ut promissa complentes mansionum Israel ordinem persequamur*), but without any further explanations, which can be found only in *Ep.* 77 (the passage quoted above, n. 19).

²² Intriguingly, these are not the first and the last one, but the seventh and the twenty-first (out of twenty-two), so that the 'epistolary frame' interferes here with the treatise proper in a rather unconventional manner.

²³ Cain 2009: 169.

²⁴ According to Müller (1998: 198–205), in the case of *Ep.* 1 a posthumous dedication would demand some additional explanation for a reader, as it did not constitute a rhetorical commonplace in prooemia.

²⁵ For example Kelly (1975: 40): 'The earliest of Jerome's surviving compositions, it betrays the beginner in its turgidity, exaggerated pathos, and extravagant use of rhetorical tricks,' and Scourfield (1983: 42): 'One is left in no doubt that the piece is the work of a man who had not yet mastered the technique of narrative writing'.

²⁶ Rebenich 1992: 68–69; 2002: 62 and especially Schwind 1997: 177–178, 185–186.

a specific work and potentially attractive to an intended audience.²⁷ The author's lively personality on the one hand and his mastery of various genres and styles on the other inhibit to a considerable extent the possibility of dating his works on a stylistic basis. In result, the impression one may have of *Ep.* 1 being permeated with juvenile emotionality cannot be regarded as a proof in this matter.

The evidence drawn from the introductory part of *Ep.* 1 is similarly inconclusive. Jerome could call himself *rudis vector* (*Ep.* 1, 2.1) regardless of his actual literary experience at the moment of writing. His claim that *otium quasi quaedam ingenii robigo paruulam licet facultatem pristini siccasset eloquii* (*Ep.* 1, 1) also does not specify the range of time elapsed from his previous literary activity nor how did 'the former eloquence' manifest itself. Both of these phrases make use of conventional metaphors associated with the humility *topos*, which can be identified in many other prefaces to Jerome's works.²⁸ In fact, if these phrases were to be interpreted with regard to the actual circumstances surrounding the creation of *Ep.* 1, this would have to be done only *after* establishing its date, not at the stage of collecting evidence for it.²⁹

²⁷ Schwind 1997: 179. He claims that numerous examples of rhetorical adornments can be found in Jerome's writings, not only among letters, but also in biographies of monks. It can be added that this is not surprising in the light of Jerome's excellent rhetorical education (cf. Kelly 1975: 14–16), for which he was extremely enthusiastic even after his conversion to asceticism (*Ep.* 52, 1.1–2: *dum essem adulescens, immo paene puer, et primos impetus lasciuientis aetatis heremi duritia refrenarem, scripsi ad auunculum tuum, sanctum Heliodorum, exhortatoriam epistulam plenam lacrimis querimoniisque et quae deserti sodalis monstraret affectum. sed in illo opere pro aetate tunc lusimus et calentibus adhuc rhetorum studiis atque doctrinis quaedam scolastico flore depinximus*). Cf. also *Ep.* 22, 30, the famous passage concerning Jerome's difficulties in renouncing classical pagan literature and his previous aversion to the uncouth style of the Bible.

²⁸ On Jerome's prefaces see Scourfield 1983: 49–53. For the classical, albeit not extended, survey of nautical metaphors in ancient and European literature see Curtius 2009: 128–130.

²⁹ Schwind (1997: 181) argues that *captatio benevolentiae* notwithstanding, there must be a grain of truth in the metaphor of rust that affected Jerome's *ingenium* and dried up his former eloquence, because a hyperbole without any real foundation would not appeal to the audience. Hence, Jerome must have already released to a wider readership at least one work displaying his literary abilities and afterwards there must have occurred a period without publications on his part. Müller (1998: 196–198) pays closer

Finally, it has been argued that the letter contains some indications concerning the temporal distance from which Jerome may have narrated the exploits of Evagrius. As stated above, all of them have been accomplished during the latter's stay in northern Italy. However, it is also known that his relationship with Jerome continued after both of them moved to the East.³⁰ Thus, it is not improbable that if the panegyric section of *Ep.* 1 had been created later, some other achievements of Evagrius would have been praised there.³¹ Apart from that, the general impression the reader gets is rather that Jerome does not narrate the events that happened a long time before.³²

In summary, *Ep.* 1 was certainly not written by Jerome before the autumn of 366. It is also probable that it happened after 368, 369 or 372, depending on the assumed date of Auxentius' condemnation at the Synod of Rome. Had it been possible to identify the episode with Damasus, the *terminus post quem* could be even later, but there is no way to confirm it. The *terminus ante quem* cannot be determined with certainty, but there seems to be more evidence in favour of a relatively early date than against it. If one rejects the possibility of a posthumous dedication or a fictional letter, then *Ep.* 1 may be dated before the death

attention to the nautical metaphor, which she claims has not been used as a cliché, but intentionally adjusted to the specific circumstances in which *Ep.* 1 was created. The work was designed as a 'Meisterstück' presenting the literary skills of Jerome and introducing him to a wider audience or his patron. Its role in the author's literary career is expressed by the picture of *rudis vector* becoming *gubernator* on the condition that his first voyage on a dangerous sea turns out to be successful. Both interpretations are attractive and after situating *Ep.* 1 in a specific moment of Jerome's life they could be easily reconciled without significant modifications.

³⁰ Cain 2009: 40. Not only did Jerome recover in his friend's house in Antioch, but also his correspondence was passed on to him by Evagrius during his subsequent stay in the desert (*Ep.* 7, 1.2: *nam postquam sancto Euagrio transmittente, in ea ad me heremi parte delatae sunt, quae inter Syros ac Sarracenos uastum limitem ducit*).

³¹ Müller 1998: 194, n. 7.

³² Schwind (1997: 180–181), opting for a later date of *Ep.* 1, claims that the phrase *in nostram aetatem incidere* (cf. *Ep.* 1, 1) tends to be used with reference to a bygone age, usually by elderly people or when speaking about a dead person. This argument has been opposed by Müller (1998: 206–210), who states that this phrase was not common enough to have such a strictly defined meaning. She points out that Jerome wanted rather to emphasise the fact that miracles can still happen in our times, that they do not belong only to the past.

of Innocentius, which occurred between 373 and 376; otherwise there seems to be no evidence in support of any other specific period in Jerome's life when the work could have been written and the *terminus ante quem* must be defined no earlier than Jerome's death in 420.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT FOR *EP. 1*

The decade 366–376 being the most probable date of *Ep. 1*, it is worth investigating what happened at that time in Jerome's life. The first obstacle that presents itself to us is the uncertainty concerning his date of birth. The sole extant ancient testimony in this matter comes from Prosper of Aquitaine, who in his *Epitoma chronicon* records the year 331 (or 330).³³ However, scholars have challenged the reliability of this evidence on multiple grounds and currently the year 347 is considered more plausible.³⁴ The difference of 16 years between these two dates is particularly confusing in the case of *Ep. 1*, for the two possibilities that have to be taken into account are that the author wrote it in his twenties or between the age of 35 and 45.³⁵

The period of Jerome's youth is generally not very well-documented. In his writings there appear few passages concerning his earlier life³⁶ and these fragmentary pieces of information should be interpreted very carefully. Not only do they rarely offer any indication of a precise date of a recalled event, but above all they serve specific purposes in the context they occur in, so that one may doubt their accuracy and reliability.³⁷

³³ *Epitoma chronicon*, pp. 451 (a. 331: *Hieronimus nascitur*) and 469 (a. 420: *Hieronimus presbyter moritur anno aetatis suae XCI prid. kal. Octobris*).

³⁴ Rebenich 1992: 21, Cain 2009: 1. For the opposite view see Kelly 1975: 337–339. The scholarly debate on this matter has been very long. Some arguments are based on the usage of words *senex*, *adulescens* and other terms denoting Jerome's age, others refer to the character of his relationship with potentially younger people, especially with Augustine. Evidence in favour of the later date includes the information that the death of the emperor Julian (363) occurred when Jerome was still a schoolboy and that his brother was born in the middle 360s (see Kelly 1975: 6, 23).

³⁵ A similar calculation can be found in Schwind 1997: 177–178.

³⁶ Rebenich 1992: 21; cf. Kelly 1975: 1–45.

³⁷ For the view that Jerome created a carefully designed self-portrait in his writings (especially in the epistolary ones) see Cain 2009.

Nevertheless, it is probable that during his education at Rome Jerome had not yet aspired for a more committed form of Christian life. His parents seem to have been rather lukewarm in their Christianity³⁸ and all we know about his religious life at Rome is that he used to visit catacombs on Sundays with a group of friends and received baptism, perhaps at some point before the autumn of 366.³⁹ He probably took advantage of various entertainments available in the city and satisfied his carnal desires during some sexual adventures, but his recollections concerning these episodes are vague and apart from the declared feeling of bitter remorse not much can be inferred from them.⁴⁰ As a student of rhetoric he delivered declamatory speeches in fictitious legal cases (*controversiae*) and frequently observed lawsuits in real courts, so it is supposed that he may have planned a secular career as a lawyer.⁴¹ His future penchant for philological scholarship was already visible in his enthusiasm for collecting a private library, at that time probably dominated by pagan classics.⁴²

This short description of Jerome's life during his education at Rome constitutes a background that must supplement the scant biographical material that we have for the decade 366–376, which interests us most in the context of *Ep.* 1. Depending on which date of Jerome's birth one assumes, this decade either succeeded immediately his stay at Rome (if he was born around 347) or was separated from it by a dozen years or

³⁸ Kelly 1975: 7.

³⁹ Kelly 1975: 21–24. There is no direct evidence for this assumption; it is based on the supposition that if Jerome had been baptised by Damasus, he would emphasise this fact in the letters written to him (cf. *Ep.* 15, 1.1: *nunc meae animae postulans cibum, unde olim Christi uestimenta suscepi* and *Ep.* 16, 2.1: *Ego igitur, ut ante iam scripsi, Christi uestem in Romana urbe suscipiens nunc barbaro Syriae limite tenor*). According to Rebenich (1992: 30–31), Jerome's decision to be baptised meant that he wanted to lead a life of a committed Christian and therefore it should be dated later, after Jerome's stay at Trier.

⁴⁰ Kelly 1975: 20–21. Rebenich (1992: 28) claims that these remorseful confessions concerning sexual misconduct have a 'topical character' (similarly to Augustine's *Confessiones*) and are supposed to show the contrast between the earlier sinful life and the purity achieved through asceticism.

⁴¹ Kelly 1975: 15–16.

⁴² Kelly 1975: 20.

more (if he was born in 331).⁴³ What needs to be emphasised is that this 'additional' period is virtually unknown to us,⁴⁴ in other words, none of Jerome's reminiscences present in his later writings can be even hypothetically ascribed to it.

Apart from Rome, there is only one city in the West where Jerome spent some time as a young man and has explicitly confirmed this fact in his later writings. It is Trier, one of the administrative centres of the Western Roman Empire and from 367 the main residence of the emperor Valentinian I.⁴⁵ Jerome's stay there cannot be precisely dated, but it most probably included the year 369 or 370.⁴⁶ He may have chosen this place with a view to advance his career in imperial administration,⁴⁷ but nothing is known about his professional aspirations at that time. Whatever the truth, it is there that we see his developing interest in Christian theology and ascetic life. He recalls how he copied two treatises written by Hilary of Poitiers,⁴⁸ and it was probably also in Trier that he started to feel attraction to the ideals of renunciation and monastic withdrawal.⁴⁹

The earliest extant correspondence of Jerome indicates that before he set out on his journey to the East he had interactions with people living in Aquileia, Stridon and Emona.⁵⁰ Some of them have already belonged to the ecclesiastical hierarchy (e.g. presbyter Chromatius, subdeacon Niceas, archdeacon Jovinus) or lead a monastic life (monks Chrysocomas and Anthony, virgins of Emona), others only shared Jerome's enthusiasm for ascetic ideals and were to fulfil them in the future (Rufinus, Bono-

⁴³ According to Kelly (1975: 24), it was recommended, and from 370 even required by law, that students from the provinces leave Rome no later than at the age of twenty. Jerome could have infringed this limit by several years, but probably not more.

⁴⁴ Kelly (1975: 24) calls it 'a black-out,' a period of Jerome's life that 'is lost to us'.

⁴⁵ Rebenich 2002: 6.

⁴⁶ See Kelly 1976: 26–27.

⁴⁷ Kelly 1975: 27–28; Rebenich 2002: 6–7.

⁴⁸ *Ep. 5, 2.3: interpretationem quoque psalmorum Dauiticorum et prolixum ualde de synodiis librum sancti Hilarii, quae ei [Rufini] apud Treueris manu mea ipse descrips-eram, aequae ut mihi transferas peto.*

⁴⁹ *Ep. 3, 5.2: cum post Romana studia ad Rheni semibarbaras ripas eodem cibo, pari fruere[mur] [cum Bonoso] hospitio, ut ego primus coeperim uelle te colere.* Cf. Kelly 1975: 29–30; Rebenich 2002: 7–9. For the interpretation of *ad Rheni semibarbaras ripas* as Trier see Kelly 1975: 25–26.

⁵⁰ Kelly 1975: 30; Rebenich 2002: 9–11. Cf. *Epp.* 3–14.

sus), still others were religiously indifferent (inhabitants of his native town). In the letters there appear also allusions to conflicts that arose between Jerome and some of those people, but it is not clear whether the malicious damaging of his reputation that he mentions⁵¹ had already begun before he resolved to leave northern Italy for the East. It has been suggested that it may have been one of the reasons behind this decision.⁵² Intriguingly, approximately at the same time many of his friends have also set off on their journeys, most of them in a similar direction.⁵³ Among them were also Evagrius and Innocentius. It is not known where and when exactly Jerome met them for the first time, but most probably it had already happened when all of them lived in the West.⁵⁴ What is certain is that they stayed together in Antioch, where Innocentius died of sudden fever and Jerome recovered from repeated illnesses under the care of Evagrius.⁵⁵ At one point during his sickness, when he was on the verge of death, he probably experienced his 'second conversion' and finally managed to renounce his beloved classical pagan literature.⁵⁶ From Antioch, Jerome did not proceed on his way to Jerusalem, which was his original destination. One can suppose that he had earlier perceived the pilgrimage to the Holy Land as a prelude to the final decision concerning monastic withdrawal,⁵⁷ but his traumatic experiences in Antioch have prepared him even better to make the ultimate choice in this matter, and in 376 at the latest he began a solitary life in the desert of Chalcis.

What has been outlined above clearly shows that the decade 366–376 was a crucial period in Jerome's life. After finishing his education at Rome,

⁵¹ E.g. in *Ep.* 6, 2.2: *licet me sinistro Hibera excetra rumore dilaniet, non timebo iudicium habiturus iudicem meum*. This reservation appears in the context of Jerome's merits in leading his sister to salvation.

⁵² This is the interpretation of Kelly (1975: 34–35).

⁵³ Kelly (1975: 34–36) rejects the possibility that they set out together, with the exception of subdeacon Niceas, who could have accompanied Jerome on the journey. Contrarily, Rebenich (1992: 76–85) thinks it quite probable that Jerome travelled in a larger company of friends.

⁵⁴ According to Kelly (1975: 33) 'it was probably at Aquileia, in the circle of Chromatius'. Rebenich (1992: 67–68) remarks that it could have happened also at Trier.

⁵⁵ *Ep.* 3, 3.

⁵⁶ *Ep.* 22, 30; Kelly 1975: 41–44. Rebenich (1992: 37–41; 2002: 7–9) insists that the dream could have taken place at another point in Jerome's life, possibly at Trier in about 370.

⁵⁷ Cf. Rebenich 1992: 77.

he probably sought to pursue the typical secular career of a well-educated, intelligent, ambitious young man. Nevertheless, one may conjecture that he still had the need of broadening his intellectual horizons and that his highly emotional personality required deeper religious involvement. It took him probably a few years to find his own path and at the end of this period we can see in his letters how much he struggled before his final decision to become a monk. In the meantime, he made acquaintances of devoted Christians, but also continued relationships with his former schoolmates who demonstrated similar interest in asceticism. However, one should remember that the evidence available to us can be misleading. It is almost sure that what has been preserved from Jerome's early correspondence is exactly what he wanted to circulate among a broader readership.⁵⁸ Accordingly, what appears to be the natural result of a long process and a carefully prepared choice might, for example, have been a spontaneous decision spurred by a failure in his professional career or in another sphere of life. In fact, what happened in his youth shall always remain little more than a matter of speculation to us.

THE IDEAS BEHIND *EP. 1*

Having examined the biographical circumstances that probably accompanied the creation of *Ep. 1*, we may now proceed to the consideration of the ideas contained in the text and see how they have been expressed. There seem to be no reasons to doubt that the story of a woman of Vercellae is based on historical events.⁵⁹ The core elements of the plot could

⁵⁸ Cain 2009: 13–42; Rebenich 1992: 21.

⁵⁹ Rebenich 1992: 63. However, in his later study on Jerome, Rebenich presented the opinion that it was not the author's intention to 'give a report of a true incident' (2002: 63). Contrarily, for Scourfield (1983: 44) 'there is no reason to doubt that J. believed that the tale was entirely true'. It is indeed hard to imagine that Jerome might have praised Evagrius for two of his 'real' deeds, mentioned almost in passing, and an entirely 'fictional' one, with its 'prehistory' accounted in detail. What seems probable is that the author did not perceive his work as historical (hence the anonymity of the main characters) and consequently preferred to focus on the miraculous part of the story, where the clarity of a spiritually edifying message counts more than the accuracy of details. Cf. the views of Scourfield (1983: 47), who classified *Ep. 1* as 'a type of history with a distinct Tendenz,' Müller (1998: 209), who claims that Jerome was not interested in relating 'eine konkrete historisch Begebenheit,' because his main purpose

have happened in the reality of the late Roman Empire. They probably included the husband's accusation made against his wife and her alleged lover, the cruelty of the *consularis* examining the defendants under torture, the man's confession and the woman's persistent denial, the execution of the man and the failure (perhaps repeated) to execute the woman,⁶⁰ the crowd's intercession on her behalf, the woman's apparent death or fainting, her recovery in a secluded place, renewed prosecution and Evagrius' intervention at the imperial court. Further details may have been added by Jerome for the sake of a literary effect, but if he was not an eyewitness (as one can reasonably suppose), he has probably already heard an account of the events that was slightly modified and perhaps even highly-coloured.⁶¹ Thus, the boundary between reality and fictionality in *Ep.* 1 seems virtually undefinable. What we can analyse is the way in which Jerome transformed the story into a literary work, what were his choices as a writer, both consciously made, dictated by his aesthetic preferences and the intended message of the text, and the unconscious ones, resulting from his inner desires, fears and presuppositions concerning the human condition in the world.

That Jerome perceived his text as a literary work can be inferred from the two introductory paragraphs.⁶² First of all, the author recalls how he was asked by his friend Innocentius 'not to be silent' (*ne tacerem*) about the miraculous events that took place in their time. It is clear that Innocentius did not ask Jerome to tell him about something which was unknown to him; the request pertained to creation of a literary version of the story, probably with the aim of releasing it to a wider audience. Moreover, the notion of 'unwelcome silence' seems to indicate some sense of duty, as if Jerome was an especially chosen or, at least,

was to demonstrate his literary skills in the literary genre of *passio*, and Shanzer (2018: 149), who states that 'what allegedly happened in Jerome, *epist.* 1 may not be complete fantasy, but an exaggeration'.

⁶⁰ On failed executions see Shanzer 2018: 147–150, 152–157.

⁶¹ Grützmacher (1901: 143) claims that Jerome heard the story from Evagrius, but this seems to be just a conjecture.

⁶² For previous analyses of the introductory part of *Ep.* 1 see Scourfield 1983: 49–80; Schwind 1997: 181–185; Müller 1998: 195–198, 205–208; Iljaš, Špelič 2021: 105–107. On the parallel passages from Cicero (*de orat.* 1, 174) and Quintilian (12 *prooem.* 3f.), which are not discussed in the present paper, see especially Müller 1998: 195–197. Literary allusions present in *Ep.* 1 are examined by Scourfield 1983 and Coppiters et al. 2014.

particularly suitable person to complete this task. One might even think that he is invited to preach to the people in some way. This would be confirmed by the subsequent invoking of religious ideas such as the greater importance of readiness to engage in divine work over one's skills and abilities (*in dei rebus non possibilitatem inspici debere, sed animum*) and the conviction that authentic faith prevents being at a loss for words (*neque eum posse uerba deficere, qui credidisset in uerbo*). However, these are arguments advanced by Innocentius, which Jerome reports, but does not necessarily accept them. Although he asserts that his safety on a dangerous 'journey' will be granted by the Holy Spirit's company (*spiritu sancto cursum prosequente confidam*), he does not feel sure about the outcome of his efforts and whether he will succeed in completing the task (*ego id uerecunde et uere, ut nunc experior, negarem, meque assequi posse diffiderem; quod implere non possum, negare non audeo; si inter asperos orationis anfractus inpolitus sermo substiterit*). What can become the cause of his failure is his lack of experience (*rudis vector; homo, qui necdum scalmum in lacu rexi*) and the difficulty of the undertaking (*super onerariam navem ... imponor; Euxini maris credor fragori*). Jerome, then, does not entrust himself wholly to the Holy Spirit's guidance. He seems not to believe that the text will come into being as a direct result of divine inspiration and that God's help will make up for the shortcomings of his own, getting the message across to the readers in the best possible way.⁶³ The thing he is most concerned about is the danger of 'unpolished style' (*inpolitus sermo*) that can result from his allegedly insufficient eloquence (*quia otium quasi quaedam ingenii rubigo paruulam licet facultatem pristini sicasset eloquii*). Stylistic excellence is so important to him that he is discouraged even by the inevitable inferiority of human speech compared to 'celestial praise' (*quia omnis humanus sermo inferior esset laude caelesti*). The possible participation of the Holy Spirit in his work notwithstanding, he knows that his abilities as a writer are going to be judged on the basis of the following narrative (*si me ad optatos portus aestus adpulerit, gubernator putabor*). One cannot resist the impression that the work, although written with some

⁶³ In this respect Jerome stays nearer to the classical pagan tradition than to the specifically Christian variant of the concept of divine inspiration understood as the Holy Spirit's guidance. On the notion of divine assistance experienced by poets in antiquity cf. Scourfield 1983: 77–79.

practical purposes (laudatory, edifying), is perceived by Jerome mainly as an artistic undertaking.⁶⁴

Coming back to Jerome's choices, the most important one is the presentation of the events at Vercellae as a miracle. In the preface, the author explicitly admits that he interpreted the episode in this way (*miraculum eius rei, quae in nostra aetate inciderat*). Consequently, the main theme of the work (to which he also alludes by mentioning *laus caelestis*) is the praise of God, who did the miracle, of the woman, who 'deserved' or even 'elicited' it through her innocence, endurance and unwavering faith, and of Evagrius, who helped to restore the woman to freedom.⁶⁵ It seems natural for a Christian to believe that the unusual, almost supernatural phenomenon of a survived execution should be classified as a miracle. The next assumption Jerome makes, that the woman must have been innocent, involves much more subjectivity. The reasoning behind it seems to be as follows: the woman claimed innocence and God rescued her, so she must have spoken the truth (God 'sanctioned' her claim). However, there is in the story the parallel case of the young man, which shows that the woman's perseverance was also necessary for the miracle to happen. The man was similarly innocent (did not commit adultery), but confessed falsely under torture and has not been rescued by God afterwards. It would seem that he simply was weaker, lacked trust in God and did not 'deserve' a miracle in a way that the woman did.

Surprisingly, this is not the interpretation that we find in *Ep.* 1. Jerome comments: *solusque omnium miser, merito uisus est percuti, quia non reliquit innoxiae, unde posset negare*. The man's weakness certainly should not be praised; but did he really deserve *to be executed*? Even though Jerome softens his statement with the verb *uideor*⁶⁶ and calls the

⁶⁴ For Müller's interpretation see nn. 29 and 59 above. The commonly accepted idea of associating *Ep.* 1 with declamatory aesthetic has been recently taken up in a new way by Shanzer (2018), who insists that Jerome's declamation has a specifically judicial character and draws on previous realisations of similar themes. However, it does not seem that a legal problem is in the centre of this text, even though Jerome might have been sensitive to such issues as a result of his education in Rome. See n. 71 below.

⁶⁵ Cf. Rebenich 1992: 69.

⁶⁶ The same verb modifies another statement summarising a morally difficult situation, when the crowd witnessing the woman's execution at first tries to help her, but finally accepts that she must die: *mirum in modum uoluntate mutata, cum pietatis fuisset, quod ante defenderant, pietatis uisum est genus, ut paterentur occidi* (10.3).

man *miser* (also *infelicissimus* in 3.2 and later *miserrimus* in 3.4, 7.1), this is an alarmingly severe judgement. It puts the responsibility for the woman's situation not on the cruel *consularis* or the equally cruel Roman legal system, but on the person who was a victim himself, though turned out to be morally weaker than the woman and succumbed to evil in order to avoid further torments (*uolens conpendio mortis longos uitare cruciatus*); and it has to be remembered that he did not have almost any time for reflection. Had the man survived the execution, Jerome would probably not assess him so harshly. Consequently, the reasoning here seems to be similar to the one reconstructed above: the man was not rescued by God, so he must have 'deserved' to die; he did something wrong before, so that was the reason for his death. In both cases God's decision to rescue a convicted person or not is interpreted by Jerome as an indication of their moral condition, which is assessed not only in respect to the crime they were (wrongfully) accused of, but also on the basis of their behaviour during the trial (survival is a reward for innocence and steadfastness, death is a punishment for weakness and sins).⁶⁷

Before trying to identify the possible reasons for such a severe criticism of the man, it is important to notice that Jerome generally does not demand punishment for people who contributed to the woman's execution or at least did not prevent it. Conversely, he even praises the woman for benefitting them. It happens three times in the course of the story: when the woman defends the young man by persistently denying her (and, consequently, his) guilt (5.2), when she informs the executioner⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Shanzer (2018: 147–150, 152–156) compares the case of the woman of Vercellae to the medieval concept of 'ordeal-by-execution'. It is interesting in this context that Jerome, in spite of clearly stating that *iuuenis* did not commit adultery, introduces defendants with the phrase *muliercula cum adultero*, as though the man's later weakness implied also his proclivity for moral trespasses in sexual sphere. Cf. Iljaš, Špelič 2021: 113.

⁶⁸ He is called *lictor* in this passage (7–8), interchangeably with *carnifex*, *percussor* and *speculator*. Otherwise one would expect the narrator to provide the information that somebody else (*lictor*, *speculator*) came up to the woman in order to finish the executioner's (*carnifex*, *percussor*) task. It is rather improbable that Jerome would neglect such details, even though the narration is clearly centred on the woman. However, the problem of executioner's prestigious attire (*paludamentum*, *chlamys*), rather inappropriate for a headsman (Scourfield 1983: 108–109), would disappear, if one would assume that *lictor* was only the *consularis*' attendant charged with supervising the execution and not carrying it out himself. That Jerome used this term imprecisely is evident

that his brooch has fallen to the ground and advises him to pick it up (7.3), and finally when she ‘seems to be dead’ (*uisa est mori*) in order that the ‘innocent’ *lictor* could be saved (11). On the factual level, the actions of the woman (or of God allowing her apparent death) did indeed create some favourable circumstances for the people mentioned, but in two situations (the first and the third) it is clear that it was not her primary intention to aid them, not to mention the idea of self-sacrifice.⁶⁹ In the second situation the reader may sense irony or scorn when she argues that the executioner’s brooch is precious, because it has been earned with hard work (*multo quaesitum labore*),⁷⁰ but Jerome explicitly interprets her comment as a *beneficium* (8.1). One can conclude that he seeks to find as many instances of the woman’s benevolence and benignity as possible. Similarly, when he praises Evagrius for having helped Damasus, he emphasises that it did not include doing harm to his opponents (15.2: *uicisse aduersarios, et non nocuisse superatis*). This view that one should refrain from revenge and benefit others, even if they cause suffering to us, could stem from Jerome’s understanding of the Christian principle of love (cf. 2.2 *quia caritas omnia potest*). He wanted to praise God who is omnipotent and just, but at the same time full of grace and clemency.

It seems, then, that the violent death of the young man simply constituted for the author a disquieting element in the story. To admit that somebody was executed undeservedly and God did not intervene on his behalf might have been troublesome for him, especially in a laudatory work. In result, he decided to present this fact as something that was regrettable, but simultaneously rightful, although he was not really certain how to justify it. Anyway, his priority was that the *laudatio* be perfect, which apparently meant for him that the story should not include elements which are presented as unjustified and irreparable misfortunes. It is not hard to notice that Jerome does not dwell on things that do not find their positive solution in the story: he neither analyses the defects

in the fact that *lictor* is mentioned twice later in the text (10, 13), where it seems to designate two other characters. On the meaning of *lictor* in *Ep.* 1 see Scourfield 1983: 108, 121, 128; Rebenich 2002: 178, n. 30.

⁶⁹ Scourfield 1983: 100, 120.

⁷⁰ Cf. Coppieters et al. 2014: 400.

in the legal procedure⁷¹ nor does he even directly rebuke the woman's oppressors, restricting himself to the vivid descriptions of their madness, powerlessness and perhaps cowardice (but it is possible that in his opinion the *curator damnatorum* was truly innocent⁷²). All characters except from the woman disappear after having taken their part in the story. This focus on the woman and her virtues allows the author to construct the narrative in which all ends well, the enthusiastic tone can be maintained throughout the work and the aesthetic ideal of coherence satisfyingly realised.

Apart from the requirements of the laudatory genre, these preferences could also stem from some deeper inner desires on the part of Jerome, such as to live in the world that is safer and more logical. As has been already mentioned, what is praised in *Ep.* 1 is not only the steadfastness of a human waging a solitary fight against evil; God's reaction to this situation is equally important.⁷³ It was probably very comforting for Jerome to think that unwavering faith can protect a human in the

⁷¹ Cf. Coppieters et al. 2014: 388, 408. The opposing view has been presented by Grützmacher (1901: 145), who interprets *Ep.* 1 as a pamphlet criticising the cruelty of the pagan legal system ('Das Martyrium der des Ehebruchs beschuldigten Christin ist das Martyrium des Christentums unter dem heidnischen Recht'), by Berschin (1988: 134), who calls the work 'sensationelle Justizliteratur' ('Es ist die Geschichte eines Justizirrtums, die man als moderner Leser absurd, makaber und bis zum Exzeß trivial nennen muß') and by Iljaš, Špelič (2021: 110–112), who claim that *Ep.* 1 illustrates the condition of a municipal community devoid of a strong leader (such as was certainly Eusebius, bishop of Vercellae, who died c. 370) and, therefore, was intended by Jerome as a critique of secular authorities.

⁷² According to Scourfield (1983: 121–122), the quotation from Virgil (*Aen.* 12, 611) is merely 'a convenient phrase' for Jerome, 'except in as much as the *curator damnatorum* is, like Latinus, in a dangerous situation'. However, depending on Jerome's interpretation of *Aeneis*, he might have perceived Latinus either as a person who is equally powerless in the face of evil or as someone who behaves in the same cowardly and passive manner as the *curator* in *Ep.* 1.

⁷³ The first divine intervention takes place in the very middle of the narrative and is supposed to reveal the glory of the Trinity: the woman is saved from the third stroke of the hangman's sword (for the interpretation of this passage in the context of anti-Arianism see Coppieters et al. 2014: 407). Jerome highlights the structural importance of this event by interrupting the tale and invoking three *exempla* from the biblical Book of Daniel. See Scourfield 1983: 113–119; Coppieters et al. 2014: 400–402.

dangerous world⁷⁴ and especially that one's innocence can be proven by divine intervention.⁷⁵ Furthermore, taking into account the anonymity of all characters in the main narrative (Evagrius is not mentioned until the epilogue) and the elements of black-and-white representation of the world (e.g. in the portrayal of the woman and the *consularis*: she is morally strong and spiritual, he behaves almost like a fierce animal), it is legitimate to a certain degree to interpret the story as a universal tale about defending the truth and the victory of good over evil. On the other hand, the presence of the historical realities (particularly in the last paragraph) and the information that the events took place during Jerome's lifetime (in the preface) may encourage the reader to see behind the text the exciting message that miracles happen also 'in our times'.⁷⁶ Additionally, the strong engagement of the narrator (most striking in his comments and interjections in 5.1, 8.1–2, 9.1–2, 15.1–3) also contributes to the impression that the story had some greater personal meaning for Jerome.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ It is worth noticing that the almost naturalistic vividness with which the tortures and the execution are described in *Ep.* 1 can not only testify to the author's alleged penchant for the macabre, but also serve an important effect in the work: when a miracle happens, all these awful, terrifying things are gloriously overcome.

⁷⁵ This seems to be suggested by numerous conflicts in which Jerome was engaged throughout his life. As has been mentioned above, already when he was leaving northern Italy for the East, his reputation was apparently being damaged by his enemies. It is also known that Evagrius had suffered from some serious accusations in Antioch before he left his hometown for Italy (Rebenich 1992: 56).

⁷⁶ Müller 1998: 208–210 (see n. 32 above). In this respect, Jerome may be a representative of his own age. Brown (1982: 69–85) has noticed that in late antiquity the belief in the afterlife was not enough to eliminate the Christian's shame connected with the weakness of their bodies and their vulnerability to death. The cult of saints, especially of martyrs, could help them to overcome these fears. Martyrs' heroism was interpreted as a 'miraculous suppression of suffering' (quotation on p. 80) resulting from God's special grace.

⁷⁷ It should be noted here that for some scholars, including Rebenich, *Ep.* 1 was written as 'ein *officium* für einen *patronus*' (1992: 70) or 'a panegyric to Evagrius' (2002: 64). The purpose of praising the author's close friend and patron could account for the duality of the work's personal/epistolary and public/literary character. Furthermore, the construction of *Ep.* 1 interpreted as a panegyric would be rather sophisticated, but not inconceivable: the praise of the anonymous woman would be 'acquired' at the end of the piece by Evagrius, who had believed in God's miracle and was able to 'continue' it or even bring it to a proper end. However, at the moment when Jerome finishes the 'miraculous' part of his story, the account of the events becomes laconic, vague, some-

Concerning the significance of the author's biographical background for the interpretation of *Ep.* 1, it has to be noted that the text contains a few passages that apparently allude to the ideas of asceticism. The first of them occurs in the woman's speech: *non ideo me negare uelle, ne peream, sed ideo mentiri nolle, ne peccem. ... equidem et ipsa cupio mori, cupio inuisum hoc corpus exuere, sed non quasi adultera ... innocentiam tantum mecum feram* (3.3–4). In the context of her impressive faith that was to 'cause' a miracle, it seems obvious that Jerome attributes to her religious rather than pragmatic motives (*ne peccem* as opposed to *ne peream*) for denying the crime of adultery. It is equally obvious that she does not want to be labelled an adulteress and praises her innocence higher than life. However, why does she *want to die* and why does she call her body 'hateful'?⁷⁸ It may be argued that the woman does not really desire to die, but simply challenges her torturers (cf. 3.4: *praesto iugulum, micantem intrepida excipio mucronem*, 6.1: *caede, ure, lacera*). She knows that she is going to be tormented and finally executed and does not have any impact on this situation, so she declares that her life and body are of no value to her and in this way apparently keeps control of the situation and reclaims her freedom. Moreover, she is sure that innocence guarantees eternal life (3.4: *non moritur, quisquis sic uicturus occiditur*), so she does not have to be afraid of death.⁷⁹ Another possible explanation could be that these words represent her general stance on the matter of body and worldly life.⁸⁰ As a Christian, she could believe that a greater happiness awaits her in the afterlife and consequently may have perceived death as something welcome. However, such views did not have to involve any form of actual rejection of one's body and without ascetic framework it is still hard to understand the reasons behind the woman's rather shocking words. The last possibility that can be imag-

what chaotic, as though he did no longer find his subject so inspiring. The impression is of an appendix, something not as important as the previous section. Nevertheless, his enthusiasm does not cease. It seems, then, that the true ending of the story simply did not ideally suit Jerome's artistic conception.

⁷⁸ Scourfield (1983: 90) notices that most manuscripts have *infirmum* instead of *inuisum*, but he supports Hilberg's choice of the second *lectio* as a 'more telling' one.

⁷⁹ On the relation between victory and death in Christian literature see Coppieters et al. 2014: 392–393.

⁸⁰ Cf. Scourfield 1983: 90.

ined is that this kind of self-destructive feelings can occur in a critical situation as a result of a possibly unconscious desire to put an end to torments at all costs. That would make the woman's behaviour comparable to the man's (3.2: *uolens conpendio mortis longos uitare cruciatus*), with the significant difference that she rejected the option of lying.

A little later, when the woman is further tortured, her soul becomes separated from the pain of her body and she enjoys her pure conscience without being affected by physical torments (5.1: *a dolore corporis spiritu separato, dum conscientiae bono fruitur, uetuit circa se saeuire tormenta*). Here again, her 'abandonment' of the body does not necessarily result from her general despise for it; she merely takes advantage of the possibility to avoid pain. Finally, after the woman comes to life from her apparent death, she stays with some virgins in a secluded house, having her hair cut and her clothes changed for male ones (14: *cum quibusdam uirginibus ad secretiorem uillulam secto crine transmittitur. ibi paulatim uirili habitu ueste mutata, in cicatricem uulnus obducitur*). This description does indeed evoke associations with ascetic life, but this was probably only a temporary solution, a disguise that enabled her to survive.⁸¹ It is also possible that as a result of torture the woman was ashamed of her body and such 'monastic' environment provided good conditions for her recovery.

Thus, all of the passages which seemingly refer to the ideas associated with asceticism (such as renouncing one's body and perceiving it as something undesirable, not deserving special care or constituting merely an obstacle to the higher spiritual life) can be explained also in a different way, as elements of a very convincing psychological portrait of a spiritually developed Christian woman in the circumstances of false accusation, inhuman torture and execution. This image could have been inspired by a real person, but could also draw on the earlier tradition of martyrdom-literature⁸² as well as be produced by Jerome's own in-

⁸¹ For other examples of disguise in Latin literature see Scourfield 1983: 130.

⁸² The affinity of *Ep.* 1 with Christian *passiones* is examined by Scourfield (1983: 44–45), Müller (1998: 208–210), Coppieters et al. (2014: 390–405, 408), Shanzer (2018: 150–152). Scholars frequently refer to the notion of 'secular Martyrdom' ('profane Martyrerakte', Berschin 1988: 134) in order to highlight the fact that the heroine of Vercellae is not persecuted for her faith in Christ, but for an alleged adultery. In the context of *Ep.* 1 it is also worth remembering that initially the term 'martyr' referred

tuition and artistic invention. However, one cannot exclude the possibility that he indeed wanted to depict a devoted Christian who, thanks to her astounding faith, has been in some sense naturally predisposed for adopting the ideals of asceticism. This could account for the presence of sexual undertones in Jerome's description of the woman's torture and execution,⁸³ which might indicate that he wanted to praise her for being immune to carnal temptations,⁸⁴ the capability which he himself probably dreamt of.⁸⁵ Another argument that can be adduced in favour of this interpretation concerns the author's milieu, which could have been dominated by enthusiasts of the ascetic movement already at the time when the letter was created.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, these premises seem too tenuous to support the conclusion that *Ep.* 1 constitutes 'an example of the subtle propaganda for asceticism by use of martyrological themes'.⁸⁷ One may perceive it rather as a document of Jerome's sincere admiration for the heroine of Vercellae (real or imagined), dating probably from a period when he himself looked for inspiring examples and models to follow, trying to persuade himself to make radical changes in his own life. Even though he might have wanted to disseminate the ideas he believed in (or

not only to Christians who *died* for their faith, but also to those who have been 'only' imprisoned and tortured (Jungmann 2013: 278). However, *Ep.* 1 is not only viewed as a tale of martyrdom, but also as a 'protohagiographical account' (Burrus 2011: 59) and it has been shown that it bears a similarity to hagiographical narratives written by Jerome. See for example Scourfield 1983: 45–47 (on *Vitae monachorum* in general); Schwind 1997: 184–185 (on *Vita Malchi*); Burrus 2011: 53–69; Coppieters et al. 2014: 394–397.

⁸³ Shaw 1996: 272–274; Burrus 2011: 53–56; Coppieters et al. 2014: 395–397; Shanzer 2018: 150–152.

⁸⁴ That would agree with her innocence of adultery. See n. 67 above.

⁸⁵ As may be inferred from *Ep.* 22, 7.

⁸⁶ It is worth emphasising that Eusebius of Vercellae, whom Evagrius accompanied on his journey to Italy, was one of the chief propagators of the monastic-ascetic ideals (Rebenich 1992: 56; Iljaš, Špelič 2021: 110).

⁸⁷ Coppieters et al. 2014: 390. See also Burrus 2011: 55 ('Martyrdom is ... construed as an ascetic practice') and Iljaš, Špelič 2021: 115–118. A different view has been presented by Rebenich (1992: 69): 'Daß hier – im Gegensatz zu den Mönchsviten – auf eine asketische Lebensführung noch nicht abgehoben, sondern nur die wunderbare Errettung der des Ehebruchs Bezichtigten geschildert wird, sollte nicht überinterpretiert werden: Der Gegenstand der Geschichte ließ sich kaum mit dem Postulat, ein asketisches Leben zu führen, verbinden'.

strived to believe in), the allusions to asceticism would probably be far more conspicuous and unambiguous, had it been his conscious intention to propagate them by means of this work.⁸⁸ What hides between the lines (or, one might say, between the rhetorical ornaments) of *Ep.* 1 are rather Jerome's spiritual needs and aesthetic preferences.

EP. 1 AS A LETTER AND A LITERARY WORK

It has been pointed out that in *Ep.* 1 the main body of the letter, which 'could have been written as a piece complete in itself,' is 'set in an epistolary framework'.⁸⁹ However, on closer examination of the text it turns out that this statement should be modified. It is true that the work's structure integrates material of two basic types and one of them can be interpreted as epistolary in character, but the way in which these two components coexist is not that of a clear-cut frame and its content. Whereas the two introductory paragraphs are clearly separated from the main body of the text by the change of topic and the disappearance of the imagined dialogue with Innocentius, the final paragraph continues the story of the woman and Innocentius is not directly addressed again.⁹⁰ Moreover, some of the narrator's comments with which the narrative is interspersed seem to constitute authorial intrusions and this impression is confirmed in the epilogue, where it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the author of the letter and the narrator of the story. In fact, if the beginning of the text creates the expectation for an 'epistolary frame' to close,

⁸⁸ Already in his (other) early letters and hagiographical works such as *Vita Pauli* (around 375) he expresses the ascetic ideas straightforwardly. Cain (2009: 8) characterises Jerome's literary profile as 'an ascetic essayist and biblical scholar' and that was probably how he wanted to be perceived after his decision to become a monk; it cannot be determined whether that had already been his desire at the earlier stage of life, when *Ep.* 1 could have been written.

⁸⁹ Scourfield 1983: 36; also Schwind 1997: 184 ('eine Erzählung, die in einen Rahmen eingebettet ist').

⁹⁰ A similar observation concerning the addressee has been formulated by Scourfield 1983: 14, 54. According to him, 'after the second chapter the addressee is completely ignored' (quotation on p. 14), with the possible exception of the phrase *Euagrii nostrii* (15.1), where Innocentius' imagined presence as a mutual friend of Jerome and Evagrius may be implied.

then at the end the reader may become slightly disappointed or disoriented, for it is by no means clear whether the piece ends as a letter or as a narrative.

In such a case, a closer look at the constituent elements of the work is needed in order to better understand its structure. As to the one with which the text begins and which is usually called 'epistolary,' it is worth considering to what extent it conforms to the typical characteristics of a letter and whether there are some other literary conventions which may be invoked here. The features that can be called epistolary are the following: the presence of the addressee, the sense of familiarity between the correspondents (a letter contributes to their personal relationship), imagined dialogue with the addressee⁹¹ (together with recalling the previous conversation and predicting the future one) and the direct reflection of author's personality (remarkably, also in the course of the narrative). It is worth noting that the last two elements correspond to the main ideas of ancient epistolographic theory: *sermo absentium* and *speculum animi*.⁹² What is lacking in *Ep.* 1 are predominantly formal characteristics of the letter, such as overtly epistolary formulae (especially an opening and closing salutation⁹³), wishes and comments regarding correspondents' health, remarks concerning the exchange of letters itself (e.g. commenting on the previous letter or asking for a response), news

⁹¹ According to Müller (1998: 205–206), 'es gibt im Œuvre des Hieronymus nur ein einziges damit vergleichbares, also dialogisches Prooimion, das ... zu Epistula 117'. For her analysis of this passage see 1998: 201–204.

⁹² Wasyl 2002: 38–40. One should distinguish these theoretical concepts from the corresponding *topoi* in the letters themselves as they have been analysed by Thraede (1970: 157–165).

⁹³ It is conceivable that these formulae were intentionally omitted during the transmission of the text; according to de Bruyne (1929b: 230), it was common to treat at least the closing ones in this way. In the case of Jerome's letters, the opening salutation could have been replaced by titles, which are not standardised across the manuscript tradition (see *Ep.* 3 as an example of the possible divergencies). Although closing formulae appear occasionally in the sources consulted by Hilberg (e.g. *Epp.* 3–6, 11–12), he does not record in the *apparatus* any additional phrase at the end of *Ep.* 1 (except from the purely technical *explicit de septies percussa* in K). Importantly, this fact does not result solely from the habits of individual scriptors, as some of the manuscripts that omit (?) the formula in *Ep.* 1 preserve it sometimes in other letters.

and reactions to them, greetings from and to others.⁹⁴ In addition, the text is relatively long, which was perceived by the ancients as atypical of a letter.⁹⁵ The reason behind most of these ‘epistolary defects’ is that *Ep.* 1 centres around one theme which can be defined as ‘Jerome composing the narrative’: at the beginning, he voices his doubts connected with the undertaking and then presents the work itself, with metatextual comments coming back at the end of the text (15.1–3: *en, quo me gestorum ordo protraxit! iam enim ad Euagrii nostri nomen aduenimus...*). As a result, there are no miscellaneous contents that characterise private epistolary conversations, including most of the earliest extant letters written by Jerome,⁹⁶ and this restriction to one basic topic brings *Ep.* 1 closer to other literary forms.

In order to determine what kind of genre-crossing may be at work here, the character of the non-epistolary element must be considered. It is certainly a narrative whose style strongly resembles a rhetorical declamation, written with a laudatory, edifying purpose, and thematically related to hagiography and martyrology.⁹⁷ Although the woman’s

⁹⁴ For a more detailed list of formal epistolary features see Trapp 2003: 34–36.

⁹⁵ Cf. Jerome’s remark in another letter, which is of comparable length to *Ep.* 1: *Plura fortasse, quam epistulae breuitas patiebatur, longo sermone protraxerim, quod mihi semper accidere consuevit, quando aliquid de Bonosi nostri laude dicendum est* (*Ep.* 3, 6). Interestingly, the reason for excessive length seems to be the same in both cases; cf. also Greg. Nyss., *Vita Macr.* 1.1–6: Τὸ μὲν εἶδος τοῦ βιβλίου ὅσον ἐν τῷ τῆς προγραφῆς τύπῳ ἐπιστολῆ εἶναι δοκεῖ, τὸ δὲ πλήθος ὑπὲρ τὸν ἐπιστολιμαῖον ὄρον ἐστὶν εἰς συγγραφικὴν μακρηγορίαν παρατεινόμενον· ἀλλ’ ἀπολογεῖται ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἢ ὑπόθεσις, ἧς ἔνεκεν γράψαι διεκελεύσω, πλείων οὕσα ἢ κατ’ ἐπιστολῆς συμμετρίαν. Similar comments can be found also in treatises in form of letters, for example in Jerome’s *Ep.* 64, 21.1: *ego iam mensuram epistulae excedere me intellego et excipientes ceras uideo esse completas; unde ad reliqua transeo, ut tandem finiatur oratio*. This ‘theorising in practice’ on the suitable length of the letter finds its parallel in Demetrius’ treatise: Τὸ δὲ μέγεθος συνεστάλλω τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ λέξις. αἱ ἄγαν μακραὶ, καὶ προσέτι κατὰ τὴν ἐρμηνείαν ὀγκωδέστεραι, οὐ μὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐπιστολαὶ γένοιτο ἄν, ἀλλὰ συγγράμματα, τὸ χαίρειν ἔχοντα προσγεγραμμένον, καθάπερ τοῦ Πλάτωνος πολλαὶ καὶ ἡ Θουκυδίδου (*Eloc.* 228).

⁹⁶ See *Epp.* 3–7. They exhibit most of the formal features listed above, which are missing in *Ep.* 1.

⁹⁷ There have been various attempts at defining the genre of *Ep.* 1. According to Scourfield (1983: 44), ‘as far as conception and content are concerned, the piece does not belong to any clearly defined genre’. He acknowledged the ‘affinities with Christian

unswerving trust in God and perseverance in defending the truth are suitable examples to be followed by Christians, the text itself is devoid of open moralising (which fills many pages of Jerome's epistolary output⁹⁸) and does not provide any more instruction than it is natural to appear in every single piece of religious literature. Therefore, it does not belong in didactic or catechetical writings⁹⁹ and there is no direct connection between its inclusion into the corpus of Jerome's letters and the presence of numerous 'epistolary treatises' in the same collection.¹⁰⁰

However, the latter ones can provide a good starting point for considering the reasons why some genres more frequently adapt certain epistolary features than others. In the case of treatises (especially philosophical), *quaestiones et responsiones* and other forms of didactic writings, it is desirable to create the impression that somebody is interested

martyr-literature' and hagiography, which was retained in later scholarship (see n. 82 above). Rebenich (1992: 69) and Schwind (1997: 184) refer to the notion of 'christliche Unterhaltungsliteratur' coined by H. Kech (*Hagiographie als christliche Unterhaltungsliteratur: Studien zum Phänomen des Erbaulichen anhand der Mönchsviten des hl. Hieronymus*, Göttingen 1977), whereas Müller (1998: 192, 208, n. 40) classifies *Ep. 1* as 'erbauliche Erzählung' or 'christliche Erbauungsliteratur'. Miranda (2007: 201–205) interprets it as a catechetical *exemplum* (see n. 99 below). Cain (2009: 14, 217) calls *Ep. 1* 'a *passio*', but in his own taxonomy of Jerome's epistolography assigns it to the category of 'praising' letters. Coppieters et al. (2014: 385–386, 408) use such terms as 'a short story with novelistic elements' (probably drawing on the suggestion of Rebenich 2002: 63), 'a fairy tale in the style of Apuleius' (adducing the opinion of Fontaine 1988: 328), 'a literary experiment, a blend of different genres of secular and religious writing' and 'theological or religious sensationalist literature'. According to Shanzer (2018: 157–163), *Ep. 1* contains 'a Christian judicial declamation'.

⁹⁸ It is enough to mention his famous *Ep. 22* (*ad Eustochium de virginitate servanda*). Cf. also Schwind's opinion on the general character of Jerome's letters: 'Für ihn ist ein Brief vor allem Träger einer für ein breiteres Publikum relevanten Botschaft, insbesondere Medium der Paränese und der Glaubensunterweisung im weitesten Sinne, und in dieser Funktion steht er gleichberechtigt neben verwandten Trägern wie der Homilie oder dem Traktat' (1997: 173).

⁹⁹ Another view has been presented by Miranda (2007), who interprets *Ep. 1* as a catechetical letter addressed primarily to Christians at large, in which the miraculous story constitutes a rhetorical *exemplum* illustrating the weakness of human speech as opposed to the truth of those who speak in Christ. The choice of the letter form was supposed to reduce the dogmatism present in theological treatises.

¹⁰⁰ For the list of Jerome's 'exegetical letters' see Cain 2009: 218–219.

in the matter that is being taught,¹⁰¹ essentially, it is a variant of the dialogic form, which can be used for similar purposes.¹⁰² Another situation when a letter may incorporate some other literary work is writing a biography of a deceased person as a consolation for his or her close friends or family, possibly also at their request. Here again the addressee of a letter is particularly interested in the subject of the work included.¹⁰³ It seems that *Ep.* 1 can be interpreted by means of analogy with these works. In such a case it would commemorate the events at Vercellae that must have been of some special importance to Innocentius.

At this point, it has to be considered whether such non-epistolary works embedded in a letter structure were intended to circulate among a broader readership. It is a well-known phenomenon that in antiquity exchanging letters constituted a vital part of social life. It was common among intellectual elites to write them not only for utilitarian purposes, but also as a form of entertainment. They provided an occasion for displaying one's own literary talents and could be a source of aesthetic pleasure for both parties of the transaction.¹⁰⁴ As such, they could be intended for publication already at the moment of creation, which resulted in the double perspective on the part of the author: he wrote to the specific addressee and simultaneously for a wider audience. The letters were usually released in collections and could be 'improved' before publication.¹⁰⁵ This raises the question whether such correspondence is still authentic, 'real,' or maybe already artificial, 'fictitious' to a certain

¹⁰¹ Morello and Morrison (2007: viii) emphasise another aspect of the epistle's suitability for transmitting knowledge or advice, namely the facility of assigning the roles of teacher and pupil to the writer and the addressee respectively.

¹⁰² One may compare Seneca the Younger's dialogues with his *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*. Cf. also Miranda 2007: 196 (her opinion on this matter has been summarised above, n. 99).

¹⁰³ The famous examples from Jerome's epistolary output are *Ep.* 77 (*De morte Fabiolae*, to her friend Oceanus), *Ep.* 108 (*Epitaphium sanctae Paulae*, to her daughter Eustochium), *Ep.* 127 (*De vita sanctae Marcellae*, to her friend Principia). Gregory of Nyssa also wrote *Vita sanctae Macrinae* in the form of a letter addressed to the monk Olympius.

¹⁰⁴ Trapp 2003: 34; Stowers 1986: 35.

¹⁰⁵ That they could be also 'published' without the author's consent seems to be confirmed by the information that one of Augustine's letters to Jerome (*Ep.* 40) had been disseminated in Italy before the addressee himself received it (de Bruyne 1929b: 230).

degree. What is more, it can be sometimes very difficult to distinguish real letters from those that were never intended to be sent and were conceived from the start as purely literary pieces.¹⁰⁶

Taking into account the above observations concerning the practice of publishing private correspondence in antiquity, it seems very improbable that letters containing carefully composed literary works were written only for an educated pleasure of a sender and a recipient. Consequently, their 'reality' can also be doubted; in some cases they could have had an 'epistolary colour' added merely in order to enhance their literary attractiveness. As such, they become rather works of art than instruments for cultivating relationships, because whom their author in reality addresses is not his or her personal friend, but a broader readership. The epistolary frame (or a more complicated structure) is no longer so sharply divided from the main body of the text, for its fictionality makes it closer in nature to the embedded literary work. However, in the case of *Ep.* 1, where the epistolary elements refer solely to the process of writing the narrative itself and thus constitute a kind of metatextual commentary, this separation becomes more evident again. This remains true also when one interprets this piece as a 'completely' non-epistolary, independent work of literature with a dedicatory preface¹⁰⁷ and authorial intrusions.

¹⁰⁶ De Bruyne (1929b: 229), acknowledging the possibility of various degrees of fictionality in letters, defines 'lettres fictives' as 'celles qui ne sont pas du tout destinées à celui dont elles portent l'adresse; le prétendu destinataire peut être un personnage réel ou un être imaginaire'. As such, he identifies *Epp.* 106, 117, 120, 121 and 147 (de Bruyne 1929a; 1929b), but this opinion has been challenged by subsequent scholars and the status of these pieces remains disputable (cf. Schwind 1997: 182; Müller 1998: 199–204). There have also been recently proposed more subtle criteria for analysing reality and fiction in ancient epistolography (see Trapp 2003: 3–4). It is worth noting that one of Trapp's criteria should be slightly modified: it is not the fact of physical sending, but the author's intention to send the letter at the moment of writing that contributes to the piece's 'reality'.

¹⁰⁷ The term 'dedicatory preface' has been already used in relation to *Ep.* 1 by Scourfield (1983: 49). He has also noticed that in Jerome's letters 'the correspondent is frequently less an addressee than a dedicatee' (1983: 54). It is worth remembering that a dedicatory preface itself takes sometimes the form of a letter, thereby becoming clearly separated from the rest of the work (which is non-epistolary), as can be seen for example in the second book of Martial's epigrams (Trapp 2003: 26).

Thus, the analysis of *Ep.* 1 does not provide firm evidence concerning how its genre was understood by the author; it only reveals the multiple possible ways of interpreting it. Other sources available to us shed some additional light on this matter, but again it is not decisive. In his autobiographical entry in *De viris illustribus*,¹⁰⁸ Jerome enumerates his works in a chronological order. Although *Ep.* 1 does not appear on the list as an individual piece, it could have been included in *Epistularum ad diversos liber*, which figures at the beginning of the catalogue (after *Vita Pauli monachi*) and must have been a compilation of Jerome's early correspondence.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, in medieval manuscripts there are no traces of such a collection. Some clusters of letters ascribed to the earlier period of Jerome's literary activity have been identified,¹¹⁰ but they seem to have originated rather in the effect of the organisation of material by medieval scribes than as remnants of the collection compiled and published by Jerome himself.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, it is telling that *Ep.* 1 almost never appears in such clusters of early letters¹¹² and can be found instead in the company of other pieces praising virtues of Christian women.¹¹³ This means that in the Middle Ages it was read rather as a narrative than as a document of friendship between Jerome and Innocentius or Evagrius. Obviously, it could function as such irrespectively of its original inclusion in *Epistularum ad diversos liber*. Furthermore, the overall character of the latter collection (as it is reconstructed in modern scholarship¹¹⁴) also does not make the situation clearer. Jerome published it probably in order to present his progress on the way to becoming a model hermit and to 'legitimize himself as an expert on ascetism'.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ *Vir. ill.* 135. The work was written in the fourteenth year of the reign of Theodosius I, which according to Siamakis (1992: 28) should be interpreted as 392. Other scholars accept 393 (e.g. Berschin 1988: 146; Cain 2009: 13).

¹⁰⁹ Cain 2009: 15.

¹¹⁰ Schwind 174–175; Cain 2009: 14–17.

¹¹¹ It was usual for medieval scribes to group letters by addressee or by theme. Interestingly, this kind of arrangement was prevalent already in antiquity (as opposed to the modern preference for the chronological order); see Gibson 2012.

¹¹² Cain 2009: 15. On this basis Cain excludes it from his reconstruction of *Epistularum ad diversos liber*.

¹¹³ Schwind (1998: 175, n. 12) noticed a following grouping: *Epp.* 77, 23, 24, 1, 127, 66.

¹¹⁴ Cain (2009: 17) assumes that it included *Epp.* 2–13, 15–17.

¹¹⁵ Cain 2009: 30, quotation on p. 8.

If one perceives *Ep.* 1 as an example of 'ascetic propaganda,' he or she may more readily assume that it was included in the compilation; but even then one cannot exclude that it circulated as an individual piece (a letter and/or, for example, an early attempt at hagiography¹¹⁶), which Jerome might have preferred not to mention when he presented his literary output about twenty years later.¹¹⁷

Although there is no possibility of determining whether Jerome intended *Ep.* 1 as a 'real' letter, a 'fictional' letter or simply as a non-epistolary work,¹¹⁸ it is worth considering the consequences of taking one of these approaches while reading it:

1. **A 'real' letter.** Innocentius is the only, or at least privileged, addressee of the letter. Therefore, the whole text must be seen through the prism of the relationship between Jerome and Innocentius, and the narrator's comments and the authorial intrusions in the narrative can also be interpreted as addressed specifically to the latter. The narrative was written at Innocentius' request. He encouraged his friend to make a literary attempt and believed in his success. Jerome could be sure that the recipient would look favourably on his work, appreciating the author's effort and forgiving the imperfections of his style. In view of the fact that the narrative was published only as a part of a letter to a friend, the reader is not supposed to criticise it as though it were an independent work and to assume his or her own criteria for its assessment.
2. **A 'fictional' letter.** The text was never intended to be sent to Innocentius as a private letter, and the request-motive is probably also purely conventional. The epistolary form has been used for artistic purposes: it generates the sense of eavesdropping a private

¹¹⁶ Its similarity to *Vitae monachorum* has been already mentioned (see n. 82 above). Rebenich (2002: 64) points out that Evagrius also produced a hagiographical work, namely the translation of Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* into Latin, and dedicated it to Innocentius.

¹¹⁷ That Jerome was dissatisfied with some of his early works is confirmed by his critical comments on the first version of his commentary on Obadiah (Kelly 1975: 45), which was written in the 370s and has not been included in the aforementioned catalogue (Cain 2009: 15, n. 9). A similar view has been presented by Iljaš, Špelič 2021: 104.

¹¹⁸ Even though Jerome might not have cared for such distinctions (Cain 2009: 208), they certainly affect the way in which the reader responds to the text.

conversation,¹¹⁹ with all the consequences for the reception of the narrative that would apply to a real letter (see point 1 above). The only difference is that now the whole of the letter constitutes a literary work (fictional to a certain degree, even if the story is based on real events). Innocentius appears in the text not as a real person, but as a literary character of a close friend and a model reader of the work contained in the letter.

3. **A non-epistolary work.** The text was intended for a wider audience and there is not any privileged reader of the narrative (in the sense explained in point 1 above). It is dedicated to Innocentius and may have been written at his request or not. The introductory part constitutes a dedicatory preface and is addressed to a specific real person, evoking associations with a letter. Other readers can largely ignore it while reading the subsequent narrative. The authorial intrusions are not addressed specifically to Innocentius and create the sense of a closer interaction between the author and the reader. The work can be assessed by every reader according to his or her own criteria.

As can be seen, approaching the text in one of these three ways results in a different sense of ‘reality’ and ‘fictionality’ in the introductory part of the text, and affects the reader’s right to assess the narrative as an independent work, but it never eliminates the duality in the piece’s structure, which is inherent to *Ep.* 1. The reader must always acknowledge the presence of two types of information that the text supplies: the *speculum animi* reflecting the writer in the process of creation, providing an image ‘filtrated’ by Jerome’s relationship with a specific friend (epistolary elements or the dedicatory preface) and another *speculum*, reflecting the writer’s soul by means of artistic expression, where the image is not directly seen and must be unveiled through interpretation, but is more objective inasmuch as it is intended for the ideal reader (the main narrative). This conclusion obviously alludes to the famous passage from Demetrius’ *De elocutione* (227):

Πλεῖστον δὲ ἐχέτω τὸ ἠθικὸν ἢ ἐπιστολή, ὥσπερ καὶ ὁ διάλογος· σχεδὸν γὰρ εἰκόνα ἕκαστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς τὴν ἐπιστολήν. καὶ ἔστι μὲν καὶ ἐξ

¹¹⁹ Morello, Morrison 2007: vi. Iljaš, Špelič (2021: 106, n. 22; 107, n. 32) suggest that the introduction and epilogue (paragraph 15) of *Ep.* 1 might have been written later than the main narrative, possibly at the moment of preparing the text for publication.

ἄλλου λόγου παντὸς ἰδεῖν τὸ ἦθος τοῦ γράφοντος, ἐξ οὐδενὸς δὲ οὐτως, ὡς ἐπιστολῆς.

It remains for the reader to decide, which *speculum* in *Ep.* 1 reflects Jerome's soul better.

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