Introduction

The use of abuse

Friday the thirteenth, January 366, was an unlucky day for some inhabitants of the Illyrican city of Sirmium. Three men, Heraclianus, Firmianus and Aurelianus, were led out from their place of imprisonment and brought before a crowd to be questioned. Seated upon his throne, the presiding official, Germinius, interrogated the men, asking them a series of questions about their beliefs and actions. Heraclianus, the only one of the trio whose responses have survived, proceeded to explicate his Christian faith, in which he stood firm despite the hectoring of Germinius and his minions. In fact, Heraclianus' theological arguments were so erudite that his interlocutors found themselves baffled and silenced. In response to the intransigence of the accused, Germinius ordered Heraclianus to be beaten. At the end of the encounter, a sentence of exile was passed on the three men, who were then led away to a chorus of hostile and menacing shouts from a mob of angry bystanders, who wished instead to murder the trio because of the discord and disunity that they had brought to the community. This tale reads like many other early Christian persecution stories. The heroes, victims of Roman judicial violence, steadfastly refused to deny their faith, preferring to endure mistreatment, exile and the threat of death at the hands of the authorities. Their fortitude was to be rewarded, both by the reverence they received from their fellow Christians on earth and through the eternal benefits they would receive in heaven. The *Altercatio Heracliani cum Germinio*, the short work that reports their exploits, therefore bears many similarities to the *acta* of Christian martyrs, which described the sufferings of the faithful under pagan persecutors and acted as models for imitation, both literary and literal.

One distinctive feature of the *Altercatio Heracliani*, however, was the identity of its villain. Germinius was not a Roman governor or a

tyrannical pagan emperor: he was the Christian bishop of Sirmium.[1] This text was the product of the intense theological disputes of the fourth century, mostly centred on the Christological issue of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, although the divinity of the Holy Spirit is also a primary concern within the *Altercatio Heracliani*. Heraclianus defended the 'homoousian' credal formula – in which the Son was defined as being of the same *ousia*, or substance, as the Father – which had been defined at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Germinius resolutely rejected this terminology, preferring instead to state that the Son was merely 'like' (*homoios*) the Father, leading to his designation as a 'Homoian' Christian in modern scholarship.[2] In addition, the bishop was angry that Heraclianus, a layman, was daring to challenge his episcopal authority, and also complained that this impertinent individual was repeating the teachings of two other bishops, Hilary of Poitiers, in Gaul, and Eusebius of Vercelli, in northern Italy, who had been travelling through the provinces spreading their ideas and stirring up trouble.[3]

The echoing of martyr *acta* in the *Altercatio Heracliani* is evident in the literary form in which its anonymous author chose to record this theological debate. While there are a number of brief statements by a narrator, in order to keep the reader informed about non-verbal proceedings, the vast majority of the text takes the form of a dialogue, mostly between Heraclianus and Germinius, although two other Homoian interlocutors – the presbyter Theodorus and a certain Agrippinus, with no recorded clerical rank – also appear. The substance of the discussion is primarily concerned, as might be expected, with the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and all parties quote liberally from Scripture. The full title of the piece and the first sentence of the narrator's account set the scene with precise details of the circumstances in which it look place, in the manner of a formal court record:

[1] See Simonetti (1967), (1975) 383–5; Duval (1985) 355–8; R. P. C. Hanson (1988) 528–9; McLynn (1994) 95; D. H. Williams (1995) 66–7; Lim (1995) 137; Lenski (2002) 241.

[2] On 'Homoian' theology, see p. 81 below. At the time, the term 'Arian' – referring to the presbyter Arius, whose 'subordinationist' views on the Son were rejected at Nicaea in 325 – was widely used by 'Nicene' Christians as a blanket term to denote anyone who rejected Nicene Christology – see pp. 15–16 below. On the Christological views of Germinius, whose 'Homoianism' differed from that of some of his contemporaries, see Simonetti (1967) 46–9; D. H. Williams (1996).

[3] *Altercatio Heracliani* 345.24–6. On Hilary and Eusebius, see pp. 83–4, 155–6 below. The two bishops had returned from exile at different times and so are not likely to have travelled to Sirmium together – see Simonetti (1997) 166–7, where it is suggested that Hilary and Eusebius communicated during their exiles and arranged to visit Sirmium during their journeys to the West. This is an interesting hypothesis, but, I believe, not necessary to explain their respective visits.

> The dispute between Heraclianus the layman and Germinius, bishop of Sirmium, concerning the faith of the Nicene Council and that of Ariminum of the Arians. This happened in the city of Sirmium before the whole populace, on the Ides of January, Friday, in the consulships of Gratian and Dagalaifus.
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> They led Heraclianus, Firmianus and Aurelianus out from custody in front of all the people, with the bishop sitting on his throne with the entire clergy before all the populace and the elders.[4]

This introduction immediately establishes the confrontation as a re-enactment of the sufferings of martyrs before the persecuting representatives of pagan emperors. The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, which described events that took place on 17 July 180, prefaces its dialogue with the introductory formula: 'With Praesens (for the second time) and Claudianus as consuls, on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of August, when Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda and Vestia had been brought into the judgement chamber at Carthage, the proconsul Saturninus said: …'.[5] This type of prefatory statement, describing the date, location, accuser and accused, is quite a common feature of accounts of martyrdom, providing the appearance of an official record of Roman judicial proceedings.[6]

In the *Altercatio Heracliani*, however, the imperial government and its representatives are nowhere to be seen. The roles as the persecuting villains of this piece are assigned instead to Germinius and his heretical supporters. Heraclianus' performance of his religious knowledge and skill, which saw him engage in debate with purportedly learned figures and succeed in besting them, was similar to the behaviour of many protagonists in martyr *acta*.[7] After one particularly searching question from Heraclianus, the narrator states that 'Germinius was silent for more than an hour'.[8] The presbyter Theodorus, who took up the questioning after Germinius, was described as speaking 'with confusion' before he himself,

[4] *Altercatio Heracliani* 345.1–15. On the Council of Ariminum in 359, see pp. 80–1.

[5] *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1. Unless stated otherwise, all references to martyr *acta* make use of the texts as they appear in Musurillo (1972).

[6] See, for example, *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Paphylus and Agathonice* Latin Recension 1; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* Preface; *Martyrdom of Pionius and his Companions* 2; *Acts of Cyprian* 1; *Martyrdom of Fructuosus and his Deacons Augurius and Eulogius* 1; *Acts of Maximilian* 1; *Acts of Marcellus* Recension N 1; *Martyrdom of Felix* 1; *Martyrdom of Crispina* 1; *Acts of Euplus* Greek Recension 1, 2; *Acts of Euplus* Latin Recension 1, 2. See also concluding statements of this sort in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 21; *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Paphylus and Agathonice* Latin Recension 7; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 47; *Martyrdom of Pionius and his Companions* 23; *Martyrdom of Dasius* 12; *Martyrdom of Agape, Irene and Chione* 7; *Martyrdom of Irenaeus of Sirmium* 6.

[7] On confrontations of this sort in martyr literature, see pp. 148–50 below.

[8] *Altercatio Heracliani* 346.34.

through Heraclianus' superior dialectical skills, 'was laid low and, humiliated, was silent'.[9] After Heraclianus made a defiant statement of his faith, the bishop did not deliver a reasoned, intellectual response, but rather 'was filled with anger and indignation and began to shout and say, "He is a heretic"'.[10] This victory in disputation is presented in the text as a particular achievement on account of Heraclianus' lack of clerical rank. Christians in martyr acts challenged the earthly authority of governors and the philosophical and sophistic learning of educated pagans, contrasting them with the simple, truthful speech of their own religion.[11] Similarly, Heraclianus placed himself in opposition to the 'Homoian Church' that assailed him, claiming that he spoke with the voice of holy Scripture. When accused of merely parroting the opinions of Hilary and Eusebius, Heraclianus responded by stating that, 'I speak with the right and authority of the sacred Scriptures'.[12] Similarly, when asked how he, a mere layman, dared to challenge episcopal authority, he replied, 'I am neither a presbyter, nor a deacon, but, as though the least of all Christians, I speak with my life as my warrant.'[13] As such, he claimed for himself the *sermo piscatorius*, the plain 'fisherman's speech' of the early Christians, speaking out against false learning to proclaim the true faith.

The behaviour of the representatives of the church in Sirmium was thus presented as resolutely that of persecutors, rather than pious Christians. After Heraclianus' statement about his lack of clerical office, events took a more violent turn, as Germinius' exasperation boiled over into fury:

> GERMINIUS SAID: See how much he speaks! Has no one knocked out his teeth?
> Then Jovinianus the deacon and Marinus the reader beat him.
> HERACLIANUS SAID: This leads to my good fortune and glory.[14]

It is not merely the physical violence inflicted on Heraclianus that makes this passage reminiscent of martyr acts; the hero's response to his suffering, in which he claims that it brings him not pain and disgrace, but glory, is central to the Christian message of martyrdom, in which the Roman enforcement of social norms through judicial punishment is

[9] *Altercatio Heracliani* 347.43, 47.
[10] *Altercatio Heracliani* 350.22–4.
[11] On this contrast as a trope in early Christian literature, see p. 210 below.
[12] *Altercatio Heracliani* 345.27–8.
[13] *Altercatio Heracliani* 345.34–6.
[14] *Altercatio Heracliani* 345.37–42. This is reminiscent of Acts 23:2, where the high priest Ananias ordered Paul to be struck on the mouth. On Heraclianus' comment as echoing martyr literature, see Simonetti (1967) 42 n. 11.

transformed into a triumph by the victim. The conclusion of the text, in which Germinius declared that Heraclianus was a heretic and so must be excommunicated and given a sentence of exile, also contributed to this characterisation of the proceedings.[15] The punishment that Germinius, like the judge in a martyr act, chose to inflict on the hero was not only supported by 'all his presbyters and deacons', but was even declared by them to be too lenient.[16] This crowd, like those who petitioned Pilate for the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus, became more and more hostile. They demanded first that Heraclianus be forced to anathematise Nicene bishops and then repeatedly shouted 'Let them be brought to the governor and killed!', until Germinius himself had to step in to prevent this.[17] While the clergy replayed the actions of persecuting pagans and the Jewish crowd before Pilate, Heraclianus created a pious role for himself. When faced with the prospect of exile, his response was to proclaim that 'God, who liberated Israel from the hand of the king of the Amorites and the king of Bashan, and Paul from the hand of the Samaritans, will liberate me from your hands also'.[18] This statement included a reference to a story from Numbers in which Moses attempted to lead the nation of Israel peacefully through the territory of the Amorites, but was attacked by this tribe, firstly under its king Sihon and then with the help of Og, king of Bashan, and his forces.[19] Both assaults were repelled and the Israelites were also able to take over the land of their enemies. This parallel presented Heraclianus as following in the footsteps of those who not only were saved from unwarranted persecution by God, but also managed to supplant their foes. As such, the text functioned as both apology and invective, since the implication was that Germinius and his clergy would also find themselves defeated and replaced by God's chosen people.

In this way, the *Altercatio Heracliani* took the recognisable theme of persecuting authority and applied it to an urban church institution that was under the leadership of a heretical bishop. Just as the heroes of martyr acts refused to renounce their faith despite all the efforts of imperial officials and torturers, so Heraclianus and his associates defended their

[15] *Altercatio Heracliani* 350.24–30.
[16] *Altercatio Heracliani* 350.35.
[17] *Altercatio Heracliani* 350.35–50.
[18] *Altercatio Heracliani* 350.31–4. The final line of the whole piece, at 350.53–4, reports that Heraclianus and his associates 'have escaped from their [the crowd's] hands up to the present day'.
[19] Numbers 21:21–35. The story of Paul escaping from the Samaritans is not found in the New Testament and may represent a textual corruption. The context would suggest that the story of Paul's escape from Jewish plotters in Damascus at Acts 9:23–5 is alluded to here. It is also possible, but less likely, that the reference is to the episode, at Acts 21–3, in which Paul is taken from Jerusalem to escape a Jewish ambush.

confession of the key Nicene term *homoousios*, shrugging off arguments, threats and violence.[20] The current Christian emperor and his officials were, however, absent from this polemical text, which turned its gaze to identify the successors of pagan emperors and biblical villains in a heretical bishop and his clergy. The *Altercatio Heracliani* thus provides a small example of the Christian literary innovation that characterised the fourth century. Its author responded to novel circumstances by appealing to the familiar. He engaged with the tradition of persecution and martyrdom literature, both biblical and Roman, but transformed it for a new context, recasting contemporary theological debates as the latest round in the struggle between the true faith and its enemies.

This book is about the use of these techniques in invective, particularly Roman imperial invective written by three Christian bishops – Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers and Lucifer of Cagliari. During the central decades of the fourth century, these individuals distinguished themselves through their vehement, and often belligerent, opposition to those Christians they regarded as heretical, most notably the emperor Constantius II (337–61), one of the sons of Constantine I (306–37). Their invectives are the earliest surviving substantial examples of Christian polemic towards a Christian emperor and thus provide valuable insights into the changing possibilities for the assessment of imperial power. From the climate of doctrinal uncertainty created by Christological disputes came textual attacks in a variety of literary forms: letters, rhetoric, history, exegesis and heresiology. Through these media, individual invectivists attacked the authority of their enemies, branding them as the heirs of impious kings, persecuting emperors and infamous heresiarchs. At the same time, they also sought to demonstrate their own adherence to authoritative Christian statements and models. In doing so, they drew upon exemplary accounts of Christian bravery and piety from Scripture and martyr literature, presenting themselves as imitators or successors of revered figures from an exclusively Christian past. Allied to this was their development of the persona of the theological expert: a figure whose knowledge of Scripture marked him out as a reliable exponent of orthodoxy amidst a sea of competing claims.

[20] The term *omousion* appears at 345.17–18, 21. In pronouncing his judgement, Germinius says of Heraclianus (at 350.26) *Omousianus est*. On this text as picking up tropes of hagiographical literature, see also Simonetti (1967) 41–2.

The three main authors discussed in this volume have been the subjects of a great deal of interest over the past few centuries. They have been studied mostly for their theological arguments, while many of their historical and polemical works have received less attention, often being dismissed as unworthy in comparison.[21] The editor of the most recent English translation of Athanasius' *History of the Arians* stated that 'there are certainly many passages which one could wish that Athanasius had not written, – one, not necessary to specify, in which he fully condescends to the coarse brutality of the age, mingling it unpardonably with holy things'.[22] Although this expression of disgust was penned over a century ago, the *History of the Arians* and many of the other texts discussed here still struggle to be taken seriously as powerful weapons in theological debates or as skilful constructions of identity and authority. Some of the more forceful invectives that have survived from this period have been dismissed more recently as 'scurrilous pamphlets' or 'frenzied rantings' and thus of little interest to 'serious' historians.[23] However, it is vital to consider their particular fourth-century context and so reconstruct the persuasive purpose that lay behind their composition and the role that they played in the depiction of individuals and ideas within the theological conflicts of the time. One must therefore be careful when reading these authors' descriptions of themselves, since they contributed significantly to the image of Athanasius and Hilary as the twin pillars of orthodoxy in East and West, never shrinking from the fight against heresy.[24] Indeed, for most of the time since their deaths, all three of these authors have shared the same fate, which is to be judged, for good or ill, on their doctrinal statements and their literary prowess. This book, however, intends neither to bury nor to praise them. It will not attempt to analyse or criticise their theological arguments based on standards of quality, validity or sincerity. It will not even say whether they were 'good' or 'bad' authors. Instead of seeking to classify authors as orthodox or heretical, sublime or ridiculous, innocent or guilty, it will consider how they attempted to position themselves and others within these categories and to invest particular people, institutions and texts with authority. It will examine the employment of these

[21] These works are sometimes studied for their relevance to modern Christianity – for instance, the main survey of Athanasius' rhetorical technique, Stead (1976) 136–7, explicitly states that it has repercussions for the faith today.
[22] Robertson (1892) 267.
[23] 'scurrilous pamphlets' – Setton (1941) 93; 'frenzied rantings' – R. P. C. Hanson (1988) 323.
[24] See, for example, Borchardt (1966) vii.

literary strategies by these three pro-Nicene bishops, who all responded to theological and institutional crises by penning vitriolic invectives.

By exploring the ways in which these authors presented themselves and their enemies within these works, this study identifies the role played by polemic in constructing and destroying the authority and orthodoxy of people, events and texts. As such, although its focus is on the central decades of the fourth century and the writings it explores are Christian, it aims to reach broader conclusions about authority in the Roman empire. My intention is to place these invectives – and Roman political invectives more generally – into their historical context: to look at function at least as much as form. While the particular texts and events explored in detail are products of the fractious Christian doctrinal disputes of the reign of Constantius II, they illuminate the role that invective could fulfil within the wider political and ceremonial world of Roman imperial presentation and legitimacy. Such works may sometimes be dismissed as distasteful and embarrassing displays of coarse and vulgar calumny, equally unworthy when compared to loftier writings by the same author, whether he were a celebrated classical orator or a sainted Christian bishop. To sideline invectives, however, is to misunderstand their place in the political cultures in which these men functioned and the roles they played. One cannot merely present a sanitised version of Cicero, the noble philosopher and dignified stateman, or Athanasius, the sublime theologian and revered teacher, without also acknowledging that the same men pilloried their enemies with puerile accusations of sexual deviancy or emphatic denunciations as demonic Antichrists. Rather, invectives need to be assigned a place, alongside panegyrics, as vital parts of the political life of the Roman world, where authority relied on the widespread recognition and repetition of key virtues, and where the persona of the outspoken enemy of tyranny was a prized weapon in many forms of public conflict. By studying an unusual upsurge of imperial invectives by Christian authors in the middle of the fourth century, this book therefore intends to bring the political ramifications of polemical texts into sharper focus.

POWER AND PERCEPTION IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Texts and authorship had particular importance for late-antique Christians. As Averil Cameron has observed, early Christianity 'had a special relation to textuality', since it was a religion based upon the authority of a set of Scriptures.[25] In her *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, she emphasised

[25] Averil Cameron (1991) 6, 110, quoting 6.

both the 'sheer power of discourse' and the development of a separate discourse through which Christians 'talked and wrote themselves into a position where they spoke and wrote the rhetoric of empire'.[26] Cameron, dealing 'primarily not with the relations of Christians to their own texts, but with Christian discourse in the context of the discourses of society at large', described the efforts of many prominent fourth-century Christians to transform Christian writing to fit a changed political situation.[27] The centrality of writing to late-antique Christianity is also evident from the attitudes taken towards the power of other texts beyond the emerging canon of Scripture. As Rosamond McKitterick has described in a discussion of the creation and use of history in the Carolingian period, 'the act of writing in itself created authoritative knowledge' and the burning of books, often on the orders of church councils, underlined the authority and power that these texts were perceived to possess.[28] This was recognised in the imperial legislation that commanded the burning of Nestorian texts and the requests of fourth-century bishops and councils that other bishops not receive letters sent by 'heretical' bishops or send letters to them in return.[29] Similarly, Averil Cameron, in her study of the importance of texts to Byzantine theological debates, has remarked that the disputants had an extraordinary sense of the importance of texts, as they 'not only carried authority; they could also be, and indeed were, used as weapons. The religious polemic of the period is worth studying in itself in terms of the attitudes displayed towards textual authority, and the techniques used – in terms, in fact, of its contribution to the sociology of knowledge.'[30]

This awareness of the power of the written text is also evident in the works of fourth-century authors, including Athanasius, who explicitly referred to their texts and the Scripture they quoted as weapons to be deployed against heretics.[31] As Walter Bauer remarked, in his *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, the literary battles between rival groups of bishops 'took the form of an effort to weaken the weaponry of the enemy as much as possible'.[32] The authority of councils, canons and

[26] Averil Cameron (1991) 1–14, quoting 2 and 14.
[27] Averil Cameron (1991) especially 120–54, quoting 7. On the centrality of rhetoric and eloquence to early Christianity, see also Laconi (2004) 177–9.
[28] McKitterick (2004) 242, 218–20.
[29] On the burning of Nestorian texts, see *CTh* 16.5.66; Allen (2000) 812. On refusing to receive letters, see, for instance, the instructions given in the letter sent to Africa by the eastern, 'Arian' bishops at Serdica in 343 at *Adu. Val. et Ursac.* A.IV.1.15–16, 24, 28 and also in the letters of the Nicene bishops at the same council, at B.II.1.8 and B.II.2.5.
[30] Averil Cameron (1994) 200. On the importance and circulation of texts in early Christianity, see also Gamble (1995).
[31] See Chapter 4. [32] Bauer (1971) 160.

bishops was similarly constructed through the production and dissemination of a vast number of texts. While the extant writings from the fourth century are much greater in number than those from other periods of classical antiquity, they still form only a fraction of those originally written. Most of the Christian works that survive do so because they were judged to be orthodox and important to the Church. In comparison, there is only a relatively small number of texts that provide a glimpse of the opposing, 'heretical' viewpoints, and most of these are transmitted as extracts quoted for refutation in the works of 'orthodox' authors.[33] Certain fourth-century individuals came to be accorded the status of 'Church Fathers', imbuing their writings with authority as 'patristic' literature, to which people felt confident to appeal in theological disputes.[34] A precise list of canonical texts had not been established by the middle of the fourth century, although there was general agreement within mainstream Christianity about most books of Scripture. After a New Testament canon had finally found widespread acceptance and the notion of patristic writings emerged, these later texts came to be accorded an elevated position within the collection of literature that defined the theological beliefs and regulated the earthly practices of Christians. However, the process by which these texts attained this status must be explained, and part of that explanation lies in the authors' own attempts to invest authority in both themselves and their writings.

Patrick Gray, in a discussion of the employment of patristic texts in fifth-century theological disputes, observes that during the Nestorian controversy Cyril of Alexandria made use of 'a father demonstrably more authoritative than any other – Athanasius'.[35] However, the appearance of patristic texts at this time immediately raises the question of how an individual acquired recognition as a Father and thus how the very concept of patristics developed. Mark Vessey very aptly describes the shift in attitudes during this period by noting that when Hilary and Athanasius clashed with their opponents, they relied upon passages from Scripture to support

[33] For the theological disputes discussed here, these include the epitome of the fifth-century ecclesiastical historian Philostorgius, as well as the 'Arian' statements preserved in the fragmentary *Adu. Val. et Ursac.* at A.IV.1–3; A.VI; B.VIII.1. More broadly, there is also surviving material from both Donatist and Manichaean authors. On the Donatists, see pp. 131–2 below. For Manichaean writings, see Gardner and Lieu (2004).

[34] See Lim (1999) 203–4.

[35] Gray (1989) 22. At 32, Gray attributes the authority of these figures to their association with certain councils, although some fifth-century writers, such as Sulpicius Severus on Hilary, appealed to them as great warriors against heresy, who had proven their worth on the theological battlefield.