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## Thinking Characters: Fictionalisation and Claims of Truth in Syriac Hagiography

Flavia Ruani\*

As readers of novels or other various narratives, we have all shared the experience of being moved upon gaining access to a character's inner life. Who among us has not found themselves feeling bored with Madame Bovary, angry with Dmitrij Karamazov, laughing at Don Quixote's reasoning, or in tears at the thought of Heathcliff's desperate love? Empathy, but also pride and curiosity, or even repulsion and embarrassment, are among the feelings that readers experience upon discovering the most secret emotions of protagonists or cruel intentions of antagonists. Whether we feel touched or disturbed by the direct access to a character's inner state of mind, as we become guests to the private world of a literary character, we feel as if we are encountering a real-life person.

Literary theory has extensively analyzed the powerful impressions our readings leave upon us. Modern narratological studies agree that the representation of the inner life of characters represents a major 'symptom of fictional narrative'.<sup>1</sup> Both the traditional approach in this field,

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which conceives of fictionality in a semantic way (i.e. as a characteristic feature of the genre ‘fiction’),<sup>2</sup> and more recent approaches, which define fictionality in pragmatic terms (i.e. as a rhetorical technique also found outside fiction),<sup>3</sup> while contesting each other in many respects, nonetheless agree in considering the representation of consciousness as a sign of fictionality, namely as something which signals the invented nature of the discourse.<sup>4</sup> This is especially so in the case of third-person narrators who describe the thoughts and feelings of a character.

While literary scholars developed their theories of the representation of the mind mostly based on examples taken from modern literature,<sup>5</sup> their colleagues specializing in Antiquity lately recognized the value of studying these representations for the field of ancient literature.

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previous drafts of this chapter. Finally, I wish to thank wholeheartedly Eduard Iricinski for proofreading and improving the English of these pages.

<sup>1</sup> This expression is used by Hägg (2014: 34). Zetterberg Gjerlevsen & Nielsen (2017: 6) list other, similar terms that denote ‘the signs that point to the fictional status of an utterance’, such as ‘signposts’, ‘signs’, ‘indices’, ‘markers’, or ‘signals’ of fiction(ality). See also De Temmerman (2016: 17).

<sup>2</sup> This approach is famously represented by Dorrit Cohn (1999), who is the author of the most extensive analysis of modes for presenting consciousness in fiction (Cohn 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Zetterberg Gjerlevsen & Nielsen (2017: 3-5).

<sup>4</sup> Zetterberg Gjerlevsen & Nielsen (2017: 8, 14).

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is Scholes & Kellogg (2006 [1966]: 160-206, 337-346) who pay attention to the historical evolution of inward representation of characters in narratives, including examples from epic (Homer, Virgil, Ovid, but also the Icelandic family saga) and from the ancient Greek and Latin novels.

They have identified and analyzed instances in the ancient epic tradition,<sup>6</sup> the Greek novels,<sup>7</sup> late antique biography<sup>8</sup> and historiography.<sup>9</sup> This approach, however, has not been adopted in the study of hagiography, with the notable exception of two works, as far as I know: the fourth-century Greek *Life of Antony*<sup>10</sup> and the fourteenth-century *Scottish Legendary*.<sup>11</sup> The occurrence of signs of fictionality, in this case, mental representations, in hybrid literary genres, such as hagiography, which cannot be defined exclusively either in terms of fiction or historicity, invites us to explore in depth the construction of the narrative. As for hagiography, moreover, this approach enables us to examine the modes in which, and the reasons why, an author chose to resort to a fictionalizing device while promoting a religious truth. This examination provides new insights for two complementary fields, one engaging with the past and the other oriented towards the future. On the one hand, it contributes to our understanding of the literary construction of ancient hagiographical narratives; on the other, it refines our modern definition of the representation of consciousness through new examples which could, in turn, enrich our knowledge of its functioning and meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> De Jong (2004 [1987]: 102-123), for the *Iliad*.

<sup>7</sup> Doody (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See De Temmerman (2016: 18-20) and the quoted bibliography there, related to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and the *Life of Aesop*, for example.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Tsitsiou-Chellidoni (2009) on Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, and Grethlein (2015) on Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

<sup>10</sup> Hägg (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Von Contzen (2016: 150-179).

With this chapter, I hope to open a new line of research, tentatively called ‘the representation of the saints’ inner lives’. The aim is to conjure further theoretical reflection out of the analysis of a specific tradition within hagiography and on a particular narrative scenario. This contribution will examine the representation of minds in relation to explicit claims of truth in Syriac hagiography. As the next pages will show, hagiography tends to combine the narrator’s psychic omniscience with claims of historical accuracy, something which, outside of works of fiction, would strike the reader as contradictory. Indeed, how could third-person narrators grant their readers access to the thoughts of their story’s characters and, at the same time, describe their account as trustworthy and accurate, without even explaining how they came to know about these private, mental affairs? This potential contradiction invites the question as to how late antique hagiographers coped with it and solved it – that is, if they reached a solution –, or whether they even perceived it as a contradiction.

## 1. Method, aims, and structure of the present chapter

Of the numerous features the notion of ‘characters’ minds’ presents, such as emotions, perceptions, and thoughts, I will solely focus on thoughts and mental processes here, for reasons of convenience. Formally, these appear in the texts discussed below as either direct citations or indirect representations of characters’ thoughts.<sup>12</sup> I will not pay attention to other components of

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<sup>12</sup> The most common narratological labels are ‘quoted monologue’, ‘psycho-narration’ (Cohn 1978: 11-14), ‘reported speech’ (‘discours rapporté’) and ‘narrativized speech’ (‘discours narrativisé’) (Genette 1972: 191-193). Genette (1983: 40) establishes the correspondence between his terms and Cohn’s.

the characters' inner life, such as prayers, which are very frequent in hagiography. While similar to inner monologues in some ways (they can also be inventions of the author, for example), internal prayers constitute, in my view, a different area of investigation altogether. This is due to the fact that they are often dependent upon shared formal conventions and, unlike thoughts, they are not meant to be addressed to the self, but to an external (divine) interlocutor.

By 'claims of truth', I mean the various 'guarantees of truthfulness', usually found in prologues and/or epilogues of hagiographical narratives, as identified and discussed by Peter Turner.<sup>13</sup> They range from familiar cases, in which the author claims to be an eyewitness to the events, or a recipient of information from a trustworthy source, such as eyewitness, civic archives, autobiographical documents penned by the saint, etc., to the less straightforward and yet commonplace strategies which establish plausibility, such as the author admitting his own inadequacy to represent the greatness of the saint's exploits. Usually, this strategy is accompanied by feigning the lack of literary pretensions, and also by the urgency of writing down those exploits without references to any literary tradition except the accounts of biblical figures.

The narratives that I have selected for this chapter chronologically range from the fourth to the seventh centuries and roughly cover two main geographical areas: the Roman/Byzantine Empire, and more particularly the city of Edessa, the ancient capital of Osroene and cradle of

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<sup>13</sup> Turner (2012: 26-74). Moreover, Turner (2012: 34) considers claims of truth as 'part of the definition of hagiography as a literary genre', which he defines more explicitly as a 'truth-telling genre'. See also De Temmerman (2016: 16-17) for an overview of authentication strategies in ancient biographies, and the chapters in the same volume for analyses of specific case-studies.

Syriac literature; and the Persian Empire, where the Christian Persian Martyr Acts originated.<sup>14</sup>

The selection is, of course, arbitrary in the sense that it depends upon my personal readings and could be extended to other texts. Nonetheless, it is as wide and varied as possible: I considered texts from different epochs and regions precisely to develop the analyses based on a variety of sources and case-studies that help, in turn, to better understand the phenomenon of mind representation and discover possible patterns in these narratives. There is, indeed, a ‘narratological’ criterion that allows us to organize these stories: the connection or disconnection between thought representation and truth claims.

I use this criterion to structure the chapter in two main parts, each illustrating one of the two opposite situations. In the first part, I discuss how the connection between mind representation and truth claims resolves the apparent contradiction mentioned above. In the second part I deal with the opposite case, namely with stories in which this contradiction does not seem to be acknowledged as such in the text, since the two elements (mind representation and truth claims in third-person narration) still occur concomitantly but their mutual inconsistency simply remains unaddressed. In these cases, questions arise concerning the literary and conceptual functions of mind representation in the analyzed narratives, which claim accuracy and authenticity. Accordingly, I will focus on some formal features, asking questions such as: Who is the thinking subject? When, i.e. in which moment of the story, does the process of thinking occur? What is the content of the thoughts? I will finally suggest possible interpretations as to why hagiographers gave their audiences access to the inner thoughts of the literary protagonists.

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<sup>14</sup> While all Persian Martyr Acts depict the vicissitudes of Syriac Christians living under Persian rule, some of them may have been composed within the territory of the Roman Empire: see Brock (2008: 5).

While showing the literary interplay between strategies of authentication, characterisation and plot-construction, these case-studies highlight ancient (Syriac) hagiographical perspectives on fictionality.

## 2. Thoughts and claims of truth: enhancing truthfulness

### *2.1 Thinking informants*

Some of the selected texts address the potential danger of contradiction deriving from the concomitant occurrence of truth claims and mind representation. The texts draw on informants who both authenticate the story and become the object of thought representation. In other words, the hagiographers claim that their accounts repeat what a trustworthy informant either told them or publicly proclaimed or just wrote down in a document which came into their hands. This informant person is generally someone who is presented either as having taken part in the narrated events or as having personally received the narration of the events directly from the saint.<sup>15</sup> In these stories, the hagiographers hold that they report solely the thoughts of the informant.

The *History of the Man of God*, written probably in Edessa in the fifth century, ends with these words:

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<sup>15</sup> This figure has been called ‘le témoin bien informé’ in scholarship on hagiography. See Delehayé (1966: 182-183).

Now this narrative about the man of God which we told above was publicly proclaimed by that custodian (κῆρυξ, παραμοναριός)<sup>16</sup> who was the friend of the blessed one. It was also written down by him for a record. For he took care and interrogated the saint with oaths and curses and [the saint] made known to him all his former exalted life and his later abased life and did not conceal anything from him.<sup>17</sup>

The trustworthiness of the custodian as an informant is highlighted in multiple ways. First, the text presents him as the friend of the saint, thus as a person close to him. Secondly, the text indicates that the informant has already widely spread the deeds of the saint both orally and in writing, something which confirms his public reputation. Thirdly and lastly, the text suggests that the informant was so close to the saint that he became his confidant. From this position he found out the whole story of the saint's life, not only about his being a beggar in the city of Edessa, but also about his earlier years when, as the son of a wealthy and noble Roman family, he escaped marriage, abandoned everything, and turned to asceticism. The final hyperbolic expression '[the saint] did not conceal *anything* from him' (my emphasis) settles the representation of the custodian as the most trustworthy source, second possibly only to the saint himself. From this sentence, the reader could also expect to have access to the saint's own thoughts, but this is not

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<sup>16</sup> i.e. the minor Church official, guardian of the church in Edessa where the saintly protagonist uses to linger.

<sup>17</sup> Transl. Doran (2006: 25). The text displays other strategies of authentication in the prologue: biblical parallels with Esau and Abraham and inadequacy to express the extreme perfection of the saint (Doran 2006: 17-18). The text is edited by Amiaud (1889).

the case here, at least not explicitly.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the audience hears the thoughts of the custodian, who appears to be the only thinking character in the entire narrative, which is of a considerable length. Moreover, even his thoughts are explicitly quoted only once:

From then on, that custodian, although he had been doing his work well, improved himself by austere practices. He trained his body more than previously until even his appearance bore witness to his austere practices as he said to himself (literally ‘in his soul’, ܩܘܠܘܢ ܕܩܘܠܘܢ ܕܩܘܠܘܢ ܕܩܘܠܘܢ), ‘If this one [i.e. the man of God] who used to live in great luxury does these things, what ought we wretches not do for our redemption?’<sup>19</sup>

This thought occurs just after the first conversation between the custodian and the saint. Following explicit requests, and under the threat of oaths and curses, the saint tells him the whole ‘truth’<sup>20</sup> about his life. After listening to him, the custodian intensifies his own ascetical practices. It is only through the quotation of his thought that we learn about the motivations which prompted him to engage in harder ascetical practices. The custodian’s choice is not

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<sup>18</sup> The saint’s thoughts are never explicitly quoted. There are, nevertheless, many instances in the text which may be comparable to a free indirect representation of his emotional and rational world.

<sup>19</sup> Transl. Doran (2006: 22-23). In the later Syriac expanded version of this story, the custodian’s thought is no longer disclosed. Since the expanded text is presented as being based on a written autobiography from the saint himself, leaving it out is coherent with the new literary context.

<sup>20</sup> Transl. Doran (2006: 22). Mentions of ‘truth’ in the development of the story are, of course, an essential part of the authenticating strategy that underlines the trustworthiness of the account.

explained otherwise; the reader only discovers that he is so impressed by the saint's way of life that he decided to imitate him and follow him on the ascetical path.

From a formal point of view, we can observe two elements that also occur in other examples and in thought representation in hagiography more generally. The first is the position of the thought, occurring immediately before or after the narration of an action for which it provides an explanation and/or a motivation. The second is the syntactical construction of the content of the thought through an 'if-then' clause, or an 'if-question' / 'if-exclamation', in which two opposed pieces of information occur concomitantly. In this case, the custodian's decision to harden his ascetical practices relies on his consideration about the social gap between the man of God and himself, as reflected by the opposition between 'great luxury' and 'wretches'. This 'if'-construction emphasizes one item of the dichotomy, usually the one that casts a positive light on the saintly protagonist. In this case, the custodian's thought highlights the holiness of the man of God. Given the latter's noble origins, the custodian considered that it must have been very difficult for the saint to renounce wealth and live in abstinence, much more than for ordinary people, such as the custodian, who, in addition, did not excel in saintly practices. This thought therefore indirectly contributes to the characterisation of the saint. At the same time, it also describes the custodian himself. It does so not by highlighting the way in which he conceives his thoughts, which is rather rhetorical than personalized, as it is the case with modern literature,<sup>21</sup> but through what he thinks. By having access to this thought, the reader appreciates both the modesty of the custodian and his reverence towards the saint. Moreover, the thought enhances the belief in his reliability as informant of the whole account. The clergyman is not only the confidant of the saint, but he is himself trained in severe asceticism, and, what is more, he is

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<sup>21</sup> See Scholes & Kellogg (2006 [1966]: 177-189, esp. 180-181).

inspired by the saint's lifestyle to advance along the same spiritual path, striving to imitate the saint himself.

This example shows how the representation of the informant's thought not only stands in harmony with the strategy of authentication chosen for this story, but also participates in the characterisation of the saint, and ultimately in that of the informant himself, modelled after the image of the saint. In other words, the technique of mind representation becomes an active component of the strategy of claiming truth by enhancing the reliability of the informant as an authoritative source of the story, anchored in the very holiness of the protagonist of that story.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.2 *Doubting informants*

In the example just analyzed, the connection between thought representation and truth claims is realized through the figure of the informant, who is both the source of the story and the only thinking character. The next set of texts included in our analysis intensify this connection, and, as a result, increase the reliability of the informant by resorting to a particular kind of thought. They too perform a self-supported circularity since they portray only the thoughts of the informant upon whom the story is based. Yet they differ from the previously analyzed text by presenting the informant as temporarily doubting the miracle of which he will become the herald later.<sup>23</sup>

The *Story of Euphemia and the Goth*, another Edessene fifth-century text, contains a prologue in which the narrator authenticates the story. He explains that he received it from a

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<sup>22</sup> See **Krueger** in this volume, who argues that fictionalisation can also have the aim of highlighting the truth of a hagiographical account.

<sup>23</sup> On doubt, scepticism, and disbelief in Byzantine hagiography, see Kaldellis (2014).

trustworthy custodian – we encounter again the same *topos* –, who heard it directly from the mouth of Euphemia, the protagonist.<sup>24</sup> The story itself recounts how Euphemia marries a Goth in Edessa and leaves with him to his country, only to find out that he already has a wife. She ends up being locked up in a tomb, the shrine of saints Shmuna and Gurya, from which she is miraculously rescued and transported back to Edessa. The meeting between her and the custodian of the shrine occurs at this point of the narrative. He approaches her and inquires about her identity. Instead of giving him a straightforward answer, she tells him her story:

But the believing one repeated before him all the deed that God had done by her from the beginning even unto the end. And when the custodian heard these things, *he was astonished at the greatness of the matter so as even to doubt* (استعجب من عظمة الامر حتى شك), and he sought to be assured of the truth and he wished to learn the abode of her mother, and with much diligence he sent and brought her mother that he might learn from her whether the matter was as her daughter said. (My emphasis)<sup>25</sup>

The first reaction of the custodian is incredulity and amazement. The author of the text skillfully multiplies the actions that the custodian undertakes to verify Euphemia's story, something which further accentuates his incredulity, making it realistic. The doubt is resolved when Sophia, Euphemia's mother, validates one part of her story, which seems sufficient to lift the doubts also

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<sup>24</sup> The custodian is presented as 'faithful and true and worthy of good remembrance', an 'excellent old man' (Burkitt 1913: 129-130).

<sup>25</sup> Transl. Burkitt (1913: 144).

regarding the other parts, including the miracle. The doubt and its resolution reinforce the authenticity of the miracle.

A similar moment of doubt occurs in the *Story of the Merchant in Constantinople*, a text that remains difficult to date with accuracy. The prologue introduces the protagonist as the original source of the account:

Folk used to tell then and say that there was a certain man from Paddana, a village in the district of Harran – *now these very persons received this story from the merchant himself (...)*. (My emphasis)<sup>26</sup>

The story relates how this anonymous merchant, who used to go every year to Constantinople for business, was asked by a friend's wife to bring her from Harran, on his next trip, a particular stone which had the miraculous power of healing female sterility. The merchant promised, but when the time came, forgot about it. Therefore, instead of the requested stone, he brought her an insignificant pebble, which the lady received believing it was the true one.<sup>27</sup> Thanks to her faith, she became pregnant nonetheless and informed the merchant about this prodigy:

Now the merchant when he heard, his heart was stupefied and trembling took possession of his limbs, and he believed in his heart and said (to himself): 'It is established for me that great is the God of the Christians, and there is no faith except

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<sup>26</sup> Transl. Burkitt (1913: 155).

<sup>27</sup> On the narrative role played by the stone in this story, and in general by objects in Syriac hagiography, see Ruani (2021).

theirs! For lo, this business – if anyone else had told it me, perchance *I should have doubted* ( *ἄρα οὐκ ἔπεισθε* ) it was not true, but lo, through my hands it came to pass and was performed! For if a bit of common stone through the woman’s faith can give her a son, how much more if I had brought her some of that very stone which she asked for!’ (My emphasis)<sup>28</sup>

What follows is a chain of transmission that reinforces the truth claim of the account: the miracle is spread widely through a chain of oral representations involving the major personalities of the city, from the noble Patricius, husband of the pregnant lady, to the emperor and the patriarch, who ends up baptizing on the same day both the baby boy and the merchant.<sup>29</sup>

In my examples, the custodian and the merchant embody a stock character of hagiographical texts: the doubter. As Gilbert Dagron has shown, several Byzantine hagiographical narratives written between the sixth and the eleventh century include episodes featuring this character to neutralize a ‘diffuse skepticism’ about the cults of saints, in particular their miraculous performances.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the character of the doubter features more in miracle accounts than in other hagiographical genres.<sup>31</sup> She/he enters the narrative after the miracle occurs; and she/he both incarnates and defuses the reader’s skepticism about the episodes defying rational

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<sup>28</sup> Transl. Burkitt (1913: 157).

<sup>29</sup> Transl. Burkitt (1913: 158).

<sup>30</sup> Dagron (1992, esp. 60). See also Kaldellis (2014).

<sup>31</sup> See Kaldellis (2014: 454).

explanation in the story. In this regard, the doubt ultimately serves the ideological agenda of the hagiographer as an authenticating device.<sup>32</sup>

We may take a further step and argue that the truth claim receives higher reinforcement in cases in which the doubt is ascribed to the character who is also presented as the very informant of the story. The informant himself gains reliability if he is portrayed as having first doubted something which common experience and logic would have rejected as impossible – in other words, if he acts and thinks like anyone, including an ordinary reader, would do. The greater the initial skepticism, the greater becomes the degree of reliability of the skeptical character.<sup>33</sup> There is, in other words, a circular argument<sup>34</sup> at work in these hagiographies. The introduction of an informant, as a mean of authentication, is followed by the representation of their thoughts, and especially doubts, and finally by the validation of the story once the doubt is solved. This self-standing, closed circuit is particularly clear when the end of the story makes manifest that the act of dispelling skepticism in itself constitutes the aim of the text. The epilogue of the *Story of the Merchant in Constantinople* offers a telling example:

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<sup>32</sup> See Kaldellis (2014: 458-459) and Turner (2012: 41).

<sup>33</sup> I would like to thank Maria Conterno for the fruitful conversations we had on this topic.

<sup>34</sup> On this fundamental tautological character of hagiography, see Dagron (1992: 65).

Now these things, O brethren of ours, we have related before you that *no man may doubt* about the true faith of Christians, as if it were a weak thing in its nature, and not able to perform miracles for us as for them of old time... (My emphasis)<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Thoughts disconnected from truth claims: other purposes

Several Syriac hagiographies show a scenario different from that outlined above (§2): one in which the representation of thoughts does not interact with authentication strategies. Now the former is no longer at the service, so to speak, of the latter. Thought representations serve other purposes, which mostly relate to the construction of the plot.

#### *3.1 Thoughts triggering plot development: thinking protagonists*

A first telling example presents the specific situation that was at play in the stories analyzed in the second section of the previous part, namely, those in which claims of truth, thoughts, and miracles appear in conjunction. Rather than providing an explanation, however, for the otherwise unbelievable event which is the miracle, as was the case above, the thoughts conveyed in this text, while still occurring after a miracle, have nothing to do with it. Shirin, a Persian martyr whose account, originally composed in Syriac around 560/570, only survived in a Greek version, witnesses the miracle of her own healing after she touched a priest's clothing. The text continues:

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<sup>35</sup> Transl. Burkitt (1913: 159). Some examples of Byzantine hagiographers who explicitly address their readers' doubts are offered by Kaldellis (2014: 463). They include the *Life of Antony*, the *Life of Mary of Egypt* and the *Life of Ioannikios*.

But this led her to a better path, for because of her stupefaction at the miracle, she desired total reunion (οικείωσις) with Christ. ‘For if by his servants,’ she said (to herself) (φησι), ‘such a deliverance is brought forth, what kind of helping power lies within the Master?’ Thus she reckoned (λογίζεται) to be deemed worthy from then on of being united with him through the holy baptism and to no longer stay away from the mysteries.<sup>36</sup>

This passage is the only one in the text that explicitly quotes Shirin’s thought. Thought representation through direct speech brings the character closer to the reader, even more so than the representation of Shirin’s inner life through the description of her feelings and intentions does. The reader entertains the illusion of being given direct access to the character’s thinking. Moreover, the very narrative moment in which the thought occurs illuminates the choice for direct citation. In the previous pages, the reader had learned that Shirin, born and raised Zoroastrian, gradually increased her connections to Christianity after meeting pious women and following several visits to the church. Yet Shirin did not dare to openly manifest her faith for fear of the Zoroastrians’ reaction. The miraculous healing constitutes the first step in her decision to openly become a Christian, a resolution further reinforced by two divine dreams. The healing and the visions incite Shirin to visit the bishop and ask him to baptize her. This episode sets up the plot and puts in motion the events which lead to her final martyrdom. The representation of thought occurs at the turning point of the plot, thus signalling the forthcoming change. It has, in other words, a proleptic function.

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<sup>36</sup> My translation. Ed. Devos (1946: 116), French transl. Devos (1994: 20).

Another Persian ‘passion historique’,<sup>37</sup> the *History of Mar Abba*, written in the sixth century, also displays the representation of thoughts in a conversion context.<sup>38</sup> This time, however, the thought does not trigger the protagonist’s confession of faith but contributes to the protagonist’s new desire to convert. Like Shirin, Abba, a member of the Zoroastrian elite, wishes to cease being a Zoroastrian to become a Christian.<sup>39</sup> Unlike her, Abba is not martyred, but receives the highest ecclesiastical title of the Church of the East, the *catholicos*. Once again, his thoughts are explicitly cited only once, in the beginning of the narrative, just after the introduction of the protagonist as a learned and important figure of the Persian government. Abba meets a monk, who will inspire in him the desire of conversion, as he is about to cross the Tigris River on a boat. The Christian ascetic, referred to in the text as ‘the son of the Covenant’<sup>40</sup> also embarks the boat, but Abba hits him and forces him to get off it. The boat begins the crossing, but a sudden and violent storm forces it to return. The tempest abides only after the Christian ascetic is allowed back on the boat. The episode repeats, however. Abba rejects again the ascetic, the

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<sup>37</sup> This term belongs to the famous categories created by Hippolyte Delehaye to define the degrees of historical reliability of hagiographical texts, which Paul Devos subsequently applied to the Syriac Persian Martyr Acts. For the *Martyrdom of Shirin* and the *History of Mar Abba* as ‘passions historiques’, see Devos (1966: 213).

<sup>38</sup> This text has probably been composed by one of Abba’s disciples and several passages and expressions reflect this familiarity, which we may therefore consider as signs of truth claim. See Devos (1966: 215).

<sup>39</sup> On this common theme among the Acts of the Persian Martyrs, see Debié (2010).

<sup>40</sup> For this ascetical movement typical of Syriac Christianity, see Pierre-Beylot (2010: 11-36).

storm resumes afresh, and the boat arrives once more to its departure point. It is at this moment that the narrator invites the reader to Abba's mind and makes plain his thoughts:

As the Blessed one was considering his clothing (i.e. the clothing of the ascetic), which was modest and different, he wondered in his mind (Ⲛⲓⲁⲓⲣ ⲛⲁⲃⲗⲁⲛⲟⲩ ⲙⲁⲩⲁⲥⲓⲁⲃ): 'Isn't he perhaps a son of the Covenant of the Christians? But maybe he is a Marcionite, or a Jew.' And he asked him saying: 'Are you Jewish?' He replied: 'Yes.' He asked again: 'Are you Christian?' And he said: 'Yes.' He asked further: 'Do you fear Christ?' He said: 'Yes.'<sup>41</sup>

The thought itself denotes Abba's curiosity about the ascetic man. After having violently rejected the Christian man, and after the strange storm, Abba fully dedicates his reflections to him. His thought anticipates the questions that Abba next addresses to the Christian ascetic. It is not so much the experience of a prodigious event, as the righteous attitude of the Christian, that makes Abba think of becoming a Christian: 'After the saint saw the virtue of that Scholar, and considered greatly his words, he decided in his mind (ⲛⲁⲃⲗⲁⲛⲟⲩ) to convert to the friendship with Christ'.<sup>42</sup> The representation of Abba's thought is not relevant for the message it carries, since the subsequent questions repeat it and would have anyway portrayed the encounter between the future *catholicos* and the ascetic. Its added value resides in the characterisation it provides. The Christian ascetic is symbolically important exactly because he illustrates the kind

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<sup>41</sup> *History of Mar Abba* §3 (ed. Jullien 2015, I: 7). English translations of this text are mine, French transl. in Jullien (2015, II: 7).

<sup>42</sup> *History of Mar Abba* §5 (ed. Jullien 2015, I: 8; French transl. II: 8).

of Christian Abba himself will become. Abba's own thoughts, made transparent by the author, precisely relate to this topic and they convey an effect which a report of the conversation alone would not have achieved. Now the reader is not only alerted about the development of the plot, centered upon Abba's conversion, but also about the precise Christian practices that Abba is likely to adopt, i.e. the lifestyle of a son of the Covenant, learned in the Scriptures.<sup>43</sup>

The importance of representing inner life at specific turning points in the narrative is also highlighted by the opposite strategy, i.e. not by depicting personal thoughts but by stressing their absence. From a narratological point of view, nothing changes since the reader still encounters the representation of the inner world of one of the characters. How would the narrator know what the character is *not* thinking? One example of it is offered by the *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Šabba'e*, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon executed by King Shabur II around 339 AD, whose acts, likely written down in the early-fifth century,<sup>44</sup> proved very influential for the composition

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<sup>43</sup> Another example of the proleptic function of thought representation is found in the fourth-century *Martyrdom of Ḥabbib the Deacon*, in which the protagonist's thought is quoted just before he delivers himself to the governor who will put him to death (transl. Doran 2000: 417). A comparable case taken from the Greek hagiographical tradition is the *Life of John Kalyvites* §4, in which the saint plans his actions, represented as a direct quotation of his thoughts, which will eventually impact the plot. Before leaving his family's house and entering a monastery, John decides to ask his parents for a copy of the Gospels. It will be this very object which, at the end of the narrative, will allow for John, now disguised as a beggar, to be recognized by his parents.

<sup>44</sup> Smith (2014: xxxi).

of other Persian Martyr accounts.<sup>45</sup> The night before his execution, significantly also Good Friday, Simon is described in the following terms:

In that night at the dawn of the fourteenth day of the passion of Our Saviour, sleep did not overcome him with its troubles, *nor did thoughts hinder him with their emptiness* (ܐܠܗܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ ܕܥܝܘܒܐ). Rather, this is what he asked and sought: ‘Jesus, make me worthy...’ (My emphasis)<sup>46</sup>

The absence of thoughts characterizes here the disposition of the saint who is ready for his martyrdom. This is a solemn moment of the story in general, and of the destiny of the protagonist

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<sup>45</sup> Smith (2014: xix-xx). The claim of truth in this text is found in the prologue and takes the form of a very elaborate parallelism between present hard times and biblical difficult times, especially endured by the Maccabees (*Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Šabba‘e* §1-6, transl. Smith 2014: 6-14).

<sup>46</sup> *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Šabba‘e* §37. Transl. Smith (2014: 50). The *History of Simeon Bar Šabba‘e*, a later version of Simeon’s martyrdom, describes this moment in a slightly different way: ‘neither did sleep overcome them by making them miserable, nor did anxiety hinder them with its worry’ (§76, transl. Smith 2014: 172). The author of the *History of Simeon Bar Šabba‘e* claims at the end that he based his account on trustworthy sources: on ‘the abundant materials that we found from the acts that painstaking men narrated before us, (and which) we summarized’ (§99, transl. Smith 2014: 210).

in particular, and the representation of inner life underscores precisely this solemnity.<sup>47</sup> The depiction of the saint free from thoughts at decisive moments of his life corresponds both to a religious and a rhetorical ideal. Simeon's description as an unperturbed saint seems akin to the description of a mystic, who can master his body, by keeping vigils, and his soul, by emptying his mind and controlling his emotions, and thus adequately prepare himself to meet the divine.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the death of a martyr is often depicted as the departure of the saint for the much-yearned encounter with the beloved Christ. Oftentimes martyrs decide to fast before their death.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, representing the spiritual disposition of a virtuous character is prescribed in the Syriac

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<sup>47</sup> Another example of the importance of mind representations for the vivid depiction of the moments preceding the death scene, is found in the *Martyrdom of Narseh*, which took place under the Sasanian king Yazdgird I (399-420), but was probably composed a bit later, towards the mid-fifth century, and is narrated as an eye-witness report. In the final scene, when Narseh is approaching the place of his execution, the narrator emphasizes Narseh's desire to be martyred, temporarily in danger of not being fulfilled, by recurring to the exposition of his thoughts: 'The blessed Narseh, when he saw that the Magus (i.e. the Zoroastrian) was turning him around, became gloomy and distressed, because he thought (ܘܚܝܢ) that he was being diverted towards the prison, and his martyrdom was not to be crowned by the sword, as was his desire' (ed. & transl. Herman 2016: 18).

<sup>48</sup> For a collection of essays on Syriac mysticism, where the mystical ideal of the concept of 'stillness', for example, is prominent, see Desreumaux (2011).

<sup>49</sup> For example, Shabur, another Persian martyr at the hand of Yazdgird I, replies to his brothers who want to partake with him in the last meal: 'God forbid that I break the fast before I shall pass on to the harbor of Christ (...)' (transl. Herman 2016: 52).



### 3.2 Thoughts justifying the plot: thinking antagonists

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the quoted thoughts of antagonists mostly consist of subterfuge and conspiracies.<sup>53</sup> Contrary to those of the protagonists, most of their thoughts are narrated *after* a key-event and thus provide an explanation *post factum*.<sup>54</sup> This prevents the reader from identifying with the thinker, since they can no longer claim foreknowledge of the hidden forces driving the story, as these forces are revealed to them after the action already took place. For example, here is a thought of the Persian king Shabur II, persecutor of Simeon Bar Šabba'e: 'Then the king commanded that he (i.e. Simeon) be bound until the morning, *for he said (to himself)* (ܝܢܗܘܢܝܘܢ), "Perhaps he will be convinced and obey us"' (*Martyrdom* § 26; my emphasis).

The story of Gushtazad, a prominent side character in Simeon's narratives, offers us insights into the narrator's motivations for representing the mind of his literary characters. Gushtazad is a eunuch in the faithful service of king Shabur who converted to Zoroastrianism from Christianity. After Simeon's incarceration, he desires to convert back and longs for martyrdom. Before his death, he asks the king to publish an edict announcing his intention to die as a martyr of the Christian faith. The narrator reveals the reasons for Gushtazad's request by quoting his thoughts:

For the illustrious one thought (to himself) (ܝܢܗܘܢܝܘܢ ܠܗܘܢܝܘܢ), "Now the rumor

'Gushtazad has apostatized' has already gone out about me, and I know that many

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<sup>53</sup> Compare with the 'heresiarch' Mani as portrayed in the fourth-century polemical account *Acta Archelai* §4.1: 'He debated with himself very seriously as to how he could ensnare him [the first Christian citizen Marcellus] in the nets of his own doctrine.'

<sup>54</sup> In narratology, this is called 'motivation from behind': see Von Contzen (2015: 10).

have lapsed because of me, and if I die now, they will not know why I die (which would allow them) to know and see and be comforted. So now I will leave behind a good deed in order that all Christians will hear that I am being killed for Christ and (thus) be comforted”.<sup>55</sup>

The reader discovers that Gushtazad intended not only to annul his own apostasy and restore his reputation as a faithful Christian, but also to provide an example for reinforcing the faith in the Christian community. The narrator comments on such generosity: ‘This is the good thought (ܟܘܢܝܢܐ ܟܘܢܝܢܐ) that was sent out by the wise old man for the benefit of the community! This is the horn of preparedness held up by an experienced man as instruction for the security of the church so that those strong in justice might be awakened and armed for battle!’<sup>56</sup>

The narrator’s commentary upon Gushtazad’s thoughts lengthens in the *History*, where it takes several paragraphs in which the thought itself is referred to as a ‘wise and holy plan’

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<sup>55</sup> *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Šabba ‘e* §32 (transl. Smith 2014: 44). The *History* contains an almost identical thought quotation: ‘For the wise old man thought (ܟܘܢܝܢܐ): Now, the rumor ‘Gushtazad denied his God’ has gone out about me, and many have lapsed because of me. And now, if I am killed, my death will not be able to compensate for the damage I have done on account of the scandal that I have wrought. But, if this is made known to everyone about me through the herald, then those who fell away will take courage because of me, and those who became weak will be strengthened, and everyone will know that I am killed for Christ’ (§59, transl. Smith 2014: 144).

<sup>56</sup> *Martyrdom of Simeon Bar Šabba ‘e* §32 (transl. Smith 2014: 44).

(ܩܫܬܐܙܐܕ).<sup>57</sup> The narrator quotes and interprets Shabur's thoughts at the request of Gushtazad, and he also compares them with Gushtazad's previous thoughts. The following fragment is a very rare example of such an intervention on the part of the narrator, who does not indicate how he would know such inner reasoning, and therefore would not technically be in the position to quote them, let alone comment on them, while claiming to present the facts as they happened:<sup>58</sup>

§60. Consider the wise old man! [...] This wise man devised this wise and holy plan that befits the wisdom of his witness. For he determined: "There are many things that bring death to those who stand in this high-ranking position in which I stand, one that is full of risk. But let everyone learn that I am killed for the faith of Christ!" O prudent old man who thought such a good thought (ܩܫܬܐܙܐܕ ܩܫܬܐܙܐܕ ܩܫܬܐܙܐܕ)! O wise old man who gave such a gift to the people of God! [...] The free will of his progeny denied him (offspring) and his own free will gave him offspring instead. For the free will of his parents denied him (offspring) and his own free will gave him offspring instead. *This is the philosopher and the philosopher of truth, who added a deed of marvel to the findings of his philosophy, and who prepared life for those who heard and heeded him. His philosophy was used not only unto thought and word, but unto the realization of deeds!*' §61. Then the king, when he heard these things from Gushtazad, became exceedingly glad because he thought: "Many will hear, and, from hearing about his killing, will fall away from the opinion of the Christians and do my will." *Gushtazad devised these former thoughts, and the latter are what the king had*

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<sup>57</sup> *History of Simeon Bar Šabba'e* §60 (transl. Smith 2014: 146).

<sup>58</sup> See note 45 above.

*in mind. The thought of the wise old man brought to naught the thinking of the stupid king!* (My emphases)<sup>59</sup>

The final sentences of §60 and of §61 show the narrator's reasons for representing the thoughts of his characters. Thoughts are action-oriented; they serve the plot's actions in a direct and decisive way. They are quoted to justify the actions that just happened, such as the edict, to explain them retroactively, implying that thoughts, words, and deeds are just equivalent expressions of the same ideology. They are also quoted to explain or even influence subsequent actions – such as the reinforcement of the Christian faith in the crowd after Gushtazad's request –, through the narrator's explicit intervention and interpretation. In this case, the narrator is almost imagining a mind battle between the two thinkers over the destiny of the Christian population.

This example shows too that the representation of thoughts is invested with a particular meaning and a driving role for the construction of the plot, regardless of its logical consistency or inconsistency with other parts of the narrative, in particular claims of truth and historical accuracy.

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter started with a question that originated in our modern understanding of fiction and our notion of logical contradiction: How can narrators claim their accounts as factual and true and, at the same time, assert to have access to the minds of the persons about whom they relate?

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<sup>59</sup> Ed and transl. Smith (2014: 146-149).

The chapter presented varied answers provided to this question by some late antique hagiographical texts in the Syriac tradition. Since hagiography represents a literary genre where fact and fiction are intertwined in sophisticated manners, these varied answers illustrate a range of usages of thought representation, and of its relation to truthfulness and claims for accuracy and historicity.

In some of the selected stories, thought representation supports authentication through the character of the informant. This is especially true when the thought is a doubt about the very events for which the informant later serves as a warrant, once the doubt is solved. Thought representation also serves other purposes, such as plot construction and characterisation, often serving the narrative's ideological goals, such as the promotion of conversion or martyrdom, and encouraging the audience to identify – or not – with specific characters. These various responses deepen our understanding of the literary construction of hagiographical texts and, in particular, prove that mind representation plays an important part in it. At the same time, they offer examples that broaden our knowledge of the ways and purposes of consciousness representation in ancient sources, contributing thus to the history of this literary mode.

Just like in ancient epic, historiographical and novelistic literature,<sup>60</sup> the representation of the mental process in hagiography vivifies the characters and invites the audience to become deeply involved in the story.<sup>61</sup> Especially when the thoughts are quoted in a direct mode – a rather infrequent form – the authors give their readers the illusion of having direct access to the minds of characters. At the same time, this device does not individualize the characters as it tends to do in modern literature, since their thinking remains formulaic. Yet, in using the display of thoughts,

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<sup>60</sup> Scholes & Kellogg 2006 [1966]: 179; De Jong (2004 [1987]: 113); Grethlein (2015).

<sup>61</sup> Same conclusions in Von Contzen (2016: 173), analyzing the medieval *Scottish Legendary*.

ancient authors lent a rationalized outlook to unusual turns of events and, indeed, to the exceptional position of the saint and the martyr within social and political pre-established structures.

We have also reviewed stories without the acknowledged clash between the omniscient narrator and the claims of truth. This ‘quiet’ scenario somehow defies our modern sensibilities about writings not clearly defined as works of fiction. It also invites us to rethink our most widespread classification of hagiographical sources based on the degree of historical reliability, since unhistorical scenarios of this kind are, in fact, shared by texts that have been categorized as ‘passions historiques’. Far from being problematic, the representation of thoughts in these texts constitutes an important part of a loose narrative structure in which actions and speech intermingle with thoughts at specific moments. In an essentially action-based genre, such as hagiography, the thoughts meaningfully intervene in the development of the plot; despite their formulaic nature, they both drive the plot forward and justify it retroactively.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, this flexible structure allows for replacements and modifications that suit the two main goals of the text, that is, on the one hand, maintaining the overall narrative coherence and its potential to convey specific spiritual messages, and, on the other hand, preserving the individual narrative coherence of the thinking characters. The latter is brought to the fore and is expected to fulfill the new tasks the author assigned to them by depicting them as thinking. The rhetorical tradition also provides help in this matter by illuminating the reasons as to why the narrator’s omniscience and the truth claim might not have been perceived as contradictory by the readers of these texts.

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<sup>62</sup> In this respect, hagiography differs from ancient epics concerning the content of the thoughts, for example: in the latter, the inner monologues mainly take the form of interior debates, portraying a dilemma faced by the character (Scholes & Kellogg 2006 [1966]: 184).

It is perhaps **the notion of conformity** that fundamentally conveys the ancient hagiographical perspectives on fictionality, in the Syriac tradition and beyond it. Ancient hagiographers resorted to fictionality for the sake of conformity to common human reality, conformity to specific and culturally determined rhetorical schemes; and conformity to biblical models but also to previous accounts of glorious deeds, etc. What made these texts enduring was probably not the respect for the norms of logical consistency, but the plausibility of the account and whatever it took to achieve it. The prologue of the *Martyrdom of Shirin* said it just as much: ‘the past is consolidated once it is signified by the acts, and the present is illustrated once it has been made conformed to what precedes’,<sup>63</sup> and not to the laws of factual and logical representation.

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<sup>63</sup> Ed. Devos (1946: 113), French transl. Devos (1994: 17).

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