The Representation of False Prophets in Polemical Discourses. A Comparative Analysis*

La representación de los falsos profetas en los discursos polémicos. Un análisis comparativo

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Abstract

In this article, I analyse some "transversal" polemical motifs (adopted by both "pagans" and Christians) in the representation of Alexander of Abonouteichos, offered in the homonymous work by Lucian of Samosata, and in the description of the Montanists in heresiological sources, focusing in particular on the polemists who are quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea. This analysis attempts to highlight how, despite the

Resumen

En este artículo analizo algunos motivos polémicos "transversales" (adoptados tanto por "paganos" como por cristianos) en la representación de Alejandro de Abonouteichos, en la obra homónima de Luciano de Samosata, y de los Montanistas en las fuentes heresiológicas, centrándome en particular en los autores citados por Eusebio de Cesarea. Este análisis intenta poner de relieve cómo, a pesar de las dife-

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differences between the mentioned authors, it is possible to find some common points in the representation of the "false prophets" that is often due to the same literary references. In particular, I analyse the way of presenting the life and behaviour of these characters and their way of delivering prophetic messages.

rencias entre los autores citados, es posible encontrar algunos puntos comunes en la representación de los "falsos profetas" que a menudo se debe a las mismas referencias literarias. En particular, analizo la forma de presentar la vida y el comportamiento de estos personajes y su manera de dar mensajes proféticos.

Palabras clave

Alejandro de Abonouteichos; Controversia montanista; Eusebio de Cesarea; Falso profeta; Glicón; Heresiología antigua; Luciano de Samosata; Maximila; Mensajes proféticos; Montanus; Priscila; Réplica polémica.

Keywords

Alexander of Abonouteichos; Ancient Heresiology; Eusebius of Caesarea; False prophet; Glycon; Lucian of Samosata; Maximilla; Montanist Controversy; Montanus; Polemical rapresentation; Priscilla; Prophetic messages.

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In her recent volume on Montanist prophecy, Maria Dell'Isola devoted a chapter to analysing how the polemical sources constructed this prophetical movement, its figures and peculiarities.[1] The scholar's discursive analysis examines the elements – in terms of vocabulary, images, polemical patterns, etc. – that characterise the portrayal of the New Prophets by the heresiologists: the madness of their ecstasies, the obscurity of their prophetic messages, the role of women in the group, up to the accusations of depravity, greed, and lust. Dell'Isola also offers an interesting comparison between these polemical representations of the Montanists and that of the Valentinian teacher Mark by Irenaeus of Lyon.[2] This analysis, displaying the common elements in the different polemical discourses, demonstrates the existence of recurring aspects in the heresiological representation of "heresiarchs", in particular of those who claim to have a prophetic gift and hold a great authority.[3]

Dell'Isola also remembers that many of these polemical elements were already present in the "pagan" controversy against the Christians: she recalls, for example, the famous portrayal of some alleged prophets by the philosopher Celsus, quoted by Origen (*Against Celsus* 7, 9). Regarding the polemical motifs in these representations, especially the most abominable ones, such as incest and cannibalism, the historian concludes:

1. See Dell'Isola, 2020a, pp. 115-152.

2. See Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies* (I 13, 2 – 21, 3), quoted also by Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 34, 2-3) in his polemic against Mark.

3. In this contribution, the terms "pagan" and "heretic" are used for the sake of convenience and in order to emphasise the polemical character of the sources that use them, although I am obviously aware of the problematic nature of these two terms and categories and of the debate about their use in a scientific context. For an overview of the recent debate around the category of "heresy", see Pesce, 2014 and 2018, pp. 67-84 and Pållson, 2021, pp. 47-65; on paganism (and polytheism), instead, see Bettini, 2014, pp. 103-114.

> "In realtà, l'accusa di infanticidio e cannibalismo non è nuova, anzi circolava diffusamente, ma in origine fu utilizzata dai pagani contro i cristiani. […] Si tratta di un meccanismo cha ha agito anche dietro altre accuse, come quella di magia, che infatti prima di essere impiegata dagli eresiologi nella confutazione degli eretici era stata utilizzata ad esempio anche da Celso contro i cristiani e contro la stessa figura di Gesù".[4]

Her analysis thus focuses on the polemical representation of the Montanist movement by polemical sources, rather than on the reconstruction of its historical reality. Explaining this particular focus on the representation of "heresies", Dell'Isola refers to the French scholar Alain Le Boulluec. In his famous study on the development of the notion of "heresy", Le Boulluec proposes, so to say, to shift the focus from the heresies to their representation in heresiological sources: "*Si l'on s'en tient à l'étude des 'représentations hérésiologiques', on situe d'emblée l'hérésie du côté des constructions contingentes*".[5] From this perspective, through the lens of polemical representations, Dell'Isola analyses how the heresiologists "created" Montanism by using certain polemical motifs which are widely spread in the representation not only of heresies but also of other religious groups (e.g., the "pagans") by Christians authors – as well as of Christians themselves by the opposing groups, as I said.

Her considerations on the depiction of the New Prophets open to a broader reflection on the diffusion of these elements in polemical representations in Greek literary production. Many of these elements, in fact, already appear in the archaic and classical period, in the depiction of some figures who are reprehended by different authors. More specifically, they seem often attributed to "prophetic figures" (prophets, soothsayers, diviners, etc.), who would boast a particular relationship with the divinities, a peculiar conduct of life and morality, and a great wisdom.[6] Against these figures, polemicists often propose both specific and common accusations, which ironically "overturn" their divine character and reveal their nature of

4. Dell'Isola, 2020a, p. 152. On the accusation of cannibalism in literary production, see Nagy, 2009. More generally, on the accusations of anthropophagy, incest, and infanticide against Christians, see Wagemakers, 2010.

5. See Le Boulluec, 1985, p. 19.

6. By the expression "prophetic figure", I generally mean a character who has some power that allows him or her to investigate the will of the deities, to know future events and to understand past ones, although I am aware of the great multiplicity and differences in these various figures between the "pagan", Jewish and Christian worlds. In this article, in fact, I will focus more on the representation of these figures (specifically, of the alleged προφῆται and of the ψευδόμαντις from Abonoutheichos) than on their historical reality or their characteristics – for which I refer to comprehensive works, such as that of Aune, 1983.

"charlatans". From this perspective, despite the obvious differences due to historical, geographical, and cultural contexts, these polemical elements against "prophet-charlatans" appear common to different groups, since both Christians and pagans use them in a similar manner.[7]

In this article, starting from the elements explored by Dell'Isola and extending the examination to other aspects, I will analyse some "transversal" polemical motifs (that is, adopted by both pagans and Christians) in the representation of the "charlatan".[8] Although, whenever possible, I will try to provide historical references to the phenomena, groups, and figures at the centre of this article, I mainly focus on their depiction by polemical sources, starting from Le Boulluec's perspective on the "construction" of otherness and extending it beyond the heresiological sources. My analysis will compare, on the one hand, the polemical representation of the Cataphrygians in the anti-Montanist sources, with a particular focus on the authors quoted by Eusebius in the *Ecclesiastical History*, and, on the other hand, that of Alexander of Abonouteichos in the homonymous work by Lucian of Samosata. In the latter polemical work, written around the end of the 2nd century – more or less, the same period of the first anti-Montanist authors – the rhetorician depicts with impetuous irony the alleged prophetic activity of the charlatan Alexander and the foundation in Abonouteichos of the oracle of Glycon with the purpose of becoming rich. I will underline the evident differences in the historical and cultural context and in the literary genre of these sources, in order to avoid oversimplified juxtapositions.

These differences are of various kinds: they are related not only to the literary form of these works but also to their cultural and social contexts of reference, as well as to the polemical objectives of their authors.[9] In particular, I hasten to emphasise how Christian authors often consider, in their polemics against the heretics, specific biblical models (e.g., the "false prophets" mentioned in the biblical books, such as the prophets of Baal or the false prophetess Jezebel) that are not present in Lucian. On the other side, the rhetorician of Samosata mentions several coeval philosophers

7. As I will try to demonstrate, these similarities are due to common literary models: for example, Plato's representation of the false μάντεις (see *Republic* 364b) who seduce and deceive people for money. See Bertani, 2020.

8. By the term "charlatan", in this paper, as I said, I mean a figure who ascribes to himself some prophetic and divinatory power, who claims to follow a particular lifestyle and boasts a special relationship with divinity and great wisdom, all characteristics that polemicists regard as deceptions. On the representation of some "holy men" as charlatans, especially in the ancient novel, I refer to the collection by Panayotakis *et al.*, 2015.

9. It should also be added that the works of the Christian authors quoted by Eusebius are in fragmentary form, and it is often not easy to reconstruct their more general context.

and philosophical schools in his work, referring to these as some of his polemical targets.[10] Such references to philosophical controversies find no place in the anti-Montanist polemicists: these authors seem to focus more on an "internal controversy" between Christians and those who profess to be Christians.

However, despite these differences, a comparison between these sources and their respective representations of charlatans is particularly interesting and, in some respects, even original. Indeed, these are sources that, besides being very close chronologically, are characterised by their polemics against figures who boast a special relationship with a divinity and a prophetic power. This very relationship would give to the prophet (Alexander in the case of Lucian, Montanus and his disciples for the Christian heresiological sources) a particular authority, causing a clash with other authoritative figures: philosophers, bishops, as well as other prophets. In this regard, one of the common elements between these different sources is the use of a series of motifs on the representation of the "charlatan" that would derive from a common literary, cultural, and polemical basis in the depiction of "otherness", particularly in the prophetic field.

The aim of this research is not to demonstrate a dependence or influence of one of these sources on another but rather to investigate these common elements in the polemical representations, which could reflect a certain literary tradition on the depiction of the false prophets.[11] This investigation will make it possible to contextualise the representations of Alexander, on the one hand, and the Montanists, on the other, in a broader literary and polemical context. I will take a broad look at the question of the representation of false prophets and charlatans in the sources, beyond, so to speak, the "religious context" of reference, through the examination of common polemical motifs. The use of these themes seems to be mainly connected to the presence of common models, mostly in a literary context, in the depiction of figures of "otherness", which are adopted, albeit in different contexts, by Lucian and the anti-Montanist heresiologists.

Regarding common polemical motifs, my analysis will focus on two general aspects in the portrayal of these figures. Firstly, I will investigate the features related

10. On this polemic against the philosophers, who are not, according to Lucian, on the same level of the wise Epicureans, see *infra*. I will only point out here that this kind of polemic is very frequent in Lucian: I mention, for example, the pamphlet *Philosophies for Sale*, where the author ridicules the various philosophers, whom Zeus sells off at the market as if they were slaves. On some polemical motifs of this work, see Massa, 2020, pp. 28-31.

11. In fact, some studies have investigated Lucian's knowledge not only of Christianity, but also of different groups and figures around the 2nd century. I will just mention an article by Ramelli (2005) on possible traces of Montanism and anti-Montanist polemic in Peregrinus. The same scholar, more recently, has also investigated the holy man/charlatan motif in the same work (see Ramelli, 2015).

to the life of the false prophets, including some aspects of their behaviour and morality. Also, it will be interesting to investigate the account of their death, which in the polemicist's strategy assumes an emblematic value. Secondly, I will focus on the forms and contents of their prophecy, i.e. the charlatans' way of entering into ecstasy and of delivering their "prophetic messages", which appear bizarre, ambiguous and deceitful.

1. Life, Morality, and Behaviour of the Charlatan

Among the most widespread accusations against "deviant" figures or groups of "otherness" (and not only in religious contexts),[12] the ones on morality and behaviour are certainly the most widespread: I refer in particular to greed, love for money and luxury, and sexual depravity.[13] These two accusations, which are very often combined in polemical discourses, seem more vehement when addressed to figures who profess a humble and sober life, conducted in poverty, ascetic rigour, and sexual continence.[14]

These two polemical motifs are widespread in the heresiological discourses against the New Prophets. Regarding accusation of greed, the anti-Montanist Apollonius, who is quoted by Eusebius, recalls that Montanus was the one "who appointed collectors of money, who organized the receiving of gifts under the name of offerings, who provided salaries for those who preached his doctrine in order that its teaching might prevail through gluttony" (*Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 2).[15] This greed corre-

12. On the creation of "otherness" in polemical discourses and the creation of the "selves" through the specular representation of the "others", especially in late antique heresiology, see the reflections of Iricinschi & Zellentin, 2008b.

13. These accusations are also already widespread in classical period and have been used by different authors, like philosophers – for example, Plato on greed in the *Hipparcus* (see Samad, 2010). Interestingly, however, polemics can be built on the opposite themes, that is excessive rejection of goods, understood as rejection of civilisation, and abstention from sexuality. From this perspective, perhaps the most famous case is represented by Euripides' Hippolytus in the homonymous tragedy; see Kokkini, 2013.

14. The greed-lust couple is in fact one of the most widespread in heresiological polemics, especially against heresiarchs: the portrayal of the masters and "founders" of movements as corrupt, avaricious, and lustful people serves to discredit the disciples as well. I will only mention the significant case of Epiphanius of Salamis. In the *Panarion*, the heresiologist depicts various heresiarchs according to these polemical motifs, such as Simon the Magician (*Panarion* 21), Carpocrates (*Panarion* 27), as well as Mani and his teachers (*Panarion* 66).

15. ὁ πρακτῆρας χρημάτων καταστήσας, ὁ ἐπ᾽ ὀνόματι προσφορῶν τὴν δωροληψίαν ἐπιτεχνώμενος, ὁ σαλάρια χορηγῶν τοῖς κηρύσσουσιν αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον, ἵνα διὰ τῆς γαστριμαργίας ἡ διδασκαλία τοῦ λόγου κρατύνηται. The Greek texts of the *Ecclesiastical History* are taken from the edition of Schwartz (1903), while the translation from the edition of Lake (1965).

sponds to a love of luxury, which is explicitly in contrast with the sobriety that should characterise the prophets. Apollonius in fact polemically asks: "Does not all Scripture seem to you to forbid a prophet from receiving gifts and money? […] Tell me, does a prophet dye his hair? Does he pencil his eyelids? Does he love ornaments? Does he gamble and dice? Does he lend money?" *(Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 3 and 11).[16] The anti-Montanist polemicists add also some allegations of sexual immorality: the prophetess Priscilla is called "virgin" (παρθένος) even if she was married and left her husband (*Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 3); furthermore, an anonymous prophetess is accused of having a depraved relationship with a certain Alexander, who was worshipped as a martyr – while, in reality, he was arrested because of his robberies (*Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 6).[17]

The allegation of greed is of absolute centrality in the polemic against Alexander of Abonouteichos: throughout his work, Lucian continually recalls how the character's alleged prophetic activity had a boundless enrichment and a luxurious life as its main aspiration. This link between money and prophecy is emblematic: excessive enrichment demonstrates the falshood of Alexander's oracles. At the beginning of the work, Lucian, telling of the misconduct of the young Alexander and his master Kokkonas, states (*Alex*. 8):

> ὡς γὰρ ἂν δύο κάκιστοι καὶ μεγαλότολμοι καὶ πρὸς τὸ κακουργεῖν προχειρότατοι εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ συνελθόντες, ῥᾳδίως κατενόησαν τὸν τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίον ὑπὸ δυοῖν τούτοιν μεγίστοιν τυραννούμενον, ἐλπίδος καὶ φόβου, καὶ ὅτι ὁ τούτων ἑκατέρῳ εἰς δέον χρήσασθαι δυνάμενος τάχιστα πλουτήσειεν ἄν… καὶ Δελφοὺς οὕτω πάλαι πλουτῆσαι καὶ ἀοιδίμους γενέσθαι καὶ Δῆλον καὶ Κλάρον καὶ Βραγχίδας…
>
> "As is entirely predictable if you put together two exceptionally wicked and daring men, itching to get down to a bit of villainy, they easily realized that the life of men is under the tyranny of two great masters, hope and fear, and that a man who could exploit both of those emotions to his advantage would get very rich very quickly. […] This is

16. δοκεῖ σοι πᾶσα γραφὴ κωλύειν προφήτην λαμβάνειν δῶρα καὶ χρήματα; … προφήτης, εἰπέ μοι, βάπτεται; προφήτης στιβίζεται; προφήτης φιλοκοσμεῖ; προφήτης τάβλαις καὶ κύβοις παίζει; προφήτης δανείζει;

17. See *Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 6. Timothy of Constantinople (*On Those Who Enter to the Church* 382; PG 86, 1, 20B), a 7th-8th century heresiologist, even depicts Maximilla and Priscilla as two prostitutes, a rare accusation in earlier heresiology. The accusation of love for parties, banquets, and revelry is already present in Plato's account of soothsayers (*Republic* 364b).

how Delphi got rich and famous, once upon a time, and similarly Delos, Klaros, and Branchidai".[18]

The reference to the most famous oracular sanctuaries is interesting: on the one hand, it seems to present a veiled polemic against their great enrichment; on the other hand, it opens a reflection on the "hunger for oracles" that, according to Lucian, would characterise mankind. Alexander and Kokkonas, who are aware of this reality, decide to create a sanctuary, but their interest is only in money. In fact, the choice of founding this sanctuary in Abonouteichos is related to the characteristics of its inhabitants, who, according to Alexander, not only easily fall in superstition, but are above all rich.[19] In this case, therefore, the love for money is not a *consequence* of being a false prophet: while Montanus is greedy *because* he is dominated by a lying demon (to whom he abandoned his soul for an arrogant desire of supremacy), for Alexander, greed *is* the main cause of his oracular activity. In both cases, however, the attachment to money, which, for the polemicists, appears in contrast to the supposed purity professed by the charlatans, becomes a clear sign of their lying character.[20]

This polemical motif appears in a similar way in the accusation of sexual depravity, which, as well as that of greed, is also widespread in Lucian's work: from the depiction of the young Alexander prostituting himself and seducing a "magician" (γόης), in order to learn his tricks, to his orgies with charming young men and married women when he reached his success.[21] As said, this accusation assumes a

18. In this paper, for the Greek texts of the *Alexander* I use the critical edition by Macleod (1993), while I refer to the very recent translation by Thonemann (2021).

19. Throughout the *Alexander*, Lucian insists on the charlatan's particular predilection for rich people: the wealth of these individuals, however, is often accompanied by stupidity and credulity, as in the case of the powerful and superstitious Rutilianus (see n. 56), who agrees to marry the daughter of the false prophet. This theme intersects with that of the critic against Alexander's public (*infra*).

20. In some parts of the work, Lucian seems to emphasise the charlatan's love for luxury as expression of his vainglory. For example, he represents him in this way at the beginning of his alleged oracular activity: "He was now wearing his hair long in curling locks; he was dressed in a purple tunic with a white stripe down the middle, with a white robe over the top" (*Alex.* 11: κομῶν ἤδη καὶ πλοκάμους καθειμένος καὶ μεσόλευκον χιτῶνα πορφυροῦν ἐνδεδυκὼς καὶ ἱμάτιον ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ λευκὸν ἀναβεβλημένος). This particular type of dress, in fact, refers to the richness of royalty, as Thonemann (2021, p. 86) observes: "The purple tunic with a white stripe down the middle (*chitōn mesoleukos*) was one of the characteristic items of royal dress of the Achaemenid Persian kings […], subsequently adopted by Alexander the Great".

21. See Lucian, *Alex.* 5. This reference to the magician's seduction is important in Lucian's argumentative strategy. This depiction at the beginning of the work of Alexander as the disciple and lover of a magician already provides a polemical perspective on the following activities of the charlatan.

particular relevance since Alexander, according to Lucian, used to fervently preach abstention from carnal relations. Lucian explicitly insists on this aspect (*Alex*. 41):

> προλέγων δὲ πᾶσιν ἀπέχεσθαι παιδίου συνουσίας, ὡς ἀσεβὲς ὄν, αὐτὸς τοιόνδε τι ὁ γεννάδας ἐτεχνήσατο. ταῖς γὰρ πόλεσι ταῖς Ποντικαῖς καὶ ταῖς Παφλαγονικαῖς ἐπήγγελλε θεηκόλους πέμπειν … καὶ νόμον δὲ ἐπεποίητο, ὑπὲρ τὰ ὀκτωκαίδεκα ἔτη μηδένα τῷ αὐτοῦ στόματι δεξιοῦσθαι μηδὲ φιλήματι ἀσπάζεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις προτείνων τὴν χεῖρα κύσαι μόνους τοὺς ὡραίους κατεφίλει…
>
> "To everyone else, he proclaimed that they must abstain from sex with boys, because it was impious; as far his own personal behaviour, he cooked up the following scheme, high minded character that he was. He announced to the cities of Pontos and Paphlagonia that they should send 'servants of god' […]. And he established a rule that he would not use his mouth to greet anyone over eighteen years of age, nor would he welcome them with a kiss. To everyone else he put his hands to be kissed; it was only beautiful boys he deigned to kiss enthusiastically himself […]".

The irony of the allegation is suggested by the image of Alexander demanding several kisses from the most beautiful young men, while to the others he only held out his hand, thus demonstrating his passion for physical beauty.

The immoral and excessive sexuality of the false prophet is emblematically demonstrated a little further on (*Alex*. 42):

> καὶ ἦν μέγα καὶ εὐκτὸν ἑκάστῳ, εἴ τινος γυναικὶ προσβλέψειεν εἰ δὲ καὶ φιλήματος ἀξιώσειεν, ἀθρόαν τὴν ἀγαθὴν τύχην ᾤετο ἕκαστος εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτῷ εἰσρυήσεσθαι. πολλαὶ δὲ καὶ ηὔχουν τετοκέναι παρ᾽ αὐτοῦ, καὶ οἱ ἄνδρες ἐπεμαρτύρουν ὅτι ἀληθῆ λέγουσιν.
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> "And in fact it was a highly prestigious thing for a husband, if Alexander started making eyes at his wife; if he went so far as to think her worthy a kiss, then the husband thought that all the fortune in the world had come cascading into his house at once. Many women even boasted that they had borne his children, and the husbands themselves testified that their wives were telling the truth".

The seduction of women is a widespread polemical motif in the various representations of the charlatans. In the case of the Montanists it is present, as I said, in the arguments against the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla, who abandoned their husbands to follow Montanus (*supra*). However, in some heresiological discourses, such as Irenaeus' depiction against Mark the magician, the heresiologist insists precisely on the deception of married (and rich) women, who, once seduced by the her-

esiarch, commit adultery.[22] In this case, the accusation of seduction and adultery are framed in the polemic of alleged prophecy, since Mark would seduce his victims with the promise of giving them the gift of prophecy – as well as with some magic tricks.[23]

Also, in the passage from the *Alexander* in analysis, the theme of adultery is employed to mock the "divine nature" that the false prophet claims to have.[24] Lucian's ironic polemic is focused precisely on the victims, who indeed appear eager to be deceived by the charlatan: not only the women, who hope to have a child by Alexander, but even their husbands, who boast when their wives commit adultery with the false prophet.[25]

However, these two accusations, greed and depravity, belong to literary polemics against different types of figures – not only the prophetical ones. A specific aspect, indeed, seems particularly suitable in disputes around prophecy: the shame and anger displayed by the pseudo-prophet in refutations. The theme of the "refutation" (ἔλεγχος) of the false prophet is a very recurrent theme in early Christian production, and the Montanist controversy offers perhaps the most significant examples.[26] Eusebius' sources report numerous cases of attempts to refute the New Prophets. The anonymous anti-Montanist author, according to his testimony, was actively involved in one of these refutations in Ankyra, where the movement was largely diffused: on that occasion the opponents were refuted and humiliated, but the inhabitants of the city asked the author for a treatise in order to enable them to refute Montanists again in the future.[27]

22. See Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies* I 13, 3.

23. *Ibidem*. On Mark and his magic activity, see Tripaldi, 2017.

24. Alexander's (semi-)divine status derives from the charlatan's claimed descent from the Homeric hero Podaleirius, who in the *Iliad* is the physician of the Achaean heroes, together with his brother Macaon. The revelation of descent from this hero appears in a specific oracle: "Behold a man of Perseus' race, beloved by Phoebus Apollo; the god-like Alexander, who inherits the blood of Podaleirios" (*Alex*. 11: Περσείδης γενεὴν Φοίβῳ φίλος οὗτος ὁρᾶται, δῖος Ἀλέξανδρος, Ποδαλειρίου αἷμα λελογχώς). The choice of this Homeric hero appears to be determined by Alexander's "strategy": Podaleirios is in fact the son of Asclepius. See Käppel, 2000.

25. We find once again the aforementioned polemic against Alexander's public, as rich as stupid and foolish for the charlatan's oracles.

26. In a heresiological context, the "refutation" (ἔλεγχος) does not only concern those heretics who boast prophetic powers: I can mention that the famous anti-heretical treatise once attributed to Hippolytus is called the *Elenchos*. Originally, the term ἔλεγχος, in a philosophical context, refers to the procedure of an analysis by which an idea or statement is refuted. For an overview on this term, see Lampe, 1961, p. 446 and Ierodiakonou & Krapinger, 2002. In the case of Alexander, the connotation of this term is primarily connected to the refutation of the false prophet's oracle; however, due to its effects, this ἔλεγχος of the Epicurean seems to extend to Alexander's activity in general.

27. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 16, 4-5: "Thus the church rejoiced and was strengthened in the truth, but our opponents were crushed for the moment and our adversaries were distressed. Therefore the presbyters of the place asked me to leave some note of what had been said against the

Most of the refutations represented in the sources, however, do not end successfully: on three occasions the supporters of the New Prophets badly drove away the opponents who had tried to approach the prophets to prove their honesty.[28] The dynamics of these attempts at refutation are particularly interesting especially for their depiction in anti-Montanist sources. These texts insist on the violence of the defenders of the false prophets, who impetuously shut physically the mouths of their opponents.[29] For the polemicists, this violent reaction is a clear demonstration of the falsehood of the alleged prophets, who feel shame and hatred and avoid any confrontation. Apollonius, for instance, challenges his opponents: "We can show the same in many instances, and, if they dare, let them stand the test" (*Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 10).[30]

These behaviours connected to the refutation of the charlatan are also evident in the *Alexander*. At the end of the work, the author reports a personal confrontation with the false prophet, where Lucian, rather than refuting his enemy, attempts (not very philosophically) to bite his hand.[31] However, the most significant example

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opponents of the word of the truth, when Zoticus of Otrous, our fellow presbyter, was also present. Though we did not do so, we promised to write from home if the Lord permitted, and to send it to them speedily" (ὡς τὴν μὲν ἐκκλησίαν ἀγαλλιαθῆναι καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐπιρρωσθῆναι, τοὺς δ' ἐξ ἐναντίας πρὸς τὸ παρὸν ἀποκρουσθῆναι καὶ τοὺς ἀντιθέτους λυπηθῆναι. ἀξιούντων οὖν τῶν κατὰ τόπον πρεσβυτέρων ὅπως τῶν λεχθέντων κατὰ τῶν ἀντιδιατιθεμένων τῷ τῆς ἀληθείας λόγῳ ὑπόμνημά τι καταλείπωμεν, παρόντος καὶ τοῦ συμπρεσβυτέρου ἡμῶν Ζωτικοῦ τοῦ Ὀτρηνοῦ, τοῦτο μὲν οὐκ ἐπράξαμεν, ἐπηγγειλάμεθα δέ, ἐνθάδε γράψαντες, τοῦ κυρίου διδόντος, διὰ σπουδῆς πέμψειν αὐτοῖς).

28. The anti-Montanist Anonymous (*apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 16, 17) speaks of two bishops, Zoticus of Cumana and Julian of Apamea, who were chased away by the Montanist Themiso's companions during an attempt to refute a Montanist prophetess. Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* V 18, 13), quoting Apollonius, mentions a certain Zoticus, who had tried to refute Maximilla in the Montanist sanctuary town of Pepuza. Finally, an anti-Montanist synodal letter, written by the bishop of Antioch, Serapion, and signed by several bishops, recalls a similar episode (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 19, 3): "As God lives in the heavens the blessed Sotas in Anchialus wished to drive the devil out of Priscilla and the hypocrites would not let him" (ζῇ ὁ θεὸς ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ὅτι Σωτᾶς ὁ μακάριος ὁ ἐν Ἀγχιάλῳ ἠθέλησε τὸν δαίμονα τὸν Πρισκίλλης ἐκβαλεῖν, καὶ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ οὐκ ἀφῆκαν).

29. On these episodes and the role of the New Prophets' supporters in sending away opponents and avoiding refutation, see Norelli, 2013; Spampinato, 2021.

30. τὸ ὅμοιον ἐπὶ πολλῶν δυνάμεθα ἀποδεῖξαι, καὶ εἰ θαρροῦσιν, ὑπομεινάτωσαν τὸν ἔλεγχον.

31. See *Alex*. 55: "And he put out his right hand for me to kiss, as he used to do with the masses; I clasped it as if about to kiss it, and by means of a really good firm bite I almost succeeded in leaving his hand paralysed" (καὶ ὁ μὲν προὔτεινέ μοι κύσαι τὴν δεξιάν, ὥσπερ εἰώθει τοῖς πολλοῖς, ἐγὼ δὲ προσφὺς ὡς φιλήσων, δήγματι χρηστῷ πάνυ μικροῦ δεῖν χωλὴν αὐτῷ ἐποίησα τὴν χεῖρα). This reference to the bite attempt is interpreted by Thonnemann (2021, p. 148), who refers to Bracht Branham (1989, pp. 205-206 and 266-267), as a reference to the dog-like attitude of the Cynics. The reaction of Alexander's supporters is aggressive and is reminiscent of the episode of the Epicurean (*infra*): they are not only

appears above in the work, when Lucian expressly speaks of an attempt of ἔλεγχος by an Epicurean. The followers of Epicurus, as recently recalled by Daniel Sarefield (2020), are presented as the only real opponents of the false prophet in the work, while the other philosophers (Platonists, Stoics and Pythagoreans) show a good relationship with the charlatan. Alexander always avoided Epicurus' followers, since he considered the philosopher "his worst enemy – and rightly so, since Epicurus considered all this kind of thing to be risible and infantile" (*Alex*. 25).[32]

One day, however, an Epicurean approach and refutes him, and for this very brave act of his he risks his life. The Epicurean, in fact, announces in front of the population that an oracle which was issued by Alexander about the death of a young man was proved to be false, since this young man had only got lost on a journey. Alexander's reaction is very harsh (*Alex*. 45):

> ὁ δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος ἀγανακτήσας ἐπὶ τῷ ἐλέγχῳ καὶ μὴ φέρων τοῦ ὀνείδους τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐκέλευεν τοὺς παρόντας λίθοις βάλλειν αὐτόν, ἢ καὶ αὐτοὺς ἐναγεῖς ἔσεσθαι καὶ Ἐπικουρείους κληθήσεσθαι.
>
> "Alexander was infuriated at having been exposed, and since he was unable to bear the truth of the criticism, he instead ordered the spectators to pelt him with stones, saying that otherwise they too would be polluted and would be called Epicureans in future".

As mentioned, the Epicurean's speech is presented as an ἔλεγχος, since it aims to prove the lie not only of the oracle in question, but of Alexander's prophetic ability in general.[33] The charlatan's reaction is so rancorous that he orders to his followers to stone the enemy. Only the intervention of a certain Demostratus, who protect with his body the Epicurean, saves the philosopher from the violence of the crowd. On the level of narrative strategy, the Epicurean's attempt of refutation, despite the turbulent ending, is successful, as Alexander's angry reaction confirms.

A final aspect of investigation into the charlatan's behaviour concerns his death. In heresiology, the death of the heresiarch often plays a very important role in the polemical representation not only of him, but also of his movement. By the depiction

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furious at the author for the bite attempt, but also for daring to call Alexander by his name and not by the name of prophet – a reference, according to Pozzi (2003, p. 132), to the Pythagorean custom of not calling the master by name.

32. ἔχθιστος δικαίως, πάντα ταῦτα ἐν γέλωτι καὶ παιδιᾷ τιθέμενος. In his speeches, in fact, Alexander often raged against atheists, Christians and Epicureans – for example, in *Alex*. 38.

33. On the term ἔλεγχος, *supra* n. 26.

of the ridiculous and miserable end of the heresiarch, the polemicist can give an even more critical reading of his life and teachings and, at the same time, mock those who still admire such a figure.[34]

Christian heresiology, in general, follows two lines in the depiction of the death of heresiarchs: 1) association with a negative character from the Scriptures; 2) representation of a death that polemically and ironically "reflects" the life and/or the doctrine of the heretic master. In the polemic toward Montanism we find both these options. The Anonymous quoted by Eusebius recalls how Montanus and Maximilla, despite their attempts to assimilate themselves to the prophets and the exaltation of martyrdom, would have hanged themselves, "like the traitor Judas" (*Ecclesiastical History* V 16, 13 Ἰούδα προδότου δίκην). Another prominent figure of the group, Theodotus, would have died in the following manner (*Ecclesiastical History* V 16, 14):

> καθάπερ καὶ τὸν θαυμαστὸν ἐκεῖνον τὸν πρῶτον τῆς κατ᾽αὐτοὺς λεγομένης προφητείας οἷον ἐπίτροπόν τινα Θεόδοτον πολὺς αἴρεῖ λόγος ὡς αἰρόμενόν ποτε καὶ ἀναλαμβανόμενον εἰς οὐρανοὺς παρεκστῆναί τε καὶ καταπιστεῦσαι ἑαυτὸν τῷ τῆς ἀπάτης πνεύματι καὶ δισκευθέντα κακῶς τελευτῆσαι
>
> "So also general report says that a certain Theodotus, that remarkable man, the first steward as it were of their alleged prophecy, was sometimes taken up and raised to Heaven, when he fell into a trance and trusted himself to the spirit of deceit, but was hurled down and died miserably".

This episode shows a clear polemical connection with Montanist prophecy: Theodotus ascended in ecstasy by what Montanists call the Holy Spirit, but then he miserably falls to the ground, demonstrating the malignity of the spirit and the falsity of his ecstasy. There is a sort of "retaliation" in the depiction of this death, since the alleged prophet dies precisely because of the prophetic ability and ecstasy he pretends to have.[35]

This "retaliation" in the death of the charlatan is also present in Lucian's polemic against Alexander and his friends. Kokkonas, master of the false prophet, would have died, according to the rhetorician of Samosata, in a rather significant manner: "in

34. Epiphanius is certainly one of the authors who most describes the deaths of the various heretical masters, through depictions often full of macabre irony. We can recall the case of Terebinthus, master of Mani, who fell to the ground while he is trying to fly in order to demonstrate his divine character to the priests of Mithras (*Panarion* LXVI 3, 12-14); or the miserable death of the presbyter Arius, who died in a latrine due to dysentery (*Panarion* LXIX 6, 9). On the representation of these figures in the *Panarion*, see Kim, 2010.

35. On this episode, see Dell'Isola, 2017.

fact, he died shortly afterwards, having been bitten, I think, by a viper" (*Alex*. 10).[36] The statement is clearly ironic and refers to what Lucian said some paragraphs before about the docility of the snake that the two charlatans bought to create their false oracle: Kokkonas died because of a bite of a snake, an animal he had used for his own deplorable purposes.

Alexander's death is even more singular (*Alex*. 59):

> προειπὼν δὲ διὰ χρησμοῦ περὶ αὑτοῦ ὅτι ζῆσαι εἵμαρται αὐτῷ ἔτη πεντήκοντα καὶ ἑκατόν … οἰκτίστῳ τέλει οὐδὲ ἑβδομήκοντα ἔτη γεγονὼς ἀπέθανεν, ὡς Ποδαλειρίου υἱὸς διασαπεὶς τὸν πόδα μέχρι τοῦ βουβῶνος καὶ σκωλήκων ζέσας…
>
> "Although he had predicted in an oracle concerning himself that he was fated to live for hundred and fifty years […] he in fact died a miserable death before he had reached the age of seventy; like a true son of Podaleirios, his leg became putrified as far as the groin, and ended up teeming with maggots".

The charlatan's death occurs when he is about seventy years old, despite the premonition about a longer existence – another demonstration, for Lucian, of the falsity of his oracles (*infra*). A terrible gangrene takes his foot and his whole leg, which becomes totally putrefied and covered in worms.[37] This painful and impressive death contains a particular sarcasm that refers to the self-declared divine nature of Alexander. At the very beginning of the work, in fact, Lucian recalled how the false prophet named himself the son of the Homeric hero Podaleirios. As Vincenzo Longo noted, the polemical discourse is focused, more than on the character of Podaleirios *per se*, on the etymology of his name – since it contains the term πούς, "foot".[38]

36. καὶ μετ᾽ ὀλίγον ἐτελεύτησε τὸν βίον, ὑπὸ ἐχίδνης, οἶμαι, δηχθείς.

37. The image of a disease that rots parts of the body and also carries worms is very widespread in the representation of the death of tyrants, across "pagans", Jews and Christians: from Pheretima in Herodotus' *Histories* (IV 205) to Herod in the *Acts of the Apostles* (12, 23), to the terrible Vandal king Huneric in the *History of Vandalic Persecution* (III 71) of Victor of Vita, to take only the ancient world into account. On this subject, see Africa 1982. With this image, is Lucian maybe mocking the regal appearance that Alexander used to show in public (*supra*)?

38. See Longo, 1986, p. 332: "Il richiamo a Podalirio, preteso padre di Alessandro, gioca sull'accostamento che può farsi fra il nome della parte malata, che nel testo greco è πούς (= piede, volendo l'A. indicare che la cancrena era salita al piede) e il primo elemento, di cui si compone il nome proprio Podalirio, che è appunto la radice ποδ-". At the same time, it is possible to think that this ironic reference to illness would echo the fact that Podaleirius was the son of Asclepius, the healer god, who would have manifested himself in Glycon: the death from such a horrible gangrene would thus demonstrate the god's distance from the charlatan.

This miserable death of Alexander gives the final and shameful demonstration of his deception: the image of the doctors who, in the attempt to heal Alexander, realise that his beautiful hairs are actually a wig represents the final and desecrating element of this strategy of unmasking.

2. Performances and Contents of Charlatans' Prophecy

In polemical portrayals of the prophets-charlatans a central element is constituted by the critics toward their prophetic activity. Generally, polemical discourses on the "prophecy" of charlatans concerns two main aspects: 1) the appearance and performances of their activity; 2) the content of their messages. Even if the sources analysed in this paper, as I said, show considerable differences also in these two aspects, it is possible to observe some common point in terms of polemical representations.

The Montanist "prophetic appearance" is one of the main features polemically pointed out by almost all heresiological sources. The anti-Montanist authors insist on the delirious, insane, and frantic nature of the New Prophets: Montanus, Maximilla and Priscilla act recklessly, look mad and are overwhelmed by a "false ecstasy" (παρέκστασις).[39] This turbulent prophetic manner is due, according to the anonymous anti-Montanist author, to the action of the spirit of lies, which possesses and agitates the New Prophets. Their insane attitude during the alleged ecstasies is, for the anti-Montanist sources, the most important evidence of the false character of Montanist prophecy: Epiphanius, for example, compares the alleged Montanist ecstasy, insane, delirious, and spectacular, in which the prophet loses consciousness of himself, with the sober, restrained, and vigilant ecstasy of the prophets of the Scriptures.[40] Indeed, the argument concerns precisely the distance of the Montanists from the biblical prophets (whose heirs they claim to be),[41] but at the same time touches on the

39. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 16, 7. On the construction of the παρέκστασις of the New Prophets, see Norelli, 2003.

40. On the polemic against Montanist prophetism in the *Panarion*, see Dell'Isola, 2020b.

41. Some aspects of the polemic against this attempted identification by heretics with the biblical prophets is already present in the words of the anti-Montanist Anonymous (*apud* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 17, 3), who insists that these prophets were not characterised by the same false ecstasy of the Montanists: "But they cannot show that any prophet, either of those in the Old Testament or of those in the New, was inspired in this way; they can boast neither of Agabus, nor of Judas, nor of Silas, nor of the daughters of Philip, nor of Ammia in Philadelphia, nor of Quadratus, nor of any others who do not belong to them" (τοῦτον δὲ τὸν τρόπον οὔτε τινὰ τῶν κατὰ τὴν παλαιὰν οὔτε τῶν κατὰ τὴν καινὴν πνευματοφορηθέντα προφήτην δεῖξαι δυνήσονται, οὔτε Ἄγαβον οὔτε Ἰούδαν οὔτε Σίλαν οὔτε τὰς Φιλίππου θυγατέρας, οὔτε τὴν ἐν Φιλαδελφίᾳ Ἀμμίαν οὔτε Κοδρᾶτον, οὔτε εἰ δή τινας ἄλλους

issue of how *charisma* is to be realised – with an accusation of the excessive elements of fervour and spectacularism of some prophetic forms that seems to echo Paul's words in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*.[42]

In the case of the prophet Alexander, his prophetic manner, which according to Lucian presents similar elements of exaggeration, is not due to the action of some lying spirit, but to the maleficent creativity of the false prophet (*Alex*. 12):

> … μεμηνέναι προσποιούμενος ἐνίοτε καὶ ἀφροῦ ὑποπιμπλάμενος τὸ στόμα□ ῥᾳδίως δὲ τοῦτο ὑπῆρχεν αὐτῷ, στρουθίου τῆς βαφικῆς βοτάνης τὴν ῥίζαν διαμασησαμένῳ□ τοῖς δὲ θεῖόν τι καὶ φοβερὸν ἐδόκει καὶ ὁ ἀφρός.
>
> "Sometimes he pretended to have a fit of madness, and started foaming dramatically at the mouth. This was a straightforward trick, which involved chewing on a root of soapwort, the herb that dyers use; but to the Paphlagonians, even this foam seemed like something celestial and wholly tremendous".

To astonish the populace, Alexander takes "a root of soapwort" that cause him tremendous effects, such as tremors all over his body and foaming at the mouth. Lucian's polemic, in my opinion, concerns first of all the self-induced character of this alleged "prophetic" attitude;[43] however, the rhetorician also seems to polemise against Alexander's spectacular and delirious behaviour. In another passage, recounting the day Alexander reveals to the citizens the birth of Glycon, Lucian depicts him half-naked, climbing on an altar, while insanely he shouts incomprehensible words to the astonished population.[44]

μηδὲν αὐτοῖς προσήκοντας καυχήσονται). A little further on, the Anonymous explicitly states that the New Prophets used to profess that their prophetic gift was the same that inspired Quadratus and Ammia in Philadelphia (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* V 17, 4).

42. I am referring to Paul's discussion (*1 Corinthians* 14, 18-19) about glossolalia and to his, if not critical, at least ambiguous opinion on this practice, which he tries to moderate and contain; see Urciuoli 2021, pp. 40-41. However, modern historians (e.g., Forbes, 1995, pp. 160-161) do not consider Montanist prophetism as a form of glossolalia.

43. Foaming at the mouth, as Thonnemann (2021, p. 90) points out, is often associated with theatrical, spectacular, and often simulated prophetic phenomena – see also ní Mheallaigh, 2018, pp. 229-230. The Pythia is also said to chew laurel leaves to obtain divine inspiration, but only from the 2nd century CE onwards (see Aune, 1986, p. 30).

44. *Alex.* 13: "Next morning, he came capering naked into market place […] shaking his long hair wildly like some demented mendicant collecting alms for the Great Mother. He leapt up on a high altar and launched into a rabble-rousing speech, calling the city 'blessed' because it was about to welcome the god in a visible form" (ἔωθεν δὲ γυμνὸς εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν προπηδήσας, διάζωμα περὶ τὸ αἰδοῖον ἔχων … καὶ τὴν ἅρπην ἐκείνην φέρων, σείων ἅμα τὴν κόμην ἄνετον ὥσπερ οἱ τῇ μητρὶ ἀγείροντές τε

This is not the only polemical case against the spectacular delirium of the oracles in Lucian, who is the heir of a specifical philosophical and polemical tradition towards oracles. In the *Zeus Rants* (30), the rhetorician, through the mouth of Zeus, deplore the activity of the Pythia, who spectacularly gasps, rolls her eyes, and seems seized by madness.[45] In short, even if the premises in the case of the Montanists and Alexander are different, it is possible to find a similar polemical attitude against an exaggerated and spectacular form of ecstatic delirium.

With regard to the prophetic appearance of the charlatans, another relevant aspect concerns their audience: it is precisely thanks to those who listen to and approve the false prophets that they, according to the polemicists, achieve widespread success. In the case of Montanists, heresiologists usually point out that the followers of the New Prophets were deceived by the devil hiding in the heretics. At the same time, however, according to a recurring polemical motif, they denounce an excess of simplicity and credulity of the people, fascinated by their spectacular ecstasies and "inspired words".[46]

This aspect seems a point of contact with Lucian's polemic against Alexander, which appears very concerned with the fervour of the populace for oracles. The examples are numerous: I can simply recall the passage in which Alexander and Kokkonas decide to establish their oracle in Abonouteichos since its citizens were "superstitious and rich" (*Alex.* 9: δεισιδαίμονας […] καὶ πλουσίους). In this case, the predictions of the charlatans reveal to be true: the people of the city are easily deceived by Alexander and his friend, because of their own naivety and their desire to listen to oracles.[47]

καὶ ἐνθεαζόμενοι, ἐδημηγόρει ἐπὶ βωμόν τινα ὑψηλὸν ἀναβὰς καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἐμακάριζεν αὐτίκα μάλα δεξομένην ἐναργῆ τὸν θεόν). On this episode, see Dickie, 2004. The blessing of the city is also interesting: something similar, although the evident differences, occurs in Montanism. Epiphanius (*Panarion* IL 1, 1-4) says that a prophetess of the movement, Priscilla or Quintilla, received a vision of Christ in female form in Pepuza, announcing the blessing of that city and the future descent of the heavenly Jerusalem. It is possible to note some points of contact in these two representations, especially at the polemical level. The prophetic message legitimises the status of a city as linked to a specific deity, and people go there also (and especially) because they are deceived by these words.

45. Aune (1983, p. 33), who cites Amandry (1950, pp. 66-67), points out that the depiction of the Pythia's madness during her ecstasies, which, as mentioned, seems to be a Platonic reference, is not, however, common in other pagan authors; instead, it will be adopted by some Christian authors in their polemic against this figure – for example, by John Chrysostom (*Homilies on First Corinthians* 29, 1-2). For some reflexions on this topic, see Pisano, 2017.

46. Jerome, in a letter to Marcella (*Letters* 41), warns her against the Montanists, who still represent a danger to people because of their fascination over them.

47. In *Alex.* 15, Lucian ironically depicted people of Abonouteichos as not similar to "bread-eating human beings" (σιτοφάγοις ἀνδράσι), a reprise of a Homeric verse (*Od.* IX 190-191) in which the

Montanism is one of the very few movements in early Christianity of which we dispose of some fragments of their prophecies, which are quoted by the polemicists in their treatises – albeit within a factious and polemical framework. One of the main themes the anti-Montanists insist on is the ambiguity of the words of the New Prophets: especially Epiphanius underlines the obscurity of the messages of the Montanist prophets, which would distance them from the clarity of biblical prophecies.[48] In fact, as Dell'Isola's analysis showed, the vocabulary and images used in these prophecies seem to echo the language of the Scriptures.[49] However, the heresiologists try to demonstrate the alleged profound differences of Montanist prophetic words from that contained in the Scriptures, of which the Montanist prophecies would be a false and bad imitation. Also with regard to the content of the prophecies, therefore, the polemic focuses on the false prophets' attempts to imitate the truth of the biblical prophets.

The theme of the ambiguity and obscurity of the prophetic message is a very common feature in Lucian's polemic against Alexander. The rhetorician reports numerous oracles of the charlatan, often commenting them in a sarcastic and irreverent manner to demonstrate their absurdities. After describing the ingenious method by which Alexander manages to read what his "clients" ask for without being discovered, Lucian adds (*Alex*. 22):

> ἔχρη οὖν καὶ ἐθέσπιζε, πολλῇ τῇ συνέσει ἐνταῦθα χρώμενος καὶ τὸ εἰκαστικὸν τῇ ἐπινοίᾳ προσάπτων, τοῖς μὲν λοξὰ καὶ ἀμφίβολα πρὸς τὰς ἐρωτήσεις ἀποκρινόμενος, τοῖς δὲ καὶ πάνυ ἀσαφῆ χρησμῳδικὸν γὰρ ἐδόκει αὐτῷ τοῦτο.

Cyclops Polyphemus is described with this formula. The use of this expression is not just a literary refinement or an ironic device (accompanying the vileness of the subject with a lofty work, as the rhetorician had also done with Thucydides; see *Alex*. 8): Lucian depicts the citizens as half-beast creatures, if not beasts at all. A little further on, in fact, he declares: "Were it not for their physical appearance, you would certainly have taken them for a flock of sheep" (*Alex*. 15: ἀλλὰ μόνῃ τῇ μορφῇ μὴ οὐχὶ πρόβατα εἶναι διαφερόντων). These references to the animal world are widespread in Lucian and show the influence of Aristophanes. See Deriu, 2017, pp. 42-43.

48. For example, the heresiologist (*Panarion* XLVIII 4, 2), having quoted a prophecy of Montanus, states: "Now, what rational person, who receives the 'profitable' message with understanding and is concerned for his salvation, can fail to despise a false religion such as this, and the speech of one who boasts of being a prophet but does not know how to speak like a prophet?" (τίς τοίνυν τῶν παρακολουθούντων καὶ μετὰ συνέσεως δεχομένων τὸν τῆς ὠφελείας λόγον καὶ τῆς ἑαυτῶν ζωῆς ἐπιμελομένων οὐ καταγνώσεται τῆς τοιαύτης παραπεποιημένης ὑποθέσεως καὶ τοῦ λόγου τοῦ αὐχοῦντος ἑαυτὸν ἐν προφήταις καταλέγεσθαι, μὴ δυναμένου τὰ ὅμοια λέγειν προφήταις;). For the *Panarion*, I use the critical edition by Holl (1980) and the translation by Williams (2013).

49. See Dell'Isola, 2020a, pp. 79-114.

> "So Alexander went on delivering his oracles and prophecies, and applied a great deal of acuity to the task, combining guesswork and inventiveness. To some people, he gave obscure and ambiguous responses to their queries; to other, his answers were completely irrational, since he thought that this too was the proper oracular way of doing things".[50]

The terms used to describe Alexander's oracles are "obscure" (λοξά), "ambiguous" (ἀμφίβολα) and "irrational" (ἀσαφῆ). The first two adjectives refer to the amphibological sphere, namely a message that can be interpreted in various ways: this expedient is cunningly used by Alexander in order to always be right, even when the course of events clearly proves him wrong (*infra*). The term ἀσαφής, on the other hand, recalls the incomprehensibility, a total lack of rationality (as its etymology indicates). Alexander's messages appear meaningless, in line with his delusional prophetic appearance. Lucian adds a relevant detail: Alexander fabricates his own responses in this manner because he tries to imitate what, in his opinion, is the style of oracles ("since he thought that this too was the proper oracular way of doing things"). Although Lucian is not more specific, his polemic is precisely about Alexander's interpretation of what an oracle is, which goes as far as to exaggerate the complexity of its contents in order to deceive people.[51]

Connected to this theme of the ambiguity of "prophetic messages" is that of their effectiveness, which is an issue of fundamental importance in the recognition of a true "prophet". Despite the common consideration as an apocalyptic movement, there are not many Montanist prophecies in which a future event is anticipated. Among these, however, there is one of particular interest for the polemic it generates. Epiphanius recalls a prophecy of Maximilla in which she announced: "After me there will be no prophet more, but the consummation" (*Panarion* XLVIII 2, 4 μετ' ἐμὲ προφήτης οὐκέτι ἔσται, ἀλλὰ συντέλεια). The announcement of imminent end is ridiculed by the heresiologist, who points out that no catastrophe happened after the death of the prophetess.[52] The denial, even centuries later, of an alleged prophetic message becomes a strong and effective polemical motif.

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50. The translation is slightly modified.

51. This reference to Alexander's imitation of the oracular style, considering what Aune (1983, p. 350) calls Lucian's "Epicurean sarcasm", seems to represent the author's polemical attitude in general towards oracles.

52. Epiphanius, *Panarion* XLVIII 2, 6-7: "But Maximilla said that the consummation would come after her, and no consummation has come yet – even after so many emperors, and such a lapse of time! There have been about 268 years from Maximilla's time until ours, the twelfth year of Valentinian and Valens and the <eighth> of Gratian, and we have yet to see the consummation which was announced by

This theme of the falsity of the prophetic messages, which is strictly connected to the refutation of the charlatan, is extremely recurrent in Lucian's polemic against Alexander of Abonouteichos: in fact, in the majority of oracles in which the prophet is consulted for an important decision, the charlatan is systematically refuted by events. The examples are numerous;[53] I can recall the most striking one. When some people ask him whether to conduct war against the Marcomanni and the Quadi, Alexander gives an oracle that orders to plunge two lions, the "ministers of Cybele", into the river Ister (the Danube). The beasts, however, survive and are killed on the other side of the river by the barbarians – an announcement of their victory and the extermination of many Roman soldiers.[54] Faced with resounding denials, the charlatan (who, as the episode of the clash with the Epicurean shows, cannot bear to be refuted) has several ways of escaping: for example, replacing an old oracle with a new one, in which the false prophet can correct an error or better explain, in his own way, some expression that had been misinterpreted. Most of the time, however, Alexander resorts precisely to the ambiguity of his own words in order to find an escape from the embarrassment: thus, in the cited case of the oracle about the lions, the charlatan reminds of the famous oracle given by the Pythia's oracle to Croesus.[55] Sometimes, finally, the charlatan's victims themselves justify the false prophet, as in the case of the rich and superstitious Rutilianus, who in his mad admiration for Alexander finds some hidden meanings in the messages he received.[56] In short, not only the denial

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this woman who boasted of being a prophetess, but did not even know the day of her own death" (αὕτη δὲ εἶπε μετ' αὐτὴν εἶναι συντέλειαν, καὶ οὔπω συνετελέσθη, μάλιστα τοσούτων βασιλέων γενομένων καὶ τοσούτου χρόνου ὑπερβεβηκότος. ἔτη γάρ εἰσιν ἔκτοτε πλείω ἐλάσσω διακόσια † ἐνενήκοντα ἕως τοῦ ἡμετέρου χρόνου, δωδεκάτου ἔτους Οὐαλεντινιανοῦ καὶ Οὐάλεντος καὶ <ὀγδόου> Γρατιανοῦ βασιλείας, καὶ οὔπω ἡ συντέλεια κατὰ τὴν αὐχήσασαν ἑαυτὴν προφήτιδα, μὴ γνοῦσαν μηδὲ τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς αὐτῆς τελευτῆς). This last polemical remark of the prophet who cannot even predict the day of his own death is similar to that of Lucian against Alexander (*supra*).

53. Chapter 36 recalls several instances in which the charlatan warns against earthquakes, fires, and plagues. In particular, during a terrible pestilence (reference to the "plague" of 165 CE), Alexander gives a one-verse oracle (*Alex*. 36: "Phoibos with unshorn locks wards off the plague-cloud", Φοῖβος ἀκειρεκόμης λοιμοῦ νεφέλην ἀπερύκει) that causes even more deaths. Many citizens, in fact, are so confident in this oracle that they write it on the doors of their houses neglecting all other cures and are therefore stricken down by the disease.

54. *Alex*. 48. Lucian probably refers to the wars against the Marcomanni between 167 and 168. On the involvement of Alexander and his oracle in this episode, see Perea Yébenes, 2012.

55. This is the famous episode recounted by Herodotus in the *Histories* (I 53). Lucian also polarises this oracle with much irony in *Zeus Catechised* (14), in the context of a strong polemic against the ambiguity and obscurity of oracles by one of the protagonists of this discourse, Cyniscus.

56. This figure, clearly the suffect consul and afterwards proconsul of Asia Publius Mummius Sisenna Rutilianus (see Birley, 2005, pp. 251-252), is described as "a good and noble man who had been tested

of the prophetic messages, but also these clumsy and ridiculous attempts to remedy them when refuted, emphasise the inability of the charlatan.

3. Conclusions

In this article I reflected on the common elements in the representation of the charlatan-false prophet in the polemic against the Montanists and in Lucian's representation of Alexander. My analysis focused on two main aspects of these polemical representations: the life of the charlatan, with his vices, the clashes against his opponents and his ridiculous and miserable death; the polemic to the prophetic activity of the charlatan, both in its forms and its contents. In analysing and comparing these sources, I underlined the evident differences, that emerge at specific points in the study. Regarding the life and behaviour of the charlatan, I pointed out how, despite the divergences, the representations of the Montanists and Alexander show several analogies: these accusations are generally widespread in polemical representations, and, although they are set in a specific prophetic context, they do not reveal any specific features of the milieu that produced them. With regard to the polemic against the prophetic activity, the differences become more substantial, since the reference models and the reasons for the polemic change. However, also in this case some aspects of the polemical representation (desire to deceive; falsity of prophetic messages, etc.) are quite similar.

There are other polemical motifs related to the representation of the charlatan that, for reasons of space, I could not analyse: for example, the shame of the polemicists in describing the activities of charlatans – an aspect that is widely found in the *Alexander* and characterises the polemical strategy of some heresiologists.[57] How-

in many Roman official posts", but, at the same time, as a man who laboured "under the most unhealthy opinions concerning the gods, and believed the craziest things about them" (*Alex*. 30: τὰ δὲ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς πάνυ νοσῶν καὶ ἀλλόκοτα περὶ αὐτῶν πεπιστευκώς). Rutilianus becomes for Lucian the clearest example of the rich man who is deceived by Alexander, since he also agrees in marrying the charlatan's daughter. His "fanaticism" towards Alexander is such that, when his son dies, he reinterprets a charlatan's oracle – in which he had said that his son's proper masters would be Homer and Pythagoras – to claim that he had already predicted what would happen. See Victor, 1997, pp. 153-154.

57. At the beginning of the pamphlet, Lucian, declaring to his friend Celsus (to whom the work is addressed) that he wanted to "clean out the stable of Augeas" and recount the events of Alexander, declares: "But really, I am ashamed of both of us [*scil*. of himself and of Celsus]. Of you, for thinking that this pestilential character ought to be preserved for posteriority both in memory and writing; and of myself, for devoting attention to such a subject […]" (*Alex*. 2 αἰδοῦμαι μὲν οὖν ὑπὲρ ἀμφοῖν, ὑπέρ τε σοῦ καὶ ἐμαυτοῦ σοῦ μέν, ἀξιοῦντος μνήμῃ καὶ γραφῇ παραδοθῆναι ἄνδρα τρισκατάρατον, ἐμαυτοῦ

ever, for the examples given, it can be said that there are some common elements in the representation of charlatans, due to the polemical literary references shared by both "pagan" and Christian authors.

δέ, σπουδὴν ποιουμένου ἐπὶ τοιαύτῃ ἱστορίᾳ…). The verb αἰδοῦμαι ("to be ashamed") and related expressions are very common among heresiologists, who often claim to feel ashamed when recounting the events of heretical masters.

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