UNDER THE SHADOW OF SOCRATES

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It was Erasmus, more effectively than anyone else, who devised the early modern image of Socrates. Alcibiades’ praise of Socrates in Plato’s Symposium served as Erasmus’ starting point in the influential essay entitled Sileni Alcibiadis, which made its appearance in the 1515 edition of the Adages. In this remarkable composition, Erasmus elaborates on the contrast between the outward appearance of the philosopher and his inner genius.

Socrates, claimed Alcibiades, was like a Silenus, an ordinary toy object, grotesque on the outside, inside of which a precious image of a god was hidden. Erasmus explains that Socrates’ appearance, like that of a Silenus, was unprepossessing. His nose ‘always running with snot,’ he seemed ‘dull and stupid.’ His speech was plain and ‘working-class.’ He seemed to admire the bodies of young men and he appeared susceptible to emotions such as jealousy. One might easily mistake him for ‘something of a clown,’ although those who knew him, those who could get past his disguises, knew him to be closer to ‘a god than a man, a great and lofty spirit, the epitome of a true philosopher.'

Having repeated this traditional praise of Socrates, Erasmus went on to make a larger point: Socrates was a rare and a great man, but he was not unique. Was not Christ another ‘marvelous Silenus’? His parents were ‘insignificant and penniless. His house was a shack.’ He endured hunger and exhaustion, insults and mockery. He ended up on the cross. But inside of this Silenus, ‘what an indescribable treasure!’

For that matter, were not the Hebrew prophets Sileni, too, exiles, wanderers, who like Socrates, bore witness to the moral greatness

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exceptional human beings are capable of? ‘The world was not worthy of them,’ concludes Erasmus, speaking of the prophets in the desert.\(^2\) The apostles were Sileni too, as were the early bishops. Even now, in the modern world, one can still find a Silenus, even though most people are like Sileni turned inside out, impressive-looking on the outside, but deeply flawed on closer examination. This is especially true, contends Erasmus, of a particular category of men, professional theologians, those ‘windbags blown up with Aristotle,’ those ‘sausages stuffed with a mass of theoretical definitions, conclusions and propositions.\(^3\)

In this way, Erasmus transforms a rhetorical commonplace into a radical sermon. Although the professors of theology occupy pride of place in his indictment of the modern world, they are soon followed by the nobility, the clergy, the rich and the powerful. Princes are branded enemies of the people, magistrates are likened to wolves and Popes are described as bandits, this being especially true of ‘godless Julius.’\(^4\)

Having begun by praising Socrates, Erasmus was soon engaged in a general discussion of moral failings. What he saw in Socrates was virtue personified. ‘Socrates despised all those things for which ordinary mortals strive,’ he writes, admiringly. ‘Neither good fortune nor bad had any impact on him. He feared nothing, not even death.\(^5\) Yet, for all that, the virtue of Socrates remained a natural, human quality which was not beyond the reach of those who wished to imitate him. Socrates demonstrated that it was possible to live justly and happily, here on earth.

It is this aspect of Socrates that will be admired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in France. Not Socrates the intellectual, but Socrates the man with ‘the most perfect soul’ will be held up for veneration. ‘L’âme de Socrates, qui est la plus parfaite qui soit venue à ma connaissance,’ writes Montaigne.\(^6\) Neither great learning nor divine grace appear to be necessary preconditions for joining the ranks of Socrates’ disciples. His behavior in ordinary situations

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\(^2\) Erasmus 1999: 172.
\(^3\) Erasmus 1999: 173.
\(^4\) Erasmus 1999: 182.
\(^5\) Erasmus 1999: 170.
\(^6\) Montaigne 1962: 402.