
Hercules, Silenus and the Fly: Lucian's Rhetorical Paradoxes in Erasmus' Ethics

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Abstract: Starting from the fierce conflict between Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, my contribution aims to show the rhetorical genesis of Erasmus' reflection on ethics. Specifically, I will focus on the fact that some of the most significant and recurrent metaphors in Erasmus' moral and theological meditation (e.g. Hercules, Silenus and the fly) trace their roots back to the work of Lucian of Samosata. Against this background, it will be possible to investigate the fundamental role of the Lucianic attitude in defining some key-concepts of Erasmus' thought, such as the rhetorical concepts of *festivitas* and *persona*. Moreover, I will demonstrate how these concepts become the starting point of Erasmus' silenic moral, modelled on the sophistic ability to transform relations and proportions between things by using words.

Keywords: Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, Lucian of Samosata, Rhetoric, *Festivitas*, Ethics.

1. Introduction

For a long time critics have underestimated the influence of Lucian of Samosata's work on the pedagogical, rhetorical, moral and theological thought of Desiderius Erasmus. Critical studies on Erasmus and on Lucian's Renaissance legacy often devote one or more chapters to the relationship between the humanist from Rotterdam and the rhetorician from Samosata, but, just as often, their analysis is reduced to a thematic catalogue where recurring characters and situations are listed without taking into account any deeper intellectual accord.¹

The only work by Erasmus on which there exist exhaustive scholarly accounts of the formal and substantial influence exerted by Lucian is the *Moriae Encomium*. This work, however, despite its symbolic value, is frequently considered either as merely a playful digression in Erasmus' workshop or as a serious labour, in which the Lucianic sophistic brilliance is no more than a disguise.²

Against this background, the objective of my contribution is to show how Lucian's rhetorical experimentations became the centre of Erasmus' moral and theological reflection, based on the concepts of exercise and contextual knowledge. First, I shall focus on the importance of Lucian's legacy in understanding the dispute on free will between Erasmus and Martin Luther. Secondly, I shall shed light on the fact that the whole of Erasmus' ethics,

whose figure are the *Sileni Alcibiadis*, originated in the sophistic aesthetics of the rhetorician from Samosata

To do this it will be necessary to understand the key role played by Lucian during the first years of Erasmus' rhetorical education. In this period the Latin translation of the Greek sophist became a training ground in language and life that accompanied the humanist from Rotterdam and his friend Thomas More for a decade, and laid the groundwork of Erasmus' pedagogy.

With this contribution, therefore, following the approach of Eric MacPhail (2006; 2011), I propose to outline a first stage in the history of Erasmus' reception of late ancient sophistry.

2. Hercules at the crossroads

There is an image that, more than any other, both unites and divides the work of Desiderius Erasmus and the work of Martin Luther: the image of Hercules.³

To show how the discussion about the value of rhetorical art constitutes the focus of the conflict between Luther and Erasmus, nothing is more effective than an investigation of the different ethical and gnoseological approaches that established their different characterisation of Hercules.

Ulrich Von Hutten was the first, after the Leipzig debate (1519), to connect Luther with the figure of *Hercules Germanicus*, which had become the emblem of the new German power, thanks to the authority of the emperor Maximilian I and the propaganda of the humanist Conrad Celtis⁴. This representation of Luther as a wild and warlike destroyer of the papal heresy, in the name of the new prosperity of the German nation, was the basis of an engraving by Hans Holbein the Younger (1522), in which a brawny Luther, covered with the lion skin and gripping the club of Hercules, shows his vigour by breaking up scholastic philosophers and curial enemies.⁵

One year later, Holbein painted a portrait of Erasmus (1523) in which the Dutch humanist is represented as a man quietly sitting at his desk and resting his hands on a bound volume, whose top edge exhibits the words ΗΡΑΚΛΕΙΟΙ ΠΟΝΟΙ (i.e. *Herculei labores*).⁶

The ironic counterpoint between the two images is evident: by turning the challenges of Hercules into a tireless research within the changing universe of speech, Erasmus' *corpusculum vitreum*⁷ is opposed to the violent and aggressive physicality of Luther's Herculean labours.

The *harena*, where the Herculean *gladiator* from Rotterdam fights, is, explicitly, that of the *cultum Musarum* (CWE 10, 438; Allen V, 590).

This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that, in the portrait painted by Holbein, the volume Erasmus is touching is a copy of his *Adagia*, at the centre of which is the proverb *Herculei labores*. Within the texture of the *Adagia*, this maxim constitutes a real *mise en abyme* of Erasmus' method of working: it shows his effort to fight the Hydra which stands for the mobility of literary sources and to bring some partial order into the changeable field of proverbial meanings.⁸

Following Plutarch's *De genio Socratis*, Erasmus' Hercules is he who learned the alphabet under the guidance of the ever-changing Proteus and handed it down to the Greeks⁹, or rather, he is, following the description given by Lucian of Samosata, the *Hercules Gallicus* who replaced the emblems of physical strength with the emblems of protean rhetorical power. It is no coincidence that Erasmus was the first Latin translator of Lucian's *Herakles*: he created a vivid portrait of the new Hercules *senex*, which became, in turn, the protagonist of many iconographic and literary "rewrites" as the symbol of *vis eloquentiae*:¹⁰

That old Heracles of theirs drags after him a great crowd of men who are all tethered by the ears! His leashes are delicate chains fashioned of gold and amber, resembling the prettiest of necklaces. Yet, though led by bonds so weak, the men do not think of escaping, as they easily could, and they do not pull back at all or brace their feet and lean in the opposite direction to that in which he is leading them. In fact, they follow cheerfully and joyously, applauding their leader and all pressing him close and keeping the leashes slack in their desire to overtake him; apparently they would be offended if they were let loose! But let me tell you without delay what seemed to me the strangest thing of all. Since the painter had no place to which he could attach the ends of the chains, as the god's right hand already held the club and his left the bow, he pierced the tip of his tongue and represented him drawing the men by that means! Moreover, he has his face turned toward his captives, and is smiling [...]. In general, we consider that the real Heracles was a wise man who achieved everything by eloquence and applied persuasion as his principal force. His arrows represent words, I suppose, keen, sure and swift, which make their wounds in souls. (Luc. *Herc.*, tr. Harmon, I, 65-67)¹¹

In this context, starting from the adage *Herculei labores*, in which Erasmus shows himself engaged in the work of organizing and reorganizing ancient literary tradition, the Herculean labours prove to be an education in the elusive luxuriance of the persuasive speech.

The Lucianic origin of Erasmus' Hercules-orator well illustrates the mediating role that Lucian's work played in the defining process of Erasmus' idea of rhetoric as a playful and contextual cognitive instrument. In accusing Erasmus of using words like an equivocal and ambiguous mask, which imprisons the interlocutor in the meshes of paradox,¹² Luther was actually-railing against this mocking and evasive Hercules-Proteus of Lucianic ancestry.

Against this background, the *Hercules Gallicus* engraving by Albrecht Dürer (1498) would have been fully appreciated by Luther:¹³ the German painter represented the *Hercules Gallicus* as a vacillating Hercules at the crossroads, his guilty hesitancy staged by details such as

his helmet, which bears the cock of the loquacious Mercury, the proof that he is an able rhetorician – "trepidat in morem galli" (CWE 33, 88; ASD II/3, 146).

3. A Lucianic training: mask, representation, exercise

Before turning back to the conflict that, with regard to Lucian's rhetoric, set Erasmus and Luther against each other, it will be useful to consider the key role that the special sophistic aptitude of Lucian had on Erasmus' intellectual biography from its very beginning.

It seems impossible to deal with the relevance of Lucian's influence on the definition of Erasmus' rhetorical paradigm without focusing on the intellectual partnership and the sincere friendship that, thanks to the rhetorician of Samosata, bonded Erasmus and Thomas More. Between 1505 and 1506,¹⁴ Erasmus and More's translation of Lucian's works¹⁵ was not only a test of their knowledge of Greek language and literature, but also, and especially, a workshop for the construction of a joint educational project and a shared view regarding the role of rhetorical practice.

In the eyes of Erasmus and More, what made Lucian especially suitable in teaching the elements of Greek, so much so that he was regarded as an essential pedagogical tool,¹⁶ was the quality that can be defined as the *festivitas*¹⁷ of the rhetorician from Samosata. On the one hand, this concept of rhetorical origin, crucial for Erasmus' pedagogical and theological elaboration, is concerned with a sociable and cheerful, refined and graceful kind of laugh. Indeed, the pleasantness of *festivitas* results mainly from expertise in the use of language and from the skill in playing with a specific cultural tradition, by translating and betraying its *topoi*.¹⁸ On the other hand, the festive approach reveals a more comic than tragic theatrical tendency, towards changing voice and character (*persona*), according to the needs of representation¹⁹ ("And this dialogue is sure to be no less pleasant than profitable, if the reader only observe the appropriate way in which its characters are treated"; Dedication of *Toxaris, sive Amicitia*' translation to Richard Foxe, CWE 2, 103;²⁰ "This dialogue of Lucian [...] is a most skilful performance, in that the drawing of so many and such different characters is so wonderfully lifelike"; Dedication of *Convivium, sive Lapithae*'s translation to Johann Huttich, CWE 4, 282²¹). Therefore, the *festivitas* is a cultivated comicality (*festivissima doctrina* and *doctissima festivitas*) and Lucian's *nugae litteratae* are made up of allusions, in which the mask has an essential role because of its quality of indirect and oblique enunciation. The impression of lightness communicated to Erasmus and More by Lucian's *festivitas* has little to do with the idea of idle and intellectually weak literary practice.²² This agreeableness seems rather to be the result of a never-ending exploration of meanings where each mask is an *exercitium* and truth takes the form of a representation. The pedagogical importance of Lucian's work, therefore, concerns laughter not only, and not so much, as a rhetorical device to capture a child's attention. Laughter is above all the focal point of a perspective in which rhetorical fiction has the quality of an intertextual structure to be explored and changed, starting from the contexts in which it is used. It

is not by chance that Erasmus and More identify the main peculiarity of the Lucianic laugh with the multiplicity of characters and situations: their topical quality becomes the means through which the work of the rhetorician from Samosata is assembled and disassembled, and forms the perfect base to receive innumerable variations, in the form of rhetorical exercises. Thus Lucian's moral usefulness, which is repeatedly emphasized by Erasmus and More,²³ is consistent with the fact that his work seems to be a mechanism for generating text and an inexhaustible container of sources, i.e. a real *palestra ingeniorum*. According to Erasmus, Lucian's laughter is the most appropriate instrument to guide pupils towards moral seriousness because it is the denial of every peremptory and dogmatic point of view and, therefore, the image of a joyful *pietas* ("true religion ought to be the most cheerful thing in the world"; *De recta pronuntiatione*, CWE 26, 385²⁴). By teaching the relativity of communicative situations and the variability of temperaments, the laughter resulting from the art of rhetoric comes to resemble the most sincere content of Christian morality, based on tolerance and loving persuasion.

In Erasmus and More's translations, the ever-present epigraph of Lucian's work is Horace's advice to *miscere utile dulci* and to *coniungere voluptatem cum utilitate*.²⁵ In this context, it should be clarified that laughter is the medium between pleasure and usefulness because it transforms every representation into a kind of partial composition related to the concept of rhetorical *exercitium*. This means that, in Erasmus and More's pedagogical approach, the ability to produce an effect on the mind has greater weight than absolute adherence to a worthless and useless truth. In a rhetorical *exercitium* the three meanings of *ludus* (game, play and school) overlap.

However, the art of persuading that Erasmus learned from Lucian is a paradoxical tool, which needs at the same time to be heeded and unpacked: it is precisely through the *festivitas* that it reveals its nature as artifice. In this context, it will be interesting to note that the works of Lucian that Erasmus chose to translate are, for the most part, rhetorical exercises in declamation (*Abdicatus*; *Toxaris sive Amicitia*; *Tyrannicida*) or texts where Lucian ironically condemns superstition as harmful gullibility, where the level of representation blends with the level of truth (*Alexander seu Pseudomantis*; *De sacrificiis*; *De luctu*; *De astrologia*). Reading Lucian means learning to recognize the *fabula* as a space of possibilities and as a fiction that serves as an antidote to superstition. This kind of Lucianism is especially evident in the group of *Colloquia*²⁶ where Erasmus looks at trickery as a real *pharmakon*, i.e. as a *fabula* staged with wit and irony to reveal the stupid stagnation of credulity with its ineptitude in decoding representations.

If one shifts the focus specifically onto Erasmus' pedagogical thought, the preceptor-rhetorician he envisaged, through the filter of Lucian, is not only someone who teaches by *ridiculae fabulae*. He is a true comedian who chooses Lucian's rhetorical skill as a lifestyle: in this comic activity of *mimesis* he goes so far as to play the role of his pupil and to take his weaknesses and his doubt as the cornerstone of all possible knowledge:

I prefer a teacher who is of an age when his vigour is in its prime, an age which does not repel his pupils and allows him to assume any role. In guiding the intellectual development of his students, the instructor should abide by the same principles that are followed by parents and nurses in promoting physical growth. (*De pueris instituendis*, CWE 26, 334-335)²⁷

It is no coincidence if, in the dialogue *Puerpera* (CWE, 39, 590-618; ASD I/3, 453-469), the two characters bear the descriptive names of *Fabulla* and *Eutrapelo*. By conversing about the most appropriate way to take care of a child's physical and intellectual education, they mark out an educational space where *fabula* and *iocus* become the real protagonists. Indeed, the perfect pedagogue is one who has the rhetorical ability to play with representations and who is able to educate his pupil to make a constant hermeneutic effort. This training allows the pupil not only to be a passive spectator of the educational *fabula*, but also to enter into the *fabula* as a protagonist, through the mimetic game. The preceptor's rhetorical skill lies in making the speech an instrument that functions as a pathway for the imagination²⁸. This means that Erasmus' preceptor does not teach through a prescriptive moralism or an unreflective persuasion. On the contrary, he suggests an educational opportunity that the pupil may develop at his pleasure. Therefore, according to Erasmus, education is a beneficent deception: it is a playful fiction ("Moreover, I'm not sure anything is learned better than what is learned as a game. To confer a benefit through a trick is surely deception of the most innocent sort"; *De utilitate colloquiorum*, CWE 40, 1098²⁹), which suspends the categories of true and false ("Nor is truth always the opposite of falsehood" *Ecclesiastes*, CWE 68, 691³⁰).

At this point, to go back to the relationship established between Erasmus and More under the banner of Lucian, it is not surprising that in his letter to Ulrich Von Hutten of July 1519 Erasmus superimposed the image of the rhetorician from Samosata onto the lively portrait of his English friend and fellow scholar:

The affection [...] that you feel for that gifted man Thomas More, fired of course as you are by reading his books, which you rightly call as brilliant as they are scholarly – all this, believe me my dear Hutten, you share with many of us [...] His expression shows the sort of man he is, always friendly and cheerful, with something of the air of one who smiles easily, and (to speak frankly) disposed to be merry rather than serious or solemn, but without a hint of the fool or the buffoon [...]. His language is remarkably clear and precise, without a trace of hurry and hesitation. (CWE 7, 16-18)³¹

More not only displays immense culture, outstanding eloquence and a great disposition to laugh, but he is also able to change his role depending on the context without abandoning his convivial levity. This *iocunditas* makes him look like the perfect Lucianic rhetorician and preceptor:

In society he shows such rare courtesy and sweetness of disposition that there is no man so melancholy by nature that More does not enliven him, no disaster so great that he does not dissipate its unpleasantness. From boyhood he has taken such pleasure in jesting that he might seem born for it [...]. In his youth he both wrote brief comedies and acted in them. Any remark with more wit in it than ordinary always gave him pleasure, even if directed against himself; such is his delight in witty sayings that

betray a lively mind. Hence his trying his hand as a young man at epigrams, and his special devotion to Lucian; in fact it was he (yes, he can make the camel dance) who persuaded me to write my *Moriae Encomium*.

In fact there is nothing in human life to which he cannot look for entertainment, even in most serious moments. If he has to do with educated and intelligent people, he enjoys their gifts; if they are ignorant and stupid, he is amused by their absurdity. (CWE 7, 18-19)³²

Significantly, the classic comedy and the particular sophistic aptitude of Lucian seem to be the literary instruments through which More formed his own character. Thus, it is obvious that he became the promoter of Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium*.

4. *Muscarum Achilles*

After this brief survey of Erasmus' Lucianic training, we can now focus on his discussion with Luther, in which his Lucianic identity became the symbol of a fundamental gnoseological opposition.

When, in September 1524, Erasmus published his own *Diatriba de libero arbitrio*, he chose to view the entire work in the light of a disproportion: the decision to discuss with Luther one of the foundations of the theology of the German Hercules put Erasmus – *Hercules senex* and *homuncio pygmaeus* – in the position of a miserable fly faced with the majesty of the elephant of Wittenberg (“Does Erasmus dare to take on Luther as a fly might an elephant?”; CWE 76, 6³³).

The apparent inanity of this confrontation was destined, however, for a potential reversal, whose paradoxical nature originates in the rhetorical universe of Lucian. Indeed, in the immense workshop of the *Adagia* there is a brief comment on the proverbial saying *Elephantum ex musca facis*, through which Erasmus makes the comical outcome of this identity exchange explicit by referring to Lucian's *Muscae encomium*:

Ἐλέφας ἐκμύιας ποιεῖς, You make an elephant out of a fly, that is, you use big words about little things and exaggerate them. Lucian in his Panegyric on the Fly: «There is much more that I could say, but I will stop there, for fear of seeming, as the proverb has it, to make an elephant out of a fly. (CWE 32, 219)³⁴

The way in which Lucian's paradoxical encomium works is concisely rendered by Erasmus' quotation. The lack of correspondence between words and things creates a parodic effect, which changes the nature of words and things themselves through a sophistic process: the fly transmutes into an elephant by a skilful patchworking of the fragments of the elephant's epic wisdom onto the laughable little body of the annoying insect.

The ambiguity of the fly-elephant couple occurs once again, when it is observed that in Lucian's *Muscae Encomium* the fly gets the better of the elephant because of its small size: “So strong is the fly that when she bites she wounds the skin of the ox and the horse as well as that of man. She even torments the elephant by entering his wrinkles and lancing him with her proboscis as far as its length allows” (Luc. *Musc. Enc.*, tr. Harmon, I, 89). The

elephant's trunk is of no avail against the fly – this is its ironic nemesis.

To draw a genealogy *sub specie muscae* – i.e. under the sign of sophistic reversibility – of Erasmus' interest in Lucian's work, it will be useful to turn our attention to the rewriting of Lucian's encomium made by Leon Battista Alberti between 1441 and 1443, as a reply to Guarino Veronese's translation of the *Muscae Encomium*.³⁵

In the context of Alberti's rewriting, the results of the contest between fly and elephant become even clearer: “posterity handed down in literary monuments that the elephant saw himself defeated by the fly” (*Musca*, 50: “elephantum a musca prostratum se posteritas vidisse litterarum monumentis tradidit”). Furthermore, Alberti's *Musca* has a particular interest because it shows how the paradoxical praise responds to a real philosophical programme, which is able to give new value to *res domesticae et familiares*. In his *Musca*, Alberti rejects the human folly of investigating the forms of reality *a conspectus abditae et in obscuro retrusae*, thereby re-evaluating those things which are for the most part *in medium expositae et cognitu perfaciles* (45-46). Therefore, if the reading of Lucian's eulogy can cheer up Alberti and cure him of the inconvenience of fever by means of laughter (45), then this depends on the fact that the tiny praised animal is the bearer of a kind of knowledge that is able to deconstruct the seriousness of knotty philosophical speculation, through the levity of play. This playful approach questions every established value. In the first proem of the *Momus*, Alberti distinguishes those who wear the static mask of sternness (*severitatis persona*), from those who attain seriousness through the changeability of *festivitas* (6-7). As we have seen, this festive quality is connected to the ability to combine and vary different sources because “nothing is said which has not previously been said” (*Momus*, 4-5: “nihil dictum quin prius dictum”). The humble fly, *minutus animans*, hardly to be taken seriously, dresses itself up in epic words and philosophical virtues, which take the form of a parodic exercise.

Fully in keeping with this spirit, Erasmus took the identity of the buzzing insect and moved the discussion on free will from the systematic ground of the *tractatus*³⁶ to the rhetorical ground of the *diatriba*,³⁷ whose literary form deals more with the rhetorical exercise of the *disputatio in utramque partem* than with the Cynic-Stoic dialogic tradition. Erasmus' diatribe is characterized by the assumption of the concept of *decorum personae* as an expression of an unsystematic philosophy, which is structured on the basis of contextual needs. Therefore, Erasmus' decisive rejection of Luther's *pervicacia asserendi* plays a central role in the first part of *De libero arbitrio* because this rejection leads Erasmus to investigate the rhetorical field of the probable and plausible:

Now for my part I was well aware how poorly suited I was for this wrestling-match – indeed there is hardly a man less practised in the art than I, for I have always preferred sporting in the spacious plains of the Muses to engaging in swordplay at close quarters. And I take so little pleasure in assertions that I will gladly seek refuge in Scepticism [...], and so I will act as disputant, not as a judge; as inquirer, not as dogmatist; ready to learn from anyone, if any truer or more reliable arguments can be put forward. (CWE 76, 7-8)³⁸

It is clear that the most appropriate context for Erasmus' reflection is that of the *ludus*, of play, and the exercise of *fictio*: what is dubious, what is difficult to discern in the labyrinth of the Scriptures cannot take the form of peremptory assertion, but it may be explored through the practice of fiction:

What you affirm, I wish; what you say you know, I desire to learn; nor is it enough for me that you firmly assert this – I demand the certitude which you profess to have [...] For it often happens that when someone comes out of the dark, he does not see anything even in full sunlight unless he has focused his eyes for a while, and some things we do not see immediately through the darkness, but as we focus our eyes what was doubtful before gradually begins to be clear to us, and the same thing happens when things are far away from us. But out of courtesy I pretended that the interpretations on both sides were ambiguous so that on a level playing field you might show something that would incline towards your side those of us who were vacillating in the middle. (*Hyperaspites*, CWE 76, 226-227)³⁹

Against this background, the letter that Erasmus wrote to John Extin in November 1499, about twenty years before the explosion of the Lutheran issue, is very significant. By relating the degeneration of a convivial discussion into a battle *inter pocula*, i.e. a kind of Lucianic anti-symposium, Erasmus represents himself as a poet-orator in the midst of an assembly of theologians: he is able to take the banquet, which is corrupted by the harshness of controversy, back to a relaxed, cheerful and sociable mood through the narration of a *festiva fabella*:

In the end, since the discussion had gone on rather long and had become too serious and too rigorous to suit a dinner party, I decided to play my part, that is, the part of the poet, with the object of getting rid of this contentious argument and introducing some gaiety into the meal. (CWE 1, 230)⁴⁰

To return to the discussion on free will, Luther recognized and was severely critical of the sophistic and Lucianic disposition of Erasmus, who was able to transform things through words. According to Erasmus, the interchangeability of roles in the competition between fly and elephant shed a playful light on the whole *diatribe*; according to Luther, however, Erasmus' art of transmutation took the form of a diabolic rhetorical *fucus*, of Odysseus' malicious *flexiloquus* (*On the Bondage of the Will*, tr. H. Cole, 3-4; *De servo arbitrio*, WA 18, 601-602): Erasmus' *festivitas* was decisively banned (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 8; WA, 18, 603), together with Lucian's laugh:

For, by so doing, you only evince that you hug in your heart a Lucian, or some other of the swinish tribe of Epicureans; who, because he does not believe there is a God himself, secretly laughs at all those who believe and confess it. (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 12)⁴¹

What shall I say here, Erasmus? To me, you breathe out nothing but Lucian, and draw in the gorging surfeit of Epicurus. (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 17)⁴²

Furthermore, Luther did not leave any space for the possibilities of fiction, so relevant to Erasmus in the field of theological education:

And moreover [I would shew you] what is it to run against divine things and truths, when, in mere compliance with others and against our conscience, we assume a strange character and act upon a strange stage. It is neither a game nor a jest, to undertake to teach the sacred truths and godliness: for it is very easy here to meet with the fall which James speaks of, "He that offended in one point is guilty of all". For when we begin to be, in the least degree, disposed to trifle, and not to hold the sacred truths in due reverence, we are soon involved in impieties, and overwhelmed with blasphemies: as it has happened to you here, Erasmus. (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 34)⁴³

Nugae and *sacrae litterae* should on no account be mixed (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 107; WA 18, 661): the inconceivable contaminations that systematically appear in Erasmus' works seemed to Luther closer to the fictional inventions of Lucian's *Vera Historia* than to serious theological engagement ("To teach, then, a something which is neither described by one word within the scriptures, nor evidenced by one fact without the scriptures, is that, which does not belong to the doctrines of Christians, but to the very fables of Lucian"; *On the Bondage of the Will*, 107⁴⁴). Thus, in the centre of his *De servo arbitrio*, Luther redeployed the image of Erasmus as a fly and portrayed the humanist from Rotterdam as leading a ridiculous army of insects and fighting against an impressive and solemn rank of fully armed men: "it is just thus, that the human dreams of the Diatribe are drawn up in battle against the hosts of the words of God!" (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 165).⁴⁵ In this context the military virtues of the fly, ironically commended by Alberti (*Musca*, 47-49), prove to be only as a grotesque shadow and a poor substitute for the stern decorum of a warrior: according to Luther, the human comedy of the *diatribe* is clearly at variance with the tragic epic of Christianity. It was for this reason that, in a letter of 1524, Luther attempted to discourage Erasmus' stance against the Protestant reformation by referring to his own theological battle as a real *tragoedia*, whose harshness did not suit the intelligence of the *homo loquax*: Erasmus should have remained simply a spectator of the Lutheran tragic drama ("I beg you [...] to be no more than a spectator of this trouble in which we are engaged"; CWE 10, 246⁴⁶). Erasmus' reply was immediate and, by turning what Luther considers the *imbecilitas* of the man of letters into a judgment parameter, he insisted on the need to take part in the *tragoedia lutherana* in order to dissipate its tragic result ("let me not be a spectator and watch the tragedy unfold- I only hope it does not have a tragic ending!" CWE 10, 255⁴⁷).

At this point, it should be borne in mind that the *muscarum Achilles* (*On the Bondage of the Will*, 165; WA 18, 688) mask, which exploits the meaning potential of laughable realities, is not a novelty in Erasmus' repertoire. In the *Prolegomena* to the *Adagia*, the proverbial form is compared to those *minutissima animantia* which reveal the expertise of nature more than the mighty elephant because of the functionality of their anatomical structure ("And, as Pliny says, the miracle of nature is greater in the most minute creatures [...] than in the elephant, if only one looks closely; and so, in the domain of literature, it is sometimes the smallest things which have the greatest intellectual value"; CWE 31, 14⁴⁸). According to Erasmus, smallness, *nugacitas*, and a witty and lively mind are one and the same. They have an essential rela-

tionship with the universe of rhetorical exercise (*Apo-phthegmata*, CWE 37, 15-16; ASD IV/4, 45) and with the stutter of human speech (*Ratio seu methodus*, LB V, 124), whose fate it is to acquire meaning only through reformulation and shift in perspective. It is no coincidence that, in the discussion with Guillaume Budé which started in 1516, Erasmus focused on the definition of a poetics of *leptologemata*. While according to Budé, Erasmus' eloquence should find more appropriate tones and subjects to display its grandeur, the humanist from Rotterdam insisted on the nugatory nature of his light philosophy (CWE 4, 102-107; Allen II, 362-366), which could adapt itself to the world stage (CWE 4, 228-236; Allen II, 463-469).

Moriae Encomium is the best example of Erasmus' paradoxical approach.—Here, the aptitude of the *tetrica philosophia* for dealing with serious things in a light and foolish manner (i.e. in specular terms, for changing trifles into serious things) is opposed to the aptitude of the *mosophus* in dealing with trivial things as such. In short, the most pleasant and useful thing is to achieve *seria* by means of *nugae*.⁴⁹ Therefore, while the supercilious philosophers reveal their silliness behind the appearance of graveness, Folly's companions recognizes the *festiva, lepida et iucunda* surface of reality as the place for the production of meaning. Once again, the acknowledgement of the *nugacitas* of *nugae* leads to the paradoxical reversibility of the fly-elephant's rhetoric.

5. Alcibiades' Sileni

There is another image in Erasmus' work that certainly can be juxtaposed with the fly-elephant couple: the image of the scarab, which is described in the *fabula* that comments on the adage *Scarabaeus aquilam quaerit* (CWE 35, 178-214; ASD II/6, 395-424). Most of this *fabella* is taken up by the development of two epideictic compositions: the first consists of the condemnation of the eagle's ferocity and arrogance, which is compared to the rapacity of contemporary tyrants; the second consists of the paradoxical praise of the hidden qualities of the humble scarab, which turn into symbols of divinity. The condemnation of the eagle affords an opportunity to stage a satirical tirade against the violence of power and to paint the portrait of the ideal sovereign; the praise for the scarab, on the other hand, is characterized by the ironic transformation of the scarab's faults into physical, moral and intellectual qualities. In short, in Erasmus' definition, the scarab is a true Alcibiades' Silenus⁵⁰ in whom a risible surface and rich inwardness coexist.

Against this background, it will be useful to go back to the point in Erasmus' *Adagia* where the proverbial phrase *Sileni Alcibiadis* is first mentioned. This will enable us to better understand the nature of Erasmus' apologue, which shows the poor scarab defeating the eagle, and to investigate more closely the peculiar qualities of this scarab-Silenus.

The commentary of the adage *Sileni Alcibiadis* is one of the most extended in the whole *corpus* of *Chiliades Adagiorum* and develops into a sort of political-theological essay where Erasmus condemns social hypocrisies and their inauspicious consequences. However, for

my argument, the most interesting aspect of Alcibiades' Silenus is his first description, which sheds light on the paradoxical relationship between amusing surface and serious inwardness, and between the playful artifice of the outward form and the numinous essence:

The Sileni are said to have been a kind of small figure of carved wood, so made that they could be divided and opened. Thus, though when closed they looked like a caricature of a hideous flute-player, when opened they suddenly displayed a deity, so that this humorous surprise made the carver's skill all the more admirable. Furthermore, the subject of these images was drawn from the well-known comic figure of Silenus, Bacchus' tutor and the court buffoon of the gods of poetry. (CWE 34, 262)⁵¹

First of all, in following Erasmus' approach, it should not be forgotten that the metaphor of Silenus originates in Plato's *Symposium*. Here Alcibiades, who is completely drunk, paradoxically praises an *atopos* Socrates, whose real nature can be understood only through the ridiculous medium of the image (*Smp.* 215a-222b).⁵² The paradox of the discrepancy between Socrates' superficial foolery and his inner qualities is the result of the ambiguous speech of the drunk Alcibiades, whom Socrates himself describes as someone who lacks the ability to see properly (*Smp.* 219a). The portrait of Socrates that emerges from what Alcibiades says is that of a man who deceives and disguises himself while upsetting roles and identities and whose irony displays the attitude of the sophist. The contradictory identity of Socrates can be understood only through the dislocated perspective of the drunk and blind Alcibiades: by confusing Socrates with Eros-sophist (*Smp.* 203d), he is compelled to hold onto a man in whom comedy and tragedy coexist (*Smp.* 223d).

In his commentary to the adage *Sileni Alcibiadis*, Erasmus fully exploited this substantial ambivalence of the Silenus metaphor, and insisted on Socrates' ridiculous appearance, his zany behaviour, his inclination to play and trick, as well as on his open staging of a weak form of knowledge:

Anyone who had valued him skin-deep (as they say) would not have given twopence for him. With his peasant face, glaring like a bull, and his snub nose always sniffing, he might have been taken for some blockheaded country bumpkin. The care of his person was neglected, his language simple and homely and smacking of common folk; for his talk was all of carters and cobblers, of fullers and smiths [...]. Last but not least, that unbroken flow of humour gave him the air of a buffoon. While that was a period when the ambition to advertise one's own cleverness reached manic heights among the foolish [...], Socrates was alone in declaring that there was only one thing he knew, which was that he knew nothing [...]. Small wonder then, though the world of those days was full of professional wits, if this buffoon was the only man declared wise by the oracle, and he who knew nothing was judged to know more than those who boasted there was nothing they did not know – was in fact judged to know more than the rest for that very reason, that he alone of them all said he knew nothing. (CWE 34, 262-263)⁵³

Therefore, the comic mask is part of Socrates as his sublime soul or, better, the comic appearance seems to be the very foundation of his inner virtues. It is not by chance that Socrates' silenic comedy is opposed to the tragedy of *praeposteri Sileni*, who are not able to recognize the the-

atrical quality of their splendours and honours and who confuse this golden surface with their individual substance:

A goodly number of men reproduce Silenus inside-out. Anyone who looked thoroughly into the driving force of things and their true nature would find none so far removed from real wisdom as those whose honorific title, learned bonnets, resplendent belts, and jewelled rings advertise wisdom in perfection. So true is this that you may not seldom find more real and native wisdom in one single ordinary man [...], than in many of our pompous theologians. (CWE 34, 265-266)⁵⁴

At this point, according to Erasmus' reappraisal of Alcibiades' perspective, it is clear that any opportunity to grasp a truth must necessarily pass through the surface of the comic mask, which creates the condition for all investigation of truth: Erasmus' silenic approach does not consist in the mere unveiling of a more substantial reality⁵⁵, but in the acknowledgement of the theatrical nature of every *persona*. The nature of Erasmus' paradox does not lie in the overturning of appearance, but in the *aporia* of coexistence⁵⁶. Silenus' comicality is related to the ability to recognize the contextual existence of each mask (*persona*); the tragedy of the inverted Silenus consists in wearing the mask as a skin.

Once again, examining Erasmus' work in the light of Lucian's paradoxes can be profitable: through the mediation of Lucian, Erasmus seems to fully exploit the potential sophistic aptitude of Alcibiades' speech. The image of Silenus that Lucian outlined in his *Bacchus* constitutes an intermediate step between the Silenus of Alcibiades and that of Erasmus. Lucian, with Alcibiades' Socrates in mind, used the image of Silenus to justify the comic quality of his writings. He states that Bacchus' pedagogue is able to produce his best speeches, and his most ornate and wise utterances when his inebriation and drollery reach their acme. In the same way Lucian's work, which is a hybrid of philosophical dialogue and comedy, achieves its most significant results when it makes explicit use of the device of laughter (*Luc. Bacch.*, tr. Harmon, I, 56-59). In this context the laughable appearance of Lucian's work becomes the real mediator and the focal point of every hermeneutical activity.

Against this background, it is not by chance that the image of Alcibiades' Silenus became the emblem of the literary structure of Erasmus' *Moriae Encomium* and the metaphor of the exegetical process required for its interpretation (CWE 27, 102-103; ASD IV/3, 104). As a matter of fact, the Silenic approach excludes a simplified allegorical reading and exploits the playful nature of the rhetorical principles of *decorum* and *aptum*.

Now that the qualities of the figure of *Sileni Alcibiadis* have been clarified, we can return to the Silenic image of the scarab. Our first impression is that the ability of the tiny despised animal to humiliate artfully the haughty eagle makes the humble insect next of kin to the fly, whose graceful levity is set against the massive structure of the elephant. On closer examination, however, the reader is disoriented by the fact that the praise of the scarab takes on an increasingly satirical tone: through the exaltation of its skill as a warrior, Erasmus ridicules military prowess and glory⁵⁷ and, through the scarab's mys-

terious sanctification, he makes fun of superstition⁵⁸. Erasmus' portrait of the scarab shows a small animal of shabby appearance, which is full of vainglory and greedy for power:

Now the beetle was not a little pleased by the very fact that someone existed who, first, was willing to owe his life to him and believed that such a great thing was in his power; and who, second, found his hole [...] suitable as a place in which to hide for safety, like a sacred altar or the king's statue. (CWE 35, 207)⁵⁹

He was also tickled by a certain alluring hope that, if the act succeeded and the eagle were overthrown, he might himself take power. (CWE 35, 209)⁶⁰

Erasmus' scarab is sure of its honour and authority ("personal dignity is no slight matter to anyone"; CWE 35, 208⁶¹), and when this insignificant beast is offended by the eagle he begins to harbour a destructive hatred and to engage in such a cruel and malicious deception ("And so he pondered all sorts of arts and trick. It was no common punishment but extermination and "total destruction" he contemplated"; CWE 35, 208⁶²). Therefore, the smallness of the scarab is at variance with the joyful and playful aptitude of the fly. Indeed, the scarab statically takes on the identity of a revealed allegory and, by forgetting and rejecting its comic mask and its laughable appearance, it does not look much different from the eagle in terms of its rapacity and thirst for glory.⁶³ Thus, the Silenus-scarab turns into a tragic mask, into an inverted Silenus, which is unable to exploit the potential meaning of its ludic *persona* and which projects outwards its own ridiculous gravity: taking a *mysterium* too seriously and effacing the comical *ambages* of its surface means eschewing the fiction that produces truth and being content with a fictitious truth.

6. Conclusion

The materials analysed in this overview allow us to affirm that some of the best-known and recurring metaphors in Erasmus' work (Hercules, Silenus and the fly) originated in the paradoxes of Lucian.

In this article I have attempted not only to trace the genealogy of Erasmus' ethics, by emphasizing the way in which its constitutive metaphors are rooted in Lucian's work, but also to show that what is most serious and deep in Erasmus' theological perspective (i.e the tolerance of *pietas*) is founded in the sophistic aptitude of Lucian's laughter and in his ability to test and experiment with the contingencies of every context.

From this point of view, the Lucianism of Erasmus is no longer the playful dressing up of a more substantial moral commitment but becomes the rhetorical aesthetics which fostered the growth of his ethics.

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Notes

- See, among others, Lauvergnot-Gagnière, Marsh and Geri.
- See, for example, M. A. Screech. For my purpose, the approach to the *Moriae Encomium* of Margolin 1983 and Fumaroli is more significant because of its focus on the rhetorical and sophistic nature of the paradoxes of Folly.
- For the plurality of values of the recurrent image of Hercules in Erasmus' work see Margolin 1996.
- For *Hercules Germanicus*'s identification with Arminius, the hero of the battle of the Teutoburg forest, see McDonald and Leitch.
- For the ascription of the engraving to Hans Holbein the Younger and for its anti-Lutheran interpretation see Burckhardt-Werthemann and Burckhardt-Biedermann.
- On the value of Erasmus' portrait by Holbein see, in particular, among others, Heckscher.
- For an exhaustive exploration of the theme of physical weakness in Erasmus' epistolary see Vanden Branden.
- Cf. CWE 34, 175-176: "Some people, I perceive, are of a disposition to measure books by their size, rather than by the learning they contain, and think a thing finished only if nothing can be added to it and much is superfluous, nothing adequate that is not greatly overdone, and fullness never achieved except where everything is repeated ad nauseam. Among this gentry, someone will say that there are points to which I might have given fuller and richer treatment [...] Who, I ask you to begin with, is so arrogant that he dare maintain such a thing? So unfair as to demand that in this literary kind work no passage shall ever be passed over? Suppose you have read everything, made notes of everything, have everything ready at hand: is it all, in this vast medley of materials, instantly available, just what you needed and where you needed it? Then think what tedious pedantry it would have been to collect from every quarter all that could in any way have been adapted to enrichment of a proverb!" (ASD II/5, 33: "Nam quosdam hoc animo esse video ut libros mole, non eruditione metiantur et id demum absolutum existiment, ubi nihil adiungi possit, supersint pleraque; quibus nihil satis nisi quod impendio nimium, atque ibi denique copiam esse iudicant, cum ad satietatem ubique dicuntur omnia. Horum igitur quispiam dicit quaedam a me copiosius locupletiusque tractari potuisse [...]. Quis tam iniquus ut exigat in huiusmodi scripti genere ne quis omnino praetereatur locus? Ut nihil non legeris, nihil non annotaris, nihil non apparaveris, itane statim in tam immensa rerum turba succurrit quod oportuit quoque oportuit loco? Deinde quae tandem futura fuerat ista molesta diligentia

undecunqne conquirere quicquid quocunqne modo poterat ad proverbii locupletationem accomodari?”).

⁹ See Grassi, 150-153 about the relationship between Hercules and Proteus and, in general, about Hercules as protagonist of the humanization of the natural world through speech.

¹⁰ For the literary and iconographic fortune of the image of *Hercules Gallicus* after Erasmus' translation see Hallowell 1962, Hallowell 1966 and, more recently, Carlini.

¹¹ ASD, I/1, 591-592: “siquidem Hercules ille senex ingentem admodum hominum multitudinem trahit, omnibus ab aure revinctis, porro vincula catenulae tenues auro electrove confectae pulcherrimis istis monilibus adsimiles. Atqui quum vinculis usqueadeo fragilibus ducantur, tamen neque de fugiendo cogitant, quum alioqui commode possint, neque prorsus obnituntur, aut pedibus adversus trahentem obtundunt, sese resupinantes: verum alacres ac laeti sequuntur, ducentem admirantes, ultro festinantes omnes, et laxatis funiculis etiam antevertere studentes, perinde quasi graviter laturi, si solverentur vinculis. Ne illud quidem pigebit referre, quod mihi videbatur omnium absurdissimum: etenim quum non inveniret pictor unde catenularum summam ansas necceret, videlicet dextera iam clavam, laeva arcum tenente, summam dei linguam perterebat, atque ex hac religatis catenulis eos trahi fecit. Ipse nimirum ad eos qui ducebantur, vultum et oculos convertebat, arridens [...]. Quin de eodem hanc in summa habemus opinionem, ut quicquid egit, id oratione fecundaque confecisse putemus, utpote virum sapientem, ac persuadendo pleraque sibi subegisse. Iam tela illius nimirum rationes sunt acutae, missiles, citae atque animam sauciantes”.

¹² Cf. *The Table Talk, or Familiar Discourse of Martin Luther*, tr. Hazlitt, 283: “[Erasmus is] a mere Momus, making his mows and mocks at everything and everybody, at God and man, at papist and protestant, but all the while using such shuffling and double-meaning terms, that no one can lay hold of him to any effectual purpose” (*D. Martin Luthers Werke. Tischreden*, I, 811, 390: “Erasmus verus est Momus. Omnia ridet ac ludit, totam religionem ac Christum, atque ut hoc melius praestet, dies noctesque excogitat vocabula amphibola et ambigua [...]. Omnia eius scripta quolibet trahi possunt, itaque neque a nobis, nec a papisti deprehendi potest, nisi prius ademeris illi amphibologiam”), and cf. *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Briefwechsel*, VII, 2093, 36: “Our king of ambiguity sits upon his ambiguous throne and destroys us, stupid Christians, with a double destruction. First, it is his will, and it is a great pleasure to him, to offend us by his ambiguous words [...] And next, when he sees that we are offended, and have run against his insidious figures of speech, and begin to exclaim against him, he then begin to triumph and rejoice that the desired prey has been caught in his snares” (“At noster rex amphibolus sedet in throno amphibologiae securus, et duplici contritione conterit nos stupidos christianos. Primo vult, et magna voluptas est, ambiguis suis dictis nos offendere [...]. Deinde, ubi sensit nos offensos et impegisse in insidiosas figuras et clamare contra eum, ibi serio triumphat et gaudet incidisse in suos casses praedam petitam”).

¹³ About the mockery of the image of *Hercules Gallicus* in Dürer's engraving see Wind.

¹⁴ Erasmus carried on his translation of the works of Lucian until 1514, constantly adding new material to the subsequent editions of Lucian's translations. The ten translated texts (four by More and six by Erasmus) of the first edition of 1506 became the thirty-six translations of the 1514 edition.

¹⁵ On this see Thompson, Delcourt, Rummel, 49-70 and Geri, 166-177.

¹⁶ The role of Lucian in Erasmus' pedagogical project is clarified in *De ratione studii*, CWE 24, 669: “For a true ability to speak correctly is best fostered both by conversing and consorting with those who speak correctly and by the habitual reading of the best stylists. Among the latter the first to be imbibed should be those whose diction, apart from its refinement, will also entice learners by a certain charm of subject-matter. In this category I would assign first place to Lucian” (ASD I/2, 115: “Nam vera emendate loquendi facultas optime paratur, cum ex castigate loquentium colloquio convictaque, tum ex eloquentium auctorum assidua lectione, e quibus ii primum sunt imbibendi, quorum oratio, praeterquam quod est castigatissima, argumenti quoque illecebra aliqua discentibus blandiatur. Quo quidem in genere primas tribuerim Luciano”).

¹⁷ For a definition of the humanistic concept of *festivitas* see Dresden.

¹⁸ Cf. *De copia*, CWE 24, 634: “Stories which are invented to raise a laugh are the more entertaining the further they are from truth [...] and can also win the ears of the educated by learned allusions. To this type belong Lucian's *True History* and Apuleius' *Golden Ass* which he copied from Lucian's example, further the *Icaromenippus* and lots of other things by Lucian; also nearly all the plots of Old Comedy, which delight us not by presenting a picture of real life, but by allusion and hidden meaning” (ASD I/6, 257: “Porro, quae risus causa finguntur, quo

longius absunt a vero, hoc magis demulcent animos [...] et eruditus allusionibus doctas etiam auras capere possint. Quo de genere sunt Luciani Verae narrationes, et ad huius exemplum effectus Asinus Apulei; praeterea Icaromenippus, et reliqua Luciani pleraque. Item argumenta ferme omnia veteris comoediae, quae non imagine veri sed allusionibus et allegoriis delectant”). For the characterization of Lucian's work as an exercise of topical assemblage (cultural *mimesis*) see Bompaire.

¹⁹ Cf. the chapter *Exercitatio et imitatio* of the *De conscribendis epistolis*, CWE 25, 25 (ASD I/2, 233) in which Erasmus regards Lucian as a rhetorician especially well-versed in the genre of *declamatio* because of his ability to assume the fictitious identity of historical and mythological characters. For the relationship between the concept of *festivitas* and the mimetic ability see Lecointe, 441-445.

²⁰ ASD I/1, 423: “Neque minus tamen iucundus quam frugifer futurus est, si quis modo decorum observet, quod in personis situm est.”

²¹ *Ibid.* 603: “Luciani dialogus [...] plurimum habeat artis ob decorum mire servatum in personis tam multis tamque diversis”.

²² Too often critics have pinned these disparaging labels on the work of Lucian, by accepting as a fact the opposition between rhetorical form and philosophical content.

²³ Cf. CWE 2, 114 “It is a dialogue by Lucian; and there is hardly any of them that is more useful or pleasant to read”; 116: “it secretes a juice of sovereign potency for health; [...] whether you look for pleasure or edification there is no comedy, or satire, that challenges comparison with his dialogues”; 122: “So you will, I hope, read him with a certain amount of profit – but also with a vast degree of pleasure” (ASD I/1, 488: “Is est Luciani dialogus quo vix alius lectu vel utilior vel iucundior”; 470: “succo praesentaneo salubrem et efficacem. [...] Nulla comoedia, nulla satyra cum huius dialogis conferri debeat, seu voluptatem spectes”; 449: “Eum igitur leges (uti spero) non modo cum fructu aliquo, verum etiam summa cum voluptate”); Cf. “Translations of Lucian”. *The Complete Works of St Thomas More* III/1, 5: “Whether this dialogue is more amusing or more instructive is hard to say” (“dialogus nescio certe lepidior ne, an utilior”).

²⁴ ASD I/4, 28: “vera pietate nihil est hilarius.”

²⁵ Cf. CWE 2, 116: “as Horace has written *He who mingles use with pleasure/ Every prize doth bear away*. [...] By his mixture of fun and earnest, gaiety and accurate observation, he so effectively portrays the manners [...] of men” (ASD I/1, 470-471: “Omne tulit punctum, (ut scripsit Flaccus) qui miscuit utile dulci [...]. Sic seria nugis, nugas seriis miscet; sic ridens vera dicit, vera dicendo ridet; sic homines mores [...] depingit”); Cf. “Translations of Lucian”. *The Complete Works of St Thomas More* III/1, 3: “If, most learned Sir, there was ever anyone who fulfilled the Horatian maxim and combined delight with instruction, I think Lucian certainly ranked among the foremost in this respect” (“Si quisquam fuit unquam vir doctissime, qui Horatianum praeceptum impleverit, voluptatemque cum utilitate coniunxerit, hoc ego certe Lucianum in primis puto praestitisse”).

²⁶ Cf. CWE 39 (ASD I/3), *Exorcismus sive Spectrum*, 531-544 (417-423); *Alcumistica*, 545-556 (424-429); *Hippoplanus*, 557-561 (430-432); *ΠΤΩΟΛΟΓΙΑ*, 562-570 (433-437).

²⁷ ASD I/2, 65: “Optarim aetatem virentem, a qua non abhorreat puer, et quam non pigeat quamvis personam sumere. Hic idem aget in formando ingenio quod parentes et nutrices facere solent in fingendo corpore”.

²⁸ Cf. *De pueris instituendis*, CWE 26, 341: “Nausea, after all, often arises from pure imagination [...]. Do we not see small boys constantly on the go all day, incredibly active, yet not experiencing any weariness? The great Milo would soon tire if he attempted to keep up a similar pace. Why are children like this? The reason is that play and childhood go naturally together, and that children think of their activity as play rather than exertion. The fact is that whenever we feel dissatisfied about something it is largely due to our imagination, which is often responsible for creating such a mood even when there is nothing wrong. [...] it is then the teacher's task to prevent these feelings from taking hold and to give the course of study the appearance of a game” (ASD, I/2, p. 73: “Nonnunquam enim horrorem adfert sola imaginatio [...]. An non videmus pueros tenerellos mira agilitate totum cursitare diem, nec sentire lassitudinem? Idem si faciat Milo, fatigaretur. Quid in causa? Quia lusus aetati cognatus est, et lusus imaginantur, non laborem. Est autem in re quavis maxima molestiae pars imaginatio [...]. An non videmus pueros tenerellos mira agilitate totum cursitare diem, nec sentire lassitudinem? Idem si faciat Milo, fatigaretur. Quid in causa? Quia lusus aetati cognatus est, et lusus imaginantur, non laborem. Est autem in re quavis maxima molestiae pars imaginatio, quae mali sensum adfert interdum, etiam ubi nihil est mali. Proinde [...] praeceptoris [...] partes erunt, eandem multis rationibus excludere studioque lusus personam inducere”).

²⁹ ASD I/3, 742: “Et haud scio an quicquam discitur felicius, quam quod in ludendo discitur. Est hoc nimirum sanctissimum fallendi genus, per imposturam dare beneficium”.

³⁰ ASD V/4, 442: "nec vero semper opponitur falsum". For Erasmus' concept of truth as human research see Margolin 1969, 45-69.

³¹ Allen IV, 13-15: "Quod Tomae Mori ingenium sic deamas [...] nimirum scriptis illius inflammatus, quibus, ut vere scribis, nihil esse potest neque doctus neque festivus, istuc, crede mihi, clarissime Huttene, tibi cum multis commune est [...]. Vultus ingenio respondet, gratam et amicam festivitatem semper prae se ferens, ac nonnihil ad ridendae habitum compositus; atque, ut ingenue dicam, appositior ad iucunditatem quam ad gravitatem aut dignitatem, etiamsi longissime abest ab ineptia scurrilitateque [...]. Lingua mire explanata articulataque, nihil habens nec praecipue nec haesitans."

³² *Ibid.* 16: "In convictu tam rara comitas ac morum suavitas, ut nemo tam tristi sit ingenio quem non exhilaret, nulla res tam atrox cuius taedium non discutiat. Iam inde a puero sic iocis est delectatus ut ad hos natus videri possit [...]. Adolescens comoediolas et scripsit et egit. Si quod dictum esset salsius, etiam in ipsum tortum, tamen amabat; usqueadeo gaudet salibus argutis et ingenium redolentibus. Unde et epigrammatis lusit iuvenis, et Luciano cum primis est delectatus; quin et mihi ut Morias Encomium scriberem, hoc est camelus saltarem, fuit auctor. Nihil autem in rebus humanis obvium est unde ille non venetur voluptatem, etiam in rebus maxime seriis: Si cum eruditus et cordatis res est, delectatur ingenio; si cum indoctis ac stultis, fruitur illorum stulticia. Nec offenditur morionibus, mira dexteritate ad omnium affectus sese accomodans."

³³ LB IX, 1215: "Erasmus audet cum Luthero congregi, hoc est, cum elephanto musca?". On the importance of this incipit of *De libero arbitrio* in the work setting see Boyle, 1-4.

³⁴ ASD II/2, 388: "Ἐλέφα ζέκ μυίας ποιεῖς, id est «Elephantum ex muscafaciis», id est res exiguas verbis atollis atque amplificas. Lucianus in Muscae encomio: Πολλὰ δ' ἔτι ἔχων εἰπεῖν καταπαύσω τὸν λόγον, μὴ καὶ δόξο κατὰ τὴν παροιμίαν ἐλέφαντα ἐκ μυίας ποιεῖν, id est "Multa adhuc commemorare possem, sed finem dicendi faciam, ne videar et ipse iuxtatritumproverbium ex musca elephantum facere."

³⁵ On the translations of Lucian by Guarino and, in general, on Lucian's legacy in the Renaissance see Mattioli and Marsh.

³⁶ Luther's *Tractatus de libertate Christiana* discusses exactly of the issue of free will.

³⁷ On the formal features of the literary genre of the *diatriba* and the gnoseological consequences of Erasmus' choice see Boyle, 5-42.

³⁸ LB IX, 1215-1216: "certe vix alius quisquam minus exercitatus, ut qui semper arcano quodam natura e sensu abhorruerim a pugnis: eoque semper habui prius in liberioribus Musarum campis ludere, quam ferro comminus congregi. Et adeo non delector assertionibus, ut facile in Scepticorum sententiam pedibus discessurus sim [...], eoque disputatorem agam, non iudicem: inquisitorem, non dogmatisten, paratus a quocunque discere, si quid adferatur rectius aut compertius".

³⁹ LB X, 1304: "Quod tu affirmas, ego opto, quod tu dicis te scire, ego discere cupio, nec mihi satis est hoc asseverari abs te, certitudinem efflagito quam tu proferis [...]. Fit enim frequenter, ut qui a tenebris prodeunt, nihil videant in media luce Solis, nisi aliquandiu intenderint oculos, et per tenebras quaedam non statim videmus, sed intendentibus oculis paulatim incipient nobis esse paecipua, quae prius erant ambigua: quod idem accidit in rebus quae procul absunt a nobis. Sed ita civilitatis causa finxi, interpretationem utriusque partis esse ambiguum, ut rebus aequatis, ostenderes aliquidquod nos in medio vacillantes in tuam partem inclinaret".

⁴⁰ Allen, I, 269: "Tandem cum et longius processisset disputatio, et esset quam ut convivio conveniret gravior et severior, tum ego meis, hoc est poetae, partibus functurus, ut et eam contentionem discuterem et festivo fabella prandium exhilararem".

⁴¹ WA 18, 605: "Nam hoc consilio aliud nihil facis, quam quod significas te in corde, Lucianum aut aliumquendam de grege Epicuri porcum alere, qui cum ipse nihil credat esse Deum, rideat occulte omnes qui credunt et confitentur".

⁴² *Ivi.*, 609: "Quid hic dicam Erasme? Totus Lucianus spiras, et inhalas mihi grandem Epicuri crapulam".

⁴³ *Ibid.* 620: "Deinde [ostendo], quid sit in divinas res et literas impingere, dum aliorum obsequio, personam sumimus et invita conscientia alienae scenae servimus. Non est ludus neque iocus, sacras literas et pietatem docere, facillime enim hic contingit lapsus ille, de quo Iacobus dicit, Qui offendit in uno, fit omnium reus. Ita fit enim, ut cum modicum videamur velle nugari, nec satis reverenter sacras literas habemus, mox impietatis involvamur, blasphemiasque immergamur, sicut hic tibi contigit Erasme."

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 661: "Docere igitur aliquid, quod intra scripturas non est ullo verbo praescriptum et extra scripturas non est ullo facto monstratum, hoc non pertinet ad dogmata Christianorum, sed ad narrationes veras Luciani."

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 688: "Sic pugnan thumana Diatribes somnia adversus divinorum verborum agmina."

⁴⁶ Allen V, 447: "spectator tantum sit tragoediae nostrae."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 452: "non licet esset spectatorem istius tragoedie, que utinam non habeat tragicum exitum!"

⁴⁸ ASD, II/1, 60: "Et ut auctore Plinio in minutissimis animantibus [...] maius est naturae miraculum quam in elephanto, siquis modo proprius contempletur, itidem in re litteraria nonnumquam plurimum habent ingenii, quae minima sunt."

⁴⁹ Cf. CWE 27, 84: "trifling may lead to something more serious" (ASD IV/3, 68: "nugae seria ducant"). It is particularly interesting to note that this statement originates in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, where it takes on a completely different meaning from that of Erasmus. "Hae nugae seria ducunt", according to Horace, means that even the smallest negligence in style can lead to a disastrous outcome in the finished work. For his part, Erasmus has fun juxtaposing *nugae* as little mistakes in the field of grammatical propriety and *nugae* as poetic games, by superimposing the seriousness of the consequences of a poorly finished literary work on the seriousness of thought content. Cf. Gordon, 54.

⁵⁰ Cf. CWE 35, 200: "But in truth, if anyone will open up this Silenus and look more closely at this despised creature, in its own setting as it were, he will see it has so many uncommon gifts that, all things well considered, he will almost prefer to be a scarab rather than an eagle" (ASD II/6, 413: "Verum si quis hunc explicit Silenum et contemptum hoc animalculum proprius ac veluti domi contempletur, tam multas in eo dotes haud vulgares animadvertet, ut omnibus diligenter pensitatis propemodum scarabeum se malit esse quam aquilam").

⁵¹ ASD, II/5, p. 160: "Aiunt enim Silenus imagnunculas quaspiam fuisse sectiles et ita factas, ut diduci et explicari possent, et quae clausae ridiculam ac monstrosam tibicinis speciem habebant, apertae subito numen ostendebant, ut artem scaltoris gratiore iococus faceret error. Porro statuarum argumentum sumptum est a ridiculo illo Sileno, Bacchi paedagogi numinumque poeticoorum morione."

⁵² About the possibility to read Plato's *Symposium* as a game with the sophistic literary genre of paradoxical praise, see Dandrey, 15-17.

⁵³ ASD II/5, 160-162: "Quem si de summa, quod dici cote, culet quis aestimasset non emisset asse. Facies erat rusticana, taurinus aspectus, nares simiae mucroque plenae. Sannionem quempiam bardum ac stupidum dixisses. Cultus neglectus, sermo simplex ac plebeius et humilis, ut qui semper aurigas, cerdones, fullones et fabros haberet in ore [...]. Denique iocus ille perpetuus nonnullam habebat morionis speciem. Cum ea tempestate ad insaniam usque ferret inter stultos profitendi sapientiam ambitio [...] solus hic hoc unum scire se dicitabat quod nihil scire [...]. Proinde non iniuria, cum id tempestatis plena sophis essent omnia, solus hic morio sapiens oraculo pronuntiatus est et plus iudicatus est scire qui nihil sciebat quam hi, qui nihil nescire se praedicabant, imo ob id ipsum iudicatus est plus caeteris scire, quod unus omnium nihil sciret."

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 166: "Bona pars hominum praeposterum Silenum exprimunt. Si quis rerum vim ac naturam penitus introspectat, reperiet nullos a vera sapientia longius abesse quam istos, qui magnificis titulis, qui sapientibus pileis, qui splendidis cingulis, qui gemmatis anuli absolutam profitentur sapientiam. Adeo ut non raro plus verae germanaeque sapientiae deprehendas in uno quopiam homuncione [...] quam in multis theologorum tragicis personis."

⁵⁵ Too often critics have insisted on the truth value of the silenic overturning and they have applied, in a short-sighted way, a dualistic conception deduced from *Enchiridion militis christiani*. They have not taken into account Erasmus' reflection on the hermeneutic value of mask (*persona*) and fiction (*fabula*). Against this background, the development of the playful aspects of Erasmus' theology in Gordon is of great interest, though Gordon's work tends to erase the rhetorical context of Erasmus' reflection on *ludus*. Indeed, he accepts the thesis of Screech, which considers Erasmus' irony in the univocal perspective of mystical ecstasy. For a critique of the reduction of the *Praise of Folly* to unidimensional mystical ecstasy see Margolin 1983, who focuses on the fact that Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* belongs to the aesthetic category of *iocoseria*.

⁵⁶ About the meaning of the Greek word *paradoxa* see *Ivi.*, 27: "Mais pourquoi réduire le sens de la préposition grecque *para* a celui d'une opposition? Elle signifie tout aussi "à côté", ou "contre", mais à la condition de donner à ce mot le même sens qu'au premier". Cf. Pavloskis, 108-111, who has explicitly shed light on the paradoxical nature of Erasmian *Silenus* where the opposites coexist and where everything is a mask of its contrary, so that the very concept of identity disappears: it is impossible to perceive the real nature of anything at all.

⁵⁷ Cf. CWE 35, 203-204: "In ancient times it was given first place among sacred images and in sacred rites as the most apt symbol of the

eminent warrior [...]. There too, not like “blue pimpernel among vegetables” as the proverb says, but among sacred images, was the scarab, carved on a seal [...]. This too is in Plutarch, in case anyone thinks I have made it up, as some ignorant theologians sometimes contrive allegories. But some uninformed person will ask, “What has a beetle to do with a military general?” In fact they have many points in common. In the first place you can see that the beetle is covered with gleaming armour and no part of its body is not carefully protected by scales and plates; Mars does not seem to be better armed when Homer equips him in his fullest panoply. Then there is its aggressive approach with terrifying, unnerving thrum and truly warlike voice. For what is harsher than the blare of trumpets, what is more vulgar than the roll of drums? The sound of trumpets, which delights kings so much nowadays, was intolerable to the Busiritae of old, because it seemed to them like the braying of an ass, and the ass was one of the things that nation considered detestable [...]. What, I ask, could be more apt for a strong leader? Indeed it is also fitting, as Plutarch also reports, that they use those dainty balls I have described to give birth to, nurture, feed, and bring up their offspring; their birthplace is their food. Do not think this esoteric aptness is easy for me to explain” (ASD II/6, 415-416: “antiquitus inter sacras imagines et in vatum mysteriis cum primis habitus est scarabeus, egregii bellatori saptissimum symbolum [...]. Aderat non corchorus inter olera, quod proverbio dicunt, sed inter sacras imagines scarabeus sigillo insculptus [...]. Nam hoc quoque Plutarchus indicat, ne quis sic a me confictum existimet, quemadmodum allegorias aliquoties comminisci solent in docti theologi. At dixerit imperitior aliquis: “Quid scarabeo cum duce belli?” Permulta sane congruunt. Principio vides, vt totus armis luceat scarabeus nullaque pars corporis sit non diligenter crustis ac laminis communita, vt non melius armatus videatur Mauors Homericus, cum illum maxime sua instruit panoplia. Adde nunc militarem assultum cum horrendo ac Panico bombo cantuque vere militari. Quid enim in suavius classicorum sonitu? Quid ἀμυσότερον tympanorum strepitu? Nam tubarum vocem, qua nunc reges tantopere delectantur, olim Busiritae non ferebant, quod asino rudenti videatur adsimilis. At ei genti inter abominanda habebatur asinus [...]. Quin et illud ad rem apte quadrat, vt idem indicat Plutarchus, quod in delicatis illis pilis, de quibus dictum est, foetus suos aedunt, fouent, alunt, educant, nec alius est locus nascendi quam cibi. Verum hoc mysterii mihi non facile sit interpretari”).

⁵⁸ Cf. CWE 35, 205: “I mean “that formidable type” of scarab that is carved on an emerald, for as the proverb says “you can’t carve a Mercury out of any and every wood”; the scarab does not consider every gem worthy of itself, but if carved on the emerald, the brightest of all gems, and hung from the neck as I said (but only with the hair of an ape or at least a swallow’s feathers), it affords an immediate remedy against all poisons” (ASD II/6, 417: “Siquidem ὀδενδὸς ἐκείνος scarabeus, smaragdo gemmae insculptus, nec enim e quovis lingo fingitur Mercurius iuxta proverbium, nec quamvis gemmam se dignatur scarabeus, sed smaragdo gemmarum omnium nitidissima expressus, ut dixi, si de collo suspendatur, at non nisi cynocephali capillis aut certe plumis hirundinis, adversus omnia veneficia adfert remedium”).

⁵⁹ ASD II/6, 418: “nonnihil placebat scarabeus, quod extitisset, qui ipsi suam vitam debere vellet quique rem tantam a se praestari posse crederet, denique cui suum antrum [...] idoneum videretur, ad quod salutis causa velut ad sacram aram aut principis statuam confugeret.”

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 420: “Titillabat et blanda quaedam spes, si facinus successisset, futurum ut profligata aquila ipse regno potiretur.”

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 419: “nulli sua levis est auctoritas.”

⁶² *Ibid.* 420: “Omnes igitur artes, omnes dolos in pectus advocat. Nec vulgare molitur poenam, internecionem ac plane πανολεθρίαν in animo volvit.”

⁶³ About it, see the significant conclusion of the adage (CWE 35, 214): “There are some little men, of the meanest sort but malicious nevertheless, no less black than scarab, no less evil-smelling, no less mean-spirited, but by their obstinately malicious spirit (since they can do no good to any mortals) they often make trouble for great men. Their blackness is terrifying, their noise is disturbing, their stench is an annoyance; they fly round and round, they cannot be shaken off, they wait in ambush. It is preferable by far sometimes to contend with powerful men than to provoke these beetles whom one may even be ashamed to beat. You cannot shake them off nor fight with them without coming away defiled” (ASD II/6, 424: “Sunt enim homunculi quidam, infimae quidem sortis, sed tamen malitiosi, non minus atri quam scarabei neque minus putidi neque minus abiecti, qui tamen pertinaci quadam ingenii malitia, cum nulli omnino mortalium prodesse possint, magnis etiam saepenumero viris facessant negocium. Territant nigrore, obstrepunt stridore, obturbant foetore, circumvolitant, haerent, insidiantur, ut non paulo satius sit cum magnis aliquando viris simultatem suscipere quam

hos lacessere scarabeos, quos pudeat etiam vicisse quosque nec excutere possis neque conflictari cum illis queas, nisi discedas contaminior”).