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Erasmus' Biographical Masterpiece: Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita

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ERASMUS shared with many Renaissance men a more than passing interest in biographical writing. He recommended Plutarch's *Lives* on several occasions, edited and annotated Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, and more importantly, several times tried his own hand at life-writing.[1] In addition to biographical sketches of his contemporaries More, Colet, Vitrier, and Warham, Erasmus wrote lives of Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, and other early Church Fathers to serve as introductions to the Froben editions of their works.

The epistolary sketches of More, Colet, and Vitrier are interesting in their own right and especially in that Erasmus uses a different biographical approach in each of them, but they are brief and remain essentially sketches, albeit extremely vivid ones.[2] Among the lives of the early Fathers, that of Jerome is unquestionably preeminent and, ironically, the only one to be omitted from Leclerc's edition of Erasmus' *Opera*

[1] See *The Education of a Christian Prince*, tr. Lester K. Born (New York, 1936), p. 200. Also, in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, eds. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen, etc. (Oxford, 1906–58), see Erasmus' letters to Valentine Furster (Allen, VI, 481) and to Brixius (Allen, IX, 108). His edition of Suetonius is *C. Suetonii Tranquilli XII Caesares . . . Annotata in eundem, et in loca aliquot restituta per D. Erasmum Roter* (Cologne, 1539).

[2] The More sketch can be found in Allen, IV, 12–23; those of Colet and Vitrier are in the same volume, pp. 507–527, and those of Warham in Allen, X, 144–147, and in volume five, 810E–812B, of *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. J. Leclerc (Leyden, 1703–06). Erasmus' introductory lives of the Fathers of the Church, with the sole exception of Jerome's, can all be found in either of the two parts of volume three of the Leclerc work.

Omnia. It was made easily available again, however, by Wallace K. Ferguson in *Erasmi Opuscula, A Supplement to the Opera Omnia* (The Hague, 1933). The *Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita* is an astonishing piece of work for its time and Erasmus one of the few early sixteenth-century scholars capable of producing the work which Ferguson rightly terms 'a new departure in the field of Christian biography.'[3] Its adherence to historical fact, realistic insight into the means of both discovering and presenting character, sophisticated use of letters and other sources, and its artistic use of the rhetorical biographical form make it an important Erasmian work.

The contemporaries about whom Erasmus wrote were all friends of his and he could rely on his own personal experiences with them and on the testimony of mutual acquaintances. But Jerome had been dead for more than a millennium before Erasmus began to write, and the simplest facts of his life as well as the essential character of the saint were hidden under a welter of legends which had grown up in the long centuries since his death. But Jerome, the urbane if sometimes testy scholar, editor, and translator of the Scriptures, was the saint most congenial to Erasmus' temperament and Erasmus was determined to present a true picture of him to the world. In the midst of his editorial work on Jerome's letters, a task which consumed several years of his life, Erasmus wrote to his friend Ammonius, 'My enthusiasm for amending and annotating Jerome is such that I feel as though inspired by some god.'[4] So before the Froben edition of the collected works of Jerome was presented to the public, Erasmus set himself to write the life of their author as a preface to the *Opera Hieronymi*. In the three years following its first publication, the life was twice put out as a separate book and continued to serve as introduction to the successive editions of the *Opera Hieronymi*.

The life of Jerome is short by today's standards, only about 15,000 words, but it is long enough for its purpose. Perhaps the first 135 lines are the most important, for it is here that Erasmus criticizes earlier historical and biographical writing and defends the principles that he will follow in writing Jerome's life. He begins with an insistence on historical truth above all other values, even beyond the desire for edification:

[3] P. 129. Ferguson's introduction, though brief, is very valuable and I am indebted to it for several details concerning the *Hieronymi . . . Vita*. Peter G. Bietenholz, in his monograph *History and Biography in the Work of Erasmus of Rotterdam* (Geneva, 1966), treats all of Erasmus' biographical writings, but his emphasis is considerably different from mine, though there is no disagreement between us.

[4] Allen, I, 531.

I am aware, of course, that many of the ancients considered it justifiable to fabricate tales for the sake of the common good: that is, either to inculcate good morals, stimulate and encourage laggards, give aid to the weak, inspire terror in evil men whom neither love nor reason can move, or else to illustrate the glory of saintly men by marvelous tales. . . .

For my part, however, I judge it better to describe the saints just as they in fact were, for even their faults become examples of piety for us. Yet if anyone taken up with fables paints a picture of some holy man prudently, not in terms of sackcloth, ashes, scourges, fantastic fasts and incredible vigils, but according to the true teachings of Christ so that he clearly makes known the nature of Christian piety—if finally he draws the portrait with some skill I can perhaps tolerate him. Still, no matter how skillfully the artist paints the bright splendor of a gem, the imitation can never have the nature of a real jewel. Truth has a force of its own which artifice can never match. So why put up with those who degrade rather than honor the saints with their absurd, ignorant, childish, nay, even old-womanish nonsense?[5]

Jerome had fared especially poorly at the hands of earlier writers, and with some exasperation Erasmus notes that even men as learned as Platina and Volterra (Raffaelle Maffei) had taken over from earlier biographers of Jerome the obvious error that the dying saint had entrusted his commentaries to Pope Damasus, in spite of Jerome's own words that Damasus had preceded him to the grave. Of such fabricated 'lives' Erasmus writes: 'In these you will find no learning, no style, no good sense or care; you will find even less of trustworthiness, the primary requisite for a writer of history.'[6] So Erasmus set himself to work. 'Consequently, I, though unequal to this task and unaided by any reliable commentaries, with whatever trustworthiness attentive care merits, have gathered together the life of this holy man from Prosper, Severus, Orosius, even his calumniator, Rufinus; but most especially I sought Jerome in his very own writings, for who could have known him more faithfully than he did himself?'[7]

Erasmus' biographical principles, then, conform to the method of historical philological criticism according to which he wrote his scriptural commentaries. In reply to the statement that Jerome had been a cardinal he retorts that such a title had not even been known at that early date, and though Jerome referred to himself as a priest often, he never once claimed the title of cardinal. Where information is lacking

[5] Footnotes five through twenty all refer to *Erasmi Opuscula*. Since the translations given in the text are all my own, this and the following references are to the line numbers of Erasmus' Latin text. The passages translated here are to be found in lines 1–8 and 65–78.

[6] Lines 115–117.

[7] Lines 120–127.

or there is insufficient data on which to base a judgment Erasmus refrains from doing so. After giving the known details about Jerome's background he adds: 'Beyond this Jerome says nothing more about his family, whether it was plebeian or patrician, rich or poor, of the private or ruling class, although some have pretended that he came of a most noble family so that by the same token they could make him prefect of the city.'[8] With caution Erasmus will sometimes use expressions such as 'It is not fully clear .... But to me it seems more probable ....'[9] It is Jerome's story and Erasmus tells it in Jerome's own words or from his works as much as possible. 'While still a child, he was sent to Rome as the best center for both religion and erudition to study the liberal arts, as he himself says in the eleventh chapter of his commentary on Ezechiel.'[10] The citations, however, are not always so specific: 'And on this journey Bonosus was his companion, as he himself declares elsewhere.'[11] But his more common practice is to give both Jerome's own words and the specific reference: 'Again, in the letter which begins "*Non debet charta*," [Jerome] says the same thing in these words, "You yourselves know the slippery path of adolescence, on which I also fell, and which you traversed not without fear." '[12]

While it was not always possible to have exact knowledge about various facets of Jerome's life, Erasmus does not hesitate in his effort to determine as precisely as possible the circumstances surrounding particular incidents, the chronological sequence of events, and so forth, even when he can 'only give my deductions as a reader.'[13] In a thirty-line passage attempting to identify Jerome's teachers in grammar and rhetoric, Erasmus cites five different works by Jerome and offers four quotes from them to substantiate his deductions.[14] In a later passage, after quoting Jerome's account of a trip to the East, Erasmus adds:

> Some, perhaps, will think that this has to do with Jerome's first journey to Syria. To me it seems more probable that it refers to his later one. First because, as Jerome himself wrote, he was hardly more than a youth at the time of his earlier journey and it does not seem likely that an as yet unknown youth would have been received with so much honor by the most famous bishop of the region. Also, because the description of

[8] Lines 161–164.
[9] Lines 428 and 432.
[10] Lines 171–174.
[11] Lines 274–275.
[12] Lines 1049–52.
[13] Lines 223–224.
[14] Lines 201–230.

this tour through Syria and Egypt coincides well with the itinerary of Paula as Jerome describes it in her epitaph, and it is clear from Jerome's account that he was with her on that pilgrimage.[15]

Though these points are perhaps trivial and not very helpful in coming to an understanding of Jerome's essential and particular characteristics as a man, they are noteworthy in showing the critical method and caution of Erasmus in trying to get at the real historical facts of his subject's life. In other passages, Erasmus' sifting of Jerome's writings to get to the man behind the external actions and factual details led to better biographical matter.

A recurring criticism of Jerome during his lifetime and thereafter was that he had been excessively sharp towards all who disagreed with him. Four times Erasmus brings up this criticism so that his reader can see it in perspective. He first tells us that Heliodorus had accompanied Jerome to the wastelands of Syria, but left shortly thereafter:

Heliodorus then changed his mind and returned home. Not long afterwards Jerome wrote him a letter, filled with the praises and advantages of the solitary life, but also with great courtesy he freed his friend from any charge of inconstancy, blaming only his own faults for Heliodorus's departure. (I call attention in passing to this praiseworthy trait in Jerome, whom some people, judging by their own manners, think to have been rather harsh and uncivil, whereas no one was ever kinder or more courteous than he.) For he wrote the deacon Julius as follows: 'Our holy brother Heliodorus was here and wished to remain with me, but my sins drove him away.'[16]

Erasmus later expresses doubts about the historicity of a particularly degrading rumor that supposedly had circulated against Jerome during his lifetime. 'For he was not accustomed to spare his adversaries to such a degree that he would fail even to mention so infamously vile a charge, one that so grievously touched his reputation that silence would little become a man of good conscience.'[17] But Erasmus is careful to show us his subject's abusive words on another occasion. Melania had accompanied Jerome to Bethlehem, but later returned to Rome where she afterward sided with Rufinus in the quarrel between the two men. After relating these facts, Erasmus adds: 'I am not sure whether she is the same person toward whom Jerome showed his ill-humor by referring to her in an obscure passage as the one whose name is aptly trans-

[15] Lines 751–760.
[16] Lines 378–388.
[17] Lines 651–656.

lated as "the black one." '[18] A final time Erasmus returns to the charge that Jerome's hypersensitivity had led him to write about his foes without due moderation, and in his defence cites Terence's dictum: 'Had you been there you would feel otherwise.' Where possible, Jerome had preferred to use humor rather than vitriol. He had been sharp in his words to Rufinus, but the latter had deserved even harsher treatment. In his dispute with John of Jerusalem he had written with due reverence for the Bishop's office. Where possible, Jerome had always concealed the name of his adversaries, preferring to use pseudonyms while still attacking their errors.

In other ways, too, Erasmus tried to show just what sort of person Jerome had been. Against the claim of pseudo-biographers that Jerome had always avoided sins of the flesh, Erasmus recalls his subject's own words on the matter. He handles this subject in the traditional Christian context of mortification of the body and repentance for sin, but Erasmus' animadversions here reveal his insight into human nature. Those who attempt to save Jerome's reputation at the expense of twisting his very own words 'would make Christ himself greater if they could. . . . It is good to recognize in the saints the scars of sins sometimes committed over and over again. For some unknown reason the example of those who have come to their senses again and returned to piety has more of an effect on us.'[19]

Jerome's method of study, too, gives insight into his personality as Erasmus reveals it. He hesitated not at all to read even heretics and pagans, knowing how, in his prudence, to mine gold even from a dunghill. In learning Hebrew, he employed the most erudite Jews he could find. If he had studied with Bar-hanina only under cover of darkness, it was not, as Jerome himself wrote, because the Christian was ashamed to have a Jewish teacher, but only to save the Jew from the ill-will of his fellows for aiding a Christian. And Hebrew had been so hard for Jerome that he referred to the hours spent learning it as his sweatshop labors.

Jerome, then, was a man like other men. He had known weakness, frailty, sin, and strife. He had traveled through much of the then-known world, met and studied under and corresponded with the greatest men of his age, fought with some of them, loved others deeply and won their love in return. He had labored in his studying and writing to serve God and make better known His holy Word. Erasmus tried to gather as

[18] Lines 814–815.
[19] Lines 1072–79.

much information about him as he could, to gain as deep an understanding of him as possible, and to present him faithfully to his readers just as he had been. But by any standard Jerome had been an unusual person, gifted, energetic, passionately dedicated to the truth as he understood it, a man who had accomplished much in his lifetime. And he was Erasmus' favorite among the Fathers of the Church. The *Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita* was not the product of a detached, disinterested observer. Never is the reader unaware of Erasmus' profound admiration for his subject. He sides with Jerome against Rufinus, answers every criticism against him that he can. In one burst of enthusiasm, Erasmus compares Jerome with other Fathers of the Church and great Christian authors: 'Many lacked skill in language, some purity of doctrine, and others moral integrity. Jerome, and only Jerome, exhibits all virtues, so that if you consider not one or another facet but the whole picture you will find, I dare to say, that not even Greece can show his equal. Let one be brought forth if possible, and I will not hesitate to retract this judgment.'[20]

Erasmus' objectivity, then, was impinged on by his partiality, and his judgments were not always free of distortion. This is perhaps the single weakness in his life of Jerome. But it is not a distortion of fact in any instance and never is there a shadow of dishonesty. Erasmus is Jerome's advocate to the world, but he argues openly and candidly. Whether a matter has to do with some aspect of Jerome's character, some incident in his life, or a criticism of one of his works, Erasmus presents his defense as best he can, trying to persuade the reader but never through suppression of fact or subterfuge of any kind. Erasmus' partiality, though a weakness according to modern biographical criteria, is eminently understandable and is such that we can live with it not too uncomfortably.

Curiously enough, scholars who have attempted to outline the development of biography in England have all given attention to Erasmus' sketches of More, Colet, Vitrier, and Warham and have all neglected the life of St. Jerome.[21] But there is reason to believe that sixteenth-century Englishmen would have been acquainted with and interested in Erasmus' *Life of Jerome*. Throughout the century English theologians

[20] Lines 1455–61.

[21] See, for instance, Stauffer's *English Biography Before 1700*; Marie Schutt's *Die englische Biographik der Tudor Zeit* (Hamburg, 1930); or John Francis Weimer's 'Biographical Writing in Sixteenth Century England (A Catalog Raisonne).' University of Wisconsin Dissertation, 1954.

showed a continuing interest in Jerome's writings. In Richard Foxe's revision of the Oxford theological curriculum, undertaken just a few years after the Froben *Opera Hieronymi* first appeared, the scriptural commentaries of the traditional medieval authorities were replaced by those of the Latin and Greek Fathers, including, of course, those of St. Jerome among the most important.[22] And the writings of the religious controversialists, from More at the beginning of the troubles to Hooker at the end of the century, are interspersed with frequent and copious quotations from and references to the writings of Jerome.[23] And Erasmus did most of his editorial work on the *Opera Hieronymi* during his stay in England between 1509 and 1514, and was still concerned with it during his return visit to England in the spring of 1515. His letters during these years, to English as well as to Continental friends, have frequent allusions to Jerome and his writings and also to the two English scholars, Thomas Lupset and Henry Bullock, who were assisting Erasmus in his editorial work on Jerome.[24] When he finally finished the work, Erasmus dedicated the *Opera Hieronymi*, to which the life was prefixed, to Archbishop Warham. Just as soon as Froben had sent him copies of the printed work, he sent gift copies not only to Warham, but also to More, Colet, Fisher, and Christopher Urswyke, and presumably also to Lupset and Bullock.[25] (Bullock, who died less than ten years later, left a copy of the *Opera Hieronymi* and twenty-three other books to Queen's College, Cambridge.)[26] England was thus well aware of Erasmus' *Opera Hieronymi* with its introductory *Vita*. When the work first appeared in 1516, nothing like the *Vita* had yet been done in England nor would there be anything comparable to it for many years. It was an example from which biographers in England well might have

[22] See James Kelsey McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 82–83.

[23] Even the most cursory survey of English religious controversial writings of the sixteenth century will substantiate this affirmation. McConica, for instance, says that the tracts of Richard Moryson, one of the propagandists recruited by Cromwell in the mid-1530's, 'reflect the atmosphere of [Pole's Paduan household] in their citations from Jerome, Vives, and Erasmus . . .' (p. 172). More, it will be remembered, in his advice to Henry to consult the writings of the 'old holy doctors' on the matter of the divorce, listed Jerome first among them.

[24] See especially in Allen, I, 517–518, 525–528, 530–532, 540–541; and in Allen, II, 27–29, 68–73, 79–90, 114–117, and 210–221.

[25] Allen, II, 354.

[26] See D. F. S. Thomson, *Erasmus and Cambridge* (Toronto, 1963), p. 218.

learned. As I have shown elsewhere, however,[27] only the few Tudor biographers of Thomas More seem to have learned Erasmus' lessons.

Donald Stauffer, in *English Biography Before 1700*, the most comprehensive study yet made of early English biography, has stated that the medieval period left two kinds of literary life-writing to successive ages: the saint's life and the royal chronicle.[28] Yet the analyses of sixteenth-century hagiographical writings given by Stauffer, Schutt, Weimer, and others show that few of these saints' lives can even be considered true biography and that fewer still have any intrinsic merit.[29] As important as Erasmus' sketches of More, Colet, Vitrier, and Warham are, they are not comparable to his biographical masterpiece, the long-neglected *Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita*. If one is to talk seriously of the place of early sixteenth-century saints' lives in the development of English biography, or of Erasmus' contributions to that development, it is this work which must be the starting point.

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[27] 'The Development of Sixteenth-Century Biography in the Tradition of Erasmus and Thomas More,' Stanford University Dissertation, 1970.

[28] Cambridge, Mass., 1930. See the whole first chapter, 'The Medieval Period,' pp. 3–33.

[29] See, for example, the cited works of Stauffer, Schutt, and Weimer, *passim*.