

DEFAMILIARISING ERASMUS:

UNSTITCHING P. S. ALLEN'S EDITION OF THE LETTERS

GIFTS FROM UNWANTED ADMIRERS

On 19 October 1515 the German humanist Wolfgang Angst sent a gift to Erasmus, with an accompanying letter. The gift was a presentation copy of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum (Letters of Obscure Men) -- an anonymous, scurrilous satirical volume in which, together with Crotus Rubeanus and Ulrich von Hutten, Angst had had a hand. The letter sought Erasmus's approval for the project:

The Unfamous Men, that caterwauling chorus over whose birth I presided in our barren sandy desert, have now plucked up their courage and wish to pay you a state call. I do all I can to forbid such a thing, but they retaliate all the more forcibly, retorting that Erasmus will give them a very warm welcome. Did he not [not]¹ long ago repeat one of their more vigorous productions from memory at Strasburg? Are they not close relatives of the gentry so brilliantly recorded in his Moria? Their pressure was too much for me; I had to run with the wind. For the rest, it is up to you not to refuse a day's hospitality to a party which, as you know, was so keen to make your acquaintance. I beg you not to despise their humour or take it amiss; it is not within the means of my humble self to offer anything to a prince of scholars like you, except good intentions. Farewell, and long life.²

'Did he not [not] long ago repeat one of their more vigorous productions from memory at Strasburg?' refers very precisely to Erasmus's visit to the sodalitas

literaria at Strasbourg in August 1514. It is possible that Angst received the report of this highly successful literary visit first hand from one of the participants. A full account, however, was to be found in print by October 1515, in the form of the prefatory material to the edition of Erasmus's De copia, published by Schürer in Strasbourg, under Erasmus's own direction, in October 1514.³

The Epistolae obscurorum virorum satirised those clerics who were pursuing the learned reformer Johann Reuchlin, because of his commitment to Hebrew scholarship (the opposition was in favour of burning all Hebrew books). Of the two feuding parties, it seems that Angst was the more justified in imagining that Erasmus would side with Reuchlin in the increasingly vitriolic (and doctrinally dangerous) confrontation between a traditional clergy hostile to Hebraic/Judaic influence (a movement spearheaded by the converted Jew Johann Pfefferkorn and the inquisitor Jacob von Hoogstraten) and a humanistic clergy committed to trilingual study of Scripture (in which movement Erasmus was already a leading light). Such a view might plausibly have been based once again on the prefatory letter to Wimpfeling published in the October 1514 De copia volume. In it Erasmus explicitly singles out the learned reformer Reuchlin for praise, in a paragraph which suggests that the sodalitas at Strasbourg consciously associated itself with the great scholar of Greek and Hebrew:

That really accomplished person, Johann Reuchlin, endowed as he is with such a range of literatures and languages that one might think he has more hearts than Ennius, in my opinion the supreme glory and shining light and ornament of the whole of Germany, is so far from here that it is hardly possible to converse with him in letters; and this I much regret.⁴

The Epistolae obscurorum virorum volume was designed to smear the reputations of those in the traditional Catholic Church currently pursuing Reuchlin, and advocating the destruction of all Hebrew works as dangerously subversive. Here was a further reason for imagining Erasmus would receive the volume kindly.

Was Angst mistaken in thinking Erasmus might be pleased to receive a copy of a work which he was not alone in comparing with Erasmus's own Praise of Folly ('Are they not close relatives of the gentry so brilliantly recorded in his Moria?')? Early on a story circulated (traceable to Simler's Life of the reformer Bullinger) that when he first read a copy, Erasmus 'fell into such a fit of laughing that an abscess in his face burst, which else should have been laid open by order of his physician'⁵

Whether or not Erasmus reacted positively to this first presentation copy or not, by the time the enlarged (third) edition came out, probably early the following year, he was no longer amused. Among the fictitious letters added (today confidently attributed to Ulrich von Hutten) – letters much more adeptly modelled on 'real' letters, and thus making the volume more satirically compelling – was one in which Erasmus himself was invoked by name and affectionately mocked.⁶ Elsewhere within these new letters Erasmus's name was casually referenced (and his Adages parodied) as if the great man himself were somehow in on the joke (real names tend to be used in the Epistolae obscurorum virorum to score particularly sharp satirical points). Readers could have been forgiven for imagining that that Erasmus was in some way complicit in the whole affair. Since he was not, and since he hated it when people tried to implicate him by association, Erasmus was annoyed, and wrote to several friends telling them so.⁷

Having Erasmus on your side was a potent weapon in any public polemic. The anti-Reuchlin camp at whom the Epistolae obscurorum virorum had been directed were swift to seize on Erasmus's private expressions of disapproval for their own purposes. Early in 1518 Ortwinus Gratius – the butt of much of the ridicule in the Epistolae obscurorum virorum – retaliated with a volume of fictitious letters of his own, in equivalently satirical vein. To these he added two 'real' documents – the papal bull denouncing the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, and a private letter from Erasmus to Johann Caesarius, made public prominently at the beginning.⁸ Erasmus never denied the authenticity of this letter, though he was furious at its inclusion in the volume without his permission. The letter expressed Erasmus's disapproval for the satire, which it bracketed with the Julius exclusus pamphlet as an unworthy waste of time on the part of its authors. It closed with a non-committal reference to the Reuchlin controversy:

I greatly disapproved of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, right from the beginning. The wit might have proved entertaining if it had not set such an offensive precedent. I like humour, provided it stops short of abuse of any individual. But what I resented still more was the mention of my own name, brought into the later edition as though mere nonsense was not enough unless they had invited me to share the odium of it, and so had undone a great part of the good I had sought with so much toil. Even that did not satisfy them: they must needs produce a second volume like the first, full of the names of people who I know by no means approve that kind of nonsense. What a lot of harm they do, not only to themselves, but to everyone who has the cause of true learning at heart!⁹

Probably this letter, in outlined argument and tone, does indeed sum up Erasmus's considered attitude to the whole affair at the time. Satire, as far as he was concerned, was a tool for drawing attention to the deficiencies of contemporary theological scholarship, but it was not appropriate for such writing to 'draw blood' by pillorying individuals.¹⁰ Where the Julius Exclusus pamphlet was concerned Erasmus was somewhat more evasive, and his public disquiet attached to the fact that attribution to his authorship rested on the fact that 'the style is perhaps rather better Latin than some' – this was an aspect of satirical epistolary writings of around 1520 which caused Erasmus general anxiety – in published letters (particularly in the Farrago volume) he complains that whenever an anonymous polemicist writes elegant Latin, it is assumed that Erasmus himself is behind the publication.¹¹

Publications choreographed in explicit support of Reuchlin soon appeared to confirm Erasmus's endorsement of the Reuchlin camp's position. In May 1519 Reuchlin himself published a volume of his personal correspondence entitled Illustrium virorum epistolae, hebraicae, graecae et latinae, as his own, measured response to the Epistolae obscurorum virorum. It was billed on its title page as the second volume to the Clarorum virorum epistolae of 1514 for which the first printing of letters of support for Reuchlin's cause by 'obscure' (rather than 'distinguished') men had been intended as a kind of witty foil. The five letters from Erasmus to Reuchlin included in the Illustrium virorum epistolae present Erasmus, and the circle of English humanists with which he was closely associated, as moderate humanist theologians who agree with Reuchlin's erudite trilingual position on the interpretation of Scripture. All five of Erasmus's letters express moderate sentiments in support of Reuchlin, and join the names of John Fisher and John Colet to his own. Fisher's interest in Reuchlin's writing is stressed in particular

-- as Bishop of Rochester his was a distinguished and authoritative voice.¹² (Later on, of course, Erasmus notoriously distanced himself explicitly and insistently from the entire Lutheran reform movement.)

Erasmus's inclusion in Reuchlin's volume of letters meant that by 1519 he had been ventriloquised three times, by both sides of the controversy, via real or fictitious letters. Some response of his own was clearly called for, preferably one which did not involve the cautious Erasmus getting embroiled too directly in the controversy itself (or the closely associated one surrounding Luther, which would shortly eclipse the Reuchlin controversy altogether). For the remainder of this paper I shall argue that, entirely characteristically, Erasmus's response to the Reuchlin controversy was a purpose-built compilation of letters, published by Froben under the copy-editing responsibility of Beatus Rhenanus – the Farrago nova epistolarum D. Erasmi Roterodami ad alios et aliorum ad hunc: admixtis quibusdam quas scripsit etiam adolescens (Basel, October 1519).¹³

We should, I am going to suggest, treat the Farrago volume of letters as effectively as every bit as much of a 'performance' as the two satirical volumes which prompted Erasmus to publish it.¹⁴ This approach is, however, I shall argue, an extremely difficult one to take, because of editorial decisions taken by P. S. Allen, the great and single-minded modern editor of Erasmus's letters, concerning the volume by volume organisation of the correspondence.

"IT SEEMS TO ME IMPOSSIBLE THAT AS SMALL A MAN AS HE IS COULD KNOW SO MUCH"

Hutten's – it has to be said, hilarious – letter from Antonius N, doctor of medicine, to Ortwinus Gratius – letter 42 of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, pokes gentle fun at Erasmus in at least two places, both jokes depending upon personal knowledge of

the man himself. In the first place, Antonius is amazed that such erudition should be associated with a person of such inconsiderable stature: "I will not believe it and I still do not believe it for it seems to me impossible that as small a man as he is could know so much".¹⁵

Then again, Antonius expresses astonishment at Erasmus's silence during their shared meal (one assumes the Erasmus was in general irrepressibly talkative): "When, indeed, they sat down, they were silent for a long time, and out of coyness none of us wanted to begin". Antonius breaks the silence at the table with an erudite quotation worthy of a *vir obscurus*: "All were silent and tensely held their tongues" [*Aeneid* II, 1]. Antonius explains to Ortwinus Gratius that he remembers this verse because Ortwinus had been his teacher, and in order to mark the passage, Antonius had drawn a little man next to the line in question, whose mouth was locked closed with a padlock. According to Antonius it was this remembered aphorism which finally started Erasmus talking. Nevertheless, Antonius confesses that he did not understand a single word of what Erasmus said, because he spoke so quietly: "I believe, however, it had something to do with theology" he comments.¹⁶

Hutten's excellent Latin style, furthermore, contrasting starkly with the deliberate gawkiness of the earlier satirical epistles, further raised suspicion that Erasmus was now involved. It is here, indeed, I think, that we arrive at the crux of Erasmus's tense and evidently awkward public relationship with Hutten's pro-Reuchlin satire. Hutten's epistolary tactic mimics the one Erasmus had personally developed and loved to use himself as a way of conveying a vivid public version of the private man and his intellectual agenda via printed texts.¹⁷

Erasmus responded to Hutten's infuriatingly apt caricature by giving like for like. He put together – or contrived to have his devoted castigator Beatus Rhenanus put together – a volume of 'real' letters which would make plain his own position vis-à-vis Reuchlin without Erasmus himself explicitly entering the controversy.¹⁸ The tactic was so successful that scholars ever since have treated the Farrago volume as if it gave a snapshot view of Erasmus's real life.¹⁹ If we compare a letter taken from the Farrago collection of Erasmus's own letters, both the tone and the anecdotal quality of 'familiarity' with the great man closely resemble Hutton's, whilst at the same time seeming compelling more 'real' than the satirical epistles:

Erasmus of Rotterdam to his friend Thomas More, greeting.

I have sent two bundles of letters, one by a merchant I know and the other by a son of Johann Crull, whom you had helped. To this man I entrusted a volume in which were the pieces by Reuchlin which the bishop of Rochester passionately wanted; by the former I sent Reuchlin's book, translated at my own expense. Send a Utopia at the first opportunity. There is a councillor in Antwerp so much struck by it that he knows it by heart. Dorp's letter to which you replied was copied by your people in such a way that the Sibyll herself could not read it; I wish you would send it me less badly written. Please write fully at the first possible opportunity about everything; for here a great revolution seems to be in prospect, unless I am quite wrong. ... If Vives has been with you often you will easily guess what I have suffered in Brussels, where I have had to cope every day with so many Spaniards come to pay their respects, as well as Italians and Germans. ...

Antwerp, 8 March 1517.²⁰

Here Erasmus captures wonderfully vividly the engaging materiality of familiar letters. The impersonality of print is transformed into intimacy by Erasmus's introducing real 'bundles of [hand-written] letters', and complaining about the scribe's handwriting. Books are carried from one location to another, and seized on enthusiastically by delighted readers. The letter also nonchalantly draws together a 'circle' of like-minded reform-minded humanist scholars, which includes John Fisher, Erasmus, More and Vives, and a shared enthusiasm (a passion) for Reuchlin. Together they stand on the intellectual threshold of 'a great revolution'.

I want to argue here that the Farrago volume artfully organises carefully selected letters (including some 'juvenile' correspondence, as the title indicates) with a number of important contemporary agendas in mind. They are characteristically agendas which converge on the practice of humane letters and bonae litterae, particularly in England, under a humanistically educated Prince who supports Europe-wide peace, and the growing tide of theological reform with whose successful challenge to traditional theology and theological institutions Reuchlin and Luther were becoming increasingly strongly associated.

Any such analysis has to begin with a reorganisation of the component letters in the Farrago volume, by dismantling Allen's literal-mindedly chronological arrangement in favour of the organisation within the Farrago volume itself (see appendices 1 & 2). A number of strong, topical agendas re-emerge immediately: a series of exchanges with Budé on the importance of Greek studies; Erasmus's educational programme, as implemented in England, and his scholarly relationship with a circle of public servants around Cardinal Wolsey associated with the 'universal peace' signed in

1518 (Colet, More, Tunstall, Fisher and Wolsey); scholarly correspondence with the Royal English Secretary Ammonius; the Reuchlin/Luther debates and strong support for their arguments coming out of England. Such preliminary observations already begin to answer a question posed by Bietenholz: 'Why, for instance, did the public have to wait until the appearance of the Farrago nova epistolarum in late 1519 to read even as much as a sprinkling of Erasmus' frequent exchanges with Thomas More? Indeed the greater part of that correspondence is now lost for good, we must presume. How much more valuable would it be to us than the laborious and dated correspondence with Budé, of which hardly a scrap seems to be missing' ('Erasmus and the German Public', 63). The former is included because it helps give 'colour' (and authority) to Erasmus's close relations as a humanist educator with the centres of political power in England, and (crucially) its political commitment to a 'universal peace' within Christendom. The latter builds a serious (even pedantic) picture of a studious correspondence conducted around Greek eloquence and erudition (even though Erasmus and Budé's purely epistolary friendship was on the wane by 1519). Bietenholz himself has an excellent analysis of one further 'agenda item' at the end of the Farrago volume: an appeal to Erasmus's friends to defend his reputation against the assaults on his scholarship by the Englishman Edward Lee.²¹

To make clear how dramatically such a reorganisation alters Erasmus's epistolary message, in both tone and tactics, I shall concentrate here on the letters which orchestrate Erasmus's response to the relationship between the Farrago volume and the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, whose context was explicitly that Reuchlin controversy with which I opened.²²

Erasmus's exchanges of letters with the English humanist community, printed at the very centre of the Farrago volume, refer casually and positively to Reuchlin and his

writings, as part of the 'rebirth' of Latin, Greek and Hebrew letters which they believed was restoring an explicitly Christian learning. Three months after the appearance of Reuchlin's *Illustrium virorum epistolae*, Erasmus wrote a long letter of carefully judged support for Reuchlin, to Jacob van Hoogstraten, the inquisitor vigorously pursuing the Hebraist. This letter was rushed into print as the penultimate item in the *Farrago* volume. It establishes the absolutely contemporary moment of the volume's appearance, and recapitulates the controversy so as to propose a spirit of enlightened compromise amongst the antagonists:

For some time now, as I read the pamphlets containing your disputes with Reuchlin, I have often been moved to write to you [the letter begins] ...

Long ago I had read Reuchlin's defence, though only in snatches, with the most painful feelings, nor did I conceal my distress in writing to Reuchlin at the way in which he had let fly at his opponents with abuse that was so obviously false and with so little self-control, whoever they might be – for at that time they were no better known to me than was Reuchlin himself [he went on] ...

... men say that you are blind to the errors of the Dominicans, and clear-sighted only when Reuchlin errs or one of his supporters [he conciliates]. ... I say this, not to give my support to Reuchlin, but in the interests of you and your party. My friendship with him is not such as to make me become involved in his case, as you seem to suspect none the less.²³

The reader is left in no doubt that the correspondents in this volume are favourably inclined towards Reuchlin, but that they draw the line at the violence with which Reuchlin's supporters have turned on his detractors in print.

A letter close to the beginning of the volume explicitly rejects the association between Erasmus and the (in Erasmus's view tasteless) Lamentationes volume:

Erasmus to his friend Hermann von dem Busche, Greeting

You cannot believe how sorely it grieves me that your disagreement should daily get worse. I am surprised that the theologians and professed followers of a strict religious life should stir up trouble of this kind, the outcome of which must be quite uncertain. Those Lamentationes – what could be more misguided or unpleasant or ill-written or malignant? I could wish that our eaglet would keep his talons off such frightful stuff, from which he can get nothing but corruption and filth. A man who takes on the Preachers has mob-warfare on his hands.²⁴

CASUALLY MENTIONING LUTHER

The Farrago volume is not just cautiously pro-Reuchlin. It is also self-consciously pro-Luther, in a highly specific, urbane, scholarly vein. Particular care has been taken here by Erasmus in the choice of letters, to and from himself, which refer to Luther and his writings. A letter from Reuchlin's great-nephew Melanchthon to Erasmus sets the tone:

Philippus Melanchthon to Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

... It gives me great pain, my dear Erasmus, that the false accusations of a worthless wretch [Eck] should make a man of your distinction suspect me of wishing to criticize and act as a censor of your noble commentaries on the Scriptures. ... I write briefly because I write in great distress of mind and on the spur of the moment, and at a difficult time too. Martin Luther, who is a keen supporter of your reputation, desires your good opinion at all points. Farewell, my eminent friend.

Leipzig, 5 January 1519²⁵

A letter from Luther himself to Erasmus testifies to the reformer's respect and admiration for the great humanist, and is worth citing in full, because of the way that all the issues on the Lutheran agenda are deftly stage-managed for a moderate readership. What needs to be noted (hence my quoting from these letters at length) is the way in which familiarity (in the *epistolae* sense of cordial communality of learned interests, and affection based on shared study rather than personality) shades and tempers the debate. Note also the frank admiration expressed (to the point of flattery) for Erasmus:

Martin Luther to Erasmus of Rotterdam. Jesus

Greeting. Often though I converse with you, and you with me, Erasmus my glory and my hope, we do not yet know one another. Is not this monstrous odd? And yet not odd at all, but a daily experience. For who is there in whose heart Erasmus does not occupy a central place, to whom Erasmus is not the teacher who holds him in thrall? I speak of those who love learning as it should

be loved. For I am not sorry if among Christ's other gifts this too finds its place, that many disapprove of you; this is the test by which I commonly distinguish the gifts of God in his mercy from his gifts in anger. And so I give you joy of this, that while you are so highly approved by all men of good will, you are no less disapproved of by those who wish to secure the highest places and highest approval for themselves alone.

But what a dolt I am to approach such a man as you with unwashed hands like this – no opening words of reverence and respect, as though you were a most familiar friend, when I do not know you nor you me! But with your habitual courtesy you will put this down to strength of feeling or lack of experience; for having spent my life among scholastic philosophers, I have not even learnt enough to be able to write a letter of greeting to a learned man. Had it not been so, think of the great letters I should have plagued you with long since! Nor should I have allowed you alone to do all the talking as I sit here in my study.

As it is, having heard from my worthy friend Fabritius Capito that my name is known to you through the slight piece I wrote about indulgences, and learning very recently from the preface to your Enchiridion that you have not only seen but approved the stuff I have written, I feel bound to acknowledge, even in a very barbarous letter, that wonderful spirit of yours which has so much enriched me and all of us; although I know that it can mean absolutely nothing to you if I show myself affectionate and

grateful in a letter to you and quite content with the gratitude and Christian love, secret and laid up in God's keeping, that burn within my heart when I think of you, just as I too am satisfied because, though you know it not, I possess your spirit and all that you do for us in your books, without exchange of letters or converse with you in person. Yet shame and my sense of duty insist on being expressed in words, especially since my name too has begun to emerge from obscurity, for I would not have anyone think, if I keep silence, that this is due to jealousy, and of the wrong kind. And so, dear Erasmus kindest of men, if you see no objection, accept this younger brother of yours in Christ, who is at least much devoted to you and full of affection, though in his ignorance he has deserved nothing better than to bury himself in a corner and remain unknown even to the sky and sun that we all share. Which is a state I have always wished for with the liveliest emotion, as knowing well enough how curt are my resources. But by some fate or other things have turned out very differently, so that I am compelled, to my great shame, to expose my disgraceful shortcomings and my unhappy ignorance to be discussed and pulled to pieces even by the learned.

Philippus Melanchthon flourishes, except that all of us together have scarcely strength enough to stop him from hastening the ruin of his health by an insane devotion to learning. He burns with the ardour of youth both to be and to do all things for all men. You will do a good deed if you write to him and tell him to preserve

himself for our benefit and for the cause of liberal studies; for so long as that man is safe and sound, I promise myself almost more than I dare hope for. Greetings from Andreas Karlstadt, who is wholly devoted to Christ as he sees him in you. The Lord Jesus preserve you, most worthy Erasmus, for ever and ever. Amen.

I have written at length. But you will bear in mind that it is not always the scholarly letters that deserve to be read; sometimes you must be weak with those that are weak.

Wittenberg, 28 March 1519²⁶

The most telling letter included in the Farrago collection of epistolae is Erasmus's reply to Luther's above, which by the time that volume appeared had already seen publication in Peter Mosellanus's Oratio de ratione disputandi volume (July 1519),²⁷ alongside a lively letter from Erasmus to the author satirising the boorish ignorance current attackers of Luther from within the Catholic Church (a letter which is also reprinted in the Farrago volume, alongside this one).²⁸ Note once again the suggestion that because of its eloquence, Luther has received assistance from Erasmus in his writings – a charge which in the end derives from the extraordinary success of Erasmus's Moriae Encomium, and the careful insistence that this is a letter-based – not an actual -- friendship.²⁹

Erasmus of Rotterdam to Martin Luther

Greetings, dearest brother in Christ. Your letter gave me great pleasure: it displayed the brilliance of your mind and breathed the spirit of a Christian. No word of mine could describe the storm

raised here by your books. Even now it is impossible to root out from men's minds the most groundless suspicion that your work is written with assistance from me and that I am, as they call it, a standard-bearer of this new movement. They supposed that this gave them an opening to suppress both humane studies – for which they have a burning hatred, as likely to stand in the way of her majesty queen Theology, whom they value more than they do Christ – and myself at the same time, under the impression that I contribute something of importance towards this outburst of zeal. In the whole business their weapons are clamour, audacity, subterfuge, misinterpretation, innuendo; if I had not seen it with my own eyes – felt it, rather – I would never have believed theologians could be such maniacs. One would think it was some disastrous infection. And yet this poisonous virus, starting in a small circle, / spread to a large number, so that a great part of this university was carried away by the spreading contagion of this epidemic paranoia.

I assured them that you were quite unknown to me; that I had not yet read your books and could therefore neither disapprove nor approve anything. I merely told them not to make such an offensive uproar in public before they had even read what you have written, and that this was in their own interests, since their judgment ought to carry great weight. I also advised them to consider whether it was a good plan to produce before a casual audience of laymen a distorted account of views which it would

be more proper to refute in print or discuss among specialists, especially since all with one voice speak highly of the author's manner of life. I did not good at all: they are so blinded by their own jaundiced, indeed slanderous, disputations. When I think how often we have agreed terms of peace, and how often on some trifling and rash suspicion they have stirred up fresh trouble! And they regard themselves as theologians. Theologians in this part of the world are unpopular at court; and this too they think is my fault. All the bishops are cordially on my side. These men have no confidence in the printed word; their hope of victory lies entirely in malicious gossip. This I despise, for my conscience is clear. Their attitude to you has softened somewhat. They are afraid of my pen, knowing their own record; and, my word, I would paint them in their true colours, as they deserve, did not Christ's teaching and Christ's example point in quite another direction. Fierce wild beasts are tamed by kindness; these men are driven wild if you do anything for them.

You have people in England who think well of what you write, and they are in high place. There are some here too, an outstanding person [the bishop of Liege <Erard de la Marck>] among them, who favour your views. As for me, I keep myself uncommitted, so far as I can, in hopes of being able to do more for the revival of good literature [bonae literae]. And I think one gets further by courtesy and moderation than by clamour. That was how Christ brought the world under his sway; that was how Paul

did away with the Jewish law, by reducing everything to allegory. It is more expedient to protest against those who misuse the authority of the bishops than against the bishops themselves; and I think one should do the same with kings. The universities are not so much to be despised as recalled to more serious studies. Things which are of such wide acceptance that they cannot be torn out of men's minds all at once should be met with argument, / close-reasoned forcible argument, rather than bare assertion. Some people's poisonous propaganda is better ignored than refuted. Everywhere we must take pains to do and say nothing out of o arrogance or faction; for I think the spirit of Christ would have it so. Meanwhile we must keep our minds above the corruption of anger or hatred, or of ambition; for it is this that lies in wait for us when our religious zeal is in full course.

I am not instruction you to do this, only to do what you do always. I have dipped into your commentary on the Psalms; I like the look of it particularly and hope that it will be of great service. There is a man in Antwerp, the prior of the monastery there [Jacob Proost/Probst], a genuine Christian, who is most devoted to you and was once your pupil, or so he says. He is almost the only one of them all who preaches Christ; the others as a rule preach the inventions of men or their own advantage. I have written to Melanchthon. May the Lord Jesus even more richly endue you with his spirit every day, for his own glory and the good of mankind. Your letter was not at hand when I wrote this.

Farewell, from Louvain, 30 May 1519³⁰

By including both these letters in his own compilation, Erasmus believed that he had strategically reclaimed them as his own, and prevented them from being turned to others' polemical advantage (i.e. as stronger support for Luther than he had intended).

LETTERS OUT OF THEIR AUTHOR'S CONTROL

It rapidly became clear, however, that circumscribing the political force of familiar letters once published was much harder than Erasmus imagined. However much he tried to control their circulation, Erasmus's letters turned out all-too-easily to escape his authorial control.³¹ The letter included in the Lamentationes volume, ostensibly claiming Erasmus as a supporter for the 'obscure men' of traditional theology was already proof of that. No sooner had Erasmus launched the Farrago volume into the public domain than its carefully moderate argument, too, began to come unstitched.

The two pro-Luther letters printed (apparently without Erasmus's consent) in the Mosellanus volume implicated Erard de la Marck by name as a Lutheran. Although Erasmus tried to cover his tracks by deleting the explicit reference from the Farrago printing, the naming in the Mosellanus printing stuck (and was repeated in a number of other unauthorised printings of the letter and its accompanying Luther letter over the following months). Marck was investigated by the Inquisition as a direct result of the letter. Although he forgave Erasmus for the lapsus calami, real damage was done to the Bishop's reputation, and his life endangered -- just the state of affairs Erasmus had been so publicly fearful of when he insisted that satire should never name individuals.³²

Still more disturbing for Erasmus himself, however, was the subsequent 'spin' put upon the carefully restrained support he had expressed for Luther.

At about the same time that Luther sent his letter of homage, Erasmus wrote a long letter to the Elector Frederick of Saxony. The letter is fundamentally a piece of flattery to a 'Christian Prince', notifying Frederick of a dedication by Erasmus. It includes, however, a judicious defence of Luther's reputation and his scholarship, even though, as Erasmus insists, 'Luther's case has very little to do with me':

To the Elector Frederick of Saxony

Greetings and all good wishes, most illustrious Prince. Although it has never been my good fortune to see or to speak with your serene Highness face to face, a fact which I count not the least among my misfortunes, I took fire from the remarkable unanimity with which everyone extols your distinguished gifts, worthy even of the highest rank, and the wonderful spirit in which you encourage good literature and have even shown very special favour to myself, and made bold to dedicate to you my revision of the Lives of the Caesars, seeking nothing from your Highness in return, and with no ulterior motive except to deepen your approval of liberal studies and give some indication of a kind of mutual esteem answering in me the favour so great a prince has freely bestowed upon me. ...

There have recently appeared some pieces by Martin Luther, and at the same time rumours has reached us that he is persecuted beyond all reason by / the authority of his eminence the cardinal

of San Sisto [Cajetanus], who is a papal legate in Swabia. What instant rejoicing at this, what triumphant glee, as they think they see a perfect opportunity offered them to do harm to the humanities! For, as the Greek proverb has it, rascals have all they need save opportunity, which gives scope for wrongdoing to those who have an ever-present desire to do wrong. Immediately the pulpits, the lectures and committees, and the dinner-tables were loud with nothing but cries of Heresy! And Anti-Christ! And in with this business, charged as it is with prejudice, especially among foolish women and the ignorant multitude, these cunning fellows mix allusions to the ancient tongues and good writing and humane culture, as though Luther trusted to these for his defence, or these were sources whence heresies were born. This worse than libellous effrontery did not find favour with men of principle but none the less was hailed as a pretty invention by some persons who suppose themselves the standard-bearers of theology and pillars of the Christian religion. See how in the blindness of enthusiasm we pander to our own faults! We count it a monstrous calumny, almost as gross an offence as heresy, if anyone calls a brawling theologian, of whom we have not a few, not a theologian but a vain talker; and we forgive ourselves if before a large audience we use words like heretic and Anti-Christ of anyone who rouses our disapproval.

I know as little of Luther as I do of any man, so that I cannot be suspected of bias towards a friend. His works it is not for me to

defend or criticize, as hitherto I have not read them except in snatches. His life, at least, is highly spoken of by all who know him; and not only is this very far above all suggestion of greed or ambition, but his integrity wins approval even among the gentiles.

...

... I write this to you very freely, most illustrious Duke, because Luther's case has very little to do with me.³³

Erasmus chose not to include this letter in the Farrago volume, in spite of its close fit with one of the 'themes' of that compilation, presumably because of the strength of the case it makes – unprompted -- on Luther's behalf. Others, however, were less restrained. Within weeks, the letter was printed and circulating freely, providing an additional, strengthened context of Erasmian support for Luther, to set alongside the letters to Mosellanus and Luther in Mosellanus's Oratio de ratione disputandi volume. Only weeks after the publication of Reuchlin's Illustrium virorum epistolae, here was further evidence of the subversive tendencies behind Erasmus's scholarly humanistic crusade for bonae litterae, despite his own resolute insistence to the contrary.³⁴

In October 1519, in an unpublished letter to Maarten Lips, Erasmus expressed anxiety about the way in which his letters were being appropriated and used for political purposes beyond his control:

Hoogstraten is now in Louvain. He has secured a copy of my letter for Luther, and thinks it will serve nicely to show me as being in favour of Luther, I having published it [in the Farrago volume] expressly to prove that Luther and I have nothing in common.³⁵

Indeed, by the time Erasmus's Farrago volume came out in the autumn, its author probably already knew that the care he had taken there to choreograph his own religious and political moderation – particularly in relation to Luther -- was to no avail. Nevertheless, the Farrago volume was a runaway best-seller. By February 1520 Erasmus told Budaeus that Froben was asking for a second edition (and Erasmus was proposing tweeking the editing to contain the volume's impact):

You [Budaeus] have seen, I expect, my Farrago of letters, but the editing is very careless. They are asking a second time for a copy with revisions, for the copies went very quickly; it often happens that the worst books are the most saleable. If you think anything should be left out or altered, let me know.³⁶

LETTERS OF OBSCURE MEN

Which brings us back, in conclusion, to the Letters of Obscure Men. By 1520 Erasmus's attitude to the pro-Reuchlin pamphlets had settled into one of firm disapproval. There was too little to distinguish the tactics of Hutten and his associates from Erasmus's own strategy of manipulating correspondence to strong didactic effect in his published volumes of familiar letters. For a few years longer, Erasmus worked with his castigatores and publishers to issue hugely popular collections of his familiar letters for pedagogic and didactic purposes. Before long, however, he had conceded that others would always put their own interpretation on the carefully orchestrated sentiments there expressed. The Letters of Obscure Men affair had revealed how devastatingly effective counterfeit correspondence could be in the public arena; in the end their success undermined Erasmus's confidence in his own, judicious manipulation of his own, real-life letters.

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Notes

¹ There is a mistake in the Toronto edition translation here: quod dudum = not long ago, recently.

² ep 363, in R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson, transl. And J. K. McConica annotated, The Correspondence of Erasmus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 3: 184-5. See P. S. Allen, Erasmi Epistolae 2:152-3. On Angst see P. G. Bietenholz (ed.), Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) 1: 58-9: 'A native of Kayserberg in Upper Alsace, Angst matriculated in 1506 in the newly founded University of Frankfurt an der Oder, obtaining his BA in 1507. At Frankfurt he met Ulrich von Hutten, who was one step ahead of Angst in his studies and soon came to exercise a lasting influence upon the young Alsatian. Both were restless, both possessed a solid knowledge of Latin, and both were devoted to the cause of Reuchlin. Unlike Hutten, however, Angst did not produce original compositions but employed his scholarship in the service of various printers. Among the editions he saw through the press were one of Cicero's Tusculanae quaestiones for Matthias Schürer (Strasbourg 1514) and a manual of sermons by Santius de Porta, edited in the winter of 1514-15 for the Hagenau printer Heinrich Gran, who specialized in the production of works of scholastic theology. Soon thereafter, however, Gran produced anonymously the first edition of the famous Epistolae obscurorum virorum, most likely as a result of the connections between Angst, Hutten and Crotus Rubianus (cf Hutten's testimonial for Angst in the second part of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, 1517, verses 124-31). Gran's first edition gave Angst reason to approach Erasmus.'

³ For a full account of the 'staging' of this volume see L. Jardine, 'Penfriends and Patria: Erasmian pedagogy and the Republic of Letters' (Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture, Toronto, March 1995), Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook 16 (1996), 1-18. Erasmus's long complimentary rhetorical letter in reply to Wimpfeling's there contains explicit reference to exchanges of poems, and the likelihood is strong that Erasmus would have recited from memory. The verses in question might have been from Sebastian Brandt's Ship of Fools (since the letter makes it clear Erasmus would have known Brandt was going to be there). They might also, however, have been by Gebweiler, since verses of his are appended to the previous edition of the De copia also published in Strasbourg a year earlier.

⁴ Letter 305. Correspondence 3: 33. Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper, the strand in these letters which distances Erasmus's Moriae Encomium from the Julius Exclusus pamphlet on the grounds that the former's satire is non-specific and harms no individual's reputation, is of some interest.

⁵ Cit. F. G. Stokes, Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum: The Latin Text with an English Rendering, Notes and an Historical Introduction (London: Chatto & Windus, 1909), 1.

⁶ Note on the various editions, and authorship of the various parts.

⁷ Nevertheless, Erasmus was sufficiently interested to want to keep up with the various editions as they came out. See ep 637 (to Peter Gilles, unpublished): 'Please arrange for Friesland to bring me the later series of the Epistolae obscurorum

virorum but seal them up so that he does not know what he is carrying'
(Correspondence 5, 86).

⁸ An earlier response, 'Johann Pfefferkorn's Defence against the Slandorous and Calumnious Letters of Obscure Men' had appeared in the summer of 1516. See Stokes, liv.

⁹ Erasmus, Correspondence, 5, 65-67 [ep 622]. This letter is known only from the Lamentationes obscurorum virorum (1st ed Cologne: [Quentel c March] 1518; second, enlarged ed Cologne: Quentel 1 October 1518; Hutten Operum supplementum I 323-418). Erasmus, who admitted his authorship of the letter, never claimed that the text was incomplete or inaccurate; but he made it clear that the publication was unauthorized (Allen Ep 967: 167-9). In the Spongia against Hutten (LB X 1640E-41B) he repeats this assertion and firmly rejects Hutten's charge of duplicity in his stand on the Reuchlin controversy. In fact, it does not seem that he ever spoke with approval of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum (cf Ep 636:3-4). It may be doubted, however, whether he would have sent this letter to Cologne if he had not wished it to circulate there, at least in manuscript. The Lamentationes were a polemical reply by Ortwinus Gratius to the Epistolae obscurorum virorum, using the same technique of ridicule. Hence Erasmus was equally outspoken in his disapproval of the Lamentationes (cf Ep 611:82n). In view of the biased source from which this letter is known, it might be possible that some short statement in favour of Reuchlin, analogous to the one at the end of Erasmus' very similar Ep 636, was suppressed by the editor. A more substantial omission would probably have been noted by Erasmus and criticized in Ep 967 or elsewhere. This letter answers Ep 615' (Letters 5, 621-2). The letter to Caesarius closely resembles another letter of around

the same time, sent to Hermann von Neuenaahr, and beginning 'All the learned circle in Basle knows that I have always disapproved of the so-called Epistolae obscurorum virorum, not that I am averse from wit and humour, but because I cannot approve this precedent they set of hurting other men's reputations, since this is within everyone's reach. I too wrote a humorous piece once in my Moria, but I mentioned no one by name.' (ep 636).

¹⁰ In the first of the letters of support for Reuchlin, published in Reuchlin's Illustrium virorum epistolae, Erasmus wrote: 'When I had read your Defence, written with such energy, such confidence, such flashing eloquence, such piercing wit, such manifold and copious erudition, I seemed to hear the accents not so much of a culprit making his apology as of a conqueror triumphing over his defeated foes. One complaint I had to make, my dear Reuchlin, for I will speak frankly as a friend should: I wish you had diverged rather less into general considerations or at least had not spent so long on them, and also that you had refrained from open personal attacks.' (ep 300, Correspondence 3, 5-8)

¹¹ Concerning the Julius exclusus pamphlet, Erasmus writes in the letter to Caesarius: 'Another thing which I resent most of all, if it is true, was told me by my servant Jacobus when he returned from your part of the world: that many people in Cologne have in their possession some sort of pamphlet attacking Pope Julius, and how after death he was shut out of heaven by St Peter. I had heard long ago that a story to this effect was afoot in France, where this ephemeral stuff has always enjoyed excessive freedom. This, I suppose, has now been translated by someone into Latin. I cannot imagine what has come into their heads, to waste time and labour like that. Besides which, I am surprised that some people suspect me as the

source of this egregious absurdity; I suppose because the style is perhaps rather better Latin than some. I have of course written a humorous piece, my Moria, but not so as to draw blood; I slighted the reputation of no man by name; I attacked men's foibles, but no man's reputation. If what my servant told me is true, for as yet I can hardly credit it, I do beg you, my friend, to do all you can to get this kind of impious stuff suppressed before it can be printed; not that these people deserve to have this service done them, but because it is our public duty to maintain a standard of decency in scholarship, which they bedaub so disgustingly with their so-called humour. As far as I myself am concerned, I am sure that no one who knows me will fail to understand that I particularly disliked this sort of rubbish, as unworthy of a scholar and an honourable man. Give my cordial greetings to Jacob of Hoorn; I enjoyed his letter more than I can say. As for the settlement of the dispute about Reuchlin, I only hope your news is true. A man from Alkmaar told me you had written me another letter, but I have not had it yet. Farewell, most learned Caesarius.' In a number of letters Erasmus comments that the pamphlet is attributed to him solely on grounds of style. See e.g., letter to Thomas Wolsey May 1519 (ep 967): 'I hear too that there are some people in your part of the world who try to fasten on me the suspicion of having written this pamphlet also; so determined are they to try everything, those men who are sorry to see this revival in the ancient tongues and in liberal studies. In so doing they rely on no argument except the style; which however is not much like my style, unless I have very little idea of it. Not but what it would [sic!] be no great surprise if in that piece or elsewhere there were some resemblance to my way of writing, for hardly anyone writes nowadays without rousing some echoes of my style, simply because my books are in the hands of nearly everyone, so that even in the work of those who attack me in print I not

seldom recognize my own phrases and feel I am transfixed with an arrow I myself have feathered' (Correspondence 6, 371-2).

¹² The letters in question are eps 300, 324, 457, 471 and 713. Fisher's real interest in Reuchlin's position is confirmed in unpublished letters exchanged with Erasmus. Although Erasmus later denied that letter 713 was authentic, because of its violent language against Pfefferkorn, Allen and the editors of the Toronto edition of Erasmus's letters are inclined to accept its authenticity on grounds of the close similarity in its phrasing to the other four published letters.

¹³ Although, as far as I am aware, Erasmus's editors do not comment on it, the title of this volume itself – a hodge-podge, or disorganised mixture of letters – hints at its less than conventional pedigree.

¹⁴ Since I began work on this argument I have discovered an article by Bietenholz which makes some preliminary remarks along similar lines. See P. G. Bietenholz, 'Erasmus and the German public, 1518-1520; the authorized and unauthorized circulation of this correspondence', The Sixteenth Century Journal 8, Supplement (1977), 61-78.

¹⁵ F. G. Stokes (transl. and ed.), Epistolae obscurorum virorum: The Latin Text with an English Rendering, Notes and an Historical Introduction (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909), 370.

¹⁶ See R. P. Becker, A War of Fools: The Letters of Obscure Men A Study of the Satire and the Satirized (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 145-7.

¹⁷ On Erasmus's innovatory practice in the field of letter-writing see L. Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ On Beatus Rhenanus's role in 'ghosting' the Auctarium and Farrago volumes see Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters. In a later letter to Rhenanus Erasmus claimed that the Farrago volume had been rushed out 'partly out of necessity' (ibid).

¹⁹ I have commented elsewhere on the fact that by replacing letters from distinct volumes like the Farrago one in strict chronological order Allen (and then the Toronto editors) obscures the textual connections deliberately drawn attention to in the printed edition. See Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters; 'Penfriends and Patria: Erasmian pedagogy and the Republic of Letters'.

²⁰ Ep 545, Correspondence 4, 544-5. I have written about this letter before in Erasmus, Man of Letters, where I argued that it was part of a carefully laid textual 'trail' associating Vives with the Erasmian project. Here we see that the Reuchlin controversy was also part of the 'scene setting' of this letter.

²¹ Bietenholz, 'Erasmus and the German public', 71-2.

²² A full treatment is beyond the scope of this paper, and is the subject of a forthcoming book on which I am working, entitled, Yours Sincerely: Erasmus and the Printed Fortune of Familiar Letters (for completion in 2004).

²³ Ep 1006 (Correspondence 7, 44-54)

²⁴ ep 830, Correspondence 5, 402-3. 'Hermann von dem Bosche was a Westphalian knight, humanist, and poet. ... He was a friend of both Hutten and Neuenahr and contributed to both parts of the Epistolae obscurorum virorum as well as to other publications in connection with the Reuchlin controversy' (Correspondence 5, 402-3).

²⁵ Ep 910 (Correspondence 6, 220-1).

²⁶ Ep 933 (Correspondence 6, 281-3).

²⁷ Mosellanus's oration was delivered at the opening ceremony of the Leipzig disputation between Eck, Karlstadt and Luther, 27 June – 16 July 1519 (Correspondence 6, 310).

²⁸ Thus Bietenholz is not correct in arguing that Erasmus was concerned at the juxtaposition of the two letters in the original publication.

²⁹ In a fuller version of this argument, therefore, one would need to include the furore surrounding the Moriae Encomium, particularly in Louvain, and the much reprinted public exchange of letters with Martin Dorp. See Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters.

³⁰ Ep 980 (Correspondence 6, 391-3).

³¹ Erasmus was clear that interpretation of things he had written was already beyond his control. See various letters about satirical intent in which he admits that however carefully he writes, he can be attributed with more barbed comment than he meant..

³² For the full story see L.-E. Halkin, 'Erasme de Rotterdam et Erard de la Marck', in Hommages à la Wallonie (Brussels, 1981), 237-52.

³³ Ep 939 (Correspondence 6, 295-9) 14 April 1519.

³⁴ See also Bietenholz, 'Erasmus and the German public', 67-8.

³⁵ Ep 1040 (Correspondence 7, 128).

³⁶ Ep 1066 (Correspondence 7, 207).