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Erasmus and the German Public, 1518-1520; The Authorized and Unauthorized Circulation of his Correspondence.

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"I would as soon the Dominicans wouldn't know what a friend I have been to Luther."[1]

"Luther I do not know, nor have I read his books. . . . I lent no countenance to Luther, even in the days when I was more or less free to support him. I only objected to the methods by which he was attacked."[2]

"It seems to me that the absolute rule of the Roman Archpriest is the pest of Christendom."[3]

"I hope that my [New Testament] will not be unworthy of Pope Leo and of posterity."[4]

THE READER WILL HAVE guessed correctly that all four of the above statements are by Erasmus. Only months and even weeks separate the points of time in which each pair was written down, although in spirit they seem worlds apart. Indeed, in view of our uncalled-for juxtaposition the reader has little choice but to conclude that the statements are incompatible or at least ambiguous. But before we sit in judgment on Erasmus we should realize that

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[1] *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, eds. P. S. Allen *et al.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906-1958), IV, Ep. 1088 (hereafter Allen): letter to Jodocus Jonas, April 9, 1520.

[2] Allen, IV, Ep 1143, to Leo X, September 13, 1520.

[3] Allen, III, Ep. 872, to Johannes Lang, October 17, 1518.

[4] Allen, III, Ep. 860, to Antonio Pucci, August 26, 1518.


ROTERODAM*ERASMVS

very few of his contemporaries can have been in a position to place these statements side by side and wonder about their congruence. Two stand in letters which were promptly published by Erasmus; the other two come from letters which remained private and were shared perhaps only between the recipient and a handful of his friends. The feats of distinguished and patient scholars such as Jean Leclerc and P. S. Allen[5] have made it possible to read his scattered private letters along with the published ones in chronological sequence. In doing so, the differences in scope and appeal are easily overlooked. For instance, the French translation of his correspondence now in progress does not pause to inform the reader of the source of each piece.[6] It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that it is, nevertheless, of real importance to know when and how certain letters came to the attention of Erasmus' contemporaries, whereas others never did.

Erasmus certainly made a distinction between private correspondence and what we might call "open" letters: pieces written and printed as a public tribute to the addressee, such as dedicatory prefaces, and likewise pieces written and printed as a public reprimand or a rejoinder to an indiscreet critic. He made this distinction in theory when he wrote his treatise on letter-writing. Letters, he found, could cover almost any subject and be classified in many ways. Some were like policy speeches, addressed to princes or to magistrates, complex and detailed. Others were private, in which case the specific circumstances had to be taken into account: both of the writer and the recipient.[7] These theories were formulated with the benefit of thirty years' experience as an avid letter writer. As a humanist Erasmus knew that the written word ought to be shared between the author and his reader. This was true particularly of private letters. To write in the same vein to Ulrich von Hutten and to Pope Leo X would have been inconsiderate, even untruthful in a sense. If such disparate letters were to be composed, ambiguities would be inevitable.[8] Nor would their occurrence call for a special apology. Apparently Erasmus trusted that the public would understand this point. As some of his letters appeared in printed collections no great editorial effort was made to avoid inconsistency.

Although Erasmus' epistolography was an endlessly refined and variegated instrument of literary expression, he did at no time overlook the simple alternatives of private letters and others composed already with a view to publication. From his literary beginnings to the last years of his life he

[5] *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc (Leiden, 1703-1706) (hereafter LB) and above, note 1.

[6] *La correspondance d'Erasme,* trans. A. Gerlo et P. Foriers (Brussels: Presses académiques européennes, 1967-).

[7] Erasmus, "De conscribendis epistolis," ed. J.-C. Margolin, *Opera omnia*, I, 2 (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1971), 213, 215, 224-225, 309-311.

[8] P. G. Bietenholz, "Ambiguity and Consistency in the Work of Erasmus of Rotterdam," *Wascana Review*, IX, 1 (1974), 134-142.

kept careful records of a great many letters, but the extent to which his copy books were actually transformed into printed collections varied dramatically. Moreover, in his mind Erasmus himself must have added a further twist to the basic distinction between private and public letters. Authorized collections of his letters began to appear in 1516.[9] The success of these collections was immediate and due to no small degree to the inclusion of letters of a very private character which provided the flavor of individuality, the spice of unconcealed emotion and spontaneous expression. Despite some glib denials Erasmus used to intervene decisively in the process of selecting and editing his letters. Even as he sat down to write or dictate a private letter, it must have frequently occurred to him that he had better watch whether it was going to be a truly private or a publishable private letter.

The criteria of selection applied by himself and his trusted helpers cannot be examined within the limits of a short paper. Such an investigation, if it were undertaken, would have to cope with a swarm of puzzling questions. 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. On the one hand Erasmus normally published Budé's letters at the first occasion, not withholding the odd sentence which Budé had carefully "coded" in Greek:[10] on the other hand, when he finally got around to publishing some of his earliest letters to More, he still included only one of More's letters prior to 1517. Was there perhaps a need for discretion? This may be so, but subsequently he saw fit to publish a letter received from More that questioned his conduct in a way which by our own standards would be deemed embarrassing.[11] Many letters exchanged between the two friends reflect on Erasmus' financial affairs and transactions. This is clearly private business, one assumes. It might account for the case of many a letter which remained unpublished if it were not that the same financial details are also treated in some of the printed letters.[12] In general Erasmus appears little concerned about public reaction to business arising from his English benefice but does not print the letters referring to his other living at Courtrai.[13] His faithful printers, on the whole, do not seem to have commanded enough status in his eyes to warrant publication of the

[9] Allen, I, 593-602, Appendix VII: "The principal editions of Erasmus' *Epistolae*."

[10] E.g., Allen, III, Epp. 929 postscript, 987 end; IV, Ep. 1015 11.68-74. Cf. M.-M. de la Garanderie, *La correspondance d'Erasme et de Guillaume Budé* (Paris: Vrin, 1967).

[11] Allen, IV, Ep. 1090. It may be noted, however, that Erasmus did not publish the more embarrassing Ep. 1770.

[12] Allen, III, Epp. 706, 908.

[13] Allen, III, Epp. 608, 621, 751, 913; IV, Ep. 1094.

frequent letters he exchanged with them.[14] Was the selection then dictated by style rather than content? That remains to be investigated, and so do the questions why Erasmus generally assumed that he was at liberty to publish the letters he received from others along with his answers, and why most correspondents seemed to concede this privilege to him without demanding reciprocity.

Questions such as these must go unanswered for the time being, and no theories will be offered as to the selection criteria underlying successive editions of Erasmus' correspondence. Rather we shall address ourselves exclusively to the impact which his correspondence had upon the reading public in Germany. Moreover we shall limit this study roughly to a mere three years from 1518 to 1520. These three years were significant, however. They contain Erasmus' earliest, and decisive, response to the cause of Martin Luther. At the same time, they encompass approximately the preparation and publication of three important volumes of selected letters, as well as revealing a good deal of reaction to these books. All three were published in Basel by Johannes Froben, with Beatus Rhenanus assuming the responsibility of editor.[15] But in each case Erasmus himself made the initial selection. Doubtless he also did most of the editing. The *Auctarium selectarum epistolarum* began to reach the public in October 1518. The *Farrago nova epistolarum* was circulating in November 1519. The *Epistolae ad diversos,* finally, did not appear until early in 1522 although much of the preparation was done in the summer of 1520. Other selections had been published before 1518, but they were slight and for the purpose of this study they may be neglected. After the *Epistolae ad diversos* Erasmus changed his practice. No further collections appeared in print[16] until the great *Opus epistolarum* of 1529, launched at the time that he had left Basel for catholic Freiburg, well past the years of his controversy with Luther.

It appears thus that for most of the 1520s Erasmus no longer desired to share part of his correspondence with the public at large. By contrast this desire had been strongest between 1518 and 1520. What measure of success then did he have in his efforts either to promote or else prevent the circulation of some of his epistolary exchanges with leading Germans? Although perhaps no more than a handful of letters were spread around against his

[14] E.g., addressed to Josse Bade: Allen, III, Epp. 764, 815; exchange with Lazarus Schürer: Allen, III, Epp. 612, 693, and with the circle of Johannes Froben: Allen, III, 594, 628-629, 634, 732-733, 796, 885, 904; IV, Ep. 1014. Even the letters from Froben's partners, the brothers Amerbach, were excluded, in spite of all the care lavished on their composition: Allen, III, Epp. 595, 802; IV, Epp. 1020, 1201, 1207. Cf. P. G. Bietenholz, "Ethics and Early Printing: Erasmus' rules for the conduct of authors," *Humanities Association Review* (The Humanities Association of Canada), XXVI, 3 (1975) 180-195.

[15] Allen, IV, Ep. 1206.

[16] Not counting a group of only five letters published in 1528: Allen, I, 600.

wishes, either on printed pages or in manuscript copies, we should be prepared to find that they had significant effects. They were liable to project an inaccurate image of Erasmus or at any rate to blur and confuse the picture that he had himself hoped to project. Perhaps this was the reason why the three editions had no immediate sequel.

The *Auctarium* was a slight book of 63 letters, barely exceeding the size of its predecessor. It had been on Erasmus' mind in the spring of 1518,[17] but when he arrived at Basel in May, he was too busy with the New Testament to spend much time on the letter collection. Perhaps he had hoped to do more, for he had taken his correspondence copy book with him,[18] and new letters were added to the *Auctarium* up to the last moment.[19] When it became available in October, it was no doubt eagerly examined by the humanists of Germany. Would it feature Reuchlin or Hutten? Would the name of Luther appear? Erasmus' contacts with the first two were by then common knowledge. His unconcealed admiration for Luther's 95 Theses was known on the Upper Rhine and had been reported to Luther.[20] The *Auctarium,* however, was bound to disappoint anyone inclined to associate Erasmus with German national sentiment and desire for religious reform. All it had to offer was a polite if unsympathetic exchange of long letters[21] between Erasmus and Johannes Eck, who had attacked the New Testament with specific criticisms that called for topical replies. In the absence of more heartening fare, however, these theological quibbles were picked up eagerly. The quiet and dignified Ulrich Zasius rushed to Erasmus' defense[22] while Christoph Scheurl connected Eck with another and less polite letter in the *Auctarium* in which Erasmus rebuked an unnamed assailant. The latter, however, was not Eck but Edward Lee.[23]

The great discretion displayed in the selection of letters for the *Auctarium* stands in marked contrast to the boldness of the second edition of the New Testament, on which Erasmus and the Froben press were working at that very time. The more forcefully Erasmus endeavored to present his very own cause, the informed and unbiased reading of Scripture, the less he desired to be publicly involved with the struggles of other men such as Reuchlin and Luther. In public sermons he had lately been linked to such causes other than his own and found it to be a harrowing experience.[24] Here the case of Reuchlin deserves particular attention. In March 1518, just as Erasmus was

[17] Allen, III, Epp. 767, 783.
[18] Allen, III, Ep. 847 headnote.
[19] Allen, III, Epp. 859, 861.
[20] M. Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-), *Briefwechsel,* I, Ep. 91.
[21] Allen, III, Epp. 769, 844.
[22] U. Zasius, *Apologetica defensio* (Basel: Froben, March 1519).
[23] Allen, III, Ep. 843; *Christoph Scheurl's Briefbuch,* ed. F. von Soden and J. K. F. Knaake (Potsdam, 1867-1872), Ep. 177.
[24] See especially Allen, III, Ep. 948; cf. below note 34.

selecting letters for the *Auctarium,* a new polemical tract was added to the growing controversy over Reuchlin. Spiked with fresh attacks upon Reuchlin and his friends, the *Lamentationes obscurorum virorum* were a polemical reply to the famous *Letters of the Obscure Men.* Like the latter, the *Lamentationes* were a fictitious composition, except for two genuine documents. One was the papal bull against the *Letters of the Obscure Men*; the other was a letter by Erasmus,[25] also containing harsh words against the *Letters of the Obscure Men* and furthermore a denial of his authorship of the *Julius exclusus,* then circulating at Cologne. The printing of Erasmus' letter was unauthorized and in combination with the papal bull no doubt wholly unwelcome to the author.

He clearly sensed the growing militancy of the conflict around Reuchlin and accordingly resented the claims laid upon him by both camps. It was most unlikely that the *Lamentationes* would for long go unanswered, and Erasmus must have thought of the reply with fearful anticipation. Eluding the hopes of Reuchlin's friends for a public manifesto in support of the assailed scholar,[26] he had nevertheless reassured the Reuchlinist camp with a number of private letters which had for their opponents nothing but scorn and explicit insult.[27] Clearly, the prospect of seeing them printed was appalling. Under these circumstances the *Auctarium* could only guard a diplomatic silence on the entire controversy, equaling an implicit declaration of neutrality. Meanwhile, retaliation for the *Lamentationes* was on the way, and, on the whole, Erasmus escaped with a black eye. In May 1519, weeks after a second printing of the *Auctarium,* there appeared the *Illustrium virorum epistolae ad Joannem Reuchlin.* This collection contained five letters which Erasmus had addressed to Reuchlin over the years.[28] On the whole, they were a fair mirror of his warm friendship for the German, albeit tinged with cautious concern over his radical postures and with dislike of his cabalism. The most recent, however, belonging to the group of abusive letters mentioned above, reserved for one of Reuchlin's opponents such flattering names as "product of circumcision" and "Christian ape." Even though he greeted the publication of his letters to Reuchlin with predictable lament,[29] Erasmus had reason to be grateful. Still major embarrassment would inevitably have resulted had his indiscreet letters to Reuchlin's friends also been divulged.

Three months later his public involvement in the Reuchlin controversy took a new turn. In August 1519 he wrote to the Dominican Jacob van Hoogstraten, a prominent critic of Reuchlin.[30] The letter was clearly intended

[25] Allen, III, Ep. 622.
[26] Allen, III, Ep. 610-611. 24-29.
[27] Allen, III, Epp. 694, 700, 703, 713.
[28] Allen, II, Epp. 300, 324, 457, 471; IV, Ep. 713.
[29] Allen, II, Ep. 1041. In view of the noticeable similarities among the letters indicated above in note 27, it is difficult to accept Erasmus' protestation that Ep. 713 was interpolated by the editors.
[30] Allen, IV, Ep. 1006.

for publication and promptly appeared in Erasmus' *Farrago* of October 1519. It is true that it dealt at some length with theological charges that Hoogstraten had leveled against Erasmus himself in a chapter of his most recent book against Reuchlin. It is also true that in replying Erasmus had chosen an attitude of studied aloofness towards Reuchlin which cannot have offered much comfort to Reuchlin's supporters. And yet, for the first time, here he was, by his own volition publicly associated with Reuchlin's party and actually defending him, in spite of repeated protests that such was not his purpose. In his search for hidden heretics, Hoogstraten had wedded Erasmus to Reuchlin. Erasmus accepted the challenge. Reuchlin was not his rival; each of them was striving for a different palm, but in defeat, he now realized, they would stand condemned together. Hoogstraten's challenge and Erasmus' response were by no means isolated. All through Germany a great national cause was shaping up in the hopeful minds of younger intellectuals. To traditionalist churchmen it was a nation-wide conspiracy. Both camps claimed that Erasmus was part of it. The *Farrago* was his answer; it would demonstrate the extent and nature of his public commitment to the German renewal.

In the case of Reuchlin then Erasmus' public response was repeatedly conditioned by external factors including the unauthorized use of his private letters. The same was true, and still more emphatically so, in the case of Luther. Repeated statements in his correspondence seem to confirm that for Erasmus the controversy around Luther was at first a continuation of the controversy around Reuchlin. Not that he would have ignored substantial differences in their ways of thinking and acting, but he was struck at once by the use, or rather abuse, of publicity which, he believed, was identical and called for the same prudent reaction. Still he soon had good reason to fear indiscretion on the part of his correspondents. As with his letters to the Reuchlinist camp, however, their disclosures did not go beyond a certain point. The most unguarded reflections of his mind concerning Luther and the pope never reached the contemporary public. Other private letters, however, did find their way to the presses very much against his wishes. Without them the *Farrago* would remain a puzzle. Let us look at the most significant cases. On April 14, 1519, while a first letter from Martin Luther was on its way to him, Erasmus wrote to the Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony.[31] Luther's letter and Erasmus' answer to Luther were both published in *Farrago*;[32] by contrast, Erasmus did nothing to divulge his letter to the Elector. Others, however, did it for him. Only weeks thereafter the letter to Frederick was in print to the delight of Luther's friends up and down the country.[33] It praised

[31] Allen, III, Ep. 939.

[32] Allen, III, Epp. 933, 980.

[33] For its circulation see Allen, III, Ep. 939 headnote; cf. I. Höss, "Der Brief des Erasmus von Rotterdam an Kurfürst Friedrich den Weisen vom 30. Mai 1519," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 46 (1955), 209-213.

the elector for his patronage of learning and letters and recommended Luther to his continued protection. Evidently Erasmus managed to perceive here two related aspects of Frederick's role as the founder and patron of the University of Wittenberg. On both counts he deserved to be assured of Erasmus' praise and support.

The letter to Frederick was published just a few weeks after the *Illustrium virorum epistolae* to Reuchlin. Once again only weeks went by before two more of Erasmus' letters made their unauthorized appearance in Germany. By the beginning of August 1519 an oration to mark the opening of the Leipzig debate, delivered by Peter Mosellanus, was circulating in print. Appended to it were a letter to the author and another to Luther, both by Erasmus.[34] The letter to Mosellanus offered a satirical collection of episodes illustrating the stupid and stubborn opposition to humanistic learning and to Erasmus personally on the part of certain friars. It was clearly composed for publication and subsequently included in Erasmus' *Farrago.* It was hardly intended, however, to be read in close conjunction with his letter to Luther. Noting that its two heroes, Erasmus and Luther, suffered similar tribulations from the hands of the Dominicans, the educated German public was apt to conclude that their problems and even their ideals must be identical. The cautiously encouraging letter to Luther, besides, was bound to create difficulties in its own right. Emphasizing the growing support for Luther from one corner of Europe to the other, it singled out as a firm Lutheran sympathizer the prince-bishop of Liège, Erard de La Marck. At the very least this was an informed guess. A long and then losing battle for the Red Hat and continuing litigation with the University of Louvain must have rendered the bishop uncharitable towards some of Luther's most typical enemies.[35] But to be called a supporter of Luther in public was entirely unwelcome to him and led to nasty enquiries. Erasmus too was not spared his share of the unpleasant consequences.[36] No doubt with little enthusiasm he hastened to publish the letter to Luther in the *Farrago,* suppressing only the bishop's identity. So he could afterwards publish statements suggesting, though not actually saying, that it had been cunningly added to the genuine text of his letter by the editors of the unauthorized version.[37] The cunning, of course, was all his own in this case, but in the bookshops of Germany the unauthorized and unexpurgated version won out handsomely. It was soon reprinted both in conjunction with Mosellanus' oration and also many times in another context. All Germany talked about it.[38]

[34] Allen, III, Epp. 948, 980, printed in *Petri Mosellani oratio de ratione disputandi.* For editions and circulation see Allen's headnote to Ep. 948.

[35] For the litigation with Louvain and for a widely noted diplomatic attack on the Roman curia during the Diet of Augsburg in 1518 see P. Harsin, *Etude critique sur l'histoire de la principauté de Liège, 1477-1715,* II (Liege: Science et Lettres, 1955), 230ff., 241ff. Erard finally obtained the purple in 1520.

[36] Allen, IV, Ep. 1038 headnote.

[37] Allen, IV, Ep. 1041.

[38] Allen, IV, Epp. 1033 headnote, 1143 headnote.

This then was the situation by August 15 when Erasmus wrote the last letter to be published, two months later, in the *Farrago.* Unauthorized letters were bound to add some highlights to the selection presented by Erasmus himself, and no doubt some challenges too. One unauthorized letter had moved him within uncomfortable vicinity to the "Obscure Men" and their attacks on Reuchlin, but another divulged his vicious remarks about an opponent of Reuchlin and his Jewish background. And several others were bound to be read with great satisfaction among the friends of Martin Luther. Either way, Erasmus had been spared the worst by some recipients of his letters. His unprecedented and uncalled-for attack on papal despotism never circulated in public. Likewise only a few men can at the time have learned about his further remarks concerning the satanic breed of Reuchlin's enemies,[39] or, on the other end of the scales, about the pressure he brought to bear on Froben, his principal publisher, who as a result would no longer dare to publish Luther's writings.[40] On balance, such indiscretions as had occurred in print tended to present him as the champion of Germany's old complaints and newly-won ideals.

Next the *Farrago* appeared, and any reader already inclined towards such a view was likely to find it confirmed on its pages – no wonder that it sold exceedingly well.[41] Although it contained nothing much directly in support of Reuchlin, Erasmus' long and lively letter of protest to the Inquisitor Hoogstraten could well be read as a token of friendship and as the long-due termination of his public aloofness. The impression of positive commitment to German causes was strengthened not only by the exchange with Luther, but also by a whole series of cordial letters to Frederick the Wise and Spalatin, to Melanchthon, Jonas, Pirckheimer, Oecolampadius, and above all others, to Hutten. Hutten was now at the court of Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz, recently made cardinal. He would not be there, one could assume, if the cardinal did not share his enthusiasm for Reuchlin and Luther, as he demonstrably shared his love and admiration for Erasmus. This inference came naturally, even to Erasmus himself. No seam was apparent as yet, let alone a tear, in the fabric of German humanism. The *Farrago,* it seemed, made that fabric resplendent in the silky sheen of Erasmus' incomparable style. It did so not only with its tokens of friendship, but just as much with critical snippets and polemical repartee. Did it not attack obscurantist theologians in Louvain and anywhere? Did it not inflict some wounds on the national pride of the French and sometimes ridicule the Italians? Did Erasmus not offer his faithful allegiance to "*Germania nostra*" in spite of the invitations he received from princes and prelates all the way from Hungary to Spain?[42] In the *Farrago,* at

[39] See above, note 27.

[40] Allen, IV, Epp. 1033 l.47, 1143 ll.20-22.

[41] Already in February 1520 Froben proposed a second edition to Erasmus: Allen, IV, Ep. 1066 ll.83-86.

[42] See e.g. Allen, III, Epp. 809 ll.127-37, 941 l.10; IV, Ep. 1009 l.69.

any rate, he could be seen as the prince of humanism preparing to lead his loyal German knights into the battlefield.

The prince of humanism, however, was like the king on a chess board, confined to a narrow sphere of action partly by his own principles and partly by circumstances beyond his control. The dilemma of the king of chess, towering but hamstrung, was to become apparent in the months to follow. Erasmus knew very well that he was not the Reuchlinist and the Lutheran he was made out to be by his admirers in Germany and his enemies in Louvain. Since the autumn of 1519 he began protesting against this misunderstanding at every suitable occasion. And again in the summer of 1520, when making a first selection of letters to be published in the *Epistolae ad diversos,* he endeavored to record his independence from Luther and Reuchlin beyond all reasonable doubt. But the *Epistolae* would not be published for many months yet. And in the meantime he was not only conscious of the misapprehension created among the German vanguard through unauthorized publicity and reinforced by the *Farrago,* but he proceeded to exploit it. Perhaps he fell a prey to the complexity of his own nature. On the one hand he strove honestly to clear his name of charges of duplicity in printable letters to which he might later refer when being attacked by the papists. On the other hand, having experienced the potential of unauthorized publicity and seen how effectively Reuchlin and Luther were being defended in anonymous libels, he decided to use these weapons too for his own ends. Perhaps he hoped to sap the energy of his critics by such typographical poison and subsequently to silence them completely by his overt defense. If so, the hope proved fallacious.

To show how the matter developed, we must begin with Erasmus' elaborate letter to Albrecht of Mainz, dated October 19, 1519.[43] Erasmus did eventually publish it in the *Epistolae ad diversos,* and there is no reason to think that he did not envisage doing so at the time he wrote it. But it gained publicity long before the *Epistolae* appeared and soon circulated in no less than seven unauthorized editions. At first Erasmus feared nothing except the irritation of Cardinal Albrecht, who received the original letter, soiled with typographical ink, only after he had seen it in print. But by the autumn of 1520 his embarrassment had grown profound, reflecting perhaps in part the discomfort of Albrecht.[44] Both centered no longer upon the transmission of Erasmus' letter but on its contents. The author had lost no time asserting his indifference to the concerns of Reuchlin and Luther, nor had he unduly minced his words when attacking his own opponents. But the essence of the letter was an eloquent plea, not yet for Luther's personal safety, but for his right to expose superstition and clerical corruption.

Whatever its perplexing potential, when this letter began circulating in Germany, it would only boost the eager acceptance of Erasmus' leadership on

[43] Allen, IV, Ep. 1033.
[44] Allen, IV, Epp. 1152, 1153 11.160ff., 1167 11.111ff., 1217 11.13ff.

the part of Germany's humanists and their willingness to do battle for him. A call to arms had actually reached them at the end of the *Farrago,* in that great letter to Hutten which contained the biography and literary portrait of Thomas More, tying as it were one close friend of Erasmus to another.[45] In the last paragraphs Erasmus turned from More to Hutten. Congratulating him on his valiant struggle "with both pen and sword, and with courage and success alike," he announced tantalizingly that a very special villain had appeared among his opponents in the Netherlands. The time had not yet come, but soon the faithful friends in Germany would be invited to smother him with such praise as he deserved. A reader of the *Farrago* had to be very innocent indeed if he did not successfully relate this passage to nearby lines in other letters in which Edward Lee was told that, try as he would, Erasmus might not much longer be able to restrain his friends in Germany from tearing him to shreds in public tracts.[46] In fact the time was ripe when Lee finally published his critique of Erasmus' New Testament in February 1520. Without delay and with devastating, if undistinguished, results[47] the German friends were instructed to raise their pens against the poor Englishman. But not surprisingly, the letters Erasmus wrote to attain his goal were treated with great discretion. Only two of them have survived.[48]

Later on, in remarks intended for the public, Erasmus would somewhat condescendingly express his dismay at the zeal displayed by the German humanists in their attacks on Lee.[49] These remarks can hardly be taken as a true reflection of his feelings. For two years running the controversy with Lee had been the major preoccupation in Erasmus' life, absorbing an exasperatingly large proportion of his time and thought. After himself answering Lee's charges at great length,[50] he must have greeted the efforts of his friends with a good deal of satisfaction. The latest and most prominent of these was a collection of testimonial letters.[51] It gave to a dozen German humanists an

[45] Allen, IV, Ep. 999.

[46] Allen, IV, Ep. 993 1.52 and note.

[47] In addition to the publications cited by Allen, IV, Ep. 1083 headnote, see *In Eduardum Leum quorundam e sodalitate literaria Erphurdiensi Erasmici nominis studiosorum epigrammata* (Mainz: [J. Schöffer], 1520); *Duae epistolae Henrici Stromeri Auerbachii et Gregorii Coppi Calvi...; adiecta est Andreae Franci Camicziani epistola ad Pirckheimerum, subiunctis etiam in fine libelli in Leum epigrammatis* (Leipzig: H. Lotter, 1520); *Recriminatio Ioannis Gertophii, adulescentis Germani, adversus furiosissimum sycophantam Eduardum Leum..., epigramma... Hermanni Buschii in eundem Leum* (Basel: A. Cratander, June 1520).

[48] Allen, IV, Epp. 1085, 1088; cf. Ep. 1074.

[49] Allen, IV, Epp. 1129, 1132 (sent to England and published by Erasmus), but cf. Ep. 1128 (addressed to a German and rediscovered only at the end of the 19th century).

[50] "Apologia Erasmi... qua respondet duabus invectivis Eduardi Lei," reprinted in *Erasmi opuscula*, ed. W. K. Ferguson (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1933), pp. 225-303; "Responsiones," *LB*, IX, cols. 123-284; cf. Allen, IV, Ep. 1037 headnote.

[51] *Epistolae aliquot eruditorum virorum, ex quibus perspicuum quanta sit Eduardi Lei virulentia* (Basel: Froben, August 1520).

opportunity to vent their indignation against Lee with a generous dose of abuse. It was launched from Froben's presses at Basel in August 1520 and may have rendered Erasmus an important service in that it helped him to put the whole matter to rest and free his mind from the compulsive snares of past months. At any rate, Lee is no longer mentioned in his letters[52] after the publication of Froben's *Letters of Learned Men,* designed to expose the virulence of Lee.

Unfortunately there were other preoccupations too which helped to make the year 1520 an unfruitful one, at least if measured by Erasmus' own high standards of productivity. By no means all his difficulties with the Louvain theologians were caused by the intrigues of Lee. Some were related to the progress of Luther's conflict with Rome. From the Leipzig disputation in June-July 1519 to the publication of the papal bull against him in October 1520 Luther's impact was steadily growing, and the controversy surrounding him had spread as far as England. The Universities of Cologne and Louvain had condemned his teachings in the fall of 1519 respectively and public burnings of his books followed. Finally in December 1520, not long after the publication of his incisive *Babylonian Captivity,* Luther himself burned the papal bull along with a copy of the Canon Law outside the Elster gate of Wittenberg. Erasmus was vexed. He knew that he had to find out where he stood with regard to Luther; he also knew that he had to explain his position in public. In the summer of 1520, with the thought of the *Epistolae ad diversos* already firmly in his mind, he turned on the German disorders with great regularity.[53] Again, not all the letters referring to Luther would be selected for publication in the *Epistolae,* but if one compares the situation with the one that had prevailed a year earlier when the *Farrago* was in preparation, one discovers noticeable differences. After the *Farrago* the number of new letters Erasmus released to Froben and Beatus Rhenanus drops sharply, yet the number of unpublished letters does not therefore increase. Likewise the total count of letters preserved, down drastically with the end of the Deventer Copy book (October 25, 1518), holds relatively stable until another sharp drop in 1521. Finally, the letters written in 1520 tend to be somewhat longer than those of preceding years (Tables I and II). The implication is, it seems, that while continuing his active correspondence and also his habit of liberal release, Erasmus was yet writing more carefully and less impulsively than in 1519. That he had indeed become more cautious is fully confirmed by the fact that no more of his private letters were printed in Germany behind his back. The letter to Albrecht of Mainz of October 19, 1519, which was dis-

[52] Allen, IV, Epp. 1139, 1140 (beginning of September; last laments about Lee who had just left Louvain to return to England; cf. Ep. 1157 (Erasmus insisting that the *Epistolae aliquot* ought to have been suppressed).

[53] Allen, IV, Epp. 1113, 1119, 1123, 1125-1127, 1127a, 1128-1129, 1139, 1141, 1141a, 1143-44.

cussed previously, was actually the last of this period to receive a wide unauthorized circulation. Thereafter private letters to Luther and Melanchthon, Jonas and Lang did apparently circulate in manuscript copies among some close associates of the Wittenberg reformers,[54] but all were too guarded to fit into the voluminous publicity campaign of the Lutheran camp. Likewise Erasmus' enemies no longer found any unpublished letters worth brandishing so as to cause him embarrassment.

The newly found moderation in his letter-writing was in no way tantamount, however, to a general renunciation of controversial and aggressive publicity. As his correspondence tended towards uniformity and consistency, he was otherwise preparing himself for a drastic departure from his own ethical norm. At about the time of Erasmus' visit to Cologne in October 1520 there appeared three different tracts; two were anonymous, and one of these is a stark and rather ugly libel; the third identified Erasmus as the author. Undeniably it was his work, although published against his will. After one has read that third tract, which can safely be ascribed to Erasmus, and a few of his published letters of the same period, one cannot help thinking that the two anonymous tracts, in essence at any rate, were likewise products of his mind and his pen. Admittedly, to do so is inference, but to reject the parallels would be unreasonable, I believe.

The *Axiomata Erasmi pro causa Martini Lutheri*[55] were written at Cologne after an interview with Frederick the Wise. They were designed to present the elector with an argumentation as he prepared to refuse a formal request by the papal legates that he hand over Luther. As Erasmus wrote them out, he asked the elector's secretary to return them at once after they had served their purpose, but soon they circulated in three different publications. The first of the two anonymous pamphlets, the "*Consilium* of a man sincerely wishing to end religious strife without disregard of the powers of the pope,"[56] is generally considered to reflect Erasmus' newly struck friendship with Dr. Johann Faber, prior to the Dominicans at Augsburg. Faber probably conceived this urgent plea for reconciliation, and he may have arranged for the printing; but many specific ideas and the ease and elegance of the Latin formulation betray Erasmus. It was his first call for that irenic attitude in the religious conflict which would become synonymous with Erasmus' name before the century was out.[57]

[54] Allen, Epp. 1088, 1113, 1127a, 1128.

[55] *Erasmi opuscula*, pp. 329-337 (3 editions in 1521).

[56] "Consilium cuiusdam ex animo cupientis esse consultum et Romani pontificis dignitati et Christianae religionis tranquillitati" in *Erasmi opuscula* pp. 338-361 (5 editions in 1521 or soon after).

[57] C. Vivanti, *Lotta politica e pace religiosa in Francia fra Cinque e Seicento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1963); P. G. Bietenholz, *Basle and France in the Sixteenth Century* (Geneva/Toronto: Droz/University of Toronto Press, 1971); *idem,* "Erasme, l'imprimerie bâloise et la France" in *Colloquia Erasmiana Turonensia*, ed. J.-C. Margolin (Paris/Toronto, 1972), I, 55-78.

The other anonymous pamphlet, however, the *Acta academiae Lovaniensis contra Lutherum,*[58] is arguably the most virulent thing he ever wrote. The worst sting came in the attacks upon the papal nuncio Girolamo Aleandro, who was officially still a personal friend of Erasmus. But disclaiming his authorship of these insidious passages completely, as was sometimes done, merely rendered the little tract more incomprehensible. For the preceding two years the attacks of Edward Lee had been a traumatic experience to the hyper-sensitive scholar. He had reacted with a hatred wholly uncharacteristic of him and an overflow of this hatred now remained to take care of Aleandro. Assuming that Erasmus wrote the libel complete with its preface, it is necessary to conclude that he also arranged for the printing, or at least did nothing to prevent it. All this amounts to an extraordinary reversal of his position. Only months earlier he had, with Lee in mind, called down the rigors of Roman Law on any perpetrator of anonymous libel.[59] Nevertheless, it was probably the first and certainly the last time in a pamphlet that he resorted to premeditated libel. It was also a befitting finale to the short period from 1519 when Erasmus, responding to the examples of Reuchlinists and Lutherans, had recourse to public defamation of Lee and his theological helpers at Louvain.

All three tracts spoke of Luther's cause by several shades more warmly than the letters to be published in Erasmus' *Epistolae ad diversos,* but at no point did they contradict his usual insistence that he and Luther stood divided by a gulf. They challenged the validity of Luther's condemnation by the Universities of Cologne and Louvain and even by the papal bull. In calling for more enlightened judges, they implied that Luther deserved a more sympathetic verdict, but they did not imply that the roles of judges and defendant should be reversed. Although they came down hard on the Louvainians and other traditionalists, they did nothing to revive the waning illusion of German Lutherans that Erasmus was one of them.

To what degree this illusion had prevailed for a time amid educated Germans and to what degree it had been shared by Erasmus himself will perhaps be better understood if some of the developments analyzed on these pages are brought into synopsis. The first edition of Erasmus' New Testament (1516), with its well-known influence upon Luther, Melanchthon, and Zwingli, presents in all likelihood Erasmus' major contribution to the origins of the German Reformation. At the same time it triggered an unprecedented number of attacks such as those by Eck and Lee. The second edition, published in the winter 1518-1519, was more uncompromising than the first, in fact, the most

[58] *Erasmi opuscula*, pp. 304-328 (a single complete edition, towards the end of 1520). From the attribution of the *Acta* to Erasmus it does not necessarily follow that he was also the author of other anonymous pamphlets such as the *Dialogus bilinguium ac trilinguium* or the *Julius exclusus*, see H. de Vocht, *A History of... the Collegium trilingue Lovaniense* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1951-1955), I, 390ff., 544ff.; K. A. Meissinger, *Erasmus* (Berlin: Nauck, 1948), pp. 271, 402-404.

[59] Allen, IV, Ep. 1126 11.177-220; see also the article cited above, note 14.

innovative of all. Undoubtedly it reflected some of the courage displayed with evident success in the writings of Hutten, Luther, and the Reuchlinists. Next to the New Testament, unauthorized editions of some of his letters to Reuchlin, Frederick the Wise, Luther, and Albrecht of Mainz affected the course of the Reformation in a manner that is easily overlooked. To these must be added several editions of the *Julius exclusus,*[60] anonymously printed in Germany and commonly attributed to Erasmus, and likewise later the *Axiomata.* Circulating in numerous editions, these were for the most part but slight tracts, often indifferently printed and a far cry from the elegant Erasmus volumes produced by the Froben press. But just because they were inexpensive and unostentatious, they carried Erasmus' name forward together with scores of similar tracts that subjected the German contemporaries of Reuchlin and Luther to a publicity campaign such as the world had not seen before. It is clear that Erasmus' unintentional contributions were selected so as to fit the radical context of that campaign although they did not reproduce the most outspoken and unbalanced comments he could on occasion write in a truly private letter. Precisely because he could normally count on the discretion of his correspondents, the few letters published against his will were bound to be revealing.

As he did with the second edition of the New Testament, Erasmus reacted positively to the signals received from Germany when he used the *Farrago* to release to the public an unprecedented number of his letters. With the *Acta academiae Lovaniensis* he even condescended to adopt for his own purposes the techniques of anonymous libel and innuendo that were so prominent in the controversies around Reuchlin and Luther while at the same time, with the preparation of the *Epistolae ad diversos,* and conceivably with the *Consilium,* he set out to correct the mistaken conclusions placed upon the preceding publications. He was not, and never wished to be, a Reuchlinist and a Lutheran. Inevitably some German supporters of reform were slower than others in discovering this truth. Luther's genius had never been misled by the superficial and partial affinities between his concerns and the Erasmian program of reform.[61] But Hutten, who had visited Erasmus at Louvain in June 1520, continued to believe for some months not that their affinities were superficial but rather the points on which they differed. On August 15 he wrote Erasmus a frank and friendly letter to urge an end to his equivocations.[62] And three months later he pleaded again and more emphatically:

> I cannot think what you are doing in the place where our party is more unpopular than anywhere else and orders from Number Ten are active now, I hear, frightfully. They have burnt Luther's books: do you think

[60] For the text and bibliography of the *Julius exclusus*, see *Erasmi opuscula*, pp. 55-124.

[61] M. Luther, *Werke, Briefwechsel,* I, Ep. 70; cf. Allen, II, Ep. 501.

[62] Allen, IV, Ep. 1135.

> you can stay in peace where you are? – as though . . . one could suppose that the men who have condemned Luther would spare you. Escape, man, escape! – We want you safe.[63]

These were probably Hutten's last letters to Erasmus. Needless to say, they were not of a kind that Erasmus would have chosen to publish. Almost a year later, in June 1521, Albrecht Dürer had heard in Antwerp of Luther's disappearance on his return journey from Worms. He thought that it was definitive and vented his anguish in his diary, calling upon Erasmus to take Luther's place. The language he used betrayed the influence of Hutten and his friends; only a German could speak like this, and many Germans still may have thought and spoken like Dürer although Hutten and Luther's closer friends did so no longer:

> O Erasmus of Rotterdam . . . Hear, thou knight of Christ. Ride on by the side of the Lord Jesus. Guard the truth. Attain the martyr's crown. Already indeed art thou an aged little man ["ein altes Männiken"], and myself have heard thee say that thou givest thyself but two more years, wherein thou mayest be fit to accomplish somewhat. Lay out the same will for the good of the gospel and of the true Christian faith.[64]

The *Epistolae ad diversos,* already being printed at the time that Dürer wrote, were unlikely to leave their readers with his illusions. Erasmus himself, however, was perhaps more disillusioned than any of his readers about the short span of time he had marched in the ranks of German humanism. He ceased to publish his letters. It even seems that he no longer liked to write them. The volume of his preserved correspondence drops sharply by 1521, but the number of letters published after his death only remains stable (Tables I and II). After the *Acta academiae Lovaniensis* no further anonymous libel has been ascribed to him by modern scholars. When Dürer penned that anguished appeal to Erasmus, the latter had finally left Louvain and by the time the *Epistolae ad diversos* appeared he had settled at Basel, exactly as Hutten had urged him to do.[65] Some of his former correspondents in Germany received no further letters from him[66] and perhaps would not have wished it to be otherwise now that he had forsaken the great battle of the day and was concentrating his efforts increasingly on critical editions of the Fathers of Church.

[63] Allen, IV, Ep. 1161.

[64] A. Dürer, *Diary of his Journey to the Netherlands, 1520-1521*, ed. J. A. Goris and G. Marlier (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1972), pp. 92-93.

[65] Allen, IV, Ep. 1161: "Your friends in Basel are longing to see you. What holds you from moving to join them as soon as you can?" It is not certain, however, that this letter actually reached Erasmus; see Allen's headnote.

[66] Discontinued are the exchanges with Johannes Lang, Jonas, Hutten, Mosellanus and Reuchlin; the correspondence with Luther is reduced to very occasional and generally bitter letters.

TABLE I
The correspondence of Erasmus by years (Allen edition)

Years	Pages (Allen)	Letters from Erasmus	Letters to Erasmus	Total
1484-96	163	39	11	50
1497	30	17	–	17
1498	27	19	1	20
1499	51	27	5	32
1500	39	21	2	23
1501	26	24	2	26
1502-10	78	42	8	50
1511	45	20	17	37
1512	22	11	5	16
1513	28	16	–	16
1514	68	22	14	36
1515	136	26	36	62
1516	245	46	80	126
1517	357	141	101	242
1518	282	135	25	160
1519	315	111	37	148
1520	284	101	24	125
1521	171	62	12	74
1522	160	45	35	80
1523	214	45	30	75
1524	243	92	38	130
1525	245	90	35	125
1526	203	77	42	119
1527	330	89	65	154
1528	264	105	52	157
1529	311	103	61	164
1530	194	94	81	175
1531	308	106	67	173
1532	209	78	81	159
1533	203	78	66	144
1534	111	42	50	92
1535	206	35	59	94
1536	90	24	37	61

TABLE II

The Correspondence of Erasmus according to modes of first publication (Allen edition)

letters dated . . . (periods of c. 9½ months)	Collections of letters authorized by Erasmus: *Auctarium* 1518	*Farrago* 1519	*Epistolae Ad Diversos* 1522	*Opus Epistolarum* 1529	letters published elsewhere with Erasmus' agreement, explicit or tacit	letters published by others against his wishes	letters not published in Erasmus' life time	Total
3.15. 1517 – 31.12. 1517 Epp. 552 – 747	24	22	1	–	17	2 (Epp. 622, 713)	131	197
c.1.1 1518 – 25.10. 1518 (i.e. date of the last letter copied into the Deventer letter book, source of many letters not published in his life time. Epp. 748 – 895	29	26	1	–	15	–	77	148
31.10. 1518 – 15.8. 1519 (i.e. date of the last letter published in the *Farrago*) Epp. 896 – 1009	–	83	5	–	8	1 (Ep. 939)	17	114
1.9 1519 – 26.5. 1520 Epp. 1010 – 1106	–	–	48	1	25	1 (Ep. 1033)	22	97
c.1.6. 1520 – 13.3 21 Epp. 1107 – 1192a	–	–	53	1	11	–	24	89
c.15.3. 1521 – 30.12. 1521 Epp. 1193 – 1251	–	–	40	2	5	–	12	59