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# *The Ages of Erasmus and the Year of His Birth\**

by HARRY VREDEVELD

Nicolaos van der Blom, germano philologo, iam septuagenario

IT IS A PERENNIAL PARADOX of Erasmus studies that neither the wealth of autobiographical information that the Dutch humanist has left us nor the enormous mass of scholarly literature that has grown up around his life and works has ever given us a firm grip on the year of his birth and the chronology of his youth. We do not know with certainty, for example, how old Erasmus was when he entered Steyn monastery. If he were born in 1466, as he indicates at times, and became a postulant in the middle of 1487, as other information suggests, he would then have been twenty years of age. Yet in an appeal to Pope Leo X for a release from some of his monastic obligations in August 1516 Erasmus asserts that he was just sixteen when he was prevailed upon to enter the monastery. On the strength of this and other evidence R. L. DeMolen has argued with equal logic that Erasmus must have been born in 1469 and entered Steyn in 1485–86. Which of his conflicting utterances, then, are we

\*I wish to express my warmest thanks to Nicolaas van der Blom and Clarence H. Miller, who kindly read over a draft of this article and suggested numerous improvements. My title is adapted from a chapter heading in Koch, 39: "Erasmus' Year of Birth and Erasmus' Ages." In rendering Erasmus into English, I have greatly profited by the translations in *CWE*.

These abbreviations are used throughout:

- ASD *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*. Amsterdam, 1969–  
CEBR *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*. Ed. P. G. Bietenholz and T. B. Deutscher. 3 vols. Toronto, 1985–87.  
CV *Compendium vitae* in *EE* 1:47–52 (Ep. II). For a translation, see *CWE* 4:403–10.  
CWE *Collected Works of Erasmus*. Toronto, 1974– .  
EE *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*. Ed. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen, and H. W. Garrod. 11 vols. Oxford, 1906–47.  
Ep. Refers to a letter by Erasmus in *EE*.  
LB *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia*. Ed. J. Leclerc. 10 vols. Leiden, 1703–06; rpt. Hildesheim, 1961–62.  
Poem Refers to a poem by Erasmus in *CWE* 85–86, edited and annotated by H. Vredevelde and translated by C. H. Miller.  
R. Refers to a poem by Erasmus in Reedijk.

to accept as genuine—the ones leading us to conclude that he was born in 1466 or the ones pointing to the year 1469?<sup>1</sup>

Compounding our perplexity is the suggestion first advanced by Preserved Smith (8) that the older Erasmus became, the earlier he put the year of his birth. This curious phenomenon has been explained in all sorts of ways. Did he perhaps suffer from an ill-developed sense of chronology? Was he taking some of the sting out of his illegitimate birth by insinuating that he had been born prior to his father's taking holy orders? Did he make himself older in a vain attempt to stay out of the theological battles of the 1520s? Or was he so worried about his supposedly dangerous climacteric years—the forty-ninth, fifty-sixth, and sixty-third—that he tried to avoid them by slipping in an extra year at hebdomadal intervals? If that were the case, as A. C. F. Koch has argued, then Erasmus knew he had been born in 1467 but sought to elude fate by maintaining a second, imaginary age that he would secretly adjust once every seven years.<sup>2</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that when Erasmus died at Basel in the summer of 1536, not even his closest friends could say exactly how old he was. And when they were confronted with the task of preparing an inscription for his tomb, they had to settle for the vague phrase "iam septuagenarius."<sup>3</sup> We might infer from this uncertainty that Erasmus himself was unsure of the year he was born. But if that were so, why does he never acknowledge the problem? Instead of expressing doubts on that score, he seems to refer to his own age, both past and present, with an air of quiet assurance. Yet

<sup>1</sup>The case for 1466 is argued by Richter, App. A, i–xix; Nichols, 1:474–76; Allen in *EE* 1:578–84 (with some reservations); Kohls, 1966<sup>1</sup> and 1966<sup>2</sup>. Arguments for 1469 are presented by Reichling, 451–56; Mestwerdt, 177–79, n. 1; Smith, 7–8 and 445–46; Hyma, 51–57; Post, 1953, 1964, and 1966; Tracy, 1972, 222–26; DeMolen, xiii–xiv.

<sup>2</sup>For arguments in favor of 1467, see Koch; Van der Blom, 1970–71 and 1971; IJsewijn, 1988. A fourth possibility, that Erasmus might have been born in 1456, was proposed by Avarucci, 241–55. This theory, which would make Erasmus at least ten years older overnight, has been rightly rejected by IJsewijn, 1985.

<sup>3</sup>Richter (App. A, ii–vii) provides a series of estimates, ranging from 1464 to 1468, made by Erasmus's contemporaries. See also Mestwerdt, 177, n. 1; and Mann Phillips, 1971 and 1972. As Richter remarks (App. A, vii), they have no independent value since in all likelihood they go back to Erasmus's own utterances. For the varying local traditions which range from 1465 to 1467 and 1469 as the year of Erasmus's birth, see Koch, 3–5; Van der Blom, 1970–71, 101, n. 2, and 1971, 77, n. 9. The age references in Ms. Scriverius (compiled in 1570 by B. Vulcanius and reprinted in LB 8), when correlated with other data, consistently point to 1469.

why does he nevertheless appear to live several lives, each with its own discrete set of dates—one for events in his youth, another for his everyday life in maturity, perhaps even a third, imaginary one to assuage his private fears? To learn the secret of Erasmus's ages and the year of his birth, it would seem, is to enter one of the recesses of his endlessly intriguing mind.

R. L. DeMolen is among those who have clearly seen the importance of the question for our understanding of Erasmus's soul. Introducing his collection of essays on *The Spirituality of Erasmus of Rotterdam* (xiii), he forthrightly acknowledges that "the premise of this book is that Erasmus of Rotterdam was born in 1469 and that he entered the monastery . . . in 1485/86 at the age of sixteen." Why does DeMolen choose 1469 rather than 1466 or 1467? He arrives at that date because it best fits his hagiographic view of the man and his works. Picking a natal year for Erasmus, it appears, is tantamount to choosing a character for him, and vice versa. Having settled on 1469 (or was it the other way around?), DeMolen then gives us an Erasmus who "was compelled by his guardians to join the religious life even though he was still a boy," but who in time accepted his lot and became a true monk in spirit, worthy of sainthood.

Who could have imagined that Erasmus's sainthood might ride on the year of his birth? Certainly DeMolen would find it much more difficult to defend his thesis if someone could prove to him that Erasmus was born two or three years before 1469. Let us suppose with Koch that Erasmus knew he was born in 1467 but tried to obscure this date in later life by making himself one year older every seven years beginning in 1517. In that case we should have to accept an Erasmus who, far from displaying a saintly trust in Christ, was anxiously concerned about his fate in a climacteric year. This Erasmus would be a superstitious man at heart, privately in thrall to fortune and the stars no matter how often he might heap contempt on fatalism and astrology in his published works. If, on the other hand, we follow P. S. Allen and E.-W. Kohls by taking 1466 as the year of his birth, we would throw out the charge of foolish superstition against him, only to convict him on the lesser charge of misrepresenting the age at which he entered the monastery—not only to his prior, but also to the pope and the public at large.

Which Erasmus should we adopt? That depends on the year he was born. Which birth year should we accept? That depends on

how we interpret his character. There is only one way out of this vicious circle, and that is the Erasmian road *ad fontes*. If we are ever to resolve the problem satisfactorily, we must return to the texts themselves and study them within their context and according to their author's intent. Our climb to the elusive goal will take us through thickets and over many a treacherous, rock-strewn slope, for the great man could not allow the mystery of his ages to be penetrated without a struggle on our part. But if we should succeed in ascending above the valley mists, we shall have the satisfaction of gazing with unclouded view at the young Erasmus, rising like a splendid star to the heights of the northern sky. *Per ardua ad astra*.

#### REFERENCES TO ERASMUS'S CURRENT AGE

Hinc illae lacrimae (Horace, *Epist.* 1.19.41)

In the mid-twentieth-century debates about the year of Erasmus's birth it was an article of faith that the first reference to his current age is to be found in "Carmen de senectutis incommodis," written in August 1506.<sup>4</sup> However, as P. Mestwerdt and J.-B. Pineau pointed out already in 1917 and 1924, a much earlier reference seems to occur in Erasmus's *De contemptu mundi*.<sup>5</sup> If we can confirm this, we will be able to start our investigation on much firmer ground than would otherwise be possible. For, as R. R. Post reminds us, the earlier the age reference, the more likely it is to be correct.<sup>6</sup>

Though *De contemptu mundi* is a rhetorical exercise full of traditional arguments, Erasmus does his best to transform the *topoi* to his own way of thinking and adapt them to his own time and place.

<sup>4</sup>See Poem 2/R. 83. A critical edition of Erasmus's poems, following the numbering in *CWE* 85-86, is forthcoming in *ASD* 1, pt. 7. The notion that the age reference in "Carmen de senectutis incommodis" is the first one which Erasmus has left us goes back to Richter, *App. A*, vii-viii. It is repeated by Nichols, 1:475; Smith, 445; and others.

<sup>5</sup>See Mestwerdt, 215, n. 2: "Auffällig ist, daß er sich an einer Stelle des [Werkes] als schon im 24. Lebensjahre stehend bezeichnet. . . . Das führt vielleicht auf den . . . chronologischen Widerspruch, wonach E. damals glaubte, 1466 geboren zu sein, während die späteren Angaben über die Zeit der Abfassung die richtigere Kenntnis voraussetzen." Mestwerdt's observation is echoed by Pineau, 31, n. 4: "D'après le *De Contemptu Mundi* lui-même, il avait 24 ans quand il le composa"; and 32, n. 5: "Si l'on admet qu'Erasmus naquit en 1466, le *De Contemptu Mundi* serait de 1490." See also Van Eijl, 338; IJsewijn, 1988.

<sup>6</sup>Post, 1964, 509: "Chacun peut en effet se rendre aisément compte si quelqu'un a 14 ou 17 ans, mais non pas s'il en a 50 ou 52, 60 ou 63."

The work is addressed to Jodocus, a young man (*adolescens*) who is said to be only slightly younger than the writer.<sup>7</sup> To persuade him to enter a monastery, Erasmus argues that theirs is surely the worst of times—the age predicted in Matthew 24:6–7. He enlivens this commonplace with specific details, however, and laments that the disasters, which in the past used to come singly, now befall this century all at once: wars, factions, exorbitant prices, scarcities, crop failures, diseases, plagues, and rampant starvation. What horrors, he exclaims, have we not seen in our own lifetime? In all our twenty-three (or twenty-four) years we have never had a holiday from the din of war: “Iam quantum et vigesimum annum agimus, nullas hoc toto spacio a bellorum strepitu ferias vidimus.”<sup>8</sup>

P. S. Allen understands this passage to say “that war has been going on continuously in Holland for twenty-three years”; he cannot, however, “find any certain term from which to reckon this.”<sup>9</sup> S. Dresden considers Erasmus’s talk of wars, factions, plagues, and other catastrophes “too vague, too general, too little ‘realistic’” to permit a firm dating of *De contemptu mundi* and dismisses such allusions as a kind of obligatory pseudorealism.<sup>10</sup> But that, surely, is to close our eyes to the historical conditions in which the work was written. We must not suppose that Erasmus, though hidden in the

<sup>7</sup>See ASD 5, pt. 1:40, ll. 2–5: “Iodoce adolescens charissime” and, a little later in the same sentence, “ego . . . natu quidem haud multo maior.” The Latin “adolescens” has a much wider range than our “adolescent.” Erasmus calls himself “adolescens” at the start of *Antibarbari*, the dramatic date of which is spring 1495; see ASD 1, pt. 1:38, ll. 4 and 11; also van Leijenhorst. Willem Hermans, who was the same age as Erasmus, is called “adolescens” as late as November 1496 (Ep. 49, l. 105). In Ep. 529, l. 73 (14 February 1517) Erasmus says that Glareanus was “still very much a youth” (“admodum adolescens”) when he received the laurel crown in 1512, at age twenty-four. The term “adolescentia” was often used to refer to the summer of life, lasting from age twenty to forty. See, for example, *Moriae encomium*, ASD 4, pt. 3:82, l. 191; *In Psalmum quantum concio*, ASD 5, pt. 2:251, l. 874; and Eyben, 156–58. This once familiar usage in denoting the four seasons or ages of life vitiates DeMolen’s anachronistic objection (xiv) that Bishop Hendrik van Bergen would hardly have described Erasmus as still being “a youth” (“iuvenem”) in 1493 if he had been born in 1466; see Beatus Rhenanus’s letter to Charles V (*EE* 1:57, l. 40). In Poem 88.91–93/R. 131.91–93 Erasmus says that Guillaume Cop, though older than he, was still “in the flower of his youth” (“florens iuvenilibus annis”) as late as winter 1496–97. Like “adolescentia,” the term “iuventus” was a standard term for the summer of life, until age forty; see n. 31, below.

<sup>8</sup>See ASD 5, pt. 1:56–57, ll. 473–84.

<sup>9</sup>Headnote on Ep. 1194.

<sup>10</sup>See his introduction to *De contemptu mundi*, ASD 5, pt. 1:15. The historical background to which Erasmus alludes is mentioned by Pineau, 33, n. 5, and described at length by Hyma, 15–18; see also Hyma, 176.

tranquil harbor of Steyn, was oblivious to the storms which at that very time were swirling around its walls. For a century and a half the factional wars between the Hoeken and Kabeljauwen had been tearing the country apart. The conflict had flared up anew after the death of Charles the Bold in 1477 and devastated the diocese of Utrecht until 1483.<sup>11</sup> No sooner was the war quelled in one part of the country than it broke out again in another. In 1488, at the start of the Jonker-Fransen-War, Rotterdam and Woerden were captured. Armed bands plundered and destroyed the surrounding region. "Few countrysides," writes Hyma, "suffered so much as the territory near Gouda where Erasmus at that very time was living in a monastery." In 1490 the crops failed again, partly because of the dismal weather, partly because of the pillaging and fighting, and the country was close to famine.<sup>12</sup> When Erasmus, therefore, tells Jodocus that in all their years they have never known anything but war and its pestilential consequences, he can hardly be speaking in the abstract. The disasters of his age are reflected, consequently, not only in *De contemptu mundi*, but also in *Oratio de pace et discordia*, in the contemporary ode "In laudem Michaelis et angelorum omnium" (Poem 50/R. 34–37) with its passionate prayers for peace,<sup>13</sup> and in *Antibarbari* (ASD I, pt. 1:44, l. 31). Willem Hermans, Erasmus's bosom friend, also dealt with the civil wars, referring to them briefly in Ep. 35, ll. 49–51, and lamenting them bitterly in his "Hollandia." This poem, the third in the *Sylva odarum* published for him by Erasmus in 1497, cries out against the ceaseless fighting. Its title describes the horrors of the war in terms closely matching those in *De contemptu mundi*: "He introduces Hollandia, already long plagued by war, scarcity, disease, factions, and lets her speak in the guise of a mother lamenting the calamity of her children."<sup>14</sup>

Erasmus's age reference may thus be placed in a historical setting, the civil wars of 1488–92. Before we can use this information as an indicator of his year of birth, however, we must establish two

<sup>11</sup>Cornelis Gerard wrote a history of this war; see Ep. 20, l. 109.

<sup>12</sup>See Hyma, 17; Scheurkogel, 208. In 1490 the desperate conditions led to the popular uprising known as the Bread and Cheese War, which continued until 16 May 1492. The factional war was concluded on 13 October 1492.

<sup>13</sup>For the *Oratio de pace*, see LB 8:545–52, esp. 550C–F. For the dating of Poem 50/R. 34–37, see the headnote in *CWE* 86.

<sup>14</sup>See Hermans, sig. b3<sup>v</sup>–b8. The poem was also printed by Snoy, sig. c2<sup>v</sup>–c6.

things. Can we be sure that the writer's age is Erasmus's? And if so, can we date the book more precisely?

In the preface he wrote for *De contemptu mundi* in 1521, Erasmus explains that he composed the work at the behest of a certain Theodoricus of Haarlem who wished to persuade his cousin Jodocus to enter a monastery.<sup>15</sup> This appears to be confirmed by the heading of the exhortation itself: "Theodoricus of Haarlem to his learned cousin Jodocus, greetings." Erasmus makes the same claim when writing to Botzheim in 1523 (*EE* 1:18, ll.16–19). The purpose of these repeated indications apparently is to dissociate the mature humanist from his youthful work in praise of monasticism. This impression hardens to certainty when we compare the heading in the printed version with that in the much earlier manuscript draft, recently discovered at Zwolle.<sup>16</sup> The heading in the manuscript version says nothing about Theodoricus of Haarlem. Instead we read: "Erasmus to his learned cousin Jodocus, greetings." We are hence quite justified in identifying the writer of the hortatory letter with Erasmus himself.<sup>17</sup> The cousin is a fiction, the idea having been borrowed from Saint Eucherius's "Paraenetic letter to his kinsmen Valerius."<sup>18</sup> Such fictions are, of course, commonplace in rhetorical exercises. In *De conscribendis epistolis* Erasmus himself recommends that a pupil composing an exhortation should "invent a friend who is in doubt about which kind of life he wishes to embrace." The pupil, he continues, might well write to this youth (*adolescens*) as "an intimate companion of his own age and fellow student."<sup>19</sup>

Erasmus, then, is without a doubt speaking of his own age when he tells his "cousin": "Iam quartum et vigesimum annum agimus." The idiom he uses here is capable of two meanings, however. De-

<sup>15</sup>See Ep. 1194 (= ASD 5, pt. 1:39). Erasmus here varies the exordial commonplace: "I write at the urging of a friend"; see Curtius, 85; H. J. de Jonge in ASD 9, pt. 2:59, note on ll. 6–7. The word "nepos" in the work's preface and heading is generally understood to mean "nephew." In ecclesiastical Latin, however, it often also means "cousin"; Willem Hermans, for example, is Cornelis Gerard's "nepos" in Ep. 28, l.6. This is the most likely sense here, since the writer and Jodocus are said to have been companions since childhood, are the same age, and share the same education and literary tastes. See also Pineau, 32, n. 5; Hyma, 169–76. The sense "nephew" may definitely be ruled out in the heading's original version. As Van Eijl notes (338), Erasmus could not have had a nephew; after all, his one brother was a monk, and they had no sister.

<sup>16</sup>See Haverals.

<sup>17</sup>This conclusion was first drawn by Van Eijl, 338.

<sup>18</sup>On Erasmus's debt to Eucherius, see Rummel, 1983.

<sup>19</sup>See ASD 1, pt. 2:429, l.21–430, l.4.



pending on whether we take the number as an ordinal or a cardinal, the expression can be understood as either "we are in our twenty-fourth year" (twenty-three years old) or "we are twenty-four years old." The ordinal sense is evidently the more literal, classical one. Erasmus illustrates it in *De copia* (ASD 1, pt. 6:168, ll.479–81) and *Colloquia* (ASD 1, pt. 3:141, ll.520–21). But the phrase can also express numerical age in the cardinal sense. Sir Thomas Elyot, for example, renders "agit vigesimum annum" with "he is .20. yeres olde."<sup>20</sup> And Thomas Paynell's contemporary translation of *De contemptu mundi* takes "iam quartum et vigesimum annum agimus" to mean "I am now .xxiiii. yeres olde."<sup>21</sup> Modern renditions vary accordingly. J.-B. Pineau (31, n. 4), A. Hyma (173, n. 13, and 176), S. Dresden (ASD 5, pt. 1:15), M. Haverals (44), C. G. van Leijenhorst (*CEBR* 3:318), and E. Rummel (*CWE* 66:150) understand the number as "twenty-four." But P. S. Allen (*EE* 4:457), P. Mestwerdt (215, n. 2), E. J. M. van Eijl (338), and J. IJsewijn (1988, 62) take it to mean "twenty-three."

Despite the linguistic ambiguity of the phrase we may already conclude that Erasmus cannot have been born in 1469. If he had been born in that year, *De contemptu mundi* would have been written between 28 October 1492 and 28 October 1494 (= 1469 + 23 or 24 years). By then the civil war was over and Erasmus had either already left Steyn or was about to do so. If, on the other hand, he were born in 1466, the book could be placed between 28 October 1489 and 28 October 1491. And if he were born in 1467, it could be dated between 28 October 1490 and 28 October 1492. Our exterior limits for the composition of *De contemptu mundi*, then, are 1489 and 1492—precisely the years during which the civil war was raging in Holland.

Is it possible to go beyond this general conclusion? To pin down the composition date of the work and hence to confirm the accuracy of the age reference contained in it, we shall have to search for further evidence.

Around the time that Erasmus wrote *De contemptu mundi* he also composed a tripartite satire on the folly of man (Poems 94–96/R. 23–25). That the hortatory epistle to Jodocus and the three paraenetic elegies are contemporaneous can be inferred from numerous close parallels in theme and language. Thus, to determine the

<sup>20</sup>Elyot [1548], 1975, sig. C8<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>21</sup>Paynell, sig. E6 = 38 (75 in rpt.).

composition date of the one is to know the approximate date of the other. Now in one of the three sections of the verse satire there is a borrowing from Fausto Andrelini's *Livia* (Paris, 1 October 1490). This is apparent when we compare Poem 96.8/R. 25.8 "Quaecunque occiduo terra sub axe latet" with *Livia* 2.1.66 "Ursa nec occiduo mersa sub axe latet."<sup>22</sup> The terminus post quem for the satire, therefore, is 1 October 1490. Moreover, in Ep. 28, l. 16—a letter which should be redated to c. March 1491—Erasmus specifically refers to his tripartite verse satire as "that one solitary satire" which he had recently written.<sup>23</sup> We can therefore assign the date winter 1490–91 to the moral satires. *De contemptu mundi*, which is not mentioned in Ep. 28, must have been composed shortly afterward, in spring 1491.

Internal evidence corroborates this dating. In ASD 5, pt. 1:42, ll. 75–77, Erasmus writes: "Ulysses . . . cera aures oppleverit" ("Odysseus stopped his ears with wax"). This odd bit of information most probably comes from Bartholomaeus Zehender's *Silva carminum* (Deventer, 16 February 1491), where on the last page we read: "Auribus oppletis caera . . . Ulysses." Both Zehender and Erasmus, contrary to Homer *Odyssey* 12.39–54 and 166–200, are of the opinion that Odysseus stopped his own ears with wax (rather than just those of his comrades), and both use the unusual verb "oppleo" rather than such standard verbs as "obturo" or "claudio."<sup>24</sup> Zehender's source in turn was Saint Basil *Ad adoles-*

<sup>22</sup>See Andrelini, 331.

<sup>23</sup>Allen conjecturally places Ep. 28 in c. 1489. Internal evidence, however, reveals that the letter was more probably written in c. March 1491. In ll. 3–8 Erasmus speaks of Willem Hermans's new poem on Saint Bavo. Since Saint Bavo was the patron saint of Haarlem, Hermans's choice of theme suggests a close connection with that town. And since Hermans had left Steyn sometime after October 1490 to help organize the new Augustinian monastery in Haarlem, this means that Ep. 28 was at the earliest composed several months after October 1490. See Tilmans, 22, with n. 50. Another allusion in the same letter permits a more precise dating. In ll. 20–22 Erasmus mentions that he has in his possession the poems of Bartholomaeus Zehender of Cologne. These were first published under the title *Silva carminum* at Deventer on 16 February 1491. Unless Erasmus is referring to a manuscript copy of Zehender's poems, Ep. 28 must have been written after 16 February 1491.

<sup>24</sup>See also Otto, nos. 213 and 1657. Leonardo Bruni, in his standard translation of Saint Basil's *Ad adolescentes*, chap. 4 (sig. a5) here uses the phrase "auresque claudendo." The unclassical variant of Homer's story crops up several times in Erasmus's later works as well. See *Panegyricus*, ASD 4, pt. 1:63, l. 181; *Parabola*, ASD 1, pt. 5:170, ll. 154–56; *Adagia* 4.3.7 (LB 2:1009B). It also occurs in other authors of the time; see Brant, chap. 36, ll. 29–34; and Eobanus, sig. B3<sup>v</sup>. For later examples, see Tilley; for

*centes*, a famous text which Erasmus, however, never adduces in his attacks on the barbarians during 1489–95 and hence most probably did not know at the time.<sup>25</sup> According to Ep. 28, ll. 20–22, written in c. March 1491, he did have a copy of Zehender's poems. We are thus again brought to infer that *De contemptu mundi* was composed in spring 1491.<sup>26</sup>

In spring 1491, then, Erasmus knew that he was born in either 1466 or 1467. The exact year depends on his usage of the expression “iam quantum et vigesimum annum agimus.” As we shall see, however, he habitually uses this idiom in the cardinal rather than the ordinal sense up to August 1516. Our provisional conclusion, accordingly, is that Erasmus was born in 1466. Why he asserted in 1521 and again in 1523 that he was “barely twenty” when he wrote the work is a question to which we shall return later.

\*                      \*                      \*                      \*

Our conclusion from the passage in *De contemptu mundi* finds support in some verses of “Carmen de senectutis incommodis” (Poem 2.61–64/R. 83.61–64). They were written in August 1506, when Erasmus was crossing the Alps into Italy: “The circle of Phoebus has not yet reverted forty times to the day of his birth, which comes at the onset of winter on the fourth day before the beginning of November.”

At first reading, these words indicate clearly enough that Erasmus was going on forty in August 1506 and was therefore born on 28 October 1466. Indeed, the very precision of the day and month reference appears to be a signal that the poet is equally precise in referring to his age. Proponents of the birth year 1467 or 1469, however, do not see it that way and argue that the reference “not yet forty times” can easily accommodate one or even three years before age forty.<sup>27</sup> A. C. F. Koch (13), furthermore, objects that

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an example in French literature, see Hepp, 62. Tilley assumes that the late sixteenth-century parallels he cites all go back to Erasmus's *Parabolae*. The ultimate source, however, appears to be Bruni's often reprinted translation of Saint Basil's *Ad adolescentes*.

<sup>25</sup>See Schucan, 176–80.

<sup>26</sup>For another argument corroborating this date, see 796 below.

<sup>27</sup>The elastic interpretation of the age reference is found first in Meissinger, 366, note on line 62 of the poem: “Eines der Argumente für das Geburtsjahr 1466; doch sollte man erstlich einen dichterischen Ausdruck nicht pressen, und dann wäre das Jahr 1469 mit dem Wortlaut ganz wohl auch zu vereinbaren: *nec adhuc* bedeutet lediglich das noch

Erasmus describes himself in Ep. 3032, ll. 202–04 (c. August 1535), as “iam accedens ad annum quadragesimum” when he first traveled to Italy in August 1506. Taking this phrase in the ordinal sense as “nearing his fortieth year,” rather than in the cardinal sense as “going on forty,” Koch argues that Erasmus was in fact only thirty-eight in summer 1506 and must hence have been born in 1467.

Koch’s argument can be sustained or refuted only by an investigation into Erasmus’s usage of the idiom “accedere ad annum . . . -um.” Fortunately there are some clear-cut parallels which will let us settle this question at once. According to the Greek and Vulgate text of Luke 3:23, “Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age.” Now both in his annotation on this verse (LB 6:243C–D) as well as in his paraphrase of it (LB 7:316A) Erasmus writes: “Iesus accedebat ad annum trigesimum.” And interpreting Romans 4:19 (LB 7:791B) he renders the clause “[Abraham] was about a hundred years old” with “iam accederet ad annum centesimum.” This does not mean that the patriarch was “approaching his one hundredth year” and was hence just ninety-eight years of age, for in a contemporaneous annotation on the verse Erasmus explains that “Abraham at that time was ninety-nine years old.”<sup>28</sup> These two instances, first published in 1516–23, prove that he used this idiom in the cardinal sense to mean “going on this or that age,” rather than “approaching the nth year of life.” We may safely conclude, therefore, that he was nearly forty in August 1506 and was born in 1466. But we need not rely solely on the evidence just cited. Later on in the same letter, where he mentions going on forty in August 1506, Erasmus returns to the topic and, as it were, himself

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nicht vollendete 40. Jahr, was auch auf das 37. passen würde.” Reedijk agrees (284–85): “At first sight ll. 61/4 point clearly to 1466 but after closer study they appear to be less decisive.” After citing Meissinger’s comments he continues: “On the other hand it should be borne in mind that when Erasmus wrote the lines in question, his birthday (28 Oct.) was close at hand and in this light the words might perhaps be interpreted in the sense that his 40th birthday lay still some seven or eight weeks ahead. But even if this was what Erasmus meant to say, we have always to remember that his inaccuracy in stating his age is notorious and that he sometimes had his own special reasons for being vague about it.” Koch, here following Reedijk, discusses the passage on 12–14.

<sup>28</sup>In his *Novum Testamentum* Erasmus translates Luke 3:23 as “Iesus incipiebat esse ferme annorum triginta” (LB 6:244A) and Rom. 4:19 as “centum fere natus esset annos” (LB 6:582A). For the annotation on Rom. 4:19, see LB 6:581D–E/Reeve, 1990, 363: “Id temporis Abraham nonaginta novem habebat annos.”

translates the phrase "iam accedens ad annum quadragesimum" with the words: "As I began saying earlier, when I went to Italy I was already about forty years old (iam fere quadragenarius)." <sup>29</sup> Thus as late as 1535 Erasmus was still affirming the prima-facie reading of the passage in "Carmen de senectutis incommodis" as indicating his approaching fortieth birthday on 28 October 1506. And in affirming this, he also avouches that he was born in 1466.

It seems not to have occurred to Erasmus's biographers to ask whether the age reference in "Carmen de senectutis incommodis" might serve some rhetorical purpose. Why indeed does he draw attention to the fact that he is virtually forty? He does so to demonstrate by his own example that youth is fleeting and that we should hence make wise use of it while it lasts. He himself is living proof of the flight of youth. Writing a few weeks before his fortieth birthday, he is about to pass the meridian of life—the threshold of old age, as he terms it. This is not some "mid-life crisis," arising from a Horatian melancholy at the flight of youth or a neurasthenic fear of aging, as modern critics have suggested. Old age setting in at forty was an objective physiological fact, not a psychological state of mind. An authoritative medical textbook of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Johannicius's *Isagoge ad Techne Galieni*, specifically asserts that we enter old age (*senectus*) at either age thirty-five or forty. <sup>30</sup> These precise age indications, common knowledge in the later Middle Ages, were derived by halving the lifespan mentioned in Psalm 90:10: "The years of our life are three-score and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore." Age forty was most often brought up in connection with the predominating system of dividing life into four seasons, each of which was thought to last about twenty years. <sup>31</sup> At forty we leave the summer of youth (*iuventus*) behind and enter the autumn of our declining age (*virilitas*

<sup>29</sup>See Ep. 3032, ll. 506–07, a passage not noticed by Koch.

<sup>30</sup>See Maurach, 155, par. 18, "De Aetatibus": "Iuventus . . . vel tricesimo quinto vel quadragesimo anno finitur. Huic succedit senectus frigida et sicca, in qua quidem minui et decrescere corpus incipit, tamen virtus non deficit quinquagesimo quinto vel sexagesimo persistens anno. Huic succedit senium."

<sup>31</sup>The tetradic system is the dominant one in the medical tradition of antiquity and the Middle Ages; it is also common in ancient and medieval literary texts. See, for example, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.199–233; Horace *Ars poetica* 158–74; Burrow, 12–36; Sears, 9–37. Erasmus himself nearly always divides life into "pueritia" (or "adolescencia"), "iuventus" (or "adolescencia"), "virilis aetas," and "senectus"; see *CWE* 86, note on Poem 2.43–53.

or *senectus*)—seasons to which Erasmus specifically refers in the poem. In his annotation on 1 Thess. 2:7 (LB 6:904F), accordingly, Erasmus says that when he first met William Warham in January 1506, he himself was already getting on in years and declining towards age forty (“proveciori iam et ad quadragesimum devertenti annum”). In his *CV*, ll. 123–24, he similarly describes himself during his stay at Bologna from late 1506 to winter 1507–08 as being “already in his declining years, that is to say, about forty years old” (“iam vergente aetate, hoc est ferme quadragenarius”). Sir Thomas Elyot is thus echoing a widely held view when he states in *The Castel of Helth* (1539) that youth (*juventute*) lasts “unto .xl. yeres” and is followed immediately by old age (*senectute*).<sup>32</sup> And Shakespeare, writing later in the century, warns his friend in Sonnet 2: “When forty winters shall besiege thy brow / And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field, / Thy youth’s proud livery, so gazed on now, / Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held.”

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From 1516 to 1530 Erasmus makes numerous precise references to his current age which consistently point to 1466, never to 1469.

Only the first two of these statements, both made in early 1516, can be interpreted as implying the birth year 1467. In the *Methodus* prefixed to his *Novum instrumentum* (Basel, February 1516) Erasmus gives his age as “iam undequinquagesimum agens annum.”<sup>33</sup> This can mean either “already in my forty-ninth year” or “already forty-nine years old.” And in a letter to Urbanus Regius (Ep. 392, l. 23) dated 24 February 1516 he writes: “Annum ago non plus undequinquagesimum” (“I am in my forty-ninth year exactly,” or “I am exactly forty-nine years old”).

P. S. Allen thinks that the statement in Ep. 392 “is at variance with Erasmus’ usual estimate that he was born in 1466.” The pos-

<sup>32</sup>See Elyot, 1539, sig. B2<sup>v</sup>–B3 = 10<sup>v</sup>–11, describing the four ages of man: “Adolescencye to .xxv. yeres, hotte and moyste, in the whiche tyme the body groweth. Juventute unto .xl. yeres, hot and drye, wherein the bodye is in perfyte growth. Senectute, unto .lx. yeres, colde and drye, wherein the body begynneth to decrease. Age decrepitate, untill the laste tyme of lyfe, accidently moyste, but naturally colde and drye, wherein the powers and strength of the body be more and more mynished.”

<sup>33</sup>See Holborn, 153, ll. 7–8. There is no reason to suppose that the *Methodus* was written before Erasmus’s birthday on 28 October 1515, as Kohls (1966<sup>1</sup>, 115) surmises. See Koch, 14–15 and 47, n. 37; Van der Blom, 1970–71, 101, n. 2, and 1971, 77, n. 9.

sibility that the idiom might express a cardinal number is also ignored by other scholars, including Richter, Nichols, Smith, Post, Kohls, and Koch. A. C. F. Koch, indeed, builds his entire argument for the birth year 1467 on the shifting sand of the two idiomatic age references of February 1516. His hypothesis, I may remind the reader, asks us to imagine an Erasmus who, out of fear of his climacteric years, tried to elude fate by deluding himself. To accomplish this, our Christian humanist is supposed to have skipped his forty-ninth, fifty-sixth and sixty-third year, thus making seven years out of every six after 1516. In this way, as N. van der Blom has wittily remarked, Erasmus accomplished what Christ thought impossible: by being anxious he added several cubits to his span of life.

Koch defends his theory by pointing to the obsessive hold which astrology had on the minds of Erasmus's contemporaries. To document that Erasmus too, though far less impressed by astrology than, say, Philip Melanchthon, could nevertheless be quite superstitious, he cites Ep. 948, ll. 15–26 (22 April 1519), where the Dutch theologian confides that he has consulted “several astrologers renowned in the exercise of this art.” But, as N. van der Blom points out, the context leaves no doubt that these remarks are to be taken cum grano salis. In defense of Koch's hypothesis, Van der Blom goes on to remark that the theory of climacterics has nothing to do with astrology as such.<sup>34</sup> Originally that was indeed the case; but already in antiquity the hebdomadal ages of life and the critical years were closely correlated with the seven planets. Besides, since Koch's construct presupposes an astonishingly superstitious Erasmus and tries to make this view credible by mentioning astrology, we cannot avoid the subject here.

Like so many of his learned contemporaries, Erasmus took it for granted that the stars—subject always to divine law—had a profound influence on human affairs. In his *Institutio principis Christiani*, *Lingua*, *Enarratio Psalmi XXXVIII*, and *Ecclesiastes*, for example, he asserts that many calamities are brought about by solar and lunar eclipses and unfavorable conjunctions of the planets.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, as he says in his epigram on the meeting between Charles V and

<sup>34</sup>Van der Blom, 1970–71, 101, n. 1, and 1971, 76, n. 8.

<sup>35</sup>See ASD 4, pt. 1:212, ll. 448–50; ASD 4, pt. 1A:26, ll. 52–54; ASD 5, pt. 3:220, ll. 836–39; and LB 5:1075C; also Chomarat, 1:45–46, n. 48. For sixteenth-century views, see Zambelli.

Henry VIII, a conjunction of the beneficent planets can bring the world great blessings (Poem 122/R. 109). He was furthermore prepared to grant that a thorough knowledge of astrology could be a useful tool in the practice of medicine.<sup>36</sup> In *De immensa Dei misericordia* (LB 5:571B) he was even willing to admit that it is possible to predict the future by studying the stars. Within the climate of contemporary thinking such beliefs cannot in themselves be branded as superstitious.

Despite his acceptance of the astrological view of causation, Erasmus throughout his mature life condemned the stargazers' efforts to divine the future. He maintained that foretelling terrestrial events by casting horoscopes was an impious and illicit attempt to peer into the secrets of God's mind. In this respect astrology seemed to him one of the black arts, a kind of idolatry which Christians ought rightly to shun.<sup>37</sup> Astrologers and chiromancers who claim to forecast what will happen in the body politic he considered charlatans and liars who cause nothing but trouble.<sup>38</sup> They are baneful to Christian faith, since they either lull people into a false sense of security or paralyze them with worries about the calamities that await them. In his *Ecclesiastes* he writes: "Even nowadays astrologers, chiromancers, ventriloquists, and magicians foretell many things that will happen; the fruit of their foreknowledge, however, is not very great. For if their prediction comes true, it is the height of misery to know in advance what cannot be avoided; but if it does not, the very fear of the misfortune is a large part of the misfortune."<sup>39</sup> And in his *Responsio ad annotationes Eduardi Lei* (LB 9:167E-F) he explicitly reminds his readers of Christ's injunction not to be anxious about the future. Those who superstitiously consult astrologers to find out what will happen to them, he insists, are guilty of breaking this commandment.

In view of statements like these it is difficult to accept the contention that Erasmus was ever a superstitious man, even in moments of crisis and depression. If we can now also show that the

<sup>36</sup>See *Encomium medicinae*, ASD 1, pt. 4:166, ll. 51-52; and Ep. 267; see also Ep. 542, ll. 27-30.

<sup>37</sup>See *Explanatio symboli*, ASD 5, pt. 1:303, ll. 898-901.

<sup>38</sup>See *Institutio principis Christiani*, ASD 4, pt. 1:177, ll. 337-43, and 215, ll. 522-24; *Adagia* 2.7.20 (ASD 2, pt. 4:102, ll. 336-44); *Lingua*, ASD 4, pt. 1A:97-98, ll. 362-70.

<sup>39</sup>See ASD 5, pt. 4:184, ll. 979-83. See also *Ecclesiastes*, ASD 5, pt. 4:438, ll. 735-40.



two age references of 1516—the very foundation of Koch’s theory—are to be understood as cardinal numbers, his theory must inevitably collapse. Such a conclusion should not come as a surprise to us now. We have already noted that Erasmus repeatedly uses the idiom “accedere ad annum . . . -um” in the cardinal sense to mean “going on this or that age” rather than “approaching one’s nth year.” He was demonstrably also employing the idiom “annum . . . -um agere” to express a cardinal number in 1516, both in the two age references already cited and in other instances besides.

In his *Novum instrumentum* (February 1516), introduced by the same *Methodus* in which one of the two equivocal age references occurs, Erasmus provides a Greek text of the New Testament, a Latin translation, and a series of philological notes. Translating the Greek of Luke 3:23 he writes (LB 6:244A): “Iesus incipiebat esse ferme annorum triginta” (“Jesus began to be about thirty years old”). In the accompanying annotation he explains that this means “annorum circiter triginta” (“about thirty years old”). He notes that in some Greek codices the adverb “about” is lacking. In that case, he observes, we should translate either “Iesus ingressus erat annum trigesimum” (“Jesus had just turned thirty”) or “Iesus accedebat ad annum trigesimum” (“Jesus was going on age thirty”). In other words, without the adverb “about” the verse means either “agere coepisse trigesimum annum” (“he began to be thirty years old”) or “accessisse iam ad illud aetatis” (“he was already going on that age”). In this annotation, first published in February 1516,<sup>40</sup> Erasmus is thus plainly expressing age in the cardinal rather than the ordinal sense.

A second example of this usage occurs in Ep. 447, ll. 87–90 (August 1516). Here Erasmus tells the papal secretary “Lambertus Grunnius” that as a teenager he sent a letter to one of his guardians. The man responded testily to the boy—“decimumquartum annum agenti”—that his Latin was so ornate that he ought to provide a commentary the next time he wrote. Does this mean that Erasmus was “in his fourteenth year” and hence thirteen at the time, or that he was then “fourteen years old”? When Erasmus recalls the same incident in *De conscribendis epistolis* (ASD 1, pt. 2:217, ll. 10–15), he uses the unequivocal expression “puer annos natus quatuordecim” (“a boy of fourteen”). Besides, according to Ep. 940, ll. 8–9, he left

<sup>40</sup>See LB 6:243C–D/Reeve, 1986, 172.

Deventer at age fourteen (“quatuordecim natus annos”); and according to *CV*, ll.41–45, his mother died shortly before, his father not long after his departure from Deventer. By this account, then, he must have been fourteen when the guardians were first assigned to him.

Erasmus’s usage of the idiom in the cardinal rather than the ordinal sense may be seen not only in the phrases “annum . . . -um agere,” “accedere ad . . . -um annum,” and “ingressus . . . -um annum,” but also in some related expressions.

In 1513, for instance, Erasmus translates Plutarch *De tuenda bona valetudine* 26 (*Moralia* 136E) ἀνὴρ ὑπὲρ ἑξήκοντα γεγονὼς ἔτη (“a man over sixty”) as: “hominem . . . qui sexagesimum pretergressus annum” (ASD 4, pt. 2:211, l.693). And in the letter to Grunnius (Ep. 447, ll.156–57), written in August 1516, he asserts that he began to be pressured into entering the monastery when he was “vix dum egressus annum decimumquintum.” This phrase is understood in *CWE* 4 as “having barely passed his fifteenth year” (that is, “having just turned fifteen”). If, however, Erasmus intended the idiom to indicate a cardinal number, the expression would mean: “having just turned sixteen.” A little later in the same letter (ll.241–42) he paraphrases the first age reference by saying: “vix dum actatis annum ingressus decimum sextum.” Once more we must ask: was Erasmus by his own account barely fifteen when he entered Steyn, or was he barely sixteen? And again we can leave it to Erasmus to answer our question. In Ep. 1436, l.49 (c. 2 April 1524) he says that when he was still fiercely resisting his guardians he was “vix dum egressus annum decimum sextum” (“barely past his sixteenth year”). The meaning in this case can obviously not be “barely past age sixteen” (that is, barely seventeen). Allen, to be sure, believes that the assertion of 1524 conflicts with the statement of August 1516 and hence infers that “egressus” might be a scribal error for “igressus.” However, the text of Ep. 1436, l.49 may be considered correct as it stands. It is Erasmus’s idiomatic usage, not his chronology, that has changed.<sup>41</sup> The statement that he was six-

<sup>41</sup>Beginning in February 1517 Erasmus generally uses the age expressions in the ordinal sense, as we shall see. He was not always consistent in his usage, however; occasionally we find him using various forms of the idiom side by side in the cardinal and ordinal sense. See, for example, *Colloquia*, ASD 1, pt. 3:141, ll.520–21, where the phrase “annum egressa iam decimum septimum” is glossed with “Annum iam agens undevigesimum. Annos nata decem et octo.”

teen when he entered Steyn is in fact corroborated, though not obviously, by Ep. 2997, ll. 80–82 (21 February 1535). There Erasmus recalls that he suffered from the quartan fever for over a year when he was sixteen (“sedecim natus annos”). From Epp. 447, ll. 242–44 and 1436, l. 35, as well as from *CV*, ll. 61–62, we learn that he contracted this fever at ‘s-Hertogenbosch in the year *before* he came to Steyn. Thus, by his own account, he had turned sixteen when he became a postulant.

Evidently, then, there is no need to emend the reference of 1524; nor are we forced to surmise that he made himself a year younger in the letter of August 1516 in order to bring his age more closely into line with the minimum age of admission into the monastery. (One had to be at least fourteen to enter an Augustinian house and at least sixteen to make one’s profession there.)<sup>42</sup> The apparent difference between the earlier and later statements can most easily be accounted for by assuming that sometime after August 1516 Erasmus’s usage of the idiom changed from the cardinal to the ordinal sense.

With this we have discovered not just two unequivocal instances where Erasmus uses the expression “annum . . . -um agere” in the cardinal sense during 1516 but a series of related idioms as well. From this usage we may conclude that Erasmus’s age references in February 1516 should not be read as ordinals, as Koch insists they must, but as cardinal numbers. They point to 1466 as the year of

<sup>42</sup>See Allen, note on Ep. 296, l. 33, and *EE* 1:582, n. 45. In Ep. 296, ll. 34–37 (8 July 1514), Erasmus tells Servatius Rogerus that a “youth of seventeen” (“puer anno decimo septimo”) does not yet know himself well enough to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life, even after a year of probation. Allen, who understands this age reference in the ordinal sense as referring to age sixteen, thinks that it might “refer to the requirements of the Augustinian Order rather than to Erasmus’ own case,” but this is unlikely within the context. More probably Erasmus is already here hinting at the line of argument that he would later present to the pope. For the phrase “puer anno decimo septimo” in the cardinal sense compare, for example, *Luciani dialogi* (1506), where a comparison with the Greek text shows that “octogesimo secundo anno” (ASD 1, pt. 1:625, l. 11) means “at age eighty-two”, “nonagesimo secundo vitae anno” (ASD 1, pt. 1:625, l. 32) means “at age ninety-two,” and “anno undecentesimo” (ASD 1, pt. 1:626, l. 43) means “at age ninety-nine.” See also *Adagia* 2.3.48, dating from 1508, where the phrases “anno ferme xxxv” and “anno undequingagesimo” (LB 2:500B) should be understood in the cardinal sense as “about age thirty-five” (5 × 7) and “age forty-nine” (7 × 7). In later years Erasmus regularly used this idiom in the ordinal sense; see, for example, Ep. 1347, ll. 205–07 (1 March 1523).

Erasmus's birth, not to 1467. As the twin pillars of his hypothesis crumble, Koch's construct falls into ruins.

Our discussion of the age references in *De contemptu mundi* and "Carmen de senectutis incommodis" and our study of Erasmus's idiomatic usage have brought out the chief problem bedeviling earlier investigations. Instead of asking what a particular reference might mean in its context, scholars have been content to argue about Erasmus's age on the basis of bits and pieces of disembodied text.<sup>43</sup> Is it any wonder that the debate has led nowhere? Let us, then, return to the texts once more and try to understand them as their author intended.

We shall start by looking at those two age references which, given his usage, indicate that Erasmus was forty-nine years old in February 1516. Why does he take the trouble to bring up his age? In the *Methodus* passage Erasmus tells the reader that he is now seriously studying Hebrew in spite of his advanced age, for he is already forty-nine years old. And in the letter to Urbanus Regius, where he declines a post at the University of Ingolstadt, he says that he is now "more senile than aged, for I am exactly forty-nine years old." Age forty-nine, then, is in both instances explicitly connected with a decline in mental acuity owing to advancing age. We find this thought expressed also in Ep. 423, ll. 59–63 (20 June 1516), where the forty-nine-year-old John Colet—he was then indeed forty-nine—remarks that he is now learning Greek, "although already advanced in years and nearly an old man." He adds that he is following the lead of Erasmus who, "level with him in age and years," is now devoting himself to the study of Hebrew. In Ep. 471, l. 27 (29 September 1516) Erasmus echoes this news and reports to Johannes Reuchlin that John Colet is working at his Greek even though he is now an old man.<sup>44</sup>

Where might Erasmus have gotten the idea of connecting age forty-nine with mental old age? He himself hints at his source in "Carmen de senectutis incommodis" (Poem 2.46–53/R. 83.46–53): "Before his fleeting years have finished the fifth decade, old age does not hesitate to assail the immortal part of our being, the part

<sup>43</sup>Van der Blom (1971, 78, n. 20) makes the same point: "Le danger existe que, dans des questions purement techniques comme la nôtre, on ne voit plus le contexte des renseignements à propos de l'âge et qu'ils vont mener leur propre vie."

<sup>44</sup>The difficulty of learning a new language at an advanced age was proverbial; see *Adagia* 1.2.61.

descended from the heavens; even this she boldly challenges and has no fear of assaulting the sacred sinews of the mind, if we give credence to the esteemed Aristotle." Indeed, he took the idea from Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.14.4 and *Politics* 7.14.11. Following Solon's famous poem which divides life into ten periods of seven years each, Aristotle impresses upon his readers the inescapable truth that biology is destiny. Physical strength, he avers, crests at age thirty-five ( $5 \times 7$ ), while the mental powers peak at age forty-nine ( $7 \times 7$ ).

Erasmus refers to this hebdomadal scheme not only in his poem on the troubles of old age, but also in *Adagia* 1.5.36, noting that mental powers begin to lag at age forty-nine (LB 2:196A): "For in his *Politics* Aristotle asserts that after age forty-eight the mind's vigor dies away." He makes the same observation in *Adagia* 2.3.48 (LB 2: 500B), citing Aristotle's *Politics* and *Rhetoric*. And in *Institutio Christiani matrimonii* (LB 5:709C) he comments that "the mind's vigor lasts until the seventh hebdomad, that is to say, up to about one's fiftieth year."<sup>45</sup>

At least one contemporary reader saw the *Methodus* passage in context and let it be known that he understood its intent. In his *Genethliacon Erasmi* ("Birthday poem for Erasmus"), written in c. February 1517, Ursinus Velius has the Muses predict that Erasmus will take up Hebrew studies when he is old and gray. When precisely in his old age? By the time Velius wrote his poem, a year had passed since the publication of the *Methodus*. He accordingly updated Erasmus's age from forty-nine to fifty: "Erasmus, as a gray-beard, after you have completed five decades (post quinquennia iam decem peracta), you will spend long nights by the lamp learning the rough-edged words of the Hebrew tongue, studiously following Cato's example."<sup>46</sup> Two years later, in November 1518 and

<sup>45</sup>The text in LB 5:709C erroneously reads "quadragessimus" for "quingagesimusum."

<sup>46</sup>See LB 1:(21), col. 2; also LB 3:226D-E. That Velius must have drawn his information from the *Methodus* passage was first remarked by Richter, App. A, iv; see also Van der Blom, 1970-71, 102, and 1971, 72. It is confirmed by Velius's phrase "exemplum . . . ad Catonis" which mirrors Erasmus's phrase "Catonis exemplum" a few lines preceding the age reference in the *Methodus* passage. According to Cicero *Academica priora* 2.5 and *De senectute* 1.3, 8.26, and 11.38 the censor M. Porcius Cato began studying Greek (literature) in his old age; Erasmus interprets this to mean age seventy ("septuagesimus agens annum") in *De pueris instituendis*, ASD 1, pt. 2, 50:13-14 (composed in 1509). For the date of Velius's *Genethliacon*, see Ep. 548 with Allen's note on l.3.

January 1519, Erasmus himself updated the age reference of the *Methodus* in his *Ratio seu methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram theologia* (Louvain, Nov. 1518; rpt. Basel, Jan. 1519), “iam quinquagesimum tertium ingressus annum” (“having already entered my fifty-third year”).<sup>47</sup> Once again we have occasion to observe that the *Methodus* passage of 1516 must be interpreted as pointing to 1466 as the year of Erasmus’s birth.

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Erasmus’s precise references to his current age in 1517–30 confirm that 1466 was indeed his natal year.

In Ep. 531, l.375 (15 February 1517) he tells Guillaume Budé: “Iam annum ago primum et quinquagesimum.” Here the idiom can only be translated as “I am now in my fifty-first year.” How do we know that Erasmus, in contrast to his usage up to August 1516, is now employing the expression “annum . . . -um agere” in the ordinal sense to mean that he is in his fifty-first year and hence fifty years old?<sup>48</sup> If he were saying that he is fifty-one, he would also be implying that he was born in 1465, which can hardly be maintained in view of the utterances already discussed. The context corroborates our interpretation, for Erasmus is at pains to point out that he and Budé are really not as far apart in age as his colleague imagines, he himself having only recently turned fifty.

Erasmus is responding to a letter of 26 November 1516 in which the illustrious French scholar had said (Ep. 493, l.368): “Anno duodequingagesimo proximus esse cepi” (“I am drawing very close to my forty-eighth birthday”).<sup>49</sup> This understated age reference—Budé was in fact already forty-eight years old and draw-

<sup>47</sup>LB 5:79A and Holborn, 184, ll.1–2.

<sup>48</sup>For the later usage where the number is understood as an ordinal, see, for example, *Colloquia*, ASD 1, pt. 3:141, ll.520–21 (1522), where “Annum iam agens undevigesimum” means “Annos nata decem et octo,” and Ep. 1347, ll.200–01 (1 March 1523), where “octogesimum agens annum” demonstrably means seventy-nine.

<sup>49</sup>Budé was born on 26 January 1468; see Garanderie, 113, n. 27. Garanderie, who is quite aware of the ambiguity of the idiom (“expression équivoque”), feels that the translation “forty-eighth year” more closely conforms to classical Latin usage than “forty-eighth birthday” and hence concludes: “Il s’est rajeuni de deux ans.” Erasmus, however, probably understood Budé’s expression “anno duodequingagesimo proximus” in the cardinal sense, for in February 1530 he says that he is only two years older than Budé; see Ep. 2275, l.21. It may seem strange that he uses the age idioms here in both the cardinal and the ordinal sense; but see n. 41 above and n. 50 below.

ing close to age forty-nine—has elicited more comment than understanding, since the context is not taken into account. Budé precedes his age reference with a long defense of his style, the ornate complexity of which he considers youthful, and contrasts it with Erasmus's middle style, the restrained simplicity of which he attributes to the Dutchman's greater age. He seems to have been under the impression that Erasmus was considerably older than he and did not know that his correspondent was only a year and three months his senior. What he is saying in essence is this: "I write the way I do, because I am a young man; you write the way you do because you are an old man." To make sure that he gets his point across, Budé retouches his age a little—not by much, of course, only a year or two. Like all educated people in the Renaissance he was quite aware of Aristotle's dictum that the mind starts losing its youthful acuity at age forty-nine. Hence he felt it rhetorically necessary to present himself to Erasmus as still some distance away from that age.

In his response (Ep. 531) Erasmus defends his middle style. He introduces the discussion of the age difference (ll. 373–77) with a sly insinuation that Budé just might have touched up his age a little for the sake of effect: "unless either you or I have done our calculation wrong." Erasmus's phrasing in itself does not imply that he was confused about the year of his own birth. He is merely saying quite politely that good philologists do not necessarily excel at arithmetic, and rhetoricians do sometimes play the sophist and stretch the truth. Even so, he observes, the difference in age is very slight, since he himself has just begun his fifty-first year and Budé is apparently drawing close to his forty-eighth birthday: "Ego iam annum ago primum et quinquagesimum, tu, ut scribis, non procul abes a duodequingagesimo." Only two years of chronological age separate them. But since those years also bridge the critical forty-ninth year after which mental acuity is supposed to begin falling off, he jokes: "Mihi igitur longe plus senii est quam tibi, senectutis non tam multum" ("I am therefore far more senile than you, but not that much older"). We recall that in his letter to Urbanus Regius, written a year earlier, Erasmus had excused himself from a professorship in Ingolstadt by saying in quite similar language that he was "more senile than aged" ("plus est senii quam senectae"). Both Budé and Erasmus, then, are playing their rhetorical games with age forty-nine.

All of the following references, using the age-idioms in the ordinal sense, unambiguously point to 1466 as the year of his birth:<sup>50</sup> Ep. 541, ll.2–3 (26 February 1517), “annum ingressus primum et quinquagesimum” (“having entered my fifty-first year”); *Apologia ad Iacobum Fabrum Stapulensem* (LB 9:20F, dated 5 August 1517), “Quinquagesimum iam excessi” (“I have now passed my fiftieth year”);<sup>51</sup> Ep. 631, ll.15–16 (24 August 1517), “Iam annum excessi quinquagesimum” (“I have already passed my fiftieth year”). Ep. 868, ll.89–90 (15 October 1518): “Ipse nunc annum quinquagesimum secundum aut ad summum tertium ago” (“I am now in my fifty-second or at most fifty-third year”). Post and Koch, following F. M. Nichols, explain that Erasmus is writing shortly before his birthday. He is fifty-one at the time of writing, but will be fifty-two by the time the letter reaches Ambrogio Leoni in Venice.<sup>52</sup> Ep. 940, ll.9–10 (17 April 1519): “Nunc ago annum quinquagesimumtertium” (“I am now in my fifty-third year”). Ep. 1347, ll.290–91 (1 March 1523): Erasmus says that John Colet, who according to Ep. 1211, ll.284–85 was two or three months his junior, was “approximately in his fifty-third year” when he died on 16 September 1519 (“anno ferme liii<sup>o</sup>”). Erasmus thus implies that at that time he himself was fifty-two and is fifty-six at the time of writing. As we now know for certain, Colet was indeed about three months younger than Erasmus, having been born in late January 1467.<sup>53</sup> CV, ll.1–2

<sup>50</sup>It is not clear why Erasmus changed his idiomatic usage in early 1517. Perhaps he first became conscious of it when Budé, the eminent classicist, mentioned his own age and so induced him to adopt the more classical ordinal sense. As far as I can tell, he continued to use the expression “ad . . . -um annum” in the cardinal sense; he seems to keep using the phrase “non procul abesse ab anno . . . -esimo” that way also (see Ep. 531, l.376 and Ep. 1347, l.196); but the other forms of the idiom are generally employed henceforth in the ordinal sense.

<sup>51</sup>See also CV, l.149: “Until he was fifty (usque ad annum quinquagesimum) he had neither attacked anyone nor been attacked by anyone’s pen.” He is referring to his controversy with Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples who criticized him in the second edition of his commentary on the Epistles of Paul (Paris: H. Estienne, colophon date 1515, but in fact printed some months after March 1516; see *CWE* 5:11–12, notes on letter 597, ll.37 and 44). A third edition was printed at Paris by F. Regnault in spring 1517. Erasmus first learned of the attack in early summer 1517 (see Ep. 597, ll.32–40) and replied at length in the *Apologia ad Iacobum Fabrum Stapulensem*.

<sup>52</sup>See Nichols, 1:476; Post, 1964, 507; Koch, 48, n. 49.

<sup>53</sup>In Ep. 423, l.62 (20 June 1516), John Colet corroborates Erasmus’s statement that the two men were “of the same age and years.” For documentary proof that this was indeed the case, see Gleason.



(written c. 2 April 1524): “Supputat annos circiter 57” (“He reckons his age to be about fifty-seven”).

In Ep. 1994a, ll. 51–57 (10 May 1528, printed at the head of *EE* 8), Conrad Goclenius expresses surprise and dismay that Erasmus in a now-lost letter of c. 20 March 1528 was worried about his grand climacteric, that is to say, his sixty-third year. P. S. Allen explains that Erasmus, if born in 1466, would indeed be entering his grand climacteric in October 1528. From the rest of the paragraph it appears that Erasmus was particularly concerned that during the approaching year fate would deprive him of his fame, for Goclenius first chides him for his “vanity, not to say impiety” and then assures him that fate has no power over his fame. The name Erasmus, he says, will live forever in the minds of men.<sup>54</sup>

In Ep. 2275, ll. 21–22 (February 1530) Erasmus states that he is no more decrepit than say Budé (two years younger than he) or Beda (perhaps five or four years younger) or Latomus (three years younger). Though Erasmus’s estimate of Latomus’s age is questionable (he seems to have been born in about 1475), his reference to Budé’s age is not far off the mark (he was born on 26 January 1468). His estimate of Beda’s age also tallies well with other evidence which indicates that Beda was born in 1470–71. The terminus ad quem for Beda’s birth year, as W. F. Bense has observed, is 1472. As a candidate for the doctoral degree in theology at Paris, he would have had “to prove that he had reached the age of thirty-five at the time of the *apertio examinis*, November 1, 1507.”<sup>55</sup> Erasmus’s earlier estimates of the French theologian’s age also point to 1470–71 as the year of Beda’s birth. In *Prologus in supputationes Beddae* (LB 9:448E) Erasmus responds to Beda’s excusing himself on account of his “old age” by saying that his adversary is in fact “not that much younger” than he. With due allowance for the rhetorical coloring of this statement, we may take it to mean that Erasmus considered

<sup>54</sup>Koch, 41, uses this passage to buttress his theory that the discrepancies in Erasmus’s age references might be rooted in his desire to avoid the climacteric years. Mann Phillips, 1973, 15, though sympathetic to Koch’s thesis, questions his interpretation of this passage: “How do we know that the allusion to the climacteric which shocked Goclenius was not a humorous remark which he took seriously?” See also Van der Blom, 1970–71, 101, n. 2, and 1971, 77, n. 9. Indeed, even straight-forward Goclenius in the end suspected that Erasmus might be mocking this kind of superstition, for he concludes by saying (Ep. 1994a, ll. 56–57): “I do not understand to what end you write this, unless perhaps it pleased you to make fun of this magic superstition.”

<sup>55</sup>Bense, 88, n. 6.

himself several years older than Beda. And in *Responsio ad notulas Beddae* (LB 9:707A), first published in March 1529, he states that Beda is "now almost a sexagenarian." With the year of Beda's birth thus established as 1470–71 and Budé's as 1468, it is plain that Erasmus's reference to his own age in Ep. 2275 continues to point to 1466 as the year of his birth; he was indeed a year and three months older than Budé and four or five years older than Beda.

Later in the same paragraph (ll.30–31) Erasmus boasts that, God willing, he could live another fourteen years in good health. P. S. Allen, sensing an allusion to Psalm 90:10, assumes that this refers to age eighty as the upper limit of life and that Erasmus must now be considering himself sixty-six years old (rather than sixty-three). But Allen's interpretation is untenable. Erasmus cannot possibly have wanted to overstate his age here. He is defending himself against the Franciscans, who had taunted him as "a decrepit old man" (see ll.21, 39, 41, and 45). The whole thrust of his argument, then, is to make himself appear youthful and vigorous. That is why he mentions being little more than two years older than Budé and only four or five years older than Beda. Having thus confirmed indirectly that he is sixty-three years of age (that is,  $9 \times 7$  years old), he now adds that he could easily live another two hebdomadal periods ( $2 \times 7$  years) in good mental and physical health.

We thus conclude that Erasmus's precise references to his current age throughout his adult life invariably indicate 1466 as the year of his birth. Post's contention that Erasmus's statements about his current age are too inconsistent to be trustworthy and Koch's hypothesis that Erasmus systematically manipulated his age to make himself a year older once every seven years after 1516 are not borne out by the facts.

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Besides these precise references there are numerous general statements which do not permit an exact dating but are occasionally useful in excluding 1469 as the year of Erasmus's birth. In Ep. 844, l.181 (15 May 1518), for example, he refers to himself as "quinquagenario" ("a man in his fifties"). He repeats this in Ep. 867, l.270 (c. 15 October 1518). Speaking of the brevity of human life where few reach fifty, he comments that he cannot complain about the length of his own life, for he at least has passed his fiftieth year ("an-

num excessi quinquagesimum"). He makes the same comment in Ep. 1347, l. 196 (1 March 1523), but now with the updated age reference that he is not far from age sixty, "non procul absum ab anno sexagesimo."

It has often been noted that Erasmus makes numerous inflated age references after 1524. Such statements, however, do not stem from any desire "to put the year of his birth farther back the older he became." Smith's conclusion (446), drawn from snippets of disconnected text, does not bear scrutiny. The imprecise references arise from a tendency on Erasmus's part during these years of turmoil to indicate his age in round numbers and in literary-figurative language. In other words, they are rhetorically motivated.

Erasmus, as we just saw, first mentions approaching age sixty on 1 March 1523. Though he was still more than three years away from being a sexagenarian, the anticipated age took root in his mind. He was getting on in years; he was older than he had ever dared hope. Nevertheless, just when he should have been looking forward to his retirement from the public arena, he found himself embroiled in a series of battles with Ulrich von Hutten and Martin Luther in 1523–24. An old man for his time, he felt himself forced to be a gladiator. He expresses these two self-images—the old man and the gladiator—in his bitter attack on Hutten, *Spongia*, published in September 1523. He mentions "pugna gladiatoria" (ASD 9, pt. 1:120, l. 89) and regrets having been drawn into "hanc harenam gladiatoriam" (165, ll. 48–49). Elsewhere in the book he speaks as an old man to the young Hutten.<sup>56</sup> A year later, in mid-1524, he uses very similar language. At the beginning of *De libero arbitrio* (LB 9:1215C–D) he wishes it to be known that as a friend of the Muses he does not care to fight a gladiatorial battle with Luther, and at the end of the treatise (LB 9:1248D) he says that as an old man he would not mind learning from the younger Luther, if he were reproved with Christian mildness.

These two images of himself, still separated in *Spongia* and *De libero arbitrio*, were first fused in his mind when he started sending out copies of *De libero arbitrio* in September 1524. It struck him that he was indeed not far from age sixty, the traditional Roman age of retirement from public affairs, when he ought to have been left alone to tend the gardens of the Muses. Instead he had to fight the

<sup>56</sup>See ASD 9, pt. 1:130, l. 189; 188, l. 602; and 200–01, ll. 875–81.

gladiatorial battles of youth in old age. These ruminations in turn reminded him of his essay on *Adagia* 1.5.37, "To throw the sexagenarians off the bridge." This adage, he had explained, "originates from the fact that in ancient times people over sixty had no right to vote, their age incapacitating them from public functions; or it may be that the youth of Rome, wishing to be the only ones to cast a vote, drove the helpless old men headlong off the bridges. It had already begun to be the custom to vote from the bridge." And he had gone on to suggest that the adage might well be applied to old people in general who (like gladiators) have received the badge of their retirement, the wooden foil: "The proverb may be used either to express aversion for old age, as useless for anything, and needing to be cut off from all the activities of life; or simply applied to those who owing to the weakness of old age have already been given the wooden foil and are exempted from ordinary duties."<sup>57</sup>

In the covering letters for copies of *De libero arbitrio* Erasmus accordingly portrays himself as the old gladiator who, though nearly a sexagenarian, has been forced out of retirement. In Ep. 1481, ll. 13–15 (2 September 1524) he writes: "I am sending you my booklet *On the Freedom of the Will*. Having been transformed from a follower of the Muses into a retiarius, I step into the arena at nearly the same age that the mime-writer Publius stepped onto the stage."<sup>58</sup> Erasmus did not get his reference quite straight, for the story was in fact told about Decimus Laberius, not Publilius Syrus. But the anecdote alluded to age sixty, and that is what mattered. During the next few days and months he uses this language over and over again.<sup>59</sup> In Ep. 1522, ll. 15–24 (10 December 1524) he makes the same comparisons, still with reference to *De libero arbitrio*

<sup>57</sup>See LB 2:196D. The translation is based on that by Mann Phillips in *CWE* 31:416–17. For the adage "Rudem accipere. Rude donare," see *Adagia* 1.9.24. See also Horace *Epistles* 1.1.1–6 and Erasmus Ep. 952, ll. 22–23. The connection between the gladiator image and Erasmus's age references was first noticed by Van der Blom, 1971, 78, n. 20: "Comme en 1531 l'image du *deportanus*, c'est en 1524/26 celui du *gladiator* qui décide de l'âge!"

<sup>58</sup>Erasmus here and elsewhere uses several different technical terms to express the idea "gladiator." A "retiarius" was a gladiator who fought only with a net while his opponent was fully armed; the "mirmillo" was armed with helmet, sword, and shield. In Ep. 1624, ll. 24–25, cited below, he alludes to his being not just a "retiarius," but also (like St. Paul before him) a "bestiarius"—a gladiator who fought with wild beasts.

<sup>59</sup>See Ep. 1489, l. 58; 1493, ll. 1–2; 1495, ll. 17–18; 1514, ll. 12–13; 1517, l. 3.

but now with the correct reference to Laberius. He also explicitly adds a reference to age sixty: "This is what the Fates had in store for me, that at my age I should be transformed from a follower of the Muses into a retiarius. The mime-writer Laberius lamented that at Caesar's bidding he had been dragged onto the stage at age sixty . . . At just about the same age I am changing from a devotee of the Muses into a gladiator."

It did not take Erasmus long to streamline the phrase "almost a sexagenarian" into the simpler, rhetorically more effective expression "a sexagenarian." In Ep. 1601, ll. 13-15 (25 August 1525), little more than half a year after Ep. 1522, he pictures himself as a sexagenarian forced to fight as retiarius and confront all kinds of monsters, either to kill or to be killed. Obviously it was not his intent here to deceive either himself or his correspondent Guillaume Budé concerning his precise age, even though such generalizing statements taken out of context might be understood to point to 1464 as the year of his birth. Nor can we say that he "tended to put the year of his birth farther back the older he became." He is using figurative language for rhetorical effect.

How figurative and indefinite such statements in fact are, can be shown by a series of references from 1525 to 1526 which all employ variations on Erasmus's self-portrayal as a sexagenarian gladiator compelled to return to the arena. In Ep. 1600, ll. 9-11 (c. 25 August 1525) Erasmus laments: "At this age, at which I ought to be enjoying peace and quiet, I am dragged into the gladiatorial arena, either to kill or to be killed, or rather, both to cut throats and have my own throat cut at the very same time." He returns to these gloomy thoughts in Ep. 1624, ll. 24-25 (c. 4 October 1525): "At this age, at which one normally gets a discharge, I am forced to play the part of retiarius, or rather, I am forced to fight with wild beasts." In the first book of *Hyperaspistes* (LB 10:1252E-F), written and published in early 1526, he complains that his battle with Luther is worse than that of a gladiator, for unlike the gladiator he has to fight against many opponents at once; a little later (LB 10:1253F) he refers to himself as a "sexagenarian." In Ep. 1677, ll. 8-10 (13 March 1526) he writes: "What has that peaceable Erasmus come to? At this age which normally grants gladiators the wooden sword, he is being forced to fight as a mirmillo in the arena, and what is worse, to fight with wild beasts." This is repeated in Epp. 1678, ll. 23-26 (13 March 1526) and 1687, ll. 32-34 (7 April 1526). In Ep. 1701, ll. 15-17 (29

April 1526) he once more adds a specific age reference: "A sexagenarian, . . . I am forced to become a gladiator, inexperienced though I am." He does so again a few days later, in Ep. 1707, ll.29–30 (6 May 1526): "Now, as a sexagenarian, I am thrust out into the gladiatorial arena, and instead of the lyre I hold the net in my hand."<sup>60</sup>

Other inflated age references also serve a distinctly rhetorical purpose. In Ep. 1970, ll.11–12 (15 March 1528) Erasmus responds to Diego Gracian's question about his age by saying: "I believe that I am now at the age at which Cicero died." Cicero died at age sixty-three, as Erasmus well knew (see Ep. 1347, ll.206–07). It is noteworthy that Erasmus introduces the reference to his own age (sixty-three, instead of the correct sixty-one) with "I believe" and then paraphrases his age by reference to Cicero's death. At that time, of course, Cicero was very much on his mind, for the *Ciceronianus* was just then coming off Froben's press. But he is evidently more concerned here with Cicero's *death* than with a precise reckoning of his own age, for he goes on to say that his health is poor, he is living one day at a time, and he is ready to depart this life when God calls.

In Ep. 2095, ll.20–21 (c. February 1529) Erasmus indicates that he is about ten years older than Prudentius was when he composed the *Praefatio*. Since Prudentius in that poem indicates he was then fifty-seven years old, Erasmus suggests that he himself is now in his mid-sixties. This age reference, however, is merely a convenient round number pegged to Prudentius's age. It occurs in the preface to a series of corrections for some of his books printed in the preceding five years. As in his letter to Gracian of March 1528, he explains that he has now reached a time in his life when each day could be his last. His own motto, "Terminus," reminds him of the phrase in Prudentius *Praefatio* 4: "Instat terminus" ("The end is

<sup>60</sup>The thought recurs frequently in Erasmus's subsequent writings. Post, 1964, 508, speculates that Erasmus in the years 1524–26 might have deliberately made himself older in order to keep himself out of the fray. As if Erasmus timorously stayed out of such gladiatorial battles! By way of proof Post cites Ep. 2453, ll.15–17 (15 March 1531), where Erasmus says that as a sexagenarian he should steer clear of controversy. Van der Blom, however, rightly points out (1970–71, 100, n. 1, and 1971, 76, n. 5.) that this statement has nothing to do with the burning questions of the day. Erasmus wonders who is currently the best Ciceronian but thinks it best not to enter the debate: "I believe it would be more advisable for a sexagenarian like me to stay away from these elections lest the young men raise a tumult and throw me off the bridge." See also Epp. 2136, l.102 (30 March 1529), and 2517, ll.10–11 (7 August 1531).

close upon me"). When Prudentius wrote those words, Erasmus observes, he was about ten years younger than he. In the very next paragraph he relates how he dreamed that he had died and gone to heaven. The purpose of the inflated age reference is thus to make sure that his point—his nearness to death—is duly emphasized and receives the proper attention from his readers. He had better get the corrections in print before it is too late, for he is now well past the age at which Prudentius thought his end was drawing near.

In Ep. 2465, ll.358–59 (27 March 1531) Erasmus remarks that, unless he is mistaken, he is still some years away from decrepitude, having not yet reached seventy ("ut qui nondum pervenerim ad annum septuagesimum"). This vague statement is repeated—as a jest about rumors that he had taken a wife—in Ep. 2528, ll.49–50 (29 August 1531): "Erasmum semivivum, ac pene septuagenarium" ("Erasmus, half-alive and almost a septuagenarian"). He makes the same joke in Ep. 2534, ll.19–21 (4 September 1531). Two years later Erasmus is still quite correctly describing himself as going on seventy, for in Ep. 2892, ll.149–52 (24 December 1533) he once more alludes to the proverb of throwing the sexagenarians off the bridge and says that this expression is even more true for himself now as "prope septuagenarius" ("nearly a septuagenarian").

On 4 June 1534, in Ep. 2940, l.10, he writes: "Perveni ad annum septuagesimum" ("I have reached seventy"). Koch (19) cites this statement as evidence for another "jump" in Erasmus's age. When read in its context, however, the age reference turns out to be only a round number, expressive of Erasmus's rage. He feels betrayed by his former servant Quirinus Hagijs; it is the worst indignity he has ever suffered in his whole long life. "I have reached three score years and ten; never before has such an affront happened to me, nor have I ever had occasion to contend with such a monster. What he needs is an exorcist!"

A month or two later, in Ep. 2961, ll.7–8 (22 August 1534), he writes: "Arbitror me iam excessisse annum septuagesimum" ("I believe I have already passed my seventieth year"). The context is as follows: "Old age does not bother me much (even though I believe I have already passed my seventieth year); it is the torments of gout and other ailments that afflict me." Half a year and one birthday later he is still using the same language, for in Ep. 3000, l.13 (28 February 1535) he says: "Iam enim, ni fallor, annum septuagesimum praetergressus sum" ("For already, if I am not

mistaken, I have passed my seventieth year"). The sentence follows a reference to the "toil and trouble" which start accompanying our life at seventy according to the Vulgate version of Psalm 90:10 (89:10). Likewise in Ep. 3106, ll. 2-3 (13 March 1536), not long before his death, Erasmus sighs: "I have outlived my allotted span. What remains is nothing but toil and trouble." What he had in mind in making these references, then, is not his precise age but rather the "toil and trouble" that attend the biblical threescore and ten years of our life.

### ERASMUS'S AGE AT PARTICULAR POINTS IN HIS YOUTH

*Cauda tenes anguillam.* (Erasmus, *Adagia* 1.4.94)

If we had only to deal with Erasmus's statements concerning his *current* age, we could stop our inquiry here and conclude that 1466 was the year of his birth. There is, however, another body of evidence, consisting of recollections about his age at various events in his youth. When these statements are combined with verifiable historical dates, they tend to point not to 1466 but to 1469. Consequently, we must now analyze this indirect evidence to determine whether it merits preference over the current age references or should be discarded as untrustworthy. We begin by examining a letter in which both kinds of testimony are inextricably linked.

In Ep. 940 (17 April 1519) Erasmus answers a letter, no longer extant, from Jacobus Theodorici of Hoorn. Theodorici, who in the autumn of 1519 was to become rector of the University of Erfurt, had studied at Deventer during the late 1490s and matriculated at Erfurt in spring 1500. He seems to have mentioned in his letter that he had seen Erasmus at Deventer sometime before the latter's departure to England in early summer 1499. In his response Erasmus thanks Theodorici for his kind overture of friendship but firmly denies that he was in Deventer at the turn of the century. "From this fact if no other," he writes, "you will easily perceive that you are the victim of a delusion: when I left Deventer, the river which flows past the town was not yet spanned by a bridge." He acknowledges that he went to England nineteen years ago but corrects Theodorici's impression that he went there directly from Deventer: "I left Deventer when I was fourteen years old, and I am now in my fifty-third year."



In evaluating these statements searchers for the holy grail of Erasmus's natal year have made their adventurous quest unnecessarily toilsome. Instead of focusing on Erasmus's intent, which is to prove that Theodorici could not possibly have seen him at Deventer, they regard the combination of age references and the date of the building of the bridge (August 1482–March 1483) as the Archimedean point by which to move the world in the direction of their theory. The futility of this exercise is evident, for none can agree on the validity of the data presented in the letter.

E.-W. Kohls, for example, is convinced that both age references are correct: Erasmus must have been fifty-two in April 1519 (that supports his argument for 1466 as the natal year) and left Deventer at age fourteen (that is to say, before 28 October 1481).<sup>61</sup> He discounts the importance of knowing exactly when the bridge was completed, because the construction went on for several years. A. C. F. Koch (31–38), by contrast, thinks that Erasmus has by now slipped in an extra year for fear of the climacteric; he therefore refuses to accept Erasmus's assertion in the letter that he was born in 1466. If the humanist were born in 1467 and was fourteen when he left Deventer, that event must have occurred not long before 28 October 1482, while work on the bridge was still going on. And R. R. Post, defending 1469 as the birth year, believes that the current age references are so inconsistent as to be worthless. Accordingly, he gives no credence to Erasmus's statement in April 1519 that he is fifty-two years old. Like Kohls and Koch, he does accept Erasmus's assertion that he left Deventer at age fourteen and looks upon this passage as the cornerstone of his argument. Our humanist, he reasons, might very well have forgotten how old he was in later life; but how could an impressionable boy have forgotten such an event as the building of the bridge or the age at which he left Deventer? In his view Erasmus departed around 28 October 1483, some months before the bridge was given its finishing touches in March 1484.<sup>62</sup>

In their eagerness to grind one axe or another, each of these scholars finds himself explaining away evidence which contradicts Erasmus's stated recollection that he was indeed fourteen years old when he left Deventer. To them his memory of that cardinal event

<sup>61</sup>See Kohls, 1966<sup>2</sup>, 352 and 357–58. See also Richter, App. A, xiii–xiv.

<sup>62</sup>Post, 1964, 498–501, and 1966, 327–30.

is inviolable. But is it safe to assume a priori that rhetorical or other factors did not color his recollected age when, as we have noted, they also affect his current age references from time to time? There are, indeed, excellent grounds for disputing his assertions on this point.

First, Erasmus cannot have left Deventer before his birthday in 1481 (Kohls) or 1482 (Koch) or around his birthday in 1483 (Post) but must have departed in mid-1484. Erasmus repeatedly says that Alexander Hegius was his teacher at Deventer, although he heard him lecture only occasionally, on high days.<sup>63</sup> Hegius, however, did not take up his duties as headmaster at the Lebuinus school until 1483, as an anonymous life of Rodolphus Agricola reports. That is confirmed by a letter from Agricola himself (written shortly after 20 October 1483) in which he wishes the newly arrived Hegius an auspicious start as director of the school—a difficult task, he fears, after the ravages of the plague which closed the school during the summer. Moreover, in a letter of 7 April 1484 Agricola tells his close friend Antonius Liber the news that Hegius is “headmaster here at Deventer”: “Alexander Hegius, qui hic ludo literario praeest, salvere te iubet.”<sup>64</sup> This evidence destroys Kohls’s contention that Hegius might have arrived in Deventer before October 1480, when Erasmus would still have been fourteen if born in 1466. It also vitiates Koch’s supposition that Erasmus might have left Deventer before 28 October 1482, when he would still have been fourteen if born in 1467. Furthermore, according to lines 41–45 of the *CV*, Erasmus left Deventer on account of the plague in which his mother had died; his father is said to have died shortly thereafter. As Hegius did not take up his duties at Deventer until October 1483, the plague which caused Erasmus to leave Deventer cannot have been the one of summer 1483. P. S. Allen, to be sure (*EE* 1:582), thinks that Erasmus’s mother might have died in 1483 and Erasmus did not leave until 1484. The *CV*, however, makes it quite

<sup>63</sup>See *CV*, ll. 36–40; *Adagia* 1.4.39 (LB 2:167A–B) and 2.2.81 (LB 2:477A); also *EE* 1:55, ll. 79–83, and 1:57, ll. 11–14.

<sup>64</sup>For these three pieces of evidence see Allen, in *EE* 1:580–82, with n. 23. For the date of the letter, see Van der Velden, 137, n. 5; Bakker, 103–04 and 110. See further Reichling, 452–54; Koch, 28–31; Van der Blom, 1970–71, 104–05, and 1971, 79, n. 26. Deventer took its first measures against the plague on 25 March 1483; from late July to the middle of October the town council was forced to meet outside the town. See Koch, 30–31 (with n. 98 on 51–52).

clear that the departure took place on account of the same plague that killed Erasmus's mother (ll.40–45): "Here he reached the third class. Then the plague that was raging there carried off his mother, leaving her son now in his thirteenth year. As the plague grew daily more and more severe, the whole house in which he lived was deserted, and he returned to his native place. Gerard when he heard the sad news fell ill, and shortly afterwards died." Hence, it is best to associate these events with the plague of summer 1484 which killed twenty of Erasmus's fellow pupils and drove away many others (*EE* 1:582).<sup>65</sup>

Secondly, we know from the town archives that the bridge spanning the IJssel was begun on 1 August 1482 and was opened to traffic on 16 March 1483.<sup>66</sup> If Erasmus's memory concerning his age at the departure from Deventer is to be trusted, as R. R. Post insists it must, then it follows that he left the town *before* there was a bridge across the IJssel, that is, before August 1482. At that time, however, he would have been only twelve, not fourteen, if born in 1469. This, of course, is consistent with the *CV*, which states that he returned to Gouda in his thirteenth year ("annum decimum tertium agente"). But Post is persuaded that the *CV* is a forgery and that age fourteen at the departure cannot be wrong.<sup>67</sup> He is consequently reduced to making the incongruous argument, earlier advanced by P. S. Allen (*EE* 1:582), that according to the town records the bridge was still receiving its finishing touches more than a year after opening to traffic in March 1483. And so Post gains the extra time required by his theory that Erasmus was born in 1469.

If our discussion of the letter to Theodorici has accomplished anything thus far, it is to show that the age references in it are wholly incompatible. Either Erasmus is giving out a wrong current

<sup>65</sup>Allen agrees with this argument in his article on the letters of Rudolph Agricola. Summarizing a letter from Alexander Hegius, dated 17 December [1484], he writes (315): "Plague in the summer has killed twenty of his scholars and frightened many away; evidently the outbreak in which Erasmus's mother died, and which caused him to leave Deventer." Koch, 52, n. 103, unconvincingly argues that Hegius's letter of 17 December should be redated to 1483. He fails to take into account the cogent reasons for the date 1484; see Van der Velden, 224–25; Allen, 315.

<sup>66</sup>See *EE* 1:582; Koch, 34–36.

<sup>67</sup>The *CV* was first published in 1607 by Paul Merula. The document's authenticity, earlier challenged by J. B. Kan, was vigorously attacked by Crahay, but without compelling reasons. Crahay has been followed by many others, including Post, Kohls, and Koch. Its authenticity has been justly defended by Allen in *EE* 1:575–78; Tracy, 1972, 221–22; Godin; J. K. McConica in *CWE* 4:400–03; and Sowards, 2, n. 7.

age for himself, or else he is retouching his age at the departure from Deventer in summer 1484, for quite obviously he cannot have been fourteen when he left the town *and* have been born in 1466, as he asserts. We must therefore return once again to the context and ask ourselves: what did Erasmus wish Theodorici to understand as he read the letter? He wanted, of course, to thank his new correspondent for offering him his friendship, but after this *captatio benevolentiae* he felt obliged to correct Theodorici's misapprehension that he had seen Erasmus at Deventer in the late 1490s. The Erfurt scholar, at least, could be trusted to read the letter in the way it was intended. And as he correlated the information there provided, he would have heard his compatriot telling him in polite and elegant terms: "My dear fellow, I do appreciate your friendship. But how on earth can you say that you saw me in Deventer at the turn of the century? You are deluding yourself, as I shall prove to you in short order. When I left Deventer, the bridge now spanning the IJssel had not even been constructed yet. You know that it was built in 1482–83, do you not? That is how far I go back! But perhaps you are still not convinced. Very well then. I was born in 1466, left Deventer at age fourteen, and journeyed to England nineteen years ago. Please put these dates together, and you will see for yourself that I left Deventer in 1480–81 (1466 + 14 years), a year before the bridge was built and nearly two decades before I went to England. Need I say more?"

With that we can at last cut the Gordian knot—that tangled skein of proof which constitutes the letter to Theodorici. Erasmus's assertion that he was born in 1466 is consistent with his other statements throughout his adult life and may be accepted as correct. But he cannot possibly be telling the truth about his age at the departure from Deventer, for that event, as we saw, occurred in 1484. The correlation which he expected his correspondent to draw, that he was born in 1466 *and* left Deventer at age fourteen in 1480–81, may well have convinced Theodorici and his contemporaries. The modern biographer, however, ought not to be deceived so easily by Erasmus's sleight of hand. In truth, he left Deventer a year *after* the bridge was built. And so Post was right in this respect at least: the construction did make a great impression on Erasmus. That is why he could still recall it vividly three and a half decades later and use it to demonstrate that Theodorici was "the victim of a delusion." Would he have remembered the date of construction if he had not been there to witness the event himself?

The letter to Theodorici, I might add, is by no means the only time Erasmus gives the impression that he left Deventer at age fourteen. In Ep. 447, ll. 87–90 (August 1516) and *De conscribendis epistolis* (ASD 1, pt. 2:217, ll. 10–11) he recalls that at that age he wrote a letter to one of the guardians appointed after his father's death. Since his parents died around the time he left Deventer (*CV*, ll. 41–45), it follows that he must have departed when he was fourteen. Yet here too we can catch him in the act of retouching his age at an event in his youth, for in the *CV* he asserts that he was “in his thirteenth year”—twelve years old—when he became an orphan.

Erasmus insinuates that he left Deventer at age fourteen also in a semi-autobiographical passage of *De recta pronuntiatione* (March 1528) where Ursus says: “I was being educated among those [brethren] at Deventer when I had not yet completed my fifteenth year” (“nondum egressus annum decimumquintum”). Ursus goes on to remark that he was pressured by the director of the school to join his religious order.<sup>68</sup> The events depicted here fit 's-Hertogenbosch, not Deventer; hence, the age reference appears to indicate that he was at least fourteen when he moved from Deventer to 's-Hertogenbosch (by way of Gouda). Ursus adds that he was afraid that his parents would be furious with him if he joined the order without their consent. The suggestion that his parents were still alive, however, fits Erasmus's Deventer period, not the time spent at 's-Hertogenbosch. As Post observes wisely (1936, 175), the passage mixes “Dichtung und Wahrheit.”<sup>69</sup>

We therefore conclude that Erasmus's stated recollection of his age at the departure from Deventer is unreliable. His age at that point in his youth is understated by three years, for he was seventeen years old in mid-1484, not fourteen.

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In lines 30–31 of the *CV* Erasmus says that he was sent to school when he was “scarcely over four years old” (“vix quatuor annos egressum”). This claim is odd indeed. R. R. Post, who was quite familiar with schooling in fifteenth-century Holland, thought it

<sup>68</sup>See ASD 1, pt. 4:29, ll. 507–18.

<sup>69</sup>Equally untrustworthy is the claim in Ms. Scriverius that Erasmus composed the “Carmen buccolicum” (Poem 102/R. 1) at age fourteen when he was still a pupil in Deventer under Hegius's tutelage. It was in fact written at Steyn, probably in late 1487; see the headnote on Poem 102 in *CWE* 86.

“strange” and “impossible.”<sup>70</sup> Children in the late Middle Ages normally started their schooling at age seven or eight. In *De pueris instituendis* (ASD 1, pt. 2:54, ll. 16–17) Erasmus does speak of children scarcely four years old (“vixdum quadrimi”) who are sent to a barbaric school. But this smacks too much of rhetorical coloring to be convincing as a picture of actual practice. Erasmus admits as much elsewhere in the same work (ASD 1, pt. 2:48, ll. 9–20), when he urges parents to start a child’s education at an earlier age than the usual seven. And in his *Institutio Christiani matrimonii* (LB 5:712B) he states that many people are still of the opinion that children are not ready for school until age seven. Cornelis Gerard, who also attended a “barbaric” school in Gouda, indicates that he himself started there at age seven.<sup>71</sup>

According to Post (1964, 495, and 1966, 324) pupils who wanted to study Latin had to leave the private elementary school (such as the one Erasmus attended in Gouda) and go to one of the grammar schools when they turned nine. We may therefore assume that Erasmus, having entered the elementary school at age seven, left it in autumn 1475, not long before his ninth birthday. Indeed, in the *CV* he suggests that he left Gouda when he was still eight (“ubi nonum ageret annum”). Did he go directly to Deventer as he insinuates in the *CV*, or did he first attend the cathedral school in Utrecht as Beatus Rhenanus asserts in *EE* 1:56–57, ll. 7–11? To answer this question we need to know when Erasmus arrived in Deventer.

Lines 32–33 and 40–44 of the *CV* report that Erasmus stayed at the Lebuinus school in Deventer from his ninth to his thirteenth year and attained the third class (counting from the eighth). Since the *CV* also intimates that he was born in 1466, we are thus given to understand that he began his studies there in 1475 and that he left in 1479. These dates are at odds both with the known historical background and Erasmus’s own stated recollections elsewhere. In the letter to Theodorici, for example, he speaks of leaving Deventer at age fourteen (in 1480–81) but does not indicate when he arrived. That date can be inferred from another document, however. In his *Exomologesis* (1524) Erasmus remarks: “A long time ago, when I was still very much a boy living at Deventer, I heard women of ill repute, of whom there were plenty in those days, applauding and

<sup>70</sup>See Post, 1964, 494 and 501–02.

<sup>71</sup>See Tilmans, 16.

congratulating each other that they could indulge themselves with their lovers because the priest had said in his sermon that certain pastors had confessed to have acted unchastely toward their flock. For this took place during the Jubilee.”<sup>72</sup> Thanks to Post’s research, we now know that the Jubilee, proclaimed in Rome at Christmas 1475, was not celebrated in Deventer until mid-March 1478.<sup>73</sup> The terminus ad quem for Erasmus’s arrival in Deventer, accordingly, is c. Easter 1478. Koch (26), however, thinks that the young Erasmus might have heard the anecdote later and hence translates: “In those days, when I, still a child, was in Deventer, *I heard* that these loose women congratulated each other because etc.” But Koch’s reading is mistaken. Erasmus is not using a subject-accusative construction and does not imply that the women’s talk precedes “audiebam.” The present participles forbid such an interpretation.<sup>74</sup>

We conclude, therefore, that Erasmus arrived in Deventer at least by Easter 1478 for the start of the summer semester and possibly already in autumn 1477 for the start of the winter semester. He cannot have come any earlier than that; as it is, he spent five to six years at the Lebuinus school, a perfectly normal length of time. Mutianus Rufus, for example, came to Deventer when he was about nine or ten years old and left at age sixteen. Hermann von dem Busche and Johannes Murmellius were also about sixteen when they left the school to go to the university.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup>See LB 5:153F: “Olim, quum admodum puer agerem Daventriae, audiebam mulierculas parum integrae pudicitiae, quarum illic magna tum erat copia, sibi vicissim applaudentes et gratulantes, quod suis amatoribus indulgerent, propterea quod parochus in concione dixisset, pastores quosdam fuisse confessos, quod parum caste sese gessissent erga gregem suum; erat autem lubilaeum.”

<sup>73</sup>The Jubilee, celebrated from Christmas to Christmas in Rome, was proclaimed later outside the Eternal City, usually for a shorter time (about two months). In the city of Utrecht it lasted from 18 October to 22 December 1477; in Deventer it was proclaimed in mid-March and must have lasted to about the end of May 1478. See Post, 1936, 173, n. 2, and 1964, 497–98.

<sup>74</sup>This was pointed out by Van der Blom, 1970–71, 104, n. 3, and 1971, 78, n. 23.

<sup>75</sup>That Erasmus, despite his later brilliance, did not advance more rapidly at Deventer than he did, is probably owing to his small Latin when he arrived. In Gouda he seems to have learned only reading and writing in the vernacular; see *CV*, ll. 31–32. His two years as a chorister in Utrecht also did not advance his knowledge of Latin much. In his annotation on 1 Cor. 14:19 (LB 6:731F/Reeve, 1990, 508), at any rate, he complains that choirboys spend all their time practicing their singing and learn nothing of consequence in the meantime. Thus, as he himself confirms in *Adagia* 1.4.39 (LB 2:167A–B), he learned the rudiments of Latin in Deventer; see also Beatus Rhenanus

If Erasmus, then, did not arrive in Deventer until autumn 1477 or Easter 1478, the years between his departure from Gouda in autumn 1475 and his arrival in Deventer must have been spent at Utrecht, as Beatus Rhenanus states.

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In his letter to Johann von Botzheim (30 January 1523) Erasmus recalls that, as a boy of about twelve (“puero ferme duodecim annos nato”), he had the good fortune to see Agricola in Deventer.<sup>76</sup> This statement has sparked much discussion as partisans of one natal year battle those of another. Post argues that Agricola did not return to Groningen from Italy until late 1479 or early 1480; hence, Erasmus cannot have been born in 1466, for by late 1479 he would already have been thirteen years old. Kohls (1966<sup>2</sup>, 355–56) counters that we do not know precisely when Agricola traveled through Deventer; for all we know, that could have happened shortly before 28 October 1479 when Erasmus was still twelve years old. Koch (27), for his part, thinks that the date of Agricola’s visit to Deventer is too uncertain and the phrase “about twelve years old” too vague to permit a precise dating. All three scholars agree, however, that the age reference “about twelve” is unquestionably accurate. But, as we have seen, Erasmus’s testimony concerning his age at specific points in his early life is too unreliable to be accepted without corroborating evidence.

The *CV*, written slightly over a year after the letter to Botzheim, sheds a different light on this question, for in lines 41–44 Erasmus recalls that he left Deventer at age twelve. Now, if according to the chronology advanced in 1523–24 he was twelve years old when he saw Agricola and also twelve when he left the town, we are clearly invited to combine these references and deduce that the meeting took place during his final year in Deventer. As it turns out, Agricola did visit Deventer in early April 1484, staying at the house of the printer Richard Paffraet. And at that very time a certain “Magister Gerardus Gaudensis”—quite possibly Erasmus’s father

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in *EE* 1:55, ll.79–81. Besides, his studies there were interrupted by the plague of 1483 and were cut short by that of 1484.

<sup>76</sup>See *EE* 1:2, ll.24–27.



—spoke with Agricola about a commentary on Vergil.<sup>77</sup> We therefore surmise that Erasmus saw Agricola in early April 1484.

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Erasmus asserts in Ep. 447, ll. 156–57 and 241–42 (August 1516) and again in Ep. 1436, l. 49 (c. 2 April 1524) that he entered Steyn when he was barely sixteen. In Ep. 296, ll. 33–37 (8 July 1514) he says that he made his profession there at age seventeen. In view of his current age references which throughout his adult life consistently point to 1466, these indications would lead us to place the two events in 1482–83 and 1483–84. These dates, as we saw, cannot be defended. If, on the other hand, he were born in 1469, he could have entered Steyn in 1485–86 at age sixteen, as R. L. DeMolen believes; but even R. R. Post admits (1964, 505) that this is too early and argues that Erasmus must be deliberately understating his age. The question, however, can be resolved quite easily. Since he left Deventer in mid-1484 and departed from Gouda presumably in the autumn of that year, not long after his father's death, and since furthermore he seems to have spent about two and a half years in 's-Hertogenbosch,<sup>78</sup> he probably returned to Gouda in late winter 1487. It appears that after several months of hesitation he entered

<sup>77</sup>See Agricola, 177 (letter of 7 April 1484): "A certain Magister Gerard of Gouda visited me. He said he had talked to you about some commentary on Vergil which a good friend of his had recently brought back from France." Allen, *EE* 1:581, feels that "the name [Gerard] occurs too frequently at Gouda to allow of any certain inference." But Reichling, 455, n. 4, objects: "Wir haben Grund, in diesem [Magister Gerardus Gaudensis] den Vater des Erasmus zu vermuten. Denn mochte Gouda derzeit auch noch so viele Gerharde aufzuweisen haben, ein Magister, d.h. ein studierter und promovierter Mann—Erasmus' Vater hatte sich längere Jahre in Rom aufgehalten—war schwerlich doppelt unter ihnen vertreten." Van der Blom adds, 1970–71, 106, and 1971, 75: how many of them would have been interested in a commentary on Vergil? Tilmans, 16, n. 9, objecting that Erasmus's father signed his name as "Rotterdamms" in Italy, not "Gaudensis," thinks that this Gerard might be the father of Cornelis Gerard, but nothing is known about him. Erasmus's father, in any case, might well have introduced himself as being from Gouda in 1484, having lived in that town for most of his life. If the Gerard mentioned by Agricola was indeed Erasmus's father, his chief purpose in coming to Deventer would have been to see his sons and their mother. While there, he took the opportunity to pay a visit to Agricola, perhaps in the company of his gifted son. Huizinga, 7, thinks that Erasmus might have heard Agricola lecture at the Deventer school; but the Latin says "videre," not "audire."

<sup>78</sup>In Ep. 447, l. 118 Erasmus writes that he and his brother spent "two years and more" at 's-Hertogenbosch. In *CV*, l. 52 he laments having wasted "about three years" there.

Steyn as a postulant in late spring of that year<sup>79</sup> and became a novice not long after his twenty-first birthday. He made his profession about a year later.

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In Ep. 2260, ll.67–78 (28 January 1530) Erasmus states that long ago he was asked by “a certain schoolmaster, who had recently brought together a herd of pupils,” to recommend a suitable Latin textbook. Valla’s *Elegantiae* being thought too bulky, Erasmus was prevailed upon to produce an epitome of it. He was then “barely twenty years old,” he says. If combined with 1466 as the birth year, that indication places the work in late 1486. In lines 82–83 of the same letter he correlates his age reference with a specific date: he wrote the book in Holland seven years before he arrived in Paris, that is, in late summer 1488. At the end of 1530, however, Erasmus changed his earlier estimate from “barely twenty” to “about eighteen years old.”<sup>80</sup> That would place the book in c. 1485! But if we note the lapse of about two years between Erasmus’s imaginary age at his entry into Steyn (barely sixteen in late spring 1487) and his supposed age at the composition (about eighteen), we arrive at the latter half of 1489 as the composition date. That date agrees closely with his championship of Valla in mid-1489 and his attacks on the barbarians, beginning with the “*Apologia Erasmi et Cornelii adversus barbaros*” (Poems 93 and 135/R. 14–15) in winter-spring 1489 and continuing with *Conflictus Thaliae et Barbariei* and *Antibarbari*.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup>In Ep. 447, ll.216–17 Erasmus recalls that a meeting prior to his entry into Steyn took place outdoors in an enclosed garden (“viridarium”); if true, that may be taken to indicate a time in late spring or summer. Allen, *EE* 1:584, cites a manuscript chronicle which confirms that Erasmus entered Steyn in 1487 and made his profession there in 1488.

<sup>80</sup>See Ep. 2416, l.4 (31 December 1530), first published in March 1531 as the dedicatory letter of the authorized *Paraphrasis seu potius epitome in elegantias Laur. Vallae*. Erasmus may have felt compelled to correct the earlier age reference because, according to its prefatory letter (1521), *De contemptu mundi* was supposed to have been written at precisely the same age.

<sup>81</sup>For the composition date of the “*Apologia*” see the headnote on Poem 93 in *CWE* 86. The *Conflictus* was most probably written in the latter half of 1489; see the headnote on Poem 128 in *CWE* 86.

The schoolmaster for whom Erasmus compiled the epitome was perhaps Engelbert Ysbrandtsz Schut of Leiden (1410/15-c. 1503).<sup>82</sup> Engelbert, who had earned his M.A. at Cologne in c. 1438, was the author of *De arte dictandi* and *Tractatus quidam de elegancia, compositione, dignitate dictatus*, both published at Gouda in c. 1484. From 1458 to 1464 he was rector of the town school in Leiden; thereafter he was headmaster of a private school ("bijschool"). In 1483 the town restricted the enrollment at his school to those pupils who were boarding with him, but this restriction was lifted in 1488. He might thus well be described in 1489 as a "literator . . . qui gregem recens collegerat." Erasmus had introduced himself to the Leiden scholar earlier in the summer of 1489, by way of a verse letter (Poem 98/R. 11) which praised Engelbert as a bulwark against barbarism. In response to this overture of friendship Engelbert conceivably asked for a suitable textbook to further the cause of elegant Latinity. Erasmus complied in late summer of 1489, in time for the beginning of the winter semester.

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In his life of Saint Jerome, published in 1516, Erasmus recalls that he wrote a first draft of *Antibarbari* when he was not yet twenty ("minores annis viginti").<sup>83</sup> This is repeated in the dedicatory letter to the dialogue itself, Ep. 1110, ll. 20-21 (c. June 1520): "I had not yet reached my twentieth year when I began this work" ("nondum annum vigesimum attigeram"). By adding eighteen years to the presumed natal year 1469, K. Kumaniecki (ASD 1, pt. 1:7-8) calculates that the first version of the book must have been composed before Erasmus's birthday on 28 October 1488. Margaret Mann Phillips (*CWE* 23:2), assuming 1467 as the birth year and adding nineteen years, concludes that it was composed instead in 1487-88. As we now know, however, Erasmus throughout his adult life maintains that he was born in 1466; hence, the statement that he was about eighteen or nineteen when he began writing *Antibarbari* would place the origins of the work in 1484-86. Erasmus himself lends weight to the earliest date in *Responsio adversus febricitantis cuiusdam libellum* (LB 10:1674D), published in April 1529, for there

<sup>82</sup>This identification was first suggested by C. Reedijk in ASD 1, pt. 4:193, n. 7.

<sup>83</sup>See Ferguson, 176, ll. 1133-35.

he estimates that he "wrote the *Antibarbari* forty-five years ago" (in c. 1484). But any date before mid-1489 is entirely out of the question, for it is not until then that Erasmus began corresponding in earnest with Cornelis Gerard, the speaker in the original version of *Antibarbari*. Since we dare not trust his overt indications for the composition date of the work, we may again hazard the method of relative dating which we used to place the epitome of Valla's *Elegantiae*. If we assume that Erasmus used his age at the entry into Steyn (barely sixteen in late spring 1487) as a basis and combine this with the statement that he was going on nineteen when he wrote *Antibarbari*, then the lapse of almost three years after mid-1487 suggests a date in early 1490 as the composition date of the work. This means it was written about a half year after the epitome of Valla's *Elegantiae* (said to have been written at age eighteen).

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At the beginning of this essay we reviewed evidence showing that *De contemptu mundi* was composed in spring 1491, when Erasmus was twenty-four years old. In 1521, however, he presented this praise of monasticism as the work of a very young man barely twenty. He says this both in the preface to the work (1521) and in the letter to Botzheim (1523).<sup>84</sup> When we correlate this age with his earlier statement that he was barely sixteen when he first entered Steyn (in late spring 1487), he is in effect implying that he wrote the work after four years in the monastery. This, too, leads us to spring 1491 as the composition date of the work.

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A clear pattern has emerged. Whenever Erasmus indicates his current age precisely (from 1491 to 1530), he points to 1466 as the year of his birth. But when he makes age references for events in his youth, he understates his age by at least three or four years. It will be of interest to see if this pattern holds elsewhere.

During his years at Paris Erasmus wrote several textbooks for his own students, among them *De copia*, *De conscribendis epistolis*, and a much more voluminous compendium of Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantiae*. In Ep. 909, ll.8-14 (1 January 1519) he says that he wrote

<sup>84</sup>See Ep. 1194, ll.9-11; EE 1:18, ll.16-17.

this compendium for an altogether unworthy student (probably Robert Fisher) "over twenty years ago" (that is, in 1498). This may be accepted as the correct date. But in Ep. 2416, ll.40–42 (31 December 1530), waxing indignant at the recent unauthorized publication of the Steyn version, he says that he wrote the Paris version "thirty-five years ago" (that is to say, in 1495). He thus predates the revision by three years.

In the preface to *De conscribendis epistolis*, Ep. 1284, ll.6–10 (25 May 1522), Erasmus states that he began writing the book in Paris about thirty years ago and that the reading and composition took him no more than twenty days. In fact, he began it twenty-four years before, in 1498. The overstated year reference, with the ritual compression of the actual length of time spent in composing it, evidently stems from a sense of embarrassment—not at the mature work published in 1522 but at the youthful version which had been published at Cambridge in 1521 by Siberch without Erasmus's permission. In Ep. 909, ll.8–16 (1 January 1519), however, he could still afford to give out a fairly exact composition date, "over twenty years ago." Within the work as published in 1522, at a less exposed location (ASD 1, pt. 2:227, ll.14–15), Erasmus also comes quite close to the truth, indicating that he began the book twenty-five years earlier. In Ep. 3099, ll.3–4 (c. 20 February 1536) he updates this reference by saying that he wrote the first draft about forty years ago but adds that he threw it off in less than two days.

Closely associated with *De conscribendis epistolis*, of which it forms a part in both Siberch's edition of 1521 and Erasmus's of 1522, is the declamation *Encomium matrimonii*. First published as a separate work (Louvain, 1518), it was quickly attacked by the Louvain theologians. In *Apologia pro declamatione de laude matrimonii* (LB 9:107F), dated 1 March 1519, Erasmus defends himself in part by claiming that he wrote the suasoria "as a youth twenty-five years ago, if I am not mistaken." He thus seems to imply that he wrote it in about 1494, before his arrival in Paris. In his *Appendix de scriptis Iodoci Clithovei* (LB 9:813B), published in August 1525, he updates this reference by saying that he joined the declamation to *De conscribendis epistolis* about thirty years ago, that is, in 1495. But the *Encomium matrimonii* was probably written in about 1498.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup>See Margolin, introduction to the declamation in ASD 1, pt. 5:338; Tracy, 1969, 358–60.

Here, as elsewhere, Erasmus is quite evidently speaking in round figures. But in doing so, he again and again understates his age at a given point in his youth by at least three or four years.

According to Ep. 1211, ll. 283–85 (13 June 1521) John Colet was about thirty years old when Erasmus first met him (in autumn 1499). Since Erasmus goes on to say in the same sentence that Colet was two or three months his junior, he appears to imply that they were both born in 1469. He was very well aware, however, that his friend was in fact going on thirty-three at that time, having been born in late January 1467.<sup>86</sup> Erasmus's implied statement that he himself was about thirty in autumn 1499 may be compared to his assertion in the letter to Botzheim (*EE* 1:7, ll. 19–20) that he began studying Greek at about age thirty (“annos natus plus minus triginta”). In truth he did not begin intensive Greek studies until late 1500, after his visit to England when he was thirty-four years old.<sup>87</sup> Again he underestimates his age at events in his youth by three to four years.

In his letter to Johann von Botzheim (30 January 1523), which is part catalogue of his works, part apology for them, Erasmus makes a series of references to his early writings and indicates approximate dates for them, either by supplying his age at the time of their composition or by reckoning the number of years that have since elapsed. Thus he mentions on p. 5, ll. 33–35 that he wrote the three-part verse declamation on the folly of man (Poems 94–96/R. 23–25) when he was not yet eighteen years old. In fact, as we have seen, the three moral satires were written in winter 1490–91, after Erasmus had turned twenty-four. They were subsequently published without his permission by Reynier Snoy in 1513.<sup>88</sup> There can

<sup>86</sup>For Colet's birthday, see Gleason. Erasmus knew Colet's age precisely, for in Ep. 1347, ll. 290–91 (1 March 1523) he notes that the Englishman was “about fifty-two years old” when he died on 16 September 1519 (“anno ferme liii<sup>o</sup>”). In that slightly later reference, however, Erasmus does not link Colet's age to his own at a specific point in his youth.

<sup>87</sup>On Erasmus's Greek studies, see Rummel, 1985, 3–19, and *CWE* 29, pp. xxi–xxxiii.

<sup>88</sup>In *Silva carminum*, published at Gouda in 1513, while Erasmus was in England. In his preface Snoy says that Erasmus wrote the three moral satires when he was not yet twenty years of age (“nondum annum agebat vigesimum”). Snoy's source for this information is unknown; but the estimate fits Erasmus's later pattern of understating the age at which he wrote his juvenilia by at least three or four years. Snoy also says that Erasmus spent about ten years at Steyn, that is, from c. 1482–83 to c. 1492–93. The date 1482–83 also fits Erasmus's retouched chronology, for it can be arrived at by

be no doubt that the mature humanist was shocked and embarrassed whenever his friends edited juvenilia like these, “non sine famae meae iactura” (6, l.1). We can readily understand why he wished to downplay these poems as the work of a precocious teenager.

On 6, ll.2–4 Erasmus says that unless he is mistaken, he published the panegyric poem on Philip the Handsome twenty-three years ago. The true date of publication was 1504, not 1500. On 16, l.18, he recalls writing and publishing the *Adagiorum collectanea* twenty-seven years earlier, “unless I am mistaken.” Since this volume was first printed in mid-1500, he errs by about four years. On 19, l.34, he estimates that he began writing his *Enchiridion* about thirty years ago (“ante annos ferme triginta”); in fact he started the work in summer 1501, over twenty-one years earlier (see Ep. 164), and published it in 1503. Here, however, we may well be dealing either with a lapsus calami or a printing error of *triginta* for *viginti*. For in *Apologia ad annotationes Stunicae* (ASD 9, pt. 2:64, ll.77–78) and Ep. 1216, l.35, both written in 1521, as well as in a section of the *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* that was first published in 1522 (LB 6:135D/Reeve, 1986, 103) Erasmus states quite candidly: “I wrote the *Enchiridion* twenty years earlier.”

As is apparent, not all of Erasmus’s dates for events that occurred when he was in his thirties are erroneous. On 18, ll.19–20, for instance, he states that he wrote *Encomium artis medicae* twenty-three years ago. The declamation was written at the request of a friend who had recently been the personal physician of Charles V. Allen surmises that this friend may be the Ghysbertus mentioned in Ep. 95, l.11 (2 May 1499). It is thus quite likely that the encomium was written in spring 1499, as Erasmus implies in his letter to Botzheim.<sup>89</sup> Since he published the declamation of his own accord in 1518, he evidently was not unhappy with it and saw no need to assign it to an earlier period of his life, as was the case with other juvenilia. His reference to the commentaries on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (34, ll.16–19) is also correct; they were indeed begun

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adding sixteen years (the supposed age at his entry into Steyn) to 1466 (the year of his birth). If Erasmus was, directly or indirectly, responsible for these calculations, his revisionist chronology took shape in his mind well before 1514. How it was communicated to Snoy must remain a mystery.

<sup>89</sup>See Domański, introduction to the work in ASD 1, pt. 4:147.

twenty-two years before. The book, however, was never completed or published. We may infer that he had no cause to feel embarrassed about it in 1523 and could afford to be exact in his dating of it.

### WHY DID ERASMUS SO OFTEN UNDERSTATE HIS RECOLLECTED AGE?

Postremo, quibuscumque plumis tegimur, homines sumus omnes,  
non angeli. (Erasmus, Ep. 2892, ll. 154-55)

We must now attempt to answer the question: why did Erasmus so often exaggerate his youthfulness by at least three or four years when recalling events in his life and career up to about 1504? Our analysis thus far suggests two intertwined reasons.

The ingrained habit of understating the age at which he wrote his juvenilia can in large part be explained by his typically humanist sensitivity regarding his fame. By such underestimations he distanced himself from the early work and (as an added benefit) cultivated a reputation of having been a most precocious and industrious youth.

The need to understate the age at which he entered Steyn and made his profession is most naturally explained by his desire to remain outside the monastery. In the years after leaving Steyn Erasmus must have often worried that someday he would be required to give up that cherished *otium* and *libertas* without which life to him would not be life at all (Ep. 333, ll. 40-42). Claes Warnerszoon, the prior who encouraged him to attach himself to some bishop, had been tolerant of the prolonged absence (Ep. 296, ll. 164-69). But after 1504, when Servatius Rogerus became prior, Erasmus felt the need to mollify his new superior to prevent being recalled (Epp. 185, 189, 200, and 203). His fears were realized in summer 1514 when Servatius ordered him to come back to Steyn. In defending his refusal (Ep. 296) Erasmus argues that he entered the monastery as a confused and harassed youth. Referring to the age at which he made his profession, he asks in high dudgeon (ll. 33-37): how can a lad of seventeen, trained in classical letters but not in self-knowledge, be expected after only one year of probation to make a decision which will bind him for the rest of his life?



The story is greatly amplified in his letter to "Lambertus Grunnius" (Ep. 447), written in August 1516. This letter accompanied Erasmus's appeal to Leo X for, among other things, a dispensation from having to live within a monastery. Erasmus's case for this dispensation rests on his immaturity at the time of his taking vows. At great length and in much rhetorically colored detail Erasmus describes his youthfulness. He was barely sixteen when he was compelled to enter the monastery and only seventeen when he was pressured into making his profession. But, as we have seen, he must have entered the monastery as a postulant in late spring 1487 and become a novice some four months later. The contemporaries, of course, had no way of confirming either his current age or his age references for events in the past. Only Servatius Rogerus could have seriously threatened his story to the pope, but even if he had known of the letter to Grunnius, he had neither the energy nor the connections to pursue such a challenge against a man who possessed both in abundance.<sup>90</sup> Once the dispensations were granted in January 1517, Erasmus was in total control of his life's story. To protect his revisionist autobiography he had only to keep the chronology of his youth straight. This he found easy to do. He had already said publicly in his widely-read "*Carmen de senectutis incommodis*" that he was about to turn forty in 1506; there was thus no point in altering his current age by making himself several years younger, even if he had wanted to do so. Besides, who would have thought of connecting his current age with his age at that distant event? It must have seemed to him far easier (and much more urgent) to bring his age at the other happenings in his youth into agreement with the entry into Steyn. Since that defining moment was now supposed to have occurred when he was sixteen (rather than at age twenty), he henceforth simply subtracted at least three or four years from his true age at any given point in his youth.

In thus revising the chronology of his early life Erasmus cannot have intended to imply that he had been born in 1469, for he continued all along to give out current age references indicating 1466.

<sup>90</sup>Allen (*EE* 2:292, headnote on Ep. 447) suspects that Erasmus was nevertheless extremely anxious in 1516–17 to obtain the dispensations out of fear of Servatius's attempts "to compel him to return to Steyn; than which no prospect could have seemed to him more appalling."

Sometimes, as in the letter to Theodoricus and the *CV*, he placed these contradictory indications side by side, secure in the knowledge that no one would ever be the wiser. The date 1469, consequently, is nothing more than the accidental by-product of his revisionist biography. Such cases of predating, I should stress, should no longer be attributed to "the weakness of Erasmus's memory for dates," as P. S. Allen has proposed.<sup>91</sup> His chronological sense was no worse than that of his contemporaries—indeed, on these points it was better than average. Erasmus had too much at stake not to have a strong sense of chronology: *mendacem memorem esse oportet*. Certainly he succeeded so well in rewriting the story of his youth that no one hitherto has successfully penetrated the mystery of his ages. He was born in 1466, and never once denied that. But in defending his reputation and his freedom from the monastery he felt again and again obliged to predate by at least three or four years the writings and events of his youth.

<sup>91</sup>Ep. 279, note on l. 12. Allen's comment is often repeated. Huizinga, for example, writes (5): "His sense of chronology was always remarkably ill developed." Nichols, 1:474, has a fairer appreciation of Erasmus's chronological sense: "Erasmus shows in his correspondence an extremely accurate memory for such dates, and a lively interest in the ages of his friends and others." Elsewhere Allen (*EE* 1:596) observes that Erasmus's dating of his early letters in the *Opus epistolarum* (1529) is frequently wrong. "Out of over 200 [dates] thus supplied more than half are wrong, and in the dates of his life before 1511 the proportion of correct ones is barely one-fourth." Many of these dates are indeed wrong by one year, some by two or three, and a few by four years. But here we are dealing with quite a different phenomenon which must be kept strictly separate from Erasmus's age references for his youth. The latter demonstrate a consistent pattern; the former do not. In the age references, which he nearly always understates, there is a purpose at work: he downplays his works or defends a false chronology of his youth. He seems to have remembered quite precisely—give or take a year—at which age he did this or that in his youth. In the dating of his letters no such pattern is discernible. Many letters are indeed predated; but many others are postdated by one or more years. This is exactly what one would expect from someone in Erasmus's position. Establishing the dates of one's early letters after a lapse of several decades is no easy task. No wonder many of them are inaccurate! What is remarkable is that Erasmus placed so many of them correctly or nearly correctly, within one year of their true dates of composition. The same holds true for other misremembered dates later in his life, such as the precise composition date of the dedicatory letter preceding *Moriae encomium*; see C. H. Miller's comments in ASD 4, pt. 3:15 and n. 12.

## CONCLUSION

*"Velut e specula"* (Erasmus, *Agadia* 4.3.95)

From the vantage point afforded by our strenuous climb we may now survey at leisure the chronology of Erasmus's youth:

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| 28 October 1466       | Birth in Rotterdam.  |
| autumn 1473           | Enters an elementary school in Gouda.  |
| autumn 1475           | Chorister in Utrecht.  |
| autumn 1477 or Easter |  |
| 1478                  | Arrival in Deventer.   |
| summer 1483           | Plague closes the Lebuinus school in Deventer.   |
| October 1483          | Alexander Hegius begins his tenure as headmaster at the Lebuinus school.                   |
| early April 1484      | Erasmus sees Agricola.   |
| summer 1484           | Plague at Deventer; mother dies. Erasmus returns to Gouda; father dies shortly afterwards. |
| autumn 1484           | Guardians send Erasmus and his brother to 's-Hertogenbosch.                                |
| late winter 1487      | Erasmus and his brother return to Gouda.   |
| late spring 1487      | Enters Steyn monastery as a postulant.   |
| c. November 1487      | Becomes a novice.  |
| late 1487             | "Buccolicum carmen."   |
| c. November 1488      | Makes his profession.  |
| 19 November 1488      | Renewed outbreak of civil war in Holland.  |
| winter-spring 1489    | "Apologia Erasmi et Cornelii adversus barbaros" (Poems 93 and 135/R. 14-15).               |
| summer 1489           | "Magistro Enghelberto Leydensi" (Poem 98/R. 11)  |
| late summer 1489      | <i>Paraphrasis in elegantias Laurentii Vallae.</i>   |
| latter half of 1489   | <i>Oratio de pace; Conflictus Thaliae et Barbariei.</i>                                    |
| early 1490            | First draft of <i>Antibarbari</i> .  |

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| late October 1490 | <i>Oratio funebris in funere Bertae de Heyen</i> . <sup>92</sup>  |
| winter 1490–91    | Composes a moral satire in three parts (Poems 94–96/R. 23–25).  |
| c. March 1491     | Resolves to write only on sacred themes (Ep. 28); “In laudem Michaelis et angelorum omnium” (Poem 50/R. 34–37). |
| spring 1491       | <i>De contemptu mundi</i> .   |
| 25 April 1492     | Ordained as priest.   |
| 13 October 1492   | Civil war in Holland ends.  |
| 1492–93           | Erasmus leaves Steyn monastery as secretary of Bishop Hendrik van Bergen.                                       |

Two crucial dates in this reconstruction—Erasmus’s departure from Deventer in mid-1484 and his entry into Steyn nearly three years later—are strikingly confirmed by a passage in his *Responsio ad Petri Cursii defensionem* (Basel, 1535), reprinted by Allen as Ep. 3032.<sup>93</sup> In lines 197–204 of this open letter Erasmus says he was very eager to travel to Italy on several occasions before finally succeeding when he was “already going on forty.” His first attempt, he recalls, came when he was “about seventeen” (“annos natus ferme septemdecim”). Since he affirms in the same passage that he was born in 1466 (he was indeed going on forty in August 1506), the phrase “seventeen years old” points to a time between 28 October 1483

<sup>92</sup>The composition date of *Oratio funebris* can be deduced from several clues. The eulogy is mentioned as “a recent production” in Ep. 28, l. 14. Since this letter appears to have been written in c. March 1491 (see n. 23 above), we may place the eulogy in the half year preceding March 1491. That tallies well with the information provided in the *Oratio funebris* (LB 8:559B), that Berta van Heyen died on the feast of Saint Bridget (8 October). Furthermore, a postscript to the work in Ms. Scriverius (LB 8:560B) states that Erasmus composed the work at age twenty. Since the biographical notes in this manuscript seem to assume that Erasmus was born in 1469, the postscript points to a date before his birthday on 28 October 1490. Berta van Heyen, we infer, died on 8 October 1490; Erasmus would have completed the eulogy later that month.

<sup>93</sup>Richter, 9, n. 2, first drew attention to this passage: “Dass im 17. Jahr in der That ein Wendepunkt in Erasmus’ Laufbahn eingetreten [ist], beweist auch seine spätere Erzählung, dass er in diesem Jahre nach Italien ziehen wollen.” Richter, however, refers this to the time just before the entry into Steyn. He can do nothing with the indication that Erasmus tried to go to Italy from Holland at age twenty. (Erasmus did entertain hopes of accompanying Bishop Hendrik van Bergen to Italy in c. 1493, but the age reference in Ep. 3032 cannot be made to fit this.)

and 28 October 1484. This closely fits our reconstruction of Erasmus's youth, for the seventeen-year-old had indeed left Deventer in summer 1484 and was ready for the university.<sup>94</sup> Instead of providing him with sufficient funds to study in Italy, however, his guardians sent him to the school at 's-Hertogenbosch. His second chance to travel to Italy, Erasmus continues, occurred when he was twenty years old and still in Holland ("rursus ex Hollandia annos natus xx"). By spring 1487, when he was twenty, he had returned from 's-Hertogenbosch, but had not yet entered the monastery as a postulant. At this point, too, as he told Grunnius in Ep. 447, l. 172, he wanted dearly to attend a university for three or four years. Once again the pressure from his guardians, the lack of money, and his own ill-health—he had been suffering from the quartan fever for over a year already—stood in the way of his dreams.<sup>95</sup>

The passage is unusual in that it provides two accurate age references for occurrences in Erasmus's youth. Why does he permit himself this accuracy here? The reason is quite clearly rhetorical. He could after all not very well predate his desire to attend an Italian university by three or four years. At age fourteen (and all the more so at age twelve!) he would have been too young to travel on his own to Italy and attend a university, even if his health and his funds had permitted so long a journey. Erasmus masks the accuracy of

<sup>94</sup>Lines 81–84 of the *CV* say that a roommate of Erasmus's at Deventer, Cornelis (Woerden), traveled to Italy before entering Steyn in about 1486. According to Ep. 447, l. 305, he went there to seek his fortune, not to study. Erasmus says that he himself was ready for the university upon leaving Deventer (at age fourteen or twelve); see Ep. 447, ll. 97–99, and *CV*, ll. 49–50. Age twelve would have been quite unusual, though not impossible; Rodolphus Agricola and Philip Melancthon, for example, were twelve when they matriculated. But Sebastian Brant, Cornelis Gerard, Jacob Locher, Hermann von dem Busche, Johannes Murmellius, Martin Luther, Ulrich von Hutten, and Eobanus Hessus all started their university studies at age sixteen or seventeen. Mutianus Rufus, sent to the Deventer school in c. 1480, when he was about nine or ten years old, enrolled at the University of Erfurt in 1486 at age fifteen or sixteen.

<sup>95</sup>Erasmus says in the same passage that he also hoped to travel to Italy from Paris, when he was twenty-eight years old ("e Lutecia natus annos xxviii"). Erasmus did come to Paris in late summer 1495 at age twenty-eight. To our knowledge, however, he expressed no intention of going to Italy then. It was not until spring 1498 that he first began making plans to take his doctor's degree in theology at Bologna; see, for example, Ep. 75, ll. 13–22 (c. April 1498). Again ill health and lack of money forced him to abandon his plans. In spring 1498, however, he was thirty-one years old, not twenty-eight. In this instance Erasmus may well be falling back into his habit of portraying himself as at least three years younger than he actually was at a specific event in his youth.

the two age references, however, by not providing further biographical details which might have caused his contemporaries to wonder how at the very same age he could have been making his profession at Steyn (age seventeen) and writing a praise of monasticism (at barely age twenty). To us, however, these two age references are proof positive that Erasmus himself was never in doubt concerning either his true age or the chronology of his early life.

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## APPENDIX

With Erasmus's birth year firmly established as 1466, we can also estimate the year in which some of his contemporaries were born.

1. Guillaume Cop, Erasmus's friend and physician at Paris. The precise year of his birth is unknown. P. S. Allen, in a note on Ep. 124, l. 16, says that Cop was born in about 1466; the *Dictionnaire de biographie française* 9:555 (Paris, 1961) gives the date as "peut-être vers 1450"; and J.-C. Margolin (49) states that Cop was born at Basel in 1466, being about three years older than Erasmus (born in 1469, in his opinion). Our best clue to Cop's age is a passage in Erasmus's votive poem to Sainte Geneviève (Poem 88.91-93/R. 131.91-93), probably written in 1531. There we read that Cop (in winter 1496-97) was still a young man in the flower of his age ("iam tum florens iuvenilibus annis"), though older than he ("me quamvis aetate prior"). This statement may be taken to imply that Cop was born several years before 1466. The phrase "florens iuvenilibus annis" indicates a young man in his twenties or early thirties. We thus estimate that Cop was about three years older than Erasmus and was born in c. 1463. If so, he would have been approximately thirty-three years old in winter 1496-97. The supposition that Cop was born in c. 1463 makes excellent sense in view of the fact that he matriculated at the University of Basel in winter semester 1478-79 and earned his MA in 1483. In the fifteenth century it was the norm to begin one's university studies at about age fifteen or sixteen and to receive one's MA by age twenty or twenty-one.

2. Ennio Filonardi of Bauco. His year of birth (c. 1466) may be deduced from Ep. 1342, l. 437, where Erasmus mentions that he is the same age as Filonardi.

3. Pieter Gerard. Since Erasmus twice says that his brother is about three years older than he (Epp. 447, ll. 155-56, and 1436, ll. 37-38), his birth may be placed in c. 1463. This is consistent with the information given in the *CV* about their parents, Gerard and Margaret. According to lines 45-46 of this autobiographical sketch, Erasmus's parents were not much over forty when they died (in summer

1484). If born in c. 1440, they would have been twenty-three years old at the birth of Pieter and twenty-six at the birth of Erasmus. According to the CV, ll. 10–29, Gerard journeyed to Italy (probably in summer 1456, at about age sixteen). He supported himself as a copyist, as can be documented for 1457–58 in Fabriano, Italy,<sup>96</sup> and subsequently also in Rome. Then, applying himself to humanistic studies, he became skilled in Latin and Greek, studied (canon) law, heard Guarino of Verona lecture (at Ferrara, before his death on 4 December 1460),<sup>97</sup> and became a priest (at about age twenty-two)<sup>98</sup>—before returning to Holland in 1462 and taking up (or resuming) relations with Margaret.

4. Willem Hermans. According to *Antibarbari* (ASD 1, pt. 1:38, ll. 9 and 20) and the heading of Poem 106/R. 9, Willem Hermans was the same age as Erasmus.

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<sup>96</sup>See Avarucci. The earliest manuscript is dated 18 February 1457.

<sup>97</sup>Van der Blom, 1988, 252, n. 14, speculates that Gerard may have obtained his master's degree at Ferrara. That is certainly possible, since he would have been about twenty-one years old in 1461.

<sup>98</sup>DeMolen, 1987, xiii, reminds us that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries it was not unusual to be ordained at such a youthful age. John Fisher, for example, became a priest at age twenty-two, Martin Luther at age twenty-three.

- this work is forthcoming in vol. 1 of *Helius Eobanus Hessus, Dichtungen. Lateinisch und Deutsch*. Ed. and trans. Harry Vredeveld. Bern, 1990—.
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