

Surfaces



ERASMUS' THEORY OF SELF-DEFENCE

Controversies. Vol. 71 of *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, edited by J.K. Sowards, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993)

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BOOK REVIEW

J.K. SOWARDS, ED., *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ERASMUS: CONTROVERSIES*

ERASMUS' THEORY OF SELF-DEFENCE

Jean-François Vallée

***Controversies*. Vol. 71 of *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, edited by J.K. Sowards, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).**

The Collected Works of Erasmus published by the University of Toronto Press is one of those mammoth editorial enterprises that spans decades. Undertaken in the early sixties, the projected 86-volume edition is now about a third of the way to completion with 27 volumes published^[1] and no less than 59 others in preparation. Directed and planned by an impressive group of scholars, the aim of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* is "to make available an accurate, readable English text of Erasmus' correspondence and his other principle writings".^[2] This is not a very "sexy" academic project (far from any kind of "Madonna studies"), but contrary to more enticing editorial artifacts it certainly is here to stay. It has been called "one of the scholarly triumphs of our time" by Lisa Jardine^[3] and qualified as "superb, reaching a standard of editing and production almost unknown these days" by Leonard Newman. ^[4]

The recently published volume which I will review here is the first (#71) of the 13 volume series (#71-83) devoted to the numerous "controversies" in which Erasmus was continually enmeshed for a good part of his life. It is edited by J.K. Sowards and includes 8 texts written (if not published) for the

most part between 1517 and 1521 during Erasmus' turbulent "Louvain period".

J.K. Sowards' substantial and relatively lengthy introduction to the volume -- entitled "Erasmus and the Louvain Circle" -- certainly has all the seriousness and informational value of the type of introduction one would expect in such a prestigious academic edition. It provides a detailed and very precise account of Erasmus' doings and undoings from the beginning of the sixteenth century to his rise to fame and the ensuing troubled period of his life during which he wrote these controversies. We learn much about the biographical context of the writings (and also about the psychological, political and religious contexts) and it would obviously be very difficult to question the editor's impressive erudition.

Unfortunately, one cannot help but be slightly disappointed by the very factual, enumerative and "no-nonsense" tone of this prefatory note. It is understandable that in this type of "timeless" editorial enterprise one would want to avoid interpretative comments that, being related to fashionable schools of thought in the humanities, for example, could become quickly outdated. Nonetheless, it would unquestionably have been far more interesting to have at least suggested different hypotheses concerning, among other things, the place of these controversies in Erasmus' "oeuvre" or the meaning of this type of controversy not only in the context of Erasmus' life but also in the more general context of Renaissance or humanist academic relationships.

Fortunately, each of the controversies is also preceded by an introductory note presented by the particular translator and annotator of the text. Only the first one, the *Letter to Dorp*, is edited by Sowards. The other editors, however, follow Sowards' trend in limiting themselves mainly to very factual observations about the controversies, information that, if not totally satisfying, remains of course very useful for the reader.

I. *Letter to Dorp*

The first text -- the *Epistola ad Dorpium* -- was written hastily by Erasmus in 1515 in reply to a (published) letter from his "friend", the theologian Maarten van Dorp, who had politely attacked Erasmus, mainly regarding the liberties he took in his *Praise of Folly*, but also regarding his projected revised translation of the *New Testament*. Erasmus replies in a rather gentle, if patronizing, tone (an "avuncular" tone, suggests appropriately Sowards) and defends at length his *Moria* and his forthcoming editions of

Jerome and of the Holy Scriptures. This is evidently not a very harsh controversy, since Dorp will eventually yield to Erasmus' views, but the letter has a certain importance, mainly because -- as Sowards remarks -- it is Erasmus' longest defence of, and commentary on, his famous *Moria*.

Most interesting is the long passage where Erasmus pleads for the necessity and "Christian" virtue of satire when it is performed in a "general" manner, i.e. without attacking anybody by name.^[5] This is a somewhat strange boast by Erasmus since, as we will see in the later controversies, he didn't always refrain from vicious nominal attacks on certain adversaries. Another interesting aspect of the letter is Erasmus' somewhat naïve confidence in his seemingly unproblematic and commendable desire to go back to the (Greek) sources of the Bible to correct the still reigning Vulgate edition. Erasmus does not yet realize that this simple philological impulse will help set the stage for the incredible earthquake that will shake Western Christendom for years to come. At that time, he still sees the whole language and textual controversy in purely academic terms, as if the individual return to, and ensuing reinterpretation of, the Scriptures shouldn't have any other consequences than simply "purifying" the Catholic faith and Church. The later controversies, as we shall see, will bring him to a more lucid understanding...

II. *Apology against the Dialogue of Latomus*

The second controversy, the *Apologia contra Latomi Dialogum* translated and annotated by Martin Lowry, is the longest (and most fastidious) text of this collection. Hastily written by Erasmus in 1519, it is a defence against a polemical dialogue published by Latomus (born Jacques Masson) which was seen by many as a direct attack against Erasmus and his *studia humanitatis* crede. The issue is still mainly academic (though it of course has many theological consequences), and revolves around the question of the necessity of learning languages (Latin of course, but also Greek and Hebrew) to do theological studies. More pragmatically, it is linked to the recent turmoil surrounding the creation of the *Collegium Trilingue* in Louvain and the related on-going strife between traditional theologians relying on scholastic methods and the humanists pushing for the knowledge of the three sacred languages and of the *bonae literae*. Erasmus, always a little bit paranoid (though sometimes rightly so), describes himself, in his combat against the traditional theologians, as an overtaxed Hercules fighting the many-headed hydra. He adopts a tired and victimized tone in his reply and often insists on the tediousness of this type of defence on which he has no time to lose. Interestingly, the author of the *Colloquies* refuses to answer in the fictional, pseudo-dialogical manner of his attacker: "This will be straight talk to the honest reader" (p. 37), he proudly announces. He also somewhat retreats from his earlier theory of anonymous attacks: "I think it

is more honest (...) to name your opponent straight away than to slant the attack so that its target is as obvious as if his name had been declared. (...) The general advancement of scholarship sometimes demands that falsely inflated reputations be punctured (...)" (pp. 57-58). However, with its (numbered) point by point arguments against the inuendos and attacks of the two books of the *Latomus* dialogue, the text of the *apologia* remains rather uninteresting. It is not without rhetorical aims though that Erasmus adopts this fastidious and tired tone, trying as he is to convince his readers of the uselessness of this kind of debate and the loss of precious time for both the writer and the reader in contradicting such "illfounded" attacks. Halfway in the *apologia*, he makes this very clear: "Already, I regret having to write this work: already excellent reader, I feel sorry for you -- if anyone is going to read this miserable stuff. I would rather have spent ten times as much effort on something which brought pleasure to me in writing it for the one reason that it would have brought some profit to the reader." (p. 56) The reader can hence only be grateful and sympathetic...

III. The Defence of the Declamation on Marriage

The third controversy, the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, translated and annotated by Charles Fantazzi, is fortunately (for the reader) much shorter and less arid, though it is not of great importance. Its main interest lies in the fact that it is directed against Jan Briart, doyen of the Louvain faculty of theology, whom Erasmus strongly suspected of being the real instigator of the two previous controversies.^[6] This new controversy stems from Erasmus' *Declamatio in genere suasoria de laude matrimonii*, written much earlier in his career (between 1498 and 1499) but only published by Dick Martens in 1518. In the tradition of this ancient rhetorical genre, Erasmus attempts to convince his audience of a certain thesis, in this case the primacy of marriage over celibacy. This seemingly innocent text will spark much controversy. As Fantazzi notes: "Erasmus continued to be plagued for the rest of his life by criticisms of his views on marriage and celibacy" (p. 87).^[7]

The first open attack comes from Briart, who in an official speech (in 1519), on the occasion of a licentiate awarding, declares certain opinions on marriage and celibacy to be heretic. He did not openly name Erasmus, but the target was obvious since Erasmus' *declamatio* had been published only recently. The attack being public and coming from a man of the institutional stature of Briart, Erasmus was compelled to reply. The *apologia* itself is, as Fantazzi remarks, "very mild-mannered, although not without its subtle accusations of Briart's naïveté in listening to his fellow theologians without having read Erasmus' work carefully himself." (p. 87) In his defence, Erasmus is very prudent indeed, and his attacks are always veiled by an

innocent and polite tone. He pretends not to believe that Briart could have publicly condemned him, and if so, he suggests that it could only have been by error: Briart must have been falsely informed about the content of his encomium of marriage. He confirms, not without acidic irony, that Briart hasn't read the treatise "since he was occupied with more serious concerns" (p. 90). He then insists on the fact that the encomium was one of his very early writings and that one must understand that it was only a rhetorical *exemplum* for declamations and "whoever professes to give a declamation disclaims all responsibility for the opinions stated; thus one's ability may be at stake but not one's credibility." (p. 92) Of course, Erasmus then goes on precisely to defend those opinions: opinions he will also confirm in a later treatise -- the *Institutio christiani matrimonii* -- published in 1526.

IV. Acts of the University of Louvain against Luther / Brief Notes of Erasmus for the Cause of Luther / Minute Composed for the Peace of the Church

This next controversy is actually constituted of three very short texts -- the *Acta academiae Lovaniensis contra Lutherum*, the *Axiomata Erasmi pro causa Lutheri* and the *Consilium Cuiusdam* -- all translated and annotated once again by Martin Lowry. These texts, written between 1520 and 1521, all pertain to the then very "hot" and touchy Lutheran problem. These writings also have in common that they were all, at one time or another, attributed to Luther (and even Zwingli in one case) and have now been formally identified as the work Erasmus. If the previous controversies concerned mainly academic and linguistic tensions, these ones deal with a much more explosive and far-reaching matter. They were written in the short period (1519-1521) that comprised such historical events as the famous confrontation between Eck and Karlstadt in Leipzig, the condemnation of Luther by the universities of Cologne and Louvain, the imperial election (which led to the arrival of Charles V in the Netherlands at the beginning of June 1520 and his /pp. 10-11/ coronation on October 22nd), the excommunication of Luther (the papal bull was promulgated on June 15th 1520), and the forthcoming Diet of Worms (at the beginning of 1521), where Luther's fate in the Empire was to be decided. This part of the controversies thus reads like a "thriller" and it is fascinating to see how Erasmus reacts (or doesn't react) in the midst of such a political and theological tempest, punctuated by book burnings and emotional appeals from all sides. Being one of the most famous intellectual and spiritual writers of his time there were of course incredible pressures coming from both parties, urging him to take sides.

As early as 1519, he had received a letter from Luther (dated March 28th, the same day that the *Apologia* against the Latomus dialogue was published) asking for support, a letter to which he replied only in May (his answer was

published against his will). In it, he partly distanced himself from the reformer, insisting on the fact that he had not yet read him although he was sympathetic to his cause, and inciting him to moderation. Erasmus' position will remain unchanged during the next 4 or 5 years:[\[8\]](#) exposed to cross-fire, he will always try to manoeuvre to avoid taking sides, proclaiming constantly, on the one hand, that he does not know Luther, and, on the other, attacking or at least trying to hold back, the many who were only too eager to condemn him. His moderate, ambiguous, shifty, and often overly "reasonable" attitude will bring him only unrest and growing spite from both parties. Much has been written about this whole affair and it would perhaps be overambitious to try to explain it in a book review, but it is necessary to at least mention a few probable reasons behind Erasmus' "strategy" in this difficult situation, because it tells us a lot about him and especially about his way of handling controversies.

At one level, Erasmus still looked upon this critical debate as a scholarly one; his principal worry, as Martin Lowry remarks, was "that the reformer [*Luther*] and humanist studies may be engulfed together" (p. 98). Since most of the enemies of Luther were also adversaries of the *studia humanitatis* and the *bonae literae*, he felt compelled to fight them. But in view of the radicalization of the debate and, especially, of the reformers, he would not jump onto their "band-wagon" for fear of being destroyed and marginalized. He himself had constantly advocated reform and contested such things as indulgences and certain aspects of the papal monarchy and primacy, but had hoped to bring about these changes from within the Catholic church. He had never wished to be excluded from the Church. Also, he was still enmeshed at the time in many petty controversies (like the one with Edward Lee), and he never really correctly evaluated (until it was too late) the magnitude of the Lutheran question. His scholarly bent and his lack of political insight led him not only to underestimate the seriousness of the situation, but also to adopt a relatively weak and rather unrealistic position. But let's see more concretely how this is revealed in the three short tracks collected here.

The first -- the *Acts of the University of Louvain against Luther* -- was published anonymously in 1520 and though it was often included in Luther's Opera omnia (in 1546, 1556, 1562 and as late as 1865), it is now believed "beyond reasonable doubt" (p. 99) to have been written by Erasmus. The incredibly vicious tone and content of the first paragraph of the *Acta*, however, contrast sharply with Erasmus' earlier ethical principle of not attacking anyone by name. The main victim of this slanderous attack is Girolamo Aleandro, an old friend of Erasmus' who had risen quickly in the Church hierarchy. He happened to be the papal nuncio who delivered the bull *Exsurge Domine* excommunicating Luther to the imperial court in the Netherlands. The feeling of betrayal by his old humanist friend, or even good old jealousy motivated by the new powerful position of Aleandro, might have triggered the spiteful attack. Erasmus insinuates that Aleandro is a Jew, and he does not hold back in his description of this "blood-brother of Judas" : "(...) there is not a single vile habit which he avoids, living indeed as

if the whole of him were going to rot away with his body. (...) his conceit is uncontrollable, his greed insatiable, his lust as unspeakable as it is unbounded: a total slave to his own /pp. 12-13/ advancement (...) he has snatched up his pen with the aim of celebrating his master Moses and darkening the glory of Christ" (p. 101). According to Erasmus "the tyranny of blockheads^[9] and maniacs is seething to its height" (*ibid.*). He fiercely denounces the book burnings organized by Aleandro and the doings of the newly reinstated inquisitor Hoogstraten. His more general strategy becomes somewhat clearer when he starts attacking the whole process in *procedural* terms: Erasmus contests the irregular way in which Luther was condemned by the Louvain faculty of theology and implies that the papal bull has been tampered with, that it is a forgery. As Lowry remarks, Erasmus "hoped to drive one wedge between Rome and the universities (...) and another between the different faculties at Louvain (...). It was only playing for time: but time might give a more moderate faction at the curia the opportunity it needed." (pp. 98-99) Astoundingly however, Erasmus still seemed to believe that the whole problem had its origin in the academia : "Now (...) let us look at the beginning of it all. The affair sprang at first from the hatred of languages and literature (...)" (p. 104). Fortunately, he also became much more lucid as to the consequences of the affair : "It's easy enough to remove Luther from the libraries. It's not going to be nearly so easy to remove him from men's hearts (...). Truth will not be crushed, even if Luther is." (p. 105)

The second tract -- the *Brief Notes of Erasmus of Rotterdam for the Cause of the Theologian Martin Luther* -- concerns a further stage in the debate, after Charles V's coronation, when the Elector Frederick the Wise was to decide on how to act in the case of his now famous subject, Martin Luther. It seems Frederick decided to contact Erasmus for counsel and these notes might have helped in "tipping" his decision towards protecting Luther. Unfortunately for Erasmus, these hastily written notes were almost immediately published, which contributed to fuel the persistent suspicion that Erasmus was on the reformers' side. Here again Erasmus professes his belief in the scholarly origin of the whole affair: "The matter has sprung from a tainted source, the hatred of literature and the claim for spiritual domination." (p. 106) His strategy remains unchanged: he is still trying to buy time (he wants to "avoid hasty decisions on this question") and to push for a reasonable and moderate settlement of the controversy. For the ever reasonable humanist, "it seems best to settle the issue through the sane advice of unbiased and discreet persons." (p. 107)

Finally, the third tract -- shortly entitled *Minute Composed by a Person who Seriously Wishes Provisions to Be Made for the Reputation of the Roman Pontiff and the Peace of the Church* -- was written in the same period that preceded the Diet of Worms, where Luther was to be judged by the imperial court. It was published anonymously and could have been written in collaboration with another "moderate", Johannes Faber, a Dominican liberal, prior of Augsburg and imperial councillor. Written in a much more pondered tone and studied style, the *Consilium* seems typically erasmian, in contrast with the fierce *Acta* and the "telegraphic" *Axiomata*. Inspired by the cardinal

virtues of prudence, justice and temperance (if not courage!) and surely also by the theological virtues (charity, hope and faith), Erasmus appeals once more to moderation, but he also puts forward the more pragmatic aspects of his proposition of "arbitration" only sketchily suggested in the *Axiomata*. Ever a scholar, he still believes that the whole quarrel is rooted in an epistemological ground: "it is sufficiently clear that the issue had ugly origins -- that is to say, the hatred of the good literature (...), and the resentment of the studies of language" (p. 108) And he hopes once again "that reasoned arguments which are likely to receive tacit support from men of sound character and judgement" (p. 108) will help resolve the problem. He also persists in his prudent strategy of contesting mainly the procedural aspects of the affair, insisting however that this does not entail an approval of Luther's cause: "criticizing the method and origins of the case does not mean one is favouring Luther, any more than insisting on the proper course of trial and verdict means arguing that a parricide should not receive his just punishment"(p. 109).[\[10\]](#)

Luther must, according to Erasmus, be "refuted with sound arguments" (p. 110) instead of being attacked in this "witchhunt" manner. Arbitrators -- "men of outstanding knowledge, proven virtue, and unstained honor" (p. 111)[\[11\]](#) -- must be chosen by the three most trustworthy kings (Charles V, the king of England, and the king of Hungary) and they must, after carefully reading Luther's books, reach a decision that will be pronounced in the presence of Luther: "that decision will be final. Luther will recognize his error when it is honestly pointed out to him" (*ibid.*) and everybody will be happy ever after! Unfortunately, the forthcoming publication of Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* will shatter whatever hope was left for such a moderate and reasonable outcome of the crisis...

V. *Manifest Lies*

The last of the controversies included in this volume -- the *Manifesta mendacia*, translated and annotated by Erika Rummel -- is an unpublished defence discovered in manuscript at the Royal Library at Copenhagen in 1966. Rummel herself was the first to identify the origin of this controversy: a book, published in 1525 under the pseudonym "Godefridus Ruysius Taxander", that attacked "Erasmus' view on confession (...) in vicious terms." (p. 114) The unpublished ensuing *apologia* is seemingly included in this volume because Erasmus identified the leading author of the book as Vincentus Theoderici,[\[12\]](#) yet another member of the faculty of theology at Louvain where Erasmus seemingly had a lot of enemies!

In comparison to the heated political controversy that preceded, the *Manifest Lies* appear less consequential and dramatic. The main subject of

discussion being the practice and legitimacy of confession, one can suppose that we are leaving the political aspects of theology for its more doctrinal aspects. But the question of confession is of high importance and has political and especially epistemological consequences that go far beyond the purely doctrinal. The practice of confession concerns language and truth and it is interesting to note that Erasmus gave such a title to his projected defence against Taxander-Theoderici.

The manuscript itself is organized much like the *apologia* against Latomus' dialogue, with a numbered point-by-point argumentative defence against the attacks of the "Taxander" book. Erasmus simply contradicts, page by page and one by one, all the inuendos and open accusations of his attacker(s), demonstrating that all these are "manifest lies".^[13] "[What a] heap of lies I have collected in this small booklet" (p. 131) he concludes after having contradicted them all. Erasmus seems much more at ease in this type of controversy than in the (more dangerous and far-reaching) previous one. He defends himself in a confident and tenacious manner against every accusation -- that he has inspired Luther, that he wants to abolish confession, indulgences, fasting, the papal primacy or the veneration of saints -- by showing that in most of these cases he was only condemning the excesses or the simply ritualistic aspects of these practices and beliefs.

The fact that as a would-be reformer Erasmus has always held a moderate, "middle of the road" position of course always made him vulnerable to attacks from all sides and he therefore constantly had to specify his overly subtle or nuanced opinions in the face of his adversaries' more crude or radical positions. Moderation -- so often related to ambivalence -- is a difficult position to hold. Paradoxically, the moderate Erasmus was at once sincerely convinced that his position was one that should encourage peace and "concord", but at the same time, to his dismay, he constantly wound up enmeshed in these endless and self-multiplying controversies. This paradox becomes obvious in the *Manifesta mendacia*, where Erasmus must defend himself against the accusation of being a creator of "strife": "He [*Taxander-Theoderici*] adds that I foster strife in the community, when there is no man who gives more encouragement to concord and who is more adverse to every kind of faction." (p. 127) It is precisely this alledged aversion for factions that of course lead him to be attacked from all sides and that compelled him to create for himself an elaborate "art of self-defence".

In this first volume of the controversies, we have witnessed many facets of this intellectual combat technique: from the friendly but patronizing response to Dorp to the fierce and slanderous aggressiveness of the *Acta*; from the pondered, seemingly overtaxed, argumentative defences of the *Apologia contra Latomi dialogum* or of the *Manifesta mendacia* to the polite and veiled attacks of the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii* against Briart. The thirteen (!) other volumes of the controversies will probably give us even more insight into this humanistic "martial art" and we can only hope

that the editors of the *Collected Works of Erasmus* will eventually treat us with a more substantial and far-reaching analysis of this fascinating intellectual phenomenon.

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[1]The published works include 10 volumes of the *Correspondence* series (out of 22), all 7 volumes of the *Literary and Educational Writings*, 4 volumes of the *Adages* (out of 7), 3 volumes of the *New Testament Scholarship* (out of 20!), 1 volume of *Patristic Scholarship* (out of 2), 1 volume of *Spiritualia and Pastoralia* (out of 5) and 1 volume of the *Controversies* (out of 14). Unpublished to date are the series devoted to the *Apophtegma* (2 volumes), the very important *Colloquies* (2 volumes), the *Expositions and Psalms* (1 volume) and finally the Poetry (2 volumes). In the published "realm", one should also add three volumes (not counted in the 86 volumes of the *Works*) devoted to the enumeration of the contemporaries of Erasmus.

[2]Though the edition is not bilingual, it provides precise references to facilitate cross-checking with the original Latin text. One should also commend the editors for the high quality of the material presentation of the *Works* : excellent binding and paper, elegant type and presentation, etc., etc.

[3]This quote is used as a blurb on the book cover of the volume I will be reviewing here. Jardine recently published a book herself on Erasmus at Princeton -- *Erasmus, Man of Letters : The Construction of Charisma in Print* -- where she seemingly paints a darker portrait of the famous humanist. I have unfortunately not yet been able to obtain this book in which Erasmus, at least according to the Princeton publicity for it, is shown to be a man who

"self-consciously created his own reputation as the Central figure of the European intellectual world". Could be interesting...

[4]The anglo-saxon publishing habit of putting such adulatory praises on book covers, even for such a serious type of edition, will never cease to amaze me...

[5]Erasmus writes: "I have always had one end in view, to do good if I can; but if not, to hurt no one." (p. 8) The tendency to slander is, of course, something that Erasmus ascribes to *women*: "it is unworthy of a generous heart to void its resentment in slander as women do." (p. 9) The "feminization" of Erasmus can therefore be deduced, in syllogistic manner, from the fact that he himself becomes extremely "slanderous" in later controversies...

[6]He even suspected Briart of *writing* the Latomus dialogue (or at least its second book).

[7]Among which, a virulent polemic with the infamous Beda and the faculty of theology of the Sorbonne around 1925. A controversy which will, I strongly suspect, be included in a forthcoming volume of the *Collected Works*.

[8]It is only in 1524 that he will yield to the pressure and write against Luther in his famous *De libero arbitrio diatribe*.

[9]I unfortunately didn't have time to look up the original Latin word for "blockhead".

[10]The choice of the analogy -- the parricide trial -- is certainly revealing... but let us leave that to the psychoanalytic critics...

[11]Erasmus obviously included himself in this group.

[12]According to Erasmus, it was written by four Dominicans, but the leading role was played by Theoderici.

[13]The rhetoric of the whole text follows the same pattern which can be summarized briefly in such a phrase as: "It is a lie (or it is false) to say that I said x. I actually said (or meant) y."