
These are the first two volumes in a projected series entitled Collected Works of Erasmus whose aim is 'to make available an accurate, readable English text of Erasmus' correspondence and his other principal writings.' The series is published by the University of Toronto Press, but the advisory committee is an international one. As the scholarship which has gone into these volumes is of the highest order, and the presentation is worthy of the scholarship, they make an impressive contribution to Renaissance studies.

It is entirely fitting that such a series should begin with the massive corpus of Erasmus' correspondence which, as the introduction to Volume I points out, 'constitutes a source of inestimable value, not only for the biography of the great humanist himself, but also for the intellectual and religious history of the northern Renaissance and the Reformation.' In 1497 Erasmus wrote 'There is nothing I enjoy more than writing to my scholarly friends or reading their letters,' and it is to this enjoyment that we owe the more than three thousand letters, some by and some to him, which appear in the collection. These two volumes cover only one tenth of that number; yet they are full of fascinating material.

The translation is based on the definitive text by P.S. Allen and others, which arranges and numbers the letters in chronological order. Consequently these two volumes cover an early period of Erasmus' life, from before 1487 to the summer of 1514. They include his entry into the monastery of the Augustinian canons at Steyn in the Netherlands (Lpp. 3-32 were written while he was there), his period of residence in Paris studying for a doctorate in theology (1495ff: Lpp. 43ff) — a period which was interrupted several times when plague struck Paris and he had to take refuge elsewhere —, his journey round Italy in 1506-8, and his residence in Cambridge (1511-14) occupying a position specially created for him as lecturer in Greek. A climax is reached just before the end of Vol. II at Ep. 296, a long and important letter to the prior of the monastery at Steyn in which Erasmus explains why he has so long absented himself from the monastery.

It is not only historians who will find valuable and interesting material in these volumes. Theologians will take note of the debate in Lpp. 108ff between Erasmus and John Colet over the nature of Christ's agony in the garden; Erasmus writes among other things 'For a man who is by no process of reasoning unwilling to die may still be terrified by death; none the less this is, in a sense, unwillingness. It was this natural aversion to death that Christ, speaking after the fashion of men, expressed when he said: "Father, let this cup pass from me; yet
not as I will, but as thou wilt...'. They will also enjoy his tongue-in-cheek remark in Ep. 108:55f: 'Nowadays practically no-one devotes himself to the study of theology, the highest branch of learning, except such as, having sluggish or disordered wits, are scarcely fit for letters at all.'

Classicists will note the allegorical interpretation of Homer's *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid* at Ep. 52:46ff, and will read with interest Erasmus' comment on the value of studying Greek (Ep. 149-21ff): 'Latin scholarship, however elaborate, is maimed and reduced by half without Greek. For whereas we Latins have but a few small streams, a few muddy pools, the Greeks possess crystal-clear springs and rivers that run with gold.' They will appreciate his dictum on Euripidean choruses, which are, he writes, 'so obscure, because of some sort of deliberate artifice, that they need an Oedipus, or Delian prophet, rather than a commentator' (Ep. 188:37ff, cf. 208:27ff); but they will take with a grain of salt his estimate of the value of Latin prose composition (Ep. 175:1ff): 'Pray continue, dear Robert, in that endeavour which, as I for one believe, is the noblest of all and most acceptable in the sight of god; that is, to prepare the youth of Ghent for the mastery of the highest forms of learning, by inculcating a pure Latin style.'

Medical historians will be interested in the references to Thomas Linacre, the famous physician and classicist who founded the Royal College of Physicians, translated the works of Galen and earned Erasmus' approval for his classical scholarship: 'Could anything be more clever or profound or sophisticated than Linacre's mind?' And for the general reader there is the appeal of a narrative skill seen at its best in the famous account of a quarrel between Erasmus' Parisian landlady and one of her serving-girls (Ep. 55, perhaps written as an exercise in narrative style), or the story of black magic in Ep. 143, or the amusing re-telling of the myth of Cain in Ep. 116.

As the quotations above will have shown, the translation is indeed both accurate and readable, and there is only an occasional slip from the highest standards. The list of insults at Ep. 70:25 contains one more term than does the corresponding list in Allen's text; and the ambiguity of 'I have read your letter on how to study hurriedly' (Ep. 230:2) seems to me intolerable, even though it preserves the Latin word order. Historical points are elucidated and classical quotations referred to their source in concise but informative footnotes. There are ample indexes, and each volume contains in an appendix a lengthy article, itself an impressive work of scholarship, on coinage in the period covered by that volume.

Misprints are very few. At Ep. 177:95n. the reference to the *Iliad* should read III 212-5, not 312-5; this is the more unfortunate in that in the Greek text, which is quoted as part of the letter, three misprints appear in four lines. At Ep. 139: 109 the word 'to' appears needlessly. At Ep. 173:60n. the Symplegades
appear wrongly as Sympleades, and in the introduction to Ep. 211 *Herculei* is wrongly spelt *Herculai*. Possessors of these volumes will not hesitate to correct their copies, remembering Erasmus' words on book-lovers (Ep. 31:35ff): 'I consider as lovers of books, not those who keep their books hidden in their store-chests and never handle them, but those who, by nightly as well as daily use, thumb them, batter them, wear them out, who fill up all the margins with annotations of many kinds, and who prefer the marks of a fault they have erased to a neat copy full of faults.' Erasmus would have regarded the freedom from misprints which these volumes display as little short of miraculous.

Throughout these volumes the dominating figure is, of course, Erasmus himself. He emerges as a great scholar, a great literary artist and a great man. That the opportunity of making his acquaintance is, by means of this excellent English translation, to be afforded to a wider readership than hitherto is a matter for rejoicing.

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