

These two recent offerings from the Collected Works of Erasmus (CWE) bring forth treasures old and new from the University of Toronto Press’s enterprise of producing English translations of the works of the famous Renaissance humanist. CWE 11, containing all the extant letters which Erasmus wrote and received in 1525, continues the long-standing project of publishing and annotating his correspondence. CWE 56 marks a new venture in the scholarly editing of Erasmus’ works, for it makes available for the first time a modern English scholarly edition of one part of the greatest monument to Erasmus’ biblical scholarship, the Annotations on the New Testament. This volume, comprising Erasmus’ notes on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, is the first to appear in a series of ten volumes (CWE 51-60) to be devoted to the Annotations. Previously, the Annotations were only accessible in their original editions and in volume 6 of Leclerc’s 1703 edition of Erasmus’ Opera Omnia. More recently, Anne Reeve and Michael A. Screech have produced facsimiles of the final 1535 edition, noting the changes Erasmus made in the four earlier editions of 1516, 1519, 1522, and 1527.

In his preface to CWE 11 Charles Nauert points out that during 1525 “Erasmus sat uneasily at Basel, apparently not even venturing outside the city to make the sort of social calls he had made to Porrentruy and Besançon in the spring of 1524” (p. xi). While he suffered from the wrenching pain of kidney stones, thousands of peasants were in armed revolt against princes and cites in Germany and Switzerland. From time to time he mentions the peasant uprisings and laments the resulting gruesome bloodshed.

Erasmus, however, was far more troubled by attacks on his own theological reputation. He repeatedly lashed out at the stupidity of his Catholic critics, who were eager to denounce him as a heretic. In particular, Pierre Cousturier (Petrus Sutor), a Carthusian monk who had studied theology at the Sorbonne, provoked Erasmus’ wrath in 1525 by openly condemning all new translations of the Bible, including Erasmus’ revision of the Vulgate. In Noël Béda, syndic of the Faculty of Theology in Paris, Erasmus had a much more formidable opponent than Cousturier. Béda and rasmus began corresponding in 1525. Their letters represent the initial skirmishes in the sharpening theological conflict between Erasmus and the Paris theologians.
Erasmus had to contend with more than simply his Catholic critics. He was wary of the opinions of Basel’s Reform leaders, especially those of Johannes Oecolampadius and Conradus Pellicanus. Ten years earlier both men had been his colleagues in biblical and patristic scholarship; now they were claiming that he shared their Sacramentarian views on the Eucharist. Erasmus was impressed by Oecolampadius’ arguments but promised Michel Boudet, Bishop of Langres, that he would publish a refutation of his Eucharistic doctrine. Although Erasmus never kept his promise, his adherence to the Catholic belief in the Real Presence lay behind his angry rejection of Pellicanus’ friendship.

The letters of CWE 11 show Erasmus’ preoccupation with his poor health and his sensitivity to theological conflict into which Catholics and Protestants seemed to be dragging him. These letters, however, also reveal a more complete picture of the life of the scholar who did not let his worries about the adverse effect of religious strife on the study of humane letters interfere with his efforts at continuing old acquaintances and pursuing new contacts among like-minded humanists. To his old friend, the Nürnberg humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, he dedicated his edition of John Chrisostom’s De officio sacerdotis, and he asked Pirckheimer to relay his greetings to Albrecht Dürer. In 1525 Erasmus tried to begin a friendship with Marguerite d’Angoulême, the famous patron of French humanists and evangelicals and the sister of King Francis I, but, as Nauert surmises, she never took up Erasmus’ offer of friendship “apparently because she thought his approach to religion too rationalistic and too little sensitive to the need of grace” (p. 285). Erasmus had greater success in cultivating friendships and patronage in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland. Erasmus’ letter to Andrzej Krzycki, the Bishop of Przemsyl, drew an enthusiastic response in which Krzycki, after declaring his “undying affection and devotion” (p. 388) for Erasmus, invited him to visit Poland.

In his first letter to Béda Erasmus announced that he was preparing a fourth edition of his New Testament, which he eventually published in 1527. His New Testament consisted of three parts: the Greek text, his revision of the Vulgate Latin translation, and most importantly, from the standpoint of his own scholarship and of the interests of modern research, the Annotations. The translators of CWE 56 state that they “have attempted to render the Latin as literally as English prose will allow” (p. xv). Each note begins with the reference to the relevant passage in Romans (chapter and verse), with Erasmus’ revision in Latin and in English translation of the Vulgate, and with the original Vulgate text in Latin and in English. Then follows Erasmus’ explanation. Most of these explanations are very brief, but some turn into short essays.

CWE 56 is more than a mere translation, however. It is an exceptional work of scholarship. Just as Erasmus’ notes embody his biblical erudition, so too the notes in CWE 56 to each of Erasmus’ notes display the painstakingly thorough research of the annotators. The exact references to Erasmus’ patristic sources and to the works of the scholastic theologians whom he cites are especially valuable since Erasmus rarely
provides these references himself. The annotators also point out the changes — usually amplifications — that Erasmus incorporated into the expanding editions of his notes and present the necessary historical and theological context of the many exegetical problems Erasmus raises and attempts to answer.

The *Annotations on Romans* allow us an impressive and detailed view of Erasmus the consummate philologist, who concludes one of his notes: “For my part, I am striving in this exposition to ascertain especially those things which contribute to a sound reading” (p. 202). He points out both the elegance and ambiguities of the original Greek text, compares variant readings in Latin and Greek codices as well as in the commentaries of the Church Fathers, and discusses the shades of meanings of Greek and Latin words. He constantly takes the Vulgate translator to task for his errors in grammar and translation, although on a rare occasion he can write that “the Translator has conveyed the sense well” (p. 176). Not surprisingly, Erasmus chides scholastic theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, for their misinterpretations. While he usually has good things to say about the philological judgments of Lorenzo Valla, whose *Annotations on the New Testament* he discovered and published in 1505, he occasionally registers his disagreement with his humanist counterpart in France, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étapes. Again and again Erasmus enlists the Church Fathers as his allies when justifying his translations. His favourites are Origen, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, and Theophylact, whom he mentions more frequently than Jerome and Augustine.

At times philology can lead to theological apologetics and homiletic or moralizing statements. In the note on Romans 5: 12 (pp. 139-151), the longest discussion in the *Annotations on Romans*, the correct translation of a Greek preposition lies at the heart of Erasmus’ insistence against his detractors that this particular passage cannot be used to justify the doctrine of original sin. Other philological considerations develop into rebukes of his fellow Christians for their many vices and superstitions.

Both CWE 11 and 56 present excellent, readable translations of Erasmus’ Latin. They will facilitate scholarly research and give non-specialists the opportunity to discover and understand more thoroughly the life and work of Erasmus as the leading scholar of the Northern Renaissance.

HILMAR M. PABEL, *Simon Fraser University*