The Enigma of Erasmus'

Conficiendarum epistolarum formula

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RÉSUMÉ: *Le mystère de la Conficiendarum epistolarum formula d'Érasme*

Des recherches récentes ont contribué à établir l'histoire de la publication et l'authenticité de la *Brevissima maximeque compendiaria conficiendarum epistolarum formula* attribuée à Érasme (Bâle? Adam Petri? 1519-20?), mais sa place dans l'histoire de la composition de l'*Opus de conscribendis epistolis* (Bâle : Johann Froben, 1522) reste un mystère. La *Formula* peut se comparer au traité terminé d'Érasme sur l'art épistolaire et à deux premières versions antérieures : celle de 1499-1500, publiée comme édition pirate sous le titre de *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis* (Cambridge : John Siberch, 1521) et celle de 1505-6, largement citée dans la *Syntaxis* de Johannes Despauterius (Paris : Josse Bade, 1509). Cette comparaison suggère que la *Formula* est une collection de notes prises par Érasme après juillet 1501, quand il révisait son traité pour répondre à deux ouvrages récents : les écrits d'Angelo Poliziano, comprenant, pour la première fois, un recueil de sa correspondance (juillet 1498), et l'*editio princeps* des *Epistolimaioi charaktères* attribué à Libanius (juillet 1501). La *Formula* montre Érasme aux prises avec les problèmes soulevés par la controverse de Cicéron. En défense de sa propre rhétorique de l'art épistolaire contre le néo-classicisme extrême, Érasme progresse vers l'équilibre entre l'*ars* médiéval et l'*imitatio* classique qu'il atteindra dans l'*Opus de conscribendis epistolis*.

Among the many pedagogical works published under Erasmus' name in the sixteenth century is a curious little pamphlet on letter-writing, the *Brevissima maximeque compendiaria conficiendarum epistolarum formula*. As Alain Jolidon has remarked, it is an enigma: 'On ne sait avec certitude ni ce qui est réellement de sa plume dans cette plaquette, ni son rapport exact avec le *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis* de 1521 et avec l'*Opus de conscribendis epistolis* de 1522, ni quelle en est l'édition originale, ni qui a été le responsable de sa première publication en 1520.'¹

Recently, some progress has been made in determining the publication history of this work, which was frequently reprinted in the sixteenth century. Three editions of 1520 are the earliest extant. Jolidon has argued persuasively that the edition of Mathes Maler at Erfurt is earlier than those of Johann Schöffer at Mainz and of Valentin Schumann at Leipzig, both of whom worked from Maler's text (pp 237–38). However, R.A.B. Mynors suggests that Maler was not responsible for first pirating the work. He argues that the first edition, which has disappeared, was printed at Basel, probably by Adam Petri late in 1519 or early in 1520. Ulrich Hugwald, a Basel scholar who corrected for the press of Petri, wrote the letter to an unidentified Petrus Fabricius that appears in Petri's reprint of September 1521.² Erasmus held the unnamed author of this letter responsible for excerpting the *Formula* from his youthful treatise on letter-writing, adding some material of his own, corrupting the style, and addressing the dedicatory letter to Petrus Paludanus, of whom Erasmus had never heard.³

The issue of authorship has also been addressed by Jolidon. Although Erasmus disclaimed all but *pauculas voces furtiuas* of the *Formula* in 1521 (Ep 1193), he finally acknowledged his paternity, with the reservations already noted, a few months before his death in 1536 (Epp 3099, 3100). Jolidon has carefully examined the style of the *Formula* and calls it 'érasmien d'allure,' even though much of the work paraphrases Quintilian and other classical sources (pp 231–35). In an earlier study of Erasmus' theory of letter-writing, I found the content of the *Formula* 'typically Erasmian,' a position I shall argue further here, although new evidence has forced me to change my mind about the date of the work and its relationship to the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* (Basel: Johann Froben 1522) and to the other extant drafts of the finished treatise.⁴

I now believe that the *Formula* is a collection of notes that Erasmus made in the process of revising his treatise on letter-writing. Influenced by current debates among Italian humanists and anticipating or perhaps responding to criticism of his treatise from extreme neo-classicists who opposed the medieval conception of letter-writing as an art, Erasmus was seeking a defense for his epistolary rhetoric in classical authorities. At the same time, he was developing the more sophisticated definition of the genre we find expressed in the later versions of the treatise. The *Formula* works toward the synthesis of medieval and classical traditions of letter-writing achieved in the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*. Erasmus was reluctant to acknowledge jottings that represented an interim stage in his thought, but for the modern scholar, the *Formula* is a fascinating revelation of his mind.⁵

Two stages in the composition of the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* are documented in the pirated *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis* (Cambridge: John Siberch 1521) and the citations of Erasmus' manuscript in the *Syntaxis* of Johannes Despauterius (Paris: Josse Bade 1509), but how the *Formula* relates to these versions has remained a mystery. Most scholars have thought that the *Formula* was taken from the first draft of Erasmus' *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*.⁶ From Erasmus' comments, we know that he wrote this draft in 1498 for Robert Fisher, his pupil in Paris, who was leaving for Italy and wanted a small handbook on letter-writing to take with him. Erasmus gave him the original manuscript, keeping no copy for himself.⁷ The *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis* has generally been considered a revision of the first draft, perhaps written for William Blount, Baron Mountjoy, or for Adolph of Burgundy, Lord of Veere, although it contains a dedicatory letter to Fisher.⁸ Despauterius' citations have been known but not much noted by scholars. I have now edited and analyzed them, and my own findings, together with those of Jolidon, have convinced me that the *Formula* postdates the *Libellus*.⁹

In the first of two articles on the early drafts of Erasmus' treatise on letter-writing, Jolidon dates the composition of the *Libellus* between May 1499 and September 1500.¹⁰ He suggests that the *Formula* is an independent work written shortly after the *Libellus*, perhaps about 1500. It lacks *nec . . . quidem*, a stylistic peculiarity of Erasmus' earlier writings, and it praises the *incredibilis nitor* of the letters of Angelo Poliziano, a phrase that Erasmus also uses to describe the style of Poliziano in his dedication of the *Adagiorum collectanea* (Paris: Johannes Philippi 1500) to Mountjoy (Ep 126). In the *Libellus*, Poliziano, who is much praised in the *Opus*, is not yet mentioned as a model of style (p 583 n1). In his later article, Jolidon retreats to the position held by most scholars that the *Formula* was excerpted from Erasmus' first draft for Fisher.¹¹

I am convinced by Jolidon's bold suggestion that the *Formula* postdates the *Libellus* and surprised by his change of mind, especially since his second article seems to me to provide evidence for dating the *Formula* no earlier than the second half of 1501. Jolidon observes that the allusion to Poliziano furnishes a *terminus post quem* for the composition of the *Formula*, since Poliziano's letters, which he collected shortly before his death on September 28–29, 1494, were first published in his posthumous *Omnia opera* (Venice: in aedibus Aldi Romani, July 1498).¹² Yet Jolidon is puzzled by Erasmus' quotation in the *Formula* of the *Epistolimaioi charaktères* attributed to Libanius, which, he claims, was first published in Venice at the Aldine press on 29 March 1499. Faced with this evidence,

Jolidon asks, 'Érasme a-t-il découvert ce passage dans un manuscrit? Ou a-t-il revu ultérieurement son texte de 1498?' (p 240 n8). Jolidon must be mistaken about the first publication of the treatise attributed to Libanius. The editors of the *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* do not mention it in their description of the 1499 Aldine edition of Greek epistolographers. Rather, Richard Förster dates the *editio princeps* of pseudo-Libanius July 1501.¹³ I suggest that the quotation from pseudo-Libanius furnishes a *terminus post quem* of July 1501 for the composition of the *Formula*.

The reference to Poliziano is also important evidence of the composition date of the work. Erasmus praises Poliziano as a model letter-writer once in the tiny *Formula*, over and over again in the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, but not at all in the *Libellus*. Was this merely an oversight? I think not. In the *Libellus*, Erasmus concludes his discussion of invective with a list of examples. He names the controversies of Demosthenes and Aeschines, Cicero and Sallust (which are now considered spurious), Jerome and Rufinus, Poggio and Valla.¹⁴ In the *Opus*, he has added Poliziano and Scala to this list.¹⁵ Apparently Erasmus had not read Poliziano's recently published correspondence when he wrote the *Libellus* between May 1499 and September 1500. By the time he wrote the *Formula*, he had, and he was so impressed by the *incredibilis nitor* of Poliziano's letters that he ranked him with Cicero and Pliny the Younger as a model of epistolary style (CWE 25:260).

Jolidon's second conclusion ('en définitive') that the *Formula* predates the *Libellus* is based in part on a stylistic comparison of their similar prefaces. Jolidon argues that the preface addressed to Paludanus in the *Formula* (Allen, Appendix XXVI) is a first draft of that to Fisher in the *Libellus* (Allen, Epistle 71): 'Le passage de "sed" à "at," de "vis?" interrogatif à "vin?," la suppression de phrases enchevêtrées ("quantis me calumniis" → "quantis calumniis me"), l'introduction d'hyperbates ("neques alienis inhaesurum vestigiis"), le souci plus grand de la variété du vocabulaire (trois "dicere" devenus respectivement "dicere," "scribere," "respondere") sont tout à fait conformes à ce que nous savons des habitudes d'Érasme quand il se corrige.'¹⁶ But is Appendix XXVI a first draft of Epistle 71 or is it the editor's 'free rewriting of the letter to Robert Fisher,' as H.M. Allen and H.W. Garrod thought?¹⁷ The colloquial informality of Epistle 71 seems the perfect style for a dedication to a student whom Erasmus had known intimately.¹⁸

The concluding sentence of Appendix XXVI contains the full title of the treatise it introduces: *Accipe itaque breuissimam maximeque compendiarium conficiendarum epistolarum formulam, tibiue hoc vnum persuade, non verbis*

tantum illas sed arte etiam indigere. Jolidon doubts that Erasmus wrote this awkward and redundant title, since later he calls the *Formula* merely a *libellus*, *opusculum*, or *compendium* (Epp 3099, 3100). Yet Jolidon does find in the title an echo, which has also struck me, of Erasmus' later description of Fisher as a lazy student who demanded rules as a short-cut to practice.¹⁹ Jolidon suggests that Fisher had expected a simple collection of formulas, such as were found in the medieval *artes dictaminis*. Assuming that Appendix XXVI is the original preface to Fisher, Jolidon finds 'pas complètement dépourvue d'insolence' (p 232) its concluding admonition that letters require not only words but also art. His argument presents two difficulties. First, in 1498 Erasmus could ill afford to insult a patron. Second, Jolidon seems to be suggesting that the editor of the *Formula* changed only the title of the treatise and that the final sentence of the preface, or at least the last part of this sentence, was written by Erasmus. Why then would Erasmus have substituted later the sentence found in Epistle 71: *Id quam ob rem alias fortasse; nunc quantum ipsi doctrina, vsu, imitatione consequi potuimus, quam breuissime trademus?*

Let us start instead with the assumption of H.M. Allen and H.W. Garrod. For the preface to the *Formula*, the editor rewrote the final sentence of Epistle 71, Erasmus' original preface, to incorporate his own title. He also changed the clause describing the contents of the treatise, for *doctrina, vsu, imitatione* described several chapters of the *Formula* but not the whole. The editor saw that the pages before him defended the position that letter-writing is an art. With the market in mind, the editor replaced the mundane reference to art, exercise, and imitation with a summary of the controversial theme of the *Formula*: *tibique hoc vnum persuade, non verbis tantum illas sed arte etiam indigere*. We know, after all, that the editor of the *Formula* tampered with Erasmus' original letter, whether that letter was Epistle 71 or something closer to Appendix XXVI. The editor must have invented Petrus Paludanus. Scholars have not been able to establish the identity of such a person, and Erasmus said that he knew no one of that name. If the editor had before him Epistle 71, then he made other changes to support this fiction: *Roberte* becomes *humanissime P.* and *Saluta amicos communes* is appended to *Vale*. If he felt free not only to pirate a manuscript but also to invent a fictional patron for it, he would not have hesitated to make any of the revisions I have described.

The editor likewise wrote a title that he thought would sell. The so-called *Formula* is not a simple collection of rules; it is primarily a theoretical discussion of letter-writing. However, it is *brevissima maximeque compendiarum*, and from at least 1519 there was a growing fashion for brief introduc-

tory textbooks. Contemporaries counted Erasmus among those who had initiated the vogue. In *De ratione studii* (Paris: J. Badius, 15 July 1512), he had argued that 'an ordered course of study' (*studiorum ordinem ac viam formamque*) offered 'short-cuts' (*semitas compendiaris*) to learning.²⁰ His *Methodus* for the study of theology, published as a preface to his New Testament (Basel: J. Froben 1516), was intended to provide just such a short-cut, as he made clear in the enlarged 1519 version of the treatise, now entitled *Ratio seu methodus compendio perveniendi ad veram theologiam*.²¹ The idea of short-cuts to learning language and theology proved especially attractive to Reformers, who were beginning to see humanist education and religious indoctrination as urgent necessities if they were to win their struggle with the Church and its scholastic theologians. Following Erasmus' example, they began writing brief textbooks entitled *ratio*, *methodus*, or *compendium*.²²

Ulrich Hugwald, the apparent editor of the *Formula*, was a follower of Luther. I suspect that he published Erasmus' manuscript under the title *Brevissima maximeque compendiaris conficiendarum epistolarum formula* because he thought it might serve as a brief introduction to letter-writing for the young student. No doubt he also realized that a work bearing Erasmus' name would sell, and he was quite right, as Jolidon's list of fifty-four extant editions proves (pp 242-3). The *Formula* would remain popular even after the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* appeared in 1522. The *Opus* was certainly not a short book, and Erasmus' followers found it necessary to adapt and epitomize this and other pedagogical works of Erasmus for the convenience of students, as Johann Monheim of Elberfeld explained in his *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opus de conscribendis epistolis in compendium redactum*.²³ What Erasmus came to think of the fashion of *compendia* may be guessed from his observation in the *Opus* that Fisher was one of 'a certain class of men' who 'pester me for a set of abridged rules for correct writing, which they want to be short enough to fill less than three full pages and of such efficacy that in less than a month they can turn a dumb brute into a fluent speaker. They need every available shortcut, they say. . . . If I felt like making fun of them, I should tell them to drink one draught from the Muses' spring and dream upon Parnassus so that we might see them transformed instantaneously from asses into nightingales' (CWE 25:22). By 1522 Erasmus had perhaps become apprehensive about the influence his recommendation of 'short-cuts' was having on education.

These must remain speculations, but at least there seems no firm evidence for dating the preface to the *Formula* before that to the *Libellus*.

Jolidon's difficulty in believing that the *Formula* postdates the *Libellus* arises, I imagine, not so much from the stylistic evidence he collects as from the form and content of each treatise and from Erasmus' comments about them. The *Formula* is brief, general, and closely dependent on classical sources, especially Quintilian. It looks like a first attempt. Moreover, Erasmus said that the *Formula* was excerpted from a hastily written treatise. It does seem both incomplete and careless. The *Libellus* is a longer, more detailed, more carefully structured, and much more original work. It looks like a revision, though not quite of the *Formula* because they differ in content. Moreover, the *Libellus* cannot have been the first draft because it refers to events after March 1498, when Fisher left for Italy.²⁴

If Erasmus wrote the *Formula* after the *Libellus*, did he intend it as an epitome of his work-in-progress on letter-writing? It seems, rather, a collection of notes on a few of the topics of the *Libellus*: style, the importance of practice, imitation, and art (which is mentioned in the preface to Fisher as the main theme of the *Libellus*), the three-fold classification of letters as demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial. It ignores other important material in the *Libellus*: formulas for greeting and farewell, epithets, the 'mixed' letter, 'extraordinary' letters (those which do not fit the three-fold classification scheme), not to mention Erasmus' detailed discussion and illustration of rhetorical and logical commonplaces in each type of letter. Even the chapters on the three categories of letters – demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial – do not exactly summarize the corresponding sections of the *Libellus*. If the *Formula* is an epitome, why is so much important material omitted? Why does it contain other material not found in the *Libellus*? Why is so much of this material paraphrased from Quintilian?

J.K. Sowards comes closest to explaining the *Formula*, I believe, when he describes it instead as 'a sketchy and unsatisfactory work based on some of Erasmus' own early notes' (CWE 25:li-iii), an opinion shared by Charles Fantazzi (CWE 25:3). I suggest that in the manuscript pages later pirated as the *Formula*, Erasmus was collecting precepts and examples from classical authorities in support of the art of letter-writing that he had described in the *Libellus*. As he continued to revise, his thought was stimulated by two recently published books: the *Omnia opera* of Angelo Poliziano and a Greek treatise on letter-writing attributed to Libanius. The first was particularly important because it contained Poliziano's correspondence. Erasmus was immediately impressed by Poliziano as a letter writer, and he was alerted to current issues in Italian humanism by reading Poliziano's exchange of letters with the Ciceronians Bartolomeo Scala and

Paolo Cortesi. For Erasmus these debates raised a question: To what extent could a man of the Renaissance imitate the classics and still remain in touch with his own age? The question affected letter-writing because the humanists had made this genre an important vehicle of discussion and reform. Seeing that some neo-classical purists in Italy were so keen to imitate the familiar letters of Cicero that they would reduce letter-writing to private conversation, Erasmus felt the need to defend his conception of the letter as an argument that might draw upon the full resources of rhetoric. Perhaps he had even been criticized as having written a medieval *ars dictaminis* by some humanists who took seriously the classical definition of the letter as a conversation between absent friends. At least he anticipated such criticism.

In the *Libellus* Erasmus had written a rhetoric of letter-writing. The treatise opens with brief chapters on style (*elocutio*) and organization (*dispositio*) before turning to its main subject, argument (*inventio*). Of the five parts of rhetoric, it treats the three that can be applied to written composition, omitting delivery (*pronuntiatio*) and memory (*memoria*). Most of the treatise describes letters devoted to a single purpose, classified under the *causæ* of the oration: deliberative, demonstrative, and judicial. That is, letters, like orations, persuade or dissuade, praise or blame, accuse or defend. Erasmus describes and illustrates the rhetorical and logical topics appropriate to the many types of letters in each category, as well as to certain 'extraordinary' letters that do not fall into his three-fold classification. For example, the first type of deliberative letter, the letter of encouragement, employs the topics of praise, hope, fear, example, expectation, and entreaty. Erasmus devotes a chapter to each subspecies of the deliberative, judicial, and extraordinary classes but not to the demonstrative. He explains that letters are seldom purely demonstrative, that is, descriptive. More often, description bolsters an argument that depends on the topics of praise or blame.

In the thoroughness of his analysis of epistolary rhetoric, Erasmus goes beyond most of his Italian predecessors, but his conception of the letter as argument echoes fifteenth-century humanist textbooks. Renaissance epistolography was an uneasy compromise between two conflicting traditions of letter-writing, the medieval and the classical. Paul Oskar Kristeller has argued that the humanists were 'the professional successors of the medieval Italian *dictatores* who taught and practiced, on the basis of textbooks and models, the eminently practical art of composing documents, letters, and public speeches.'²⁵ Like their predecessors, they often made their living as Latin secretaries or as teachers of Latin composition.

Their credentials for employment included knowledge of the elaborate protocol of address that had become conventional in medieval letter-writing. No matter how enthusiastic they were about the newly discovered letters of Cicero and Pliny, in their professional capacities they could imitate them only within prescribed social limits. Experiment was difficult except in *avant-garde* letters to friends. For that reason, humanist reform of letter-writing often amounted to little more than purifying style of medieval barbarisms or improving the techniques of argument through the study of rhetorical treatises, especially those of Cicero and Quintilian, which had been largely lost to the Middle Ages. Those humanists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century who advocated a more exact imitation of Cicero represented an extreme.²⁶

Humanist textbooks paid mere lip service to the classical definition of the letter as a written conversation between absent friends. In this respect the *Libellus* is typical. Erasmus introduces his long discussion of the rhetoric of letter-writing by repeating the classical distinction between the letter and the oration.²⁷ Letter-writing is not like declaiming in a theatre, he says, but like whispering in a corner with a friend. The writer should avoid the formal style of the oration and strive instead for acumen, appropriate diction, wit, humor, charm, and brevity. Erasmus criticizes the linguistic barbarism and parasitic flattery of medieval formulas and recommends a return to classical simplicity in greeting and addressing correspondents. Yet he acknowledges that contemporary customs differ from the ancient and allows the writer to vary the classical formulas as long as he avoids barbarism and flattery. Erasmus is an enthusiastic student of the ancients, but even in this early period he is not a strict Ciceronian. Classical imitation must serve the contemporary world.

Thus the medieval and classical conceptions of the genre remain in unresolved tension in the *Libellus*, as in the treatises of Erasmus' humanist predecessors. When he wrote the *Libellus*, Erasmus had read critically at least the *Opusculum scribendi epistolas* (Venice 1488) of Francesco Negro and perhaps other Quattrocento handbooks on letter-writing.²⁸ From Negro he borrows a distinction between 'mixed' letters and 'unmixed' letters, but he criticizes Negro for insisting that every letter have an introduction. Erasmus is trying to find the right balance between art and imitation. Negro's medieval division of the letter into parts on the model of the oration overemphasizes art. On the other hand, Negro's classification of the genre into 'mixed' and 'unmixed' appeals to Erasmus because it encompasses both the familiar letter of classical tradition and the formal epistolary argument of the *ars dictaminis*.

In the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, Erasmus achieves a synthesis of the medieval and classical traditions. He distinguishes the letter from other genres by its amazing flexibility: 'as the polyp adapts itself to every condition of its surroundings, so a letter should adapt itself to every kind of subject and circumstance' (p 19). A book, Erasmus says, must be written 'to please all men of learning and good will,' but a letter must please only the individual to whom it is addressed (p 14). Thus almost any style can be appropriate: 'it will present itself in one guise to the old, in another to the young; its aspect will vary according as the person addressed is stern and forbidding, or of a more jovial nature; a courtier or a philosopher; an intimate acquaintance or a total stranger; a man of leisure or one engaged in active pursuits; a faithful companion or a false friend and ill-wisher' (p 19).

The *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* attacks both poles of contemporary letter-writing, medieval barbarism and Ciceronian purism. In the finished treatise Erasmus has enormously expanded his brief remarks on salutations, subscriptions, and epithets in the *Libellus*. His discussion often becomes a satire of the barbarism and pride of princes, churchmen, and theologians, who demand that their correspondents observe a ridiculously elaborate and outdated etiquette. At the same time, he has recognized a new folly, a neo-classicism so extreme that it would restrict letter-writing to idle conversation. The first eight chapters of the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* are, I believe, directed against the Ciceronians, although Erasmus does not use that label. Rather, he criticizes those 'learned men' who would 'impose a narrow and inflexible definition on what is by nature diverse and capable of almost infinite variation. . . . These men consider a letter unacceptable unless it keeps to the plainest manner of writing, has a free and easy flow without the intensity of impassioned utterance, is composed solely of words taken from common usage, and finally qualifies as a letter rather than a book by its very brevity' (p 12).

Scholars have assumed that Erasmus became aware of extreme Ciceronianism during his sojourn in Italy.²⁹ In the *Ciceronianus* (Basel: *in officina Frobeniana* 1528), he describes a sermon, preached before the pope on Good Friday, 1509, which was so Ciceronian that it was not even Christian. This early experience was reinforced in 1519 by his acquaintance with Christophe de Longueil, whom contemporaries considered the prototype of the fictional Nosoponus in the *Ciceronianus*. Nosoponus thought that writing a properly Ciceronian letter of six periods asking a friend to return a book could not be accomplished without months of effort and the sacrifice of pleasure, family ties, and public office. Erasmus began

remarking on the Ciceronian disease after 1525, when Thomas Lupset sent him from Italy a copy of Longueil's lifetime production, a slim volume of letters and orations, published posthumously in 1524. When Erasmus saw it, he lamented the waste of Longueil's talent on trivia. Erasmus himself had made the letter a weapon in his program of social, political, educational, and religious reform.³⁰

The citations of Erasmus' treatise on letter-writing in Johannes Despauterius' *Syntaxis* show that Erasmus began forming these views at least as early as 1508. Indeed, the evidence suggests that Erasmus completed a revision in 1505-6 and left the manuscript behind when he departed for Italy. He was at the Aldine Press in Venice when Despauterius finished writing the *Syntaxis* on November 11, 1508. Josse Bade printed it at Paris the following year.³¹ In a chapter on letter-writing, Despauterius drew extensively from a manuscript that contained close-to-the-final version of Erasmus' *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*. He merely mentioned Erasmus' teaching methods, described in three chapters of the authorized edition (CWE 25:22-44), as well as the discussion of deliberative, demonstrative, and judicial letters (CWE 25:65-254) already found in the *Libellus*. He quoted and summarized in detail seven of the first eight chapters of the *Opus* (CWE 25:12-22) and the lengthy discussion of formulas that follows the chapters on pedagogy (CWE 25:45-65).

In annotations that he added to his *Syntaxis* in 1510, Despauterius interpreted the opening chapter of Erasmus' treatise, *Quis epistolae character*, as anti-Ciceronian. He commented that Erasmus shared the views expressed by Angelo Poliziano in the opening letter of his correspondence and in his exchange with the Ciceronian Paolo Cortesi. In the opening letter to Piero de' Medici, Poliziano defends himself against anticipated criticism of his eclectic style by arguing that he wrote his letters for particular occasions, not as a unified collection. Furthermore, he can justify any stylistic characteristic as an imitation of some classical letter-writer. In his famous controversy with Cortesi, he argues against the exclusive imitation of Cicero. The writer must develop his own style by reading and thoroughly assimilating many good writers. Despauterius' note suggests to me not only that Erasmus had become concerned about apish Ciceronianism before 1509 but also that he was alerted to the direction Italian humanism was taking by reading Poliziano, his predecessor in the Ciceronian controversy.

The *Formula*, where Erasmus first mentions Poliziano's correspondence, considers the implications of extreme neo-classicism in letter-writing. The work contains eight chapters that fall into two parts. The first part discusses

the definition of a letter, practice, imitation, and art. The second describes the three kinds of causes, demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial, then devotes a chapter to each. Erasmus offers none of the specific precepts and examples that so impress the reader of the *Libellus* and the later *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*. Instead he musters classical authority in defense of his own rhetoric of letter-writing. Although the *Formula* seems little more than a collection of notes, although it lacks a consistent argument, it does have a central theme: letter-writing is an art. Sketchy as it is, the *Formula* shows Erasmus struggling toward that practical synthesis of the medieval and classical traditions that distinguishes the authorized *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*.

On the surface, the *Formula* seems merely inconsistent. As in the *Libellus*, Erasmus begins by recalling the classical conception of the letter. The definition of Libanius, he says, is typical: 'A letter is a conversation between two absent persons.'³² The letter-writer should therefore avoid *tragica grandiloquentia*,³³ a phrase that echoes the opening sentence of the *Libellus*: *Scenicus quidam verborum apparatus, et affectata grandiloquentia, cum alibi vix ferri potest, tum ab epistolari familiaritate vehementer abhorret*.³⁴ Erasmus continues, 'For the style of the letter should be simple and even a bit careless, in the sense of a studied carelessness. Pliny's letters are a good example of this, being incisive, eloquent, and clear, and while they contain nothing but personal and mundane matters, succeed in expressing everything in a clean, ornate Latin; his style is controlled and elaborated with great ingenuity and refinement, yet it gives the appearance of being effortless, improvised, and extemporaneous' (p 258). Finally, he criticizes those "word-fowlers" and eager hunters to be found today who are prepared to indite a letter for the sake of a single word,' when Horace, Cicero, and Quintilian all enjoin that the words should come naturally from the argument (p 258).

In the chapters on practice, imitation, and art that follow, Erasmus nonetheless argues against those 'who maintain that there should be no use of artificial rules in personal, everyday letters, but that they should be made up of common sense and ordinary language' (p 261). He acknowledges that rules should not be followed rigidly. 'Those who divide up all letters into salutation, exordium, narration, and conclusion and think that the whole technique of letter-writing lies therein are all the more deserving of ridicule,' he says, echoing his criticism of Francesco Negro in the *Libellus*. Even more than the orator, the letter-writer must consider 'the case, the times, the occasion, and necessity,' since letters 'treat of various subjects, and they are written to men of different origin, rank, and

temperament at different times and in different places' (p 261). Yet 'those who follow no rules and rush helter-skelter wherever their impulse leads them, diffuse and unbridled, pour out streams of words freely and indiscreetly.' Fluency comes with practice. The student must begin slowly, taking pains to follow rules and imitate good writers (p 262).

On the subject of imitation, Erasmus acknowledges, 'Whoever takes Cicero as his model and guide will never have reason to be disappointed in eloquence, incisiveness of language, or orderly arrangement.' Yet the student must read widely in many authors, 'not only ... the letters of those whom we wish to imitate, but also all other writings that contribute to the perfection of style and diction. And indeed, just as letters are not all of one kind, so the authors we choose should not be of the same kind' (p 260). Furthermore, imitation must not be slavish, for 'no one can equal someone else by merely treading in his footsteps; it is inevitable, again according to Quintilian, that one who follows must always remain behind. Besides, there are many essential qualities of literary style that cannot be imitated, like natural ability and fertility of invention. Therefore there is need first of technical training and rules, then imitation and judgment, and lastly, frequent exercise of the pen' (p 261). But is it not possible to work too hard? Erasmus acknowledges that 'infinite pains should be avoided and "we should take care to write as well as possible, but to write according to our ability" [Quintilian 10.3.15]; there must be certain limits even to hard work' (p 259).

In the next chapter of the *Formula*, introducing the classification of letters into three kinds of causes, demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial, Erasmus asserts that 'all the various types of letters must be reduced to these three. This will be obvious to anyone who has ever made essay of the art that lies hidden in the letters of ancient writers or who, in aversion to the superficial manner of speaking and writing to which I have referred, prefers to seek out sure methods and principles rather than discourse aimlessly' (p 262). Erasmus does not recall here, as he does in the *Libellus*, that certain 'extraordinary' letters do not fit into his rhetorical classification.

Erasmus next turns to a consideration of the general principles of each class of letters: demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial. In his chapter on demonstrative letters, Erasmus quotes Quintilian's distinction between the styles of orations and letters.³⁵ For instance, demonstrative arguments invite the orator to 'give fuller display of his talents,' Erasmus says. 'But the letter has a certain character of its own.' It 'must remain comparatively free and easy' (p 263). For this reason, he recommends praises of men in

the letters of Pliny the Younger (Epp 1.10, 1.14) and descriptions of places in the historians Sallust and Livy as models for the letter-writer, but not Cicero's description of Sicily (*In Verrem* ii 1.1.4) or Virgil's description of the port of Carthage (*Aeneid* 1.167-8).

Judicial argument is even more difficult to keep within the bounds prescribed for the letter. When we accuse others or defend ourselves, 'speech becomes so impassioned that all the emotions are poured out. In this class we express wishes, avert omens by prayer, plead, and show anxiety in accusation or defense, as in these examples; "Would that your father would come back to life," or "O gods, ward off harm," or "I beseech thee now, O Jupiter, greatest and best," and innumerable other expressions that are more suitable to a speech than to a letter, although the letter is at various times a vehicle for all the emotions. Therefore in letters of this kind we must open with a brief introduction, proceeding cautiously with art and cunning to the main question' (p 266).

The chapter on deliberative letters seems mainly concerned 'to reduce the entire discussion to a brief compass, the honourable, the profitable, the easy, or possible,' topics borrowed from Quintilian's discussion of the deliberative cause. Erasmus also gives special consideration to the classification of the letter of recommendation, which 'is included by some in the deliberative class' (p 265).

The *Formula* is a collection of jotted thoughts mixed with paraphrases, quotations, and illustrations from classical sources. Logical argument is too much to expect of such material. Rather, Erasmus grapples here with the issues raised by Poliziano's letters on imitation, the issues he himself must resolve in revising his treatise on letter-writing. Confronted with conflicting conceptions of letter-writing, Erasmus moves toward the redefinition of the letter on which his synthesis of the classical and medieval traditions will be based. The letter is an all-purpose genre, even more versatile than the oration. If the writer is to treat many subjects under many circumstances, he must develop his skills by reading widely in diverse authors and diverse genres. He must learn rules, but he must exercise good judgment in using them, considering the purpose he is trying to achieve. He must practice diligently, but he must not be too self-conscious. Ultimately, he will become a good writer only if he trusts himself and follows his own genius.

In addition to redefining the genre to encompass the full range of classical and contemporary letter-writing, Erasmus reinterprets the classical distinction between the letter and the oration. Classical letters only seem artless, Erasmus suggests. In fact, their art is merely hidden. The

good letter-writer follows the 'sure methods and principles' of classical rhetoric. In the first chapter, Erasmus describes Pliny as a writer of 'great ingenuity and refinement' whose letters nevertheless appear 'effortless, improvised, and extemporaneous.' In the chapters on demonstrative, deliberative, and judicial letters, Erasmus takes most of his examples of good letter-writing from Pliny rather than from Cicero. This bias is in keeping with his theme. As he says in his chapter on imitation, 'Cicero, the prince of Latin eloquence, is said to have more naturalness than art in his letters, while Pliny exhibits more art and more precision' (p 260). When he describes the techniques of deliberative and judicial letter-writing, Erasmus makes the same point. These letters use the devices of rhetoric but less obviously than deliberative and judicial orations. The letter-writer cannot display his skill openly, as the orator can, but letter-writing is nonetheless an art.

The *Formula* is not a rigorous argument, and in searching among Erasmus' notes for the seeds of thought that flowered in the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, I have perhaps implied a unity that it lacks. Erasmus was reluctant to acknowledge the work as his own precisely because it does not have the logical structure of a finished treatise. Nevertheless, both the content of the *Formula* and Erasmus' own remarks imply that the notes are his. Erasmus complained that the editor had corrupted the style in some places (the example he gave comes from the chapter on the deliberative letter), had mutilated others, and had added some material of his own, notably the letter to Fabricius, but he said that the work had been excerpted from the treatise on letter-writing that he had begun for Fisher. What did Erasmus mean by this? If the printer had worked from a manuscript containing a draft of the whole treatise, in spite of the vogue for *compendia* he surely would have published all of it. By 1519-20, Erasmus' books were in demand. One possibility is that Erasmus removed these pages in revising his treatise. A second is that one of his pupils or friends copied them into another manuscript. A third is that they are only notes for revision. As I have suggested, the formlessness of the material favors this last hypothesis.

If, however, the *Formula* is only notes for revision of his treatise on letter-writing, it is all the more valuable as a revelation of the process of Erasmus' thinking. Here he first responds to the movement of Italian humanism toward extreme neo-classicism that he would satirize in the *Ciceronianus*. Here he works toward a redefinition of the letter that would incorporate both medieval art and classical imitation. Here he defends against those who would limit its scope the genre he himself would use so

powerfully as a weapon of reform. The *Formula* is far more important, I suggest, than scholars have generally realized. If my suspicions about it are correct, we may learn as much about Erasmus from this enigmatic little work that so embarrassed its author as from the more finished and more famous products of his pen.

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Notes

- 1 'Histoire d'un opusculum d'Érasme: La Brevissima maximeque compendiaria conficiendarum epistolarum formula,' in *Acta conventus neo-Latini Sanctiandream: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, St Andrews 24 August to 1 September 1982* ed I.D. McFarlane, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 38 (Binghamton, N.Y. 1986) 229–43, esp 229.
- 2 Introductory note to the translation by Charles Fantazzi in *Collected Works of Erasmus* 25 (Toronto 1985) 256–57. On Hugwald, cf *Contemporaries of Erasmus*, ed Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas B. Deutscher, 3 vols (Toronto 1985–87) 2:212–13.
- 3 P.S. Allen et al, eds *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami* 12 vols (Oxford 1906–1958) Ep 3099: *Hoc opusculum truncatim decerptum est ex quodam commentario quem ante annos quadriginta tumultuario labore intra biduum conscripsi, sed vni priuatim, nimirum rudem rudi, crasso crassum. Quis sit hic artifex vel absque cribro facile diuino. Eum honoris causa non nomino. Pleraque detruncavit, nonnulla de suo adiecit, quaedam per inscitiam deprauavit: velut illud 'Quem cui commendes' corruptit in 'Qualem commendes', non agnoscens sermonis elegantiam. Praefationem veterem addidit, sed mutato nomine: nam ego Petrum Paludanum hominem natum noui neminem. Adiecit de suo epistolam ad nescio quem Fabricium, in qua nullum verbum est meum, nec est quicquam illa insulsius.* Cf Ep 3100. *Hic artifex* is therefore the editor, Hugwald, not the pupil, *nimirum rudem ... crassum*, for whom Erasmus began his treatise on letter-writing, as I once incorrectly assumed: 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing,' in *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed James J. Murphy (Berkeley 1983) 331–55, esp 344–45. The pupil of whom Erasmus speaks so harshly is clearly Robert Fisher. See n7 below. The name Petrus Paludanus is probably an invention. See Allen 11:366–67; *Contemporaries of Erasmus* 3:47–48.
- 4 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing' 345.
- 5 I am indebted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous support of my research on Renaissance textbooks of letter-writing, of which this article is one product. The article was circulated in manuscript to participants in a seminar on epistolography at the Congress of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies in Toronto on 8–13 August 1988, and I have benefited from their suggestions. The errors that remain are my own.
- 6 Aloïs Gerlo, 'The *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* of Erasmus and the Tradition of the *Ars epistolica*' in *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500–1500: Proceedings of an International Conference Held at King's College, Cambridge, April 1969* ed R.R. Bolgar (Cambridge 1971) 103–14, esp 106; James D. Tracy, 'On the Composition Dates of Seven of Erasmus' Writings' *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 31 (1969) 355–64, esp 359; Jean-Claude Margolin ed *De conscribendis epistolis* in *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam 1969–) 1:2:160; Jacques Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Érasme*, 2 vols (Paris 1981) 1005; Henderson, 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing' 344–45. Allen merely noted that 'there were two versions at least of the Paris composition in circulation' in 1521: Ep 1193n.
- 7 See Epp 71, 1284, 3099, 3100; CWE 25:22.

- 8 See Allen, Ep 71n; Tracy 359; Henderson, 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing' 346-47; Fantazzi, in CWE 25:3. Margolin 167, is vague about its relation to the *Formula*. Erasmus' letters record his intention to revise the work for Mountjoy, his pupil in Paris (Ep 117), or the young Adolph, pupil of his friend Jacob Batt (Epp 95, 130, 138, 145).
- 9 'Despauterius' *Syntaxis* (1509): The Earliest Publication of Erasmus' *De conscribendis epistolis*, *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 37 (1988) 175-210.
- 10 'L'Évolution psychologique et littéraire d'Érasme d'après les variantes du "De conscribendis epistolis"' in *Acta conventus neo-Latini Amstelodamensis: Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Amsterdam 19-24 August 1973* ed P. Tuynman, G.C. Kuiper, and E. Kessler (Munich 1979) 566-87.
- 11 'Histoire d'un opusculé d'Érasme' 236.
- 12 'Histoire d'un opusculé d'Érasme' 241 n18. A facsimile edition of the *Omnia opera Angeli Politiani* has been published (Rome: Editrice Bibliopola Vivarelli e Gullà, nd).
- 13 *Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke* 8.2 (Stuttgart-Berlin 1973) cols 65-69, no 9367; *Libanii Opera*, ed Förster 9 (Leipzig 1927) 21-22. The Aldine collection does include the *Typoi epistolikoi* of pseudo-Demetrius, but Professor John Monfasani of the State University of New York, Albany, assures me that it does not contain pseudo-Libanius. Cf his 'Three Notes on Renaissance Rhetoric,' *Rhetorica* 5 (1987) 107-18.
- 14 Fol 67, S3v. The copy of Siberch's edition in the British Library is available in the series *Early English Books 1475-1640* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International) STC 10496, Reel 1752.
- 15 CWE 25:221-22. For the Poliziano-Scala correspondence, see *Omnia opera Angeli Politiani* f3v-glv.
- 16 'Histoire d'un opusculé d'Érasme' 231.
- 17 Allen 11:366-67.
- 18 Professor Elaine Fantham of Princeton University has suggested to me that the use of 'at' and 'vin' in this letter to Fisher reflects Erasmus' early interest in Terence.
- 19 CWE 25:22. See my 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing' 345.
- 20 *De ratione studii*, trans Brian McGregor, CWE 24:665; ASD I-2:111-12.
- 21 *Et satis festinat, qui nusquam aberrat a via. Sæpe & sumptum duplicat, & laborem, qui crebris erroribus, ac longis ambagibus tandem eo pervenit, quo destinarat, si tamen pervenire contingat. Porro qui compendiarium quoque viam indicat, is gemino beneficio juvat studiosum. Primum ut maturius quo tendit peringat, deinde ut minori labore, sumptuque quod sequitur assequatur. Opera omnia* (Leiden 1703-6; rpt Hildesheim 1962) v, col 75.
- 22 Christoph Hegendorff, author of one of the earliest Lutheran catechisms, drew upon Erasmus' *De copia*, his edition of the letters of St Jerome, and probably the *Formula* in his *Ratio epistolarum conscribendarum compendiarium*, published at Leipzig in 1520 by Valentin Schumann, who printed one of the earliest extant editions of the *Formula* the same year. The *Ratio* contains a letter by Andreas Palæosphyra Gundelfingius (Andreas Althamer of Brenz) recommending the book in words that echo Erasmus: *Bene enim agere videntur qui, ubi laboriosum, salebris respersum, ac longum iter sit, eundem brevem quandam methodum ostendunt* (D3v). Palæosphyra suggests that Hegendorff has provided a brief method for the study of letter-writing, as have Erasmus for theology, Reuchlin for Hebrew (*De rudimentis hebraicis* 1506, and *De accentibus et orthographia lingue hebraicæ* 1518), Oecolampadius and Melanchthon for Greek (*Dragmata græcæ literature* and *Institutiones græcæ grammaticæ* respectively, both 1518), and Eck for dialectic (*Elementarius dialectice* 1517). The mention of *Joannes Eckius noster* in the context of Erasmian method suggests that Eck's quarrel with Luther was still viewed by contemporaries as a dispute among scholars. Melanchthon would soon produce his famous compendium of Lutheran theology, *Loci communes*, in competition with Erasmus' *Ratio*. Protestants

pioneered method, but Erasmus' influence as an educator was also strong in Catholic circles. Indeed, the Jesuits quickly learned that they must produce their own *ratio studiorum* and *compendia* if they were to compete for students with the Protestant educators.

- 23 In *L. Vitruvii Roscii Parmensis de comoda ac perfecta elocutione, deque conficiendis epistolis isagogicon una cum aliis* (Basel: R. Winter 1541) s5r, p 281. Monheim's epitome was first published at Cologne by H. Alopecius in 1539. Other textbooks that borrow substantially from Erasmus' *Opus* include *Methodus conscribendi epistolas* (Hagenau: J. Seltzer 1526) by Christoph Hegendorff; the *Epistolica* of Georgius Macropedius (Antwerp: J. Hillenius 1543), which was reprinted by Protestant publishers in Germany and England under the title *Methodus de conscribendis epistolis* with an epitome of Erasmus' *De copia* by Johannes Rivius; and *Epitome ex opere Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami de conscribendis epistolis* (Antwerp 1552) by Johannes Nemius.
- 24 Jolidon notes an account of the death of Charles VIII at Amboise on 7 April 1498 (fol 71r-72v), some 'allusions presque certaines... malgré le camouflagage des dates' to the coronation (27 May 1498) and marriage (18 January 1499) of Louis XII (fol 69v), and a letter apparently written by Erasmus to Hendrik van Bergen shortly before 1 May 1499 (fol 52v-53v). See 'L'Evolution psychologique et littéraire d'Erasme' 568.
- 25 *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* ed Michael Mooney (NY 1979) 24.
- 26 See Henderson, 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing,' cited above, and 'Defining the Genre of the Letter: Juan Luis Vives' *De Conscribendis Epistolis*,' *Renaissance and Reformation*, ns 7 (1983) 89-105.
- 27 Cicero *Epistulae ad familiares* 9.21.1; Seneca *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* 75.1.
- 28 In a letter to Mountjoy, written either in 1499 or 1509 to accompany a draft of his treatise on letter-writing, Erasmus mentions also the treatises of Niccolò Perotti, Giammario Filelfo, and Giovanni Sulpizio. See Ep 117.
- 29 See 'Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing' 349-51.
- 30 Especially after 1514, as Wallace K. Ferguson observes in his introduction to *The Correspondence of Erasmus* CWE 1:xii.
- 31 See further my argument in 'Despauterius' *Syntaxis* (1509).'
- 32 Trans Charles Fantazzi in *Collected Works of Erasmus* 25:258. All subsequent English translations from the *Formula* are also his.
- 33 Antwerp: Michaël Hillen, 23 July 1521, [A]2r. Cambridge University Library Bb.* 10.29.
- 34 Blr. I have expanded abbreviations and modernized u and v.
- 35 *Institutio oratoria* 9.4.19. See CWE 25:263.