Erasmus' *Colloquia*: Dramatic Elements Real and Metaphorical

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In an article on the *Colloquies* of Erasmus, Sister Geraldine Thompson remarks, "A writer's *habitus* of mind is surely the determinant of his creative imagination."¹ Indeed in examining the *Colloquies*, one becomes increasingly aware of Erasmus' particular *habitus* of mind and how it shaped these potential, incipient little dramas. Some of these lively, amusing conversations tremble on the verge of theatre, but ultimately they—like Erasmus—never go over the edge. Let me then consider Erasmus' dramatic sense, his inclination for stage metaphor, the potential influence of ancient drama on his writing of the *Colloquia*, and the extent to which he employed dramatic elements and structure in his dialogues. Finally, we may perhaps conclude from these considerations why he went no further than he did.

The translator of the *Colloquia* into English, Craig R. Thompson, has credited Erasmus with possession of "the dramatist's eye; he saw everything and could re-create scenes with his pen."² Given the low level of "action" in the *Colloquies*, we might say instead that Erasmus has the dramatist's ear and a gift for recreating colloquial exchange—appropriately since one of the avowed purposes of the book is the "refinement of Latin speech."³ Still the dialogues are not devoid of images that encourage visualization of a character or a setting, or suggest physical movement of the participants. For example, Arnold's quick sketch of his long-lost friend Cornelius—"dirty, thin, and pale" (p.4)—*De votis temere susceptis* readily gives us a sense of this pilgrim's appearance; Eusebius' villa and gardens in the *Convivium religiosum* are shown to us almost cinematically; and such *colloquia* as *De lusu* or *Ἀστραγαλισμός, sive Talorum lusus* include the actual playing of games just as the *convivia* include the eating of a meal.

To further illustrate Erasmus' sense of drama, we need only look at the early *formulae*, which provided the seeds for the later *colloquia*. In the midst of a varied list of possible polite and/or friendly greetings we find

Greetings, you consumer of quarts.

Answer. Greetings to you, too, you bottomless pit and devourer of cakes.(p. 558)

This playful and unexpected little exchange evokes characters of Falstaffian proportion and reminds the prescient reader of Prince Hal and the

fat knight exchanging epithets in *1 Henry IV* (II.iv.242ff). A second greeting and response gives us a glimpse of the speakers and even provides the suggestion of a moral:

Good luck to you with your baldness!

Answer. Good luck to you with your crooked nose. As you greet, so shall you be greeted; if you say anything nasty, you'll hear worse!

(p. 558)

Another provides knowledge of place with more subtlety than the Elizabethan technique of asking "What is this castle call'd that stands hard by": when the initial speaker greets his friend with "χαίρε!", the answer comes, "Remember you're in Basel, not in Athens" (p.559).

These three examples were doubtless included in the *Formulae* primarily to keep the interest of Erasmus' young readers,⁴ but they are dramatic in quality nonetheless. We next encounter a proto-dialogue (p.562). It is brief—only eleven lines—and the speakers remain nameless, but a fair amount of information is packed into the exchange, some of it stated directly, much of it inferred from the remarks. Two friends, men of letters, meet on the street. One of them is in a hurry. He is travelling by foot directly to the university town of Louvain where the two have mutual friends at the Collegium Trilingue. Of this information only two things are stated directly: that the second speaker is hurried and headed for Louvain. The rest can be deduced. Erasmus thus has a fine sense of dramatic economy, the capacity to convey a lot with a little and in a manner other than a recitation of facts. He soon provides a greater sense of individuality by giving names to his speakers (p.563), using the names of his students and his godson in some cases (Christian, Augustine, Erasmus) and drawing also on classical pastoral⁵ (Mopsus) and Terence (Dromo, Geta, Syrus).⁶

There are further dramatic additions: Maurice and Cyprian's discussion of the confiscation of Cyprian's money on his departure from England injects a hint of a plot line (p.568f). The little "Domestic Conversation" (p.570ff), besides introducing a third character, requires at least two entrances; it includes an aside to the audience, the necessity of opening a door, and two lines spoken from "within." Finally, the opening lines of the *Convivium profanum* (p.592) constitute what amounts to three brief scenes: Christian sending Peter to fetch Augustine for dinner, Peter delivering the invitation, Augustine arriving at Christian's house. All this is accomplished in five lines with a speed more suited to a screenplay than a stage play—or, rather, it is admirably suited to the freedom of the dialogue form. Still the scenic principle is suggested, and we see that Erasmus has now employed most of the basic tools he would need to construct a play.

In the *Convivium profanum*, when More's servant comes to ask the

character Erasmus to visit his master, the disappointed host, Christian, protests, "the comedy isn't finished yet," to which Erasmus replies "What's left except for me to say 'Farewell. Now give your applause'?" (p.606).⁷ The lines suggest a number of things. An argument might be made that Christian's protest is simply a characteristic remark,⁸ since he seems to have an interest in theatre and has been making references to Terence, comparing himself and various of his guests to characters in the Latin playwright's canon. On the other hand, the statement "the comedy isn't finished yet" consciously associates this *formula* with comic drama and seems to call attention to its own artifice much as Berowne tells the King of Navarre that twelve months and a day is "too long for a play" (*Love's Labour's Lost* V.ii.878).

There is, however, another possibility which has to do with the metaphor originating in classical Greek literature and popularized for the Middle Ages by John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* of life as a play and the world as a stage.⁹ If we might be a trifle wary of accepting Folly's word in the *Moriae Encomium* that "all human life is nothing but a stage-play,"¹⁰ Erasmus, devoid of Moria's mask, declares in *De copia* that "comedy is nothing else than a copy of life,"¹¹ a deft reversal of Folly's naturally inverted view. If comedy is a copy of life, then what Erasmus seems to wish to depict in the *Colloquia* is the "human comedy," as Christian calls it when talking with Peter in an early *formula* (p.583). The *Colloquia* are to be a form of vicarious experience, a means of learning about life's follies, of passing through them at second hand, so to speak.¹² Erasmus puts it this way in *De utilitate Colloquiorum*: "Young people learn these things [the foolish caprices and baseless notions of the public] better from this little book, I believe, than from experience, the teacher of fools" (p.625). And to know such things is, according to Erasmus, "part of good, practical sense."

The analogy between life and the theatre was one of which Erasmus was especially fond. It appears time and again in his writings from satiric dialogue such as the *Ciceronianus* to his personal correspondence. Bulephorus, for example, in the *Ciceronianus*, when he sees his friend Nosoponus "diseased" with Ciceronianism, says to Hypologus, "I shall act the part of Davus [the clever slave from Terence's *Andria*]; do you help the conversation along and take a part in the play." Bulephorus having explained that "There is no better way to heal [those who are diseased] than to pretend that you have the same trouble," Hypologus agrees that "Not only a spectator of this play, but a willing helper will I be."¹³ We have then in this case a play within a play or at least a play within a dialogue, with characters assuming other rôles for the purpose of educating a colleague gone astray. Erasmus had done much the same thing in the *Moriae Encomium* and says as much in defending himself to Martin Dorp: "I assumed a mask to play this part."¹⁴ By assuming the rôle of Folly he had hoped to cure others of the disease.

There were times, however, when active participation in the human comedy was distasteful to Erasmus. Unlike his friend Thomas More, Erasmus steered clear of civil service, with the exception of the honorary post of counselor to Charles V. He tried to maintain a position aloof from political and religious turmoil, so that he might concentrate his efforts on the promotion of *bonae litterae* and the *philosophia Christi*. This desire to distance himself is never more evident than in his dealing with the Lutheran controversies. When his personal attempts at arbitration ranging from Calais to Cologne with Emperor, Elector, and kings failed to produce results of any great promise, Erasmus saw quiet withdrawal as the only possible means of maintaining his neutrality. On November 8, 1529, he wrote to Reuchlin from Cologne:

You see what a fatal tragedy is now being enacted, the catastrophe of which is uncertain . . . I prefer to be a spectator rather than an actor in this play, not because I deny the cause of Christ, but because I see it is beyond my littleness.¹⁵

The human comedy had become a tragedy and Erasmus wanted off the stage. Having made as much of an exit as the times would permit—he declined an invitation to be present at the Diet of Worms—he turned his attention characteristically to the writing of a dialogue whose participants were Thrasymachus (the battling Luther) and Eubulus, the Catholic with good counsel to offer. He himself assumed the arbitrating rôle of Philaethes, the lover of truth. The dialogue, like Erasmus' foregoing foray into public affairs, was abandoned.¹⁶

There are in Erasmus' correspondence more light-hearted uses of theatrical metaphor. In the 1523 letter/catalogue to Botzheim, for instance, in referring to his constant revising and reissuing editions of such work as the *Adagia*, he says, "You might have been rid of the trouble over me too, if before leaving the stage I had said to you all 'Valete et plaudite', and, believe me, it would have happened if some good wine of Burgundy had not come on the scene like a *deus ex machina*."¹⁷ We see him here comfortably conversant not simply with the *theatrum mundi* but with the classical formulae and machinery as well.

Let us look then at the use Erasmus makes of dramatic metaphor within the *Colloquia* themselves. Some uses are relatively simple if somewhat unusual comparisons of one event of social interaction, a meal, with another, a play. In *Diversoria*, Bertulf describes dinner at a German inn as "alternating solid food and pulse, as actors alternate choruses and dramatic scenes. But they're careful to make the last act the best" (p.151). And in *Πολυδαιτια*, when Spudus explains that he wishes to have a dinner party that displeases none of the guests, Apitius exclaims, "What play was

ever so well written or acted that it pleases the entire audience?" (p.378). Further, Spudus' query as to the number of courses causes his advisor to draw this analogy:

Apit. How many parts has a formal speech?

Spud. Five, if I'm not mistaken.

Apit. How many acts to a play?

Spud. I've read in Horace that it should be no longer than five acts.

Apit. Change dishes often enough to have a soup for prologue and a conclusion or epilogue of various desserts.

(p.379)¹⁸

Some dramatic metaphors are associated with cleverness and resourceful inventiveness as in *Hippoplanus* where Phaedrus, finding himself cheated by the horse-dealer, concocts a plan to even the score and "immediately enlist[s] a man to play a supporting rôle in this comedy" (p.247). There is, however, a little more here than simply an association with cleverness. The horse-dealer, in selling to a traveller a horse he knows tires very quickly, is not playing his proper—that is, honest—role. Phaedrus by assuming a rôle as dishonest as that of the dealer may not necessarily teach him to mend his ways, but he certainly makes a fool of the man as he deserves.

While *Hippoplanus* uses the dramatic metaphor of a comedy to refer to only one episode in a man's life, other *colloquia* employ the play metaphor to encompass an entire life. In *Funus*, another Phaedrus describes the deathbed scene of one George Balearicus. When the sick man "shuddered and gave unmistakable signs of having reached his last moment," then the "final act of the play" was set in motion: the reading of a plenary indulgence forgiving his sins and declaring goods acquired in war rightfully his (p.367). While the "final act" may very well refer only to the last part of the tragicomedy of his deathbed—complete with the reported dialogue of the pugnacious mendicants—it is difficult not to associate the sense of a play with his whole life.

The *scaena vitae* is much more clearly delineated in the delightful *Γερωντολογία, sive 'Οχημα*. Once the four members of this college reunion are comfortably ensconced in their hired carriage and are catching up on the events of each other's lives, Glycion asks the variously employed Pampirus how he could "preserve decorum" having "changed so often." Pampirus airily replies, "Why should I be less able to do so than actors, who sometimes play one rôle after another in the same drama?" He then proceeds to ask Eusebius to disclose "a scene from his life." "Oh, no, the whole play if you like," comes the response; "it doesn't have many acts" (p.201).

The metaphors also include the world stage as in *Ἰχθυοφαγία* where

the butcher reminds the fishmonger—and the reader—that war, like religious upheaval, turns the human comedy into tragedy: “you know the uproars of comedies always end in marriage. Princes conclude their tragedies in the same fashion. But in comedies the marriages occur quickly; here the business between great men is carried on with vast exertions” (p.325). It is as the learned Magdalia says to the Abbot in *Abbatis et eruditae*, “The world’s a stage that’s topsy-turvy now”—tragedies ending with marriage?—“as you see. Every man must play his part or—exit” (p.223)—advice Erasmus had just taken much to heart in his own life. We are moving now to an aspect of the metaphor alluded to earlier and one to which Erasmus gave deep significance, that of rôle. Magdalia is telling the Abbot, though he does not have the wit to perceive it, that he is not fulfilling his proper rôle. He would rather dance, drink, hunt, and play games than tend to his ecclesiastical office. Because of his ignorance he may soon see laymen preaching, since pastors have become “tongue-tied.” Topsy-turvy indeed.

It is generally when Erasmus is trying to point up improperly played rôles that we find negative references to the theatre. In *Virgo poenitens*, for example, Catharine refers to her flashy procession to the convent as a “show” which attracted “crowds of people.” Eubulus interjects with fitting cynicism, “Smart actors! They know how to put on their plays before the simple-minded rabble” (p.113). So too did Misoponos, that hater of work, who, in *Πρωχολογία*, painted sores on his body with such skill that he “might have played Job in the tragedy” (p.251). Another actor playing his rôle poorly is described in *Concio, sive Merdardus*. The Franciscan reveals his ignorance—and his cheeks reddened by drink—in his attack on Erasmus’ interpretation of the Magnificat. As Hilary describes the scene to Levinus, the latter wants to know “who brought such a player onto this stage?” (p.465).¹⁹

These last examples begin to take into consideration the audience for the dramas: the “simple-minded rabble” impressed by conventual pageantry, the passers-by who are to pity Misoponos, and finally the learned and articulate hearer who will not tolerate folly or vice. We may then consider what a large proportion of the *Colloquia* are actually about incidents reported sometimes by a participant but often by a spectator, a non-participant in the action. Further we may recall Erasmus’ own desire, cited earlier, to be a spectator rather than an actor. Combing through the *Colloquia*, we come upon one of the anecdotes in the *Convivium fabulosum* in which Louis XI rewards his lord chancellor, the man who stands back and asks for nothing while surrounded by greedy fools. The lord chancellor is described thus: “More circumspect than the rest, he did not proclaim his services but acted the part of spectator at the play” (p.263). The metaphor bespeaks the kind of wise detachment Erasmus sought, the distance to observe coolly and comment drily when necessary—a vital form of mental

participation. It indicates that to be a spectator does not, in fact, make one a non-participant. Erasmus claimed that rôle, for life would cease to be a comedy altogether if there were no spectators left to laugh at the foolish players and laud the wise ones.

Having seen that theatrical metaphor plays an illuminating rôle in the *Colloquia*, we may consider the possible classical dramatic influences that might have helped to shape the structure of the *Colloquia* and give them their dramatic flavor. The logical place to start is Terence's plays, since Erasmus had a love for the works of this playwright from boyhood. Beatus Rhenanus in the life of Erasmus he sketched in the preface to Origen (1536) claims, "As a boy he had the comedies of Terence at his fingertips";²⁰ and again in the enlarged biography for the 1540 *Opera*, "As a boy he fully understood all of Terence and Horace."²¹ Indeed Terentian comedy seems to have been one way for the youthful Erasmus, trapped in the monastery at Steyn, to keep his sanity. The well-known autobiographical letter to Grunnius recalls secret midnight sessions with "Cantelius": "Florentius [Erasmus] secretly, sometimes in one night, used to read a whole Terentian comedy to him, so that within a few months in furtive and nocturnal meetings they completed the principal authors."²² Also about 1489 to acknowledge the kindness of a friend Erasmus sent him a manuscript of Terence which he himself had copied out. He speaks of the comedies in the cover letter in these terms: "sermonis puritas, proprietas, elegantia."²³

This love of Terence expressed so early proved a continuing one. He cites the plays throughout his works; there are over 250 references and quotations in the *Adagia*, for example,²⁴ and we have already noted earlier some of the references in the *Formulae*. In addition, in the *Convivium poeticum* (p.158ff) the guests discuss brief passages from the *Eunuchus* and the *Andria*, scanning the lines and suggesting textual emendations. In 1531 Erasmus prepared an edition of Terence, which was published by Froben the following March. Interestingly if not surprisingly, we find that there is an increase in the number of references to Terence in the *colloquia* first published in 1531.²⁵

What we should note, however, is that Erasmus did not admire Terence for his dramatic flair, but for his Latin, which was both elegant and conversational. A recent editor of Terence remarks that "even as early as Cicero and Horace he was more quoted for his humanity and style than for his stagecraft."²⁶ It was that same humanity and style that caused Erasmus to recommend Terence to students: "among Latin writers who is more valuable as a standard of language than Terence? He is pure, concise, and closest to everyday speech and then, by the very nature of his subject-matter, is also congenial to the young."²⁷ To this he adds in his preface to his 1532 edition, "The purity of Roman discourse is better learned from no other

writer, nor is there another more delightful in the reading, or more suitable to the disposition of youths . . . For there is more accurate judgement in one Terentian comedy . . . than in all Plautus."²⁸

Whatever Erasmus got from Terence, therefore, had little to do with dramatic structure. The five-act division of the comedies in the surviving manuscripts—the earliest is Pietro Bembo's Codex Bembinus of the fourth or fifth century²⁹—is a later and somewhat arbitrary imposition,³⁰ which probably had no more effect on Erasmus than to reinforce what he knew from Horace.³¹ Terence placed an emphasis on the quick twists and turns of plot and indeed is credited in theatre history with contributing the double plot, while Erasmus' *Colloquia*, with a few notable exceptions, rarely possess more than a suggestion of plot line. We might well wonder, though, if Erasmus did not have the typical setting of Terence and other writers of New Comedy in mind, since so many of the *Colloquia* begin as chance encounters of friends in the street. The Terentian juxtaposition of two houses would also facilitate something like Christian's dinner invitation to Augustine in the *Convivium profanum*. But with the exception of the *convivia* and such *colloquia* as *Adolescentis et scorti* and Πτωχοπλούσιοι, the immediate setting of the speakers is of practically no importance. Erasmus does draw, however, on a New Comedy type for a few of his characters. The soldiers of *Militaria*, *Militis et Cartusiani*, and Ἰππεὺς ἀνιππος, are all descendants of Terence's Thraso and Plautus' Miles Gloriosus. Other than this, it is Terence's conversational ease that was of use to this writer of colloquies. This Erasmus had long since absorbed into his own style.³²

Aside from familiarity with Terence, Plautus, and Seneca—he edited the later twice, in 1515 and 1529—Erasmus had some early experience with Greek drama as well. In 1506 Badius published in Paris Erasmus' Latin translations of Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia Aulidensis*. Erasmus had undertaken the translations primarily as a means of improving his Greek and the *editio princeps* by Musurus in 1503 of the Greek text of Euripides provided an admirable opportunity.³³ That this was indeed a learning experience is testified to by the careful approximation in Latin of the Greek metre line by line in the *Hecuba*, the first of the two plays translated. The handling of the verse in the second effort, the *Iphigenia*, is much freer.³⁴ We find Erasmus, apparently unsatisfied, in Venice, revising the texts for a second edition printed by Aldus in 1507. Beatus Rhenanus says, "Having re-examined them, he again published the two tragedies of Euripides, *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*."³⁵

The choruses, however, gave him a great deal of trouble and not simply by their metrical variety, which, Erasmus noted, neither Seneca nor Horace had ever imitated. Their content was also alien to him. He wrote that if his studies permitted further translation,

I should not be afraid to make changes in the Chorus style and matter. I would rather treat of some common topic, or go off into a pleasant digression, than spend my time on melodious nonsense, as Horace says. It seems to me Antiquity was never more inept than in producing choruses like these; there is too much effort to be original, it ruins the eloquence, and in the hunt for verbal miracles all judgement of realities is lost.³⁶

This passage says a great deal about the *habitus* of its writer's mind—practical, rational, prone to that which is utilitarian. It also provides, in a way, a fairly apt description of the *Colloquia*, which deal with common topics, include pleasant digressions, and have on the whole a good grip on reality.³⁷ The only thing Erasmus may have gained, dramatically speaking, from his exercise in Euripidean translation was a deeper sense of characterization. Still while Euripidean characters are more psychologically individuated, much less typical than Terence's, they are hardly cast in the comic or satirical vein to which Erasmus was given.³⁸

For satiric comedy we must turn to the dialogues of Lucian, which are generally acknowledged as having had the greatest influence on the style and form of the *Colloquia*. Erasmus himself felt "these dialogues are better than any comedy or any satire, whether you are looking for pleasure or profit."³⁹ He places Lucian first among Greek prose writers in *De ratione studii*, while Euripides is relegated to third place among Greek poets.⁴⁰ Since rational thinking was considered to be in effect a mental dialogue,⁴¹ Erasmus naturally found Lucianic form most congenial; he also found in Lucian's attacks on "the intellectual and moral weaknesses of contemporary religion and its adherents as well as many other manifestations of the bogus, pretentious, and hypocritical,"⁴² a reflection of the failings of his own times. While he began translating the *Dialogues* with Thomas More as a method of furthering his knowledge of Greek, as he did with the Euripides, the effects of these Lucianic studies reached much further.

The first thing to notice is, of course, that Lucian wrote dialogues not plays. But the Renaissance found them sufficiently dramatic for them to be performed in schools and colleges from the fifteenth century on.⁴³ There were sporadic attempts at dramatic adaptations such as that by Tito Livio de' Frulovisi about 1430 and that of Boiardo (in the vernacular) in 1494.⁴⁴ But the fact remains that in technique Lucian, like Seneca, is at best "armchair theatre." By evoking the illusion of set, costume, and action, the dialogues provide "a replacement of drama, not a recipe for it."⁴⁵

It is more striking to find that Erasmus does not necessarily pursue the semi-dramatic options Lucian offers him any more than he did the genuine ones provided by Terence or Euripides. To demonstrate this we may look at Erasmus' *Charon* and Lucian's *Downward Journey*, which with the Lucianic *Charon* and the *Dialogues of the Dead* 14 and 20 provided the

inspiration for Erasmus' colloquy. Lucian's dialogue is something of a "day in the life"—of Charon and his under-world companions Clotho, the judge Rhadamanthus, and the guide Hermes, who only half belongs to the shadows. It is also a day—the first day—in the death of a number of interesting and varied people: the tyrant Megapenthes, who tries to run away and thinks he can bribe his way back to life; a club-wielding and helpful philosopher, Cyniscus, ready and willing to die; and Micyllus, a poor cobbler, who is not only philosophical about death but can even joke about his now unworldly state. The plot traces their arrival at and passage over the Styx and their final judgement. The setting alters from the dark tunnel leading down from the light to the Stygian shore where Charon's boat lies rigged and ready, to shipboard, to the gloom of Rhadamanthus' court lit only by the torch in the hand of the Fury Tisiphone. There are entrances and exits and a fair amount of action in between: loading the boat with the lamenting dead; dragging the tyrant bodily (shadily?) into the boat by the leg; the cobbler's jumping into the river to swim after the boat and his being pulled aboard to sit on the tyrant's shoulders; the philosopher's taking an oar to row since he cannot pay for his passage; disembarking and stripping one by one for judgement. After Cyniscus' prosecution of Megapenthes, the tyrant is given a suitable sentence—never to drink the water of Lethe that he might forever remember his former power and wealth—and the dialogue ends.⁴⁶ We have then rich characterization, vivid settings, and progression of plot that corresponds with physical action.

Erasmus' *Charon*, while interesting and entertaining in its own right, pales in dramatic terms when compared to its model. The two participants, Charon and the avenging spirit Alastor, hurrying in opposite directions—one up, one down—meet at some indeterminate mid-point, Alastor bearing news of fresh—and very specific—wars. The character of Charon, who is soaking wet, having just climbed out of the Stygian swamp after his boat sank, is sketched quite well though without Lucianic richness. He is a practical business man, pleased at the prospect of fresh slaughter, as it means extra passengers at an obol apiece. He can also appreciate the business acumen of the friars Alastor tells him of, preaching wars as just and holy. He fears some Erasmian Polygraphus may turn fickle mortal minds to peace or that some god, some *deus ex machina*, may settle affairs before he can get his new and bigger boat paid off. The figure of Alastor, however, is there primarily to report information and does not have a chance to develop much character. There is no real plot outside of the fact that Charon is on his way to buy the new boat (*where*, for heaven's sake?) and with the exception of the initial entrance/meeting and parting/exit there is no action, though we do get an amusing off-stage glimpse of the shipwrecked shades "swimming with the frogs." Given a mini-drama as a model, Erasmus has chosen instead a "reportage presentation."⁴⁷ What

we actually have here is a still moment set no place in particular in the midst of action going on elsewhere where two modestly characterized figures come together to talk. What they talk about is what is important. Action, appearance, even individual identity do not matter; what goes on in the mind does.

The *Colloquia* are so varied they cannot be neatly categorized,⁴⁸ but one division does come quite naturally to mind: those colloquies that are distanced and those that are immediate. By that I mean, first, those in which a character describes something that has happened to him or to someone else—thus distant in time and place. Quite often, there is also a distance in temperament between speaker and those spoken of. Then there are the immediate colloquies, in which we witness the action first hand as it takes place rather than after the fact and through an interpreter. There are, of course, exceptions to these distinctions. Such colloquies as *Alcumistica* or *Exorcismus* have the immediacy of, say, a fabliau. Colloquies like *Funus*, *Alcumistica*, and *Hippoplanus* contain dramatic dialogue. And those such as *Naufragium*, *Diversoria*, even *Peregriantio religionis ergo* conjure up vivid pictures of setting and action despite being reported. Some “immediate” *colloquia* have only isolated moments of dramatic brilliance, such as the *Convivium poeticum*, which can bog down the reader yet possess not only the feisty and contrary housekeeper Margaret but the inspired visual noted by Crato of the guests sitting around all “with this flashing of fingers” (p.164) as they try to scan a line from the prologue of Terence’s *Eunuchus*.

Generally, however, those colloquies in which the action is not being rehearsed by an observer are, of course, those that possess genuine dramatic immediacy and are those to which we should now turn. To begin with we have *Proci et puellae*, the first of the so-called “marriage group,” in which we meet the charming, witty, and poised Maria. The opening of her conversation with Pamphilus reminds us of the exchange between Phoebe and Sylvius in *As You Like It* (III.v) in that both women ask their smitten lovers for evidence that their eyes are death-dealing. In Phoebe’s case it is genuine annoyance born of a lack of sympathetic understanding that causes her to be so uncooperative. But Maria has a more practical end in view: she is not necessarily averse to Pamphilus’ suit, but wishes to determine its true nature and the basis of his affection. As marriage is a most serious business, she wants to make sure they would be well suited to each other. “Judge by your reason,” she tells him, “not your feelings. What emotions decide is temporary; rational choices generally please forever” (p.98). By resisting his more frivolous Petrarchan overtures, she hopes to bring him to a more reasoned and responsible position.

Other immediate *colloquia* in the marriage group include *Virgo μισόγαμος* and *Virgo poenitens*, a two-part drama or complementary pair

of scenes in which the determined but wrong-headed Catharine is brought, through sorry experience, to realize that convent life is not for her. Erasmus distances the crucial scenes: those twelve days in the convent are only reported by Catharine to Eubulus. As Geraldine Thompson puts it, "A spate of drama must have spiced that off-stage fortnight of postulancy."⁴⁹ However, what actually happened is not what is important to Erasmus. Rather he wishes to convey the effect the experience has had on Catharine's mind. Ignoring the advice of wiser heads, those of her parents and Eubulus, she passed through a painful experience she might have avoided had she exercised proper judgment. What Erasmus wishes to depict in his two little scenes is a change of mind.

The depiction of a change of mind is also the purpose of *Coniugium*, another "scene" from the marriage group. This time we meet Xanthippe, who is caught in what she feels is a bad marriage. As she talks with her friend Eulalia, we begin to see from Erasmus' characterization of her that her attitude has much to do with her difficulties. Eulalia sees it too and sets out to temper Xanthippe's mind, mold it so that she herself may rectify her situation. Again the true action of the piece takes place in a mental landscape. We also see that these "marriage" *colloquia*, if stitched together, would form the patchwork of a single life. Erasmus is constructing a metaphorical *scaena vitae*.

One of the most dramatic of the colloquies on love and marriage is *Adolescentis et scorti*, which is something of a variation on the other puella scenes. This time the *procus* is Sophronius, who would woo Lucretia away not from a convent but a brothel. We get a considerable sense of the brothel setting as the two speakers move from the outer room to the inner bedroom to the deep gloom of Lucretia's private dressing room where "it's so dark we'll hardly be able to see each other" (p.154). The metaphor is appropriate: she must move into the depths of darkness so that Sophronius may lead her once more into the light. And Sophronius, who has been there both literally and figuratively, is certainly in a position to know whereof he speaks. The sense of characterization is as strong as that of setting. Sophronius, on the one hand, has changed considerably his ways as well as his appearance—Lucretia does not recognize him at first with his new beard—but the change has not made him self-righteous or condescending. Lucretia, however, is touchy about criticism of her "trade," and we know from Sophronius' responses her annoyance has not only agitated her but made her raise her voice (p.155). A few cracks begin to show in her carefree veneer, which she tries to cover by joking and teasing her visitor and former customer, calling him "this new preacher" and saying slyly, "I've always looked upon you as a brother" (p.156). He persists patiently, gets her interest by telling her of Erasmus' New Testament,⁵⁰ and finally convinces her to leave the brothel and her life there behind. The change in

Lucretia is still a trifle sudden and not entirely convincing, but the didactic purpose is nonetheless dramatically achieved.⁵¹

The theme that clearly emerges in many of the most effectively dramatic colloquies then is that of a change of mind. One more example is *Πτωχοπλούσιοι*, the wealthy beggars, those who are most rich being most poor. Of all the *Colloquia*, this one is probably the most developed dramatically. We have something approaching a genuine cast list—a variety of people with a corresponding potential for variety of action; not just speakers or a collection of like-minded scholars, but two mendicants, a village priest, an innkeeper and his wife. The colloquy is constructed in two distinct scenes with separate settings, one before the door of the village priest, the other in the stove room of the local inn. The latter room, we learn is decorated with pictures.

Erasmus displays good dramatic sense by opening Scene 1 in mid-conversation as the pastor turns away the friars refusing them lodging for the night. He is not such a bad fellow—he does direct them to the public house—but he is not exactly imbued with Christian fellowship. We get the impression he has been burned before and is not going to take any more chances: “if you saw a hen or chicks in my house, you’d abuse me before the people in a sermon tomorrow” (p.204). With the door shut in their faces, Conrad and Bernardine discuss the best course of action as they walk to the inn. Conrad, the bolder and more talkative of the two, has probably been in this situation before.

The second scene opens in the stove room when the innkeeper looks up from where he is lying shirtless behind the stove and sees the two friars, who have just burst into the room. There is quite a bit of action in the first part of this scene. The innkeeper’s wife comes in to encourage her husband to let the two men stay, and when her husband tells her to mind her house she returns to the kitchen after having had her say. The keeper then puts on his shirt and soon the servants are setting the table, bringing in dinner, and sitting down to eat. Conrad and Bernardine produce meat and wine, which they cut and pour and offer to share with the keeper. He tastes the wine and then the three settle in to talk. The most fascinating thing about the scene is listening to the innkeeper progress from suspicion bordering on hostility, to scepticism, to grudging acceptance, to lively and concurring conversation, to confession and concern for the well-being of his two visitors. He is nothing if not stubborn. He does not understand why there should be such variety of dress among the Orders, and he keeps coming back tenaciously to the point until Conrad has made him see that the clothes do not make the man. The keeper finally concludes, “Really, you’ve been very good company for me. Hanged if I don’t prefer this conversation to a drinking bout with my pastor. Do us the honor of preaching tomorrow. And if you happen to travel this way hereafter, be assured there’s a place here ready for you”

(p.217). He is ultimately a plain, decent, educable man, probably the type Erasmus would like to have heard humming the Scriptures. On the whole, this colloquy is Erasmus' most successful depiction of the progress of a mind from ignorance and ideas both mistaken and superficial to knowledge and deeper understanding.⁵²

Given the effectiveness of these dramatic colloquies, we may wonder why Erasmus chose to distance us so much of the time by using intermediaries to tell the tale. *Exorcismus*, for example, has seemingly the most overt dramatic structure. The story told by Anselm is literally divided into a prologue and five acts and is related in theatrical terminology: author, director, actors, cast, plot, performance, role, costume, scene, setting, characters. And yet the colloquy itself is not a play. In fact, we are getting the story of Faunus, the foolish priest, and the tormented spirit at third hand, for Anselm himself has heard the story from someone else and is chuckling over it when he meets Thomas, who asks to be told the tale. The dramatic structure imposed on this fabliau functions then as a metaphor. Erasmus is constructing another *scaena vitae* and as the topic is folly, it follows Folly's dictum that life is a stageplay: the action of the story progressing like that of a play, it would seem we have a case of life literally imitating art. The gullible and foolish Faunus does not know, however, that he is an actor in Polus' play. He is, like the Abbot in *Abbatis et eruditae*, one who ignorantly goes through life without recognizing what his role is or should be, what part he actually plays. The constant reiteration of the play metaphor intensifies the ridicule of the fool who does not know he is a fool and yet will never play any other part. It also encourages us as readers to step back, see the over-all picture, distance ourselves, and watch the folly without participating in it.

This last is very important. Erasmus, as a spectator himself of the human comedy, was always intensely aware of his audience. The *Colloquia* were intended for young people to improve their Latin and to instill lessons of practical Christian morality. They were to provide vicarious life experiences including knowledge of evil and folly, so that his readers might learn to be right-thinking spectators not actors in such comedies. Much of what Erasmus imitated from life in his art was negative, the things he wished his readers to avoid. Foolishness, rejection of *bonae litterae*, hypocrisy, pretentiousness, the waste of war—recognize them, observe them, understand them for what they are, but do not take an active role in them. And we find that these are the things that are most often distanced in the *Colloquia*. That which is unworthy of imitation in life comes to us, in Erasmus' art, at one or even two removes, complete with a built-in commentator—Adolf in *Naufragium*, Menedemus in *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*, Phaedrus in *Funus*, both speakers in both 'Ἀγαμος γάμος and *Concio*, Cannius in *Cyclops*, Philecous in *Exequiae seraphicae*, to name a few. Such a

commentator/story-teller mediates between the reader and the evils he describes. He is ultimately the role model for the young reader. He has the capacity to stand back, as Erasmus always tried to do, out of the swirl of fools and make cogent and corrective remarks about the behaviour he has observed. In this respect, Erasmus' art is imitating his own life. It is also at times an idealized imitation, for in his little plays he could control the responses of those with whom he disagreed in a way that he could never control the opponents in his own life. Whether consciously or not, his *habitus* of mind has indeed shaped his creative imagination as it is expressed in the *Colloquia*.

The more immediate colloquies, the dramatic colloquies, tend to show the good rather than the bad.⁵³ They depict those that can be taught, those who experience a change of mind and heart: two young people whose courtship is founded on reason and practicality, a young girl persuaded not to enter the convent, another persuaded to change her evil way of life, a wife shown what she can contribute to the health of her marriage, an innkeeper made to realize that the mind not the clothes reveal a man. Goodness and movement toward knowledge require no mediating screen. In such cases Erasmus would be only too happy to have life imitate art. So we see that despite his vast knowledge of classical drama, Erasmus drew out only those few dramatic elements that would liven the presentation of the *Colloquia* for his readers. He never let the characterization confuse the moral intent, the drama become more important than the educational aim. In the final analysis, a strictly dramatic technique would neither have suited his psyche nor have fulfilled his purpose.

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Notes:

- 1 Geraldine Thompson, "As Bones to Body: The Scope of *Inventio* in the *Colloquies* of Erasmus," *Essays on the Works of Erasmus*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 165.
- 2 Introduction to *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, tr. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. xxvi. All English translations of the *Colloquies* are from this edition and will be cited internally by page number.
- 3 *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, Appendix I in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, p. 625.
- 4 Erasmus always maintained that a degree of entertainment went a long way as an aid to learning. See *De utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 625; *De ratione studii*, tr. Brian McGregor, vol. 24 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 669.
- 5 Note the influence of classical pastoral in Jodocus' and Peter's quest for a "pleasant place" in which to tell stories, lacking "neither shade of grove nor verdure of green fields nor bubbling fountains" (p. 571).
- 6 Terence also crops up in the text. Two examples referring to *Phormio* and *Adelphoe* respectively: "What Demipho's advisers say in the comedy . . ." (p. 565); "You still a Demea? Argue tomorrow if you like; be a Mitio for today, I beg you" (p. 598). See also pp. 600, 601.
- 7 Cf. Folly's conclusion in *The Praise of Folly*, tr. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 138.

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- 8 See Lawrence V. Ryan, "Art and Artifice in Erasmus' *Convivium Profanum*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 31 (1978), 1-16, for a discussion on Erasmus' revisions of the original *Convivium* as it appeared in the unauthorized 1518 edition to provide for greater consistency in characterization.
- 9 See E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 138-44, on theatrical metaphors.
- 10 *The Praise of Folly*, p. 43-44, 76, 120.
- 11 Cited in English by M.M. Phillips, "Erasmus and the Art of Writing," *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. J. Coppens (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), I, 346.
- 12 See Geraldine Thompson, "As Bones to the Body," p. 165, and *Under Pretext of Praise* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1973), p. 105.
- 13 *Ciceronianus*, tr. Izora Scott (New York: AMS Press, 1972 [reprint of 1908 ed., Columbia University contributions to education. Teachers College series, no. 21]), p. 20.
- 14 Letter to Martin Dorp (1514), *Praise of Folly*, p. 145. The pseudo-dramatic form allowed Erasmus to disclaim responsibility for opinions frowned upon in certain circles. In defending himself and the colloquy *Epicureus* in *Declarationes ad Censuras Facultatis Theologiae Parisiensis*, he writes, "you see, reader, what it is . . . , in a work which is made up entirely of [the opinions of] various characters, to make no distinction of persons," Ryan, p. 15. For the Latin, see *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Clericus (Leiden: Peter Vander Aa, 1703-06), IX, cols. 933-34.
- 15 *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, tr. Preserved Smith (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), ep. 331. See also eps. 333, 477 for references to the "Lutheran tragedy."
- 16 Preserved Smith, *Erasmus: A Study of His Life, Ideals and Place in History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), pp. 249-50. We have instead the irenic *Inquisitio de fide* first published in the March 1524 edition of the *Colloquia*.
- 17 See *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906-58), I, 27. All future references to this work will be cited as EE. The English translation is supplied by M.M. Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times: A shortened version of 'The Adages of Erasmus'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. xvii.
- 18 For a rough parallel drawn between the parts of an oration (as explained by Cicero in *De rhetorica*) and the structure of Terentian comedy, see T.W. Baldwin, *Shakspeare's Five-Act Structure* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 55. The reference to Horace by Spudus is to *Ars poetica*, 189.
- 19 It may be noted that while no theatrical metaphors occur in Ἰππῆδς ἀνὴρπος, *sive Ementita nobilitas*, this colloquy consists of Nestor advising Harpalus on how to act a role, how to pretend to be something other than he is. We might also note here Folly's remarks on popes who "think they have done quite well by Christ if they play a bishop's role with mystical and almost theatrical pomp," *Praise of Folly*, p. 112. It is not the theatre that is being sneered at, of course, but the inappropriate spectacle surrounding what ought to be a role of humility. This calls to mind that extraordinary vision of the pomp and glory of Julius II's pontificate in the *Julius exclusus*. The description of "the supreme Pontiff being carried high in the air in a golden chair" is the most intensely dramatic moment in the dialogue: what is most dangerous and most despicable is most gloriously sweeping, evocative and grand; it produces a spectacular picture in the mind's eye, and we realize how easy it is to be caught up by the externals, forgetting that they actually signify how far Christianity has strayed from the Christian ideal. See *The Julius exclusus of Erasmus*, tr. Paul Pascal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 83-4; *Erasmi Opuscula*, ed. Wallace K. Ferguson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1933), pp. 117-18.
- 20 EE, I, 55 (my translation, as are the subsequent quotations from EE).
- 21 EE, I, 70.
- 22 EE, II, 301.
- 23 EE, I, 124. Interestingly in this letter (p. 123) he also draws an analogy between himself and Aeschines "adolescens ingeniosus et pauper." Aeschines was, of course, a devotee of Socrates and author of Socratic dialogues. Erasmus ultimately had more than *ingenio* and *paupertas* in common with him.

- 24 Introduction to Terence, *The Comedies*, tr. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 24.
- 25 In *Concio*, *Phormio* and *Eunuchus* are cited in giving examples of proper Latin style to justify the addition of a preposition to the Vulgate text (p. 468); Demea's change of heart in the *Adelphoe* and "the old comic poet" on reputation in the *Andria* are mentioned in *Philodoxus* (pp. 481, 484); John Boner, one of the dedicatees of the 1532 edition of Terence, is a speaker in *Amicitia*. Also Clitipho's slave Syrus in the *Heauton Timorumenos* is mentioned in the 1533 colloquium *Epicureus*.
- 26 Radice, introduction to *The Comedies*, p. 17.
- 27 *De ratione studii*, p. 669.
- 28 EE, IX, 402-03.
- 29 Radice, p. 21.
- 30 Baldwin attempts to argue that the divisions are in keeping with Terence's intentions, chap. 1.
- 31 The use of a five-act structure in *Exorcismus* follows roughly the progression of prologue, protasis, epitasis, catastrophe laid out in the tract *Evanthius de fabula* attributed to Donatus, Terence's fourth century commentator. See Baldwin, p. 33.
- 32 Thompson in the introduction to the *Formulae*, p. 556, notes that Terentian idioms as well as names turn up in these early conversations. He also observes that Terence was frequently thought of as a prose writer. Even Erasmus makes this mistake early on (EE, I, 99, lines 100-01).
- 33 Introduction to *Euripidis Hecuba et Iphigenia Latinae Factae Erasmo Interprete*, ed. Jan Hendrik Wazink, *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1969), I.1, 195.
- 34 See Wazink, p. 202, and M.M. Phillips, "Erasmus and the Classics," *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 7-8. The dedicatory epistles for the two plays are EE, eps. 188 and 208.
- 35 EE, I, 61.
- 36 The English is supplied by Phillips, "Erasmus and the Classics," p. 8. See EE, I, 440f.
- 37 The only colloquies that contain what might be considered flights of fancy are *De incomparabili heroe Ioanne Reuchlino in divorum numerum relato*, *Epithalamium Petri Aegidii*, *Echo*, *Charon*, and perhaps *Ἀποσδιόνυσσα* and *Senatulus*.
- 38 We might pause here to note that Erasmus' translation of the *Hecuba* at least was given a student performance at the Collège du Porc at Louvain. See EE, II, 388 and n.; Wazink, p. 207.
- 39 Phillips, "Erasmus and Classics," p. 9 (EE, ep. 193).
- 40 *De ratione studii*, p. 669.
- 41 Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence," *Renaissance Essays*, eds. P.O. Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 214.
- 42 A.E. Douglas, "Erasmus as a Satirist," *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey, p. 45. See also Christopher Robinson, *Lucian and His Influence in Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1978), pp. 166-67.
- 43 Erasmus' *Colloquies* likewise turn up in the dramatic curriculum. Allen (EE, VII, 508 n.4) says that in 1529 after stay with Erasmus in Basle, Joachim Fortius Ringelbergius of Antwerp went to Freiburg to stay with a schoolmaster, Sebastian Cassamer, whose pupils "sang to [Ringelbergius] Odes Of Horace and Epigrams of Martial and acted Erasmus' Colloquies."
- 44 Robinson, pp. 99-101.
- 45 Robinson, p. 100. Robinson, pp. 165-97, provides an excellent detailed discussion of the Lucianic influence on Erasmus especially on the *Colloquia*. The discussion also places considerable emphasis on the dramatic elements to which I could add little. What interests me primarily in this paper is why Erasmus chose to make less rather than more of what drama he had at his disposal.
- 46 Lucian, [*Works*], ed. & tr. A.M. Harmon (London: William Heinemann, 1915), II, 1-57.
- 47 Robinson makes this point, p. 174.

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- 48 Robinson, pp. 165-97, is most thorough, intelligible, and useful in providing categories based on kinds of Lucianic dialogues.
- 49 G. Thompson, *Under Pretext of Praise*, p. 112.
- 50 The *Novum Instrumentum* turns up elsewhere in the *Colloquia*, nowhere more delightfully than in *Cyclops, sive Evangeliphorus* where Polyphemus uses it to "absolve" a friar by banging him on the head with it (pp. 420-21).
- 51 In considering the dramatic difficulty of portraying a change of mind, we might remember Hamlet, who sails for England undecided and unresolved. When next he appears on the stage, having returned to Denmark, he possesses the calm and the readiness which had previously eluded him. His change occurs off-stage. We encounter it as a *fait accompli*.
- 52 A colloquy that has no real place in our immediate discussion, but that contains a small stroke of dramatic genius is *Γερωντολογία*. This colloquy, discussed earlier metaphorically, is constructed in three scenes: the meeting of the four old men and their agreement to travel together, the journey in the carriage, and finally the delightful exchange between Hugh and Harry, the two carriers (cf. *1 Henry IV*, II.i.). This is the only time in the *Colloquia* that Erasmus completely clears the stage and brings on new actors who have their own concerns but who offer a new and somewhat different perspective on the main action, in this case on "those frigid old fellows" (p. 202). Also of structural interest are *De lusu* and *Herilia*, the latter of which reads like a series of farcical blackouts.
- 53 As always, there are exceptions, but where there is no ironic right-thinking commentator as in *Πτωχολογία* and *Ἰππεὺς ἀνίππος* the two deceivers are completely open and "honest" about their dishonesty. There is no chance the young reader would be taken in.