Macropedius' *Rebelles* and Erasmus' Principles of Education*

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The neo-Latin playwright George Van Lancvelt, better known as Macropedius (1487-1558), published his comedy *Rebelles* in 1535. In the prologue to *Rebelles* and *Aluta* (printed together in the first edition and in the second edition of 1553)¹ Macropedius observes that these plays are educational in nature: the goal of this type of "learned comedy," he says, is to promote learning and virtue, especially among the young.

Like most of Macropedius' plays, *Rebelles* was composed for performance on the stage by schoolboys. Its publication date coincides with the time when its author, a teacher and school administrator, became rector (principal) of the Jerome School in Utrecht. This school, which was founded and run by the Brothers of the Common Life, was quite famous in its time, and has been called a centre of humanism.²

Thus it is plausible that Macropedius' claim for the edifying nature of the play can be substantiated, though not necessarily in the way in which Macropedius envisaged it. Though my general purpose in selecting *Rebelles* from among the author's twelve published plays is to gain attention for a great master of neo-Latin drama who is unjustly neglected today,³ my particular aim is more narrow and precise: to throw some light on the literary and dramatic aspects of the play and to explore in some detail the educational philosophy hidden behind the dramatic situation. First impressions to the contrary, Macropedius' ideas will prove to be surprisingly close to the educational ideas evolved by his illustrious elder contemporary and compatriot Desiderius Erasmus (1466?-1536).

In spite of the current neglect for Macropedius' dramatic oeuvre, there is no lack of information regarding his life and work: he was a dedicated teacher whose life-long association with the devotional movement known as the Brothers of the Common Life should give at least some indication of his educational orientation. Furthermore, his sympathy for the New Learning is on full display in the works that he published for use in

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schools, including his Latin and Greek grammars and his popular treatise on the composition of letters known variously as *Epistolica* (1543) or *Methodus de conscribendis epistolis* (in the edition of 1561). Though the period's history of education is rich in examples of the struggle between old and new, Macropedius' passionate response to a personal challenge highlights the conflict particularly well. The preface to his Latin grammar (the *Institutiones grammaticae*, 1538 and 1550) contains a personal note regarding the manner in which the authorities intervened to prohibit the publication of the author's Greek/Latin grammar. Wryly Macropedius describes the pressure that led to the deletion of the Greek sections, a pressure (he says) on the part of the old, conservative forces which have only contempt for humanistic studies (the *bonorum studiorum osores*).

Turning to the comedy *Rebelles* ("The Rascals"), one would expect to find clear reflections of the pedagogical orientation of Macropedius the teacher and pedagogue, but this is not so. Although the play is full of educational situations, it does not seem to offer a coherent educational position; on the contrary: the vision that emerges is hard to characterize as either old or new, conservative or forward looking, and is, in its ambiguity, in need of considerable clarification.

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Upon casual inspection, the action of *Rebelles* concerns the escapades of two truant schoolboys. After lying, shirking and stealing their way through most of the play, Dyscolus and Clopicus barely escape from being hanged by the local authorities through the last-minute intervention of Aristippus, their dignified schoolmaster. Aristippus claims jurisdiction over the two boys, which is apparently in accordance with local law, and his request is granted. The two young louts are then heartily flogged and returned to their mothers, who should have taken better care of them, to begin with: the clear implication is that the mothers are much at fault for having pampered their offspring in every possible way, instead of preparing them with the necessary strictness for life in the community. The "Contents" (*Perioche seu argumentum*) of *Rebelles* sums up the plot rather well:

Two truant boys who are pampered by mom
 rebel against school and spurn their teacher.
 When trickery leads to fraud and theft
 they are quickly arrested and sentenced to death.
 But in the eleventh hour, when death is near
 the teacher obtains their release — through the rod!
 Thus the prey is snatched from Satan's jaws:
 what a joy for the mothers, and for their sons!⁶

At the surface level the action of the play is limited to the realistic description of human situations and weaknesses (shown through stock characters) that we know from the Latin comedies of Terence and Plautus. The setting is that of life in a sixteenth-century Dutch town, while the situations and characters range from low-life comedy to broad farce: robbers get robbed, a venerable teacher gets beaten, verbal abuse leads to physical assault. When the two boys lose their money in a game of dice with two conny-catching pimps, and have no money left to pay for their abundant eating and drinking, they forfeit their gorgeous new garments and are forced to beat a hasty retreat.

On the level of ideas, a casual reading of *Rebelles* would seem to indicate that Macropedius is at best conservative and at worst backward when it comes to a) his notions regarding school discipline and b) his notions about the position of women in society. Occasionally boys must lower their pants to get thrashed. The mothers Philotecnium and Cacolalia are portrayed as indulgent ladies, blind to the most glaring faults in their rather criminally inclined boys. To top it off, there is a vehement outburst of anti-feminine sentiment on the part of the chorus, at the end of the third act of *Rebelles*, which seems to show that Macropedius was somewhat of a misogynist:

There's nothing in the world more barbarous or shameless
and nothing more wanton than a bad woman. . .

It appears right, therefore, to accept Thomas Best's characterization of Macropedius as a conservative and a misogynist, for it is hard to escape the impression that Macropedius is a believer in strict law and order, and it seems clear from *Rebelles* that he had a rather low opinion of woman's role in society. Yet it should also be obvious that Macropedius' portraits of school justice and of female lack of sense are reflections of commonly held convictions of the age — which is said to account for these attitudes, not to excuse them! And while it is tempting to take a high-minded view of certain aspects of sixteenth-century society by calling them backward in relation to our own enlightened customs, such a judgement would not only distort the content of *Rebelles*, but might actually hinder our appreciation of what is going on in the play. In other words, by emphasizing such negative (read backward) notions one might be led to think that sixteenth-century society was retarded, that its view of women was primitive, and *read the play in that particular context* — which is to miss many of its points, and much of its intended meaning. Easy as it is to be carried away by the seductively realistic settings of Macropedius' representations of Dutch life, and his exploitation of broad comedy situations, one might end up by imposing twentieth-century ideas on a sixteenth-century play, a temptation which Thomas Best doesn't quite avoid.

Any reasonably complete analysis of the play should consider how its ideas are integrated in the text. For Macropedius' *Rebelles* – while retaining many older, medieval elements – is the work of a self-conscious humanist, steeped in the new ideas about education that had reached England in 1510, with the opening of St. Paul's School under Dean Colet, and that were rapidly spreading over England and the Low Countries. Both Macropedius' treatment of women and his concern with the rod ought to be explained in the context of that new ideology of education. Paradoxical as it may seem, Macropedius was part of the tradition that was helped in being started by his fellow countryman Erasmus, with whom he has much in common.

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Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (posthumously published in 1570) owed its origin to the story of two schoolboys who had run away from Eton for fear of the whip of their harsh master, not an uncommon story in education. Ascham complains rather bitterly about the quality of many schoolmasters, who are "of so crooked a nature, as, when they meet with a hard-witted scholar, they rather *break* him than *bow* him, rather *mar* him than *mend* him."⁷ (my italics) Such an observation is squarely in the tradition of Erasmus,⁸ who abhorred most contemporary grammar school teachers for their lack of training and ability, their poor teaching methods⁹ and, last but not least, their intensive use of the instrument for physical punishment. In order to improve teaching methods Erasmus suggested a separation between church and school (cf. his famous saying, "Choose for your boy a public school, or keep him at home," Woodward 204) and the introduction of good text books instead of a system of learning largely based on memorization. Erasmus himself contributed greatly to an improvement of methods by producing *De Ratione Studii* (*Upon the Right Method of Instruction*, 1511) while his *De Duplici Copia Verborum ac Rerum* (1512) dealt with a variety of topics, such as grammar, syntax and composition, that would be an aid both to Colet and the schoolboys at St. Paul's (for whom the book was written) and to many generations of schoolboys to come.

While Erasmus' personal involvement in education was never again as extensive as during his Cambridge period (1510-1515), his most incisive remarks about educational method are to be found in his *De Pueris Instituendis* (1529), which might be called Erasmus' Psychology of Education. And among the most eloquent passages in this book are his formidable attacks against the physical abuse of children that was so current in his time:

...there are natures which you will rather break than bend by flogging: whilst by kindness and wise stimulus you may do anything with them. I confess that I personally am constituted in this way. (205)

Masters who are conscious of their own incompetence are generally the worst floggers. What else, indeed, can they do? They cannot teach, so they beat. (206)

If we put away tyrants from their thrones, why do we erect a new tyranny for our sons? (207)

Yet Erasmus does not condemn all instances of physical disciplining. As Woodward points out, Erasmus found corporal punishment unsuited "for any but moral faults." (Woodward, p. 100) All other methods should be tried first, but

should none of these avail, then, if it must be so, let the rod be used with due regard to self-respect in the manner of it. (209)

In his discussion of the role of women in education, Erasmus is less than enthusiastic. "No woman ought to be allowed to strike a child," says Woodward, summarizing Erasmus' position, for "she has not the self-control required." (Woodward, p. 100) Erasmus' distrust of women in this matter goes quite far and is based on the notion that women lack the reason and the self-control that are required of every educator:

Now as a general principle I should affirm that it is contrary to Nature that men [read male children] should be placed under the exclusive control of women; for women are not only lacking in the necessary self control, but when aroused are prone to extreme vindictiveness and cruelty. (204)

Simply put, when women are in charge of education, they are likely to be more emotional than is good for the child.

This point about the position of women is a theoretical one, and one that was upheld by the church and (we may assume, though this is a more thorny question) accepted by the people for more than a thousand years, from Tertullian, in the third century, through Milton:

... though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seem'd;
For contemplation hee and valor form'd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
Hee for God only, shee for God in him:

(*Paradise Lost*, Book IV)

The position, however abhorrent to many men and women today, seems to represent both the orthodox doctrine and the social reality, and it certainly represents them with cogency. The traditional view is best summed up in the words of Thomas Aquinas, who observes that women are by nature subordinate to men "because the power of *rational discernment* is by nature stronger in man."

This is close to the view of Erasmus, who finds that women (at least in their function as educators) are ruled too much by the heart, and too

little by reason. Reason, *ratio*, is (in Erasmus' words) "at once the enlightened reasoning of the teacher operating upon the learner, and the active reason of the learner reaching out to meet it." (Woodward, pp. 79-80) Man, the creature of Reason, doesn't fully realize what he owes to Nature, says Erasmus (191). "Nature, in giving you a son, presents you, let me say, a rude, uninformed creature, which it is your part to fashion so that it may indeed become a man" (187), and again, "This *capacity for training* is, indeed, the chief aptitude which has been bestowed upon humanity" (184). Notice that Nature, as it is used here, is to be understood both in its larger sense, and as the specific condition that allows a child to be educated, so that the act of education becomes quite literally that of bringing out (*e-ducare*) the child's inner nature, and helping it towards its development. This notion of Nature is confirmed by Erasmus' definition of it: "By *Nature*, I mean, partly, innate capacity for being trained, partly, native bent towards excellence." (191)

Though the terms may have changed, Nature, as it is defined by Erasmus, comes close to some modern twentieth-century perceptions of it. Though vaguer in his terms, Robert Coles, the well known Harvard research psychiatrist, means the same thing when he speaks of "the mystery of the brain's dynamism," in his discussion of the early learning process: "There is inherent in a growing child's brain," says Coles, "what you might almost call a lust for confrontation with the world, for comprehension of the world." He also refers to it as curiosity, and as "the innate developmental urge to explore and come to grips with the world."¹¹

I am about to suggest that the educational position of Macropedius resembles that of Erasmus to a much larger degree than might be guessed from a casual reading of the play *Rebelles*. With the help of Erasmus' insights it is possible to form a much closer understanding of Macropedius' attitude towards physical punishment and the female sex and this, in turn, is bound to enhance our appreciation of the play's action itself. Such a reading of the play should make it abundantly clear that Macropedius does not (as Thomas Best believes) extol the "Spare the rod, spoil the child" principle, but only advocates physical punishment in extreme situations, and to avoid worse: as the action of the play demonstrates, there may be some virtue in being thrashed when it keeps your neck from being broken. The entire ideological paradigm underlying the play is one in which Nature is seen as the capacity for being trained, while the play's action is a drawn out *exemplum* of what happens when, because of lack of proper training, the course of Nature is allowed to become perverted.

When we first meet the two rascals Dyscolus and Clopicus, they are about to be entrusted to a new teacher who is said to be learned (*doctum*) and skilled (*peritum*) (Act I, scene 2). But the main quality of Aristippus

(who is, like his creator Macropedius, a Brother of the Common Life) is his unusual reputation of teaching without using the rod. When the boys, whose mothers have evidently no control over them at all, hear that they will be instructed without having their behinds whipped, they are naturally delighted — a delight which, in a humorous separate scene, is echoed and shared by two noisy devils who have a minor role in the play's action. The devils see much future gain for themselves (and for their master Lucifer) in a situation which, as they jubilantly exclaim, is bound to bring the two undisciplined young fellows to the gallows in no time at all. And this is exactly what happens: once the boys have been stripped of their money and their outer garments by a pair of particularly lively, well-conceived parasites, they turn to thieving in order to regain their losses and, one suspects, their shaken belief in themselves. But even their attempt at stealing is poorly controlled and directed: soon they are arrested and — in a display of stern sixteenth-century jurisprudence — sentenced to death by hanging. Until the arrival of Aristippus, who intervenes on behalf of the boys, there seems to be nothing that can save their neck. But Aristippus' argument is that the boys are his pupils and, as such, entitled to his protection, and in a swift reversal of the action the judge complies. All that is left is for the boys to be flogged in accordance with Aristippus's argument that whipping will sufficiently correct the situation, an argument with which the boys are quite willing to agree. So the rod has the final part of the action in this play, but it is used as a last resort, i.e., in order to bend rather than to break, and in a situation with which Erasmus too would have agreed.¹²

The position of Macropedius towards women is more complex particularly because he evidently wasn't much of a woman lover (a chorus passage in the play *Aluta* bluntly observes that a man's worst fate is to have a stupid woman: *Nil gravius est viro bono/Quam habere stultum coniugem*). Yet the main reason for the unflattering portrait of the two women in *Rebelles* is clearly their much too soft-hearted sympathy for their boys, even after they have totally lost control over their educational and moral progress. Both this sympathy and their lack of control in confrontation are shown as weaknesses of *reason*, as can be seen in the passage in which Cacolalia confronts Aristippus, after the boys have been caned for playing at dice and fighting during school hours. When Aristippus, without losing his calm, points out that the two boys might end up on the gallows — in which case their mothers will have only themselves to blame for their lack of sense and indulgence (*amentia* and *indulgentia*) — Cacolalia, still furious over the beating of her darling, runs out of terms of abuse, and attacks and strikes the teacher.

Even for a play in the New Comedy style, *Rebelles* is a savage play. Human relations are marred throughout by misunderstanding and physical abuse. In the early part of the play Philotecnia complains to

Cacolalia that her hips and shoulders are black and blue from the beating she received from her husband. Cacolalia, in turn, boasts of the power she has over her man, and describes with relish how she hit him over the head with a chair. With such lack of understanding prevailing between husbands and wives, one ceases to wonder why the men don't look after the education of their off-spring. In *Petriscus* (1536) which closely follows the pattern of *Rebelles*, much of the implied blame for the mother's mismanagement of her son's education is reserved for her husband Galenus, a feeble man. Fearful of his overbearing wife, he yields to her the control over his son's education, and escapes to the tavern as much as he can. Thus Galenus is more than a stock character who is the object of his wife's aggression and the audience's laughter, in turns: he becomes a central character whose weakness constitutes a key to the meaning of the play. Likewise *Rebelles*, if read at this serious level, becomes a story about the do's and don't's of education. One can certainly sympathize with the two mothers whose abhorrence of beating is an indication that they intend to break out of the circle of violence, at least as far as the next generation is concerned. Even so the play makes it clear that the women have insufficient control, both over themselves and their children, to handle the education of their sons. The nature of the boys must, in accordance with Erasmus' principles of *Natura*, be adjusted and bent by a firmer hand than theirs.

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With so much resemblance between Erasmus' and Macropedius' educational principles, a few words should be added about the things that set them apart. In his understanding of the great power of Nature (the child's native bent towards excellence) Erasmus was probably more optimistic than his younger compatriot. Maybe he could more easily be generous in his ideas because he did not spend much time applying them inside the class room: Erasmus was never able to see himself as a professional teacher, not even in a professor's chair. Thus when Colet expressed the desire to have Erasmus as his principal at St. Paul's School, he either was not realistic or he was writing in jest.

Above all, the difference between the two men comes down to a difference in genius, temperament and choice of profession. Carefully (though not always successfully) steering away from educational practice (how gladly he abandoned the supervision of Dr. Boerio's two sons, in Italy, at the end of 1506) Erasmus was destined to become the spokesman for the New Learning and the most prominent man of letters of his age — a reputation still intact today. In contrast, Macropedius climbed up to become principal of his school and a respected member of the bourgeoisie of Utrecht. He divided his time between his educational and

administrative duties and had to steal from both in order to write school primers and plays for the Carnival season. The plays remain as his permanent claim to fame, and rightly so. Though coarse, they are entertaining and full of life; though not without pedantry, they are authentic in outlook and provide fascinating glimpses of a society that was beginning to be touched by the ideals of Renaissance humanism.

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Notes

- 1 The only modern edition is that edited by Johannes Bolte (Berlin, 1897).
- 2 Cf. R.C. Engelberts, *Georgius Macropedius: Bassarus* (Tilburg, 1968), p. 25.
- 3 Though practically unknown today, Macropedius was once recognized as one of the leading playwrights of Europe. Among the other prominent dramatists of the period are the Italian Ariosto (1474-1533) and the Dutchman Willem de Volder (usually known as Gnaphaeus, 1493-1568). The latter's *Acolastus* (1529) was so popular that forty-seven editions of it had appeared by 1585. Macropedius' most popular play, *Hecastus* (1539), a Breughelian, rather fleshed-out version of *Everyman/Elckerlijc*, ran through many separate editions both during its author's life-time and in the course of the second half of the sixteenth century. During the same period it was translated into a variety of languages and frequently performed all over Europe, including in towns as far apart as Danzig, Prague and Munich. (See Thomas Best, *Macropedius*, New York, 1972, p. 24, and Engelberts, p. 31.)
- 4 Engelberts gives a rather detailed, if uneven, survey of Macropedius' life and publications.
- 5 The study of Macropedius' work has only recently gained some momentum, and so far none of his twelve plays are available in English. The best introduction is Thomas Best's monograph in *Twayne's World Authors Series*.
- 6 The translation is by Yehudi Lindeman.
- 7 Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. R.J. Schoeck (Don Mills, Ont., 1966), p. 25.
- 8 In other matters, such as his method for teaching Latin, Ascham is too much of a Ciceronian to resemble Erasmus. Cf. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 281.
- 9 See W.H. Woodward, ed., *Desiderius Erasmus Concerning the Aim and Method of Education* (New York, 1904 and 1964), pp. 204-05. All references (most of them to the *De Pueris Instituendis*, of 1529) will be to this edition. The numbers of the pages appear in my text between parentheses.
- 10 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation* (New York, 1963-), I, 92, 1.
- 11 Robert Coles, *The Place of the Child*, from a transcript made available by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, based on three radio talks given for CBC's *Ideas* series.
- 12 Cf. Erasmus' injunction to the teacher: "Warn him of the fate of those who by neglect of high wisdom have sunk into contempt, poverty, disgrace and evil life. These are your instruments of discipline, my Christian teacher, worthy of your calling and of your flock. But should none of these avail, then, if it must be so, let the rod be used with due regard to self-respect in the manner of it." (Woodward, p. 209.)