Douglas H. Parker

If an anthology of influential and factual Reformation literature were produced to-day, the *Letters of Obscure Men* would hardly find a place in it. The work would undoubtedly contain a good deal of Tyndale, Erasmus, and Luther, probably some Melancthon and Oecolampadius, and quite possibly snippets from the precursors, Wycliffe and Huss. But it would be a presumptuous editor indeed who would include a work whose authorship is still unsettled, whose issues and personal portraits are exaggerated and calumnious, and whose historical authenticity is often suspect. Such a work is the *Letters of Obscure Men*.¹ But to say this is not to deny its importance as a document which in many ways captures the emotion, the spirit, and the temper of the times better, and even more precisely, than the more factual and authentic reformation tracts that we still possess. In many ways it is in the tradition of Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium*. Although considerably less artful and more clumsy in its satire than Erasmus's *Folly*, the *Letters* still shows some indebtedness to that work. The creation of the naive narrator unwittingly speaking stupidity and nonsense and thereby tinging all that he mentions in good faith with ridicule, is not unlike Folly in one of her many poses. The issues attacked — clerical worldliness, monastic institutions, the stultifying hair-splitting of scholasticism, and so on — find many of their roots not only in the general dispute between the old order and the new, but also in the *Praise of Folly*. However, unlike *Folly*, we are always sure where we stand in the *Letters*. The narrative technique is simplistic and straight-forward; whatever the correspondent lauds and praises to Ortwin Gratius, the recipient of most of the letters, we are supposed to condemn and laugh at. The numerous narrators are types rather than individuals, and their letters are all similar in theme and tone. They are the reactionaries tenaciously clinging to the old order and strongly opposing social, educational, and most importantly, Christian progress.

In the light of this basic narrative simplicity, it is almost beyond belief that anyone could read the *Letters* in any way other than the one so obviously intended. And yet the renowned Steele, writing in *The Tatler* (197), demonstrates total unawareness of their simple satirical intent. He writes:

It seems this is a collection of letters, which some profound blockheads, who lived before our times, have written in honour of each other, and for their mutual information in each other's absurdities. . . . It is, methinks, wonderful that fellows could be awake, and utter such incoherent conceptions, and converse with great gravity like learned men, without the least taste of knowledge or good sense.²

It would be instructive and probably amusing to know how Steele would have responded to the labyrinthine complexities of narration in the *Praise of Folly*.

Unlike *Folly* as well, the *Letters* is not averse to slander and character defamation of the most pernicious kind. This thorough and often unjust assassination of anyone who happened to rouse the furor of the authors was what Erasmus seemed to object to most of all. His anger had some justification; in the second volume in particular, he is associated with those who carry out these personal attacks upon their enemies. His attitude is expressed in a letter to Hermann, Count of Nuenar, 25 August 1517:

It is well known to all the Basel society, that I always disapproved of the book, which has for title, *The Epistles of Obscure Men*. It is not that I have any aversion to a lively

jest, but that I dislike the precedent of injury to the good name of another — a wrong which anyone may so easily commit. We did ourselves, long ago, make sport in the *Moria*, but no one was attacked by name. These writers, whoever they may be, not contented with the trifles already produced, have added a similar sheet in which — for some reason which I cannot guess — they have thought fit to bring in my name over and over again.³

From this excerpt it is clear that Erasmus did not approve of at least three elements in the *Letters*. First of all, he resented the kind and degree of direct personal slander. Secondly, he saw the work, written in a style that he would have considered crude and tasteless, as a direct threat to the cause of peaceful religious reform and the advancement of good letters. And finally, because of these two elements, he resented the mention of his own name in the work and attempted to dissociate himself as much as possible from the crudities of the *Letters*. In this letter he mentions the *Praise of Folly* as a work which spoke generally of faults and errors in existing institutions without descending to the level of personal invective. This, in large part, is true. However, one cannot help remembering the *Julius exclusis e coelis*⁴ and the degree to which Erasmus's general criticism could descend into personal vituperation. Although one cannot disagree with the viewpoint expressed by Erasmus in this letter, at the same time it is understandable how the authors of the *Letters of Obscure Men* could feel confident that they were mustering an ally in Erasmus and not creating a foe. Indeed, that Erasmus himself must have felt that he had established an infelicitous precedent for the authors of the *Letters* through the writing of the *Julius* is clear in at least two of his own epistles. In the letter cited above, immediately after scolding the authors of the second volume of the *Letters of Obscure Men*, he adds:

My James, on his late return from Cologne, has brought me back a sort of pamphlet, which he found in circulation in your neighbourhood, in which the late Pope Julius is introduced in a ludicrous fashion.

.....
James added however, — though I scarcely suppose it to be the fact, — that there were some people who suspected, that the thing was an invention of mine, because — so he said, — the Latinity was fairly good.

Now, I really have not leisure enough, to spend an hour upon any such nonsense; neither is my mind so irreverent as to wish to throw ridicule upon a Pope, or so silly as to write against persons, who have it in their power to proscribe the writer.⁵

Further, in another letter written some eleven days earlier to John Caesarius, Erasmus once again yokes together the *Letters of Obscure Men* and the *Julius*. One is forced to conclude that Erasmus himself, despite his protestations, clearly recognized his unintentional association with the authors of the *Letters* and their recognition of his — as an ally because of his irreverent and mocking *Julius*. He protests too much again in this manner:

I highly disapprove of the *Epistles of Obscure Men*. Their pleasantry might amuse at first glance, if such a precedent had not been too aggressive. I have no objection to the ludicrous, provided it be without insult to any one. But it was more annoying, when in the second edition my name was mixed up in it: as if it were not enough to play the fool, without exposing us to prejudice, and in a great measure destroying the fruit obtained by so much laborious study.

.....
But of all such incidents none has given me so much annoyance, as the report (if

true), which has been brought me by my servant James, that there is some sort of publication in the hands of many persons at Cologne, directed against Pope Julius, and representing him as excluded by St. Peter from heaven. I had heard some time ago of some such play being acted in France, where there has always been an excessive licence with respect to nonsense of this kind; and I suppose that somebody has turned it into Latin. I wonder what people are thinking of, when they waste their leisure and their labour in such a way. But I am still more surprised to find that there are persons who suspect that such signal folly has proceeded from me. I attribute this to the fact that the language used is perhaps not such bad Latin!⁶

As well as sharing general similarities in tone with some of Erasmus's writings and in the attacks made upon the corruptness of the old order by him, the authors of the *Letters* must also have seen him as an ally in the event which, ostensibly at least, sparked the writing of the work, the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy. This controversy is important not only because it establishes the context for the work, but also because it is in large part responsible for both Erasmus's appearance in the book and the portrait of him which emerges from it.⁷ The *Letters of Obscure Men* developed out of an extended dispute between two principal characters, Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Jewish convert to Christianity, and Johannes Reuchlin, a lawyer by profession and one of Europe's most prominent Hebrew scholars. In 1508, the zealous convert Pfefferkorn denounced in writing the Jewish practice of usury and the Jews' hatred of Christians and set about trying to have Jewish books taken out of public hands and general circulation. In August 1509, the first positive step in this direction was taken by the Emperor Maximilian who issued a mandate ordering the collection of all Jewish books. When the archbishop of Mainz objected to this action, Maximilian ordered the archbishop to solicit the opinions of the universities of Mainz, Cologne, Erfurt and Heidelberg and to seek the aid of experts on the matter. Three of the four universities came out in overwhelming support of Pfefferkorn. One of the experts, Jakob von Hochstraten, the Dominican inquisitor general in the archdioceses of Cologne, Mainz and Trier, agreed with the three universities and the case was decided in favour of Pfefferkorn.

However, another of the experts, Reuchlin himself, decided against Pfefferkorn and made his opinions felt in a work which not only explained his case, but also questioned the sincerity of Pfefferkorn's conversion to Christianity. Reuchlin's actions thus initiated a controversy of no small proportions in which a number of prominent persons including Erasmus himself were to become involved. Pfefferkorn replied to Reuchlin's work in the spring of 1511 and accused the Hebrew scholar of being bribed by the Jews. Pfefferkorn's work entitled *Hand Mirror*, was answered by Reuchlin in August of the same year. In his book entitled *Eye Mirror* he not only violently attacked Pfefferkorn, but also the theological faculty of the University of Cologne. This work so angered the theological faculty that they too now actively joined the fray and Reuchlin found himself attacked by both Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans. Pfefferkorn kept up his barrage of insults in a work entitled *Brand Mirror*. Reuchlin was quick to respond with his *Defense* which he presented to Maximilian. The Cologne theologians now moved quickly and used their influence to have Reuchlin's *Defense* condemned and suppressed. Meanwhile Hochstraten, working behind the scenes, tried to defeat Reuchlin by calling him before a court of inquisition presided over by the Dominicans. The archbishop of Mainz however ordered such proceedings stopped and Reuchlin appealed to Pope Leo X. Rome commissioned the bishop of Speyer to decide the case and on March 29, 1514 he decided the issue in favour of Reuchlin. However, the end of the dispute was

far from over. The issue sprang up again soon after Reuchlin's exoneration by the bishop of Speyer and it quickly became clear that the dispute was becoming one between humanists on the one hand and monks on the other. Erasmus's position in this fracas clearly shows his own humanistic leanings and his desire to uphold the cause of good letters against the barbarisms of the scholastic theologians. Erasmus first met Reuchlin at Frankfurt in 1515⁸ and thus began a relationship that was to last until Reuchlin's death in 1522. However, as early as 1514 he had heard about the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy probably from Ulrich von Hutten who was involved in defending Reuchlin against his detractors.⁹ In the same year, Erasmus wrote to Reuchlin from Basle expressing his own sympathy with his cause as well as the sympathy of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and John Colet.¹⁰ In 1515 he corresponded with Cardinals Riario and Grimani and spoke out in favour of Reuchlin and his cause.¹¹ Throughout this period he continued to defend Reuchlin and in one letter he denounced and attacked Pfefferkorn and those who were supporting him.¹² As Preserved Smith has pointed out, "Reuchlin received so many testimonials from eminent supporters that he published them under the title of *Letters of Famous Men*."¹³ This volume of laudatory epistles plus the entire controversy on which it was based set the stage for the appearance of the satirical and biting *Letters of Obscure Men* — a work designed in part at least to serve as a commentary on the stupidity and incredible arrogance of Reuchlin's opponents. Hence, such issues as the advancement of the new learning and the spread of humanism, the attacks upon scholasticism, the call for religious reform, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy, indicate to some extent why the name of Erasmus appears as often as it does in the *Letters of Obscure Men*. The authors were including in their work a kindred spirit who shared a good many of their beliefs and who had supported their views (or so they thought) both in his own writings and in his defense of and sympathy with Reuchlin.

It now remains to consider the view of Erasmus as it emerges from the *Letters*. Although many of the elements in the work cannot be seen as a factual and accurate picture of the times, nevertheless, the drawing of Erasmus's portrait by these German reformers allows one a candid view of their attitude towards a person whom many considered the champion of religious reform and humanism. By far the largest number of references to Erasmus occur in the second volume of the *Letters*. In the first volume he appears only twice; in the second he is referred to nine times.

Erasmus's first appearance in volume I occurs in letters XLII. The letter, addressed to Ortwin Gratius, is sent by one who describes himself as "Anton N., of the Art of Medicine almost Doctor Licentiate." This opening description of the letter writer gives one a good indication of how Erasmus is about to be depicted and what aspects of his thought are to be attacked. Apparently Anton hears of Erasmus at Strasburg; Erasmus is described as "one who is profoundly skilled in all knowledge and in every branch of learning." Probably Erasmus himself would have denied this fact; Anton does so, but in the process reveals his own stupidity. He "could not believe. . . that a man so small as he is could know so much." Anton earnestly requests a meeting with Erasmus to test his knowledge and prepares thorny and "subtle questions concerning the medical art." The description of the preparation of these questions — "Out of this notebook, therefore, I called me a question with all the comments thereon, and the arguments *pro* and *con*, and armed with these I purposed to beset this man . . ." — suggests the general form of discussion for which Anton is preparing. The format is quite obviously to be the scholastic one of interminable definition, classification and division. Anton will probably ransack his precursors, the medieval scholastic theoreticians, with their incomprehensible quiddi-

ties. To make matters worse, Anton's friend is to prepare a feast and invite "speculative Theologians and Jurists of high renown" to participate in the discussion. The very mention of "speculative Theologians" makes explicit the conflict which the authors of the *Letters* are establishing here. The champion of humanism is to be pitted against charlatanism as represented by the Schoolmen who rangle and fight over nonsense until they have turned truth upside down and appropriated it to themselves alone. The day of the feast arrives, and Erasmus begins the discussion with "a mightily long preamble." Anton is incapable of understanding anything Erasmus says "by reason that he had such a wee small voice." More probably, however, Anton cannot understand Erasmus because he is a blockhead and unable to comprehend anything outside of a scholastic framework. After a discussion with a "Magister Noster"¹⁴ the conversation turns to poetry. Here again, Anton demonstrates his scholastic preoccupation by applying the form of a syllogism to an analysis of classical poetry. The result is, of course, a classic example of *reductio ad absurdum*:

Our host therefore, who is a humanist of parts, fell to some discourse on Poetry, and greatly belauded *Julius Caesar*, as touching both his writings and his valorous deeds. So soon as I heard this, I perceived my opportunity, for I had studied much, and learned much under you in the matter of Poetry, when I was at *Cologne*, and I said, "Forasmuch as you have begun to speak concerning Poetry, I can therefore no longer hide my light under a bushel, and I roundly aver that I believe not that Caesar wrote those *Commentaries*, and I will prove my position with argument following, which runneth thus: Whosoever hath business with arms and is occupied in labour unceasing cannot learn Latin; but *Caesar* was ever at War and in labours manifold; therefore he could not become lettered and get Latin.

This statement is perhaps one of the best examples of unwitting deflation in the work. Here the scholastics are not only seen as out of touch with the practical aspects of life, they are also depicted as narrow-minded and totally obsessed with the be-all and end-all of their existence. Erasmus's attitude towards Anton's absurdity is typical of the author of the *Praise of Folly*. He says nothing to refute what has been said and merely laughs. Anton interprets Erasmus's refusal to respond as total victory; he has "overthrown [Erasmus] by the subtlety of [his] argument." The letter closes with a final attack on poetry and classical revivalists. Erasmus may be a poet and know "fair Latin" but what is this in comparison to a thorough knowledge "of the philosophic sciences, such as Theology and Medicine . . ."

The other appearance of Erasmus in this first volume occurs in letter XLVIII. The letter discussed above was primarily concerned with depicting Erasmus as a defender of good letters against the Schoolmen; this letter indirectly demonstrates his contribution to the cause of a renewed and revitalized Christianity. The correspondent, Jakob Van Hoogstraeten, presents Erasmus in this way:

It is said that *Erasmus of Rotterdam* hath composed many treatises on Theology; I cannot believe he hath avoided error. He beginneth by writing a tract to vex the theologians, and now he writeth theologically himself — so that it passeth! If I come back to *Germany* and read his scribblements, and find in them the very smallest jot on which he hath gone astray — or which I do not understand — let him take heed to his skin! He hath also written in Greek; this is not well, for we are Latins and not Greeks. If he would fain to write what no man can understand, why doth he not use Italian, or Bohemian, or Hungarian? For then none could understand him. In the name of a hundred devils let him conform to us Theologians, and dispute in his writings with *Utrum*, and *Contra*, and *Arguitur*, and *Replica*, and such formal conclusions, as all Theologians are wont to do, and then we could read them.

Hoogstraeten's objections to Erasmus's kind and method of theology is not clearly presented in this passage, but it is possible to piece together what he means from Erasmus's works principally devoted to an explanation of his theological position. Probably the best theoretical explanation of Erasmus's attitude towards theology is found in the *Paraclesis*,¹⁵ the preface to his *Novum Instrumentum*; its practical application is outlined in the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.¹⁶ Whereas the Schoolmen were primarily concerned with the intricacies of dogma and doctrine, Erasmus's greatest contribution to theology was his emphasis on the inculcation of a Christian ethic and the practical application of the few simple truths of the faith as found in the New Testament. For Erasmus, all men had the potential to be theologians. For him theology probably meant little more than a way of life modelled upon the example set by Christ in the Gospels. On the other hand, the Schoolmen saw it as the exclusive property of a select few who had been trained in the rigid methods of formal scholastic debate. Erasmus regarded this view as wrong-headed and ultimately detrimental to the cause of Christian progress. The Incarnation took place for all men and all were directed to one final goal. Erasmus's task, as he saw it, was to cast aside the veils and remove the obscurities that for so long had kept in darkness the *philosophia Christi*, the essence of Christianity. While remaining steadfast in this belief Erasmus always maintained his orthodoxy often in the face of overwhelming opposition. His objections to scholasticism were not so much based upon dogma or fundamental truth – indeed he always maintained that his mind was ill-equipped to argue about such matters – but only with the manner in which they conveyed the truth and obscured it with *adiaphora*. It was finally this attitude of doctrinal orthodoxy coupled with his desire for Christian unity which would not allow him to become an active supporter of the reformers when they presumptuously, he must have thought, moved outside the pale of the Roman Church on doctrinal grounds.¹⁷

The tract written by Erasmus to vex the theologians is probably *Antibarbarorum*.¹⁸ This work was originally intended to be made up of two parts. The first book was to be an attack upon the scholastic theologians, designated as barbarians; the second, a defence of good letters.¹⁹ Of these two only the first book has survived.

In this letter as well, reference is made to Erasmus's use of Greek in his writings. Hoogstraeten objects to it and by so doing defines himself, in Erasmus's frame of reference, as a barbarian. The barbarism evident in his disdain for Erasmus's kind of theology is also apparent in his dislike for Greek and good letters in general.

Erasmus's portrait in the first volume of the *Letters* can perhaps best be compared to cameo appearances. He is outside of the mainstream of the majority of the *Letters* and is called upon, one feels, only to give the work a certain general self-justification as satire with a desperately serious moral intent. His two appearances, although detailed enough in their own context, suggest a kind of hesitancy or reluctance on the part of the author or authors of this first volume to call to their aid a person whose position on certain crucial matters of the day often defied precise definition because of the complexity of his thought and his restraining doctrinal conservatism. In contrast to the singlemindedness of the German reformers, Erasmus's thought was always subject to nice introspection resulting in the establishment of firm priorities and, often enough, qualification of earlier positions. His aims at reform were tempered by prudence. Reform could lead to revolution, and revolution to disunity, his greatest fear. In short, his vision was a long term one which allowed him to project a present course of action into the future and determine its effect on the future. While passionately concerned with reform in his own day,

he was also wise enough to realize the sometimes lethal effects of time on present expedient positions.

Erasmus's appearances in the second volume however, point to a total unawareness on the author's part to realize what can be described as Erasmus's intellectual aloofness. Rather than appearing only occasionally, he becomes more like a permanent fixture in this volume and is associated, without qualification, with a definite faction that because of its radicalness, was soon to lose his sympathy altogether. This presumption manifests itself not only in the frequency with which Erasmus's name is mentioned, but also in the varying contexts in which it appears. The rather unfortunate appearance of this volume in the spring of 1517 must also have given Erasmus some disturbing moments. Luther's *Theses* were to appear later in the same year and it did not take a great deal of prescience to realize that a serious religious conflict was inevitable. Moreover, from one of Erasmus's letters, it seems that there were some at least who maintained that he not only supported the content and tone of the *Letters*, but wrote them as well.²⁰ Such inflammatory issues as Indulgences (VI), Masses (XII), and Confession (XII), are satirized in this volume in varying degrees. To suggest that Erasmus was not concerned with these issues and their abuses would be an open denial of many of the things that he said about them in his writings. But at the same time, to maintain that he whole-heartedly supported the views expressed by a radical group would be tantamount to saying that his thought never went beyond pure criticism. In the final analysis this is perhaps what distinguished him from the authors of the *Letters*. Their intent was to satirize existing abuses and to this end they mustered Erasmus as one of their supporters. But by so doing, they abstracted one small part of the man's thought from his total view. This attempt to re-create him in their own image led to infelicitous distortions and perhaps to greater calumny, albeit unintentional, than that brought upon any other person in the work.

It would be impossible to describe in detail the varying views of Erasmus in this second volume of the *Letters*. However, a simple list suggests the many angles from which he is seen. In six of the nine letters in which he appears, he is depicted as a stalwart supporter of Reuchlin against Pfefferkorn (XII, XX, XXXVIII, XLIX, LIX, LXIV). Moreover, three of the letters refer to his influential epistles to Leo X in support of Reuchlin. Five of the letters attack his theological writings (XII, XX, XLIX, L, LI). In two (XLIX, LI) he is seen as a heretic, and in one of these he is described as a "mock Christian." In four letters (XX, XXXVIII, LXIV, LXVIII) he is scorned as a poet and in one of these (XXXVIII) his Proverbs are described as worthless next to Solomon's. Unlike his more general appearance in the first volume, this second makes mention of many of his works and writings in general. We have already seen the references to his letters to Leo and the Proverbs. In addition to these, mention is made of the *Antibarbarorum*, the *Moriae Encomium*, purposely re-titled *Moria Erasmi*, his *Novum Instrumentum*, his edition of Jerome, his commentary on Jerome, and Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools*, wrongly attributed to him.

This cavalier invocation of Erasmus's name and works which wrongly suggests his allegiance to the radical German reform movement is, in one instance, made even more intolerable by what can only be seen as an attack upon his integrity and honesty. In letter LIX, Erasmus's name is employed by the narrator in a characteristic way to demonstrate the former's abhorrence of scholasticism and his distrust of monasticism. At the same time, the author takes this opportunity to articulate, through the narrator, his scepticism towards Erasmus's sincerity. The context of the letter is, as usual, the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy. Johann Loffenholz,

the narrator, is engaged in seeking out those who are defending Reuchlin. A list of names is produced and the narrator adds,

Then I enquired in other quarters whether *Erasmus of Rotterdam* taketh their part? And a certain merchant saying. *Erasmus* taketh his own part; but he assured he will never be the friend of those Theologians and Friars; and he hath evidently, in his words and writings, defended and vindicated *Johann Reuchlin* and hath addressed letters to the Pope on his behalf.

The important phrase here is "Erasmus taketh his own part." As the Reformation movement became more critical, increasingly Erasmus was to see himself as an outsider and as one who could not, in all conscience, support any faction that threatened to divide Christendom. Ulrich von Hutten, the probable author of this second volume of the *Letters*, was to become more aware of this as the situation became graver, and his view of Erasmus's position was not one of admiration. Perhaps even at this early stage he recognized the road that Erasmus was determined to follow and saw this as a kind of cowardice.²¹ The Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy and the way it is expressed in this volume suggests and anticipates the future polarization of the conservatives and the reformers, just as Erasmus, taking his own part, predicts in many ways the course that he felt obliged to follow.

One letter in particular in this second volume (LXVIII) stands out as an interesting one for examination because of its partial view of Erasmus. Even though the narrator of this passage is not to be regarded as objective, nevertheless the elements of Erasmus's thought which he extrapolates from the entire picture, present Erasmus in a most unfavourable light. Because of the deliberate selectivity of the passage, Erasmus emerges as little more than a ranting anarchist intent upon the destruction of Christian unity and peace. Perhaps even more annoying — and here again we come to what must be seen as the basis of Erasmus's legitimate complaint — the author is endorsing the opposite of the narrator and thereby employing the narrator's objections against Erasmus to give support to his own position. The passage reads:

Now, not to be tedious. I avouch that I have no good opinion of *Erasmus*. He is an enemy of the monks: he speaketh much ill of them; he saith they are clumsy jackasses, who hate polite letters, and they can do naught save guzzle, and swill, and mumble psalms. Yet he lieth in his throat when he saith these things. He himself is the jackass. He is a sound Latinist, and writeth fair Latin — but he knoweth naught else. He hath written many books — notably the *Ship of Fools* and a commentary on Jerome — and in these he doeth not but belabour the Regulars. I warn him, pardy, that if he refrain not his hands from them we will do to him as to *Reuchlin*, though he were in a hundred ways favoured by the Pope and King *Charles*. We have seen many men as arrogant as he, and yet we have suppressed them. I will tell you somewhat — but blab not thereof, or the devil may confound me. Doctor *Jacob van Hoogstraeten* and all the Doctors in Cologne and *Cambridge* are now examining his commentary on *Jerome*, and I hear that it will go woundily hard with him. . . . I cannot call to mind all that they found, but I remember somewhat; he declareth that Saint *Jerome* was not a Cardinal — and this is high treason; he is heterodox concerning *St. George* and *St. Christopher*, and relics of Saints, and candles, and the Sacraments of Confession; moreover in many passages he speaketh blasphemy, inasmuch as he speaketh against the Holy Doctor and the Subtle Doctor. He declareth that their Theology is nothing worth.

It should be obvious from this long excerpt that the narrator's negative bias against Erasmus is the author's positive prejudice. What the narrator deplores, the author praises. Erasmus is

associated with a book that he did not write; he is a deadly enemy of the monks and casts aspersions on them; all he knows is Latin; some of his writings are treasonous; accusations against saints, relics, and Confession amount to heresy; he denies the validity of traditional theology. Certainly Erasmus's criticism of the established institutions involved a good number of these things, but many accusations made against him here are overstated and some are total fabrications. His numerous positive contributions are not critically articulated and his criticisms are seen as destructive and similar to the captiousness of the German radical group. Erasmus, of course, realized the abuse he was suffering at the hands of the authors of the *Letters* and found it difficult to understand how on the one hand they could admire and respect him and on the other, subject him to such unfair treatment. In a letter written in August 1517, a few months after the publication of the second volume of the *Letters*, he questions the authors' motives for including his name in the work:

If they wish me well, why expose me to so much prejudice? If ill, why put me in a different class from that against which their publication is aimed.²²

Increasingly in this second volume of the *Letters*, Erasmus's views are being associated, in quite a false manner, with the more extreme views of the reformers. To presume to propagate this unfair identity in belief and attitude was, to Erasmus's way of thinking, unjustified because it ignored his firm insistence upon his doctrinal orthodoxy, the totality of his thought, and his attempts to work for gradual and peaceful reform while remaining within the fold of the Catholic Church.

The general picture of Erasmus in the *Letters of Obscure Men* should not come as too much of a surprise to anyone aware of his precarious position during the years of religious revolt. Many of his writings suffered the same fate.²³ Much of what he said and wrote could be used as support for all sides in the religious struggle, and where firm approbation for opinion could not be found, many did not hesitate to resort to radical "decontextualization." The religious controversy of the sixteenth century was, like most wars, a battle involving extremists, who, ironically, called upon Erasmus and used his works to support their views, and at the same time, failed to heed his most recurring call for tolerance, unity and peace.

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Notes

- 1 All quotations from the *Letters* are taken from *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, intro. and trans. Francis Griffin Stokes (London, 1909).
- 2 Quoted in Stokes, VIII.
- 3 Francis M. Nichols, *The Epistles of Erasmus* (New York, 1901; reprinted, 1962), vol. III, p. 19.
- 4 Wallace K. Ferguson, *Erasmi Opuscula* (The Hague, 1933). Ferguson presents a convincing case to show that the *Julius* was Erasmus's brain-child.
- 5 Nichols, III, p. 20.
- 6 Nichols, II, pp. 610-11.
- 7 A much fuller description of the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy as well as the authorship and details of publication of the *Letters* can be found in Stockes' Introduction as well as in *On the Eve of the Reformation*, "Letters of Obscure Men," intro. Hajo Holborn (New York, 1954), XII-XIV.
- 8 Preserved Smith, *Erasmus, A Study of His Life, Ideals, and Place in History* (New York, 1922; reprinted, 1962), p. 132.
- 9 Smith, p. 132. Hutten had, in fact, defended Reuchlin in print in a work entitled *The Triumph of Reuchlin*.
- 10 In the following excerpt, Erasmus praises Reuchlin's *Eye Mirror*: "While I was staying in England I received your letter, with the Bishop of Spire's judgment of acquittal, which

- I communicated to several friends, of whom there is none that fails to respect your fertile and happy genius. They laughed; and urgently demanded to see the condemned book, concluding that it was something splendid from the character of its opponents. I refer especially to the Bishop of Rochester, a man of the highest integrity and a consummate theologian, and John Colet, dean of St. Paul's in London" (Nichols, II, pp. 156-57). In this passage Reuchlin's association with eminent English humanists is made clear: "I cannot find words to express, in what affection and veneration your name is held by that great chieftain of literature and piety, the Bishop of Rochester, inasmuch that, whereas Erasmus has been hitherto in high esteem, he is now almost despised in comparison with Reuchlin . . . Do not fail to write frequently to him, and also to Colet. Both take a great interest in you" (Nichols, II, pp. 373-74). And finally, in the following excerpt, the learned teacher Reuchlin is emphasized: "The Bishop of Rochester almost adores you; to John Colet your name is sacred . . . I was visiting lately a very old Carthusian Monastery at St. Omer. The Prior of that house, by reading your books, without any other instructor, had obtained a very considerable acquaintance with Hebrew, and was so devoted to you that your very name was an object of reverence" (Nichols, II, pp. 395-96).
- 11 Nichols, II, pp. 189-93 passim. To Grimani he complains that Envy is the cause of the complaints against Reuchlin: "For you know how old a story it is, that Envy, more noxious than a serpent, meets every extraordinary effort with a discordant hiss. An example of this we have lately seen to our great sorrow in the case of that eminent man, John Reuchlin. It was time, that a man of venerable age should enjoy his noble studies, and reap an agreeable harvest from the glorious field of his youthful labours". To Riario he states: "I do earnestly beseech and adjure you for the sake of good Letters, which your Eminence has always loved, that that distinguished man, Doctor John Reuchlin, may enjoy your protection and good-will in the business in which he is concerned."
 - 12 Writing to Reuchlin in 1517, Erasmus states: "That circumcised creature, who from a wicked Jew has become a still more reprobate — I will not say Christian, but professor of Christianity, — has published a book, and that in the vulgar tongue, so as to be intelligible to his own class of people, in which, as I am told, he tears to pieces all the learned, naming them by name. But in my judgment it is a monster, that does not at all deserve to be mentioned in the letters of accomplished persons. Good heavens, what a tool it is in the hands of those masked enemies of Religion! That one man, half-Jew, half-Christian, has done more mischief to Christianity than a whole sink of Jews. He is simply doing, if I am not mistaken, the same service to his tribe as Zopyrus did to Darius, but is much more wicked than he. It is us for, my Reuchlin, to turn our backs upon such portents, and to find our pleasure in Christ, and in the enjoyment of honourable studies" (Nichols, III, pp. 148-49).
 - 13 Smith, p. 134.
 - 14 That the *Praise of Folly* is not far from the authors' minds here is evident in their choice of the expression "Magister Noster". In one part of the *Folly* Erasmus pokes fun at the scholastic theologians in this manner: "... they think themselves nearest to the gods whenever they are reverently addressed as 'our masters', a title which holds as much meaning for them as the 'tetragram' does for the Jews. Consequently, they say it's unlawful to write MAGISTER NOSTER except in capital letters, and if anyone inverts the order and says *noster magister* he destroys the entire majesty of the theologians' title at a single blow" *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1971), section 53, p. 163.
 - 15 *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, V (Lugduni Batavorum, 1704), 137-43. Hereafter cited as L.B.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 1-66.
 - 17 For a more detailed view of Erasmus's theological position and the *philosophia Christi* see James K. McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics Under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford, 1965); also B. Hall, "Erasmus, Biblical Scholar and Reformer", *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London, 1970), 81-113.
 - 18 L.B. X, 1691-1743.
 - 19 *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. and H.M. Allen, I, 37 (Oxford, 1913), p. 136. For further bibliographical details on

Antibarbarorum see *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. I, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson; annotated by Wallace K. Ferguson (Toronto, 1974), p. 55 (note).

20 Allen III, 808, p. 263.

21 This view was by no means restricted to the German reformers. William Roy the eccentric author of *Rede me and be not wroth*, (STC 21427) views Erasmus in this way in his vicious little dialogue:

He feareth greatly some men saye/
Yf masse shulde vterly decay/
Least he shulde lose his pension.

b^v
7

And again:

Also he hath geven soche a laudacion/
Vnto the ydols of abhominacion/
In his glosynge pistles before tyme.
That yf he shulde wother wyse reclame/
Men wolde impute vnto his blame
Of vnstable inconstancy the cryme.

b^r
8

Hutten's statement, and to a greater degree Roy's as well, suggest that there were some at least who seriously questioned the sincerity of Erasmus's motives.

A more detailed view of Erasmus's attempts to defend himself against allegations made by Hutten is found in his *Spongia*, a work in which his defence of Reuchlin is again explained. *L.B. X*, 1631-72.

22 Nichols, III, p. 19.

23 A classic example of the suitability of many of Erasmus's writings to serve particular causes can be seen in the numerous editions of the first translation of the English *Enchiridion*. The work was published throughout the sixteenth century from 1533 to 1576. As the years advanced and the political and religious situation in England became more solidly Erastian and Protestant, the content of the *Enchiridion* was altered, sometimes drastically, in order to bring the work more in line with government policy.