Erasmus' Manual of Letter-writing: Tradition and Innovation

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RÉSUMÉ: *Le Manuel d'art épistolaire d'Érasme*

Le Manuel d'art épistolaire d'Érasme contient un certain nombre de références extrêmement critiques à l'égard de ses contemporains et de ses prédécesseurs dans le domaine. Cela semble suggérer qu'il va offrir des réflexions complètement nouvelles ou différentes, une suggestion que la lecture du traité ne confirme pas. On peut donc en conclure que les critiques d'Érasme ne représentent, dans une certaine mesure, qu'une sorte d'affectation. Les limites et le contenu de son manuel, en particulier ses commentaires sur les types de lettres et leurs caractéristiques ainsi que son procédé de fournir des exemples de lettres et de phrases, continuent une tradition établie par les premiers humanistes et certainement les écrivains progressistes du moyen âge qui eux-mêmes s'appuyaient sur la tradition rhétorique classique. Dans un domaine, cependant, Érasme va nettement plus loin que ses prédécesseurs. Une section du manuel s'adresse aux professeurs de l'art d'écrire plutôt qu'aux étudiants et traite de méthodes d'enseignement. Bien que les idées présentées dans ce contexte ne soient pas neuves et reprennent les théories de Quintilien et d'autres auteurs classiques, la présentation vivante et emphatique donne à cette section un caractère typiquement Erasmien et reflète l'intérêt pour la théorie de l'éducation qu'il a partagé sa vie durant.

Authors often preface their work with a claim to superiority over their predecessors, but the exordium in Erasmus' *De epistolis conscribendis* combines this claim with an unusually violent diatribe against earlier teachers of epistolography. Within the space of two pages Erasmus calls them 'untaught,' 'illiterate,' 'tyrannical,' 'petty schoolmasters,' and 'blabbering idiots.'¹ On reading such epithets one naturally expects the author to offer a radically different approach to the subject. The purpose of this article is to put this implied claim to the test.

Perhaps one should begin by asking who the much-reviled (but usually nameless) schoolmasters were. Some scholars see in Erasmus' criticism a 'vigorous attack on the medieval formulae for letter-writing' and a reaction against the 'medieval legalists.'² Others say that its main thrust was directed, not against medieval theorists, but what one scholar terms 'neo-classicists,' that is, Renaissance authors of the Ciceronian persuasion.³ Such diverse interpretations are possible because Erasmus' approach to the subject of epistolography is eclectic at best, inconsistent at worst.⁴

Among writers criticized by name in Erasmus' manual are a number of authors from the 15th and 16th centuries. In the prefatory letter, Erasmus comments on Francesco Negro, the Venetian teacher whose instructions on letter-writing had been published in 1488: 'What is the point of reading Francesco Negro? Not only are his rules pedantically petty . . . but there is not a single letter of his in existence which is even in good Latin.'⁵ The work of Giammario Filelfo, the son of the famous humanist Francesco Filelfo, also seemed unsatisfactory to Erasmus. It was in his opinion, 'entirely muddled and disorderly and to speak fairly candidly, defective both in scholarship and in suitability to the purpose at hand.'⁶ As for Giovanni Sulpizio and Niccolo Perotti, whose treatises were widely used as textbooks and frequently reprinted, Erasmus would only go as far as saying that he did not condemn their efforts entirely.⁷ He expressed more decidedly negative opinions on two northern scholars, Engelbert Schut and Carolus Virulus (Menniken).⁸ Virulus' handbook enjoyed a great deal of popularity when it was published in 1476, but was soon considered *passé*, according to Erasmus, who declared that in his time "no one thinks [his letters] worth looking at."⁹ As for Schut, Erasmus addressed to him in 1489 a flattering poem, praising him in extravagant terms as the man under whose aegis Eloquence would reign supreme.¹⁰ A few years later, however, he declared that Schut's instructions were worthless and that he 'taught his pupils by his trifling letters how to write badly' (CWE 25:25). One is left to wonder whether this is an example of flagrant opportunism or a maturing of literary taste.

Despite such wholesale criticism, however, Erasmus did not completely break with tradition. To show the historical roots of his manual it will be useful to follow his own arrangement and consider four aspects of epistolography: the definition and general characteristics of a letter, the methodology of teaching letter-writing, the parts of the letters, and kinds of letters.

Describing general characteristics, Erasmus quotes Turpilius' definition of the letter as a 'kind of mutual conversation between absent friends.'¹¹ This tag is also used by his predecessors Aurelio Brandolini and Francesco Negro.¹² The definition which focuses on private correspondence is a very

suitable one for humanist manuals. The medieaval *artes dictandi*, by contrast, often served the needs of the professional secretary and therefore focused on the drafting of documents and business letters. They, too, defined the letter as an instrument of communication between absent parties, but frequently introduced reasons other than friendship for choosing a written rather than an oral message: the confidentiality of the contents or the need for precise documentation. Sample letters, especially in the early *artes*, typically deal with legal transactions and business matters, or more generally, affairs of church and state. This is not to say that they totally excluded the domain of personal and private correspondence. Friendship was certainly a recognized motive in letter-writing. Thus Konrad of Mure defined the letter as, among other things, a replacement for *colloquia amicorum*, conversation between friends, and we find among the sample letters of the 12th and 13th centuries a sprinkling of private letters between friends and family.¹³

Renaissance manuals generally reverse the priorities and deal predominantly with personal correspondence. Erasmus' book is characteristic of this trend. He did not address the needs of the would-be secretary but of the educated layman. His instructions and sample letters are therefore concerned with affairs of a more personal nature: letters tendering advice on choice of career or marriage partner, dispensing praise or blame, offering condolences, thanks, personal news, etc. Most Renaissance manuals present sample letters and phrases comparable in content to those found in Erasmus' book. His criticism of earlier handbooks therefore cannot concern the general parameters of the subject, and we must turn elsewhere to discover the reasons for his disapproval.

At one point Erasmus suggests that authors of earlier manuals were a narrow-minded lot and given to rigid rules: 'To expect all letters to conform to a single type or to teach that they should, as I notice even learned men sometimes do, is in my view at least to impose a narrow and inflexible definition on what is by nature diverse and capable of almost infinite variation,' Erasmus writes. 'Indeed I find this attitude no less absurd than that of a cobbler who would insist on stitching a shoe of the same shape for every foot. . . . These men consider a letter unacceptable unless it keeps to the plainest manner of writing, . . . is composed solely of words taken from common usage, and finally qualifies as a letter rather than a book by its very brevity' (CWE 25:12).

In this statement Erasmus focuses his complaints on specific areas of epistolography. He alleges that his predecessors exaggerated demands for brevity, clarity, and simplicity to the point of neglecting the most basic stylistic and structural requirements. He was especially critical of their supposedly

categorical demands for brevity and their habit of measuring the adequacy of a letter 'by the size of the paper or the number of lines' (CWE 25:14).

Demands for brevity, clarity, and simplicity of style are, of course, echoes of classical rules found in Cicero and Quintilian. According to Cicero the narrative should include only what is necessary and dispense with details, digressions, repetitions, or elaborate transitions; it should aim for clarity by preserving a natural order and avoiding unusual words or intricate phrases.¹⁴ Similar instructions are given by Quintilian, but in more flexible terms and with a more generous interpretation.¹⁵ In his manual Erasmus adopts Quintilian's approach in emphasizing the elements of appropriateness and suitability. In his words, the length of a letter is appropriate if 'nothing can be subtracted ... [if] even after several readings it does not cloy' (CWE 25:13). Erasmus' effort to define brevity in relative terms is not unique. It is found in many medieval and Renaissance authors. One wonders therefore whom Erasmus had in mind when he spoke of those who would be satisfied only with a note written in crude style and 'less than twelve lines long.'¹⁶ While there were no doubt pedants among his predecessors, Erasmus' criticism does not apply to the majority of authors, many of whom shared his concern for appropriate form and content.¹⁷ Epistolographers generally softened their rules for brevity by adding provisos. A Saxon handbook from the 13th century, for example, advocates 'brevity combined with clarity and lucidity,' but adds the warning: 'Do not omit anything relevant for brevity's sake' (Rockinger 212). A similarly common-sense approach is taken by the author of the Baumgartenberger manual from the turn of the 14th century. He states that a letter of suitable length should contain 'nothing abridged and nothing superfluous' (Rockinger 725). In the 15th century Perotti repeated the classical rule that the letter should be brief but added that it should not, for the sake of brevity, be reduced to a 'humble, barren, curt, and plain' note (k4^v - 5^r). Erasmus' observations and qualifications regarding the requirement of brevity do not, therefore, constitute a radical shift in thinking.

On clarity and simplicity of style Erasmus had this to say: 'We must take pains to be clear, yes, but clear to the educated' (CWE 25:17). The writer should not be obliged to lower his standard of writing for the sake of boorish people. Again Erasmus employs a forceful tone, suggesting that he is presenting an unusual or controversial point of view. Thus he states that 'there are some people who will not tolerate a letter unless it is free from elaboration. They do not want it to contain figures of speech lest it be said that it reeks of the lamp' (CWE 25:14). Again one asks who made such categorical demands? It is true that the author of a 12th-century manual demanded that letters be composed in a 'simple and artless style' and that

Brandolini – following Cicero – restricted the writer's vocabulary to 'commonly used terms' and discouraged an ostentatious style,¹⁸ but a degree of elegance was understood and expected. This can be seen from definitions in medieval *artes* of the letter as a composition 'decked out with figures of thought and diction' and 'brilliant in beauty of words and figures of thought.' Indeed the ability 'to compose words and sentences in a pure and elegant style' was part of the writer's expected skills.¹⁹ There were demands that the letter-writer show 'good sense, perfect grammar, and ornate diction' and produce 'an agreeable speech, intelligent thought, and elegant effect.'²⁰ In a similar vein Perotti stated that 'while one must avoid new, contrived, and obsolete words, a certain rhetorical skill is necessary for a letter to be persuasive' (k6^v). In short, Erasmus' demand that a letter be both functional and attractive is neither startling nor new and his interpretation of classical guidelines for brevity, clarity, and simplicity are by no means unprecedented. His instructions do not differ substantially from those of his predecessors, though they are perhaps stated more emphatically and explained in greater detail.

How then are we to explain the antagonistic tone in Erasmus' manual? I believe that hyperbole is part of Erasmus' personal style and writing strategy. His extreme statements cannot be taken literally. If we were to believe him, there existed teachers who would admit only a single type of letter, written in plain words and not exceeding twelve lines, teachers to whom Quintilian's Latin was 'all Greek and Arabic,' who refused to learn proper Latin, demanding instead of others to 'become experts in their kitchen jargon.'²¹ Who were these boors? Erasmus offers only one concrete example: that of his own guardian, the schoolmaster Peter Winckel. 'When I was a boy of fourteen,' he tells us, 'I wrote to one of my guardians . . . and included some quotations from books I had read. The impudent rogue whose arrogance matched his ignorance wrote in reply that if I intended to send such letters in future I should include a commentary' (CWE 25:16). A regrettable experience – but is it representative? The evidence quoted so far would indicate that the story has anecdotal rather than paradigmatic value.

Erasmus was not alone in his demand for flexibility though he was perhaps more careful than other writers to qualify every rule. Some might say that he was careful to a fault. It is remarkable how studiously Erasmus avoided committing himself to any norm. His statements on style in general and brevity and clarity in particular are models of equivocation. On style he said that 'the best form of expression is that which is most appropriate to the context' (CWE 25:12); on brevity that it 'depended on the time at the disposal of the writer and prospective reader' (ibidem:13); on clarity that 'one must take into account the subject and recipient of the letter: one can

break rules but not the bounds of good sense within which art must everywhere be confined' (ibidem: 18). These statements are no doubt prudent and carefully crafted – but how useful they are to a student, especially a beginner looking for guidance, is another matter altogether. This prompts the question: for whom was Erasmus' manual intended? And here, I think, we have come to a point in which Erasmus' handbook is indeed different from those of his predecessors. While they wrote for the student of epistolography, Erasmus wrote for both student and teacher, addressing the latter exclusively in chapters nine to twelve of his treatise.

These chapters deal with the methodology of teaching letter-writing and include instructions regarding the presentation of material, the use of incentive and corrective measures, as well as remarks on practice and imitation. On each of these points Erasmus offers the teacher general advice as well as practical suggestions. Many of the ideas advanced here go back to the pedagogical theories of Quintilian and earlier Greek sources; for example, the view that the successful student must be talented, zealous, and willing to practise,²² and correspondingly, that the good teacher must be industrious, energetic, and knowledgeable, that he must stimulate the student's interest and foster creativity, that he must motivate his pupil with praise rather than blame and avoid harsh punishment.²³

While such ideas are modelled after classical precepts, much of what Erasmus says has a decidedly modern flavour. For example, he reminds city magistrates to give more consideration to education in their budgets. 'Fluteplayers and trumpeters by the dozen are maintained with huge salaries,' Erasmus writes, 'yet no one more rightly deserves a large and attractive salary than a learned schoolmaster' (CWE 25:23). Erasmus also expresses his views on tenure and fixed salaries: The salary, he writes, 'should match the qualifications of the man appointed, and there should also be provision that it be increased or diminished according as his teaching and industry either surpass or fall below expectation' (ibidem).

Remarks on teaching methods are rare in medieval and Renaissance manuals, most of which are merely concerned with the subject matter and not with its presentation. In the few cases where learning and instruction are discussed, the comments are brief and general and usually concern the student's attitude and qualifications rather than the teacher's methods of presentation. Thus the Saxon manual inquires into the 'qualities that make a person suited to the art of letter-writing.' The prerequisites are: natural talent, loyalty, and trustworthiness, a certain knowledge of literature, and a fear of God. As professional secretary the letter-writer must also be 'affable, friendly and modest' (Rockinger 211–12). Similarly Konrad of Mure lists as prerequisites of excelling in the art of letter-writing the classical trinity:

talent, learning, and practice (Kronbichler 26). Another manual composed in the first half of the 14th century demands that the letter-writer 'be subtle in inventing, prudent in arranging, skilful in remembering, and distinguished in his style of writing.'²⁴ Among Erasmus' humanist forerunners, Aurelio Brandolini has a chapter on 'art, imitation, and practice,' but it contains little more than definitions of these terms and the general advice to know the rules of the art while making the letter appear artless, to imitate Cicero above all others, and to practise daily.²⁵ While the inclusion of such material was therefore not unprecedented, the scope, detail, and specific content of Erasmus' remarks are unique.

It is remarkable, moreover, how frequently Erasmus uses direct address in this section of his manual. Abandoning the impersonal verbal forms and royal plurals so common in scholarly writings he employs the familiar 'you' and 'I' instead. 'You' often denotes an imaginary schoolmaster who is not up to Erasmus' standards and who is therefore variously addressed as 'Arcadian ass,' 'sacrilegious rogue,' 'dull-witted blackguard,' 'brute,' and 'Bocotian swine' – 'barbarian' being too mild a term for the incompetent and authoritarian teacher.²⁶ Such a man must be driven from school where he is as out of place as the proverbial 'dog in a bathhouse.' He ought to be tied to a plough-handle or obliged to dig ditches in a chain gang, which is all he is good for.²⁷ The section also includes an exchange between the author and an imaginary reader protesting Erasmus' tough standards. 'Look here,' the reader complains, 'this is really hard advice you are giving.' Erasmus cuts him short: 'I made it clear from the start that I wasn't writing for an ass but for a qualified instructor' (CWE 25:34).

The personal tone employed and the fact that many of the ideas voiced here are recurring themes in Erasmus' other educational treatises, notably *De pueris instituendis* and *De ratione studii*,²⁸ indicates that he does not merely regurgitate classical theory but is speaking from the heart. In all his educational writings he expresses an abhorrence of violence, coercion, and authoritarianism. He is emphatic about instilling love of learning in the young and treating them with sympathy and affection. He deplores not only abusive language but even looks 'that convey the impression that one hates the pupil' (CWE 25:39). Thus the section on methodology, though indebted to classical thought, reflects Erasmus' personal interests, his active role in promoting a suitable climate for learning, and his life-long concern for the quality of education.

After dealing with the general characteristics of a letter and providing an outline of teaching methods, Erasmus proceeds to the main part of his work, beginning with instructions concerning the address, exordium, and conclusion of the letter. This type of arrangement, which proceeds according to the successive parts of a letter, is the common approach used in medieval

manuals and in turn reflects the traditional order observed in classical handbooks on rhetoric.²⁹ Thus instructions that the exordium must render the reader 'attentive, receptive, and benevolent,' that the material for the exordium may be derived from the person of the writer, the recipient, or the subject matter, go back to Cicero and Quintilian and can be found in a number of medieval *artes* and Renaissance handbooks.³⁰ Similarly, Erasmus' checklist of pitfalls to be avoided in composing the exordium and his remarks on *insinuatō*, the indirect approach to the exordium, echo those of Cicero and also appear in the handbooks of his predecessors.³¹ While Erasmus accepted this tradition in its broad outlines, he also criticized a number of specific rules taught by medieval teachers. Forms of address is one such area. These held a place of central importance in medieval handbooks and usually allowed little room for ingenuity and innovation. Erasmus acknowledged that conventions were important and their neglect could jeopardize the writer's cause,³² but he nevertheless balked at the constraints they imposed on the letter-writer. He objected in particular to the custom of addressing an individual in the plural.³³ He was, however, not the first to condemn this 'boorish custom.' We find critical remarks regarding the use of the plural as early as the 13th century. Konrad of Mure regretfully acknowledged it as a well-established custom that must be observed, but Boncompagno spoke out more boldly and called it 'more of a vice than a custom.'³⁴ The humanist Coluccio Salutati tried substituting *tu* for *vos* in addresses to individuals but abandoned the effort on meeting with stiff opposition.³⁵ Perotti, however, expressly instructed his students not to use the plural when addressing one person, noting that this was 'a fault to be found in almost all writers of our generation' (k5r).

Another custom criticized by Erasmus was the use of excessively flattering epithets in the address. 'They do not say the addressee's name,' he wrote, 'but call him phoenix, eagle, vine, garden, ray of light, thunderbolt, paradise' (CWE 25:53). Such 'nonsense,' as Erasmus termed it, can indeed be found in some manuals,³⁶ but the majority of epithets recommended are less colourful than the expressions mocked by Erasmus and are in fact comparable to his own list of acceptable epithets.

Erasmus also criticized the substitution of servile and grovelling phrases for simple greetings. He complained that the recipient of the letter was being saluted with 'All wealth of Midas!' or addressed with 'most humble reverence' and 'willing servitude with due reverence' (CWE 25:54). These and other contrived expressions ridiculed by Erasmus are well documented in medieval style manuals.³⁷

Apart from the expressions used in greetings, Erasmus also discusses word order. In the classical formula, he stresses, the sender's name precedes

that of the recipient. In medieval manuals we find as an alternative the so-called *salutatio subscripta* in which the order of names is reversed as an expression of courtesy or humility when the addressee is of higher rank than the writer. This inverted form is mentioned in manuals of the 12th and 13th centuries and was designated by Anthonius Haneron, an author of the 15th century, as the fashion 'which we must observe nowadays.'³⁸ Not everyone approved of this practice, however. Erasmus was not the only one to regard it as a sign of flattery rather than courtesy. His opinion was shared by his contemporary Konrad Celtis who condemned this form of greeting as 'a barbarous custom...introduced for the sake of flattery' (Rupprich 640:49-51), and both Erasmus and Celtis were anticipated by Perotti who called it a reprehensible practice (k5^r).

In these specific aspects, then, Erasmus turned against medieval traditions, against what Murphy termed 'the automatizing tendency which had been an undercurrent in the *ars dictaminis* from the earliest days,'³⁹ but, as we have seen, Erasmus was not innovative in proposing a more flexible approach. Resistance to formulae had already begun during the Middle Ages and was carried on by Renaissance authors before Erasmus.

In discussing the parts of the letter, Erasmus observes the traditional arrangement in medieval *artes*, but makes it plain that he is not entirely satisfied with this approach. The arrangement, which reflected that found in classical handbooks on rhetoric, must be modified to suit the specific subject of letter-writing, Erasmus said. There was little point in simply repeating the instructions of classical authors. 'And yet,' he complained, 'all those who have dealt with letter-writing have done exactly that' (CWE 25:76). They copied what they found in Cicero without regard to appropriateness, writing about the parts of the speech, the various kinds of narratives, the types of arguments, and the kinds of rhetorical devices to be used. 'Good God,' Erasmus exclaimed, 'what has all this to do with letter-writing?' (ibidem). Once again, his tone of exasperation is posturing. Most manuals did not follow Cicero slavishly and without judgment; many practised exactly what Erasmus was preaching so forcefully. They adapted the material found in the ancient sources to their own purpose and commonly reduced the classical divisions to three – *exordium*, *petitio*, and *conclusio*.⁴⁰ It is true that some manuals contained material that was obviously irrelevant, for example, remarks on facial expressions and delivery.⁴¹ However, Erasmus himself was guilty of this very offense. Indeed he admitted that one section in his book – concerned with argumentation – was not relevant to his topic, but justified himself by explaining that the passage had not been included in his original manuscript and 'had undoubtedly been patched on by someone' (CWE 25:110). This may have

been the case, but one feels that he might have exercised editorial discretion and deleted the passage.

After approaching his topic in the traditional fashion, that is, by discussing the parts of a letter, but at the same time voicing strong criticism of this arrangement and specific rules associated with it, Erasmus abandons the approach and turns to a thematic arrangement, presenting the remainder of his material according to content.

This topical approach also goes back to classical sources. Erasmus distinguishes four categories (*genera*) of letters: advisory, laudatory, judicial, and familiar. The first three represent the tripartition established by Aristotle, which became the standard division in rhetorical treatises after his time.⁴² 'To these,' Erasmus wrote, 'it will be possible to add a fourth class, which, if you please, we shall call the familiar' (CWE 25:71). This *genus familiare* may correspond to the *genos proshomiletikon*, 'the kind used in private discourse' mentioned first in Plato's *Sophist*.⁴³ One may argue, however, that Erasmus did not rely on classical sources for inspiration but created the fourth category himself for types (*species*) of letters that did not fit into the three standard categories. This may explain why he abandoned the term *genus familiare* in the second half of his work and substituted for it the term *genera extraordinaria*, 'unusual classes of letters' (CWE 25:225).

The tripartition of *genera* is well established in handbooks on letter-writing, but no canon exists for their subdivision into species. Both Cicero and Quintilian noted that there were innumerable species, and Erasmus shares this sentiment.⁴⁴ In medieval manuals topical subdivisions are sometimes given under the heading of *petitio*, that is, under one of the parts of the letter. The number and types of letters listed vary greatly. It appears that each author devised his own list, selecting either the most common kinds or aiming at a complete presentation, or, as Konrad of Mure put it candidly, enumerating them 'as they came into my head' (Kronbichler 47). A similar variety existed in Renaissance manuals: some twenty kinds of letters are listed by Negro, eighty by Filelfo, and some two dozen by Erasmus himself. Given this variety, we find once again that Erasmus protests too much when he says: 'Just as sorcerers have certain definite forms of incantation, so too rhetoricians have certain species of letters laid down so that they believe not even a stroke can be altered without great peril to things human and divine' (CWE 25:72).

After presenting his own list, Erasmus announces that he will 'now give instructions about each species in turn' (CWE 25:73). These instructions usually begin with an outline of stock themes pertaining to the type of letter discussed, followed by sample letters, a comprehensive list of relevant sample phrases, and cross-references to collections of letters termed *silvae*.

They point the reader primarily to classical sources (Cicero, Pliny), but Poliziano's letters are mentioned as well. This arrangement is fairly common in humanist manuals. In fact it is already used in the 13th century by Boncompagno who supplies in addition to sample letters so-called *notulae*, lists of commonplaces.⁴⁵ The practice is also adopted by Negro, who explains the general thought patterns associated with certain topics before offering his own sample letters, and by Filelfo who provides lists of what he calls *synonyma*, phrases and sentences conveying the main ideas of each species of letter.⁴⁶ Commonplace arguments associated with certain types of letters are also given by Brandolini and Celtis.⁴⁷ Sample letters generally incorporate these topoi. The following chart will provide a synopsis of topoi in letters of consolation and recommendation, as found in the manuals of Erasmus, Negro, Virulus, Brandolini, and Celtis.

	Topos found in				
a) The letter of consolation topos:	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i> *
Expression of compassion	x	x	x	x	x
Diminishing the significance of the misfortune, especially the argument 'lot shared by many'	x	x	x	x	x
Depicting a brighter future	x	x	x		
Citing historical examples of steadfastness in misfortune	x			x	x
offer of help	x	x	x		
b) The letter of recommendation topos:					
Praise of the addressee	x	x	x	x	
Praise of the recommended person	x	x	x	x	x
Relationship between writer and recommended person explained	x	x	x	x	x
Granting the favour is possible, easy	x	x	x		x
Granting the favour is just, honourable	x	x		x	x
Promise of gratitude / reward	x	x	x		x

* E = Erasmus; N = Negro; V = Virulus; B = Brandolini; C = Celtis

While the chart shows that Erasmus' treatment is rather fuller than that of other authors, it also reveals that he is following a well-established canon of arguments. His treatment of letters varies, however. One notes a reduction in volume of material presented as one goes through his manual, as if the author's enthusiasm had waned or his patience had worn thin. In the end his instructions are tapering off rather than being brought to a well-rounded conclusion.

We may now return to our original question: Did Erasmus' approach differ significantly from that of his predecessors? It appears that this was not the case. His general framework, his remarks about the characteristics, parts, and types of letters, and the scope of his samples follow a tradition established by earlier humanists, which in turn was based on classical theories and filtered through medieval *artes dictandi*. In some points Erasmus clearly turns against the medieval tradition, but his objections are not new. They were anticipated by earlier humanists and progressive medieval writers. In the remarks addressed to the teacher of epistolography, however, Erasmus goes beyond his predecessors. Although he is not entirely original but rather reviving classical ideas, he brings a new zeal to the subject. Thus Erasmus' outspoken criticism of his predecessors does not signify a radical departure from tradition but exemplifies the sort of competitive spirit lampooned in the *Moria*. Perhaps Erasmus was exercising self-criticism when he put these words into Folly's mouth: 'Every grammarian is convinced of the great importance of his subject. If someone slips up on a single word and his sharper-eyed fellow happens to pounce on it, Hercules, what dramas, what fights to the death, what accusations and abuse. And if that's a lie, may the whole world of the grammarians turn on me' (CWE 27:123).

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Notes

- 1 In the following I am using the translation of Charles Fantazzi in volume 25 of *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto 1985). The quotations appear on pp 12-13.
- 2 A. Gerlo 'The *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* of Erasmus and the Tradition of the *Ars Epistolica*' *Classical Influences in European Culture AD 500-1500* ed R.R. Bolgar (Cambridge 1971) 107; M. Fumaroli 'Genèse de l'épistolographie classique: rhétorique humaniste de la lettre, de Pétrarque à Juste Lipse' *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 78 (1978) 887-8. For a bibliography of writings concerned with traditions in epistolography see Judith Rice-Henderson 'Erasmus and the Art of Letter-Writing' *Renaissance Eloquence* ed J.J. Murphy (Berkeley 1983) 332-3 nn4,5.
- 3 Rice-Henderson (op cit in note 2 above) 352
- 4 Cf A. Gerlo's verdict on Erasmus' haphazard arrangement: 'The sequence of topics does not seem governed by any logical plan' (op cit in note 2, 107-8).

- 5 CWE Ep 117:33-7. Erasmus is referring to Francesco Negro's *Opusculum scribendi epistolas* (Venice 1488). In the following I quote from this edition.
- 6 CWE Ep 117:38-40. Erasmus is referring to Giammario Filelfo's *Epistolare* (Basel 1495). My quotations in the following refer to the text in this edition.
- 7 CWE Ep 117:48-9. Giovanni Sulpizio wrote *De componendis et ormandis epistolis* (Rome 1491); Niccolo Perotti is the author of *Rudimenta grammatices* (Rome 1476), which contains a section on letter-writing. In the following I quote from this edition.
- 8 Engelbert Schut wrote *De arte dictandi* (Gouda c 1480), which I quote in the following. Carolus Virulus was the author of *Epistolarum formulae* (Louvain 1476). In the following I quote from the edition published at Cologne 1493.
- 9 CWE 25:24. Erasmus' judgment was shared by his contemporaries (cf A. Gerlo op cit in note 2, 110). The work was not reprinted after 1520.
- 10 Cf C. Reedijk *The Poems of Erasmus* (Leiden 1956) no 11.
- 11 CWE 25:20, cf Turpilus fragment 213.
- 12 A. Brandolini *De ratione scribendi* (Cologne 1573) 10-11 (in the following, quotations from Brandolini follow this edition); Negro a 3^r.
- 13 For examples of personal letters, see L. Rockinger *Briefsteller und Formelbücher des elften bis vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, New York 1961 (cited in the following as 'Rockinger') 55, 64, 71, 81, 832-3; W. Kronbichler *Die Summa de arte prosandi des Konrad von Mure*, Zürich 1968 (cited in the following as 'Kronbichler') 30.
- 14 Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.14-15, *De inventione* 1.20.28. Cf Rice-Henderson (op cit in note 2) 334.
- 15 Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 4.2. 36-9, 40-51
- 16 CWE 25:13, cf ibidem 14.
- 17 This concern is already voiced in the 11th century by Peter the Venerable who criticized 'the desire for brevity to which modern men are drawn' and considered the requirement of brevity a strait-jacket for the writer (G. Gilmore *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, 44-5, 134).
- 18 Rockinger 30, Brandolini 28
- 19 Ludolf of Hildesheim (Rockinger 359), Bernard of Meung (quoted by J.J. Murphy *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, Berkeley 1974, 227 n66), for similar pronouncements cf Konrad of Mure (Kronbichler 30), Brandolini 14, Schut 1.16.
- 20 Symon of Dudinghe (Rockinger 975), Mure (Kronbichler 61)
- 21 CWE 25 12-14, 17-18
- 22 CWE 25:23, cf Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 1.2.16, 2.8 passim, 2.19.1. The combination of the three prerequisites for success is a classical common place, cf P. Shorey 'Physis, melete, episteme' *TAPA* 80 (1909) 185-201.
- 23 CWE 25:23-4, 40-41, cf Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 1.3.8-17, 2.2.5-8.
- 24 Quoted by J.J. Murphy (op cit in note 19) 236-7
- 25 Cf Brandolini 15-16.
- 26 CWE 25:41-2
- 27 CWE 25:41
- 28 Cf *De pueris instituendis* CWE 26:311, 317, 331-36; *De ratione studii* CWE 24:672ff: 'On the method of teaching pupils.'
- 29 Cf Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.4, *De inventione* 1.14.19, Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 4 Pr 6.
- 30 On the purpose of the exordium cf Erasmus CWE 25:75, Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.6, *De inventione* 1.15.20, Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 4.1.5; cf Konrad of Mure (Kronbichler 144), Celtis (in H. Rupprich *Der Briefwechsel des Konrad Celtis*, Munich 1934, quoted as 'Rupprich'

- in the following) 640:53, Filelfo a 7^v, Haneron *Partes dictaminis* 2. On suitable material for the exordium cf Erasmus CWE 25:76–8, Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.5.8, *De inventione* 1.16.22; cf Rockinger 18f, 367, Filelfo a 7^r, Brandolini 18, Celtis in Rupprich 640:55ff.
- 31 CWE 25:75, cf Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.7.11, *De inventione* 1.18.26, Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 4.1.71, Rockinger 144–5, Filelfo bl^r, 2^r–3^v.
- 32 At CWE 25:48 Erasmus relates the misfortunes of a man who neglected to address his bishop by the proper title.
- 33 CWE 25:45–50
- 34 Kronbichler 48, Boncompagno is quoted by Kronbichler 48:4n.
- 35 Cf R.G. Witt *Coluccio Salutati and his Public Letters* (Geneva 1976) 26.
- 36 In a 12th-century manual we find ‘lighting bolt of wisdom’ (Rockinger 12); Filelfo used ‘rare phoenix’ (c7r).
- 37 We find among recommended formulae the salutation ‘may you obtain the desired success’ and greetings tendered with ‘willing servitude,’ ‘due reverence,’ or ‘reverence at your feet’ (Rockinger 732, 956, 959, 963).
- 38 Rockinger 10, Kronbichler 143, A. Haneron *Ars dictandi* 2.1, text edited by J. IJsewijn-Jacobs in *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 24 (1975) 29–69
- 39 Op cit (above note 19) 259
- 40 Cf eg Konrad of Mure (Kronbichler 31), Hugh of Bologna (Rockinger 56); for similar arrangements cf Rockinger 10, 103–9, 359.
- 41 Filelfo, for example, has a section on *vultus* and *gestus* (c4^r – 4^v); Brandolini wrote extensively about methods of argumentation even though he conceded that ‘it does not concern my subject’ (80).
- 42 Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.3.3; cf Cicero *Ad Herennium* 1.2.2, *De oratore* 1.31.141, *De inventione* 1.5.7; Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 3.3.14.
- 43 *Sophist* 222C, also mentioned by Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 3.4.10
- 44 Cicero *De oratore* 3.9.34, Quintilian *Institutio oratoria* 3.4.2, echoed by Brandolini 12 and Erasmus CWE 25:70
- 45 Cf Rockinger 140.
- 46 For Negro see the chart above. For Erasmus’ verdict on Filelfo’s *synonyma* cf CWE Ep 117:41.
- 47 See chart above.