

## Roman and Erasmian Humanism \*

The relationship between Roman and Erasmian humanism is a fascinating and puzzling problem. To begin with, an unbiased assessment of this relationship is not easily found, nor is it easily made for several reasons. First of all, not many Erasmian scholars know much about Roman humanism, and vice versa. It is typical that, e.g., Italy is not even mentioned in the Proceedings of the 1986 Wolfenbüttel Conference on Erasmus and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Second, theological and ecclesiastical problems not only interfered with the normal development of humanism in Italy as they did North of the Alps, but they continue to do so often enough in modern scholarship. Often a so-called Roman paganism is opposed to Erasmus's truly Christian humanism. Finally, from Erasmus's time on, satirical pamphlets and invectives on both sides have distorted our view of the complex reality that was Rome, as well as of Erasmus: take Erasmus's *Ciceronianus* on one side, some writings of minor Roman humanists such as Baptista Casalis and Petrus Cursius on the other. Neither party was at all averse to techniques of disinformation, as we now know.

In this situation, how can we proceed to gain a better insight into the differences and similarities of Roman and Erasmian humanism? One way would be to compare a theoretical general image of what Roman humanism might be, with a similar image of Erasmus. This procedure threatens to be highly subjective and unworkable, not least because humanism in Rome is such a complex phenomenon that any theoretical view of it will necessarily be incomplete and, therefore, distorted in one way or another. In fact, whereas Erasmus is only one man, Roman humanism evokes almost two centuries of scholarship, art and literature. That is the reason why I opted to try an entirely different approach, viz. a comparison between Erasmus and one man in Rome. This option also entails serious problems, to begin with, the choice of the man.

At first sight, an obvious choice could be Laurentius Valla, and interesting comparisons have indeed been made, e. g. between Valla's *De vero bono* and Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* by Luca d'Ascia in his thesis on *Erasmus e l'umanesimo romano* and by Letizia Panizza in her Fifth-annual Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture.<sup>2</sup> Such a

\* My warmest thanks go to my dear colleague and friend James McConica, who kindly corrected and improved my English.

<sup>1</sup> A. Buck ed., *Erasmus und Europa* (Wiesbaden 1988).

<sup>2</sup> The dissertation of L. D'Ascia has been published at Florence in 1991; Panizza's contribution in *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 15 (1995) 1-25.

comparison, however, will inevitably turn out to be a study of influence, dependence and continuation in one direction since, by the time Erasmus was a student and a scholar, Valla had become a classical author in his own right.

I wanted to do something different, viz. to compare Erasmus to a contemporary humanist in Rome in order to see what, independently from one another, were their similarities and the differences. Again, the choice of such a humanist is an awkward decision, because it predetermines part of our findings. Think of such different figures as Cardinal Bembo, Baptista Casalis, Angelo Colocci and Thomas Phaëdra Inghiramus. Therefore, our conclusion never can be, nor will be: 'ab uno disce omnes'. At the best we can hope to shed some light on the general problem, which in the future may be modified by means of, and adjusted to, other evidence.<sup>3</sup>

## Ianus Corycius and Erasmus

The man I chose to compare with Erasmus is not a Roman nor an Italian, like the humanists just mentioned, but a Luxemburger established in Rome, Johann Goritz (or Ianus Corycius with his Virgilian 'nome di battaglia'). He appears a couple of times, albeit marginally, in the correspondence of Erasmus, but that is not the main reason for my choice. Apart from the fact that I happen to have studied the man for quite some time,<sup>4</sup> the reason of my choice is that he played a leading part in Roman humanistic circles in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and that the career of a man originating from Germania Inferior just like Erasmus himself, shows what could have become of Erasmus in other circumstances, if he had chosen to stay in Rome as a 'paenitentarius'<sup>5</sup> instead of going to England, or if he had returned there in later years according to his own wish so often expressed in his correspondence from Basel. My choice may also help to explain why, to quote Erasmus's own words: "Ciceronianus meus non paucos offendit Italos."<sup>6</sup>

Erasmus and Corycius were roughly of the same age. Corycius's year of birth is unknown but he cannot have been much older than Erasmus since he was a pupil of the famous Alsatian humanist Jacobus Wimpfeling, born in 1450. Both men received a solid Northern education, Erasmus in the school of Alexander Hegius at Deventer, Corycius, as I said, with Wimpfeling, who advised him to go to Rome. And here we

<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of my inquiry I want to make one point clear. Unlike most Erasmusian scholars, I will not use the *Iulius exclusus* in my discussion of Erasmus and Roman humanism. The authorship of this dialogue is not established beyond doubt — I personally do not believe that Erasmus wrote the text as we know it — and I do not deem it a sound method to use a doubtful text as an argument in a scholarly debate. I explained my point of view in my contribution to the Rovigo conference on Erasmus: 'I rapporti tra Erasmo, l'umanesimo italiano, Roma e Giulio II', A. Olivieri ed., *Erasmo, Venezia e la Cultura Padana nel '500* (Rovigo 1995) 117-129.

<sup>4</sup> My critical and annotated edition of the *Coryciana* (Rome 1524) will be published by the Academia Latinitati Fovendae in Rome in 1997. I refer to that edition and its introduction for all further information on Goritz, his career and his friends in Rome.

<sup>5</sup> See the letter of Beatus Rhenanus to Emperor Charles v (Allen 1, 61-62, 187-216): "Oblata est Poenitentiarium dignitas, si Romae manere vellet, via futura ad altiora conscendendi. Nam emolumentum non contemnendum inde esse poterat."

<sup>6</sup> Allen Ep. 2056, 21, written at Basel about October 1, 1528.

find an initial and, I think, decisive difference between the two humanists: in their impressionable early years Erasmus was pushed into a Dutch monastery, where he remained exposed to the strong influence of the piety of the Northern Common Life, a rather narrow vision, if you ask me; Corycius traveled to Rome, where with both hands he seized the possibilities of a career in the Curia and, at the same time, readily enjoyed the pleasures of the Italian High Renaissance. So, although both men entered upon an ecclesiastical career — Erasmus as a priest of the archdiocese of Utrecht, Corycius as one of Treves — their destinies proved to be widely different. Erasmus for several years was locked up in a Dutch monastery among his so-called barbarians, with only a few books and one or two kindred souls, such as Cornelius Aurelius, for comfort. Luckily, his spirit was strong enough to overcome this setback and to develop the scholarly and literary talents with which he was so richly endowed. Corycius on the other hand, living in Rome, a meetingplace par excellence of humanists great and small, became an enlightened bureaucrat. He did not write himself, probably because he felt his talents were no match for men such as Pomponius Laetus, Annius of Viterbo, Paulus Cortesius, Cardinal Hadrianus Castellesi, Pierius Valerianus, Marcus Hieronymus Vida and scores of other scholars and writers he could see at work in Rome. But if he did not write himself, he used his money well to foster artists and humanists, as we shall see.

The first date we know for certain in Corycius's Roman career is May 1496, when he was already a member of the Roman bureaucracy under Alexander VI. Since under Clement VII he is said to have served six popes, it follows that he had entered the Curia under Alexander VI, who was elected in August 1492. Much about the same time poor Erasmus was trying to escape from his monastical fetters, first as a secretary of the bishop of Cambrai (1493), next as a teacher of rich students in Paris, where he himself was starving in the harsh Standonck College (1495), finding solace in the friendship of one or two wandering Italian 'poetae' such as Faustus Andrelinus.

More than a decade later, in 1509, their paths may have crossed. It remains unclear, however, if Erasmus actually met Corycius when he was in Rome. According to later letters, in which he calls Corycius a new friend,<sup>7</sup> it seems not or, if they met, it must have been a fleeting contact leaving no trace on either side. After all, Erasmus in 1509 was only one of many visiting scholars who came to Rome from the North, not yet the man everybody already knew and wanted to meet, whereas Corycius at that time was one of the scores of Curial officers, who had done nothing so far to attract attention.

Only a few years later the situation had completely changed. In 1511 Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* as well as a new edition of the *Adages* and his *Copia verborum* appeared in Paris, the beginning of a long history of successes and controversies. In 1512 Erasmus was teaching Greek in Cambridge. In the following years his renown as a scholar and a humanist was growing all the time and spreading all over Western and Central Europe, not yet hampered by the turmoil of theological conflicts stirred

<sup>7</sup> Allen Ep. 1342 to Marcus Laurinus, written in 1523.

by Luther, into which he was dragged from about 1520, much to the detriment of his humanistic concerns and the peace of his life. In those years too it became perfectly clear that he was, by nature, totally different from Corycius. In Rome he had refused the office of penitentiary; in Leuven a professorship at the university; in October 1516, he evaded the occasion of becoming a bishop and in 1522 he did not accept the invitation of Hadrian VI. These repeated refusals seem to indicate that Erasmus was, indeed, a scholar who abhorred the boring bureaucratic work and shifting situations in which practical or political decisions and choices had to be made. Is it not typical that he wanted to advise Hadrian VI only in secret?<sup>8</sup> Corycius, on the contrary, had accepted that kind of life, not without substantial material rewards.

Indeed, in those same years Corycius in Rome had become a rich man, living in a house near Piazza Navona and in a villa on the slope of the Quirinal hill overlooking the valley of the old Forum Romanum and the Tarpeian rock. His rising social standing is clearly illustrated by the fact that in 1520 Ludovicus Bigus Pictorius, a court poet from Ferrara, dedicated to him three books of Latin poems calling them *Corricia*. Erasmus, for his part, remained a wandering scholar, living with friends or in a university college, and looking for patrons to whom to dedicate his works in the hope of some profit.

About the time when Erasmus was staying with Thomas More, Corycius had become wary, it seems, of almost twenty years of a purely bureaucratic life, and decided to enter in full into the artistic and humanistic life of the city. He hired two of the foremost artists available at the moment, viz. the sculptor Andrea Sansovino and the painter Raphael. Here we notice another marked contrast with Erasmus who never, as far as we know, showed much interest in contemporary art. Kristeller has noticed a similar lack of interest in the sciences.<sup>9</sup> I find it highly characteristic that in *Contemporaries of Erasmus* one looks in vain for the names of the great artists of the time, Bramante, Michelangelo, Rafael and others, some of them he could have seen at work in Florence and in Rome. Notwithstanding his many travels and his close contacts with the Curia and the courts of kings and emperor, Erasmus is basically a bookish man with, culturally speaking, rather limited interests. One may guess that, apart from personal inclinations, some influence of the unwordly Common Life mentality continued to determine his life.

Corycius asked Sansovino to carve a marble statue, not of some classical god or hero, but of Saint Anne, the Holy Virgin and the child Jesus, a so-called 'Anna Selbdritt' or 'Anna-ten-drieën', the well-known group one still finds in many old churches in the Low Countries and the Rhineland. It is obvious that Corycius was still thinking of his native land and piety when he ordered that particular statue to be made. It was to be placed in the Church of St. Augustine near Piazza Navona, where

<sup>8</sup> Allen Ep. 1329, 12-13 (22 December 1522): "Si tua Sanctitas iubebit, audebo secretis litteris indicare consilium meum." In an 'elzeviro' ['Gli intellettuali? Ornamenti nella vetrina del Principe'] published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* of 6 September 1996, p. 24, the famous Italian journalist Indro Montanelli almost unwittingly offers this portrait of Erasmus: "In tutte le epoche ed a tutte le latitudini, il sogno dell'intellettuale è stato, e rimane, quello di diventare il direttore di coscienza del Principe e di gestire attraverso di lui il potere senza assumerne le responsabilità".

<sup>9</sup> P.O. Kristeller, 'Erasmus from an Italian Perspective', *Renaissance Quarterly* 23 (1970) 1-14, esp. 5-6.

we still can admire it today. Above the statue, on the column against which it was placed, Rafael painted a large figure of the prophet Isaiah, the connection of which with the statue is not hard to see.

The statue was ready in 1512 and from that year onwards Corycius organised a humanistic feast on Saint Anne's day, the 26th of July. When one studies the details of that feast it becomes clear that those 'Annalia', as they were called, were a perfect Christianised version of the Saturnalia described by the early fifth-century Roman writer Macrobius at the beginning of his work of the same name. The feast comprised both a religious and a literary commemoration. In the morning a mass was celebrated in the church of St. Augustine; later during the day, Monsignor Corycius entertained his friends and guests in his villa at a reception and a banquet, in return to which the participants offered to their host Latin poems in praise of Saint Anne, the artists, and, last but not least, Monsignor himself. From the descriptions we have, the banquets were 'convivia poetica, philosophica et religiosa', in many respects comparable to the 'Convivia' of the Erasmian *Colloquies*.

For Corycius the poems were a kind of antidote against the dry-as-dust stuff of the appeals he had to read every day in his job as 'receptor supplicarum'. In a rare letter to a friend he thanked for the gift of the poem *De urbanis poetis* by Franciscus Arsilus because, he says, "it is far more pleasant and charming reading than the petitions which are under my hands every day and, although I am used to them, make me sick and angry."<sup>10</sup>

At the Annalia 'le tout Rome' could be seen, from cardinals such as Bembo and Sadoleto and ambassadors such as Baldassare Castiglione to all kinds of humanists, established authors as well as young students from the Roman upper class families such as the Mellini. It will not come as a surprise that a number of German visitors were also present. After all, as a Luxemburger Monsignor Goritz was a member of the community of Santa Maria dell'Anima, the building costs of which he had helped to defray. Among his German visitors we notice Ulrich von Hutten. And here a little surprise is in store: among the poems Hutten offered to Corycius, there is one in which he entreats the Holy Virgin to heal his feet, sore after the long journey to Rome. There is nothing ironical in this text, which shows how quickly men could change their belief and convictions at that time. In this context it is well to remember that Luther himself seems to have applied for permission to stay in Rome for ten years to study,<sup>11</sup> and that Erasmus, notwithstanding his *Colloquies*, implored the help of Saint Paul as soon as, on the road to Ghent, he had fallen from his horse and hurt his back.

The poems give a good idea of the general religious atmosphere in Corycius's circle and they may help us to gain a better insight in the spiritual side of Renaissance Rome at the time of Julius II and Leo X. After all, one hundred poets and more, old

<sup>10</sup> The letter precedes poem 400, the last one of the *Coryciana*. It begins: "Multam, Silvane, tibi debeo gratiam, quod mihi nostri Arsilii *De urbanis poetis* legendum libellum induleris, longe iucundiorum profecto et venustiorum iis libellis, qui mihi quotidie inter manus versantur et lites praeferunt atque contentiones ac, licet assueto, nauseam et bilem commovent."

<sup>11</sup> H. Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen 1985) 237-238.

and young, certainly offer a representative sampling of humanistic Rome. I shall now try to put together the main characteristics of their religious feelings as expressed in their poems:

1. Corycius's friends feel themselves to be Christians and devout worshippers of Christ, his mother and his grandmother. Over and again they rejoice at the victory of the Christian faith over the ancient pagan gods.
2. In their poems they pray for two divine favours: a happy life on earth and, afterwards, to be allowed into the heavenly abode of the blessed.
3. At the same time they underline that they are not theologians, but poets speaking as poets. They claim artistic freedom, which means, in practice, that nobody should take offence at their using words such as 'deus' and 'dea' instead of 'divus' or 'sanctus', because often the metre does not allow them to do otherwise.

If Erasmus and many a modern scholar in his wake — to begin with Augustin Renaudet<sup>12</sup> — had given more attention to this point, many misunderstandings about a so-called paganism could have been avoided. And let us not forget either that Erasmus himself had called nuns "Vestales virgines" in his *Antibarbari* (ASD 1-1, 77,13-14), and still called hell "Tartarus" in his *De praeparatione ad mortem* of 1533,<sup>13</sup> and Christian priests "druidae" in his poem to Saint Genovefa (v. 41), written in 1531, that is, several years after his *Ciceronianus*. Let us not forget either that the use of pagan terms for Christian ideas is as old as Christian Latin poetry itself: Iuvenius, the first Christian Latin poet, also calls God "Tonans" in his versification of the Gospels, and so does Arator in his Acts of the Apostles, varying it with expressions such as "rector" or "regnator Olympi."

In 1524, when Erasmus was involved in his conflict with Luther on free will, Corycius had a selection of his 'carmina Coryciana' nicely printed in Rome. It is a typical humanistic publication, typographically a splendid book, and now a first-rate witness of literary life in Rome at the time when Luther was upsetting the whole Christian world. Even in Corycius's collection the first signs of the storm ahead can be traced: two or three epigrams attack Luther. On the other hand, and strange as it may seem, in a long poem Hadrian VI is hailed as the new hope of humanistic Rome, quite different from what poets such as Francesco Berni would be saying only a few months later.

The Lutheran conflict became also fatal to Corycius, and what happened to him may help to understand better the hostility of some Italian humanists towards Erasmus in his later years. The year 1527 was a disaster for both Rome and Corycius. The 'Sacco di Roma', the occupation and looting of the 'Urbs' by German and Spanish mercenary troops in May, is a never forgotten calamity. Most of the members of the humanist community, among them Corycius, lost their property; many were killed, others such as Corycius fled from Rome destitute and died soon afterwards from fatigue and sorrow. Those who remained and survived never forgot nor forgave the

<sup>12</sup> A good survey of his and others' vision on Erasmus and Rome or Italy is found in James D. Tracy's book on *Erasmus: the Growth of a Mind* (Geneva 1972) 115-117.

<sup>13</sup> See ASD 5-1, 354,329; 386,146.

brutalities of the German invaders. In order to place ourselves into the survivors' situation and try to understand their state of mind, I find it most helpful to visit the splendid Villa Farnesina in Rome, build around 1510 by the Vatican banker Agostino Chigi, and there to reflect a few moments on those tragic events while looking at one of the frescoes in the 'Stanza delle Nozze' still damaged by scriblings in old German, left by one of the invaders.<sup>14</sup>

As often happens in such dramatic circumstances, some people overreact. So we find that some of Corycius's former friends such as the learned Monsignor Colocci and the poet Ioannes Baptista Sanga put the blame for all their misfortunes not only on Luther, but also on the Germans they knew, such as Corycius. Strange but true, Erasmus in his *Ciceronianus*, when discussing Longolius, shows himself aware of such unjust generalisations,<sup>15</sup> yet did not anticipate the Italian reactions to his own pamphlet. Upon the dead Corycius's head the 'Sacco' victims poured out their wrath, accusing him of being of one mind with Luther. And applying well-known classical tactics of abuse, they went as far as to revile him as an old and vicious lecher, who had erected a statue, not in honour of Saint Anne, but for a whore called Anne. About ten years earlier those men had written poems in praise of Corycius and Saint Anne and still allowed them to be printed in Corycius's collection of 1524!

Taking into account these circumstances, one can easily imagine the effect of Erasmus's *Ciceronianus* arriving in Rome precisely in the months following the Sack of Rome. It must have come as a kind of literary slap in the face for men traumatised by the Sack, who still had under their eyes the consequences of the German invasion. It was to be expected, therefore, that the same men, who were cursing their former friend Corycius, would now vent their anger against that other German Erasmus, whom they could only see as an ally of their murderers and looters. For some it will have confirmed the slander some theologians, such as Stunica, had spread about Erasmus from the time of Leo X onwards. Still, the strongest reactions against Erasmus did not come, as far as I know, from Rome, but from other places, especially from Northern Italy and France. If Casalis had still been alive, he might have written another invective. Only five or six years later Petrus Cursius, a minor humanist,<sup>16</sup> paid off the old grudge by taking exception to an innocent passage in the *Adagia*, in which Erasmus had said that an "Italus bellax", a warlike Italian, was hard to find. But before we laugh at the touchiness of that patriotic Roman poet, let us remember that in the time of Mussolini an Italian scholar Roberto Valentini, in a paper read in 1937 to the Accademia dei Lincei, still shows the same irritation at Erasmus's words, which are for him an "offesa", and he perfectly understands that the Italian culture "non permetteva ad uno straniero di chiamare in causa quei valori spirituali che erano rimasti intatte prerogative della razza."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Elsa Gerlini, *Villa Farnesina alla Lungara, Roma* (Rome 1988) 63 (text) and 66, fig. 37.

<sup>15</sup> ASD 1-2, 694,25-27: "Interim Longolii causam gravabat Lutheri causa, cuius gratia apud Romanos male audiebat quicquid erat affine Germaniae, ne dicam Cisalpini omnes."

<sup>16</sup> On Casalis († 1525) and Cursius see Silvana Seidel Menchi, *Erasmus in Italia 1520-1580* (Turin 1987) 45, 59.

<sup>17</sup> R. Valentini, 'Erasmus di Rotterdam e Pietro Corsi: a proposito di una polemica fraintesa', *Rendiconti della R. Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, s. vi, xii (1936) 895-922, esp. 919-920.

## The case of the *Ciceronianus*

The case of the *Ciceronianus* deserves some further comments, because it sheds clear light on broader cultural issues. First, there was more than just the unhappy timing of the *Ciceronianus*. For the former friends of Corycius it was easy to see that Erasmus's description of the preaching "coram papa" was utterly false, as O'Malley has demonstrated some years ago. Most of the orations held in the Sistine chapel were not at all that Ciceronian rubbish and flattery of the pope that Erasmus had made of them. If it happened that, exceptionally, an orator had exaggerated in that direction, he was openly criticised by his fellow-humanists. That was what happened to the Venetian Petrus Alcyonius in 1525, whose sermon on Whitsunday was publicly ridiculed.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Erasmus's criticism of the Roman *μουσεῖα*, the forerunners of our museums and art galleries, is totally unfair. I quote: "If you have ever observed those museums of the Ciceronians at Rome, just recollect whether you have ever noticed in any of them a crucifix or a representation of the Trinity or the apostles. No, everything is full of the monuments of paganism ..." <sup>19</sup> This is really a very narrow-minded brand of humanism — if we still can speak of humanism in such a case! — and again one can imagine the impact of such words on men who just had lost their collections of ancient marbles. Corycius, like Julius II himself and many other prelates, had been a collector of ancient inscriptions and sculptures and today we are grateful that these men no longer let them be used as building materials by lime burners and building contractors. If Nosoponus exaggerated in his extreme ciceronianism, Bulephorus's views are equally obtuse. What is left of humanism if ancient and prophane art is utterly condemned, if the Bible is the only subject of art that we are allowed to esteem? The strange thing is that Erasmus usually did not speak in the same way when literature was concerned. As late as August 1526 he wrote in a letter to Vergilius Polydorus: "Of course, I strongly agree with you, since it is indeed the right order to go from the human concerns to the divine ones. I do not want you to abandon the defence of the Muses. ... As long as our age allowed it, we have worked hard to promote them ... What I still can do now is to exhort others to defend classical literature."<sup>20</sup>

The unjust attack of Erasmus on one of the finest aspects of Roman and Italian humanism must inevitably have reminded the Roman academicians of the equally mean reaction of Hadrian VI against the Laocoon sculpture saved by Julius II. Let me recall to mind a passage at the end of the *Hadriani Sexti Vita* of Paulus Iovius (Giovio), an author who is generally hostile neither to Hadrian nor to Erasmus: "He

<sup>18</sup> See Kenneth Gouwens, 'Ciceronianism and Collective Identity: Defining the Boundaries of the Roman Academy, 1525', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993) 173-195.

<sup>19</sup> ASD 1-2, 647,10-13: "Si quando Romae conspicatus es Ciceronianorum *μουσεῖα*, recole quaeso nuncubi videris imaginem crucifixi aut sacrae triadis aut apostolorum; paganismi monumentis plena reperies omnia." I quote the English translation of Betty I. Knott, *CWE* 28 (Toronto 1986) 397.

<sup>20</sup> Allen Ep. 1734, 12-14.23-25 (Basel, 19 August 1526): "Equidem animum istum tuum vehementer probō: nam hic est ordo verissimus, ut ab humanis ad divina proficiamus. Nolim te tamen Musarum patrocinium deponere ... Nos, quoad per aetatem licuit, sedulam illis provehendis navavimus operam ... Quod unum igitur superest, alios ad bonarum litterarum defensionem adhortor."



did not at all think much of the splendor of prominent painting nor of ancient sculptures, so much so that, when Vianesius, the ambassador of Bologna, praised the sculpture of Laocoon before him, which Iulius had bought for much money and put in the garden of the Belvedere to enhance the beauty of the place, he immediately turned away his eyes disparaging the sculptures of pagan people.”<sup>21</sup> With such a mentality there never would have been a Vatican nor any other archaeological museum!

Erasmus is not less unfair when he writes that in Rome only pagan art could be seen. Didn't Michelangelo and Raphael and many other artists leave us masterpieces of Christian art? And to come back to Corycius: several poets state that the Saint Anne statue and the poems were intended as a Christian counterpart to the statue and poems of Pasquino at the other end of Piazza Navona. If, therefore, Romans could see the degree of disinformation used by Erasmus in his pamphlet published at a most painful moment of their civic history and culture, can we really be surprised if some of them reacted in the same way as Petrarch had done in 1373, writing a *Contra eum qui maledixit Italie* when Urban v had failed to bring the Holy See back to Rome?

The humanists' anger was undoubtedly fuelled by reminiscences of Hadrian VI, who had disappointed their expectations and, in their imagination, lived on as a barbarian from the North. I refer again to the story told by Iovius. In the case of Hadrian VI too, it is not easy to proffer a balanced judgment. I will not venture upon the tricky field of Church affairs and politics, for which I do not feel competent, but limit my considerations to the cultural aspect, which is what humanism is about. Personally, I am not surprised at all that Roman humanists, after initial expectations, soon considered Hadrian a disaster: with a scholastic theologian from Leuven it could hardly be otherwise. Let me recall the fact that a humanist such as J.L. Vives left Leuven for Bruges because he could not stand the oppressive atmosphere in the university town created by the theologians. Once he wrote to a friend that in Leuven it was strictly forbidden to laugh and that on each streetcorner nasty figures were looming to prevent any sign of a merrier life.<sup>22</sup>

If, therefore, Italians had objective reasons to owe Erasmus a grudge, the reactions of quite a few, such as Bembo and Sadoletto — far more important humanists than either Casalis or Corsius — were not hostile, but moderately positive, as Luca d'Ascia has pointed out. Moreover, when the storm of the 'Sacco' had calmed down, other members of the same Roman circles were fair enough to pass more balanced judgments on Erasmus. Let me quote two of them, namely Lilius Gregorius Gyraldus from Ferrara and the Tuscan Paulus Iovius or Giovio.

The first author is well-known for his dialogues on ancient and modern Latin poets. In the *Dialogus posterior de poetis suorum temporum* he had this to say on

<sup>21</sup> “Ornamenta insignis picturae et statuarum priscae artis nequaquam magnificet, adeo ut Vianesio Bononiensium legato commendante statuam Laocoontis, quam in Belvederii viridariis Iulius ingenti pretio coemptam ad loci dignitatem collocarat, aversis statim oculis tamquam impiae gentis simulachra vituperaret.”: Paulus Iovius, *Opera 6 Vitarum pars prior*. Ed. M. Cataudella (Rome 1987) 139.

<sup>22</sup> Letter written on 22 May 1521 to Franciscus Craneveldius. See *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 43 (1994) 23-27, esp. 25 (letter 61).

Erasmus as a poet: “Among the Germans the first of whom I can think, not in order of time but because of the renown of his name is D. Erasmus from Rotterdam. I will not speak of his prose works, a list of which he made in one of his publications. To me he seems to have been a very able poet in his Latin translations of tragedies of Euripides. He was less brilliant in some poems and verses made by himself, partly translated from various Greek texts into Latin. Erasmus is in all respects a great man, but I am not sure if he is as great as some make him. Among the Germans he was certainly a great Latin author, among the Italians he sometimes smacks of German.”<sup>23</sup>

This certainly is a competent evaluation: with sure critical sense Gyraldus picked the translations of Euripides as Erasmus’s poetic masterpiece. Nobody will contradict this judgment. Nor will anyone disagree where the other poems receive less praise. Most of Erasmus’s poems are dull, and the translations of verses in the *Adages* are made to clarify the meaning, not to emulate their poetic qualities. There is also much to say for the general evaluation: Erasmus’s greatness is duly acknowledged and a warning against exaggerations was, and is, not unfounded. And not many Italian humanists were prepared to admit that among the Germans there could be good Latin authors.

Iovius included Erasmus in the ‘docti viri’ of whom he wrote ‘elogia’. His judgment encompasses the whole of Erasmus’s work. I quote: “Erasmus of Rotterdam ... seems to me to deserve eternal praise for his learning. Indeed, the richness of his mind surpasses almost the best of the writers of our age. In his youth a pious decision of his religious mind made him join a monastic order, as if he was despising the world. But soon enough he became wary of such an inconvenient confinement and the rashly taken vow. He therefore leapt the enclosure of his holy order and, in search of learning, he wandered as an entirely free man through all the universities of Europe. He was zealously striving for the highest pitch of glory. When he had acquired, through endless reading and by an uncommon memory, the secrets of all sciences, he realised that he could reach that glory by means of thorough scholarship.

He published the *Praise of Folly* and through it, for the first time, he acquired a very widely spread renown. Imitating Lucian’s satire, he filled it with sharp and stinging remarks and referred to Folly the activity of all groups of men. Even for serious and busy men it is really a very pleasant work because of its wittiness, but it does not well suit a priest, since he seems to ridicule also religious matters. Finally, however, when he was gaining bad repute because of this insolence, he applied himself to purer studies. Exerting the formidable strength of his mind in translating Greek and composing scholarly works he published more volumes than any other author. Yet if he had chosen to imitate more seriously the Latin classics rather than to

<sup>23</sup> Lilius Gregorius Gyraldus, *Dialogus posterior de poetis suorum temporum* (ed.: Leiden 1696) 2, 558C: “Inter hos [Germanos] omnium primus non tempore, sed nominis celebritate mihi occurrit Des. Erasmus Rhoterodamus, qui – ut mittam quae soluta oratione perscripsit, quae et ipse suo quodam libello connumeravit – non parum etiam in poetica profecisse videtur ex iis, quas ex Euripide feliciter tragoedias Latinas fecit; edidit et ipse, sed non pari felicitate, aliqua sua carmina et versus partim sua incude formatos, partim ex diversis Graecis in Latinum conversos. Vir hic iure ubique magnus, sed an tantus fuerit, quantus a nonnullis existimatur, haud mihi parum liquet, certe inter Germanos Latinus, inter Latinos aliquando Germanus.”

indulge in his own impetuous and hurried talents, he certainly would have earned by himself greater admiration from all. He strove for a personal glory of originality in matters of style and structure, which does not depend on a sure emulation of the ancients, as he has shown in his *Ciceronianus* which is full of patent envy. So rich was his nature that he was always, so to say, pregnant and superfetating. Rejoicing in the various and precipitate progeny of his abundant mind, he was all the time bringing new manuscripts to his printers who were to act as his midwives.”<sup>24</sup>

For a man such as Iovius, who was himself a rather strict Ciceronian, this is a fairly well-balanced mixture of admiration and criticism. Most of us will no longer accept the second part of his judgment concerning the *Praise of Folly*, nor his want of good Latin style. But in other respects, such as with his observation that Erasmus was working too hastily he certainly hits the mark.

## Conclusions

What kind of conclusions, if any, can we draw from our discussion of Erasmus and his Roman contemporaries? Perhaps this: we have to be very careful in formulating general statements about Roman humanists as pagans and empty rhetoricians, and about Erasmus as the marvellous model of a true Christian humanist and a unique scholar. Such a black-and-white picture will not do, as Paul Oskar Kristeller has underlined already twenty-five years ago.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, Erasmus was one of the greatest scholars of his age, as leading Roman humanists readily recognised. The sheer bulk and the quality of much of his philological and editorial work is there to prove it eloquently. As a humanist he knew his

<sup>24</sup> Paulus Iovius, *Elogia doctorum virorum* (Antwerpen 1557) 208-209 (Nr. 85): “Erasmus Roterdamus ... perpetuis eruditae laudis honoribus extollendus videtur, postquam aetatis nostrae scriptorum prope omnium decus ingenii fertilitate superarit. Is ab adolescentia pio religiosi animi decreto ad cuculatos sacerdotes se contulit, tanquam humana despiceret. Sed non multo post, pertaesus intempestivae servitutis votique temere suscepti, ea sacra ordinis septa transiliit ut ad excolendum ingenium plane liber per omnia Europae gymnasia vagaretur. Contendebat enim cura ingenti ad summa gloriae fastigium, ad quod literarum omnium cognitione perveniri posse intelligebat, quum iam ad arcana cuiusque doctrinae infinita lectione inusitataque memoria penetrasset.

Edidit Moriam atque inde primam nominis famam longissime protulit, imitatione Luciani satyrae pungentes aculeos passim relinquens, omnium scilicet sectarum actionibus ad insaniam revocatis. Opus quidem salsa aspergine periucundum vel gravibus et occupatis, sed sacro viro prorsus indecorum, quum divinis quoque rebus illuisse videretur. Sed mature demum quod eius intemperantiae male audiendo poenas daret, sanctiores litteras complexus est, tanta robustissimi ingenii contentione ut vertendo Graeca et commentarios excudendo plura quam quisquam alius volumina publicavit. Verum seipso haud dubie cunctis admirabilior futurus, si Latinae linguae conditores graviter imitari quam fervido properantique ingenio indulgere maluisset. Quaerebat enim peculiarem laudem ex elocutionis atque structurae novitate, quae nulla certa veterum aemulatione pararetur, ut in Ciceroniano non occulti livoris plenus ostendit. Tanta enim erat naturae foecunditas ut plena semper ac ideo superfoetante alvo, varia et festinata luxuriantis ingenii prole delectatus, novum aliquid quod statim ederetur chalcographis tanquam intentis obstetricibus parturiret.

Obiit apud Helvetios Friburgo in pago, sive ut aliqui asserunt, Basiliae, septuagesimum excedens aetatis annum, quum Carolus Caesar in Provinciam irrumpens, ad Aquas Sextias Franciscus Galliae regi grave bellum intulisset.”

<sup>25</sup> Kristeller, ‘Erasmus from an Italian Perspective’, 7.

classics thoroughly and he loved them better than he sometimes could acknowledge. I cannot follow Richard DeMolen, when he asserts that “the classics were no more than tools that were used by Erasmus to prod others to adopt his *philosophia Christi*.”<sup>26</sup> If that were true we could no longer call Erasmus a humanist, let alone the prince of humanists. But it is true that Erasmus’s humanism is limited and bookish by nature. In that respect he is fundamentally different from many Roman humanists, who certainly did more than just to foster an overly-exaggerated cult of Cicero. In the age of Erasmus important and serious scholarly work was done in Rome: important Greek works were being translated into Latin, such as the *Epidemiarum libri VII* of Hippocrates by Manente Leontini, and Basilius Magnus by Raphael of Volterra; the Greek dialects were studied by Bartholus Castrensis, and a Greek dictionary was being prepared by Varinus Phavorinus; unknown Latin texts were published for the first time, such as Seneca’s satire on Claudius (*Apocolocyntosis*, 1513) and, most important, five more books of Tacitus’s *Annals*, edited in 1515 by Philippus Beroaldus jr., one of the Corycian poets; ancient inscriptions, the importance of which Erasmus never seems to have understood, were searched for and published in collections, such as *Epigrammata antiquae Urbis* (1521). At the same time poets, painters and sculptors were exerting themselves in a common effort to create the glory of a new Augustan Rome. One understands Erasmus when, in England and in Basel, he was looking back in nostalgic desire to his months in Rome and the cultural richness he had witnessed in the ‘Urbs’.

I will not venture upon a judgment of the religious feelings of Erasmus or his contemporary Roman humanists for other reasons, and because the image of a good Christian changes too often throughout the generations. The danger of an anachronistic assessment is far too great. All I want to say is that most humanists probably considered themselves to be good Christians, but that not many were prepared to limit their interests to matters of faith and religion only. Life has more to offer than just reading the Bible and study theology. I cannot see an interest in ancient art as a proof of paganism, and it is certainly wrong to claim that poems must be theologically correct treatises. If one would apply to the letter some of Erasmus’s ideas, hardly any room would be left for humanism at all, and literature would be reduced to pious poetry and biblical paraphrases. Some parts of Erasmus’s own work and much of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature show how dull that kind of writing can be. For a healthy cultural balance we need men such as Corycius not less than others such as Erasmus.

<sup>26</sup> R.L. DeMolen, *The Spirituality of Erasmus of Rotterdam* (Nieuwkoop 1987) 36.