Karl A.E. Enenkel, ed.


The ten essays in this volume originated with papers at the “Around Erasmus” conference in Amsterdam in January 2011. They are splendidly introduced by editor Karl Enenkel and provide an illuminating look at the ways in which Erasmus was perceived, received, and his work appropriated in a variety of European contexts. The essays are spread through four parts: Humanism; Religious Ideas; Political Ideas; and Receptions of *The Praise of Folly* in French, Italian, and Dutch Literature. All are meticulously researched. They supplement book studies of the reception of Erasmus but, uniquely, this volume provides case studies to “increase our knowledge with respect to the underlying processes of the reception of Erasmus, and to shed light on aspects and texts that have not been taken into account or not understood in this way” (9). The reception of Erasmus was an international phenomenon so this volume is appropriately broad in scope. What emerges is the recognition that “Erasmus's reception is at least as complex, flexible, and manifold as his works” (17, 18).

Enenkel’s study of Beatus Rhenanus’s Second *Vita Erasmi* (1540) illustrates the complexities of Erasmus’s reception. In this life of his close friend, Rhenanus strategically avoids controversial aspects of Erasmus’s works to prevent new polemical outbursts. He suppresses and excludes literary works to present the Dutch Humanist as a “serious, altruistic, and precise scholar—as a textual critic, linguist, theologian, and specialist in ancient Greek” (33). Erasmus was portrayed as a progressive or “advanced” Humanist who was presenting a “new theology,” shifting from Scholastic to patristic grounds and whose work should be satisfying to a variety of religious, confessional, and intellectual persons.

A different type of reception is illustrated by Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, Theodor Bibliander (1509–1564) who became “the major European Hebrew scholar and the ‘father’ of modern exegesis” (85). Lucia Felici’s essay on “Universalism and Tolerance in a Follower of Erasmus from Zurich: Theodor Bibliander” shows Bibliander’s thorough appropriation of many of Erasmus’s emphases, including a drive for religious concord and the *philosophia Christi* which emphasized living in the imitation of Christ and his message of love and charity. Bibliander developed his theology beginning from a “postulate of universal election to salvation” by a magnificently merciful God, revealed through the “law of nature” and inscribed in human reason—ideas found and defended in Erasmus’s writings (88). Religious concord is grounded in a “science of righteous living,” shared by Christian, Jews, Muslims, and pagans (93). Bibliander’s
views put him at odds over the doctrine of predestination with Reformed theologians, Oswald Myconius and Peter Martyr Vermigli. His conception of Christianity as “a religion accessible in its basic principles to all peoples of the earth considerably widened the horizons of the regnum Dei” (97).

Erasmus’s reach into England is demonstrated in Gregory Dodds’s essay, “Betwixt Heaven and Hell: Religious Toleration and the Reception of Erasmus in Restoration England.” Dodds focuses on Roger L’Estrange and Edward Stillingfleet who used Erasmus “to further their religious visions for English society” (105). Erasmus stressed Christian moderation and religious toleration in his dreams of a Christian society. L’Estrange, a zealous royalist, supported the Church of England as a church devoted to peace and unity. He rendered an excellent translation of Erasmus’s Colloquies and believed attacks on him were similar to attacks Erasmus had experienced. For L’Estrange, Erasmus represented, as Dodds says, “an alternative to the belligerent Protestantism that characterized English political and social discourse” (111). Bishop Stillingfleet, an able preacher, maintained the Church of England was perpetuating the true Catholicism and thus “Erasmus’s Catholicism was therefore Stillingfleet’s Catholicism” (116). Dodds suggests that whatever the motivations in appealing to Erasmus, examining the reception of Erasmus’s texts and legacy “provides a useful contextual angle” for studying debates at the core of Christian faith that remained, beyond the Reformation period: “the struggle over Christian unity and disunity, peace and violence, tolerance and intolerance” (125).

Hilmar M. Pabel’s “Praise and Blame: Peter Canisius’s Ambivalent Assessment of Erasmus” is an illuminating study of the ambivalence experienced by Canisius who was “among the most dynamic of the first recruits of the Society of Jesus” (131). Canisius did not try to “recuperate Erasmus for Catholicism.” Rather, Pabel finds that “Canisius’s evaluation of Erasmus betrays ambivalence, not balance. His hostility was palpable, but he could not bring himself to pronounce a consistent condemnation. Praise and blame of Erasmus coexist uneasily in the mind of one of the most prolific writers of the early Society of Jesus” (133). Canisius believed Erasmus was “a peerless expert in belles lettres but a dangerous dabbler in theology” (138). While Canisius quoted Erasmus, especially his Adages, he objected to portions of Erasmus’s biblical exegesis in his Annotations on the New Testament. Yet, while in effect portraying Erasmus as a tyrant or bully for claiming too much for himself at points, Canisius “never explicitly brands him a heretic” (144). A particular point of difficulty was his view that Erasmus “did not hesitate to attack the honour due the mother of God and to injure her openly” (153) in Erasmus’s comments on the Virgin Mary. In addition, Erasmus laid the egg Luther hatched. At the end, as Pabel concludes, Erasmus “engendered confusion in the mind of Canisius,” due to the
complexity of the Erasmian heritage. Canisius could give neither “uncritical adulation or uncompromising censure” (157).

Further essays consider the reception of Erasmus in the poetry of Pierre de Ronsard; Eobanus Hessus’s poetic rendering of an Erasmus writing on medicine into Latin verse; Erasmus’s views of government in relation to Justus Lipsius; and the receptions of The Praise of Folly. Each piece is intriguing in itself and collectively fulfill Enenkel’s introductory description of “manifold reader responses” (1).

The multifaceted Erasmus is displayed in this book. His name was sometimes invoked for authorizing un-Erasmian ideals. But truly, “Erasmus had as many responses as he had readers” (18).

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