ThOMAS MORE TO MAARTEN VAN DORP: TRADITION AND HUMANISM

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Characters and Setting

Thomas More wrote four important letters defending Erasmus: in 1515 against the Louvain theologian Maarten van Dorp; in 1518 against the Oxford University “Trojans,” who opposed the study of Greek; in 1519 against the Carthusian prior John Batmanson; also in 1519 against the English cleric Edward Lee.¹ This essay concentrates on some aspects of the letter to Dorp, which both guards the classical tradition and exhibits innovative humanist traits. These four letters – all addressed to attackers of Erasmus – probably constitute the most elaborate defense of The Prince of the Humanists ever penned.

As the attacks on Erasmus had been basically against this Prince’s humanist traits, so More’s defenses of him supported these same traits. Hence when Daniel Kinney came to translate and edit the four letters for the Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, he entitled the volume In Defense of Humanism. The earliest, and at 18,000 words the longest, the letter to Dorp, is important for several reasons. First, it covers so much intellectual territory that it establishes definitively several basic humanist concerns: personal (in terms of friendship), rhetorical, linguistic, and theological. Second, its arguments concerning theology posit unmistakably the partisanship of More and Erasmus with the humanists against the later scholastics. Third, a somewhat thinly disguised subtext reveals the internecine struggles among the theologians of Louvain, who seemed to have used the young and accomplished Dorp as actor in a plot to disguise their own enmity towards the brilliant Erasmus, an enmity based perhaps on jealousy of him.

¹ These four letters are found in their original Latin with English translation in Daniel Kinney, ed., In Defense of Humanism, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Volume 15 (New Haven and London, 1986). Quotations from More’s letter to Dorp are from this edition and are indicated by page number in the body of my text, as are quotations from Daniel Kinney’s commentary. In the printed text of the letter, Latin is on the verso, English on the facing recto.
During the autumn of 1514, Dorp – whom Erasmus had known as a young student at Lily College in Louvain – wrote an open letter to Erasmus attacking *The Praise of Folly* as well as the bilingual edition of the New Testament, *Novum Instrumentum*, on which Erasmus was working (Allen 304). Erasmus did not see the letter until May or June of 1515. He was traveling from London to Basel, precisely to bring the manuscripts of his edition of St. Jerome and his *Novum Instrumentum* to Johann Froben for publication, and in so doing he crossed the Low Countries. From Antwerp he wrote a quickly composed answer to Dorp, promising a more careful response at the end of his voyage (Allen 337). Without waiting for Erasmus’s second letter, however, Dorp – three days before receiving his doctorate in theology – sent him another, dated August 27, 1515, which denounced certain aspects of the New Learning, including its predilection for polished writing (Allen 347).

In the meantime Thomas More had been designated by Henry VIII as a participant in negotiations between England and the Low Countries regarding a commercial agreement known as the *Malus Intercursus*. He arrived in Bruges on May 17, 1515, and was thus there when Erasmus passed through in June; the two friends discussed their latest reading. More seemed not to have known of Dorp’s letter previously. (During lulls in the diplomatic negotiations, More had begun to write the work first called *Nusquama* and eventually known as *Utopia*.) It was not until October 21 that More finished his answer to Dorp, sensing perhaps that Erasmus – occupied with the important texts he was bringing to Froben – had no real desire to polish his original response to Dorp. The Dorp file, then, consists of two letters to Erasmus from the Louvain theologian (Allen 304 and 347), a provisional answer from Erasmus (Allen 337), and Thomas More’s letter to Dorp (CW15, 1–127), the last much longer than the other three put together. Instead of writing a second response to Dorp, Erasmus completed the first and elaborated on it. Thierry Martens, the Louvain printer who produced the first edition of *Utopia* in December 1516, printed Erasmus’s revision with the Commentary on Psalm 1, *Beatus Vir*. The manuscript copy which More used to compose his letter to Dorp

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