On a Verse of Erasmus*

by Nicolaas van der Blom

As we all know, Erasmus has no reason to complain of our century. The volumes in the new edition of his Opera Omnia, the ASD, worthy successor to the BAS and LB,1 that have appeared since 1969—when we celebrated the year we thought he was born, 1469,—2 are coming out in steady progress. The masterly work of P. S. Allen, Erasmus' Epistolae, was finished in 1947 (hereafter: Allen). And for the poetical part of Erasmus' works there is C. Reedijk's The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus (hereafter: Reedijk), which was published in 1956.

It detracts nothing from the merits of Reedijk's book, a Leiden doctoral thesis, when I try here to offer the solution to a riddle that the editor himself confesses he could not solve in a satisfactory way. This note will bring forward some unknown details on Erasmus' early life, and gather additional information on other verses (for part of which I have to thank two Dutch correspondents). I hope these remarks will themselves further the study of Erasmus' poetical work.

In eight verses (Reedijk 50–58), six new bells of a church that was struck by lightning and later, after the fire, were restored present

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* An abbreviated version of this note has been published in the Dutch language in Hermeneus, 53 (1981), 29–31.

1 BAS = Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi (Basileae: Hieron. Frobenius and Nic. Episcopius, 1540); LB = Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi (Lugduni Batavorum: P. van der Aa, 1703–06); ASD = Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1969–).

2 See A. C. F. Koch, The Year of Erasmus' Birth (Utrecht, 1969) and my review of this book with additions of my own in Humanistica Lovaniensia, 20 (1971), 69–79. The local tradition in Rotterdam maintains without exception that Erasmus was born in 1467. On the occasion of putting up, in 1964, a new socle for the famous bronze Erasmus (see my Erasmus en Rotterdam, number 26 of the Publications of the Historical Society "Roterodamum," small series, 1969; for English-speaking readers, see my contribution in Erasmus in English, 6 [1973], 5–9), the year on the original socle was changed from 1467 to 1469 at the request of C. Reedijk and the present writer, who based their decision on the judgment of R. R. Post. Afterwards J. W. C. Besemer, restorer of St. Laurent's church and a defender and preserver of tradition, reproached us for it. In his view, no matter what Erasmian scholars say, have said or will ever say, the socle and its inscriptions are an historical document and the traditional year 1467 should have been maintained. Alas! we find that it is impossible for us penitents to have our fault corrected. For this tragicomedy, see Rotterdams Jaarboekje (1978), 219–222.
themselves: “I am consecrated to the Trinity, I to Mary, I to John the
Baptist, I to Peter, I to Mary Magdalene, I to All Saints.” (Erasmus
offered alternative texts for the second and the last verses). The text of
the first, Reedijk 50, runs:

Concinimus sex aera, at ego cui maxima vox est
Alpha et 00 Triadi rite dicata vocor.
Nos aedemque sacram Scasti pia cura Girardi
Praesulis absumptam fulmine restituit.

We, six bronze bells, sing in harmony—but I
whose voice is loudest, consecrated to the
Trinity, am called Alpha and Omega. With
pious care, Bishop Girardus Scastus restored
us, together with the holy church building
after it had been destroyed by lightning.

In his introduction, Reedijk poses three questions: Which church
was referred to? At what time was the poem first written? Who was
Bishop Girardus Scastus?

As for the identity of the church, Reedijk suggests that it might
possibly have been the church of Den Hem (in Holland, near Schoon-
hoven and Gouda). We know it was destroyed by lightning in 1495.

As for the time: did Erasmus write the verses during his last visit to
Holland in 1501? Or did he compose them earlier, sending these verses
from abroad, at the request of Cornelius Aurelius (of Gouda), his
friend and co-poet? The only thing we know for certain is that the
verses were published, with many others, as the second part (the Epigrammata)
of a volume that the printers Badius and his partner Petit
brought out at Paris on January 8, 1507 (Reedijk, list I, number 3, p.
361).

As for the identity of Bishop Girardus Scastus—who could be
located nowhere—Reedijk refers to “the gift of Erasmus for confusing
or corrupting the names of those who did not concern him immedi-
ately.” He thinks Erasmus may have confused the names of a suffragan
bishop of Utrecht, Henricus Schadehoet, who, perhaps, had conse-
crated the rebuilt church of Den Hem, with that of Bishop Gerard
Scadde, who circa 1424 founded the house of the Brethren of the
Common Life at ’s-Hertogenbosch—the two lost years which
Erasmus spent in that house, perhaps, being responsible, if I may mix
some Freud in this narrative, for this Fehlleistung.