The Writer and His Style: Erasmus' Clash with Guillaume Budé

by Laurel Carrington

The quest for a form of verbal expression that is simple, basic, and unambiguous is centuries old. At its heart is the desire that such expression should be so accurate that neither the meaning nor the motives of the originator could possibly be misunderstood, thus allowing for perfect disclosure. Yet side by side with this quest is the awareness that perfect disclosure is not always what a writer or speaker intends. Thus the same skill with words that can allow someone to communicate his meaning exactly might also enable him to hide his true motives and present a false front to the world.¹ This article considers how two sixteenth-century humanists, Desiderius Erasmus and Guillaume Budé, confront together the problem of what writing discloses and what it conceals, in an exchange of letters that began in 1516 and spanned a dozen years. Their correspondence gave the two men an opportunity to comment on each other's works, their respective approaches to writing, and the works of others in a manner that reflects their most deeply-felt concerns.

That the two should eventually correspond was almost inevitable, for they were both securely placed within an elite circle of acclaimed humanist writers, and as a result they developed a multitude of acquaintances in common. Erasmus had published an authoritative Greek text for the New Testament, which became the basis for his own Latin translation and his ever-growing body of annotation. Budé's interest was in Roman law texts, which he sought to liberate from the accumulated errors of medieval glossators. Both men cherished an ideal of returning to the ancient sources that they, as humanists, considered to be the well-spring of all subsequent thought. They strove to master the disciplines of philology and etymology and to understand ancient

¹ Thus G. L. Hendrickson, "The Origin and Meaning of the Ancient Characters of Style," in the American Journal of Philology, 26, 3 (1905), p. 254, cites Aristotle's concerns in the Rhetorica about one of the mainstays of rhetorical theory, the need for appropriateness of style in language: "Indeed, as the appropriate in Aristotle's definition of style is the category under which most of his observations looking to embellishment fall, so also is it the doorway through which distortion or perversion of the abstract truth is admitted to rhetoric." (Rhet. III. 7, 1408a, Oxford translation).
texts in terms of the texts' current standards of usage and style. Their method demanded a painstaking attention to details of word usage and context, in combination with an intuitive grasp of the languages with which they worked, skills that required years of reading both widely and in great depth. Erasmus and Budé took on these labors willingly because they believed that an intimate knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages was essential to an understanding of the most important works the ancient world had handed down to them. In addition, they believed that a correct use of these languages was important in order to communicate well to readers and scholars of their own generation. Because of this, they both gave great care to developing and maintaining an elegant style in which to render their ideas.

Their essential sympathy with each other in so many of their goals was combined with major differences in the circumstances of their lives and in their temperaments. Budé, born in 1468 to a family that for several generations had produced French court officials, spent his life working for the crown in an administrative and diplomatic capacity. He identified strongly with his French homeland, and frequently spoke of his loyalty to his country. This loyalty was amply returned by his compatriots, who heralded him as the pride of their nation. Erasmus, born in Holland at about the same time as Budé, from an irregular union between a physician's daughter and a priest, had no similar roots in family and country. Instead, he spent most of his life outside of his native land, which many educated Europeans considered a backwater, and had to live down the double stain of illegitimacy and being the son of a priest. Budé married in 1505, fathered a large family, and took upon himself the responsibilities of a representative and spokesman for the French crown along with those of a breadwinner for his family. Erasmus, orphaned as an adolescent and persuaded by his guardians to join a monastery, was free from any such family responsibilities, and in the interests of maintaining his freedom he carefully avoided associating himself too closely with any powerful ruler.