Eleventh-Annual Birthday Lecture:

Rabelais and Montaigne as Admirers of Erasmus*

by M. A. Screech

Just over forty years ago, as a “temporary part-time assistant” not yet an assistant-lecturer at University College London, I embarked on my professional career. After a childhood and youth touched and often dominated by the negotium of war I gratefully entered into the otium which leads to thought, reading, discussion, teaching and even wisdom, all centered on a quest for truth, a quest never ungrateful towards those sacrifices of life, limb and treasure which make such otium possible.

A good moment then to take stock. However, since I discovered Rabelais when a young soldier, Erasmus during the blitz and Montaigne (in Florio’s translation) when still at school, I must touch lightly on authors with whom I have spent most of my life and who remain as guides.

Recently I was waiting for a very rare Spanish text to be delivered to me in one of our ancient college libraries. A book was lying on the table. I picked it up and flipped through it. It professed to explain to the curious some recent critical methodologies; and I suspect that it succeeded. Near the beginning it asserted that critics were once content, as often as not, to call their admired authors “geniuses” and to add little of value by their critical statements to that bald assertion: a case of setting up a man-of-straw for the pleasure of toppling it down. Did anyone who ever taught me anything ever waste breath on telling me (what in my own terms I already knew) that Isaiah, say, or Homer or Virgil, or Shakespeare, or Erasmus or Rabelais or Montaigne were “geniuses”? We all seemed to know that authors are legion but great authors are few: they wrote things which others keep alive across the centuries; they can sweep you off your feet. They are not all worth following: when they are, they seem great indeed. Yet none was presented to me as a “genius.” If that word was used at all, it was in another sense: they were men with a “genius” for writing or thinking or creating. Shakespeare, we were told, used the English tongue so richly, and used that richness to say so many and such probing things, that his writings, with the Authorized Version of the Bible, are the best-selling books in English. Erasmus I met first through a master who loved his flexible, personal, living Latin style: he lent me a chunky Gryphius Novum

* Offered at the Sir Thomas Browne Institute, University of Leiden, on 9 November 1990.
Testamentum of 1552 and told me how, even during the blitz, I could get hold of a Vulgate to compare with what Erasmus wrote. Erasmus' Novum Testamentum was the first old book I had ever handled, and I loved it for its feel and for its smell. Not long ago I bought a copy of the same Gryphius edition for myself as an act of piety.

Margaret Mann Phillips tells in her delightful last book how she had a clear private vision of Erasmus: he came and stood approvingly behind her during a mathematics class in her girls' school in York.1 I cannot rival that, but my wife and I did give Erasmus as one of his Christian-names to our first-born son (which led to our second son wondering why we had not given him the name of Rabelais). Anyway, like Margaret Mann Phillips I devoured while at school Charles Reade's The Cloister and the Hearth and Froude's Life and Letters of Erasmus, both of which informed my adolescent religious conscious-

ness. Such reading may probably explain why I devoured (often in bed) Erasmus' Annotationes in Novum Testamentum and his controversies with his contemporaries long before I read the Praise of Folly which indeed I came to only after the War, by which time I was already also quite at home with the Adagia, the Apophthegmata and, for relaxation, the Colloquia (which made so much in Charles Reade's novel spring back to life). But the Moriae Encomium, once read, seemed to sum up with (if you will excuse the oxymoron) such simple complexity so much of Graeco-Christian culture from its inception to the Renaissance that it took half a lifetime to feel equipped to write a meaningful book about the "folly" which is so central to Erasmus' religion.

Naturally, to study Erasmus, Rabelais and Montaigne together (not least when spurred on by an inner compulsion to set them in the contexts of time and thought and to trace their branches back to their roots) revealed how much they held in common in an age of humanist Christianity. It also of course revealed how much they differed in their excellencies. That Rabelais had read Erasmus, and that Montaigne had read them both, soon became clear. In a sense, the easiest statement about our authors from a reasonably well-read scholar consists in pointing out their "sources." So, when studying the influence of one great author upon another, by far the easier task for a patient scholar is to identify textual borrowings. In the case of a lesser writer or thinker drawing on a greater one, that is often all you need to do; in the case of two great ones, it is hardly a beginning. Such studies can indeed throw light on to the meanings of words, phrases, episodes, chapters, even whole books; yet in themselves they cannot clarify, let alone explain, the creative