"O"therwise, if women always had to keep silence, why did Nature give us, too, tongues as ready as men's and voices just as loud—though men sound hoarser and more like donkeys than we do.”¹

When I was reviewing some of Erasmus' literary and educational writings a few years ago, it struck me that: “When Erasmus speaks in his own name, in some sense representing himself (or a part of himself), he is less Erasmian (or 'Erasmian') than in those texts and those moments when he creates another voice—say Moria's—or in a dialogue, where he can achieve a distance from himself.”² I have continued to think about those “other” voices, and I want to discuss his representations of women and their discourse in three seminal texts: the Praise of Folly, the Complaint of Peace, and a few of the Colloquies—I can not consider all of them here. These are among Erasmus' best known works, and it seems to me that their energy, their engagement, their imaginative and intellectual freedom, and the kind of irony that has led critics to think of Erasmus as "'the king of but'"³ depend, in part, upon their female and cross-gendered voices and presences.⁴

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In the first two works, more specifically, Erasmus assumes a mask, playing the part of Moria, a female Folly, and Peace, another allegorized woman, while he invents numerous women's parts, to be spoken (in some sense played) by the male students for whom he wrote the Colloquies. In all three works, then, female voices, cross-gendering, and gender blurring are crucial, and quite unlike what happens in the works of Thomas More, a fellow humanist and good friend. More also has many representations of women, but usually they are not his masks or personae: rather, they function as foils, asking the questions or otherwise precipitating the responses that allow More or a Morean persona to amplify, if not completely clarify, his own position. Consider, for example, More's conversations with Dame Alice, his second wife and sometime shrew, or the dialogue-letter with his daughter, Margaret Roper, who is represented as a quasi-temptress, a second Eve, and who challenges his refusal to take the oath of supremacy, a refusal that will cost him his life.5

This leads me to ask why, and more specifically, how, Erasmus uses women's voices as he does. I do not think we can ever wholly answer the first question, but perhaps the "hows"—as we discover them—will say something about the "whys," at least by implication. Certainly there is no obvious or easy answer to my "why," and possible connections with women Erasmus knew seem particularly problematic. In writing to actual women, Erasmus was, it seems to me, constrained. As Sister Anne M. O'Donnell pointed out in the sixth-annual Bainton lecture, "Most women held a marginalized position in the correspondence of Erasmus just as they did in Renaissance society."6 In fact, "Of some 3,140 extant letters, only three are from women and fourteen are to women"—including three queens, one other noble woman, one learned woman (Margaret Roper), and several nuns.7 Sometimes giving or asking for spiritual consolation, sometimes angling for more tangible support from an actual or potential patron, sometimes offering praise, these letters respect


7 O'Donnell, 72; 37-43.