Assimilation or Construction? Representing a Literary Relationship

In the Seventh-Annual Birthday Lecture a few years ago, John C. Olin offered us the fruits of his long reflection on Erasmus and Saint Jerome. After documenting the Dutchman's reliance on his patristic precursor as a model of Christian humanism and theological method, Olin concluded with a statement of the broader significance of this special relationship: "The affinity between the two great scholars," he wrote, "is a classic example of that revival of antiquity—that return to the sources—we associate so basically with the Renaissance. The bond is a witness of a 'discovery' but also of an assimilation..." To most students of Erasmus this assessment would have seemed both just and sufficient. For confirmation of it we had only to await publication of Volume 61 of the Collected Works of Erasmus, allotted to the edition of Jerome. That volume duly appeared in the summer of 1992, edited by Olin and James F. Brady. Here at last was Erasmus' Jerome, Life and Letters together, republished for the first time since the sixteenth century, "albeit only in selected parts and on a very reduced scale." With these definitively Erasmian texts once more readily accessible, readers of the English Erasmus could look forward serenely to a second harvest of patristic material in Volume 62, curious to see what other affinities and assimilations might therein be revealed.


3CWE 61:xi. For the contents of this volume, see below.

4Other contributions to the modern scholarship on Erasmus and Jerome are listed by Brady and Olin in the notes to the introduction of CWE 61. After Wallace K. Ferguson's edition of the Hieronymi Stridonensis Vita in the Erasmii Opuscula (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1933), the first serious approach to this topic was made by a patristic scholar and Jerome specialist: Denys Gorce.
So one might have predicted—incorrectly, as it turns out. The present essay should have been a review of CWE 61. In a certain sense, I hope, it may still serve that purpose. At the same time, and at the cost of a few more pages of the Yearbook, I want to address some of the issues raised by Lisa Jardine's searching study of Erasmus, Man of Letters, published less than a year after the Brady-Olin volume, which presents a major challenge to the prior consensus regarding Erasmus' Jerome. Drawing partly on my own research into patristic models of literary activity and their influence, I shall put forward a view of the relations between the Opera Hieronymi and Opera Erasmi which, while consistent with Jardine's in its emphasis on strategies of publication, is also compatible with the more traditional interpretation upheld by Olin, Brady, and others.

Even as Olin's lecture went into print in 1987, scholars of Renaissance humanism were reacting to a radically new account of their traditional subject-matter. The joint work of Jardine and Anthony Grafton, From Humanism to the Humanities pointed to a deep and lasting inconsequence in the educational enterprise of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European humanists. It was an inconsequence manifesting itself in a set of correlated discrepancies: between cultural aspiration and social convenience, pedagogical theory and classroom practice, the faith in literary study as a path to virtue and the fact of a literary training that made a few men (and fewer women) eloquent without demonstrably making them good. It was, in short, the gap between an ancient ideal of humanitas and the reality of the "humanities" as instituted in early modern Europe. What leading Renaissance humanists, including...