Second Annual Birthday Lecture:

"To every thing there is a season. . .":

Ways and Fashions in the Art of Preaching on the Eve of the Religious Upheaval in the Sixteenth Century*

by Emile V. Telle

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh—at the Folger!

This last verse from the book of Ecclesiastes, III, will serve as an introduction to my “sermon” tonight, and also as a conclusion and send off.

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At the behest or rather at the beck and call of Erasmus Roterodamus, I shall try to bring back to life not only Erasmus himself but also a famous, a very famous, Franciscan friar and preacher whose name is brought to our earnest attention by the great Augustinian canon, who very likely never preached in the pulpit. By the same token, we shall commemorate tonight the five hundred and fifteenth anniversary of his birth (i.e. 1466).

* This lecture was presented originally at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Washington, D.C.) on October 27, 1981.
The Franciscan friar is Fra Roberto Caracciolo (ca. 1425–95), born at Lecce in the province of Apuglia, later bishop of Aquina and Lecce, whose fame or notoriety was as great in his lifetime as Erasmus'; of a very different quality indeed, as well as of a strikingly contrasting nature, especially in the realm of eloquence. Thus, evoking the spirit of the great Dutchman, I hope to have you grasp a neglected aspect or symptom of the religious upheaval to come (not awaited for around 1520, unexpected in 1495) as well as consider the image of Erasmus as reflected in the mirror of Caracciolo's eloquence. This aspect denotes a change of mind, style, and gradually of purposes and convictions, in religious matters above all and, especially, in the art, science, and practice of eloquence—an art woefully forsaken today in churches and elsewhere: in the law court as well as in the lecture halls and political arena. Eloquence in the pulpit, until recently (that is half-a-century ago!), was, together with eloquence at the bar, one of the meaningful earmarks of a civilized society and the finest form of intellectual achievement and... entertainment: in other words, the Mastery of the Word!—and the art of Persuasion.

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In his long delayed last work, printed in August 1535, the bulkiest, the one on which he labored on and off since 1522; probably his most finished production and intellectual testament; the volume which crowned his life, his literary, philosophical, and theological output, that is the Ecclesiastes, sive concionator evangelicus, filling 333 tall columns in tome five of the folio edition put out single-handedly by Jean LeClerc between 1703 and 1706, Erasmus mentions thrice in the text and in the margin the name of Fra Roberto Caracciolo. He is the only contemporary to be thus singled out, in spite of one glancing mention of Savonarola.

Let us remember that in 1535 Caracciolo had been dead forty years, but his fame lingered as his voice still rang in the ears of his Italian critics and admirers alike—in Erasmus' mind also, though he never had a chance to be in his engaging presence and listen to his spell-binding voice. Why did Erasmus mention his name? This is the occasion and