Fifteenth-Annual Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture:

“A Remarkably Supercilious and Touchy Lot”:
Erasmus on the Scholastic Theologians*

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Then there are the theologians, a remarkably supercilious and touchy lot. I might perhaps do better to pass over them in silence . . . lest they marshal their forces for an attack with innumerable conclusions and force me to eat my words.” So Erasmus’ Dame Folly, as she turns from her satirical criticism of lawyers to the theologians; but of course she did not pass over them, and the Praise of Folly itself became one disputed issue in the many controversies with both individual theologians and faculties of theology that consumed much of Erasmus’ time and energy from 1514, when young Martin van Dorp wrote to complain about the Folly and Erasmus’ risky plan to engage in textual revision of the Latin Bible on the basis of the Greek New Testament, Ep. 304. Although Erasmus was reconciled with Dorp, who became a reliable friend, controversies with other theologians pursued him down to the end of his life. Virtually every book he published on religion came under attack at some point; and several of his greatest achievements, including the immensely popular Enchiridion, the pathbreaking edition of the Greek New Testament, his Paraphrases, and his critical editions of Latin and Greek church fathers, became the target of bitter and sustained attacks by theologians who found both scandalous and heretical statements in them and sought at the very least to compel him to retract those statements—that is, to force him “to eat my words.” Nothing mollified the most persistent critics: not the endorsement of many of his works by three successive popes (one of whom was also a distinguished scholastic theologian), by many of the most respected cardinals and bishops, and by a whole stable of firmly Catholic secular rulers. The conservative theologians, many but not all of them also members of the mendicant orders (which had their own special objections to Erasmus’ books), charged that he was secretly in league with Martin Luther,

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was even the real author of Luther's books, or that he was the source from whom Luther had drawn his heretical ideas. At the very least, these people accused him of sympathizing with Luther and acting to shelter the heretic from summary punishment for his heresies. Not even his open break with Luther, marked by the publication of *De libero arbitrio* in 1524 and the ensuing exchange of bitter, insulting polemics, threw Erasmus' accusers off track. With some justification, Erasmus complained of being "stabbed in the back" by the theologians even as he was engaged in open conflict with the German heretic and (in his own opinion and that of many others) had become the most effective defender of Catholicism in the chaotic Germany of the mid-1520s.²

The goal of this paper is not to write a history of Erasmus' conflict with the scholastic theologians. Erika Rummel has published a comprehensive account of these controversies. In addition, there are studies written from the perspective of the various universities—on Paris by James Farge and on Louvain by Henry de Vocht, and works by Marcel Bataillon and Lu Ann Homza on the effort by the mendicant orders in Spain to secure official condemnation of Erasmus' publications.³ Nor do I intend to focus on the rocky course of Erasmus' relations with individual critics at Louvain (Nicolaas Baechem of

²For example, in Ep. 1679, Erasmus' complaint addressed to one of his most persistent critics at Paris, Noël Béda, syndic of the faculty of theology. A similar complaint is in Ep 1700, addressed to his admirer Mercurino Gattinara, the imperial chancellor who at this time was the most influential adviser to Charles V. Gattinara responded to Erasmus' complaints that the theologians of Louvain had employed legalistic subterfuge to evade an order from the emperor demanding that they silence public attacks on Erasmus by writing a stern letter of his own to the university, deploiring their attacks on a good scholar who was actively defending the Church against Luther; his letter, which follows closely the outline of an earlier letter of complaint from Erasmus, picks up the phrase "stab in the back" and implicitly (but unmistakably) threatens that the chancellor will take reprisals that will make the theologians regret any further refusal to heed the emperor's command on this issue. The letter, which was not known to Allen, appears in English translation as Ep 1784A in CWE 12.