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Margaret Mann Phillips Lecture:
Tradition and Innovation in Erasmus’ Epistolary Theory: A Reconsideration

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Abstract
Erika Rummel has questioned why Erasmus in Opus de conscribendis epistolis attacks his predecessors in both the medieval and humanist traditions to which he is deeply indebted. This reconsideration of Erasmus’ often combative guide to letter writing places it in the context of a mixed northern European reception of Quattrocento epistolary theory as recorded by the early sixteenth-century humanists Heinrich Bebel, Jodocus Badius Ascensius, and Johannes Despauterius. Humanist substitution of classical “elegantiae” for contemporary formulas of greeting, address, and signature could challenge professionals and offend patrons. Condemning the rigidity of both medieval and Ciceronian letter writing, Erasmus describes a rich epistolary rhetoric that avoids impressing the letter’s recipient with either the ignorant barbarity or the pseudo-intellectual immodesty of the writer.

Erika Rummel has observed that in the opening of his work on letter writing, Erasmus indulges in “an unusually violent diatribe against earlier teachers of epistolography” as “‘untaught,’ ‘illiterate,’ ‘tyrannical,’ ‘petty schoolmasters,’ and ‘blabbering idiots.’”1 Testing Erasmus’ claim to innovation in Opus de conscribendis epistolis (Basel: J. Froben, 1522), Rummel acknowledges that he

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shows “a new zeal” for teaching epistolography, but she finds that his “general framework, his remarks about the characteristics, parts, and types of letters, and the scope of his samples follow a tradition established by earlier humanists, which in turn was based on classical theories and filtered through medieval *artes dictandi*” (310). Then on what grounds, she asks, does he attack his predecessors? Rummel concludes by wondering if Folly’s observation in *Moriae encomium* of the mortal combats of contemporary grammarians over “a single word” might be Erasmian “self-criticism” (310).

Rummel is right, of course, that Erasmus builds his epistolography on solid humanist and even medieval foundations as well as on classical theories and models. Nevertheless, his *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* was so admired as a contribution to contemporary debates that it dominated the teaching of letter writing through most of the sixteenth century.² If we are to distinguish innovation from tradition in this and other grammatical and rhetorical works of the Renaissance, I suggest that we heed the testimony of Erasmus’ Folly and examine them carefully in the context of sometimes fierce contemporary controversies about Latin style, just as Rummel herself has set Erasmus’ philological theology in the context of contemporary religious controversies, to the lasting benefit of Erasmus scholars.³

Arguments about the form and subject matter of letter writing at the turn of the sixteenth century are a good start for such a study, for no genre was more deeply embedded in social interaction and in power structures, and therefore was more controversial, than the epistle. Even in our own democratic and digitally oriented society, letter writers respond nervously to pressures for revision of well-established formulas. If late twentieth-century writers and readers felt awkward replacing the quaint but still conventional “Dear Sir” with gender-neutral salutations, if aging baby boomers (like me) now find almost incomprehensible, and even a little rude, the abrupt text-messaging lingo of