ERASMUS AND THE LOUVAIN THEOLOGIANS —
A STRATEGY OF DEFENSE

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Erasmus was involved in polemics with Louvain scholars over a period of two decades. A survey of these controversies, which span the years 1514-1536, reveals a number of tactics used by Erasmus in dealing with his critics: meeting with the opponent in person; appealing for help to third parties or, more generally, rallying public opinion; harassing the opponent; issuing a formal response; maintaining a calculated silence. I propose to examine these strategies individually and evaluate their effectiveness.

Erasmus lived in Louvain from the summer of 1517 to the end of 1521. His move to Louvain was prompted by practical considerations rather than personal inclinations. He tells us that "Prince Charles, to whose council I had recently been appointed, decided that I should take up residence in Brabant, preferably in Louvain." Erasmus respected the wishes of his prince and moved to Louvain, but he did so with considerable reluctance. Explaining his misgivings in a candid letter to Andrea Ammonio he wrote: "I should have to pay my own way and be


2 W. K. Ferguson, Erasmi Opuscula (The Hague, 1933) pp. 237-38, in the following referred to as Opuscula. In references to other Erasmian texts the following abbreviations will be used:
CWE = The Collected Works of Erasmus (Toronto, 1974-)
ASD = Opera Omnia Des. Erasmi Roterodami (Amsterdam, 1969-)

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the humble servant of the university people. The young men would be interrupting me all the time with their chatter....And there is no one there whom it would by any credit or any help for me to know. On top of all this I should have to listen sometimes to the chatter of the theologians, the dreariest sort of men." The feelings of aversion were mutual. The Louvain theologians looked with suspicion on the humanist who was trespassing on their territory, applying philological methods to Holy Writ. Indeed Maarten van Dorp had been delegated in 1514 to express their reservations about Erasmus' projected New Testament edition. Thus Erasmus did not relish the thought of taking up residence in Louvain. He saw only one advantage in the move: by establishing a personal presence he could keep his critics in check. Even before the actual move to Louvain in July 1517, he paid a short visit to the city for this very purpose, explaining that the theologians "were creeping up on me with their knives drawn...but in the end I went to Louvain in person and blew all the clouds away." A year later he delayed a journey for similar reasons. He had planned to go to Basel to supervise the printing of the second edition of his New Testament, but delayed his departure "on account of the theologians, who would have stirred up no end of trouble for me, had I not been there in person." In both cases Erasmus' actions indicate that he believed in the effectiveness of personal diplomacy. Even his enemies conceded that he was persuasive — "a great charmer, if he wants something," as Edward Lee noted. On the whole, however, Erasmus' efforts at personal diplomacy met with mixed success, as four case studies will show.

Jan Briart of Ath (1460-1520), a graduate of Louvain and at the time vice-chancellor of the university, had criticized Erasmus' *Encomium matrimoniiae* in a public address, without, however, naming its author. In a subsequent, private meeting the parties agreed that it was all a misunderstanding. Ath had failed to take into consideration the nature of the declamation which, as Erasmus pointed out, was no theological treatise but a rhetorical display piece and thus not indicative of the

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4 Dorp wrote two letters to Erasmus (Epp. 304, 347), who replied with an Epistola apologetica (Basel, 1515 = Ep. 337).
5 CWE Ep. 539: 4-8.
7 Apologia (Paris, 1520) sig. AAii verso: "mirus praestigiator cum quid cupiat".