The Latinity of Erasmus and Medieval Latin: Continuities and Discontinuities[1]

by Terence Tunberg

This essay has its origins in a long-term fascination with the rich and varied language of Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), perhaps the true father of northern humanism, a man who expressed himself entirely in Latin, a Latin that abounds with echoes of virtually the entire previous Latin tradition, but also bears the very distinctive and personal stamp of Erasmus himself. In attempting to appreciate the linguistic instrument used so effectively by Erasmus, one is led inevitably to the question of Erasmus and the medieval part of the Latin tradition. Erasmus, after all, was a humanist imbued with the ideas that had taken root in Italy during the century before his birth, and one of the cornerstones of these ideas was not merely a devaluation of the recent past, or the period we call medieval, by comparison with the glorious civilization of the ancient Romans, but especially a denigration of the latinity of the medieval era.[2] What precisely did Erasmus think of the latinity of the

[2] Two very useful studies that touch on matters relevant to the present article are István Bejczy, *Erasmus and the Middle Ages: The Historical Consciousness of a Christian Humanist,* Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 106 (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne, 2001), and P.G. Schmidt, "Erasmus und die mittellateinische Literatur," in *Erasmus und Europa*, ed. A. Buck. Wolfenbütteler Abhandlungen zur Renaissanceforschung 7 (1988), pp. 129–37. These studies greatly clarify Erasmus's views of the past and (especially in the case of that by Schmidt) his relationship to the Medieval Latin literary tradition. In the present work, we focus more narrowly and specifically on Erasmus's assessment of the actual latinity of medieval authors, and his own linguistic debt to the medieval sector of the Latin tradition.

Middle Ages? And to what extent is the actual latinity of Erasmus indebted to Medieval Latin?

As far as the role of the Latin language was concerned, the Renaissance did not differ much from the medieval era. In the world of the humanists, just as in the Middle Ages, Latin was nobody's native language; it was the common language of the learned community, the church, law, and diplomacy, and it remained the universally understood vehicle for a lot of other communication too. Its continued use was not merely a matter of tradition but also utility.[3]

There is, however, one primary distinction between medieval and humanist Latin. Although most humanists freely used post-antique, or even quite new Latin words to express new ideas or implements, they tried much more consistently than most medieval authors to revert to the structure, syntax, norms, and styles of ancient pagan Latin prose. Some, inclined more to extremism, thought Cicero alone should be imitated by modern Latin authors. Others – and this group seems to have been rather larger in most regions of Europe and in most periods of humanist Latin – were more eclectic. They opined that modern authors could combine elements of style and language from a wide range of ancient models. Erasmus is clearly in this second group. As a young man, like Valla and many of the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century, Erasmus seems to have included almost exclusively ancient pagan writers among the best stylistic models for modern Latinists.[4] But he soon grew to appreciate the latinity of certain church fathers also, and he especially esteemed St. Jerome, whom in more than one place he seems to admire no less (or even more) than Cicero as a stylist.[5]

---

[3] The best overview is provided by the monumental work of Jozef IJsewijn, *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies, Part I: History and Diffusion of Neo-Latin Literature,* 2nd rev. ed. Supplementa Humanistica Lovaniensia 5 (Leuven, 1990), and J. IJsewijn and Dirk Sacré, *Companion to Neo-Latin Studies, II: Literary, Linguistic, Philological and Editorial Questions,* 2nd rev. ed. Supplementa Humanistica Lovaniensia 14 (Leuven, 1998). A much shorter general survey is T.O. Tunberg, "Neo-Latin Literature and Language," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance,* vol. 4., ed. P.F. Grendler (New York, 1999), pp. 289–94. On the use of Latin for communication outside the learned, ecclesiastical, and diplomatic communities during the early modern period, see Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Polity Press, 1993), pp. 34–65.

[4] See, for example, Ep. 20, ed. Allen, 1:99.95–101. See also the remarks of Jacques Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Erasme,* vol. 1 (Paris, 1981) pp. 399–406. In some very early letters, Erasmus occasionally appears to put church fathers ahead of pagans, but, as Chomarat argues persuasively, the ranking in these cases is based on factors other than language or style. See Chomarat, ibid., p. 400. Erasmus discusses the choice of authors for reading as part of an educational programme in *De ratione studii* (see ASD I-2).

[5] For example: "<Hieronymus>... non Christianos modo omnes longo post se intervallo relinquit, verumetiam cum ipso Cicerone certare videtur. Ego certe, nisi me sanctissimi viri

It will be worthwhile to consider a passage in which Erasmus very explicitly declares what he supposes to be best guidelines for his contemporaries when expressing themselves in Latin:

> Ego nec hos probo, qui, neglectis in totum praeceptionibus, ex autoribus petunt loquendi rationem, nec hos, qui praeceptis addicti non versantur in evolvendis autoribus. Praecepta volo esse pauca sed optima: quod reliquum est arbitror petendum ex optimis quibusque scriptoribus, aut ex eorum colloquio, qui sic loquuntur ut illi scripserunt. (*Ep.* 1115, ed. Allen, 4:290.28–34.)

We can make the following observations about this passage. First, the background to Erasmus's remarks here lies in the ancient dispute in the Latin grammatical tradition between those who considered analogy to be the most important principle, and others who believed anomaly more important. Erasmus advocated a middle way. He believed that some abstract rules and precepts or principles were useful, but not too many of them. Like Lorenzo Valla and a number of humanists before him, Erasmus believed that long reading and internalization of the works of the ancient authors themselves – including observation and assimilation of their habits and idiosyncracies – were of the highest importance for anyone who wanted to write and speak well in Latin.[6] Secondly, this passage is not merely about written expression in Latin, it tells us something about speaking good Latin, and speaking well in Latin depends on exactly the same sources and principles as writing well. Moreover, according to this model, the language and style not only of the classical authors, but also of contemporary Latinists can be worthy of imitation, provided that their language reflects the qualities, proprieties, and idioms of the best authors (Erasmus refers explicitly here to a contemporary spoken use that might be exemplary, but one can reasonably infer that the same proviso would apply to contemporary written expression too). This is consistent with what we observe elsewhere. In the dialogue *Ciceronianus*, for example, Erasmus discusses the style of a long list of authors, and in this list, as we shall see shortly, not only ancient authors play a large role, but also near-contemporary humanist authors.

Erasmus does not frequently comment on the style or language of medieval writers,[7] except in the case of scholastic theologians and

---

fallit amor, cum Hieronymianam orationem cum Ciceroniana confero, videor mihi nescio quid in ipso eloquentiae principe desyderare" (*Ep.* 141, ed. Allen, 1:332.39–43.).

[6] See especially Salvatore Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla: Umanesimo e teologia* (Florence, 1972), pp. 150–90, and David Marsh, "Grammar, Method and Polemic in Lorenzo Valla's 'Elegantiae'," *Rinascimento* 19 (1979), 104–7.

[7] We should note also that citations of Medieval Latin texts in Erasmus's works taken as a whole are relatively few by comparison with citations of ancient Greek and Latin authors, or

grammarians, whose mode of expression he virtually always mentions with disapproval.

Let us first consider some of Erasmus's views pertaining to the scholastic philosopher-theologians of the later Middle Ages. Erasmus argues that the true sources and authorities that furnish the basis for Christian thought lie in the scriptural texts themselves and the church fathers rather than in the works of the academic philosopher-theologians and commentators who flourished after the late twelfth century. These later medieval theologians, in Erasmus's view, rely upon an excessively obscure and abstruse dialectic that leads readers away from the true sense of ancient Christian texts, especially scripture. He makes this explicit in a number of passages, such as this one from the *Adagia*:

> Novum est pueris ad grammaticam institutendis inculcare modos significandi, praelegere delira glossemata, quae nihil aliud doceant quam impure loqui. Novum est adolescentem ad philosophiae, iuris, medicinae, Theologiae studium recipi, qui ob inscitiam sermonis nihil intellegat in vetustis autoribus ... Novum est adolescentibus philosophiae candidatis inculcari nugas sophisticas et commenticias quasdam difficultates, meras ingeniorum cruces. Novum est in publicis scholis aliud responderi secundum viam Thomistarum et Scotistarum, Nominalium et Realium ... (ASD II-7, p. 241, lines 192–200).

The scholastic enemies of the humanists not rarely charged the humanists with importing a new (and pernicious) method of education that relied on pagan poets. Erasmus here rejects such charges. What is new, says Erasmus, is not the humanist approach, but the scholastic training typical of the academies of his day. Of course, when Erasmus says "novum est", he is actually referring to something not very new – namely the late medieval methods of education that had been in use for some centuries. But these medieval methods that relied so heavily upon dialectic, were more recent than the ancient rhetorical education, of which the humanists saw themselves as the restorers. Mentioned explicitly in this passage are the *modi significandi*. These are the teachings of the *modistae* or speculative grammarians, whose discipline became entrenched from the fourteenth century onward. It was especially such teachers who moved away from the mere study of Latin and proceeded in the direction of philosophical inquiry into language (any language) itself, and how language signifies. The late-medieval methods of education, Erasmus implies, focus on this sort of

contemporary and near-contemporary humanist Latin writers: see Schmidt, "Erasmus,", p. 131.

material expressed in a desiccated, technical, highly dialectical language, but entirely omit the wide reading of the ancient authors necessary to develop a good style. Students in such schools imitate the modes of expression typical of the dialecticians, and as a result speak the same barbarous language, and morever cannot understand the ancient texts that are the sources of the medieval disciplines, including the sacred texts that are the basis for theology. According to Erasmus, the apostles were simple people, who spoke touched by the holy spirit. To understand their work we do not need syllogisms, but rather a deep knowledge of the classical languages.[8]

Erasmus regards the medieval grammarians as perhaps even more responsible than the theologians for the – in the view of Erasmus – arid, faulty and rhetorically barren latinity that dominated the learned literature of the later medieval era. Erasmus, again, like Lorenzo Valla and certain other illustrious humanistic predecessors, finds fault with the grammarians' habit of handing down a multitude of precepts which, in the opinion of Erasmus, are often unnecessary, too abstract, and sometimes quite false. Likewise Erasmus seems to share the humanistic disdain for certain medieval lexicographers, whose works were thought by the humanists to hand down false definitions and barbarisms. These sentiments about grammarians and lexicographers are expressed quite often in the works of Erasmus.[9] To illustrate them, we may consider two representative passages.

> Ludi omnes nil nisi meram crepant barbariem, nusquam lectitantur auctores Latini, ululant in scholis Papias, Hugutio, Ebrardus, Catholicon, Graecista[10]... quibus cum nihil sit arrogantius, inter se tamen contendunt de palma ignorantiae, omnia praecipiunt, nihil norunt. Hi barbarorum duces linguam Romanam funditus evertere.

[8] The classic passage on the simplicity of the apostles is found in the *Laus stultitiae* (see ASD IV-3, pp. 178–94). This passage, though satiric, is consistent with what Erasmus says elsewhere about the learning of the followers of Christ (see the comments of Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique*, vol. 1, pp. 548–49)

[9] There are perhaps to exceptions to this general disdain for the medieval grammarians. In *De pueris instituendis*, Erasmus describes the *Doctrinale* of Alexander de Villa Dei as *tolerabilis* (see ASD I-2, p. 77). And in an early letter from 1489, he cites Geoffrey of Vinsauf as an authority on rhetoric along with Cicero, Quintilian, and Horace (*Ep.* 27, ed. Allen, 1:117.42–45). Perhaps, however, not much weight should be attached to the latter passage because it comes from Erasmus's early development.

[10] Erasmus here indiscriminately lists names of authors and titles of works. Papias's *Vocabularium* was a lexicon composed in the eleventh century. Hugutio's *Derivationes* was a twelfth-century lexicon. The *Catholicon* was a lexicon composed in the thirteenth century by Ioannes Balbus Genuensis. Finally "Graecista" probably refers to the *Graecismus*, a popular grammar composed in the early thirteenth century by Ebrardus (Eberhardus) Bethuniensis.

> Ab his potissimum ortus est miserabilis ille litterarum occasus ...
> (*Ep.* 33, ed. Allen, 1:133.83ff.)
> ... iam negligi ceptae <sunt> bonae litterae, fastidita Graecanici
> sermonis peritia multoque magis Hebraici, spretum eloquentiae
> studium: quin et ipsa lingua Latina sic conspurcata est subinde
> nova barbarie, ut iam nihil minus esset quam Latina ... Tantum ad
> sophisticas quasdam argutias contracta res litteraria, et eruditionis
> summa penes summularios quosdam collectores ac excerptores
> esse coepit ... (*Ep.* 396, ed. Allen, 2:213.75ff.)

The train of thought that lies behind these and similar passages would seems
to be something like the following. The medieval grammarians place great
emphasis on handing down rules and precepts – all too often without
sufficient knowledge ("omnia praecipiunt, nihil norunt"). Thus Medieval
Latin itself, being the product of writers whose latinity was formed by the
assimiliation of the works of the grammarians, increasingly departed from
the proprieties of ancient latinity. This latinity, removed from the *consuetudo*
of the authors, gradually become infected with a *barbaries* which Erasmus
undoubtedly thought to be the product of scholastic jargon (and sometimes
possibly material imported from other languages), a language whose sphere
of discourse was reduced to "sophisticas quasdam argutias." Because of the
domination of such grammarians in the schools, the pursuit of *eloquentia*
and wide reading of authors came to be increasingly neglected. So, in the
mind of Erasmus, the general level of knowledge of *bonae litterae* (i.e. Latin
and Greek literature) was steadily reduced – and with it obviously the
sensitivity to the stylistic or linguistic peculiarities of various ancient writers.

It will be appropriate here to consider another passage which is too long
to reproduce, and cannot be properly appreciated through excerpts. It is
found in Erasmus's dialogue *Ciceronianus*, and consists of a long catalogue,
along with evaluations, of Latin authors of various periods.[11] A number of
Medieval Latin writers are mentioned here, including Remigius, Anselmus,
Alexander Halensis, Petrus Gandavenis, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventura.
But the medieval authors are passed over quickly and much more attention is
paid both to the ancient Roman authors and especially to the contemporary
or near-contemporary humanist Latin writers. This catalogue shows us
clearly that Erasmus did not view the patrimony of Latin and Latin letters as

---

[11] For the entire catalogue of writers, see ASD I-2, p. 657, lines 1–702, line 4. The
object of the catalogue is to show that throughout the patrimony of Latin letters, no Latin
writer can truly be called Ciceronian, except for Cicero himself. Says Bulephorus "At
responde mihi per Musas, quem mihi dabis Ciceronianum, praeter unum Ciceronem? A
veteribus ordiamur ..." (ASD I-2, p. 656, lines 34–657, line 2).

something terminated by antiquity, but as a tradition continued up to his own time – with of course certain periods of florescence and others of decline or barrenness. Both the ancient writers and the recent ones (namely the humanists) receive careful attention and often praise, but among the medievals only Thomas Aquinas seems to win marginal praise – and only in his less technical works.[12] But elsewhere Erasmus implies that while St. Thomas had a good intellect, he was worthy to have lived in a better age. And in this other passage Erasmus's total lack of praise for Aquinas's use of language leaves little room for doubt that Erasmus, on the whole, was less than enthusiastic about Aquinas's latinity.[13] In general, therefore, the catalogue of writers in the *Ciceronianus* is quite consistent with what we have so far observed in other passages.

Of course Erasmus himself read the works of quite a few late medieval scholastic authors, especially theologians. He often displays his knowledge of such works in his own theological works, primarily in his commentaries on sacred scripture. Given Erasmus's comments about such authors, we can hardly doubt that he read their works with such care for the information to be gained from their works – especially in the field of theology or exegesis of sacred texts – and not for their style or language.

However, this far from exhausts Erasmus's reading of Medieval Latin texts. An examination of the commentary and *apparatus fontium* in the critical edition of Erasmus's poetry, recently published in the Amsterdam series of Erasmus's *Opera Omnia*, suggests he knew quite a bit of Medieval Latin poetry too. Of course, Erasmus had assimilated with special care the poetry of pagan antiquity (there are echoes of almost all classical and silver age poetry, but reminiscences of Horace, Ovid and Vergil are especially

[12] For the medieval authors, see ASD I-2, p. 660, lines 32–661, line 14. Says Nosoponus, the Ciceronian spokesman: "... Thomas Aristotelicus prorsus est, *apathes* in dicendo, tantum hoc agens, ut doceat lectorem." Replies Bulephorus, who seems to represent the point of view of Erasmus himself: "Verum, in quaestionibus: caeterum ubi rhetorem aut poetam agit, satis spirat Ciceronem." Nosoponus hotly rejects the suggestion and proposes that they say no more about the scholastics, who lack any eloquence at all – not to speak of Ciceronian eloquence. Bulephorus does not disagree. He too shows no wish to dwell on these medieval authors: "Age redibimus ad aliud scriptorum genus nostro seculo vicinius. Nam aliquot aetatibus videtur fuisse sepulta prorsus eloquentia, quae non ita pridem reviviscere coepit apud Italos, apud nos multo etiam serius ..." And he adds that the *princeps* of the revived eloquence among the Italians was Petrarch (ASD I-2, p. 661, lines 6–18).

[13] Erasmus's remark had aroused the ire of one who had not fully understood it: "... Quodam igitur in loco cum excusans Thomae lapsum, adiecissem virum indignum esse, qui in ea incidisset tempora, significans videlicet atque etiam exprimens Thomam dignum fuisse feliciori saeculo, cum ipsi nec ingenium nec industria defuisset; noster theologus gravissime de me questus est, clamitans blasphemiam non ferendam, qui Thomam tantum ac tam sanctum virum appellassem indignum ..." (*Ep.* 1126, ed. Allen, 4:315.261–316.267).

numerous). He was well versed in the Christian poetry of later antiquity (especially the works of Prudentius). He also knew the poetical works of near-contemporary humanists (particularly the works of Baptista Mantuanus). The echoes of Medieval Latin verse in the poems of Erasmus are not nearly as dense as those of ancient Latin poetry, but there seem to be quite distinct reminiscences of verses by Alcuin, Hrabanus Maurus, Sedulius Scottus, Baudri de Bourgueil, Alan of Lille, some twelfth-century Latin comedies, Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and Walther of Châtillon, among others.[14] Erasmus did not need to study such authors as models for his own verses. The authors who lived within the temporal bounds of what we call antiquity would have sufficed for that. Why then did he read Medieval Latin verse? No definite answer seems possible, and probably no simple answer would be valid, but perhaps Erasmus did not completely despise such works. Perhaps he even admired the dexterity of versification that is conspicuous in some Medieval Latin poetry. This supposition is even more probable, as we shall see, in the case of the works of Latin authors who were active before about 1200.

In fact Erasmus did not reject the totality of Medieval Latin. To gain a clearer indication of this, let us turn to an edition that Erasmus prepared of a Medieval Latin spiritual treatise by Algerus Cluniacensis, an author of the twelfth century. In Erasmus's prefatory letter to this edition, we read the following words:

> Nuper exiit opus Guimundi, ex monacho Benedictino episcopi Aversensis. Nunc prodit Algerus, ex scholastico monachus eiusdem instituti. Guimundus acrior est et ardentior ac plus habet spiritus rhetorici, hic sedatior est et religiosior; uterque tum dialectices, tum reliquae philosophiae belle peritus, licet citra ostentationem; uterque in canonicis scripturis ac priscis illis doctoribus, Cypriano, Hilario, Ambrosio, Hieronymo, Augustino ... quorum scripta plurimum adhuc referunt spiritus apostolici, studiose versatus. Uterque tantum habet eloquentiae, quantum a theologo requirere par est. Certe dictionis argutiam et collectionis acumen nusquam in illis desideres ... Et tamen hos tales viros apparet ante Bonaventurae, Thomae, Scoti, Alberti Magni, atque etiam Petri Lumbardi tempora floruisse. Ac recentiores quidam ut plus iactant Aristotelicae philosophiae, ita phrasim habent aridiorem nimirum Aristotelem suum imitati (qui tamen sic

---

[14] See ASD I-7 passim, and especially the indices pp. 506–15. See also D.J. Sheerin, "A Carolingian Cure Recovered. Erasmus's citation of Hucbald of St. Amand's *Ecloga de calvis*," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 42 (1980), 167–70.

neglexit affectus et ornamenta dictionis, ut summam praestiterit elegantiam – quod idem hi non potuerunt). At nescio quo pacto mihi decere videtur ut in mysteriis explicandis adsit quaedam orationis dignitas, nec absit affectus. (*Ep.* 2284, ed. Allen, 8:378.32–379.53.)

In this passage the "recentiores" are those who lived from the time of Peter Lombard onward. These "recentiores" imitated the dryness and unadorned expression of Aristotle, without, however, being able to capture the *elegantia* of Aristotle's style. Erasmus here employs the term *elegantia* with the technical meaning that it has in ancient rhetorical handbooks, especially the anonymus *Ad Herennium*. Used in this specifically rhetorical sense, *elegantia* denotes a quality that comes not from ornament, but from the precise use of words, and the purity, clarity, and correctness of diction.[15]

Erasmus therefore seems to realize that the rather technical and arid latinity typical of scholastic authors arose in the very late twelfth century, and especially in the thirteenth century, and that the latinity of earlier medieval authors was quite different. This earlier type of Medieval Latin could be quite close to that of the church fathers – in which case it was not to be spurned, especially in treatment of theological matters. Erasmus recognized that certain twelfth-century writers are by no means lacking in eloquence, and might even be read for the sake of their style. We should emphasize that this passage is not inconsistent with the negative statements of Erasmus about medieval latinity that we have considered above. For these negative statements are largely directed against a type of latinity that arose in the second part of the Middle Ages.

What we learn from this letter is corroborated by another letter, which is Erasmus's preface to his edition of another pre-scholastic medieval text, the *Pia brevis ac dilucida in omnes psalmos explanatio sanctissimi viri d. Haymonis.*[16] The author, according to Erasmus, lived at a time when learned men strove to reduce the subtle and ample doctrine of the ancients to simpler compendia for the sake of the unlearned, and Erasmus numbers both Bede

---

[15] "Elegantia est quae facit ut locus unus quisque pure et aperte dici videatur. Haec tribuitur in Latinitatem et explanationem. Latinitas est quae sermonem purum conservat ab omni vitio remotum. Vitia in sermone quominus is Latinus sit duo possunt esse: soloecismus et barbarismus ... Explanatio est quae reddit apertam et dilucidam orationem. Ea comparatur duabus rebus, usitatis verbis et propriis ..." (*Ad Herennium* 4.12.17)

[16] See *Ep.* 2771, ed. Allen, 10:162–65. In Allen's preface to this letter and in scholarship on Erasmus a confusion exists between Haymo of Auxerre and Haymo of Halberstadt. The commentary is assigned by Allen to the ninth century. According to the most recent scholarship, however, the commentary is the work of an anonymous author and was written in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. See Schmidt, "Erasmus,", pp. 135–36.

and Anselm in this group, so we realize that he is perhaps thinking of a period between the eighth and eleventh or twelfth centuries. These men contributed "non mediocrem utilitatem," says Erasmus, if we consider the times and regions in which they lived.[17] Though the language of the commentary lacks all rhetorical artifice, Erasmus does not despise it: indeed, he praises the work's *brevitas*, *simplicitas*, and *perspicuitas* (qualities, we may observe, quite consistent with *elegantia*), and he contrasts the approach of this writer with that of those, who profess "doctrinam … minime simplicem, sed argutiis supervacaneis, et Averroicis dogmatibus, ac novis insuper somniis spinosissimam."[18] Here also the earlier medieval text is regarded much more favourably than the works of the scholastics who are obviously alluded to in such phrases as "argutiis supervacaneis" and "Averroicis dogmatibus."

Erasmus's view of the medieval part of the Latin tradition, therefore, may be summarized as follows. Like many other humanists, he found fault with a large part of the Medieval Latin patrimony, especially with the scholastic philosophers and grammarians, who flourished from 1200 onwards. If such writers were to be read, in Erasmus's view, they were to be studied only for the information one might get from their works, and certainly not as models for latinity. But he acknowledged that language of some authors, at least of the twelfth century (and perhaps earlier), was not far removed from that of the church fathers, and was therefore not to be despised, even in terms of eloquence. These authors lived before the great shift in the Latin tradition that occurred around 1200 with the rise of the universities and a new academic jargon, the preoccupation with which took students away from the essential sources of pure latinity.

So far we have focused on Erasmus's views about Medieval Latin. What about his actual language? Are there aspects of Erasmus's diction that are indebted to the medieval part of the Latin tradition? Or did he express himself in an idiom that was entirely rooted in the ancient Roman sector of Latin letters?

Before we can answer these questions, a few general points ought to be made. The question of the "medievalness" of Medieval Latin, and how it differs from ancient Latin scarcely has a set of simple answers.[19] Medieval

---

[17] *Ep.* 2771, ed. Allen, 10:163.7–12.

[18] Ibid., pp. 162–63, lines 5–21.

[19] In part we suffer from an inadequate division of the history of Latin into periods, along with a very inexact and inconsistently applied terminology. In many handbooks of Medieval Latin the term "classical Latin" is loosely used to refer to all of ancient Latin. But for classical philologists "classical Latin" typically refers to the period of the late republic, and specifically the *prose* usage of Cicero and Caesar. According to this conception, the

Latin ranges from the language of charters and documents, which are often strongly influenced by local vernaculars in vocabulary and phrasing, to varieties of latinity that are more or less international, such as the technical academic language of the scholastic philosophers, theologians, grammarians, or the more 'literary' idiom of poets, letter writers, fabulists, and some historians, and so on.[20]

If we focus, setting aside charter Latin, documents, local legal jargons, and macaronic texts, on works in Medieval Latin of a more literary or academic character, such as those mentioned above, and merely consider grammar and syntax (and not vocabulary or orthography), we find that is actually not easy to isolate features that are unequivocally and exclusively peculiar to this Medieval Latin. It is worth making this point here, because the grammatical and syntactical differences between medieval and ancient Latin (for which the typical phrase is "classical Latin") are often described in widely used handbooks and anthologies of Medieval Latin in a way that is too simplistic and rather misleading. In such textbooks the standard from which deviations from classical usage is measured seems more often than not to be the syntactical and grammatical norms taught in modern prose composition texts or introductory grammars, a set of norms that reflects the prose usage of only two canonical authors, Cicero and Caesar (that is, "classical" usage in the narrowest sense).[21] But, in fact, ancient Latin, considered as a whole from the age of Terence to the church fathers, is also

language of Cicero's contemporary Sallust is un-classical (largely because of Sallust's deliberate pursuit of archaism, brevity, and asymmetrical structure), the comic poets Plautus and Terence are ante-classical (or archaic), and Livy is already post-classical, especially because Livy seems to have imported into his prose a considerable range of constructions and modes of expression that were formerly only (or primarily) employed in poetry. Again, according to the standard (and now traditional) conception of classical philology, the period of Latin letters from Livy to Suetonius or Aulus Gellius is "post-classical" or "Silver Latin" (following the "Golden" Latin of the "classical" period), and the Latin tradition from Tertullian to the writers of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, such as Ammianus, Symmachus, Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Macrobius, etc. is thought of as "late Latin."

[20] The best overview written in English of the typologies and genres of Medieval Latin is *Medieval Latin Studies: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Frank Mantello and A.G. Rigg (Washington D.C., 1996). The most complete and up-to-date reference work for the linguistic features of Medieval Latin is the multi-volume work by Peter Stotz, *Handbuch zur lateinischen Sprache des Mittelalters,* Handbuch der Alterumswissenschaft 2.5.4 (Munich, 1996–), of which four volumes have been so far published.

[21] The works to which I refer are all, with the exception of this one point, excellent, extremely useful introductions to Medieval Latin, and are composed with scholarly precision. See K.P. Harrington, *Medieval Latin.* 2nd ed., rev. Joseph Pucci (Chicago and London, 1997); Keith Sidwell, *Reading Medieval Latin* (Cambridge, 1995); C.H. Beeson, *A Primer of Medieval Latin. An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (Chicago, 1925, repr. Washington D.C., 1986).

characterized by a vast variety, and the great majority of the so-called typical syntactical features of Medieval Latin are already well-attested in this segment of the Latin tradition. Ancient comedy, and also the works of the poets of the golden and silver ages, are often distinctive for a syntax that totally violates the Ciceronian rules sanctioned in modern textbooks for teaching Latin. Not a few Christian texts composed in the first centuries A.D. are very similar to many Medieval Latin texts. Just to give a few examples, the notorious use of *quod* with a verb in the indicative instead of the accusative and infinitive for indirect speech is found in a considerable variety of pagan authors from Plautus onwards, and is especially frequent in scripture and in early Christian texts. This was a widely used construction long before the Middle Ages, and common in many ancient texts from which medieval authors learned Latin.[22] The infinitive is used for purpose (in such phrases as *progredior visere, ibat ferire* and so on) not merely in Plautus and Terence and by classical poets such as Horace and Vergil, but also, in the first centuries A.D., in pagan prose authors such as Justin, Gellius, and Apuleius.[23] The ablative of the gerund with the meaning of a present participle, so far from being a medievalism, is quite common in ancient prose from Livy onward (with some isolated instances even earlier).[24] The rather precise distinctions in the uses of the demonstrative and indefinite pronouns defined in our introductory Latin textbooks are blurred, confused, and sometimes non-existent in Latin authors from the "silver" age on, and

---

[22] Not only *quod*, but also *quia*, and in the course of time other conjunctions, such as *quoniam* and *quatenus*, are employed in this construction. Also in later antique authors the subjunctive, as well as the indicative, becomes more common in such clauses. See Manu Leumann, J. B. Hofmann, Anton Szantyr, *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik*, Handbuch der Alterumswissenschaft 2.2.2 (Munich, 1965), pp. 576–77. This mode of expression is rarer in humanist Latin, but not entirely absent. See Lore Wirth-Poelchau, *AcI und quod-Satz im lateinischen Sprachgebrauch mittelalterlicher und humanistischer Autoren* (Diss. Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1977), pp. 101–69. Indeed, Erasmus himself on rare occasions employs this construction. See Tunberg, "Collected Works of Erasmus" (see bibliography in appendix), p. 124.

[23] See Raphael Kühner and Carl Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache*, 5th ed. (Hanover, 1976, repr., Hanover, 1988), Teil 2. 1, pp. 680–81. Even the use of *debere* with the infinitive as a kind of compound future tense that stresses intention, or in place of a sort of potential subjunctive, a use that certainly occurs in early medieval texts (see Max Bonnet, *Le latin de Grégoire de Tours* [Paris, 1890], pp. 691–92), is also found in one passage of Petronius, and quite well attested by the fourth century A.D. (see Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax*, p. 314).

[24] See Kühner and Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache*, 2.1:752–53.

especially in the Vulgate and the church fathers.[25] Such changes in the use of pronouns are well attested before the Middle Ages, as is the non-reflexive use of the reflexive pronouns and possessive adjectives.[26] The norms of tense sequence that we learn in elementary Latin textbooks are constructs of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians based on Caesar, and a few canonical orations of Cicero, and are much less easy to define in other texts by Cicero himself,[27] not to speak of such authors as Seneca, Tacitus, and Apuleius – and certainly not to speak of the Vulgate or the church fathers. Erratic tense sequence – erratic in a way that sometimes defies a conclusive grammatical explanation – is certainly *not* a characteristic of Medieval Latin alone.[28] Before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rules for sequence of tenses as we know them were hardly described in grammar books, and children who learned Latin developed a sense for tense-sequence merely based on hearing, reading, and memorizing many phrases.[29] Needless to say, the usage found in the ancient pagan and Christian models learned by such students would not always conform to the simplified rules learned by modern students.

There are, of course, some features found hardly before late antiquity, and then only rarely, but are quite frequently encountered in certain medieval texts; for example, *quod* is used as a subordinating conjunction after verbs of fearing,[30] *quatenus* is used instead of *ut* to introduce consecutive clauses.[31] Morever, there are indeed morphological changes that might be called truly medieval; for example, verbs change conjugations, verbs become deponents that previously were not, and vice-versa, new compound adverbs come into use, nouns and adjectives change declensions, or borrow forms from other declensions, new morphological variations

[25] Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax,*, 2:179–98. H. Rönsch, *Itala und Vulgata* (1868, repr. Munich, 1965), p. 425.

[26] Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax,* 2:174–6.

[27] See in general, Jules Lebreton, *Études sur la langue et la grammaire de Cicéron* (Paris 1901), pp. 208–78, and especially Lebreton's remarks about diversity of practice, p. 277.

[28] See, for example, M. Andrewes, "The Function of Tense Variation in the Subjunctive Mood of *Oratio Obliqua,*" *The Classical Review* n.s. 1 (1951), 142–45.

[29] Margaret Benner and Emin Tengström, *On the Interpretation of Learned Neo-Latin,* Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia 39 (Göteborg, 1977) pp. 80–85.

[30] Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax,*, 2:582.

[31] The use of *quatenus* instead of *ut* to introduce final (or "purpose") propositions, or as a conjunction to introduce an indirect statement in the indicative (instead of the accusative and infinitive) seems to be a little earlier, or at least is attested in some slightly earlier sources. See Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax,* 2:656.

appear in the principal parts or endings of some verbs, and so on.[32] Moreover, in late scholastic Latin some innovations appear, such as the use of *ly* as a sort of definite article, that are truly unparalleled elsewhere and make this sort of technical latinity, especially in the later Middle Ages, quite distinctive.

But how does the usage of Erasmus fit into this tradition? We can find some scholarly observations on Erasmian latinity in a number of articles or chapters of books largely concerned with other issues, and prefaces to editions of several of Erasmus's works. Moreover, a few very useful essays have been published that present an overview of some of the major features of Erasmus's language.[33] But so far there has been no large-scale and systematic philological study devoted exclusively to the language and style of Erasmus's prose or verse. The production of such a study, especially of Erasmus prose, the primary medium in which Erasmus expressed himself, would of course be a formidable task (since the output of Erasmus is immense, and includes a vast variety of genres and styles).

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some general statements about the latinity of Erasmus, before we advance to some more specific observations. Erasmus, as we have said, is not to be grouped with some humanists who make a conscious attempt to mimic the language of Cicero, or indeed any specific author.[34] Erasmus's language is truly eclectic, and in this respect is quite consistent with the views on imitation that he expresses in several works.[35] He makes free use of expressions from comedians, perhaps from Terence more than Plautus, from poets, especially Horace, and historians, such as Sallust and Suetonius. Erasmus drew the elements of his prose language more or less indiscriminately from ancient prose authors and poets – in this respect quite unlike some of the philologists of later times who tended to distinguish more carefully and scrupulously between ancient poetic and prose language.[36] Erasmian prose is peppered with pithy sayings,

---

[32] Some of these developments are treated in detail by Peter Stotz, *Handbuch*, 4:5–232.

[33] See the appendix to this article which contains a bibliography of modern scholarly works that pertain in various ways to the study of Erasmus's language.

[34] On the eclecticism of Erasmus, see Tunberg, "Ciceronian Latin" (see bibliography in appendix), especially pp. 13–16 and 44–61.

[35] These views are expressed in the greatest detail and most effectively in the dialogue *Ciceronianus* (see above, nn. 11 and 12).

[36] One of the main developments in the history of Latin prose during early imperial period (or the "Silver" Age) is a tendency to import into prose the constructions, vocabulary and imagery that had been peculiar to poetry in "Golden" or classical Latin. It almost goes without saying that, after this evolution, patristic and medieval authors had little sense of the linguistic differences between classical poetry and prose. This distinction was only gradually

expressions, and proverbs adapted from the entire range of ancient Latin authors, and often from Greek sources too – sayings and expressions that he consciously collected, published, republished in ever larger editions of the work he entitled *Adagia*. The assiduous use of such proverbial sayings, or *adagia*, add colour and great expressive power to Erasmus's diction. To gain a quick impression of this aspect of Erasmian language, we may consider this brief excerpt from the *Laus stultitiae* (the *adagia* are indicated in italics):

> Ad convivium adhibe sapientem: aut tristi silentio aut molestis quaestiunculis obturbabit. Ad chorum advoca: *camelum saltare* dices. Ad publicos ludos trahe: ipso vultu populi voluptatibus obstabit et cogetur *e theatro migrare sapiens Cato*, quandoquidem supercilium non potest ponere. In colloquium inciderit: repente *lupus in fabula*. Si quid emendum, si contrahendum, breviter si quid eorum agendum, sine quibus haec quotidiana vita transigi non potest, stipitem dicas sapientem istum, non hominem. Usqueadeo neque sibi neque patriae neque suis usquam usui ese potest, propterea quod communium rerum sit imperitus et a populari opinione vulgaribusque institutis *longe lateque discrepet*. (ASD IV-3, p. 100, lines 515–25)

It is noteworthy that the vast majority of Erasmus's *adagia* come from the Latin and Greek literature of the ancient world and hardly ever from Medieval Latin literature.[37]

In his literary works, especially in his letters, dialogues, treatises, colloquies, and declamations, as opposed to his annotations and commentaries on scripture, the structure of Erasmus's sentences sometimes resembles the pointed phrases of Seneca, and is remarkable for a fluidity that stems from an immense variety of construction and vocabulary. Erasmus's mode of expression is often elliptical, but without the denseness and occasional obscurity of Tacitus – or Tacitus's Renaissance imitators, such as Justus Lipsius. Especially when reading the texts mentioned above, the reader of Erasmus is often captivated by a lively and familiar tone that is the result of his inexhaustible variety of expression spiced up by *adagia*, his copious use of diminutives, and a kind of rhetorical parataxis in which subordinate constructions are not explicitly signified by various

---

rediscovered with the rise of what we might recognize as scientific classical philology from the later sixteenth century onwards.

[37] A few have origin in the vernacular folklore of Erasmus's day. These, of course, are skilfully translated by Erasmus into pithy and proverbial Latin. See especially Wesseling, "Dutch Proverbs" (bibliography in appendix), Tournoy and Tunberg, "On the Margins" (bibliography in appendix), pp 161–66, Suringar, *Erasmus over Nederlandsche spreekwoorden* (bibliography in appendix).

subordinating conjunctions, but by the mere contrast, antithesis, or rhetorical juxtaposition of thoughts. This parataxis, however, should not be confused with the diction of the Vulgate, or the very simple style of certain types of early Christian and medieval texts: it is redolent of the very studied practice of many pagan authors.[38] These elements of style, separately and in various combinations, can be found in the works of many different Latin authors both ancient and humanistic, but Erasmus applies them copiously with natural ease, and combines all of them in a rich texture of expression in which the total effect is quite distinctive and individual.

Very occasionally we encounter in Erasmus grammatical constructions not attested before late antiquity. Erasmus, for example, employs *esto* as a concessive conjunction with the subjunctive much like *quamvis* (as do other humanists).[39] He habitually employs certain phrases that seem to originate in

---

[38] There is no space to list a wide range of such sentences, so a few examples must suffice to give a flavour of what is quite a pervasive mode of expression:

"... nihil possunt blande dicere, vix etiam arridere ridentibus: dicas plane Gratiis iratis natos" (*De pueris instituendis*, ASD I-2, p. 54, lines 5–6), with equivalent force to a relative statement (e.g., "...nihil possunt blande dicere, vix etiam arridere ridentibus: *quos* dicas plane Gratiis iratis natos").

"... quod eventurum ne vates quidem ... praescire poterat; tu nec suspicari" (*Contra tyrannicidam*, ASD I-1, p. 536, lines 22–23), with force equivalent to a subordinate proposition with *tantum abest ut* (e.g., quod eventurum *tantum abest ut* tu suspicari possis, *ut nullus* vates praescire possit").

"Iam vis scire quantum matrimonio tribuerit antiquitas? Violati matrimonii poenam perpende." (*Encomium matrimonii*, ASD I-5, p. 102–3), where rhetorical questions take the place of condition statements (e.g. "*Si* vis scire quantum matrimonio tribuerit antiquitas, violati matrimonii poenam perpende").

Many other sub-categories of this kind of paratactical expression could be enumerated. The classic study on the typologies of paratactical expression, especially in later antique authors, is Jozef Svennung, "Lateinische Nebensätze ohne Subordinationswort," *Glotta* 22 (1934), 163–93. Rhetorical parataxis is skilfully employed by Cicero himself, and sometimes with great effect in his orations. Erasmus undoubtely learned much from Cicero, who himself was a master of variety (the widespread view that Cicero exclusively employed the periodic style is quite erroneous, a point effectively made by Michael von Albrecht, *Cicero's Style: A Synopsis Followed by Selected Analytic Studies*, Mnemosyne Supplement 245 [Leiden, 2003]).

[39] See, for example, this passage in Erasmus's declamation *Contra tyrannicidam*: "... esto, sane, certum haeredem sustuleris." (ASD I-1, p. 549, line 18). For the same construction in other humanists, see Tunberg, "Ciceronian Latin" (bibliography in appendix), 21–2; for the late antique antecedents, see Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax*, 2:605. We should note that this construction appears in Erasmus's favourite author Jerome. But perhaps Renaissance authors had no notion that this mode of expression was of later provenance, because the erratic punctuation typical of the Renaissance could easily have made it appear that *esto* was connected with syntactically separate propositions in some passages of early printed editions of classical texts (See Tunberg, "Ciceronian Latin," 21–22.).

the Latin literature of late antiquity, such as *pro virili* instead of the fuller phrase *pro virili parte*, or *iuxta* as a preposition with the accusative with a meaning similar to that of *secundum* with the accusative. But the syntax and structure of Erasmian Latin, generally speaking, resembles that of authors who flourished between the times of Cicero and Suetonius, especially if we include the major poets of the Augustan age and the early empire. In general, we find hardly anything in the syntax and structure of Erasmian Latin that could not also be found in some Latin author of the period from Terence to St. Jerome. We should leave out of consideration anomalies – such as, for instance, the indicative in consecutive clauses in a few isolated Erasmian passages. A phenomenon such as this is almost certainly the result either of a slip made in hasty handwriting (perhaps by Erasmus himself) or a typographical error (in the case of common constructions like consecutive clauses, we can observe Erasmus's normal practice on virtually every page).[40] It has been suggested on the basis of several revisions of one work that over time Erasmus's diction developed in the direction of an increasing classicism.[41] Erasmus, however, revised the majority of his works, sometimes several times, during his lifetime. The extent of such revisions varies from work to work, and some of them have been carefully studied.[42] It is difficult, in the view of the present writer, to find much in them that cannot be explained as correction of mistakes, or stylistic improvements to give more fluency to sentences, to make sentences more emphatic, to improve rhetorical effect and word-order, to reflect new conceptual attitudes, and so on. Perhaps we can simply say that Erasmus refined his stylistic sensibility over time. The spelling of Erasmus, known from some autograph

[40] There are a few passages in ancient texts in which the manuscripts transmit the indicative in consecutive clauses. Clearly this is material for editorial disputes: see Leumann et al., *Lateinische Syntax,* 2:639. For this phenomenon in a passage by Erasmus, see T.O. Tunberg, "Notes on Seven Declamations" (see bibliography in appendix), pp. 210–11.

[41] See Alain Jolidon, "L'Évolution psychologique" (bibliography in appendix). Perhaps as Jolidon argues, Erasmus's views about the the use of certain expresssions, such as *nec...* *quidem,* developed over his lifetime.

[42] See Louis Halkin, *Erasmus ex Erasmo* (bibliography in appendix), and Kumaniecki's introduction to his edition of Erasmus's *Antibarbari,* a work originally composed in the 1490s and extensively revised by Erasmus around 1519–20 (ASD I-1, pp. 23–25). Similar studies have been made of the revisions that other humanists made in their own works. See, for example, the study of Petrarch by Silvia Rizzo ("Il latino del Petrarca nelle Familiari," in *The Uses of Greek and Latin. Historical Essays,* ed. A.C. Dionisottti, Anthony Grafton, Jill Kraye, Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts 16 [London 1988], pp. 41–56), who concludes that Petrarch's revisions in his letters in some instances possibly indicate a developing idea of classical expression, but she makes this conclusion with admirable caution. Later revisions made by an author in her/his own work, we suggest here, more often than not tell us very little about true stylistic development, unless there is some independent evidence.

manuscripts, reflects, as we might expect, the transitional phase between late medieval orthography and the norms of a restored classicizing spelling of Latin that did not become fully standardized until well after the lifetime of Erasmus, perhaps in the seventeenth century.[43]

In vocabulary alone do we find an element in the language of Erasmus that could be unequivocably called medieval. In certain contexts Erasmus quite freely uses medieval words, or medieval meanings of ancient words. In this respect Erasmus's practice is quite consistent with the theory of style that he himself expounds in the dialogue *Ciceronianus*, where the ancient rhetorical principle of *decorum* is skilfully applied to the question of the norms of Latin expression appropriate to the times in which Erasmus lived. According to the argument of the *Ciceronianus*, one must use the words and language that accord with the institutions, ideas, and entities of the time and place about which one is speaking or writing. The dialogue ridicules the practice of a few extreme Ciceronians, who tried to express concepts peculiar to a Christian world in the terminology of the Roman republic. The representation of the Ciceronians presented in the *Ciceronianus* is not much of an exaggeration in this respect, since in the speeches of Christophorus Longolius, the ultra-Ciceronian orator who seems to be the prototype for Nosoponus, the Ciceronian character in Erasmus's dialogue, one actually finds such expressions as:

"sacris liquoribus delibutus atque perfusus" for "baptizatus"

"duodecim Christi legati" for "apostoli"

"e sacra hominum communitate exterminatus" for
   "excommunicatus"[44]

Erasmus, of course, like many or most other humanists, would use the Christian terminology, not the pseudo-Ciceronian circumlocutions. But words like *baptizatus* are already the norm in the Christian latinity of antiquity. What about words or meanings first attested in authors that we would call truly medieval?

A good context in which to observe Erasmus's practice in this regard is provided by the academic world, since universities and the institutions associated with them had had an unbroken existence since the end of the twelfth century and Latin had continuously been the language of academic life since then, and there existed a distinctive Medieval Latin terminology associated with academic life. Let us consider here a tiny selection of the medieval academic words that appear in Erasmus's writings. Of course, one

---

[43] See, for example, Allen, vol. 3, appendix XIII, pp. 630–34.

[44] For these and other expressions, see Tunberg, "Ciceronian Latin" (bibliography in appendix), p. 44.

can find many more such words in his works, but perhaps even this small sample will suffice to indicate his attitude to such vocabulary.

> *baccalaureus* (one who has the bachelor's degree) (ASD I-3, p. 384)
>
> *beanus* (freshman/new student) (ASD I-2, p. 61)
>
> *bursa* (stipend/fellowship) (*Ep.* 1768, ed. Allen, 6:439.53)
>
> *collegium* (university college) (*Ep.* 51, ed. Allen, 1:165.10)
>
> *facultas* (faculty/department) (*Ep.* 305, ed. Allen, 2:22.197)
>
> *gradus* (degree) (*Ep.* 1211, ed. Allen, 4:515.286)
>
> *licentia* (the licence, an academic diploma) (*Ep.* 2934, ed. Allen,
> 10:385.7) *licentiatus* (one who has achieved the licentiate)
> (*Ep.* 147, ed. Allen, 1:350.50)
>
> *theologizantes* (those practising theology) (*Ep.* 1768, ed. Allen,
> 6:439.54.)
>
> *vicecancellarius* (vice chancellor) (*Ep.* 1, ed. Allen, 1:22.31)
>
> *vicedecanus* (vice dean) (*Ep.* 2205, ed. Allen, 8:252.6)

Some words, of course, are already found in antique and even classical Latin, but are used by Erasmus with their medieval meanings.[45] *Collegium*, for example, is common in the works of Cicero, but Erasmus, in the appropriate context, uses it to mean a university college. Similarly, the noun *gradus* is found in all periods of latinity, but if the context is academic, Erasmus may use it like any medieval author to mean "university degree" or "diploma." Other words, such as *baccalaureus* or *beanus*, are attested in no texts written before the high Middle Ages. In cases where a Medieval Latin word denotes something specific, such as an institution, rank, or office, Erasmus tends to use the medieval word rather than attempt to find an antique equivalent. Occasionally he will add an explanatory phrase. For example, in one letter he speaks of university stipends "quas bursas theologi vocant,"[46] but such explanatory additions seem to be absent at least as often as they are present. Sometimes, where there is less chance for ambiguity, he will use an ancient term: for example, he employs the grecism *gymnasiarcha* to denote the principal of a school.[47] Words of Greek origin like *gymnasium*, *paedagogicus, didascalus* are also used by Erasmus and others in the academic context, and such Greek terms are perhaps more often used by

---

[45] On medieval academic vocabulary see especially Olga Weijers, *Terminologie des universités au XIIIe siècle*, Lessico intellettuale europeo 39 (Roma 1987) and eadem, ed., *Vocabulaire des collèges universitaires (XIIIe–XVIe siècles). Actes du colloque Leuven 9–11 avril 1992*, CIVICIMA Études sur le vocabulaire intellectuel du moyen âge 6 (Turnhout, 1993).

[46] *Ep.* 1768, ed. Allen, 6:439.53.

[47] *Ep.* 298, ed. Allen, 2: 1 (salutation).

Erasmus in discourse applying to educational institutions and affairs below the university level.[48] But this is not always true. In the works of Erasmus the words *lycaeum* and *academia,* for instance, may refer to universities,[49] and in humanist Latin in general a variety of terms of Greek origin, such as *archigymnasium*, and *athenaeum,* can be used to mean "university," along with typical medieval terms, such as *studium generale* and *universitas.*[50] The words of Greek origin impart an antique flavour to humanistic discourse about such matters, and frequently seem to be used for stylistic effect and variation, without ever ousting the standard medieval terminology. For we see that the medieval words co-exist in the works of the same humanists.

In general it is clear that Erasmus does not shrink from using Latin words of medieval origin, especially if he is discussing post-antique entities for which the medieval vocabulary had become established.

The practice of Erasmus represents what is probably more or less the norm for most of the humanistic and early-modern age, a period that we may conceive as enduring up to the end of the seventeenth century, or even later in some areas. The authors of this age typically favoured the syntax and usage of the *auctores probati*, but employed new or post-antique words where needed.[51] In their readiness to employ new words, they could invoke the authority of Cicero himself, who had given much new vocabulary to Latin, often drawn from Greek sources, so that philosophical notions could be expressed in Latin.[52]

We have paid special attention here to the use of medieval academic words in Erasmus. Would authors who flourished a century and a half after Erasmus's death have used such vocabulary to a lesser extent? The story of the use of Medieval Latin academic words in Neo-Latin texts composed between 1600 and 1800 is an unwritten chapter in the history of Neo-Latin.[53]

---

[48] See *Ep.* 149, ed. Allen, 1:153.67; *Ep.* 570, ed. Allen, 2:166,32; *Ep.* 666, ed. Allen, 3:91.5.

[49] *Ep.* 45, ed. Allen, 1:149.4; *Ep.* 386, ed. Allen, 2:19047.

[50] On all of these words see René Hoven, *Lexique de la prose latine de la Renaissance* (Leiden, 1994), and Weijers, *Terminologie des universités.*.

[51] See the conclusions of Benner and Tengström, *On the Interpretation of Learned Neo-Latin* (n. 29).

[52] *De finibus*, 3.3.10.

[53] Very many of the Medieval Latin words for university officials, ranks, degrees, etc. still exist, slightly modified of course, in various European vernacular languages – a tangible testimony to their once widespread use in Latin when it was the international language of learning. But perhaps it is worth noting that in the satiric 1761 oration by the famous classical philologist David Ruhnken, entitled *De doctore umbratico*, the medieval vocabulary is strictly avoided. In Ruhnken's Latin, the *rectores* of the university are *moderatores*, and the university itself is always called *academia*. See *Davidis Ruhnkenii oratio de doctore*

Whatever the answer might be in the case of academic words, it is clear that medieval vocabulary persisted for a very long time in discourse about the sciences, technical fields, and law. Medieval Latin, as the works of Erasmus and others indicate, never really died out, as long as Latin remained a widely used language for practical discourse outside the narrow boundaries of classical philology.[54]

Bibliography pertaining to the latinity of Erasmus

V.C. Clark, *Studies in the Latin of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Lancaster, PA, 1900), pp. 82–109. In the chapter devoted to Erasmus there are some useful observations on certain features of Erasmian diction.

Louis Halkin, *Erasmus ex Erasmo. Érasme éditeur de sa correspondance.* Livre – Idées – Société, série in 8°, 3 (Aubel, 1983). A study of Erasmus as an editor of his own texts. The book touches here and there on matters that have relevance to the study of Erasmus's language.

Jozef IJsewijn, "Castigationes Erasmianae," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 26 (1977) 239–43; 27 (1978) 297–304; 28 (1979) 344–49; 29 (1980) 315–17; 32 (1982) 206–18; 33 (1984) 315–16; 35 (1986) 284–86; 36 (1987) 299–302; 37 (1988) 273–75. In this series of textual notes, Jozef IJsewijn provided an invaluable supplement to the Amsterdam series of editions of the *Opera omnia* of Erasmus. Within the mass of textual emendations proposed by IJsewijn, there are some comments useful for our understanding of Erasmus's style.

Jozef IJsewijn, Dirk Sacré, Gilbert Tournoy, Marc de Schepper, "Instrumentum bibliographicum," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 43 (1994), 476–78. The editors of the annual bibliography of Neo-Latin literature that appears in each issue of *Humanistica Lovaniensia* here include some proposed corrections to the then newly published ASD II-1 which include one or two remarks pertinent to the study of Erasmus's language.

---

umbratico, ed. Helgus Nikitinski (Naples, 2001), pp. 28–29 (et alibi). Whether this choice of words reflects the tastes of Ruhnken himself or what, by the second half of the eighteenth century, was a general practice, the present author is unable to say.

[54] For example, in the Latin of Euler, Gauss, and others who wrote in the field of mathematics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries we find much Latin terminology of medieval and even more recent orgin. The same could be said of writers in other fields. On learned discourse more generally, see L. Olschki, *Geschichte der neusprachlichen wissenschaftlichen Literatur*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1922).

Alain Jolidon, "L'Évolution psychologique et littéraire d'Erasme d'après les variantes du 'De conscribendis epistolis'," in *Acta conventus neo-latini Amstelodamensis. Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Amsterdam 19–24 August 1973*, ed. P. Tuynman, G.C. Kuiper, E. Kessler (Munich, 1979), pp. 566–87. The author discusses what revisions in one work might tell us about the evolution of Erasmus's style.

Alain Jolidon, "Thomas More et Erasme traducteurs du Tyrrancide (1506)," in *Thomas More 1477–1977. Colloque international tenu en novembre 1977*. Travaux de l'Institut Interuniversitaire pour l'étude de la renaissance et de l'humanisme 6 (Brussels, 1980), pp. 39–89. The article is mostly about Erasmus as a translator of Greek into Latin. But some of Jolidon's observations help our understanding of Erasmus's Latin style.

J-Cl. Margolin, ed., *Erasme. Declamatio de pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis, Étude critique, traduction et commentaire*. Travaux d'humanisme et renaissance 77 (Geneva, 1966), pp. 599–619. This introductory chapter to Margolin's annotated edition and translation contains a study of the language of the text.

C.M. Miller, "Styles and Mixed Genres in Erasmus's Praise of Folly," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Guelpherbytani. Proceedings of the Six International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Wolfenbüttel 12 August to 16 August 1985*, ed. M. Di Cesare, S. Revard, F. Rädle (Binghamton NY, 1988), pp 277–87. On various levels of discourse in the *Laus stultitiae*.

E. Schäfer, "Erasmus und Horaz," *Antike und Abendland* 16 (1970), 54–67. On Erasmus's large debt to Horace.

W.H.D. Suringar, *Erasmus over Nederlandsche spreekwoorden en spreekwoordelijke uitdrukkingen van zijnen tijd* (Utrecht, 1879). An account of Erasmus's use of sayings and proverbs of apparently Dutch folk origin. Of interest to the student of Erasmus's latinity is the way Erasmus translates such sayings into Latin.

D.F.S. Thomson, "The Latinity of Erasmus," in *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London, 1970), pp. 115–37. The author presents an overview of the qualities of Erasmian diction.

Gilbert Tournoy and T.O. Tunberg, "On the Margins of Latinity? Neo-Latin and the Vernacular Languages," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 45 (1996), 134–75. See especially pp. 143–45 and 161–66 for discussion of aspects of the language of Erasmus.

J. Trapman, "*Solet* instead of *solebat* in Erasmus and Other Neo-Latin Authors," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 44 (1995), 197– 201. An anomaly of tense in Erasmus and some other humanists.

T.O. Tunberg, Review article of *Collected Works of Erasmus, 56: Annotations on Romans,* ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. and annot. John B. Payne, Albert Rabil Jr., Robert D. Sider, and Warren S. Smith Jr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 15 (1995), 115–25. The review article contains a number of comments on the usage of Erasmus.

T.O. Tunberg, "Notes on Seven Declamations by Erasmus," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 45 (1996), 201–44. This study proposes many corrections to both the Amsterdam editions and the English translations (published in the Toronto series *Collected Works of Erasmus* or CWE) of several Erasmian works, and includes a number of observations on Erasmian language.

T.O. Tunberg, "Ciceronian Latin: Longolius and Others," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 46 (1997), 13–61. Observations on the language of several Ciceronian humanists, with some remarks on Erasmus. In the second part of this article there is a discussion of Erasmus and eclecticism.

N. Van der Blom, "Philologica Erasmiana II," *Moreana* 25, no. 77 (1988), 47–56. Some useful discussion of Erasmian vocabulary.

Harry Vredeveld, "*Asterisco praenotanda*: notes to Erasmus's *De contemptu mundi*," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 44 (1995), 168–96. Suggestions for the improvement of the ASD edition that include some observations relevant to the study of Erasmus's latinity.

Harry Vredeveld, "Notes on Some Poems of Desiderius Erasmus," *Daphnis. Zeitschrift für mittlere deutsche Literatur* 16.4 (1987), 589–613. Notes preliminary to the later ASD edition of the poems of Erasmus. These notes contain several valuable observations on Erasmus's language and vocabulary that do not appear in the critical edition itself.

Harry Vredeveld, "The word 'anormis' in Erasmus's *De praeparatione ad mortem*," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 37 (1988), 265–66. On Erasmian vocabulary.

Harry Vredeveld, "Towards a Critical Edition of Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis*," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 48 (1999), 8–69. The author proposes many improvements to the current ASD edition of this text. In the course of these notes, there are scattered observations that pertain to the study of Erasmus's language.

Harry Vredeveld, "Towards a Critical Edition of Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis*," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 49 (2000), 102–37.

A few of these notes have some bearing on the study of Erasmian language.

Ari Wesseling, "Dutch Proverbs and Ancient Sources in Erasmus's Praise of Folly," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994), 351–78. A study of Erasmus's use of *adagia*.

Ari Wesseling, "Dutch Proverbs and Expressions in Erasmus's Adages, Colloquies, and Letters," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002), 81–147. This study of proverbial expressions cited by Erasmus that have their origin in vernacular culture should be taken with Suringar (above).

E. Wolff, "Mots rares et mots nouveaux dans les Colloques d'Érasme," *Revue des études latines* 69 (1991), 166–86. This excellent work presents a thorough and accurate study of the vocabulary of Erasmus's *Colloquia familiaria*, along with copious information on sources. Erasmus's *colloquia* are especially rich in words of medieval origin.