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ERASMUS, RHETORIC AND THEOLOGY:  
THE *ENCOMIUM MATRIMONII*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The following study extends an argument on the humanist declamation that I first made in my 1987 doctoral dissertation.<sup>2</sup> In my dissertation I concluded that the interest of the early sixteenth-century humanists in declamation, and specially in the rhetorical treatment of the *thesis*, must be understood in light of their view that rhetoric, if taught following their method, can provide a substantial contribution to moral education. In this article I shall exemplify this conclusion by means of some observations on Erasmus's *Encomium matrimonii*, a model letter of persuasion which forms part of *De conscribendis epistolis*. After a brief introduction in which Erasmus's concern for the *thesis* in declamations is briefly established, the *Encomium matrimonii* will be analyzed in light of the rules for deliberative oratory, as described in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, 3, 8. Next, the polemic surrounding the *Encomium matrimonii* will be focused on briefly. More specifically, I will examine how Erasmus, in his three apologies of the *Encomium matrimonii*, appeals to the rhetorical status of the *Encomium matrimonii* to defend himself against allegations of heresy formulated by his opponents.

## 2. Erasmus and Classical Rhetoric

Erasmus valued rhetoric not only as a linguistic, dialectical and stylistic guide by means of which the quality of Latin writing could be

<sup>1</sup> This study was made possible by a grant from the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences and is based on a paper presented at the 10th biennial conference of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric (Edinburgh, July 18-22, 1995). I thank Dr. P. Tuynman (Amsterdam) for his useful remarks and Professor K. Lloyd-Jones (Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut) for help with my English.

<sup>2</sup> M. van der Poel, *De declamatio bij de humanisten. Bijdrage tot de studie van de functies van de rhetorica in de Renaissance. With an English Summary* (Nieuwkoop, 1987).

improved, but also as a curriculum offering both a complete intellectual training and a moral education. This approach to rhetoric was inspired by the ancient ideology commonly referred to through Cato the Elder's motto *orator est vir bonus dicendi peritus*. Among the ancient theorists who were influential in later times, Quintilian was its most enthusiastic defender. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, he strongly opposed the theory, defended by other ancient authors, that rhetoric is merely a technique of persuasive discourse, devoid of value judgements. According to Quintilian, a public speaker is not an orator, unless he is an honorable man who places himself at the service of the moral improvement of society. Quintilian believed that the precepts of decent and honest living ('ratio rectae honestaeque vitae') belong not only to the field of philosophy, but also to that of eloquence.<sup>3</sup> Together with the actual curriculum described in the *Institutio oratoria*, Erasmus adopted Quintilian's philosophy of rhetoric, as becomes evident in the *Ratio studii* (1511), the *trivium* curriculum designed for John Colet's school at St. Paul's cathedral in London.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the notion of the orator as an educator in private and public morality forms the background against which Erasmus's well-known declamations, such as the *Encomium moriae* (1511) or the *Querela pacis* (1517) must be understood.

Among the instruments by means of which the ancient orator could provide his speech with the desired moral content, the *thesis* figures prominently. The *thesis* or general question (*quaestio infinita, consultatio* or *propositum*) belongs originally to philosophy and treats subjects from a general, abstract perspective. The Greek rhetor Hermagoras (second century B.C.) had introduced the *thesis* into rhetoric, distinguishing it from the concrete question (*quaestio finita* or *causa*), which is defined by the actual *circumstantiae* of life, and which in other words concerns concrete facts and persons in the context of

<sup>3</sup> *Inst.*, 1, *praefatio* 10. On the moral quality of rhetoric see e.g. *Inst.*, 1, *praefatio* 9-20; 2, 15 ('what is rhetoric?'); 2, 20 ('is rhetoric free of values?'); 12, 1 ('a great orator must be a good man'). See for Quintilian's view on rhetoric and moral philosophy in the context of other ancient views on this matter specially M. Winterbottom, 'Quintilian and the 'vir bonus'', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 54 (1964), 90-97.

<sup>4</sup> Erasmus indicated his admiration for Quintilian's pedagogy, among other places, in the following passage of *De ratione studii*: "Sed video te cupere vt de docendi quoque ratione nonnihil attingamus. Age mos geratur Viterio, quanquam video Fabium hisce de rebus diligentissime praecepisse, adeo vt post hunc de iisdem scribere impudentissimum esse videatur" (*Opera omnia*, vol. I, 2, ed. J.-Cl. Margolin, Amsterdam, 1971 [henceforth referred to as ASD I, 2], p. 119, lines 14-17).

place and time.<sup>5</sup> According to Quintilian, the discussion of general questions also belongs to the field of the orator because only then can every concrete question be discussed completely, when the underlying general question is also taken into consideration. Thus, Cato can only answer the question whether he himself should marry, when he has first made up his mind about the value of marriage in general.<sup>6</sup> In order to stress the importance of the *thesis*, Quintilian also refers to Cicero (*Orator* 45, *De oratore* 3, 120 and *Topica* 21), who emphasizes the importance of discussing the particular matter at hand in light of the underlying, general question, so as to provide the audience with the necessary information to make a respectable and fair judgement.<sup>7</sup> Quintilian stresses how useful it is for the orator to declaim *theses*,<sup>8</sup> and he points out that some *theses* can be turned into concrete questions in the deliberative field simply by putting them into the mouths of specific persons.<sup>9</sup>

In the rhetorical theory and practice of Erasmus the *thesis* likewise plays an important role. Thus, in *De ratione studii* (1511), all the themes which Erasmus proposes for *suasoriae* (that is, declamations in the deliberative field) are *theses*, some of which deal with philosophical issues which have been debated since olden days, while others deal with problems belonging to Erasmus's own times: 'from the outset the best things should be learned,' 'happiness does not consist in wealth,' 'a mother should nourish her offspring with her own milk,' 'Greek should or should not be learned,' 'a man should or should not marry,' 'one

<sup>5</sup> H. Throm, *Die Thesis. Ein Beitrag zu ihrer Entstehung und Geschichte* (Paderborn, 1932), pp. 80-159; S.F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (Liverpool, 1949), pp. 2-11; D. Matthes, 'Hermagoras von Temnos 1904-1955', *Lustrum*, 3 (1958), 121-132. The distinction between *quaestio finita* and *quaestio infinita* forms, since the time of Hermagoras, a standard part of rhetorical theory (see, e.g., Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 5, 5).

<sup>6</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 5, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 5, 14-15. Quintilian also mentions that Cicero, in his youthful work *De inventione*, 1, 8, had criticized Hermagoras for distinguishing the cause from the general question, but that he later changed his mind completely. See for the *thesis* in Cicero's orations A. Michel, *Les rapports de la rhétorique et de la philosophie dans l'oeuvre de Cicéron* (Paris, 1960), specially pp. 201-219.

<sup>8</sup> *Inst.*, 2, 1, 9; 2, 4, 24 (where he notes that Cicero included in the *Pro Murena* the *thesis* 'who deserves the greatest praise, the lawyer or the soldier?'); 10, 5, 11; 12, 2 25. Compare Cicero, *Att.*, 9, 4, and the *theses* in the *Progymnasmata* of Aphthonius (fourth-fifth century).

<sup>9</sup> *Inst.*, 2, 4, 25. He cites the examples of 'whether marriage is desirable' and 'whether a public career should be the object of ambition.'

should or should not go on pilgrimages.<sup>10</sup> In the 1490s, at a time when he worked as a teacher in the art of speech, Erasmus developed the traditional *thesis* for and against marriage into two (*epistolae*) *suasoriae*, and it is to these that we shall now turn our attention.

### 3. Erasmus's *Suasoriae* for and against Marriage

The *epistolae suasoriae* for and against marriage were written in the course of the 1490s and form part of *De conscribendis epistolis*.<sup>11</sup> They are included both in the 1521 unauthorized edition of *De conscribendis epistolis*, printed in Cambridge, for which a manuscript circulating in England from the 1490s was used,<sup>12</sup> and in the authorized 1522 edition published in Basel in 1522.<sup>13</sup> From 1518 onward, the *epistola suasoria* in favor of marriage also has a long printing history as a separate decla-

<sup>10</sup> "Aliquando ceu declamatorium thema dabit in diuersis generibus, puta (...) statim optima discenda. In opibus non esse foelicitatem. Matrem proprio lacte nutrire debere quod peperit. Literis graecis non esse dandam, aut esse dandam operam. Vxorem esse ducendam, aut non esse ducendam. Peregrinandum esse, aut non esse peregrinandum, in genere suasorio" (ASD I, 2, p. 133). It will be noticed that in antiquity, these topics do not fall into the field of deliberative oratory in the strict political sense of the word. Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 8, 14-15, however, already observed that the deliberative field comprehends more than issues regarding the polis strictly; the humanists, to all intents and purposes, included all things about which it is possible to deliberate under the heading of deliberative oratory; see M. van der Poel, 'Observations on J.L. Vives' Theory of Deliberative Oratory in "De Consultatione" (1523)', in: A. Dalzell - Ch. Fantazzi - R. Schoeck (eds.), *Acta of the Seventh International Congress of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies, Toronto, Canada, 8-13 August 1988* (Binghamton, NY, 1991), pp. 803-810. See for the importance of the *thesis* within the rhetorical writings of Erasmus: P. Tuynman, 'Erasmus: functionele rhetorica bij een christen-ciceronianaan', *Lampas*, 9 (1976), 163-195.

<sup>11</sup> Erasmus affirms that they form part of *De conscribendis epistolis* in the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii* of 1519 (LB IX, 108 C) and in the *Catalogus lucubrationum* of 1523 (Allen, letter 1, p. 18, l. 7-10; vol. 1, p. 18). In this passage of the *Catalogus lucubrationum* and in the *Dilutio* of 1532 (see note 28 below for the full title of this writing; ed. Telle, p. 70) Erasmus mentions that he wrote the *suasoriae* for and against marriage for his student William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, to whom Erasmus taught rhetoric in the late 1490s. See on the date and the addressee also Allen, letter 604, note at line 10 (vol. 3, p. 17).

<sup>12</sup> Erasmus mentions this manuscript, of which he still had a copy in 1526, in the *Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei* (LB IX, 813 B). I have been unable to consult the 1521 edition; Margolin records that it contains both the *pro* and *con* part (Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, vol. I, 5, Amsterdam, 1975 [henceforth referred to as ASD I, 5], p. 339, note 22).

<sup>13</sup> ASD I, 2, p. 400-429 (the letter in favor of marriage), p. 429-432 (outline of the letter against marriage).

mation. In the first two of the separate editions, it was called *Declamatio in genere suasorio de laude matrimonii*. From the third separate edition onward it was simply called *Encomium matrimonii*;<sup>14</sup> we shall henceforth refer to it by this title.

Notwithstanding the fact that these *suasoriae* treat a commonplace topic, they do not merely contain a rehearsal of standard arguments. To the contrary, they offer a two-sided, dialectical discussion of marriage, in which Erasmus presents a quite innovative view of marriage. He defends the view that celibacy, as distinguished from complete abstinence, is not by definition and under every circumstance morally superior to marriage, and that this even applies to clerical and monastic celibacy. In other words, he defends the view that marriage is, as such, just as worthy as clerical and monastic celibacy, and that it depends on the psychological and external circumstances of the individual as to whether celibacy is the better choice or vice versa. This view is explained through two opposite themes which explore under which circumstances marriage can be preferable to clerical and monastic celibacy or vice versa. As is fitting for declamations, the circumstantial details of each theme are completely fictional, but, as we shall see, they are true to life and they have been invented in such a way that the reader can easily understand how each theme has affinity with reality. Throughout the discussion of each theme, general observations play a very important role; that is to say, the *quaestio finita* is worked out in light of a detailed discussion of the underlying *quaestio infinita* or *thesis*. Let us now consider both sides of the issue as Erasmus presents them.

In the case against marriage, Erasmus introduces a boy named Peter, who is completely devoted to his intellectual pursuits. Yet his mother forces him to quit school and implores him to marry, against his wishes, a certain rich and beautiful girl. Peter's father does not stand against either his wife or his son, and allows his son to make his own choice.<sup>15</sup> In this case, it is evident that, if the boy were to choose in favor of marriage, he would make this decision on the basis of unsuitable arguments,

<sup>14</sup> The first edition was printed in Louvain, March 30, 1518; the third edition was printed in Basel, August 30, 1518; there are eleven separate editions dating from Erasmus's lifetime, plus translations into French, German and English (see *Bibliotheca Belgica*, vol. 2, p. 767-774). Modern edition in ASD I, 5, p. 385-416.

<sup>15</sup> ASD I, 2, p. 429, line 25-430, line 5. Erasmus discusses first the *causa* for marriage and then the *causa* against marriage; this order of presentation is inverted here for the sake of convenience.

namely against his own will and psychological disposition, and merely out of compliance with his mother's wish. Therefore, it is obvious that a letter of dissuasion must be written. In *De conscribendis epistolis*, being a manual for Latin writing, Erasmus only presents fully elaborated examples of a few kinds of letters, but mostly confines himself to suggesting relevant arguments or to giving indications about the way to compose, by way of exercise, a particular kind of letter. This is also the way he now proceeds in the case of the letter of dissuasion.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, he provides a detailed survey of standard arguments against marriage (marriage leads to servitude, marriage gives rise to lasciviousness, the standard misogynic ideas found in writers like Juvenal and the Church Fathers, the disadvantages inherent even to good marriages, such as lack of time to devote oneself to intellectual pursuits, etc.).<sup>17</sup>

In the case in favor of marriage, Erasmus introduces a young man of noble birth, who is the only son and heir; this implies that the hope of prolonging his lineage depends on him alone. The young man is determined to remain celibate, although he has an affectionate relationship with a rich young woman of noble descent, who unites beauty with honesty and loves him greatly; the young man also disregards the advice of all his friends, who strongly recommend him to get married. The motive for the young man's reluctance to get married is twofold: first, grief caused by his mother's recent death, and secondly, as Erasmus puts it, religious scruples ('religio').<sup>18</sup> Here, the circumstantial details are chosen in such a way that the young man's decision in favor of clerical celibacy appears to be wrong for three reasons. First, he does not have a true spiritual vocation; secondly, he ignores the love which exists between himself and the young woman; and thirdly, he neglects his duties toward his family. Thus, this case constitutes a strong argument in favor of marriage.

Erasmus developed this recommendation into a full deliberative address, discussing the fictional case in light of the problems which existed concerning marriage in his own time, and against the background

<sup>16</sup> In the 1519 *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, Erasmus observes that he did not elaborate the opinion against marriage into a full discourse, because it had already been dealt with by so many authors before him (LB IX, 108 C).

<sup>17</sup> ASD, I, 2, p. 430, l. 4 - p. 432, l. 14. The second part of *De copia* contains, from the 1514 edition onward, also a brief discussion of possible arguments against marriage (ASD I, 6, ed. B. Knott, p. 224-225).

<sup>18</sup> ASD I, 2, p. 401, lines 7-18; ASD I, 5, p. 385, line 13 - p. 386, line 23.

of the general aspects concerning marriage which are relevant to every person, living at any time and at any place, who deliberates whether to get married or stay single. Because he wrote his *Encomium matrimonii* for didactic purposes as a model letter, it is to be expected that he made an effort to follow closely the classical rules. To see this, it is useful to read the text in light of the rules for deliberative oratory provided by Erasmus's master Quintilian (*Inst.*, 3, 8). The subsequent observations on the *loci argumentorum* (the grounds for arguments or topics) suggest that he did indeed follow Quintilian. My observations on Erasmus's handling of the topics suggest moreover that some of Quintilian's remarks on deliberative oratory are useful for interpreting the tenor of the *Encomium matrimonii*.

In the section on deliberative oratory, Quintilian offers, among other things, detailed observations on the topics. He considers *utile* and *honestum* the most important points of view, and he examines them at great length (3, 8, 1-3; 30-35; 35-47). He also discusses *necessitas*, only to reject the view of those theorists who introduced *necessitas* as an independent topic (3, 8, 25-28). In this context, he also mentions that some theorists defined many other topics, such as *fas*, *iustum*, *facile*, *iucundum* and their counterparts (3, 8, 26-28). According to Quintilian, these topics do not merit separate treatment, because they constitute subdivisions of either *honestum* or *utile*. However, he does discuss briefly *iucundum*, because some theorists consider it in some deliberations as the only relevant topic (3, 8, 28-29).

In the *Encomium matrimonii*, Erasmus uses precisely the four topics, which Quintilian particularly discussed in 3, 8, namely *honestum*, *iucundum*, *utile* and *necessarium*; these last two, as we shall see, are in fact combined to form one topic. Erasmus enumerates these topics, using the term *rationes* (reasons, grounds for arguments), in the introduction of the *Encomium*, where they function as the *divisio* in classical speech, immediately after the description of the *causa*.<sup>19</sup> He then proceeds to the

<sup>19</sup> ASD I, 2, p. 401, line 19-402, line 2. I shall only refer to the edition in *De conscribendis epistolis* (ASD I, 2, p. 401, line 19 - p. 428, line 24). The text is largely the same in the *De conscribendis epistolis* version and in the separate version (ASD I, 5, p. 385-416). The following three passages from the 1522 edition of *De conscribendis epistolis* are lacking in the separate edition: 1. a short but very critical passage on the practise of priests living with concubines, included in the examination of Christ's praise of those who live chastely (ASD I, 2, p. 418, lines 3-10; cp. ASD I, 5, p. 404, note at lines 225-226); 2. a passage on the levirate, included at the end of the discussion of the topic *honestum* (ASD I, 2, p. 419, line 20 - p. 420, line 15; cp. ASD I, 5, p. 407, note at l. 249);

*confirmatio*, which consists of three parts, corresponding to the topics or *rationes*, as enumerated in the introduction, that is *honestum*, *iucundum* and *utile-necessarium*. Let us briefly discuss each part.<sup>20</sup>

### *Honestum*

Some ancient rhetors taught that *utile* is the main topic relevant to deliberative oratory. Quintilian criticizes this view, and states that if he had to choose one specific topic, he would, like Cicero, not choose usefulness, but dignity (*dignitas*; *honestum*).<sup>21</sup> Erasmus, in his turn, follows Cicero and Quintilian, and uses *honestum* as the first and hence most important argument. His discussion of this argument moreover constitutes the longest part of the *Encomium matrimonii* (p. 402, line 3 - p. 420, line 19).

In this part, Erasmus mainly presents general considerations; in other words, this part is almost entirely situated on the level of the *thesis* or *generalis quaestio*. In order to argue that marriage is honorable in itself, Erasmus offers a wide range of considerations, which are ordered under three headings: marriage as a divine law, a human law, and a law of nature.<sup>22</sup>

1. Marriage, so Erasmus begins his advice to the young man, was not instituted by human law, but by divine law (p. 402, line 3 - p. 406, line 10). At Creation, God gave Eve to Adam as a companion, and created

3. a passage on second marriages, in which the second marriage of Thomas More is mentioned, included at the end of the discussion of the topic *iucundum* (ASD I, 2, p. 425, lines 9-16). A number of small additions were moreover included in later editions of *De conscribendis epistolis*, one in the Paris edition of 1527 (see critical apparatus in ASD I, 2, p. 407), and several in the Basel edition of 1534 (see critical apparatus in ASD I, 2, p. 403, 406, 410, 411, 414, 418, 426, 428).

<sup>20</sup> An entirely different analysis of the *Encomium matrimonii* was proposed by E.V. Telle, *Erasmus de Rotterdam et le septième sacrement* (Geneva, 1954), pp. 160-176. Telle's analysis presupposes the view that the *Encomium matrimonii* is not a piece of deliberative oratory, but a work on doctrine that contains an (albeit veiled) attack on monasticism. Telle's notes on the *Dilutio* (see note 28 for the full title of this writing) also presuppose this view and likewise amount to a polemical attack against Erasmus's sincerity and his allegedly heretical views. J. Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Erasme* (Paris, 1981), vol. 2, pp. 949-952, presents a short but useful analysis of the *Encomium matrimonii* to show that it does indeed follow the classical rules of deliberative oratory. Compare also the remarks on the *Encomium matrimonii* in J. B. Payne, *Erasmus. His Theology of the Sacraments* (Atlanta, 1970), pp. 109-111.

<sup>21</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 8, 1. He refers to Cicero, *De oratore*, 2, 334.

<sup>22</sup> Some of the arguments discussed under these headings are in fact rather traditional, as Payne shows (*Erasmus*, p. 280, note 26).



her from Adam's rib to make us understand that nothing should be dearer, closer and more indissolubly attached to man than his wife (Genesis 1, 28). After the Flood, God gave as his first commandment to the race of mortals that it should increase and multiply, and thus ordered by implication that man and woman should be joined in matrimony (Genesis 9, 1). This view is supported by the New Testament, since Christ referred to the law that man should leave his family and join his wife (Matthew 19, 5 and Mark 10, 7). Erasmus also stresses that marriage was instituted before the Fall, in order to contribute to man's happiness, not as a remedy for sin, and he mentions that the Bible confirms the divinity of marriage by means of example, when Christ attended the wedding at Cana and honored it by performing his first miracle there (John 2, 1). Erasmus then discusses several objections based on Scripture, which he refutes one by one. First, he refutes the counter-arguments that Christ himself did not marry (we must not follow Christ in everything, he says, because He is a supernatural being) and that Christ was born from a virgin (Erasmus acknowledges the validity of this point, but argues that the Blessed Virgin was nonetheless married, thus showing us the way to follow; Joseph is mentioned as an example that stimulates men to live virtuously in the nuptial bond). Next, Erasmus observes that the Gospel never mentions celibacy in the normal civil sense of not being married, in which he himself uses the term, but extols the nobility of marriage (e.g., Ephesians 5, 32 and Hebrews 13, 4); he also mentions that the Old Testament actually condemns childless marriages (e.g. Psalm 127, 3), and therefore *a fortiori* celibacy.

2. Under the second heading, human law (p. 406, line 11 - p. 409, line 2), Erasmus argues that, from olden days and in various cultures, marriage has always been a highly honored institution. As examples, he mentions relevant evidence from Jewish law, Roman law and Spartan law (Lycurgus). An argument *ex contrario* is also presented: Jewish, Roman and Spartan legislators took firm action against adultery.

3. Under the third heading, the law of nature (p. 409, line 3 - p. 420, line 19), Erasmus advises against the extremely negative attitude toward sexuality, which constitutes one of the main reasons why the young man described in the introduction (*thema*) of the *Encomium matrimonii* does not want to marry. In this section, which is the longest of the three sections dealing with *honestum*, Erasmus opposes the negative attitude of contemporary clerics toward marriage. He starts his discussion by saying that the desire to get married (i.e. to search for a mate) is a universal

desire, among both human beings and animals (and even among trees and magnetic stones, which are also identified according to masculine and feminine gender). To illustrate this claim, he draws a few examples from Pliny the Elder and from mythological tales; he also observes that even among the most barbarian nations marriage was sacrosanct, and he mentions the example of wise men who were married (Abraham, Jacob, Solomon, Socrates).

He then starts his discussion of relevant Biblical testimonies. First, he states that sexuality cannot be sinful, because marriage was instituted prior to the Fall, and because human beings share their sexual urge with animals, that is, with creatures who have no free will and therefore are without sin (p. 414, line 11 - p. 415, line 3). Next, he refutes the young man's objection that one should follow the rule of virtue, not of nature. To this objection Erasmus answers that the virtuous life must never go against nature, since virtue offers the perfection of nature. More specifically, he points out that the young man, who as a layman does not have the mission to teach the people, is not required to imitate the life of the apostles (p. 415, line 3 - p. 416, line 5). Finally, he refutes the young man's objection that Christ Himself praised those who have embraced chastity and renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven ('sese castrarunt'; Matthew 19, 12). Erasmus accepts the authority of this statement, but interprets it in its historical context. He explains that Christ's words apply to the time when it was proper that preachers, who needed to travel and who risked persecution, were completely free of all worldly duties. Nowadays, however, it is among married people that one is likely to find the least spoiled purity of morals. Moreover, scriptural praise of chastity does not only apply to those who abstain from marriage, but also to those who live purely and chastely within marriage; nowhere does Christ lay an obligation on Christians to remain celibate, and He condemns divorce in strong terms. In the context of these Biblical observations, Erasmus formulates harsh criticism of those clerics who, under the pretence of living chastely as celibates, indulge in lust, he exalts marriage, purely and chastely observed, as the most devout way of life, and he even suggests that in certain circumstances it would be morally preferable to give unchaste priests and monks the right to marry (p. 416, line 5 - p. 418, line 10).

In conclusion, Erasmus discusses the young man's objection that chastity and marriage are incompatible because chastity is divine while marriage is human. He counters this objection by observing that virgin-

ity is a praiseworthy thing, but not if all men practise it, and specifically in the case of the young man addressed in this model letter, chastity is even bad, because he will be responsible for the extinction of his noble lineage if he does not get married. In this context, Erasmus also discusses the argument against marriage which can be drawn from the high praise for virginity formulated by the Church Fathers. Erasmus observes that their enthusiasm for virginity was functional in their time. In the present time, he continues, the ethical standards of Christian society would be better served if those who unconditionally promote celibacy were to acknowledge the practical and moral value of matrimony (p. 418, line 11 - p. 520, line 15).

### *Iucundum* •

After a brief review of the arguments presented under the heading *honestum* (p. 420, lines 15-19), Erasmus goes on to discuss the second main point, namely *iucundum* (p. 420, line 19 -p. 425, line 16). At first sight, this part seems less significant than the first, because it no longer focuses on Biblical exegesis. Erasmus presents a rose-tinted picture of the daily existence of a married couple and their children living happily in mutual trust and harmony. Opposing the general negative attitude toward women, he stresses the special character of the nuptial bond which unconditionally unites, both spiritually and materially, husband and wife. Whoever disapproves of the physical and psychological joys generated by this bond, Erasmus argues, is hard-hearted and stupid. He also refutes three objections of the young man. In response to the first, arising from misogyny, that some wives are bad, he eloquently states that bad wives are not born but made by the bad behavior of their husbands: "Crede mihi, non solet nisi malis maritis mala uxor contingere" (p. 423, lines 11-12). He next observes that all the examples of bad marriages from history and mythology can be countered with examples of good marriages; several examples are enumerated. Finally, to the objection that marriage destroys the freedom of the individual, he observes that in a good marriage the individual feels himself entirely free, that celibacy has its drawbacks too, and that the existence of second marriages constitutes the proof that marriage is a thing to be desired.

If we assume that Erasmus uses rhetoric mostly for moral purposes, it perhaps seems rather surprising that he makes *iucundum* into one of the main parts of his letter, comprising both arguments and the refutation of

objections. Thus, it would have been possible and sensible to simply include a remark about the joys of a good marriage in the section on marriage as a law of nature. By such an approach Erasmus would have at least reduced the danger of giving the impression of favoring sexual pleasure. (The theologian Clichtove indeed felt that the *Encomium matrimonii* smacked of illicit love and he compared it with books he considered lascivious, namely Poggio's *Facetiae* and Valla's *De voluptate*.<sup>23</sup>) The fact is, however, that Erasmus introduces an important moral lesson into his discussion of the topic *iucundum*, namely the husband's responsibility to treat his wife decently. Moreover, it was necessary to treat this topic in the given fictitious circumstances of the theme in order to counteract the young man's aversion to marriage, which to a large extent causes his ill-advised intention to abstain from marriage. Finally, the topic *iucundum* merits a prominent place in the *Encomium matrimonii* because it figures among the standard topics in deliberative oratory as described by Quintilian.

In this context, it is important to realize that Erasmus seems to follow closely Quintilian's guidance concerning the topic *iucundum*. Quintilian disagrees with those theorists who claim that the question whether something is pleasant sometimes constitutes the only question of a deliberation. He stresses that whenever the *iucundum* is relevant, it must come after the considerations based on *honestum* and/or *utile* (*Inst.*, 3, 8, 28-29), and this is exactly how Erasmus uses the topic *iucundum*. In light of Quintilian's rule, it thus seems that the position of *iucundum* in Erasmus's letter mitigates its content to a certain extent: Erasmus does not maintain that marriage is pleasant, and therefore desirable, but that marriage is honorable, and in addition also pleasant, and hence desirable. This rhetorical subtlety was, of course, wasted on the theologians (as Clichtove's above-mentioned reaction shows), but it must be taken into consideration if we wish to understand fully the view on marriage which Erasmus is expounding.

#### *Utile; Necessarium*

The two remaining topics are dealt with briefly in a single section (p. 425, line 16 - p. 428, line 4). Erasmus points out that marriage is useful,

<sup>23</sup> J. Clichtove, *Propugnaculum ecclesiae, adversus Lytheranos* (Paris, 1526), fol. 127<sup>r</sup>. In his *Dilutio* (see note 28 below for the full title), Erasmus justifiably complains that this comparison is absurd (ed. Telle, p. 96).

because without it, the human race would perish;<sup>24</sup> conversely, celibacy, defined here as an institution intended to give us an impression of life after death, is honorable for some individuals, but not for the average man and woman. In the particular case at hand, the young man (who, it must be remembered, has indeed at this very moment an affectionate relationship with a young woman) has a moral duty to marry, because without his offspring by honorable marriage, his noble line will die. Like the two previous ones, this section also has a separate *refutatio* in which the objections of the young man are countered. In response to the objection that the example of his sister, who became a nun, is an encouragement to celibacy, Erasmus repeats the thought that he, as son and heir, has the moral duty to produce offspring, and therefore must necessarily get married, or, as Erasmus puts it, perform his duty as a human being which his sister does not wish to perform. After having made this point, Erasmus comes to the conclusion of the entire letter (p. 428, line 5 - p. 428, line 24).

The treatment of the topics *utile* and *necessarium* calls for a few comments. As observed above, *utile* is, together with *honestum*, the main *locus* in Quintilian's theory of deliberative oratory. Here, it occupies only a minor position and its content ('marriage is useful, because without it, the human race would perish') seems superfluous and rather naive. As to *necessarium*, we saw that Quintilian rejects the view that necessity can constitute the main argument in deliberative oratory. He objects to this view, because deliberations, like all forms of oratory, deal with uncertain things (*dubia*; *Inst.*, 3, 8, 25) and imply freedom of choice, while necessity excludes it. Nevertheless, Erasmus uses this topic, albeit from only one specific point of view and in function of the circumstances inherent to this particular case at hand.

The minor position and weak content of the topic *utile* in Erasmus's *Encomium matrimonii* help to underscore the importance of its traditional counterpart, the topic *honestum*. Moreover, the topic *utile* serves to meet a justifiable objection to the relevance of the topic *necessarium*. The observation drawn from the topic *utile* ('marriage is useful, because without it, the human race would perish') indeed constitutes only the introduction to the main point of the argument, which is drawn from the

<sup>24</sup> In the *altera pars*, Erasmus eloquently counters this argument: "quasi vero desint qui isto munere (i.e. procreation) fungantur" (p. 432, lines 3-4).

topic *necessity*: for this particular young man, who is son and heir, marriage is not only useful, but necessary, because without his legal offspring his lineage will perish. The strategy which Erasmus follows here offers two advantages. First, it allows him to use in a meaningful way two standard topics which, in the case at hand, seem at first sight to fail to yield any arguments, or to offer only weak arguments. In particular, it is clear, as mentioned above, that the argument drawn from the topic *utility* seems unsubstantial by itself, but if it is considered in connection with the argument drawn from the topic *necessity*, it becomes meaningful. It is also significant that the concept *necessity* is defined in terms of moral obligation.

Second and more importantly, Erasmus, by means of his handling of these two topics, carries his entire argument from the level of the general question at which it has been mostly situated so far, definitively back to the level of the particular case at hand. Thus, he complies with one of the rules to which Quintilian attaches great importance, namely the rule that specially in deliberative oratory the orator must tailor his discourse to the psychological and material circumstances of those addressed (*Inst.* 3, 8, 15; 3, 8, 35-47). In the *Encomium matrimonii*, the argument develops slowly from the almost purely intellectual discussion of Christian marriage (the section *honestum*), via a brief section in which general psychological and intellectual observations are combined to influence the feelings of the fictitious young man (the section *iucundum*), to a final section which focuses entirely on the personal circumstances of the young man (the section *utile/necessarium*). Placed as it is at the end of the letter, the moral and emotional appeal which is finally directed face-to-face to the addressee carries the entire weight of the preceding general, intellectual observations, and hence its effectiveness is guaranteed. Moreover, the final section of the *Encomium matrimonii* clearly repeats the moral lesson of the entire argument, which had already been formulated clearly in the part dealing with *honestum*, namely that some people in the present day ('hoc tempore') need marriage, not clerical celibacy, in order to live as pious Christians.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Compare Erasmus's remarks in the 1519 *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*: "Quid, quod hoc etiam tempore necessarium (sc. matrimonium)? Nemo tam superstitiosus est, opinor, qui neget esse, quibus potius esse debeat matrimonium quam coelibatus" (LB IX, 108 F). Erasmus is thinking specifically about the evil of unchastity among clerics and monks.

#### 4. The Reaction of the Theologians to the *Encomium Matrimonii*

In 1518, three years before the first publication of the *Encomium matrimonii* and its counterpart, the dissuasion against marriage, in the Cambridge edition of *De conscribendis epistolis*, Erasmus published the *Encomium matrimonii* as a separate declamation in a small edition containing four declamations.<sup>26</sup> As a result of this publication, he fell into a polemic concerning his views on marriage and celibacy, first with the Louvain theologian Jan Briart of Ath, and later with the Paris theologian Josse Clichtove. These theologians considered the letter to be a hidden attack against clerical celibacy and monasticism, and hence accused Erasmus of spreading Lutheran ideas or at least of encouraging their dissemination; in plain words, they accused him of heresy. This controversy gave the *Encomium matrimonii* a high degree of notoriety, and, during Erasmus's lifetime, it went through a considerable number of publications and was translated into French, German and English.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1519 and 1532, Erasmus wrote three apologies to defend himself against the accusations of Briart and Clichtove.<sup>28</sup> He also returned to the topic of marriage and celibacy in a number of other writings published after 1518, specially in the *De institutione Christiani matrimonii* of 1526.<sup>29</sup> It is not relevant to our present purpose to study the theological content of the apologies against the background of the criticism of Briart and Clichtove and in light of Erasmus's other theo-

<sup>26</sup> See for bibliographical details, note 14 above.

<sup>27</sup> See for bibliographical details, note 14 above.

<sup>28</sup> The first apology, *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, dated March 1, 1519, is a response to the verbal attacks of Briart, formulated in a speech delivered at a degree-granting ceremony. The *Apologia* was inserted in the *Paraphrasis ad Corinthios* then in press; see Allen, letter 916, introduction (vol. 3, p. 480); text in LB IX, 105 F-112 A. The second apology, *Appendix de scriptis Iodoci Clithovei*, is a brief response, written in haste in order to include it in a writing which was about to be published, to the attack which Josse Clichtove, in his *Propugnaculum ecclesiae adversus Lutheranos* of 1526 (see above, note 23), had formulated against both the *Encomium matrimonii* and the 1519 *Apologia*; the *Appendix* was inserted in the *Prologus in supputationem calumniarum Bedae* (Basel, 1526); see Allen, letter 1780, note at line 38 (vol. 6, p. 454); text in LB IX, 811 F-814 D. The third apology constitutes a more detailed refutation of Clichtove's attack (*Dilutio eorum quae Iodocus Clithoveus scripsit adversus declamationem Des. Erasmi Roterodami suasoriam matrimonii* (Antwerp and Basel, 1532); modern edition with notes by E. V. Telle (Paris, 1968)).

<sup>29</sup> Also in *Paraphrases in Ad Corinthios* 1, 7; in *Matthaeum* 19, 10 ff (1519); in several passages from *De interdicto esu carniarum* (1522), *Comparatio virginis et martyri* (1524), *Vidua christiana* (1529), and finally in the colloquies *Proci et puellae* (1523), *Virgo misogamos*, *Virgo poenitens*, *Coniugium* (1523), *Coniugium impar* (1529).

logical and literary writings concerning marriage and celibacy.<sup>30</sup> But it is important to make a few observations on those passages from the apologies which deal with the rhetorical nature of declamations.

It is evident that Erasmus's innovative and well-argued view that marriage is intrinsically as honorable as celibacy, which underlies the *Encomium matrimonii*, was controversial and would have given rise to vigorous debate among contemporary theologians even if the *Encomium matrimonii* had been understood correctly. But in fact, Briart and Clichtove did not understand (or perhaps did not want to understand) its rhetorical purport correctly, and it is this rejection of rhetoric which gave rise to their excessive reaction. It is precisely this problem which Erasmus deals with at the beginning of each apology. The problem was that Briart and Clichtove neither understood nor accepted that the *Encomium matrimonii* is a *suasoria*, that is, a recommendation concerning a concrete case addressed to a concrete person. In general, the theologians of the period did not want to recognize that rhetoric had an independent role in its own right in the forming of public opinions on *dubia* (Quintilian, *Inst.*, 3, 8, 25) and morality in everyday life, as I argue in my study *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations*.<sup>31</sup> As a result, Briart and Clichtove did not see that Erasmus's discussion of the general aspects concerning marriage (in other words, the discussion of the *thesis*) is not at all a statement claiming absolute and universal validity, but a part that belongs naturally to the counsel. Hence the misunderstanding rose that the *Encomium matrimonii* was written as an impartial treatment of marriage as such, and thus as an unconditional general praise of marriage to the detriment of celibacy in general and clerical and monastic celibacy in particular. Judged as a general praise such as a priest might give when preaching the doctrine, the *Encomium matrimonii* was considered by Briart and Clichtove to be heretical, because it opposed what they felt to be the definitive doctrine on marriage and celibacy, as defined by Scripture, the Church Fathers and the consensus within the Church.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Two useful recent articles on Erasmus's views on marriage are M. Heath, 'Erasmus and the Laws of Marriage', in R. Schnur (ed.), *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Hafniensis. Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies (...)* (Binghamton, NY, 1994), pp. 475-484, and A. W. Reese, 'Learning Virginitv: Erasmus' Ideal of Christian Marriage', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 57 (1995), 551-567.

<sup>31</sup> Brill's *Studies in Intellectual History*, 77 (Leiden, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Before he wrote the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, Erasmus had already discussed the misunderstanding concerning the rhetorical nature of the *Encomium matri-*



In response to this attack, Erasmus stresses that the *Encomium matrimonii* is not an authoritative theological statement concerning marriage, but a rhetorical discourse. In this context, two points in Erasmus's defense deserve attention. Erasmus stresses first the dialectical nature of rhetoric, and secondly the liberties to which rhetoric can lay claim on account of its dialectical nature. The first point signifies that rhetoric, like dialectic, deals with the realm of probability, and hence can never aim to offer definitive answers in the form of authoritative statements; it necessarily only argues viewpoints on the basis of argumentation and refutation of counter-arguments.<sup>33</sup> A *suasoria* moreover is not a general discourse, but offers concrete advice to a particular individual who seeks guidance tailored to his or her situation.<sup>34</sup> Because declamations offer

*monii* with Briart in a private interview; see the *Apologia adversus debacchationes Sutoris* of 1527 (LB IX, 770 B) and Allen, introduction to letter 670 (vol. 3, p. 93). "Videtur autem pro materiae subiecte qualitate vocari potius debuisse: commendatio matrimonij, vel exhortatio ad matrimonium" (J. Clichtove, *Propugnaculum ecclesiae adversus Lutheranos*, Paris, 1526, fol. 128<sup>r</sup>). "Jodocus ita citat mea, quasi ego theologum agens serio suaserim illa populo Christiano" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 813 A).

<sup>33</sup> "Quis enim nescit, Declamationes exercitandi ingenii gratia in fictis thematis versari? (...) Tum harum hanc esse naturam, ut in utramque partem tractentur: veluti pro tyrannicida, contra tyrannicidam: pro raptore, contra raptorem: pro bello, contra bellum: pro Alexandro, contra Alexandrum: quod utrinque collatis propositionibus ac probationibus, plurimum accedat iudicio et inventioni, quae duae res ad eloquentiae facultatem valent plurimum" (*Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*; LB IX, 108 A-B). "Novit (i.e. Clichtove) enim (...) quid sit declamatio, nimirum argumentum fictum, quod exercendae dictionis gratia tractatur in utramque partem" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*; LB IX, 812 F). Clichtove, who did indeed understand the dialectical nature of declamations, argued that declamations are usually confined to forensic issues, and therefore refused to see the *Encomium matrimonii* as a declamation (*Propugnaculum ecclesiae adversus Lutheranos* (Paris, 1526), fol. 127<sup>v</sup>-128<sup>r</sup>). In response, Erasmus argued that even if one calls the *Encomium matrimonii* a commendation of matrimony or an exhortation to matrimony instead of a declamation, as Clichtove did, then it still is a classical *suasoria*, namely a counsel on a concrete subject for which it is possible to argue *in utramque partem* (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p. 71-73). See also, for the difference between 'suasio' and 'suadere' on the one hand and 'exhortatio' or 'commendatio' on the other, Erasmus's remarks from the second book of the *Ecclesiastes*: 'Quod Fabius suasorium (sc. genus) appellat, alii vocant deliberatium. Verum vbi nulla est ambiguitas, ibi nulla est deliberatio. Dubitari potest, an expediat coniugatos ad continentiae votum recipere virente etiam annuam aetate. At nemo deliberat an caste bonaque fide sit colendum matrimonium, hoc tamen suadetur vt, quod expetendum esse constat, alacrius expetatur. Ita venire potest in quaestionem an phas sit profiteri vitam monasticam, insciis aut inuitis etiam parentibus quibus liberorum officio sit opus, sed nullus ambigit quin liberi parentibus debeant honorem et obedientiam. Quoties igitur suademus quae citra controersiam pia sunt, exhortamur verius quam suademus, nisi quod est quorundam tanta ruditas, vt de manifestis quoque dubitent (ASD V, 4, ed. J. Chomarat, p. 312, lines 581-591).

<sup>34</sup> "Ne dicam interim, quod quaestionem tracto, non generalem, sed circumstantiis adstrictam" (*Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, LB 108 E). "Nam tracto

dialectical reasoning, not doctrinal assertions, Erasmus stresses that the *Encomium matrimonii* should be read in combination with its *altera pars*, the *suasoria* against marriage, included in *De conscribendis epistolis*.<sup>35</sup> It is significant that, in the 1519 *Apologia*, Erasmus stresses how useful the exercise in dialectical reasoning is, as exemplified by his *suasoriae* for and against marriage, in that it contributes to *eloquentia*.<sup>36</sup> Echoing his own pedagogical principles, he thus stresses the role of rhetoric in moral education, aimed at teaching people to reflect on and to discuss important issues, and thus to make the right moral choices in their own lives. In short, the argument which Erasmus develops in his apologies is that it is inappropriate, given the dialectical character of the *Encomium matrimonii*, to judge it by the standards of theology, that is, by the standards which apply when one formulates or propagates the already established truths of faith and doctrine (as for instance in a sermon).<sup>37</sup>

In the context of this argument, Erasmus makes his second point, namely that a rhetor, when writing a declamation, "thereby deliberately takes away credit from himself" (i.e. he makes it clear that he is arguing a case, not proclaiming the absolute truth, as would be required in a theological treatise), and that the only thing at stake is his talent.<sup>38</sup> This remarkable statement does by no means imply that an orator or a philosopher may tell lies, say insincere and unbelievable things, or, in the case of the earnest Christian orator, may say things which go against established Christian truths. First, it contains the correct observation that the argu-

quaestionem suasoriam circumstantiis implicitam" (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p.73; also p. 75-76).

<sup>35</sup> *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, LB 108 C. "Si in priori parte nullum esset argumentum quod refelli posset, quid haberet quod diceret, is qui diversam declamaret?" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 813 B).

<sup>36</sup> See quotation in note 33.

<sup>37</sup> "Quis unquam audivit exempla grammaticorum, aut dialecticorum, qui artis praceptionem tradant, exigi ad Theologorum placita?" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 812 F). "Infirorum offendiculo mihi uisus sum satis occurrisse, quum praefatione testarer argumentum esse declamatorum, ad parandam dicendi facultatem paratum, non ad dogmata religionis Christianae (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p.70). "Iam fingat me declamatiunculam illam ad rigorem theologiae uoluisse corrigere, quis non reclamasset, inepte quid facis?" (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p. 71).

<sup>38</sup> "Quisquis enim declamationem profitetur, ipse sibi fidem abrogat: ac de ingenio periclitari potest, de fide non potest" (*Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, LB IX, 108 E). "Quod si rhetoris est in veris causis non semper vera dicere, sed probabilia, modo faciant ad victoriam, multo iniquius est in ficto themate singula ad theologicum rigorem excutere. Qui declamationem profitetur, ipse sibi fidem abrogat, nec potest nisi de ingenio periclitari" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 812 F - 813 A).

ments in a rhetorical discourse must be judged in light of their mutual connection and in function of the concrete question under discussion. Thus, it was incorrect and unfair of Clichtove to refuse to see the section *iucundum* in the context of the entire *suasoria* and to deduce from it that the *Encomium matrimonii* incites to lasciviousness. Secondly, Erasmus responds here, once more, to the unjustified accusation that the *Encomium matrimonii* contains absolute assertions which oppose the teaching of the Church. Erasmus is not however hiding his real intentions behind the mask of oratory, as has often been claimed, but he is offering resistance to the desire of the professional theologians to silence those who advocated ecclesiastical and theological reform, by appealing unnecessarily to the dogmas and the authority of the Church. In the apologies, he criticizes this desire by pointing out that it is at variance with the scholastic tradition itself. For within the context of academic exercises in disputation, as Erasmus observes, there exists a tradition of very lively debate *pro* and *con* theological topics in a dialectical setting. In these debates, he says, it is common to debate even doctrinal issues and to defend views which go against the teaching of Rome, and yet the dogmas and Church authority are never invoked and the debater's orthodoxy is never doubted.<sup>39</sup> His point is that if it is permissible in theological *disputationes* to say controversial and heretical things because *disputationes* are only debates, then this must also be allowed in rhetorical exercises.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Erasmus mentions the quodlibetical disputations, the *vesperiae* (*Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, LB IX, 107 C) and the *obligatorium* (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p. 73). See for the *vesperiae* and the *obligatorium* S. Clasen OFM, 'Collectanea zum Studien und Buchwesen des Mittelalters', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 42 (1960), 205; 43 (1961), 271. In the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii* Erasmus mentions the example of reasoning *pro* and *con* the thesis that fornication is a mortal sin (LB IX, 108 D). In the *Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, he observes that theologians would protest if one were to attack Thomas Aquinas for defending the thesis that in the Eucharist, it would be better to represent the body of Christ by means of the flesh of cattle than by means of bread and wine, for the theologians would claim that Thomas also gave the arguments against this thesis (LB IX, 813 B). He makes a similar point in the *Dilutio*, quoting two examples from Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p. 74). In the *Apologia* of 1519, Erasmus also observes that a malicious reader could find heretical statements in virtually every Christian author from ancient to modern times, such as Cyprian, Hilarius, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Scotus, Aquinas, Peter of Lombard and Gerson (LB IX, 110 EF).

<sup>40</sup> "Qui inter theologos proferunt Aristotelis placita ex diametro pugnantia cum doctrina Christi, sat habent dicere, loquor ut philosophus" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 812 F). "In concertationibus scholasticis etiamsi quid dicitur repugnans catholicae ueritati, satis est dicere, Nunc loquor ut philosophus: et mihi nihil proderit vociferanti, Loquor ut rhetor, nec formo mores, sed instruo linguam" (*Dilutio*, ed. Telle, p.71).

For rhetoric, like dialectic, deals with probable things, not with established truths; moreover, declamations focus on questions taken from everyday life, not on abstract questions or theological doctrines.<sup>41</sup>

It must be stressed that Erasmus's objection to his opponents' rigidity does not mean that he himself was a sceptic with regard to dogma and Church authority. To the contrary, when Luther accused Erasmus of scepticism in the context of their argument about Free Will, Erasmus responded with a clear statement of loyalty to the Church and its teaching.<sup>42</sup> In his conflicts with Catholic theologians Erasmus also formulated his full allegiance to the truths of the faith, both those which are revealed directly by Scriptural authority and those which have been agreed to by the consensus of theologians and hence formulated as dogmas by the authority of the Church. According to Erasmus, these truths, such as the divine and human nature of Christ or the immortality of the soul, must never be a subject of debate, since that would bring them into the domain of things about which we have no certain knowledge.<sup>43</sup> But

<sup>41</sup> "Atque id faciunt (i.e., the theologians argue *pro* and *con*) in opere serio, cum ego declamationem duntaxat polliceor" (*Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, LB IX, 108 D). "Hoc si valet (i.e., that one must listen to the arguments both *pro* and *con*) in disputatione theologica, quanto magis valere debet in ficto themate, in quo declamator neutram partem praestare cogitur" (*Appendix de scriptis Jodoci Clithovei*, LB IX, 813 C). In the *Apologia pro declamatione matrimonii*, Erasmus points out that Peter of Lombard strongly supports the argument for the propagation of the race in his *Sententiae*, that is, a doctrinal work, whereas he only presents one particular case in which marriage is argued as necessary (LB IX, 108 F - 109 A).

<sup>42</sup> *Hyperaspistes*, book 1 (LB X, 1262 AB); this passage constitutes a response to Luther's attack on a passage in *De libero arbitrio*, in which Erasmus states that his approach to theological problems is unauthoritarian and that he prefers to abstain from pronouncing a definitive statement wherever the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of the Church permits it (LB IX, 1215 D). See on these passages Chr. Christ-v. Wedel, *Das Nichtwissen bei Erasmus von Rotterdam: zum philosophischen und theologischen Erkennen in der geistigen Entwicklung eines christlichen Humanisten* (Basel - Frankfurt a. M., 1981), pp. 108-111. In the *Detectio praestigiarum* (1526), which forms part of the polemic on the Last Supper, Erasmus gives a definition of three different kinds of *dogmata* or theological doctrines; he submits unconditionally to only one kind, namely those doctrines which are formulated literally in Scripture and in the Symbol of the Apostles and the decisions made in Church councils properly called together and conducted (ASD IX-1, ed. C. Augustijn, p. 256, line 575-258, line 605).

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., the introduction of the 1519 annotation of 1 Corinthians 7, 39 (LB VI, 692 F). The introductory words to this note must be read in conjunction with Allen, no. 1006, lines 165 ff. (vol. 4, p. 47 ff.), a letter to Hoogstraten in which Erasmus responds to the former's attack of Erasmus's view on divorce as explained in his 1516 annotation of Matthew 19, 8. The point Erasmus makes in 1519 is that his note must not be read as a statement on the official teaching concerning marriage, but as an explanation of the Scriptural passage with regard to his concern with moral practice (see below, note 45).

Erasmus felt that it was permitted to debate, within the limits set by doctrine, questions concerning marriage and celibacy in civil life, because they are not the object of such absolute consensus within the ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>44</sup>

The controversy between Erasmus and the professional theologians seems in many cases to have stemmed from the fact that Erasmus refused to approach problems from an authoritarian point of view by looking at the general dogma only, but chose to approach problems from the point of view of the practice of Christian life, that is, the individual effort which every Christian must undertake to live according to the adhortations of the Gospel. As a theologian, an orator and an educator, Erasmus saw it as his lifelong duty to counsel his readers in support of this effort.<sup>45</sup> It is for this reason that he wrote declamations such as the *suasoriae pro* and *con* marriage, both in his early and mature age, and it is also for this reason that in 1532, he still defended his *Encomium matrimonii*, composed some thirty years earlier as a youthful exercise in rhetoric, with the same confidence and candor that had characterized the *Encomium* itself.

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<sup>44</sup> In the 1519 annotation of 1 Corinthians 7, 39 (LB VI, 693A-703D) Erasmus shows how divergent the opinions concerning marriage, divorce and celibacy have always been among the Church Fathers and scholastic theologians.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., the introductory remark of the 1519 annotation on 1 Corinthians 7, 39: "Et ut fas non est, divinam Scripturam, quam certissimam habemus vitae regulam, abrogare, ita pii ac prudentis dispensatoris est, eam ad publicos mores accommodare" (LB VI, 692 F - 693 A), and Erasmus's remarks in a letter from 1521 to Peter Barbirius: "Ab asseueratione tempero, monitor esse malens quam dogmatistes" (Allen, no. 1225, vol. 4, p. 561, lines 231-232).