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*Was Agrippa von Nettesheim an Erasmian Humanist?**

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Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) is both an historic figure and a myth. He is famous as the author of one of the most influential Renaissance books on magic, the *De occulta philosophia*, and as the author of a large rhetorical volume, a declamation on the role of arts and sciences in society. This is the famous work *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium*, or *De vanitate*. These two works are the basis for the principal characteristics of his legendary reputation. In 1584, almost fifty years after Agrippa's death, André Thevet wrote in his biographical dictionary that Agrippa is justly considered as a blasphemous and atheistic author because he wrote these two works. As for Agrippa's biography, Thevet sets the tone for the centuries to come when he draws the picture of a man in contact with evil spirits, who was constantly accompanied by the devil in the shape of a dog.¹

The well-known nineteenth-century biographies by Morley and Prost still leave some of these legendary features unimpaired. Scholarship had to wait until the biography of Nauert, published in 1965, for an historically sound story of Agrippa's life.² Likewise, Agrippa's works have been the object of unbiased research only within the last decades. Thanks especially to the work of Ms. P. Zambelli it has become clear that Agrippa is a syncretistic thinker, deeply influenced by the Neoplatonist movement of Marsilio Ficino and with a special interest in the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Nonetheless, it is still very difficult to give a complete picture of Agrippa as an intel-

* I wish to thank Prof. Clarence Miller (St. Louis) and Dr. M. J. Heath (London) for their comments on my paper and for providing me with some useful bibliographical information. I am also grateful to Dr. P. Tuynman (Amsterdam) for his remarks on the written version of this paper.

¹ *Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres grecz, latins et payens . . .*, (Paris, 1584), 2 fols. 542r–544v.

² Ch. Nauert Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1965).

lectual in the world of humanism. One could say that scholarship wavers between two opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, Agrippa is represented as a “speculative” humanist like Reuchlin and Franck on account of his philosophical works (such as *De occulta philosophia*); on the other hand, he is considered to be a “literary” humanist like Erasmus and Vives on account of his rhetorical writings (such as *De vanitate*).

In a number of studies, Zambelli has analyzed the relationship between Agrippa and Erasmus. There is ample biographical evidence to justify such a study. In 1519, Agrippa wrote to a friend to ask for certain books by Erasmus. This is the starting point of what Zambelli has called the Erasmian period in Agrippa’s life. Agrippa not only talked about Erasmus to his friends and read his works, but between 1531 and 1533 he also exchanged letters with him. Nine letters of this correspondence survive. In a contribution published in the *Colloquia Erasmiiana Turonensia* of 1972, Zambelli shows convincingly that Agrippa was especially interested in Erasmus’s views on contemporary theological questions.³ Agrippa’s writings of his Erasmian period, such as his polemical work on the monogamy of Saint Anne from 1519, his *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae* and the *De vanitate*, both of 1526, have an Erasmian tone. For instance, Agrippa claims, like Erasmus, that not only specialists but also the general educated public must reflect on theological issues, and he follows the Erasmian method of discussing theological issues. The church fathers are often cited with approval and there is a general hostility towards a theology which gets entangled in logical subtleties, that is, scholastic theology (Zambelli 114, 123). On top of that, Zambelli stresses that Agrippa likes to use the literary form of declamation, which she considers a typically Erasmian form of writing (114). Thus, Agrippa’s Erasmian writings must in general be distinguished from his earlier works, such as his *Dialogus de homine* and the *Praelectio in Pimandrum*, which are written under the influence of the Cabala and the Hermetic writings (123). In the last pages of her article, Zambelli briefly mentions Agrippa’s *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (1509, partly rewritten for publication in 1529) and *Declamatio de sacramento matrimonii* (1526). Both works, it is stated, take an Erasmian stand in praising women and family life (138). Erasmus’s *Declamatio de laude matrimonii* and *Christiani matrimonii institutio* are mentioned among the writings which influenced Agrippa’s views (139).

This paper takes Zambelli’s thesis as the starting point of a brief and partial comparison between Agrippa’s *Declamatio de sacramento matrimonii* and Erasmus’s *Declamatio de laude matrimonii*. It cannot be denied that Agrippa was very familiar with Erasmus’s theological works. Indeed, Agrippa’s correspondence contains a letter in which the author discusses some of the critical remarks made by theologians on his *Declamatio de sacramento matrimonii*.

³ P. Zambelli, “Corneille Agrippa, Erasme et la théologie humaniste,” in *Colloquia Erasmiiana Turonensia* (Paris: Vrin, 1972), 1:113–59.

This letter contains a reference to Erasmus's *Annotationes* to the New Testament and his answer to Lee's attack on that work.⁴ However, this does not unequivocally mean that Agrippa must be considered as an Erasmian humanist. The following observations will try to show firstly that Agrippa's use of the literary form of *declamatio* differs widely from that of Erasmus's, and secondly that Agrippa's favorable discussion of the institution of matrimony was probably not written with the same intention as Erasmus's *Praise of Marriage*.

Erasmus wrote his *Declamatio de laude matrimonii* or *Encomium matrimonii* at the end of the fifteenth century for his student, the young Lord Mountjoy, who was about to get married or had recently got married. It was published as late as 1518, and was often reprinted after that date, both as an individual text and as a part of Erasmus's treatise on letter writing, published for the first time in 1522.⁵ Thus, as Zambelli stresses, it is very likely that Agrippa knew Erasmus's *Laus matrimonii* when he wrote his declamation in 1526. As for Erasmus's *Christiani matrimonii institutio*, while it is true that it appeared in the same year as Agrippa's declamation, it is unlikely that Agrippa could have used it because it appeared several months after the completion of Agrippa's writing.⁶

Erasmus's declamation is cast in the form of an *epistula suasoria*. It sets out to persuade a young man, son and only heir of his noble family, to get married. In spite of the pleading of his friends and relatives the young man remains unwilling, even if his bride is a beautiful girl of noble background, who loves him very much and who has a large dowry. In other words, Erasmus's declamation treats a particular *causa* or *hypothesis*. The declamation is built on three main grounds, three main *loci argumentorum*, namely, the virtue of marriage (*honestum*), its utility (*utile*) and its pleasantness (*iucundum*). Each point is treated in detail. Erasmus makes use of all the weapons afforded by rhetoric: he not only tries to convince the young man on rational grounds, but also uses moral and emotional arguments. Thus he makes use of the three kinds of proof traditionally studied in the theory of rhetoric. In accordance with the rules for *decorum*, the style is attuned to the character and the social position of the person who is addressed.

Agrippa wrote his declamation during his French period (1524–1528), more specifically in the first months of 1526. It was dedicated to Princess Margaret, the sister of King François I. The declamation was published

⁴ Epist. IV,7, in *Opera* (1600; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), 2:787–89.

⁵ *De laude matrimonii* as an individual text in ASD I,5 (1975), 385–416; as a part of *De conscribendis epistulis* in ASD I,2 (1971), 400–29. Both texts were edited by J.-Cl. Margolin.

⁶ Erasmus's *Christiani matrimonii institutio* was printed by Froben in August 1526. Several months earlier, on April 2, a friend wrote to Agrippa to inform him that some intellectuals were criticizing several passages in his *Declamation on Matrimony* (Ep. IV,2, in *Opera* [1970], 2:782–83). Consequently the writing must have been completed, and perhaps already printed, for some time.

with a French translation by the author,⁷ and reprinted without the translation in a 1529 edition including a number of Agrippa's small tracts.⁸ Agrippa's declamation is a brief essay in defense of the institution of marriage. In contrast with Erasmus's declamation, it is scholarly in structure and style. Although Agrippa does address himself directly to the reader ("Tu igitur quicumque uis uxorem ducere . . ."; "Tu itaque quicumque si homo esse uis . . .," fol. E4r; fol. [E6]r), his declamation does not discuss the subject in the framework of a *causa*. Agrippa's declamation consists of two more or less clearly distinguishable parts. First, there is a *theoretical* section, explaining the biblical law concerning marriage. Second, there is a section in which the author criticizes the *practical* attitude towards marriage in contemporary customs and legislation. The form of ratiocination in this declamation is quite distinctive. Indeed, Agrippa supports his theoretical points with testimonies taken from the Bible alone. At various places, Agrippa shows that human laws agree with the divine law by referring to legal sources such as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* and several texts pertaining to canonical legislation. Finally, Agrippa regularly illustrates his statements with examples taken from history. The formal elaboration of Agrippa's declamatio is thus totally different from that of Erasmus. One can affirm without hesitation that Agrippa's work completely lacks the eminently Ciceronian character of Erasmus's work.

Consequently, the tenor of the two tracts is completely different. Erasmus's declamation makes clear how a general thesis works out in a specific situation. Starting from the notion that the Church teaches the preferability of celibacy Erasmus shows that in practice, in real life if you like, marriage can be an equally honorable option for some people. This interpretation of the declamation is not only based on a reading of the text, but it has also been set forth by Erasmus himself in his apologies of 1519 and 1532.⁹ In an effort to stress the point that it is not his aim to provide a comprehensively dogmatic or philosophical analysis of the institution of matrimony, but to discuss this topic in the context of the individual who must choose a way of life, Erasmus included a sketch of the counterpart, the *altera pars*, of his declamation in the treatise on letter-writing. In this outline, the *circumstantiae* are reversed. Here, the orator sets out to convince a young man who has made

⁷ *Bresue declamation du saint sacrement de mariage: compose en latin per Henricum Cornelium Agrippam et par luy traduit en vulgaire francoys* (s. l., s. a.). The translation is published, with an introduction, by E. Droz, *Chemins de l'hérésie. Textes et documents* (Genève: Slatkine, 1971), 2:1-27.

⁸ *De Nobilitate & Praecellentia Foeminei sexus, (. . .) De sacramento Matrimonii declamatio (. . .)* (Antwerp: M. Hillenius, 1529), fols. (D5)v-(E6)r. All references are to this edition. The treatise was reprinted in *Opera* (1970), 2:538-49.

⁹ LB IX, 105F-112A and *Dilutio eorum quae Iodocus Clithoveus scripsit aduersus Declamationem Des. Erasmi Roterodami suasoriam matrimonii*, ed. E. V. Telle (Paris: Vrin, 1968). See for an analysis of Erasmus's use of rhetoric P. Tuynman, "Erasmus: functionele rhetorica bij een christen-ciceroniaan," *Lampas. Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse classici* 9 (1976): 163-95.

up his mind or is about to make up his mind to get married that wedlock is the most miserable of conditions.¹⁰

Agrippa's declamation, on the other hand, does not leave the level of the general issue (the *thesis* or *propositum*) and his observations do not aim to be applicable to a particular individual.¹¹ What does Agrippa want to accomplish with his declamation? Judging by his method of reasoning, he wants to show, to illustrate, to exemplify (but not to prove by argument), that his thesis is correct by showing that it is compatible with Scripture, especially the Old Testament. Hence the large number of testimonies which he cites and the lack of rhetorical proofs, rational or other. In his *Declamation on Original Sin* of 1518, which is very similar to this declamation in structure, style and method of reasoning, he wrote that the opinion set forth in that declamation is illustrated with *testimonies* (*testimonia*) and will need confirmation from the *proofs and arguments* (*rationes/argumenta*) of those who will agree with him. He thus literally invites specialists (that is, theologians) to take up his thesis and put it to the test in a ratiocinative analysis.¹² It is true that he does not repeat this point in the *Declamation on Marriage*, but given the similarity in form and method of exposition in the two writings, it is safe to assume that it is valid for this declamation as well. It is thus clear that the declamation as Agrippa writes it stays, unlike that of Erasmus, very close to the academic setting which was considered appropriate for the discussion of theological topics, namely the academic disputation. In this context, it is useful to remember that Agrippa often claimed that he wanted to be regarded as a theologian, although he never was an academic theologian by profession, and that he wished his scholarly writings to be discussed seriously by academic theologians. Erasmus, on the contrary, stresses in both his apologies of his *Praise of Marriage* that this work is not a theological writing, but a piece of rhetoric. This claim is, of course, not a disavowal of the content of his declamation, as one might think, but a clear statement to the effect that Erasmus is talking on a different level; that he is not, as it were, ad-

¹⁰ ASD I, 1 (1971), ed. J.-Cl. Margolin, 429–32.

¹¹ In the dedicatory epistle Agrippa casually remarks: "(...) tibi (i.e., Princess Margaret) prae caeteris dedicanda erat (sc. declamatio), ut (...) illorum contumeliosae, ac sacrilegae obiectioni, non tam verbis quam operibus responsum sit, qui dicunt sapienti non esse nubendum: (...)" (Antwerp, 1529, fol. [D6]r). These words constitute an indirect reference to a well-known fragment on matrimony by Theophrastus, which is preserved in Latin translation in Saint Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, I,47 (*Patrologia Latina*, 23: col. 288–291). Saint Jerome introduces the fragment with the remark that the author investigates the question "an vir sapiens ducat uxorem" (col. 289). Simultaneously, Agrippa's words refer to the standard example of the philosophical *thesis* or *propositum*, well known from the collections of *Progymnasmata* or *Elementary Exercises*, and thus tell the reader what kind of rhetorical writing he must expect.

¹² *De originali peccato disputabilis opinionis declamatio*, (Antwerp, 1529), fols. I3v–K4r; reprinted in *Opera* (1970), 2:551–65. See M. van der Poel, "Agrippa von Nettesheim and Rhetoric: An Examination of the Declamatio de Originali Peccato," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 39 (1990): 177–206.

dressing the same issue as the theologians. In short, one must conclude that in the hands of Agrippa and of Erasmus, the declamation is a totally different kind of writing.

These formal differences correspond with differences in conceptual approach. As is clear from the brief outline given above, Erasmus discusses marriage mainly from an ethical point of view. For him, marriage answers to the natural disposition of man, both physical and psychological, and it is therefore a source of happiness. Agrippa's treatment of the subject, by contrast, strikes the reader as rather dogmatical.

A full discussion of the declamation is not possible in the context of this paper, but a few general observations will illustrate the point adequately. In order to explain God's intention concerning the creation of the special bond between man and woman, Agrippa identifies three formal goals in the institution of matrimony: marriage is necessary because God did not intend man to live a solitary life, because God ordered man to guarantee the preservation of the human race, and finally because it is necessary in order to avoid illicit sexual behavior. These three reasons are supported by biblical testimonies: Gen. 2.18: "Dixit quoque Dominus Deus: Non est bonum esse hominem solum; faciamus ei adiutorium simile sibi"; Gen. 1.28: "Crescite et multiplicamini"; 1 Cor. 7.9: "Quod si non se continent, nubant; melius est enim nubere quam uri." The three-fold division reflects the view of marriage as the image of trinity and is very common in scholastic sources, which discern three elements in the essence, in the institution, in the cause, in the benefits and in the impediments of marriage.¹³ It seems safe to say that Agrippa's line of approach is inspired by the medieval, more specifically by the scholastic literature on matrimony, although it must be stressed that this statement does not necessarily imply that the medieval scholarly literature has in fact influenced Agrippa's views. Furthermore, Agrippa's dogmatism is manifest in the way that he considers marriage, in the light of the three Biblical testimonies, as a categorical obligation for human beings. His dogmatism can be clearly illustrated if we take a look at Agrippa's discussion of the first reason ("God did not intend man to live a solitary life"). Interestingly, Agrippa does here talk about the human values connected with marriage, such as *caritas coniugal*is, yet not so much in human terms, as the attainment of happiness, but rather in theological terms, as obedience to the divine law. The closing statement of this discussion illustrates this point. Those who choose to remain unmarried or to break up their marital relationship, Agrippa warns the reader, will necessarily lead an unhappy life because they trespass against the law of God. Similarly, when Agrippa discuss-

¹³ An excellent example of this kind of treatment is provided by Anselmus von Laon (ca. 1050-1117), one of the leading figures of the early scholastic period, in the *Sententie* (*Systematische Sentenzen*, herausgegeben (...) von Prof. Dr. F. P. Bliemetzrieder, [Münster i. W.: Aschendorff, 1919], 112-13).

es the contemporary abuses of the institution of matrimony, he juxtaposes the absolute necessity of marriage and the equally absolute compulsion to freely choose a partner on the basis of *consensus amoris*. His point is to criticize on dogmatic grounds the arrangement of marriages by parents or guardians, who act for the sake of financial gain or social advancement and who thus frustrate the freedom of matrimonial consent required by the sacrament. Fully in line with orthodoxy, Agrippa condemns these parents and guardians as grave sinners. This position is also forcefully expressed when Agrippa discusses the intervention of secular authorities in marriage contracts and the existing legal obstacles to marriages, such as the levy of a tithe on the dowry. Those who are responsible for these rules are called, in the uncompromising phraseology so familiar from the *De vanitate*, enemies of God, blasphemers of Jesus Christ, destroyers of the Church, and contaminators of sacred rites.¹⁴

Thus, the difference in outlook between Agrippa and Erasmus is evident. For Agrippa, a good marriage has an objective value, to be judged in terms of biblical orthodoxy. According to Erasmus's *Praise of Marriage*, a good marriage has a clearly vocational aspect, defined in terms of human conditions, both individual and social.

If the biblical commandment to get married is valid universally, as Agrippa claims, what about those who are engaged by vows to a monastic life? In other words, is Agrippa a proponent of marriage in contrast with monastic celibacy? Agrippa is quite clear on this point. He writes that the biblical command does not pertain to these people, because their vow of chastity "makes them immune," just as those who are impotent are exempted because their "natural weakness excuses them":

Duo tamen hominum genera a contrahendo matrimonio excipi possunt, qui scilicet ob naturae imbecillitatem ad hoc penitus inepti sunt, utputa frigidi, maleficiati, furiosi, pueri, impotentes, & eunuchi: atque qui acti spiritu Dei perpetuam castitatem delegerunt. [fol. E2v]

The point is repeated in the last paragraph of the declamation, where Agrippa stresses that every human being must be united in wedlock,

nisi illum (sc. hominem) aliquid minus homine natura impedita produxerit, uel aliquid maius homine humanas uires transcendendo angelicam castitatem perpetuo seruare delegerit. [fol. (E6)r]

This specification seems important on two accounts. First of all, it is yet another demonstration of Agrippa's dogmatism in that it shows that he sees marriage predominantly as a remedy for concupiscence. Throughout his works, Agrippa displays an extremely negative attitude towards sexuality. In

¹⁴ In this passage Agrippa also attacks the custom of charivari, which is, according to Agrippa, inspired by the public disapproval of second marriages.

this, he is diametrically opposed to Erasmus, who had written in his declamation:

Nec audio qui mihi dicat foedam illam pruriginem et Veneris stimulos non a natura, sed peccato profectam.¹⁵

The position Erasmus criticizes is the generally negative attitude to sexuality in Christian thinking, but it is all the more a rejection of the opinion of Agrippa, who had gone so far as to identify sexuality with original sin in his declamation of 1518.

It is clear that Agrippa's attitude to marriage must be seen in the context of his view of monasticism. In his *Sermo de vita monastica*, a short address of unknown date, Agrippa depicts a hierarchy of ways of living, based on scriptural exegesis.¹⁶ At the bottom of the hierarchy he places the *vita peccatrix* of those who do not accept any religion. The middle part of the hierarchical structure is taken up by those who do have faith; they live either a purgatorial life striving for purification (*vita purgatoria, activa*) or a life of discipline enjoying the experience of divine wisdom (*vita disciplinae, contemplativa*). The top of the hierarchy is formed by those who are monks in the true sense of the word, that is, those who imitate the life of Christ (*vita perfecta, exemplaris*) in that they sublimate the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Like Christ, the true monk, untroubled by any vice, both enjoys the contemplation of the divine, and sets by his actions an example for his fellow men to imitate. The details of this address do not matter in the present context, but it is important to remark that Agrippa considers the monastic vows, and especially the vow of chastity, as the key external characteristic of the most excellent way of life. This view is also expressed in the *Declamation On original Sin* from 1518. Thus it is clear that, however much he considers marriage a valuable institution, Agrippa believes that monastic celibacy is a higher form of living because it brings man closer to God.

The above remarks hardly constitute a full interpretation of Agrippa's *Declamation on the Sacrament of Matrimony*, nor do they contain all the elements necessary to provide a full answer to the question mentioned in the title of this paper. For example, it would be interesting to examine in detail Erasmus's views on specific dogmatic points which Agrippa supports, such as the indissolubility of marriage (only to be annulled in the case of fornication), the view that children are not a *meritum naturae* but a *benedictio et mysterium omnipotentis Dei*, or the advocacy of second marriage for widows and widowers.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that a fair assessment of Agrippa's views must include a reflection on the question whether the wide range of extra-biblical literature on marriage with which Agrippa was so familiar (the

¹⁵ ASD, I,5, ed. J.-Cl. Margolin, 398–400.

¹⁶ This *sermo* appears for the first time in a reprint of the small tracts (see note 8 for the first edition), published in 1532. It was reissued in *Opera* (1970), 2:565–75.

church fathers and the extensive and multifarious post-classical dogmatical and canonical literature) exerted any positive influence on the formation of his thought on marriage. In this context his philosophical and anthropological views should be carefully taken into account. Agrippa believed, in Neoplatonic fashion, that man is created in the image of God as a microcosm constituted by a vegetative world, a celestial world, and a spiritual world. God is present in all three worlds, and therefore human love (not to be understood as sexual passion) and procreation are divine, as Agrippa explains in his early *Oratio on Love*.¹⁷ This philosophical background should be taken into account if we wish to understand the full purport of Agrippa's statement at the end of the declamation that marriage is necessary in order to realize one's humanity as the image of God. Thus, it does not need explanation that a thorough assessment of Agrippa's views on marriage in the light of his anthropology and philosophy will probably have a very un-Erasmian tenor.

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¹⁷ *Oratio in Praelectionem Convivii Platonis, Amoris laudem continens*, in *Opera* (1970), 2:1074–88. This is the first of ten orations which were published in Cologne, 1535. It is probably one of Agrippa's early writings, because it mentions the *De praecellentia et nobilitate foeminei sexus* (1509) as a work that the author is planning to write.