

WHO NEEDS GREEK?

Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page vi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	viii
Introduction: shaking the foundations	i
1 Learning Greek is heresy! Resisting Erasmus	14
2 Becoming Greek, with Lucian	60
3 Blood from the shadows: Strauss' disgusting, degenerate <i>Elektra</i>	108
4 Who knows Greek?	178
5 The value of Greek. Why save Plutarch?	246
Conclusion: rainbow bridges	294
<i>Works cited</i>	300
<i>Index</i>	322

Illustrations

1	Portrait of Erasmus, by Quentin Metsys. The Royal Collection ©2001, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II	<i>page</i> 18
2	Portrait of Peter Gilles, by Quentin Metsys. Private collection. Photograph: Photographic Survey, Courtauld Institute of Art	55
3	Viola Tree, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	114
4	Christian Herter, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	117
5	Raymond Duncan, from <i>The Sketch</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	119
6	Lady Constance Stewart-Richardson, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	122
7	Lady Constance Stewart-Richardson, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	124
8	Lady Constance Stewart-Richardson, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	125
9	Maude Odell, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	127
10	Princess Mahara, from <i>The Tatler</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	128
11	Viola Tree, from <i>The Illustrated London News</i> , 1910. By permission of the British Library	130
12	'Elektra' [Edyth Walker], from <i>The Illustrated London News</i> , 1910. By permission of the British Library	132
13	Edyth Walker in the role of Elektra, from <i>The Sketch</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	134
14	The cast of <i>Elektra</i> , from <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , 1910. By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library	135
15	The costumes for <i>Elektra</i> , from <i>The Daily Express</i> , 1910. The Royal Opera House Archives	136

- 16 Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, the entrance of Clytemnestra.
By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library 155
- 17 Gertrude Eysoldt in the role of Elektra. By permission of the
Syndics of Cambridge University Library 155
- 18 Gertrude Eysoldt in the role of Elektra. By permission of the
Syndics of Cambridge University Library 156
- 19 Gertrude Eysoldt in the role of Elektra. By permission of the
Syndics of Cambridge University Library 157
- 20 Robert Lowe, (1836), and Lord Sherbrooke [Robert Lowe],
(1889), from *Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Robert Lowe,
Viscount Sherbrooke, G.C.B., D.C.L.*, by A. Patchett Martin (1893).
By permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library 198

Abbreviations

<i>CPW</i>	<i>Matthew Arnold. Collected Prose Works</i> , ed. R. Super, 12 vols., Ann Arbor
<i>CWW</i>	<i>Richard Wagner's Prose Works</i> , trans. W. Ellis, 8 vols., London (1892–9)
<i>CWE</i>	<i>Collected Works of Erasmus</i> , Toronto (1976–)
<i>CWM</i>	<i>Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St Thomas More</i> , New Haven (1963–)
<i>EE</i>	<i>Erasmi Epistolae</i> , ed. P. S. Allen, 12 vols., Oxford (1906–58)
<i>OL</i>	<i>Orbis Litterarum</i>
<i>GQ</i>	<i>German Quarterly</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>DVLG</i>	<i>Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte</i>

All other abbreviations as in *L'Année philologique*

CHAPTER ONE

Learning Greek is heresy! Resisting Erasmus

I

Why should you care about Erasmus?

Let me make a case, as best I can. First of all – and this is not a joking matter – he invented the academic, at least for the modern West. I don't mean the scholarly bore, the trivial questioner, the man – yes, this one usually is a man – who has no connection with the Real World of power and politics. And I am certainly not talking about the job of university lecturer. No, I mean *your* fantasy of what *you* might be doing by reading and writing or teaching. The intellectual whose pursuit of truth changes the way that the world is perceived. The writer whose contribution does not merely mark a massive shift in the cultural and intellectual world but *creates* it. The teacher whose teaching dominates a culture and whose values are passed across the generations. The very grandest fantasy one could share.

Erasmus was the first and greatest international intellectual superstar of the modern West. During the violent invention of Protestantism, Erasmus was accused of being a founding father of that passionate revolution and of rejecting its basic tenets – by different sides in the Reformation. He was instrumental in the complete overhaul of the education system, particularly in England, and his works still made up the basic tools of the schoolroom centuries later. By law, his paraphrases of the Gospels were placed in every parish church in the kingdom, 'next to the Bible', and every cleric below the level of Doctor of Divinity was required to own his own copy of that work. His words were placed in all those mouths and minds. The writer he translated first, however, and always loved was put on the Index of banned books by the Catholic Church and became a byword for cynical blasphemy. Yet he dedicated

The following footnotes contain mainly references for passages cited, major academic debts, and some further reading on detailed points. They are the barest minimum, and need not be consulted while reading the text.

his most controversial religious volume – the first Greek edition of the Gospels – to the Pope and received a letter of praise in reply. He wrote letter after self-promoting letter, many hundreds of which were collected and published in book form in his lifetime, constructing an image of an international brotherhood of scholars so strongly that a scholar's name and standing could be denigrated simply by the rhetorical question, 'Where is his letter from Erasmus?' By any conventional standard, Erasmus matters. If all the name Erasmus evokes is a vague image of a pious humanist, that would be really missing the boat. He was an ambivalent, provocative, polemical figure who divided and dominated European intellectual life. He was profoundly instrumental in the construction of conflicts still being waged today. We are all his heirs.

But I have another concern, which some might think a touch parochial. I care about Erasmus because he made learning Greek sexy. That is, important, politically charged, socially relevant, and trendy. He has become, I confess, a major figure in *my* fantasy.

Erasmus had a Mission with Greek. He wrote repeatedly about learning Greek and tirelessly performed his role of demanding, cajoling, teaching, stimulating knowledge of Greek in cities across Europe, often in the face not just of apathy but of organized and extended opposition. This is a story with a Hero for a classicist like me. He made learning Greek a myth of his own coming to be, and made it a requirement of those who wanted to follow him into his version of an intellectual calling. 'How is your Greek progressing?', he kept nagging bishops, theologians, politicians, students. It is with missionary pride that he writes from from Calais to Reuchlin, the distinguished German scholar of Hebrew in Stuttgart, that Colet – the founder of St Paul's School in London – 'old man as he is, is learning Greek'.¹ And adds, 'The Bishop of Rochester has made good progress.' And he encourages Reuchlin also to send a letter to Colet to gee him up in the enterprise. The shared international enterprise. There were many major issues which demanded Erasmus' attention and engagement, of course, but learning Greek was not just an adjunct to his religion or his scholarly agenda, nor was it a byproduct of his university training. Studying Greek was integral and essential to Erasmus' sense of self and to the project that was his life.

Now at some point every discussion of Erasmus has to rehearse that (auto)biographical project. There are biographies aplenty, of course,

¹ *EE* 1: 330–1 [*ep* 457], 27 August 1516. For the state of Greek studies in England, see Tilley (1938).

many of which are fascinating historical documents in themselves.² (His illegitimate birth, his leaving his first monastery because the conversation was sterile, his choosing his own first name, I will leave to the novel – though I admit that in view of the story of translation I am about to tell, I do find it at very least intriguing that the name he chose for himself, ‘Desiderius’, is – with self-conscious wit – the Latin translation of what his name ‘Erasmus’ would mean in Greek, ‘desired’, ‘desirable’, ‘love(ly)’.³ This is also a story of desire, inevitably, and change. ‘Thou art translated . . .’ How could a self-chosen name not be *telling*?) But it is the Letters that make all the difference to what gets said about Erasmus. Some of his letters are formal introductions to his books – dedicatory epistles. Some are apologias – statements of defence – for his life and work. There are numerous letters of recommendation, of encouragement, of commentary on his work and relationships and the politics of religious controversy. Every work of Erasmus is surrounded by the filagree of self-representation, carefully preserved, circulated and edited by generations of scholars, starting with Erasmus himself. Reading Erasmus is continuously to watch him addressing ‘you . . .’, telling ‘you’ how to read and live. The celebrated and remarkable twelve volume edition of *Erasmii Epistolae* by P. S. Allen is crowding my desk as I write this, constantly offering from its six thousand pages another gloss to any comment on Erasmus’ work and biography. Erasmus’ *life* – as he and others re-tell it – was important, politically charged, socially relevant, trendy: in part, it is because learning Greek is such an important thread in Erasmus’ self-told life that it becomes such a hot topic.

But not only because of that. The excitement and passion of Erasmus’ discovery of Greek doesn’t lead simply to a desire to promote its pursuit among his friends, as if Greek were a brilliant new game or technology. Rather, knowledge of the Greek language provides a seminal link between Erasmus’ scholarly activity and his hugely influential role in the increasingly bitter and vitriolic politics of the Reformation.⁴ This is a story where knowing how to translate Greek – or *whether* you should translate Greek – becomes a life and death conflict about religious affiliation. It is the way in which studying Greek becomes intertwined with

² From Erasmus’ own *Compendium Vitae* (1524) and Rhenanus (1540) (both translated usefully in Olin ed. (1975)) to Huizinga (1952), Bainton (1969), Tracy (1972), Halkin (1993); Tracy (1996).

³ See Rhenanus (1540), [Olin ed. (1975) 53] for the self-recognition of the meaning of ‘Erasmus’/ἐράσμου[ι]ος.

⁴ For general intellectual background to Erasmian polemics, see Kristeller (1961); Nauert (1973); Shuger (1994); Tracy (1980); Rummel (1992) and Nelson (2001), each with further bibliographies.

sixteenth-century politics, theology and cultural change that makes it mean so much. A matter of your eternal soul. Thomas More (I can't avoid those conflicts even by not calling him either 'Sir' or 'Saint' . . .), Erasmus' close friend, who translated the witty blasphemer Lucian along with Erasmus, died on the scaffold with a calm witticism on his lips – and it makes sense to see that life's journey as a coherent intellectual narrative, a consistent commitment to an ideal and a practice.⁵ The combination of integrity and humour, commitment and wit, passion and learning, mean that these friends have continued to be embraced as heroes of the intellect. Our stars of the Renaissance. The study of Greek is integral to this founding story of a new Europe, a new sense of the person.

II

I am going to begin my account of this engagement with Greek and with religious and cultural politics through the study of Greek at the point where Lisa Jardine begins her fine study of Erasmus' self-construction through his writing, namely, with a picture and a story.⁶ The picture is the famous portrait of Erasmus painted by Quentin Metsys in 1517 (the year after Erasmus was writing to Reuchlin about Colet's Greek studies) when Erasmus was fifty-one. It is reproduced here as plate 1. It may be pretty familiar, but that makes it hard to look (again) at its detail with enough care. Its power – and polemics – will take some teasing out. The story is the briefest of anecdotes about the painting from a letter to Thomas More in the same year, which provides also a vivid vignette of why one might not want to experience sixteenth-century medical practice. But I think it is Erasmus' wry self-recognition of his own Folly that has led biographers to love to re-tell this story. And so will I.

Erasmus and his close friend, Peter Gilles, paid to have their portraits painted in a diptych by Metsys to send as a present to their mutual dear friend in London, Thomas More. Gilles fell rather seriously ill and the project was delayed. Erasmus writes to More the following report: 'I myself was in excellent health, but somehow the physician took it into his head to tell me to take some pills to purge my bile, and the advice he foolishly gave me I even more foolishly agreed to take. My portrait had

⁵ As does especially Fox (1982). See also Duncan (1979) 52–76, and the extensive biographical tradition from William Roper (1557) and Harpsfield (1557) to Chambers (1935), Reynolds (1953) Marius (1984) and Ackroyd (1998). Monti (1997) rehearses the hagiographic tradition more obviously than most.

⁶ Jardine (1993).



1. Portrait of Erasmus, by Quentin Metsys

already begun, but after taking the medicine, when I went back to the painter, he said it was not the same face; and so the painting has been put off several days until I become somewhat more cheerful [*alacrior*].⁷

You can see how seductive Erasmus' self-portrait can be. Wise after the event, writing to his intimate friend and partner in irony, the great scholar lets us see himself, apparently unbuttoned, foolishly following foolish advice. The foibles of the patient's dealings with his doctor are sharply etched because we – Thomas More and you and I – know that

⁷ *EE* 2: 576 [*ep* 584], 30 May 1517.

the man who stupidly swallows the bile-reduction pills is the celebrated arbiter of biblical authorities, the counsellor to Christian princes – and the author of the scandalous book, *The Praise of – precisely – Folly*. His face – though not, finally, his portrait – reveals his discomfiture. This self-deprecating anecdote was published a bare two years after the painting was finished in one of the many collections of Erasmus' letters published in his lifetime, and it was widely circulated. We readers are being invited to overhear the engaging private exchange of these famous friends. From the beginning, then, the portrait of Erasmus which Metsys painted is surrounded – framed – by Erasmus' self-portrait in words. So, it should be appreciated that the little story also lets us glimpse the collusion of painter and sitter. Erasmus must present the right face to his friends and to the public, and the painter directs him towards a somewhat more cheerful, less bilious expression. His best side. As ever with realism, the construction of image is all.

The Metsys portrait has indeed become an icon of the sixteenth century. It would be hard for us now to picture Erasmus without it, so many times has it been reproduced. (Like the later Holbein and Dürer portraits, which Metsys already has influenced.)⁸ Concentrated, austere, taut-faced, with a faint smile ('somewhat more cheerful'), the dark scholar writes intently in his study, surrounded by his books and the candlewick trimmer (or scissors) hanging from the shelf. Four of the books are inscribed with titles, and each is a volume written by Erasmus – defining the scholar in and by his works. Even the candlewick trimmers may have a symbolic significance, representing the editorial projects of Erasmus, 'trimming the wick of scriptures so that their light shines out strongly and brightly'.⁹ It is a picture designed to project a very particular image of Erasmus. Thomas More is its recipient, of course, and ideal viewer. But as the published letters show, you and I, the wider public, are never far away. It is so well known and so authoritative an image by now that it is hard to imagine its power to shock or outrage. But even as a private gift, a gesture of complicity shared between friends, this remains a provocative picture, which takes a strikingly bold stance on the significance of Erasmus and his works. This portrait is designed to be, as they say, in your face.

I want to try to explain how this picture of a scholar and his books could be so charged. The portrait is modelled, as many scholars state, on the contemporary iconography of St Jerome in *his* study.¹⁰ And the

⁸ Hayum (1985); Gerlo (1969). ⁹ Jardine (1993) 75.

¹⁰ E.g. Jardine (1993); Gerlo (1969); Rice (1988), each with further bibliography.

light source which illumines the face of Erasmus and the pages on which he writes, also picks out a book on the shelf. You can read clearly on it 'HIERONYMUS', that is, JEROME. The iconography and the book are both keys that open a route to the heart of Erasmus' self-image. Lisa Jardine, with particular flair, has explored the significance of this highlighted text and Erasmus' iconographic affiliation to the saint. It is a fascinating story of intellectual formation.

Erasmus had published his edition of Jerome's Letters in 1516, with a life of Jerome by way of introduction. It was a work he had been planning for years, and he takes great pains to point out to you what a massive task it has been to complete. 'I had worked myself to death that Jerome might live . . . it cost Jerome less to write his works than it has cost me to restore and explain them.'¹¹ As early as 1500, he wrote to James Batt that he needed money desperately to buy the collected works of Jerome (and some clothes and Greek books) in order to write a commentary on the saint's texts.¹² He lectured on Jerome in Cambridge during his formative stay there.¹³ Jerome is a constant reference point for Erasmus over nearly forty years of study. He leads every list of heroes of the Church for Erasmus, and is brought forward as an authority to win argument after argument. He was the one figure writing in Latin who could match or even better his beloved Greeks. As he wrote to Pope Leo X, 'I saw that St Jerome was so completely the first among Latin theologians that we might call him the one person worthy of that name. What a fund in him of Roman eloquence, what skill in languages, what a knowledge of antiquity and of all history, what a retentive memory, what a perfect familiarity with mystic literature, above all, what zeal, what a wonderful inspiration of divine breath! He is the one person who at the same time delights by his eloquence, teaches by his erudition, and ravishes by his holiness.'¹⁴ So how should a saint be praised to the Pope, these days? The smelly, painful, lonely, sufferings of a Simon Stylites are far from the linguistically gifted, scholarly theologian of Erasmus' imagining. (Is this the first time a saint has been lauded for his faculty of retentive *memory*?) When Jerome goes to the desert, it was, as Erasmus tells it, to 're-read his entire library' and systematically to collect references and

¹¹ *EE* 2: 88 [*ep* 335], 21 May 1515, to Pope Leo X; see also 2: 76, 77 [*ep* 334], 15 May 1515, to Domenico Grimani, for the same expressions.

¹² *EE* 1: 321 [*ep* 138], 11 December 1500, to James Batt.

¹³ Thompson and Porter (1963) 38–43 (with, in particular, *EE* 1: 570 [*ep* 296], 8 July 1514, to Servatius Rogerius).

¹⁴ *EE* 2: 86 [*ep* 335], 21 May 1515, to Pope Leo X.

citations for later use.¹⁵ More sabbatical than mortification. It is Jerome's eloquence and erudition that lead even his ravishing holiness. He is a good . . . historian. 'Jerome is Erasmus' hero and model', as Olin puts it succinctly, but 'the portrait he has given us is that of the ideal Christian humanist'.¹⁶

The Church itself, when it declared Jerome one of the four Fathers and Doctors of the Church back in 1295, had glowingly declared that 'their flowing discourse, fed by streams of heavenly grace, solves scriptural problems, unties knots, explains obscurities, and resolves doubts'.¹⁷ But the dominant strand of medieval representations had a suffering penitent at its heart. Eugene Rice sums it up excellently: 'so holy was he that he remained a virgin until his death at ninety-six, traditional exaggerations of both his age and his continence. He drank no wine and ate no meat or fish. Indeed, he scarcely allowed even the words "meat" and "fish" to pass his lips, but lived entirely on uncooked fruit, greens and roots. He wore a hairshirt under rags, slept on the bare ground, whipped himself three times a day until the blood flowed . . . and patiently endured every imaginable abstinence, temptation and mortification'.¹⁸ There were even groups of ascetic penitents, who particularly followed that example of flagellation and fasting, called 'Hieronymites'. It is against this that Erasmus is writing his life of Jerome. Here's how he puts his portrait to the leading churchman Warham (who as Archbishop of Canterbury led the Ashford inquisition in Kent which burnt five men at the stake in 1511¹⁹):

Was there ever an individual expert in so many languages? Who ever achieved such familiarity with history, geography, and antiquities? Who ever became so equally and completely at home in all literature, both sacred and profane? If you look to his memory, never was there an author, ancient or modern, who was not at his immediate disposal.²⁰

Geography, history, languages and classical literature, coupled (again) with a good memory, make Jerome a classy patron saint of academia

¹⁵ See Rice (1985) for balanced account of sources on Jerome in the desert.

¹⁶ Olin (1979) 321.

¹⁷ Papal decree, 20 September 1295, by Boniface VIII: *Corpus Iuris Canonici Lib vi Decretalium*, III tit. xxii, cap. 1: *Eorum etiam foecunda facundia, coelestis irrigui gratia influente, scripturarum aenigmata reserat, solvit nodos, obscura dilucidat, dubiaque declarat.*

¹⁸ Rice (1985) 50.

¹⁹ Hughes (1956) 128: forty-six arrested, forty-one recanted, five burnt at the stake.

²⁰ *EE* 2: 215 [ep 396], 1 April 1516, to William Warham: the whole letter, the dedication of the volumes of Jerome, is an extended *laudatio* of the saint.

(or perhaps the core curriculum). Indeed, not only does Erasmus find an ideal Christian humanist in Jerome, but also, as he tells the story of Jerome's life, stripping away, as he claims, the fantastic tales of naive hagiography, Erasmus himself becomes disconcertingly overlapped with the figure he is describing. In a bizarre version of the 'imitation of saints' recommended by Augustine and others, Erasmus' scholarly struggles are Jerome's, Jerome's lifework his. In Erasmus' portrait, Jerome and Erasmus look a lot alike. Metsys' portrait of Erasmus, in depicting Erasmus as Jerome, is following a fundamental strategy of Erasmus' own self-representation – or as Jardine would put it, his self-construction.

Erasmus' identification with Jerome is not just because of the saint's academic powers. In a while, I will be discussing how vitriolically Erasmus was attacked for his passion for secular studies, and in particular the study of ancient Greece and Rome. The one story about St Jerome that everyone knew was the one about his dream. Jerome dreamt he appeared before the tribunal of Heaven, where the grim figure of Christ the Judge demanded he identify himself. 'I am a Christian', he declared. 'You lie', retorted the Judge, 'You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' And Jerome was flogged, and 'tormented by the flame of conscience', until he tearfully declared, 'Lord, if ever I again possess secular books or read them, I have denied you.'²¹ Attempts to explain this dream as figurative, or to limit its purchase to 'excessive study of Cicero', or Cicero's philosophical texts, foundered on what Erasmus recognized as the story's simple and annoyingly powerful message. 'This is the story which everyone remembers, even those who have never read a word that Jerome has written. Jerome, they say, was flogged because he read Cicero.'²² In this way, Jerome himself could be turned as an example against Erasmus and his mission. Although the authority, sanctity and scholarship of Jerome were privileged appropriations of Erasmus' self-fashioning, there lurked in Jerome's most famous self-description a more threatening image. To study Jerome required a knowledge of the classics, which Jerome himself seemed to ban. Jerome may be 'reborn in Erasmus',²³ but Erasmus could only try to explain away Jerome's famous tearful promise to give up the classics – or brazen

²¹ Jerome *Ep.* 22, 30.

²² Erasmus' commentary on Jerome's *Ep.* 22, in *CWE* 61. Jardine (1993) 65–9 points out the importance of Valla's earlier celebration of Jerome in his defence of classical literature.

²³ A phrase taken from Jardine (1993) 68. I have learnt a great deal from Jardine and Rice in particular throughout this discussion of Jerome. The great Italian humanist, Lorenzo Valla, is an important intermediary here also. Erasmus read Valla – who both praised Jerome and wrote *Annotations* to the New Testament.

it out: 'I would rather be whipped with Jerome than fêted in the company of those who are so frightened by Jerome's ideas that they scrupulously avoid good literature.'²⁴ As Jardine puts it beautifully: 'At the heart of the Jerome edition – the opus Erasmus produced at the zenith of his international career – and on the threshold of his self-formation as an icon of scholar-piety – is the fusion or perhaps confusion of secular and sacred attention.'²⁵

Erasmus had actually learnt Greek precisely in order to rescue his hero and model: 'I would rather be mad with Jerome than as wise as you like with the crowd of modern theologians', he writes in 1501, 'Moreover, I am struggling with a laborious task which one might call the work of Phaethon: to make it my role to restore the books of Jerome which in part have been ruined by those half-educated fellows, and in part obscured or mangled or mutilated or certainly falsified and full of monstrosities because of ignorance of classical matters and of Greek literature . . . I see that Greek must be my first priority of study. I have decided to learn some months with a Greek teacher, a real Greek, or rather doubly Greek, since he is always hungry and teaches for a large fee!'²⁶ The desire to learn Greek (which doesn't stop the standard Latin jokes about hungry and money-grabbing Greeks) is in service of his aim of restoring Jerome to the world as 'prince of theologians'.

Knowledge of Greek, however, will turn out also to be the means by which his own standing as theologian is achieved and contested – primarily because of his edition of the Greek Bible. This celebrated and scandalous edition – which I will come to very shortly – was inevitably seen by many as an attack on Jerome, because he was traditionally regarded as the author of the Vulgate, the standard Latin version of the Bible, whose text Erasmus freely criticized and emended. Erasmus denied that Jerome wrote the Vulgate (he was not the first to do so; and it is clear that on any scholarly argument Jerome cannot be its author²⁷; but even the Council of Trent could not bring itself to make such a bold declaration against tradition.²⁸) Thus Erasmus found himself once again going into battle both for himself and for his version of Jerome.

²⁴ *Hieronymi Stridensis Vita* [Ferguson (1933)] 178. ²⁵ Jardine (1993) 74.

²⁶ *EE* 1, 353 [ep 149], 16? March 1501, to Antony of Bergen; the whole letter extols Greek learning.

²⁷ Lefèvre d'Étaples and Paul of Middleburg had already denied Jerome was the translator. See Rice (1985) 178–87; Schwartz (1965) for a general background; Bentley (1983) 113–93 for Erasmus' biblical philology. Particularly important for Erasmus was his (re)discovery of Valla's *Adnotationes* to the New Testament. See also the works cited below n. 31.

²⁸ Indeed it defended the Vulgate as authentic precisely because it was hallowed by the long tradition of use in the Church. For everything you might want to know (and more) about the Council of Trent, see Jedin (1961), especially, for our purposes here, vol. II, 52–98.

So learning Greek, studying Jerome, and becoming a polemical theologian, fighting over Jerome, are interwoven ventures that stretch throughout Erasmus' life. When Metsys paints Erasmus in his study in the iconographic pose of Jerome in his study, and highlights the text of Jerome on which Erasmus had spent so many years' effort, he is marking out not merely a fundamental strand of Erasmus' own self-fashioning, but also the site on which Erasmus' polemics have been waged. The image of intently gazing sage with his book also signifies the intricate and extended intellectual journey of the sitter and the strongly contested struggles along the way.

III

The second most brightly lit book on the shelves of Metsys' portrait, shaded by an unnamed volume leaning over it, but with its title directly facing the viewer, is marked 'NOVUM TESTAMENT', 'The New Testament', truncated of its last syllable in Latin. Erasmus' most celebrated contribution to theological debate was his edition of the New Testament. The outline of the story is simply told; the fallout complex and compelling.

Erasmus' Greek studies led him back to the texts of the Gospels, written originally in Greek, of course. They were, he recognized, in rather poor Greek, especially when judged by the standard of the classical masterpieces of Athens or by the assiduous imitators of those classical masterpieces in the second century CE such as Lucian or Philostratus. So, he set out to produce a critical edition of the Greek text, with a facing Latin translation. Not only did he find many places where he thought he needed to correct, tidy up, or emend the Greek manuscripts, but also he produced his Latin translation directly from the Greek text afresh – and thus offered a Bible that was outrageously different from the Vulgate, the Latin text, which was ascribed to Jerome, and used every day in every church in Europe. The Vulgate was hallowed by tradition (and eventually by the Council of Trent, which declared in 1546, with dizzying theological assertiveness, that this Latin translation of the Greek text was 'authentic' (not 'good' or 'reliable' but '*authentic*'), and that 'nobody dare or presume to reject it under any pretext'²⁹), and it was the basis of all theological discussion from basic sermon to the debates of university Divines. Indeed, the whole edifice of Medieval theology, and, consequently, the social order that depended on the structure and

²⁹ That a translation is declared 'authentic' should give pause: it certainly outraged the Reformers. For a rather apologetic discussion of *authenticia*, see Sutcliffe (1948).

authority of the Church relied on the status of the Vulgate. It was this text to which Erasmus offered a corrective. The outrage and scandal which arose, came about – not unreasonably – not just because of a question of wording but because of what was at stake in the Word of the Vulgate: social and moral order itself.

The first edition of the *Novum Testamentum* was rushed through the press in 1516.³⁰ It was lousy with misprints and other typesetters' errors, and the notes were often perfunctory. It caused none the less a considerable stir. Erasmus was sufficiently upset by the printing fiasco – for which he was upbraided by scholars of the exalted status of Budé, the leading classicist of his generation – that he rushed to plague-ridden Basel to produce a second edition personally and as soon as possible. The second edition early in 1519 pulled no punches. Egged on by his friends and supporters, Erasmus added new and even more radical suggestions, and defended them with more strident polemical scholarship. They weren't the sort of changes in translation that might slip by missed. A whole and crucial sentence of Paul's *Letter to John 1*, now known as the 'Comma Johanneum' [1 John 5:7], he failed to find in any Greek manuscript – so he deleted it from his text.³¹ (We will see a particularly bloody fallout from this later.) For centuries the Gospel of John had begun *In principio erat verbum*, 'In the beginning was the Word' (as the usual translation has it). Now Erasmus printed *In principio erat sermo*, 'In the beginning was the speech/conversation.' Pugnacious, arresting, an opening designed to shock the reader into reaction.

So what's with *sermo*? The scholarship, first: Erasmus' notes on this passage reveal that Cyprian, the Church Father, used *sermo* whenever he cites this verse. Tertullian, the second- /third-century theologian, who also uses it, notes that *sermo* is the 'customary' reading. Augustine knew two textual traditions, both *sermo* and *verbum*. (Erasmus – though not his opponents – is less than exhaustive in his pursuit of countercases, however.) Why is *sermo* Erasmus' choice? *Sermo* implies, as *verbum* does not, a sense of dialogue, which, apart from the humanist love of dialogue, has a particular theological point. This sense of dialogue or address 'is essential

³⁰ This first edition was called *Novum Instrumentum*. All subsequent editions were entitled *Novum Testamentum*. 'Rushed through rather than published', is Erasmus' own well-known description of the process.

³¹ See de Jonge (1980); Bentley (1983); Margolin (1990) for another test-case. De Jonge believes (against most) that Erasmus did not mean to edit the Greek text of the New Testament in a critical manner. His rhetoric of criticism may be different when he treats the New Testament (rather than Seneca, say), but the deletion of the *Comma* on grounds of manuscript authority is hard not to see as an act of 'textual criticism'.

to *logos* as the second person of the Trinity',³² whereas '*verbum* . . . if not so intended originally' came 'to support . . . christological and trinitarian speculation'³³ of a scholastic type which Erasmus found hard to allow. More shakily, Erasmus adds that *sermo* is a masculine noun and thus better represents the gender of Christ than a neuter noun (e.g. *verbum*), and that *sermo* has a softer – *mollius* – sound than *verbum*. Even these dodgier arguments, however, articulate what is at stake in this issue of translation: not just capturing the Greek, but also how the perfection of divinely inspired language expresses the world perfectly. God's language. 'Softness' is not just a phonological but a theological gloss. Although Erasmus does express a further preference for *oratio* (a third translation: 'In the beginning was the Address'),³⁴ *sermo* has ancient authority and is 'more apt', 'more correct', 'more perfect'.³⁵ Theologically and semantically, *sermo* thus is in all ways a better translation of the Greek *logos* than *verbum*, argues Erasmus.

And argue he had to. Any disingenuousness he may have maintained about this being simply a point of linguistic accuracy or intellectual enquiry was rapidly dispelled. The *Novum Testamentum* was praised by many and the second edition came with a letter of support from the Pope; but it caused an extraordinary outburst of protest across Europe, and years of bitter, often violent argument. The translation was proclaimed an attack on the foundation of the Church and its traditions; the turn back to the original language of the Gospels was rejected as threatening; for the authority of the Vulgate was the very grounding of social and moral understanding. Learning Greek became such an icon in the religious wars that it could be declared that Greek was 'the fount of all evil',³⁶ and to know Greek was a 'heresy'!³⁷ The Preface of St Jerome's edition of the Bible had worried precisely that 'Which man, be he educated or uneducated, when he picks up the book and sees that what he is used to read is different from the saliva he once drank, will not immediately burst into cry and call me heretic and sacrilegious because I dare to add,

³² Jarrott (1964) 36–7.

³³ Boyle (1977) 30 – a full and excellent study of the implications of the choice of *sermo*. See also Rummel (1989).

³⁴ Erasmus *Annotationum in Evangelium Joannis* 1: 2, cited and discussed by Boyle (1977) 33–57.

³⁵ Adjectives lifted from *Apologia de 'In principio erat sermo'*.

³⁶ The view of Baechem, cited by Rummel (1989) 139.

³⁷ Erasmus *Antibarbari*, *CWE* 23: 32; *EE* 4: 400–411 [*ep* 1167] to Lorenzo Campeggio is a full-scale description of the escalation of insult into attacks of heresy. So common becomes this attack that it is parodied in the anonymous farce, *Le Farce des Théologastres* (C. Longeon ed. [Geneva, 1989] 493–5), cited by Rummel (1992) 723: 'He who speaks Greek is suspect of heresy.' Bentley (1983) finds a further root to the slur in the fact that the Greeks were schismatics.

change, correct something in the old texts?³⁸ Ironically enough, it was Erasmus who prompted exactly the reaction his master anticipated. So, how were the battle-lines drawn up?

Erasmus' mission to have all educated people learn Greek worked at a personal and institutional level. I have already mentioned the network of letters which trace Erasmus continuing the work of Grocyn, Linacre, Latimer and Lily, by promoting Greek and by making the story of a struggle to learn Greek a fundamental myth of initiation into the Erasmian circle. No Greek, no title of scholar. 'In no learning are we anything without Greek',³⁹ he writes, 'all scholarship is blind without Greek learning'⁴⁰; 'I affirm that with slight qualification the whole of attainable knowledge lies enclosed within the literary monuments of ancient Greece. This great inheritance I will compare to a limpid spring of undefiled water; it behoves all who are thirsty to drink and be restored.'⁴¹ (The adaptation of the Gospels' language of thirst and fulfilment to Greek texts is the most shocking debt here.) As Latimer replies to Erasmus: 'You show a remarkable desire to promote Greek learning.'⁴² The word for 'desire' there, 'desyderium', puns on Erasmus' name, Desiderius. Erasmus' own name becomes synonymous with his project of promoting Greek. His example was followed to the letter. Philip Melanchthon, giving his inaugural lecture in 1518, encourages his students in Wittenburg: 'Greek learning is especially necessary', 'Just give some extra hours to the Greeks', and – his professorial slogan – 'Embrace the Greeks!'⁴³

This growing network of powerful friends – 'a vast mutual admiration society'⁴⁴ – is integral to any picture of humanism at work. Yet it had lasting and influential institutional effects. Colet's St Paul's School was paradigmatic in its statutes and lesson plans in requiring Greek – and deeply influential on (even) Wolsey's self-promoting programme of

³⁸ *Praefatio in Evangelio*: 'Quis enim doctus pariter vel indoctus, cum in manus volumen adsumperit et a saliva quam semel inbibit viderit discrepare quod lectitat, non statim erumpat in vocem, me falsarium me clamans esse sacrilegum, qui audeam aliquid in veteribus libris addere, mutare, corrigere?'

³⁹ *EE* 1: 406 [*ep.* 181] to John Colet, December 1504.

⁴⁰ *EE* 6: 403 [*ep.* 1744] to Simon Pistorius, September 1526.

⁴¹ *de rat. stud.* *CWE* 24: 669 (though I have cited the translation of Woodward, taken from Baldwin (1944) 80). This is a trope of much humanist writing. The return to the source(s), *ad fontem/ad fontes*. Interestingly, Valla [*Opera* 1.341: ed. E. Garin, 2 vols. (Turin, 1962)] defending himself in reply to Poggio Bracciolini already asks, 'Why then did I compare the Latin stream with the Greek fount?' For the importance of Valla to Erasmus, see e.g. Bentley (1983). The attack on the humanist project can be seen as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, Hunt (1940).

⁴² *EE* 2: 440 [*ep.* 520], from William Latimer, 30 January 1517.

⁴³ Keen (1988) 54, 54, 56. ⁴⁴ Mason (1959) 28.

establishing educational institutions.⁴⁵ Indeed, most, if not all schools in England by the 1540s specified by statute that Latin and Greek were the only languages to be *spoken* by the schoolchildren, ‘whatever they are doing in earnest or in play’.⁴⁶ (As Erasmus wrote to Gilles advising him about his son: ‘even now let him absorb the seeds of Greek and Latin and greet his father with charming prattle in two languages’.)⁴⁷ The State became intimately involved with all aspects of the education system to an increasing degree throughout the sixteenth century. Sir Thomas Smith (whom we will meet later arguing over the pronunciation of Greek), Ascham (Elizabeth’s Greek tutor) and other politicians became closely involved in the founding of schools, the redistribution of land after the Chantries Act, and the establishment of County Commissions to oversee educational provision.⁴⁸ One result of the *mêlée* of conflicting purposes and patronage was the development through the 1540s of an ‘authorized uniformity’ in education; and ‘in the treatise *de ratione studii* [“On the system of education”] by Erasmus is the fundamental philosophy of the grammar schools in England’.⁴⁹ The Erasmian (or, more broadly, Humanist) turn to Greek and the classics, supported by its educated and committed administrators, continued to inform the shifting institutional strategies and practices of school education well into the seventeenth century and beyond.

It was at university level, however, where the re-invention of Greek learning caused more trouble, not least because of the vested interests of the ranks of theologians and scholars continuing the medieval tradition based on Aquinas and the scholastic debates (in Latin). Erasmus can tell the story in the mode of triumphal progression to his friend, Bullock, a Fellow of Queens’ College, Cambridge:

Thirty years ago nothing was taught in the University of Cambridge except Alexander, the Parva Logicalia, as they call it, and those old sayings of Aristotle

⁴⁵ Baldwin (1944) is fundamental for material, and there is excellent analysis in Simon (1966) (with discussion of the influence of St Paul’s 124–62), McConica (1965) and Grafton and Jardine (1984), and the still highly influential Bolgar (1954) 265–379.

⁴⁶ This phrase is taken from the statutes of Canterbury School written in 1541. ‘This rule of speaking, always Latin or Greek, is universal in grammar schools of the time, however well or ill it may have been observed’, Baldwin (1944) 333.

⁴⁷ *EE* 3: 146 [*ep.* 715], to Peter Gilles, November 1517, a letter of consolation for the death of Gilles’ father.

⁴⁸ See in particular Simon (1966) for this picture of ‘profound change, not only in teaching but in structure and in relations with the Government’ (McConica (1965) 76). McConica (1965) and Bolgar (1954) are good on the politics here; Grafton and Jardine (1984) on the coal-face of teaching.

⁴⁹ Baldwin (1944) 179; 94.

and the questions of Scotus [the scholastic curriculum] . . . then arrived knowledge of Greek; then all those authors whose very names were unknown in the old days even to the brahmins of philosophy, Iarcas-like enthroned. And what, pray, was the effect of all of this on your University? Why it flourished to such a tune that it can challenge the first universities of the age . . .⁵⁰

Erasmus, with an aggressive self-display, is *performing* the alienating change of scholarly focus by expecting the reader to understand his reference to the ‘brahmins of philosophy, Iarcas-like enthroned’. Iarcas is an Indian sage met in Philostratus’ *Life Of Apollonius of Tyana*, a second-century CE text, also referred to by St Jerome, and thus discussed by Erasmus in his edition of the letters.⁵¹ Erasmus’ slur demands your engagement in his intellectual ways, travelling back through Jerome to the Greeks. Such persuasive triumphalism is often rehearsed in a rather lazy way as the story of the Renaissance’s attractive emergence from the greyness of Medieval Theology. But that developmental tale hides the compulsive conflicts that dogged Erasmus’ mission for twenty years and more.

In the same letter from which I have just quoted, Erasmus tells us of another rather different reaction in Cambridge to his Greekified Bible studies and his new edition of the Gospels:

I have heard from trustworthy witnesses that you have one college, steeped in theology, whose members are regular Areopagites and who are said to have provided by solemn resolution that no man bring the said volume [the *Novum Testamentum*] by horse, boat, wagon, or porter within the curteledge of said college. I ask you, my learned friend, should one laugh or cry? How their zeal has led them astray!⁵²

This local attack on the leader of the humanists was pronounced by Richard Pace (‘the typical humanist, the representative of what was thought to be daring and new in the early years of the sixteenth century’⁵³) to be ‘devoid of theology, indeed barely human’ – expressions he puts tellingly in Greek. But true to his role model, he still ‘laughed out loud’ when he heard of the pompous college decree.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *EE* 2: 328 [ep. 456], to Henry Bullock, August 1516.

⁵¹ Jerome *Ep* 53.1, with Erasmus’ note *ad loc*: *CWE* 6r: (text) 208; (commentary) 220.

⁵² *EE* 2: 321 [ep. 456], to Henry Bullock, August 1516.

⁵³ Mason (1959) 33.

⁵⁴ *EE* 3: 39 [ep. 619], from Richard Pace. ‘*Istud collegium tu θεολογικώτατον vocas; sed ego ne θεολόγον quidem, immo vix ἀνθρώπινον ἰδικο.*’, ‘*Effusissimum mihi risum movit . . .*’. Rummel (1992) 716–17 has a nice discussion of the rhetoric of animal abuse in these discussions.

More damaging attacks on the *Novum Testamentum* came from all sides. Erasmus bitterly writes to Cardinal Wolsey – seeking support from the powerful, as ever – how even (especially?) those who haven't read his work 'traduce him to the populace with querulous shouting' and how 'someone' – a barely disguised John Standish, a Franciscan Doctor of Divinity in London whom Erasmus particularly loathed – in a public meeting (in fact, the Sermon at St Paul's Cross) attacked his use of *sermo* for *verbum*. 'As if John had written in Latin!', Erasmus explodes, 'As if Cyprian, Hilary, Jerome and lots of others had not before me called the Son of God sermo instead of verbum! As if sermo isn't a better translation of the Greek word logos than verbum!'⁵⁵ To Cardinal Campeggio – enlisting further ecclesiastical power-brokers – he stridently recalls that 'they keep shouting in a quarrelsome way "Keep your children from Greek learning! That's where heresies are born! Don't touch the books of that man or that . . . the one who emends the Gospel of John!"'⁵⁶

The attacks of Standish in London (and Egmondanus in Brussels, and Maier in Germany, and Lefèvre in France and Stunica in Spain and . . .⁵⁷) prompted Erasmus to publish a brief but pungent pamphlet, 'Apologia for "In principio erat sermo"', which he rewrote at greater and greater length in response to the continuing criticism of his work. In particular, Edward Lee, future Archbishop of York, wrote a detailed rebuttal of Erasmus' scholarly aims and practices (based on the first edition with its many mistakes). This involved a long and highly involved exchange between the two men and their supporters.⁵⁸ Lee, unlike Standish, was a scholarly figure who published a volume entitled 'annotationes ad annotationes Erasmi' ('Annotations on the Annotations of Erasmus'). Erasmus tried to get a look at this book pre-publication; he then quoted evidence from it in his own second edition, without attribution; then he denounced it. The row became a cause célèbre. Scornful letters were published (in collected books too; More, Lupset, other heavy hitters); poems, including

⁵⁵ *EE* 4: 158 [ep. 1060], to Cardinal Wolsey. See for the report of an extended exchange, *EE* 4: 309–18 [ep. 1126] to Hermann Busch, 31 July 1520 – where Standish calls Erasmus *Graeculus iste*, 'that Greekling'.

⁵⁶ *EE* 4: 182–3 [ep. 1062] to Lorenzo Campeggio, 5 February 1520 [1519]. The preface to the *Paraphrasis ad Ephesios*, which also contains an extended defence of 'good learning'.

⁵⁷ Usefully collected and explored in Rummel (1989); on Stunica see also Bentley (1983) 197–219; on the theology of Standish see Hughes (1956) 1: 152–5. For More's support of Erasmus see the *Letter to Dorp*, *Letter to Lee*, *Letter to Oxford*, and *Letter to a Monk*, collected in *CWM* xv. See now also Saladin (2000).

⁵⁸ See Rummel (1989) 94–120; and Coogan (1992).

a whole book making fun of Lee's name.⁵⁹ Perhaps the most extraordinary episode, however, concerns the display of Lee's book in a Minorite library. Three days after it went on display, users of the library complained of a foul smell. It was traced to Lee's book which was found to have been smeared by someone with human shit. Erasmus – one of those to recall the story not without pleasure some years later – is still quick to add that he doesn't know who did it. Erasmus' lack of regret at such theological guerilla tactics is matched by the anonymous composers of two poems which offer epigrammatic encomia to the man who smeared shit on the pages of Lee (as Nesen writes delightedly to Lupset, sending him the poems⁶⁰). The classical paradigm here – always necessary – is Catullus' famous invective of a rival's historical prose as 'cacata carta', 'pages for wiping shit.'⁶¹ Thomas More, a few years on, less than saintly: 'Luther has nothing in his mouth but privies, filth and dung . . . Mad friarlet and privy-minded rascal with his ragings and ravings, with his filth and dung, shitting and beshitted.'⁶² One reader of Lee seems to have literalized this language of abuse in a gesture of theological disgust – to the pleasure of the supporters of Erasmus.

Such escalation of verbal violence (and its turning into more physical abuse) fuelled the fires of the Reformation. We should remember where this is all heading. Look at the following dialogue of inquisition recorded between the Fransiscan friar Cornelius Adrian and an Anabaptist called Hermann van Flekwyk [Flehwijt], who died at the stake on 10 June 1569:

Inquisitor: 'You have sucked at the poisoned breast of Erasmus . . . But St John says: 'There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.'

⁵⁹ In *Ed. Leum quorundam e sodalitate literaria Erphurdiensi Erasmi nominis studiorum epigrammata* (Erfurt, 1520); *Epistolae aliquot eruditorum* . . . (Antwerp, 1520). The humour of the Humanists is here repeatedly placed in service of the aggressive attack on Lee: 'how I laughed when I read . . .' is a topos of the letters, instantiated in the epigrams' spiteful wit. Other books of polemical letters also circulated, including even forged letters (*Epistolae obscurorum virorum* . . . – to which by the third edition even Hutten contributed a forgery), also full of often scurrilous and lewd humour.

⁶⁰ Nesen in *Epistolae aliquot eruditorum* . . . (Antwerp: Hillen 1520); Rummel (1989) 113 says that Nesen 'quotes an epigram': 'I have been unable to trace such a quotation in Nesen's letters, unless his comment that 'all that remains is to find another temple to keep the volume in, where it can be preserved with a liquid a long way from cedar-sap' is taken as the content of the epigrams. (Books were preserved with what is called *succum cedri*.) Nesen tells the story with the qualification that the Minorites themselves are beyond reproach, but with great pleasure in the details; see the recollection of Erasmus *EE* 8: 92–3 [*ep.* 2126] March 1529, to Valdes.

⁶¹ Catullus 36. ⁶² *Responsio ad Lutheram* (CWM v. i. 683).

Anabaptist: I have heard that Erasmus in his *Annotationes* upon that phrase shows that this text is not in the Greek original.⁶³

Erasmus' textual criticism has become a martyr's shield in a murderous drama. Something to kill and die for. The omission of the 'Comma Johanneum' leads to the stake. I don't know if this is still within any scholar's *grandest* fantasies of intellectual importance.

In the years following the publication of Erasmus' Bible up until 1559, twenty-five academics and students from Cambridge, Erasmus' alma mater, were burnt at the stake for heresy, many pursued by the agents of More.⁶⁴ Many others went into exile.⁶⁵ Greek studies also opened the way for vernacular translations of the Bible (crucial to the development of a language of Protestantism, especially in Luther's Germany) and thus to further violent response from the authorities. Thomas More proposed, indeed demanded the burning of Tyndale's English version, not just because it was in English but because its choice of vocabulary constituted a Protestant attack on the Catholic Church:⁶⁶ to take one specific and pointed example, More bitterly objected on theological grounds to the use of 'love' rather than 'charity' to translate the Latin *caritas*, since 'love' implied 'faith', whereas 'charity' implied 'good deeds',⁶⁷ and this privileging of 'faith' over action and ritual was a Protestant tenet. (Irony is not quite the term for such violence over *those* words.) Though 'nearly all the first makers of English Protestantism suffered violent death',⁶⁸ the Cambridge reformers in particular were instrumental in the developments towards the religious settlement of 1559, which formally established Protestantism as the religion of England. The tutors of both Edward VI and of Elizabeth I, first Protestant monarchs, were Cambridge men, who were closely bonded through their shared commitment to learning Greek and to Protestant theory.⁶⁹ They taught the

⁶³ Wallace (1850) 2: 272–80 for a full account. The Anabaptist denies any influence from Erasmus earlier in the dialogue.

⁶⁴ Following the list of Rupp (1949) 195–209.

⁶⁵ On Marian exiles, see Porter (1958) (with list 91–8) and Garrett (1966) with fuller census 61–349.

⁶⁶ A partial account in Daniell (1994), especially 83–151; see also Rupp (1949); Fox (1982) 147–66; Marc'hadour and Lawler (1981). Tyndale, when he writes to More, also appeals to the history of Greek learning to form a bond with him: 'Remember ye not how within this thirty year and far less, and yet dureth until this day, the old barking curs, Dun's disciples and like draff called Scotists, the children of darkness, raged in every pulpit against Greek, Latin and Hebrew' (Walter (1850) 75–6.). The three languages are, of course, often cited together as a trio.

⁶⁷ Marc'hadour and Lawler (1981) especially 512–16. See *CWMVI*; *CWMVIII* – the immense length of these responses of More show the importance of Tyndale's threat. Ackroyd (1998) 299 calls it 'The most important dialogue within English religious discourse, perhaps of any age.'

⁶⁸ Rupp (1949) 196. ⁶⁹ Hudson (1980).

Prince and Princess how to write and read Greek and, with it, theology. Greek knowledge and religious reform *did* go hand in hand, as the opponents of Greek had feared. The authority of the Catholic Church *was* undermined. The Cambridge Reformers met in an inn, the White Horse, opposite King's, which was known, because of their presence, as 'Germany', or 'Little Germany'.⁷⁰ (The church nearby, St Edward's, where the Reformers also spoke, still boasts on the sign by its gate that it was 'the cradle of the English Reformation'.) The pub was convenient because members of King's, Queens' and St John's could 'enter in on the backside'.⁷¹ It was raided, but the Reformers had been tipped off from London and escaped. So, this lovingly preserved and retold story of revolution would have it, from earnest and precarious conversation in the pub to control of the State. (A model for so many future cells.) As John Foxe, with uncustomary understatement, recalls the beginning of religious war during those nights at the inn: 'At this time, much trouble began to ensue.'⁷²

These horrifyingly violent consequences of theological difference may make you less willing to smile with Johannes Jäger's little satiric drama, 'Theologians in Council', set in 1520. Here's a fragment:

Professor Duplicitious: And even if they recommend it a hundred times I *won't* learn Greek and Hebrew. I can hardly read the Psalter – and now they want us to read these fantasies.

Ed Lee: I never approved of that new fashion, and those new doctors, Jerome, Augustine, Athanasius. . . . [But] My Greek is progressing and I want to study Greek still further so that I may traduce Erasmus before the bishops, the Pope and the cardinals. . . .⁷³

It's hard to tell if such lumpy jokes on the 'newness' of Jerome, the malice of Lee, and the lazy ignorance of the anti-humanist divine were bitingly funny when first published. The play's conclusion, however, should still have an uneasy edge. It ends with a solemn decree banning 'these new doctrines which have emerged by the counsel of the Devil'. They must not be spoken of or written about 'even in private letters'. The attempt to silence the learning of Greek and its perceived threat to the religious establishment was indeed repeatedly enacted. Other cases of such authoritarian attempts to muzzle new questions or criticism are not hard to summon up. It is still disconcerting, however, to trace this

⁷⁰ Foxe (1837–41) v. 414–5 calls it simply 'Germany'; modern scholars, including the detailed account of Porter (1959), 'Little Germany'.

⁷¹ Foxe (1837–41) v. 415. ⁷² *Ibid.* ⁷³ Rummel (1993) 57–8.