POEMS FROM THE EGERTON MS. 1651

INTRODUCTION

After his departure from the monastery Erasmus continued to write some verse, but with a less whole-hearted enthusiasm than formerly. Most of the poems he wrote during the following years were occasional. The young humanist had apparently begun to realize that poetry was not his destined medium. In the *Catalogus Lucubrationum* he asserted that for some years before his first visit to England in 1499 he had neither read nor written poetry 1). This was not strictly accurate; but it is an indication of a changing interest. That he no longer took his poetic labors very seriously is further suggested by his frivolous letter to John Sixtin in October 1499, in answer to the latter’s fulsome praise of his poetry 2):

Sobrii scribimus versus adeo sanos vt nullum omnino Apollinis vestigium habeant. . . . Incidimus omnino in siccum quoddam, exile, exangue, exuccum carminis genus, partim ingenii paupertate quadam, partim cacozelia.

The criticism was not intended seriously, but it would have been impossible to the young poet who had paid his conscientious homage to the Muses a decade before at Steyn.

Shortly before he wrote the criticism just quoted, Erasmus had been forced to make practical use of his poetic talent by an incident at once flattering and embarrassing. In the autumn of 1499, just before going to Oxford, he visited his friend and patron Lord Mountjoy, in whose company he had come to England, at

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1) "iam annos aliquot nec legeram nec scripseram ullum carmen." Allen, I, 6, 7—8.
2) Ep. 113, 44—53.

W. K. Ferguson, *Erasmi Opuscula*
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his country house in Greenwich 1). During the visit the young
Dutch scholar was taken by Thomas More to pay his respects to
the children of the royal family, who were staying in the neigh­
bourhood at Eltham Palace. The presentation was made with due
ceremony. More presented a complimentary address or poem to
the nine-year-old Prince Henry; but Erasmus, not having been
warned, was unprepared. Years later when recounting the inci­
dent he could still remember the embarrassment and annoyance
he had felt 2). Determined to repair his mistake, he returned to
Greenwich, and within three days completed a poem entitled
Prosopopoeia Britanniae maioris 3), in praise of England and its
rulers. At the same time, he prepared for presentation a special
copy of such poems as he had at hand, together with a compli­
mentary epistle to the prince 4). The copy, a manuscript of ten
leaves octavo, has been preserved, and is at present to be found
in the British Museum, Egerton MS. 1651 5). Beside the prefatory
epistle, it contains twelve poems by Erasmus, three of which are
not included in the Opera Omnia nor in any of their author’s
other printed works, and so fall within the scope of this edition.
There is also a short epigram by Robert Gaguin, addressed to
Erasmus and Faustus Andrelinus, for which this is the only source.
These four poems were published for the first time by Preserv­
ed Smith in Appendix III of his Life of Erasmus. The Egerton
manuscript was apparently executed rather hastily and was not
carefully revised. Comparison with the printed texts shows a
number of errors and variants.

Of the three poems with which we have to deal, the first two are
occasional and can be assigned approximate dates without diffi­
culty. The latest possible date is set by that of the manuscript. It

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1) On Erasmus’ visit to England and friends there, see Smith, p.
59 ff.
2) Cat. Luc., Allen, I, 6; cf. Smith, p. 61.
3) LB, I, 1213 ff.
4) Ep. 104. It was printed with the Prosopopoeia in the first edition
of the Adagia, 1500.
5) For full description of the MS., see Smith, p. 453 ff; Allen, IV,
p. XXI.