

*Canon of the Ruler's Image-building in
the 15th and 16th Centuries in the Epistolary Genre:
Cases of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania Vytautas
the Great and Sigismund the Old*

DOVILĖ KERŠIENĖ

Abstract. The subject of this article are letters by two authors addressed to two rulers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The first was written around 1429 by a certain Franciscus de Comitibus Aquae Vivae (about him the recent research still has little to say) and addressed to Vytautas the Great (Alexander), the Grand Duke of Lithuania. At the time he was the ruler of a huge state and was about to be crowned. Vytautas's intention provoked many discussions and disagreements with the Polish king Jogaila and other nobles. The author of the letter tries to dissuade Vytautas from seeking the crown with the help of different arguments, praising and sometimes reproving the ruler. The other two letters were written by the famous humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam to Sigismund the Old, the Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland, in 1527 and 1528 respectively. Here, the sender speaks in the humanistic manner about the ruler's obligations, virtues, his search for peace and praises the addressee. In this article, I will analyse and compare the canons – literary, rhetorical, cultural and epistolary – used by both authors in these letters. Besides, I will discuss a ruler's portrait created by the authors, evaluation of his personality, actions and behaviour, and the authors' intentions.

Keywords: Late Middle Ages; Renaissance; letter (correspondence); letter (fictitious); Franciscus de Comitibus Aquae Vivae; Vytautas the Great; Coluccio Salutati; Erasmus of Rotterdam; Sigismund the Old

Introduction

In the epistolary codex of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania (further in the text – “the GDL”; 1350–1430), three letters were found written by Franciscus de Comitibus Aquae Vivae in about 1429¹. One of them was addressed to Vytautas

¹ Precise dates of writing these letters are unknown, but Antoni Prochaska, the compiler of the codex, dates these epistolary texts to the end of 1429, basing his assumption on the chronology of the political events of the time, and the content of the letters (especially the first one). He notices that all three letters (copies) were written by the hand of the same scribe.

(*Codex epistolaris Vitoldi* 1882 [the abbreviation will further be used CEV]: No. 1394, 879–885), the ruler of the powerful state of the late Middle Ages, who was getting ready for his coronation. Detailed research has shown that quite a large part of the letter addressed to Vytautas was copied word for word from a letter by the well-known Italian humanist and political figure Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) written to the governor of Padova (1388–1405) Francesco Novello da Carrara (1359–1405) in 1390 (Salutati 1891–1911: “Magnifico domino Francisco de Carraria patavino domino”). Salutati was called “the man of letters”, was famous for his public, propaganda and business letters written while holding the position of the Chancellor of Florence (from 1375), as well as his epistolary texts of personal character². The aim of this letter was to expound to Francesco Novello da Carrara the qualities of a truly good and wise ruler and warlord. He was encouraged not to trespass the boundaries of humanism, not to tease Fortuna by continuous fighting and violent behaviour. He was advised to avoid urgent and wild actions, decisions which might bring to perdition their deviser himself, his family, subalterns and allies. Franciscus borrowed the idea of Salutati’s letter, its essential structural parts, examples and realities and applied them creatively to Vytautas’s person and specific situation, adding his own examples and thoughts and expressing his own position.

The epistolary legacy of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) is especially abundant. Among his letters to many addressees a few were found addressed to Sigismund the Old, the Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland (1467–1548). In our research, we used his letters written in 1527 and 1528 respectively that were addressed to the above-mentioned ruler and are present in the epistolary codex of the latter (*Acta Tomiciana* [the abbreviation will further be used *Acta Tomiciana*]: t. 9, 1876, No. 167, 180–183; t. 10, 1899, No. 382, 368–370). The first letter by Erasmus was written on his own initiative, without any specific or urgent need. It is like a letter-memorial, similar to other pacifist writings of the famous Dutchman (for example *Querella pacis*; *Julius exclusus e coelis*; *Oratio de pace et discordia*; *Dulce bellum inexpertis*), as in the letter he emphasizes Sigismund’s ambition to reconcile European kings and strive for peace. In the letter, Erasmus says that disturbances present in the world and his great desire for peace were the stimulus to write it. In addition to this, the letter is related to Erasmus’s other treatises about the ruler’s obligations and particularities of governance (for example *Institutio principis Christiani*, 1546)³.

² See in more detail on Salutati’s biography, works and letters: Coppini 1995: 1319–1320; Witt 1976: 1–4; 2004: 1007–1008.

³ See for more detail: *Über Krieg und Frieden. Die Friedensschriften des Erasmus von Rotterdam* 2017; Huizinga 2000: 89–91, 156–160.

His second letter, which was a response to the King's short letter, continued building up the peaceful and pious ruler's image.

Review of Former Research

Historiography has very little information on the letter by Franciscus to Vytautas, as well as on its author. Short notes can be found in two works by Antoni Prochaska (1882: 14–15; 1914: 364), a monograph dedicated to the history of the Jagiellonian dynasty by the Polish historian Ludwik Kolankowski (1930), Paulius Šležas's article (1930: 205–234) on coronation peripeteias of Vytautas, where the content of this letter is summarized in several sentences, stating that the Italian's letter did not influence the duke's coronation intentions. Stephen C. Rowell also mentions it in his article (2002: 22), which analyses the idea of Lithuania as "the rampart of Christianity". The historian Rūta Čapaitė refers to this Italian humanist in her article about the correspondence between Vytautas and his contemporaries, explaining in more detail his praises for the duke's generosity (2001: 18; 2010: 61). Other researchers interested in this letter (Sigitas Narbutas and Giedrė Mickūnaitė) have analysed the above-mentioned text from other aspects. Discussing the theoretical issues of the Lithuanians' possible Roman origins, Narbutas associates this letter with the new cultural challenges faced by our state, which was still medieval at the time (2004: 291). Mickūnaitė analyses the letter in the context of Vytautas's image formation: she briefly describes its content and Vytautas being compared to the warriors of antiquity, emphasizing that Franciscus exalts the military merits of the ruler, remarking that he has failed to clearly identify this person (2008: 156–159).

The author of the present article has analysed in greater detail these and other two letters by Franciscus in her article (Keršienė 2012 (t. 34): 59–119), where she explained the intentions and goals of writing these letters and also advanced the hypotheses related to their authenticity, the addressor's identity, aspirations, possible commissioners or inspirers, etc. The cultural environment at the court of the GDL and its chancery office was discussed. The article also analysed the content, composition, realia and literary expression of these epistolary texts.

The letters of Erasmus to Sigismund interested mostly Polish researchers. The book by Maria Citowska (1969) deals in more detail with the correspondence between the Polish nobility and Erasmus (95 letters have survived), including the letters to Sigismund under our analysis. Its introductory article illuminates the relations between the Polish nobility and Erasmus and presents the translations of this mutual correspondence⁴.

⁴ See the introductory article "Od tłumacza" on p. 5–15 (Citowska 1969).

Among more recent studies, the article by Mirosław Sadowski can be mentioned, where the author discusses briefly the content of these letters, Erasmus's approach to Sigismund and his panegyric (2011: 63–74). As far as the Lithuanian historiography is concerned, no new and comprehensive studies can be found so far, except perhaps the article by Juozas Jakštas written in 1970, where a short biography of Erasmus and the content of his letters to Sigismund the Old and the Polish nobility are presented in short (1970: 66–70). The author of this article notices that in his praises to the king, his peaceful and wise character and his discussion of the king's relations with Moscow, Erasmus in some places loses the track of historical truth. Thus, we can state in summary that the above-mentioned articles have provided no comprehensive analysis of these epistolary texts, of the principles and canons for shaping the ruler's image, and Sigismund's image presented by Erasmus has not been compared to the picture of Vytautas created by Franciscus. Therefore, the present article aims to do this.

Analysis and Comparison of the Letters

1. Contexts. Almost 100 years separate the letters of Franciscus and Erasmus. This was an entire epoch, during which many changes happened. But speaking of the ruler's image-building, what did those two authors have in common? What were their differences? Both of them had never met their addressees, but were well-informed about their activities. The process and peripeteias of Vytautas's coronation (1429) were quite widely known in Europe. Franciscus in his letter focuses a lot on this fact, as well as the relationship between the King of Poland Jogaila and Vytautas, who were cousins and on good terms in their early lives, but quarrelled later, giving his support to the first ruler. Franciscus knows about the famous victory against the German Order at the battle of Grunwald (1410), about specific events in Vytautas's life (e.g., he mentions a riot, its suppression and brutal punishment of the instigators), about the Grand Duke's treatment of envoys and all kinds of petitioners, about his generosity, even about the gossip related to the coronation problems, he knows about Vytautas's campaigns in the East, battles with the Tartars, spreading Christianity, etc.

Famous all over Europe, Erasmus was quite aware of the politics of Poland, knew a lot about Sigismund's activities, peculiarities of his foreign policy, creed and character. Most likely, he was informed about all this by his friend Jacobus Piso, the legate of the Pope, who himself not once visited Poland, as well as European humanists, Polish noblemen, Sigismund's courtiers (the King's personal secretary and Erasmus's friend Jan Łaski, another royal secretary Jost

Ludwig Dietz, the court doctor Jan Antonin, chancellor Krzysztof Szydłowiecki, bishop of Krakow Piotr Tomicki, poet and secretary Andrzej Krzycki and others, with whom Erasmus corresponded). Besides, the news about the victory at the Battle of Orsha (1514) spread in Europe accompanied by different propaganda works. None the less popular was Sigismund's marriage to Bona Sforza, who was Italian (Cytowska 1965: 6–9). Thus, Sigismund the Old no longer needed "to prove" to Europe that the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland belonged to the Christian world, unlike Vytautas, who constantly emphasized this fact in his letters to representatives of other countries, men of power and the Pope. Erasmus praises the piety and wisdom of the addressee, approves of his wars, referring to them as a mere necessity; calls him almost the only guardian and promoter of the Christian faith, a carrier of peace.

Salutati, the author Franciscus imitated, and Erasmus himself were famous "men of letters" of their time, both were well-read and imitated by others; whereas Franciscus, a person unknown in history, called himself an Italian. Why? Was it a certain custom, the question of prestige or a synonym of a good traditional education, which he attempted to prove? It can be stated that the author of the letter himself was canonized, was most likely willing to attract more attention to himself, to add more "weight", to sound more convincing to the addressee.

Aquaviva was a well-known family name from Naples. Some information on him can be found in his letter to Vytautas. Following Salutati's example, only changing respective realia⁵, the author introduces himself as follows: I am a Christian like you (*religione tecum christianus sum*), Italian (*sum gente Italicus*), from Naples (*sum patria Neapolitanus*), of the nobility (count) (*sum natura et affectione nobilis*) (p. 880). He also calls himself a foreigner and almost unknown (*extraneus et vix bene notus*). His gives his incentive for writing the letter: their shared Christian faith, taking care of one's neighbour (*diligere proximum, quam nos ipsos*). His Italian origin is associated with human virtues and the humaneness of their Roman ancestry (*sum denique gente Italicus, quorum pectoribus uti a patribus nostris Romanis originem duximus sola viget humanitas*); the addressor's Neapolitan origin is related to the venerable and ancient traditions of Naples. Further in the text, a conclusion is made that these are the reasons for the author's respect and love for Vytautas, his acknowledgement of the high status of this ruler (p. 880). The introductory part is completed with the list (*enumeratio*) of the motives for addressing Vytautas, such as descent, faith, nationality, homeland and feelings (p. 880). Relations

⁵ In his letter, Salutati introduces also his political beliefs: "I am a Guelf by my origin and status."

bind people together (being human, their common Christian faith, etc.) – this idea, very common in humanists' letters and textbooks of epistolography, is also supported by the Italian. Thus, the introductory part discloses several arguments why he has written his letter. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that this introduction is constructed following closely Salutati's letter. Interestingly, Franciscus expands the introduction of his compatriot, not only changing it according to himself and the addressee, but also emphasising ancient Italian traditions and their humanism, respect for tradition and rulers, because all this was probably required when writing to a faraway foreigner.

By the way, Vytautas and Sigismund also were the "men of letters" in their own way. With the help of letters they administered a huge state; back then without such a correspondence a ruler's daily life was unimaginable. They were different though in their learning – Vytautas, as it was common with medieval rulers, was illiterate, while Sigismund had obtained an excellent humanist education. His teachers were the famous Polish historian Jan Długosz, the Italian Filippo Buonaccorsi (Callimachus) and Jan Boruchowski, the Professor at the Academy of Krakow. Both rulers left abundant collections of letters as their heritage. Without doubt, in most cases these letters were prepared by experienced and skilful scribes, among whom were some gifted writers well aware of the new humanist ideas.

2. Links to the tradition of fictitious letters. The peculiarities of the period's communication code. Letters by both authors fall into the tradition of fictitious letters going back to antiquity. Such epistles were created on behalf of some hero, a well-known person, or sent to a similar addressee, making use of existing examples and adapting them to one's needs. The authors' purposes varied, ranging from apologetic, didactic, slanderous and literary to a desire to just disseminate their own ideas. Both letters under analysis can be categorized as epistolary writings, because, as detailed research has shown (Keršienė 2012 (t. 34): 64–71), the letter by Franciscus was fictitious and it most likely never reached the addressee, and the goals of Erasmus's letters were more idealistic, creative, rather than specific and real. The authors of both letters used certain codes and canons typical of the genre and their period. Franciscus made use of Salutati's letter, the early Renaissance ideas about a ruler and appropriate governance, while Erasmus, a representative of mature humanism, created a picture of the ruler of a great country which was more theoretical than real. Back then, it was a tradition to address a ruler and try to persuade him to change his opinion on one or another matter, while discussing the obligations of the ruler in general. Humanists believed in the power of the letter, the influence of eloquence on the powerful of this world. By their declarations

and writings, they sought for a response and thus actively declared their public position.⁶

A canon is a certain code. The canon in question, going back to antiquity, was standardized in the Middle Ages, when numerous letter-writing textbooks appeared and the art and science of letter writing, *ars dictaminis*, was introduced into the curricula of the budding universities. It was expanded in many *ars epistolandi* treatises, which were written by European humanists.⁷ The question arises, how much can this code be understood by the people of a different epoch? Vytautas was a ruler in the late Middle Ages when a leader excelled in warcraft, not letters. Erasmus, one of the most educated persons in Europe, created novel canons by his activities and writings. Vytautas and Erasmus operated at different levels. The Italian's fairly free and familiar approach, the discussion-like, didactic character of his discourse, argumentation based on ancient and renaissance examples might have been ineffective, had the different "rules of the game" been applied – in this case the feudal ones. Most likely, such a letter would not have had the desired effect on the addressee. Thus, such an obvious incomprehension of the addressee and ignorance of the rules of communication (especially political) and thinking models determined by Vytautas's environment support the hypothesis that this letter was written by a representative of a different culture altogether, or in imitation of such a culture, and that the letter never reached the addressee.

The authors of both letters used similar canons and attempted to influence their addressees through them. Although we can ascribe these letters to a bit different subtypes of the genre, in essence their goals and means of expression are similar. The text by Franciscus is a mixture of several types of letter-writing (*epistola mixta*), with characteristic elements like persuasion, dissuasion, advice, encouragement and exhortation (*epistola exhortativa*, *hortoria*, *hortatoria*, *consultoria*, *suasoria*). Letters of this type were discussed both in the medieval letter-writing textbooks *ars dictaminis* and humanistic *ars epistolandi*.

⁶ E.g., Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1351–1402), an influential nobleman of Milan, once said about Salutati's letters that one letter by him could harm more than a thousand knights of Florence. See the works of Ronald G. Witt (1976: 4). According to this author, Salutati's major epistolary triumph was in 1390–1406, during the battles with the Visconti family; see Witt 2004: 1007.

⁷ Letter-writing textbooks – *ars dictaminis* and *ars epistolandi* – formed and represented a specific model of communication which was determined by the peculiarities of medieval and renaissance society, and they functioned in the common space of European Latin culture for a certain period. In their own time, they were a new and modern phenomenon witnessing the processes of common spiritual and social changes of the time. See in more detail in: Keršienė 2010: 24–38; 2012 (t. 33): 16–17, 19–26.

In Franciscus's letter, a fair amount of rhetorical panegyrics to the ruler can be found, and in some places the tone of the writing really resembles that of a mentor or scholar; at the beginning of this letter a consolation is mentioned (*epistola consolatoria*). In Erasmus's letters, a laudation to the ruler Sigismund, persuasion, reasoning about the necessity of peace and obligations of a good ruler are present (*epistola laudatoria, hortatoria, suasoria, deliberatoria, disputatoria*). According to the tradition of such letters, examples and rhetorical, literary and historical canons were often used.

As mentioned before, Franciscus's writing was a certain variation on Salutati's letter: the thoughts borrowed from the latter comprised about 1/3 of Franciscus's text, which was written forty years after Salutati's letter. The semantics of the text was complemented with other meanings of the relevant political and cultural context; the borrowed text was composed and applied in Franciscus's own way. Nevertheless, canonical examples and arguments were used maintaining the age-old tradition.

3. Exempla et argumenta. Franciscus takes many arguments and illustrative examples from Salutati, but he also uses his own, only applicable to this particular addressee. The arguments why Vytautas must refuse the crown are the following: the coronation decision had been made hastily and thoughtlessly; it is a threat to the addressee's life and honour, it can even destroy both states, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland, as well as his beloved cousin Jogaila; finally, it contradicts the wishes of the latter; Vytautas is old and such troubles do not add to his health; he has everything that he needs, why then desire more; by his deeds he has proven being worthy of the king's name, so why pursue such vain glory; the fate, which it is impossible to control (*noli fatum occupare tuum*), is variable – the higher you rise, the harder you fall. The latter idea runs through the entire letter and determines the selection of many arguments and examples, which, by the way, are arranged chronologically – starting from the most ancient history towards later times. Franciscus's position is that it is impossible to control fate, one needs to obey Fortuna, as it is whimsical and unstable, it can be soothed only by all kinds of human virtues. And Vytautas so far has been favoured by Fortuna but this may change.

The letter includes quite a number of thoughts by famous authors and heroes of antiquity, the Middle Ages and early renaissance, or stories about them. Franciscus tells sad stories about famous generals and uses them as illustrations of meaningless pursuit of fame. Examples from the life of Persian, Lydian, Greek and Roman rulers are mentioned, with the aim of showing to the Grand Duke how fate could treat an excessively ambitious person badly. Their experiences, pain and losses were reiterated in humanists' letters, rhetorical

texts and poetry. Poets, writers and orators are also quoted or mentioned by Franciscus. Was the illiterate ruler Vytautas able to understand all this context? We should add that in his letter *Salutati* provided even more examples and compared them to his addressee's life and character.

In the argumentation part of the text quite a lot of the rhetorical exposition is dedicated to old age, fragility of human earthly life; the "grey-headed" ruler is constantly reminded of his (and his cousin's) age, persuading him to enjoy his well-deserved rest; the qualities suitable for an elderly man, such as seriousness of character and attitudes, peace of mind, mature decisions are emphasized; the temporality of human life and inevitable death are considered, God's omnipotence is mentioned. Nevertheless, the influence of renaissance humanists prevails. Such a hybrid letter is quite common for early humanism.

Erasmus's principles of argumentation and *exempla* are very similar. However, he uses other heroes and stories, more Christian examples, Biblical characters, besides, he mentions the peculiarities and symbols of Egyptian rulers. These include the sceptre and the eye, the eagle and the hippopotamus. Such symbols represent a righteous, strong spirit and caution, serendipity, contempt for earthly things and an ability to overcome anger and cruelty, the human affects which disturb clear thinking. To Erasmus it is important to expound his pacifist idea, using Sigismund – the peace-maker's – example. He has no specific goals concerning the addressee. Further, I will give a list of the authors and heroes, mentioned in the letters of both addressors, for comparison.

Salutati–Franciscus: *Croesus, Cyrus Magnus, Athis, Alexander Magnus, Xerxes, Darius, Miltiades, Marcus Furius Camillus, Manlius, Scipiones, Gaius Marius, Pompeius, Mitridates, Caesar, Achilles, Hector; Ovidius, Terentius, Quintilianus, Cicero, Valerius Maximus, Vergilius, Lucanus, Plato, Democrites, Petrarca, Boecius, St. Hieronymus.*

Erasmus: *Marcus Furius Camillus, Scipio Africanus; Plinius Maior, Tullius Hostilius, Plato, Homerus, Plutarchus, Jupiter; biblical figures – Moses, Christus, Susanna, Simeon, Daniel, Solomon, St. Lucas.*

4. The ruler's image creation principles. Epithets of rulers. Below I would like to discuss what kind of image of the ruler was composed by both authors. Vytautas's image created by Franciscus is quite contradictory and typical, at the same time. We can say he depicts a colourful personality: cruel and merciful, kind, wise, insightful and seeking for too much, excessive, ambitious, reckless and beneficent, generous and strictly punishing. He also uses the associations of the name Alexander, compares Vytautas to the famous military leader Alexander the Great (this topos was often used). The military accomplishments of the ruler are praised most of all (this was obligatory when speaking to a

ruler-soldier), as well as his merits as a Christian warrior are emphasized: his possible role in organizing a new crusade to Jerusalem and withstanding the attacks of the Turks.

The ruler pictured by Erasmus is quite the opposite to the militant Vytautas. He creates a picture of a peaceful, wise, diligent, benevolent and especially pious king – *rex pacificus*. In the ruler's person such qualities as *humanitas* and *pietas*, *devotio moderna* were important for Erasmus. As well as Christian modesty, mercy, justice, forgiveness, wisdom, steadfastness. Erasmus states that *rex viva lex* – that a ruler must strive to solve conflicts peacefully. He has to overcome his human affections, which are obstacles to clear thinking, has to despise worldly matters and be able to overcome his anger and brutality. This is the Renaissance ideal of a ruler.

Certain epithets also served the purpose of building up the ruler's portrait. Franciscus uses the following epithets: *glorious, invincible, bold, of great spirit, Alexander/Caesar/Eagle-like courage, insightfulness, nobility, power, mercy, piety, kindness, generosity, forgiveness*, and, in addition to this, *justice and strictness*, comparable to that of a captain's (*magister navis*). Franciscus recites the attributes necessary to a king; states that Vytautas already possesses all of them and his relentless courage has been worthy of the green laurel for long; the Fortuna and Fate have also been favourable to him, bringing riches, titles, glory, honour, power and influence, fame and merit – so why does he still need the coronation? He also emphasizes the limitation of human powers. According to Franciscus, the ruler is just a mortal man. He also warns him about the temporality and fragility of fame and success, continuously reiterating the need for modesty in wishing and pursuing things; he persistently suggests that the addressee should refuse coronation – this is the leitmotif and goal of the entire letter.

In Vytautas' time, possessing certain qualities and pursuing certain activities were often expected of the Christian ruler: one's noble origin, the lawful inheritance of the throne, military achievements, the prosperity of the governed lands, charity, justice, support of the Church and sincere Christian piety (Kurbis 1977: 19–40; Mickūnaitė 2002: 109; Keršienė 2012: 102–103).

Erasmus uses the following epithets: *kindness of nature, piety, devotion, noble spirit, exceptional wisdom, love for the homeland, religious zeal, thoughtfulness, enthusiasm, diligence, Christian modesty*. He calls Sigismund by the Roman title of *pater patriae*, praises him for his attempts for the sake of the peace, justifies his wars as defensive, not aggressive.

In the list of the ruler's accomplishments it can be seen what canonical comparisons are used by the addressors and which epithets are the same:

The epithets used for both rulers:

Franciscus about Vytautas: *miles Christianus; Vytautas = Alexander the Great; dux magnus; leo; magister navis; tuae mansuetudinis et humanitatis immensitas; natura et affeccione nobilis; serena fama, rex invictissimus, tanta fortitudo; invicta, insuperabilis virtus; animi magnitudo, magnanimitas, tam magni cordis, tam elevati animi, Alexandrinus, Cesareus, aquileius animus; tanti consilii, excellentia mirifica tui fastus, potentia, pietas, caritas, dilectio, bonitas, munificentia, largitas, clementia.*

Erasmus about Sigismund: *rex pacificus; rex sanctissimus; pater patriae; amor patriae; humanitas; bonitas naturae; pietas; rex viva lex; hujus aetatis principum insigne decus; rex invictissimus; rex, cum primis inclite; insignis naturae tuae bonitas, devotio, studium religionis; excelsus animus, celsitudo animi; prudentia singularis, amor patriae, tanta vigilantia, studio, cura, christiana modestia, misericordia, veritas, clementia, sapientia, constantia.*

5. Canons of the epistolic genre. Canons of the epistolic genre should be also born in mind. Franciscus uses the letter as a means of bringing people closer together. Although he clearly tries to make an impression on the addressee, he makes a pretence of not having taken great care when composing his letter, it being simple and off-hand (*rudis incomptaque epistola; domestica scriptio*). This is a literary topos of ostensible modesty (*falsa modestia*), quite often used in humanists' letters. Similar things can be found also in Erasmus's letters to Sigismund. The topos of ostensible modesty is well illustrated by the introduction of the author himself as the humblest of servants (*mancipium infimum, humile*) offering his help.

Erasmus was a real master of letter writing, an excellent connoisseur of canons of this genre. His concept of a letter covered rhetoric, the expression of the author's position, praise of and support to the ruler. Such letters required certain humility, respect for the addressee and pursuit of his favour (*captatio benevolentiae*), which is illustrated by the following phrase at the beginning of the letter (1527):

Ut calamum in manus sumpsi, Sigismunde rex, hujus aetatis principum insigne decus, multa protinus occurrebant, quae deterrent a scribendo. In primis enim parum mei pudoris videbatur, si tantillus homuncio tantum heroa, si ignotus, si ultro, si nullo pene argumento compellarem, et ut ex veterum annalibus tradit Plinius, Tullo Hostilio male cecisisse, quod Jovem evocasset, ita non semper

tutum fuit appellasse summos orbis monarchas, quos oportet adire non solum in tempore, verum etiam religiose.⁸

This is the introductory part of Franciscus's letter for comparison:

Consilium mihi fuit fortasse non improbum, illustrissime ac invictissime princeps et mi domine singularis, distulisse hucusque maiestati vestre aliquid stili officio denotare.⁹

Both texts in one way or another reflect the requirement that a letter be short, concise, although actually the authors ignore this requirement, as both letters are quite long. At the end of both letters, the authors make excuses (as was customary) for their extensive texts:

Erasmus: "Sed longius feror, quam epistolae modus patitur."¹⁰

Franciscus: "Quamquam decreveram de tuis virtutibus tam theologicis quam moralibus lucius pertractare, que in te videntur clarissimis radiis emicare, ne verborum prolixitate gravis efficiar, nauseam de me sumas, institui michi hec cuncta, que mente conceperam, brevitatis gracia silencio preterire."¹¹

Thus, both authors stick to the appropriate epistolary canon, using the phrases which were common in their time.

⁸ When I picked up my pen, King Sigismund, the most famous embellishment of all the rulers of this age, I had many thoughts in my head urging me not to write. First of all, the reason for my hesitation was that myself, such a lowly man, should address such a heroic man [like you are], although I am unknown and doing this of my own will and without any cause. As in ancient annals we are told by Pliny, when Tullus Hostilius cried for Jupiter, he ended up badly. Similarly, to address the powerful monarchs of the world may not always be safe and you have to approach them not only cautiously, but also with all due respect. (*Acta Tomiciana* 1876: t. 9, No. 167, 180, translation by the author of this article).

⁹ Maybe my procrastination to expose some thoughts in writing for Your Majesty's attention was not such an inappropriate decision, the most lucid and invincible ruler, and my only lord. (CEV: 879).

¹⁰ But I am speaking already longer than is appropriate in a letter. (*Acta Tomiciana* 1899: t. 10, No. 382, 370).

¹¹ Although I have decided to tell in more detail about your virtues, both, related to your faith and morality, which, as can be seen, are flaring radiantly, I have chosen to keep it to myself – all those things, which I have had on my mind, for the sake of conciseness, so that I won't be called unpleasant for my excess, so that you won't be disgusted with me. (CEV: 882).

Conclusion

What was the fate of these letters? The first letter by Erasmus was printed in Hieronymus Vietor's printing office¹², in Krakow, in 1527 and it stirred up massive enthusiasm in Poland, but displeased certain people in the Austro-Hungarian Empire who supporting the Habsburgs. Erasmus even received 100 golden coins from Sigismund as a sign of his gratitude. Franciscus's letter was kept for many years in the epistolary codex of Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, among many other letters and was wrongly interpreted by researchers as one of the first examples of the early renaissance in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. These letters demonstrate, however, how letters of famous humanists spread, how creatively and ideologically they were used for "teaching" a ruler not only of one's own but, also, of a foreign country and culture; how ideas were disseminated.

Sigismund corresponded with Erasmus on more or less equal terms, but there is some doubt as to whether Vytautas would have appreciated and understood "correctly" the rhetorical letter written in the humanist manner by Franciscus. When comparing it to Vytautas' epistles, an obvious difference can be seen in the style, rhythm and content of the text, almost no difference can be sensed at all when comparing the letters of Erasmus and Sigismund – the style of both correspondents is humanist Renaissance; of course, the ruler's letter reveals his majesty, yet is quite warm and friendly to the addressee. The mere fact that the most famous European humanist writes to the ruler of Poland and Lithuania upon his own initiative signifies Poland's involvement in European culture. Sigismund understands perfectly the attention this brings him and he thanks Erasmus for presenting him as his addressee to the entire world, invites him to Poland, although he realizes that it would hardly be possible.

These letters witness the relevance of the epistolary genre, its important place in the political and, of course, cultural communication of the time. It also can be noticed that over a hundred years the principles of creating the ruler's image, examples, arguments and epithets changed little.

Dovilė Keršienė

dovile.kersiene@gmail.com

Anglistikos, romanistikos ir klasikinių studijų institutas

Vilniaus universitetas

Universiteto g. 3

Vilnius 01513

LIETUVA / LITHUANIA

¹² [Erasmus Roterodamus] 1527.

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