



BRILL

## In Memoriam

*Franz Bierlaire (1944–2023)*

Franz Bierlaire, professor emeritus of the University of Liège, left us on November 12, 2023. The academic world has lost a renowned Renaissance specialist and skilled teacher who was able to ignite the passion for history in generations of students. He devoted his career to studying Erasmus' figure and the question of schoolbooks and education during the Renaissance.

Franz Bierlaire was born on July 8, 1944, and spent most of his childhood in the Charleroi region (west-central Belgium). He began his studies at the University of Liège in October 1962. He had two decisive encounters this autumn month that would shape the rest of his life. First, that of Professor Léon-Ernest Halkin who taught him the rudiments of historical criticism and notions of modern history, as well as the concern for the elegance of style. Second, Professor Halkin introduced him to Erasmus of Rotterdam, who would become his companion for over sixty years. His masters thesis, devoted to the *familia* of Erasmus, constituted his research approach to the prince of humanism and his galaxy (published in 1968<sup>1</sup>). His introduction into the “Erasmus Corporation” (*sodalitas erasmiana*), as he liked to say, took place at a colloquium in Mons in 1967 on the sidelines of the fifth-centenary celebrations of the birth of the Rotterdam humanist. The young graduate presented, with confidence, the results of his first work in front of an audience of choice: Marie Delcourt, Marcel Bataillon and Jean-Claude Margolin, personalities with whom he forged a deep friendship. He confirmed his status as a great Erasmian with his doctoral thesis dedicated to the *Colloquia* (published in 1977, 1978<sup>2</sup>). Franz Bierlaire also edited some texts by Erasmus. He participated in the edition of the *Colloquia* in collaboration with Léon-Ernest Halkin and René Hoven, published in the prestigious collection of the *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (1972<sup>3</sup>), and gave us, forty years later, again in the same collection, the edition of the

- 1 Franz Bierlaire, *La 'Familia' d'Érasme. Contribution à l'histoire de l'humanisme*, Paris, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1968.
- 2 Franz Bierlaire, *Érasme et ses 'Colloques': le livre d'une vie*, Genève, Droz, 1977; Id., *Les 'Colloques' d'Érasme. Réforme des études, réforme des mœurs et réforme de l'Église au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège—Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1978.
- 3 ASD I-3.

*De Civilitate morum puerilium* (2013<sup>4</sup>), of which he had proposed a full French translation a few years earlier (1999<sup>5</sup>).

Franz Bierlaire was interested not only in the thought of the prince of humanism, but also in the modes of its diffusion and its reception in the heart of sixteenth-century Europe. From his pen, we discover the richness and complexity of Erasmus' work, the material conditions of its expansion, the relationship of the humanist to the book as object and the virulence of religious polemics of that time. Worthy heir of the Liège school of studies on humanism and the Renaissance, he never ceased throughout his career to read and reread the work of Erasmus, whether as a historian, eager to make intelligible a turning point in our history, or as an accomplished Latin philologist, concerned with the precise meaning of each word. If the Erasmus pedagogue particularly caught his attention, it is indeed the study of the humanist project of the emancipation of men by a renewed pedagogy and by the return to sources of Antiquity that intersects the work of Franz Bierlaire. This interest naturally led him to study, more broadly, teaching practices through schoolbooks and to question the education of children in the sixteenth century. The title of the festschrift published at his retirement perfectly summarizes the amplitude of his scientific curiosity: *Reading, writing and education during the Renaissance*, published in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

Franz Bierlaire was also a brilliant teacher who had a rare ability to take you with him in his passion for the early modern period. In 1969, Léon-Ernest Halkin hired him as an assistant to begin his career at the University of Liège. He was appointed associate lecturer in 1979, before becoming associate professor in 1990, and then Professor and Departmental Chair of Modern History in 1998. He also taught at the Free University of Brussels from 1988. His academic concerns were primarily focused on transmission, teaching, and supervision. His course on humanist history was outstanding and demonstrated an excellent understanding of this movement, as well as his unique ability to engage his audience. His seminars in modern history were an opportunity for him to instill in his students a rigorous historical method, based on a fine analysis of sources, as well as a concern for perfection and a rejection of the less-than-perfect. He was very attentive to textual philology and insisted on the importance of using an accurate vocabulary and weighing every word. Erasmus, of course, was at the centre of his teachings. Entire generations of apprentice historians were drawn

4 ASD I-8: 299–341.

5 Erasmus, *La civilité puérile d'Érasme. Petit manuel de savoir-vivre à l'usage des enfants*, trad., ed. and intro. by Fr. Bierlaire, Bruxelles, La Lettre volée à la Maison d'Érasme, 1999.

6 *Lire, écrire et éduquer à la Renaissance. Mélanges en l'honneur de Franz Bierlaire*, ed. Annick Delfosse and Thomas Glesener, Bruxelles, Archives et bibliothèques de Belgique, 2013.

into the humanist's abundant correspondence. To those who repented, wearied by the sometimes grumpy character of Erasmus, he mischievously recalled that they had the opportunity to work from a French translation, which was not his case when he was a student, while insisting on the urgent need to return systematically to the Latin text. He was also a demanding teacher, attentive and always available, who kept throughout his life a benevolent outlook on the different paths of his students. He particularly liked to see one or the other "venture into Erasmian lands". Even if he observed with some bitterness the state of humanist studies in Belgium, his dearest wish would have been to see a work published on Erasmus and the Low Countries, "a synthesis comparable, by the magnitude if not by the quality, to the Erasmus and Spain of Marcel Bataillon".<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible to finish this tribute without recommending the reading of his latest opus on Erasmus, *Érasme au fil du temps* (*Erasmus over time*), which was published in October 2021.<sup>8</sup> This fascinating essay, filled with great erudition and penned beautifully, condenses sixty years of engagement with the Dutch humanist. It transcends the strict boundaries of biography. He aims to return to the major stages of Erasmus' life and examine his work, while warning young scholars of today: "Whoever discovers the thought of Erasmus will have to beware of the danger of supporting modernity to excess" (p. 110). The book, in its last part, focuses on the evolution of the perception of this humanist over the centuries, he who is sometimes seen today as the emblematic figure of European citizenship. No doubt Franz Bierlaire could certainly have made his own this excerpt from a letter by Erasmus which he highlighted in this book: "so impassioned am I for the study of the humanities that I consider all those who are devoted to them or especially gifted in their pursuit as my closest kith and kin." (Ep. 1885 to Francis Vergara, 13 October 1527).

Franz Bierlaire, who was a true *homo litteratus*, occasionally mischievous, and sometimes teasing, but always joyful in sharing his last readings or reflections on the historian's practices of yesterday and today, left behind a rich corpus and the memory of a man of rare modesty with a keen sense of attention to others.

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7 Franz Bierlaire, "La recherche érasmienne en Belgique: Histoire et perspectives", in *Éditions, impressions et traductions des textes humanistes*, ed. Alexandre Vanautgaerden and Jean-François Gilmont, Turnhout, Brepols, 2000, p. 57.

8 Franz Bierlaire, *Érasme au fil du temps*, Bruxelles, Académie Royale de Belgique, 2021.