

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Erastus was arguably the most important Reformed natural philosopher of the late sixteenth century. With a few notable exceptions, however, modern scholars have not found Erastus an attractive figure. Though he made a significant theological contribution, the fact that he opposed Calvinist ideas of church discipline has generally banished him from the Reformed faith's pantheon of heroes.¹ Likewise, his opposition to the German Hippocrates, Paracelsus, has earned him an ignominious place in the history of medicine. Add to these sins the fact that Erastus upheld the validity of the death penalty for witches, and there is little for a positivistic historian to hope for from our subject.

While much of the attention that Erastus's career has garnered has been negative, historians have not ignored Erastus. Two excellent monographs, one in French and one in German, have investigated his theory of the proper relationship between magistrate and church, "Erastianism."² Though his scientific contribution has received less sustained analysis, it has attracted the attention of Walter Pagel, Owsei Temkin,

¹ While this process was already underway in Heinrich Alting's *Historia de ecclesiis Palatinis*, the best example of this phenomenon was Karl Sudhoff's *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus*. Sudhoff presented Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus as the leaders of the Heidelberg Reformed movement and took a negative stance toward Erastus and the anti-disciplinists, casting them as a morally suspect lot. Karl Sudhoff, *C. Olevianus und Z. Ursinus, Leben und ausgewählte Schriften der Väter und Begründer der reformierten Kirche*, vol. 8 (Elberfeld: R.L. Friedrichs, 1857); Heinrich Alting, *Historia de ecclesiis Palatinis* (Amsterdam, 1644); reprint in Menso Alting, *Mensonis Altingii . . . Vita descripta per Ubbonem Emmium* (Groningen, 1728). N.B.: All references to Alting's *Historia de ecclesiis Palatinis* are to the 1728 Groningen reprint. (I thank R.S. Clark for sharing this edition with me.) See also Walter Hollweg, *Heinrich Bullingers Hausbuch: Eine Untersuchung über die Anfänge der reformierten Predigtliteratur* [BGLRK 8] (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), 261.

² Ruth Wesel-Roth, *Thomas Erastus: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der reformierten Kirche und zur Lehre von der Staatssouveränität* [Veröffentlichungen des Vereins für Kirchengeschichte in der evang. Landeskirche Badens 15] (Lahr/Baden: Moritz Schauenberg, 1954); Auguste Bonnard, *Thomas Érasme (1524–1583) et la Discipline Thomas Ecclésiastique* (Lausanne, 1894). See also Robert C. Walton, "Der Streit zwischen Thomas Erastus und Caspar Olevian über die Kirchenzucht in der Kurpfalz in seiner Bedeutung für die internationale reformierte Bewegung," *Monatshefte für Evangelische Kirchengeschichte des Rheinlandes* 37–38 (1988–1989): 205–246. The origin and meaning of the term "Erastian" are discussed in chapter 5 and the epilogue.

and Lynn Thorndike, three of the greatest scholars of the history of science and medicine of the twentieth century.³ While from time to time Erastus has been ignored in works in which one would have expected to find him, more often than not he has been remembered in reference works and historical overviews.⁴ Being the eponymous father of Erastianism, however, has been a dubious honor; scholars have applied his name to movements and people who had little affinity with his own thought. While he has become a signpost in the field of church history, his inclusion in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* suggests that he has also achieved canonical status in the history of science. Thus, to suggest that Erastus has languished in obscurity would be misleading. He has not been forgotten.

In all of this attention, however, there has been one major defect. Since almost everything that has been written on Erastus has focused narrowly on one or another aspect of his career, the scholarly world does not know one Erastus but many competing and mutually contradictory visions of Erastus. On the one hand, Erastus has sometimes been hailed as a man ahead of his time. For example, analyzing Erastus from the perspective of his theory of church-state relations, J. Neville Figgis cast him as a sixteenth-century “Aufgeklärter,” and more recently Robert Dán characterized him as a “freethinker” on the basis on his heretical associations and his opposition to the Calvinist disciplinarians.⁵ He has also won intermittent praise in the history of science; for example, John Brooke portrayed Erastus as a sixteenth-century forerunner of Francis

³ Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. (Basel: Karger, 1982), 332; Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginning of Modern Neurology*, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971), 184–202; idem, “Fernel, Joubert, and Erastus on the Specificity of Cathartic Drugs,” in *Science, Medicine and Society in the Renaissance*, ed. Allen G. Debus (New York: Science History Publications, 1972), 1:61–68; Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia UP, 1923–1958), 5:652–667. See also Eberhard Stübler, *Geschichte der medizinischen Fakultät der Universität Heidelberg 1386–1925* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1926), 45; Allen G. Debus, *The Chemical Philosophy: Paracelsian Science and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2 vols. (New York: Science History Publications, 1977).

⁴ For example, there is no article on him in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (TRE) (Berlin, 1977–1990) and no discussion of his theories of church-state relations in J.H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1430–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

⁵ J. Neville Figgis, “Erastus and Erastianism,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 2 (1901): 68; Robert Dán, *Mathias Vehe-Glirius: Life and Work of a Radical Antitrinitarian with his Collected Writings* [Studia Humanitatis 4] (Leiden: E.J. Brill; Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982), 14.

Bacon.⁶ On the other hand, Erastus has also been characterized as a narrow-minded scholastic who was the opponent of nearly every positive intellectual trend of the sixteenth century, namely those represented by Paracelsus, Johann Weyer, and Petrus Ramus.⁷ My goal has been to replace the multiple and often competing versions of Erastus in the historiography with a more unified, intelligible portrayal of Erastus; in short, to move from many Erastuses to one. I endeavor to do this by analyzing Erastus's career in the light of the Heidelberg context and by tracking salient themes across his written corpus.

The chief goal of this study is to present a coherent narrative of Erastus's life and work during his time in Heidelberg; put simply, how Erastus shaped the Heidelberg Reformation and the history of the German Reformed movement, and how his own work was in turn influenced by his times, struggles, enemies, and friends. While in Heidelberg, Erastus rarely experienced the tranquility of proverbial ivory tower isolation, and when he did, the results were not necessarily salutary. During the 1560s, as one of the fathers, if not the central ringleader, of the Palatine Reformed movement, he was blown from one theological controversy to another. His theological acumen and political skill helped him win Frederick III and the Palatinate for the Reformed cause and carried him to heights of influence. With his work on the church council and with his vernacular theological treatises, he had a decisive influence on the development of the Palatine Reformed Church—including a prominent role in the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the second half of the 1560s, Erastus went from the position of insider to dissenter by championing the resistance to the Calvinist-led effort to establish a church consistory, independent from state control, to control moral life. With the victory of his Calvinist rivals and the humiliation of his anti-disciplinist partisans in an Antitrinitarian scandal, Erastus lost political clout in the Palatinate. Erastus's public humiliation and exile from church politics proved the watershed event of his career. Now forcibly silenced in the theological arena, Erastus would concentrate his efforts on

⁶ John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 71. D.P. Walker also suggested this connection. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), 158.

⁷ Johann Karcher, "Thomas Erastus (1524–1583), der unversöhnliche Gegner des Theophrastus Paracelsus," *Gesnerus* 14 (1957): 1–13. Thorndike, while favoring Erastus over the Paracelsians, likewise had little positive to say for Erastus. Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 5:652–667.

natural philosophical pursuits. After 1570, his academic publishing career gained new momentum, weight, and acerbity. Upon the death of Frederick III in 1576, Erastus enjoyed a brief but frustrating return to favor in Heidelberg under the Lutheran Elector Ludwig VI, which lasted until 1580. Then, at the time of the adoption of the *Formula of Concord* in Heidelberg, Erastus moved to Basel, where he died in 1583.

This study focuses on the years from 1558 to 1580 when Erastus was a member of the faculty of the University of Heidelberg. The narrative that his surviving letters tell is primarily of an ecclesio-political struggle in Heidelberg. Although this is the best known of the many potential Erastus narratives, it has received little prior attention in English language scholarship. This study crosses disciplinary boundaries and turns over new ground, particularly in the setting of Erastus's anti-Paracelsianism and his controversy with Johann Weyer over the punishment of witches. Because Erastus's surviving correspondence illuminates the theological side of his career more thoroughly, I have chosen to focus primarily on the religious dimensions of the later controversies. This limiting strategy no doubt introduces a certain distortion of Erastus's larger worldview by the material I have chosen to cover in depth and, more significantly, by all that due to necessity has been left out.

Sources

This study is based chiefly on Erastus's correspondence and his printed works. Standing on the shoulders of Auguste Bonnard, Ruth Wesel-Roth, and Gustav Adolf Benrath, and with the help of Wim Janse and the editors of Heinrich Bullinger's correspondence, I have been able to construct a database of some five hundred letters of Erastus, the vast majority of which have not been printed (see Correspondence Register). While earlier studies drew heavily on Erastus's letters to Heinrich Bullinger and Johann Jakob Grynaeus, I have expanded this source base with use of Erastus's letters to Joachim Camerarius II, Rudolf Gwalther, Albert Hardenberg, Konrad Pellikan, Josias Simmler, Konrad Ulmer, and Theodor Zwinger. In the selections from Erastus's correspondence and other sources that follow in the footnotes, illegible or damaged spots in the manuscripts are denoted by brackets without text. In other cases, brackets are used to indicate plausible interpolations or to fill out conventional Latin abbreviations. It is my hope to make these transcriptions available to other scholars by means of a Website devoted to the corre-

spondence of the Heidelberg Reformation. Likewise, I have had access to all of Erastus's printed works and to the works of the many early modern figures who engaged Erastus, though they are not all treated in detail here.

Much source material for Palatine history did not survive the multiple depredations of the 'Thirty Years' War or the wanton destruction by Louis XIV's armies.⁸ A particular deficit exists in the church records from the era of the Reformation, which, when they do exist, are often divided among the many successor states of the Palatinate. Fortunately for this study, the most critical surviving church records concerning the Antitrinitarian affair were published by Hans Rott. After the Palatine Wittelsbachs inherited the throne of the duchy of Bavaria, the political records of the Palatine Wittelsbachs were removed to Munich; these records survive in the *Geheimes Staatsarchiv*. Since these sources do not directly concern Erastus's career and since Volker Press studied these records exhaustively, these sources have not been directly consulted in preparing this study. The archive of the University of Heidelberg preserves the records of the university senate from the late sixteenth century. These protocols, which document faculty appointments and remuneration and shed light on the various controversies between the court and the university, were of inestimable value. These named sources, along with other standard printed records from the period, make up the bulk of this study's source base.

Names

In general, I have sought to render the names of individuals and places in each subject's native language (e.g., "Ottheinrich" and "Girolamo Zanchi" as opposed to "Otto Henry" and "Jerome Zanchi" or "Hieronymus Zanchius"). When such figures are so well known as to have a common English language rendering of their name, however, I use the accepted form (e.g., John Calvin; Frederick III the Pious). I also break the rule of favoring the vernacular spellings when uncertain of the person's name in their original language (e.g., lesser known faculty of the University of Heidelberg) or in such cases where the person's nationality is debatable (particularly with Eastern Europeans and Netherlanders). In these cases, I have adopted the Latin spelling.

⁸ See Henry J. Cohn, *The Government of the Rhine Palatinate in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965), 251–255.