

Laudatio Anthony Grafton, 8 February, 2006

Dear Doctor Grafton,

Fashions come, fashions go, as in life so in scholarship. For us, living in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to understand why some of our scholarly forbears were so fascinated by the science of historical chronology. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, great scholars such as Poliziano and Pico in Italy, Copernicus in Poland, Luther and Kepler in the Holy Roman Empire, racked their brains about problems of dates, both absolute and relative, and calendar systems in ancient and recent history, for both the Western and the Eastern world. The issue was regarded as all-important, as it meant the establishment of a definitive chronology of history since the Creation of the universe, fitting in the main events of biblical history such as Noah's Flood and the Last Supper, but also the reigns of the ancient Egyptian kings and the central dates of Greek history. It was even hoped that the science of historical chronology would throw light on the future. The French humanist Joseph Justus Scaliger, who in 1593 accepted a research post at Leiden University, became the absolute authority in the field. Here in Leiden he published his impressive collection of writings in many languages, a true treasure of partially reconstructed ancient texts. According to you - I quote - "no other scholar of the period [...] issued such a flood of massive, interminable, magnificently unreadable books, or left so spectacular a legacy."

Now one does not normally receive an honorary doctoral degree at Leiden University just for reading difficult books. But maybe you, Professor Grafton, are the exception that proves the rule. For many years you have been studying the practices of learning and of education, immersing yourself in the world of Renaissance culture. You not only had to read the books of the Humanists you were examining, but also the ancient writings they themselves had studied. In this way, you delved deeper and deeper into an almost forgotten past. Historical chronology, a subject of great technical complexity, has no secrets for you. It is part of your investigation of the transmission of culture as a creative process in which change is always charged with meaning. The history of learning and education, of books and readers, directed you to various other aspects of Renaissance culture, in particular the history of science. In those happy days of humanism the examination of scientific subjects and the study of the humanities were still conjoined. The close links between humanist learning and the development of modern science are made clear in many of your books. Your research on Scaliger's philology and his work as an editor of texts was the origin of your very enlightening views on the history of textual

interpretation and commentary, including the fascinating history of forgeries, which you present as the criminal sibling of scholarly criticism, and, last but not least, of the footnote.

Your publications have tackled a varied range of topics. From time to time you leave the world of Humanism and the Renaissance to visit later periods, especially the intricacies of German intellectual history. However, you also succeed in presenting to us a lost world of scholarship that is vibrating with life. In a few moments I shall speak to you and everyone present in Latin. This will not be an empty gesture based on an outdated tradition. Any university, but especially the University of Leiden, which was founded by and for humanists, should not forget that the Latin language is an essential part of a precious heritage. These Latin words, with which I shall now invest you with the honorary doctorate are a resounding witness to a living past which has shaped the present, and the future, of our science and scholarship.