



My Dear Erasmus

The Forgotten Reformer



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The Greatness of Erasmus

Erasmus in childhood	an academic orphan
Erasmus in maturity	linguist and scholar
Erasmus in his prime	a chronic invalid
Erasmus in Europe	an international traveller
Erasmus at home	a tireless correspondent
Erasmus at work	author, editor, translator
Erasmus and the classics	an enthusiastic student
Erasmus and young people	an invaluable teacher
Erasmus and the New Testament	translator; expositor
Erasmus and Jesus Christ	a diligent disciple
Erasmus and morality	Christ's teaching
Erasmus and the Popes	critic; optimist
Erasmus and the Roman Catholic Church	rebel; reformer
Erasmus and the Reformation	the forerunner



Preface

Erasmus was thirty years old in 1500, so it might not seem surprising that he is little known today. Yet to many of his contemporaries he was the greatest man alive, the modern Socrates, whose learning and wisdom had not been equalled for a thousand years, ‘a kind of divine being sent down to us from heaven’.

They may not have been altogether wrong, for in 1969 the University of Toronto Press began to publish the ‘Collected Works of Erasmus’ in English in 86 volumes. By the dawn of the new millennium half of them were already in print, including eleven which record his surviving correspondence up to 1525.

Those eleven volumes, four thousand pages of letters written by him or to him, are the prime source of this book. My aim has been to discover from them the convictions he held and advocated before he was eclipsed by Luther. For the march of history has not been kind to Erasmus. In spite of his phenomenal achievements he has been forgotten, concealed behind the Reformation.

He corresponded on a massive scale with the leaders of society all over western Europe apart from Scandinavia, with kings and popes, with cardinals, bishops and theologians, with professors and headmasters, with philosophers, humanists and doctors, with businessmen, administrators, bankers and lawyers, along with a host of intellectuals influenced by his writings, who became colleagues or critics of his daring research into the human condition and its responsibilities.

Quotations are identified by letter number and line number, while the Index of Selected Subjects enables his thinking on moral, spiritual and theological issues to be investigated.

I am indebted to my wife Felicity for much helpful advice and to Dr. R. M. Schoeffel of the University of Toronto Press for his encouragement.




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Latin and printing;
Jerome; Mountjoy; Colet; *Adages*.


1469-1500: Netherlands, Paris, London, Oxford

Erasmus was born in 1469 at Rotterdam in the Netherlands. His parents had not been married, for his father was a Catholic priest. Both died when he was thirteen but, although denied secure home life, he was from childhood exceptionally intelligent. ‘Swept away by some natural force, when I was playing with my toys I was already an academic’ (447:261-2). At school he learnt Latin, which appealed to him so much that he made it his own language, virtually abandoning Dutch. ‘When I was a boy the study of classical literature had begun among the Italians, but because the printer’s art was known to very few, nothing in the way of books came through to us, and unbroken slumber graced the universal reign of those who taught ignorance in place of knowledge. The former teacher of my own teacher, well acquainted with Greek as well as Latin, was the first to bring us a breath of purer learning out of Italy. As a boy of twelve or so, I was blessed with a sight of him, but that was all, and yet a kind of secret natural force swept me into liberal studies. My teachers might forbid it; even so, I furtively drank in what I could from




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such books as I had managed to acquire. I practised my pen and I used to challenge my companions to compete with me. In boyhood my preference for verse was such that it was with reluctance I turned to prose: there was no form of poetry which I did not attempt' (1341A:31-45, 66-70 and 23:58-65).



His guardians proposed he should become a monk, but 'my mind was attracted solely to literature' (296:20) and he longed to go to a university. However, a monk related to him urged him to share his life, pointing out that there was a fine library in the monastery. Together they began to study the writings of Terence, the pre-Christian Roman comedian, and then for several months read other classical authors extensively in furtive nocturnal sessions. And so it came about that his guardians got their way and Erasmus, contrary to his real wishes, was absorbed into a monastic order. After a probationary year he had to conform to customs and ceremonies 'utterly repugnant to my mind and body alike, to my mind because I disliked ritual and loved freedom, to my body because I could not tolerate its hardships', such as fasting and broken nights (296:30-35). 'I will not deny that I had a tendency to grievous faults, but literary studies kept me from many vices. I have never been a slave to pleasures, though I was once inclined to them. Drunkenness and debauchery have always disgusted me and I have avoided them' (296:42-56).




He remained in the monastery for several years, reading very widely. Then he became secretary to a French bishop, so it was not until 1495, when he was 26 years old, that he entered the university of Paris. And by that time he had educated himself so thoroughly that he was more a teacher than a learner, inspiring others not only by his warm

friendship and disciplined life but also by his encyclopaedic knowledge of Latin language and literature, including Church Fathers as well as classical authors. ‘Jerome was a favourite in my adolescence,’ he said later (1451:154), and ‘when I was a boy Cicero attracted me less than Seneca. I was almost twenty before I could bear to read Cicero at any length, although I liked almost all other writers’ (1390:113-115).



In his time, western Europe was dominated by the Catholic Church, whose bishops, priests, monks, and monasteries were prominent all over the continent. Inheriting this tradition, so powerful and successful for over a thousand years, Erasmus was automatically Christianized, but during the century in which he was born that great renewal of the mind known as the Renaissance had influenced the thinking of the intelligentsia. Impressive pre-Christian Latin and Greek writings had been rediscovered, encouraging scholars to go back to earlier sources and quickening a sense that medieval ecclesiastical authors did not have a monopoly of wisdom. A new humanism had developed which was not anti-Christian but laid its emphasis on man rather than God, on earth in preference to heaven, and on secular interests instead of predominantly religious considerations.

And the international language of Christendom was Latin. Boys who went to school spent a lot of their time not only in mastering Latin grammar and literature but also in learning to speak it. So educated people, no matter where they came from or what their mother tongue, could talk to one another and write to one another in Latin. Though he was studying in Paris, Erasmus needed only a smattering of French, for the University used Latin.



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In addition to this linguistic unity, Erasmus had the good fortune to be born fifteen years after the invention of printing. By the time he was needing them a new race of technicians had arisen, the great early printers, putting an end to the countless centuries when every single book had to be written out separately by hand. So, as the year 1500 approached, the prevailing religious uniformity, the opening of minds thanks to the Renaissance, the Latin language, and the printers offered a wide prospect of influence which no one was to exploit more effectively than that unwanted boy who had been a scholar from the cradle.




About thirty of the letters he wrote as a teenager have survived the centuries. ‘For some inexplicable reason I do not become wearied by continuous letter-writing but am rather filled with an ardent desire to go on with it. The more I write, the more I wish to write.’ He was well aware that ‘the two famous Fathers of the Church, Augustine and Jerome, managed never to lack each other’s presence because they exchanged letters, each placing his mind and feelings at the other’s disposal’ (23:4-15).

Alluding to ‘the paths I myself have followed from boyhood’, he gave advice to fellow-students in Paris. ‘Your first endeavour should be to choose the most learned teacher you can find, for it is impossible that one who is himself no scholar should make a scholar of anyone else. As soon as you find him, make every effort to see that he acquires the feelings of a father towards you. Your friendship with him is of such importance as an aid to learning that it will be of no avail to you to have a tutor at all unless, by the same token, you have a friend. Secondly, be regular in your work. Regularity produces by daily practice a greater result

than you would suppose. But nothing is worse than excess, so you should from time to time abate the strenuousness of your studies by recreation. Indeed, a constant element of enjoyment must be mingled with study, so that we think of learning as a game rather than drudgery. Remember to devote part of your time to silent thought; in addition, the contest of minds wrestling together is specially stimulating to the sinews of human understanding. Don't be ashamed to ask questions or to be put right. Avoid working at night. Daybreak is an excellent time for study. After lunch take some recreation or go for a walk. Just before you go to sleep read something of exquisite quality. Let sleep overtake you while you are musing on it and try to recall it when you wake. Choose the best authors for your reading, avoiding like the plague those who are lax and indecent, specially at your present time of life, which is instinctively lewd and prone less to follow the good than the evil way' (56, 63:37-43).

In his many surviving letters from those days he rarely mentioned God apart from formal expressions like 'God forbid', preferring to speak impersonally of Heaven, Providence, or Nature, occasionally of fate, or 'some deity'. When he recovered from a severe fever he was grateful 'for the aid of St. Geneviève, the famous virgin whose bones daily radiate miracles', and looking back over 'all the troubles that have from boyhood beset me' he professed not to be sure whether they were 'due to God's command or the influence of my birth-star' (50:5-7, 31:6-8), but in other moods persistent ill-health made him long for 'a life wherein I may in sanctified leisure devote all my time to God and meditate on holy writ' (74:6-8). 'As I reflect on the eminence of our friend Erasmus,' wrote an Italian



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lecturer in 1498, ‘not only in learning but in a life transparently free from every vice, I cannot refrain from rejoicing. What is better or finer, or indeed more divine, than to discover so great a man, resplendent in dazzling gifts of both literary skills and moral character in this age of ours which is so slothful and corrupt, so detestable?’ (84:1-15).


Though he claimed to set high value on the Bible (48:4), in his correspondence in these years he hardly ever referred to it apart from a few sayings of proverbial type such as ‘a dog returns to its vomit’. He made no mention of what it teaches us to believe or do, yet in the same letters he quoted classical authors hundreds of times. Lines from Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Terence, Ovid, Juvenal, Quintilian, Seneca and Pliny sprang automatically to his mind. He advised people to carry Cicero’s books everywhere with them as their constant companion, yet he scarcely mentioned the name of Christ.

He knew perfectly well that other young men in ‘the dangerous phase of adolescence’ (147:44-45) were ‘wallowing in bestial self-indulgence without regard for decency or virtue, attending to dance and song as if we were born for play and amusement, roaming the streets by night, succumbing to drinking bouts and enslaved to mistresses, the most demanding tyrants of all’ (35:54-69). But from his childhood he had enjoyed hard work and daily he reaped its benefits. ‘I cannot admire you when the only thing you lack is the will to work,’ he said to one of his friends. ‘It is your own help you need first of all. You need expect no god or man to help you if you fail yourself. You must check and restrain the immoderate desires of your time of life, if you cannot altogether repress them, which

is scarcely possible for a human being. You know what I mean' (15:4-66, 16:38-41).

He was criticised for advocating the plays of Terence by those who felt they contained nothing but immoral love affairs between young people which could only corrupt the reader's mind, but he disagreed. 'I am convinced that the comedies of Terence, read in the proper way, not only have no tendency to subvert men's morals but even afford great assistance in reforming them, for they inculcate the lesson that love is a most unhappy business, like a disease, treacherous, full of madness' (31:60-81). He maintained that true 'lovers of books are not those who keep their books on shelves and never handle them, but those who day and night thumb them, batter them, wear them out, and fill up the margins with notes' (31:35-38). That was how he had long been treating the works of Jerome, the outstanding Christian author living in Bethlehem eleven hundred years previously. 'To shock us out of our lethargy and awaken drowsy readers to study the inner meaning of the Scriptures, there is no class of author which Jerome did not use. Like a bee that flies from flower to flower, he collected the best of everything to make the honey stored in his books. I not only read his letters but copied all of them out with my own hands' (396:214-220, 22:22-23). Indeed Jerome became his model, his surrogate father.

Chronically short of funds, he made money by helping rich students in their work, including a young Englishman, Lord Mountjoy, who was to be tutor to the son of King Henry VII. In May 1499 Mountjoy took him over to London, where he not only met the nine year old boy who was one day to be Henry VIII but also Thomas More, the future Chancellor, who remained his close friend



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throughout life. And he spent two months in Oxford. John Colet, whose father had twice been Lord Mayor of London, had moved to Oxford after studying in Italy. ‘It was here that I first knew him, for some good fortune had brought me there at the same time. He was about thirty, a few months younger than I. He was giving public lectures on all the Epistles of St. Paul’ (1211:310-314). Having heard glowing reports of Erasmus in Paris, Colet invited him ‘to share in this grand undertaking by lecturing on old Moses or on that elegant stylist Isaiah’. But Erasmus declined. ‘I have learned to live with myself and I am only too well aware of my inadequacy. I am not yet qualified to work with you. Your proposal is too great for my powers. But nothing could afford me greater pleasure than daily debates between us on the subject of holy writ’ (108:84-128).


In the course of these debates Erasmus revealed a wealth of Christian conviction and understanding impossible to deduce from his correspondence prior to 1500. He brilliantly corrected Colet on the meaning of Christ’s words ‘let this cup pass from me’, insisting that they express ‘a natural human aversion to death’, for he was truly man as well as truly God, who then by his death reconciled fallen mankind to his Father, and as our redeemer revealed his love and mercy, setting us an example of obedience. ‘Our Lord’s purpose was to be a pattern of gentleness, mildness and patience’ (109:62-3, 104-5).

Though he repeatedly differed from Colet during those few weeks, they became friends for life and Colet’s letters were an inspiration to him. ‘My dear Erasmus, of books and knowledge there is no end. Nothing can be better, in view of this brief life of ours, than that we should live a holy and pure life, using our best endeavours every day to

become perfected. In my opinion we shall achieve this only by the fervent love and imitation of Jesus. Let us therefore take the short road to the truth. I mean to do this as far as in me lies' (593:18-25).

'I never found a place I like so much' was Erasmus' verdict after eight months in England, but as he was leaving the country on January 27, 1500, customs officers confiscated almost all the money he had hoped to take back to France. 'I lost twenty pounds on Dover beach, all I had in the world, shipwrecked before I even got on board.'

After crossing the Channel, he reached Amiens on his way to Paris, 'so exhausted from travelling that I was alarmed I might fall ill'. Noticing a signboard 'Horses for Hire', he turned in and the hirer was called. 'We agreed on a price, but he asked me what sort of currency he was to be given. I showed him the coins I had and he kept the finest for himself. I hired two horses and rode off about evening accompanied by a youth whom he claimed was his son-in-law, who was to bring the animals back. The beast on which I sat had a huge open sore on its neck. The youth asked permission to ride pillion behind me, saying the horse was used to carrying two riders. I allowed it and we began to talk of many things. He entertained no very high opinion of his father-in-law. The next day, long before nightfall we reached the village of Saint Just. I recommended going ahead but the youth made excuses, saying the horses should not be taxed beyond their strength. We had almost finished our supper when the servant-woman called the youth aside, alleging that one of the horses was in trouble. Then, to my great surprise, the hirer himself came into the dining-room. I asked what had happened. He said his daughter, the youth's wife, had been so severely kicked by a horse that



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she was almost at death's door. I began to detect an odour of fiction about this story and noticed a shiftiness in the hirer and dullness in the youth' (119;11-64), so he carefully barricaded his door that night. Such travels were invaluable to him, taking him away from his books and into the lives of ordinary people, whose experiences and thinking he was to capture so successfully in years to come.

Although he was not at all well in Paris after the hardships he had endured travelling on sea and land in winter, he succeeded in completing a book he had begun long before. 'As I was suffering from a persistent fever I had to dictate the work instead of writing it myself. Nevertheless I do not altogether despair, for I trust in St. Geneviève, whose ready help I have more than once enjoyed, particularly since I have also enjoyed the services of a highly-skilled physician. If we have received the gift of life from the Supreme Creator of the universe, yet it is by a physician's care that it is preserved. He, as it were, gives us our lives again, so he deserves to be regarded as a sort of god on earth' (124:15-19, 126:12-15).

This book, *Adages*, was to make him famous. A kind of summary of pre-Christian wisdom, it was a collection of 819 quotations, proverbs, and anecdotes out of the Latin classics, each with his own explanation and comments. In subsequent editions over many years he kept enlarging the book till it embraced 3,600 sayings. In due time the Venetian ambassador in London was to express the reaction of eminent people all over western Europe. 'I continue my daily reading of your *Adages* with the greatest pleasure, dear Erasmus, chuckling as I find myself throwing over all the things that used to satisfy me. And though the *Adages* you have got together are quite delightful, a great help to



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both learning and liveliness, yet what you add to them is far better still. The scholarship, the variety, the force, the abundance of the language, the delightful gaiety which beguiles the reader with its wit and refreshes his weariness, all this is quite extraordinary. If your work were compared with the classical writers, at no point would a fair-minded reader not prefer your modern inspiration to their ancient majesty. You have given so much new brilliance to the Latin language that I think you have done more to make it new and splendid than it has done to make you famous' (591:40-55, 66-68). Erasmus lived to see the book republished at least twenty-six times.

