



Erasmus of Rotterdam

A Portrait

CHRISTINE CHRIST-VON WEDEL



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Acknowledgements

It was a great pleasure, after decades of intensive engagement with Erasmus' writings, to summarize my researches in this booklet, to combine serious with amusing topics in a manner that parallels Erasmus' own ironic approach, and thus to provide an introduction to the life and work of the great biblical humanist. I would like to thank the cartoonist Albert de Pury and my publisher, the Schwabe Verlag, now headed by Susanne Franzkeit, and especially Marianne Wackernagel, who helped to shape this book, first published in German in 2016, in our preliminary discussions. Albert de Pury chose as the subject of his cartoons the relationship between Erasmus and the reformer Martin Luther. The two men, whose influence endures to the present day, never met in person, but exchanged letters and apologiae. Their exchanges were courteous at first, then increasingly overshadowed by hatred and antagonism. Yet there was much that connected the two men. Both engaged throughout their lives in the study of the Bible, both devoted their efforts to bringing about a much-desired reformation of the church and society, and both were exceptionally gifted intellectually and in their command of language. The difference in their respective characters was irreconcilable, however. Albert de Pury focused his cartoons on this aspect since the contrast in character points to the most striking and progressive features of Erasmus' work.

I would like to thank Erika Rummel, the well-known Erasmus specialist, for suggesting an English edition of this portrait of Erasmus. She not only suggested the idea but immediately set about translating the book, and giving it a new glow and polish.

Life-long Erasmian studies first linked me to Erika Rummel. Thus this English portrait of Erasmus is the result of fruitful research going beyond national borders, an idea fostered by Erasmus himself and as such recommended to English readers.

Christine Christ-von Wedel
Basel, March 2020

I: Youth

Erasmus was the second son of a priest and a physician's daughter. He was embarrassed by his illegitimate birth and kept it secret as far as possible. He covered it up with the romantic tale of a clandestine engagement between his parents: They were prevented from marrying because the family expected Erasmus' father to enter the priesthood. In despair, the young man bade his fiancée farewell and travelled to Rome where he eked out a living as a copyist. At the time of his departure, his fiancée had been pregnant, and the family wrote to him that she died. In his grief he committed his life to God and was ordained. When he realized that he had been deceived it was too late.¹ That was Erasmus' version of the events. Clearly he did not lack dramatic flair and knew how to pull emotional strings, but he did lack self-assurance. Others openly admitted their illegitimate birth since it was a common belief in early modern Europe that bastards were especially energetic and talented. The illegitimate children of popes and princes obtained honour and glory and were proud of their origins, and the sons of priests often acknowledged their illegitimate birth as well.² Not so Erasmus. He kept his contemporaries in the dark about his origins although he claimed that his *character was straightforward and his dislike of falsehood such that even as a child he hated other boys who told lies, and in old age even the sight of such people affected him physically*.³

1 CWE Ep 1437:237–64.

2 See Simona Slanicka: "Bastarde als Grenzgänger, Kreuzfahrer und Eroberer. Von der mittelalterlichen Alexanderrezeption bis zu Juan de Austria", *Werkstatt Geschichte* 51 (2009) 5–22.

3 CWE Ep 1437:387–90.

Historians, however, exposed his account as fiction and proved that he was in fact the second child of the couple. Yet we should accept Erasmus' self-portrait as a lover of truth in the sense that he was outspoken and loved clarity. He detested darkness and obscurity and had no patience with secret doctrines and secret societies. He ridiculed alchemy, magic, and astrology at a time when many were drawn to hermetic doctrines. Magical thinking dominated the natural sciences, and even celebrated theologians and reformers like Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon were fascinated by them, practiced astrology, and believed in stories of witchcraft.⁴ Erasmus, by contrast, made fun of magic and declared in a *Colloquy* of 1531: *Some people seek happiness by magic arts, some from the stars. I believe, for my part, that a person can find no surer road to happiness than by avoiding the kind of life from which he instinctively recoils and by following that to which he is attracted (always excluding what is dishonourable).*⁵ He rejected cabalistic teachings, which became popular in his time as the knowledge of Hebrew became more widespread among scholars. Luther likewise rejected cabalistic teachings – for theological reasons –⁶ whereas Erasmus rejected them because they were too obscure for his liking. He declared that Hebrew writings were *full of the most tedious fabrication, spreading a kind of fog over everything, Talmud, Cabala, Tetragrammaton, Gates of Light, words, words, words.*⁷

Erasmus loved cleanliness as much as he loved clarity. Indeed, being rather anxious and a hypochondriac, he insisted on cleanliness. He spoke with great indignation about grimy inns in Germany, where guests were often forced to sit close to each other in crowded taprooms. He complained about bedding left unchanged and water for washing his hands so dirty that he had to demand a fresh supply to wash off the filth.⁸ He lamented: *But nothing seems to me more dangerous than for so many persons to breathe the*

4 For Erasmus see ASD I–5, 366:86–88 and 725:173–177; ASD IV–1 A, 97:362–370. For Luther's views on witchcraft see WA Tr 2, nr. 3979, p. 51–2. For Melanchthon on astrology see Beate Kobler: *Die Entstehung des negativen Melanchthonbildes*, Tübingen 2014, 410–20.

5 CWE 40, 1046.

6 WA 2, 491:7–9.

7 CWE Ep 798:21–3.

8 ASD I–3, 335.

same warm air, especially when their bodies are relaxed and they've eaten together and stayed in the same place a good many hours. Quite apart from the belching of garlic, the breaking of wind, the stinking breaths, many persons suffer from hidden diseases, and every disease is contagious. Undoubtedly many have the Spanish or, as some call it, French pox [syphilis, newly introduced from America and rapidly spreading in Europe], though it's common to all countries. In my opinion, there's almost as much danger from these men as from lepers. Just imagine, now, how great the risk of plague.⁹ In another Colloquy which dramatized the effects of syphilis, Erasmus expressed his fear of contagion in extreme terms, allowing one of the speakers to suggest euthanasia to root out the disease. At the very least those infected with syphilis should be treated like lepers, he said, and kept from associating with healthy people.¹⁰ Conversely Erasmus praised French inns. There, he said, you were always surrounded by *laughing, jolly, sportive girls. They asked of their own accord if we had any dirty clothes; they washed them and brought them back – clean. In short, we saw nothing there but women and girls except in the stable, though often girls invaded even that. They embrace the departing guests and take leave of them as affectionately as if they were all brothers or close relatives.*¹¹

Erasmus demanded cleanliness of body and clarity of spirit, and yet he himself was a master of equivocation. He liked to keep questions, especially questions of faith, unresolved. His readers (then and now) generally understood what he meant and where his sympathies lay. But unlike his contemporaries who were firm in their teachings, Erasmus thought it preferable to leave questions open-ended. He was no liar, even if he covered up his illegitimate birth with a sentimental story seeking to preserve the honour of his parents, whom he lost in early childhood. A feeling of shame prevented him from confidently admitting his illegitimate birth, he admitted. He shied away from such revelations because of a *maidenly bashfulness*.¹² His sensitivity may also have hampered his forming friendships at school. At any rate, he

⁹ CWE 39, 372.

¹⁰ ASD I–3, 597:224–231.

¹¹ CWE 39, 370.

¹² CWE Ep 145:155, see also Ep 447:501–510.

described his school years as an unhappy and wasted time. The philosophy of education prevalent at the time may have aggravated his discomfort. Teachers were advised to break a child's will with floggings.

In later life Erasmus offered drastic descriptions of the cruel methods used in schools, which followed the Old Testament counsel *Whoever spares the rod, spoils the child* (Prov 13:24). *So schools have become torture-chambers* Erasmus wrote; *you hear nothing but the thudding of the stick, the swishing of the rod, howling and moaning, and shouts of brutal abuse*.¹³ Erasmus himself had suffered accordingly. One of his teachers, he tells us, used a pretext to beat him thoroughly to break his will. This treatment ruined his joy of learning, plunged him into a deep depression and brought on a fever that almost killed him. Yet Erasmus was filled with a zeal for learning. Studies in ancient literature attracted him even as a youth, he revealed in later life.¹⁴ He shared this love with his father, he said.¹⁵ But according to Erasmus' testimony, it was only toward the end of his school years that teachers showed an understanding for his love and promoted his studies.¹⁶ Of course "humanism" of the sixteenth century – the term humanism was coined only in the 19th century – meant more than a love for ancient languages and classical authors. It also meant a new approach to texts. Many classical writings reached Italy only after the Fall of Constantinople, when they were brought along by refugees and translated into Latin. The number of people who admired antiquity grew, and they seized not only more on classical texts but also read the works differently than medieval scholars. The appeal *Ad fontes* – back to the sources – meant treating old texts in a completely new manner, even texts that had been known for a long time. The followers of the *studia humanitatis* had no qualms about reading non-Christian authors and taking their inspiration from them. They read them as authentic texts and for their own sake, without rushing to Christianize them or rejecting them as

¹³ CWE 26, 325.

¹⁴ H 135.

¹⁵ See J.K. Sowards: "The Youth of Erasmus. Some Considerations", *ERSY* 9 (1989) 1–2.

¹⁶ Allen I, 48:34–39 and 57:11–28. On the influence of Hegius, Synthen, and Agricola see Richard J. Schoeck: *Erasmus Grandescens. The Growth of a Humanist's Mind and Spirituality*, Nieuwkoop 1988, 40–46.

pagan. They wanted to understand the meaning of classical writers and indeed to learn from them. Most humanists were convinced that the wisdom and virtue of antiquity could be combined with Christian values, that they might be sources of inspiration and guide them back to a pristine form of Christianity. Did not Socrates' love of the truth, Cato's uprightness, and the practical wisdom of Cicero put contemporary Christians to shame? they asked. Did they not inspire reform? They pointed a finger at the monasteries, which had become too detached from the world by the end of the 15th century, at the inflexible doctrines of scholastic theologians, at the corrupt and power-hungry prelates of the church – could they not learn from classical antiquity to adopt a completely new *modus vivendi*, embracing the world cheerfully and energetically, imitating Christ in the love he showed for his neighbour? In his writings, Plato placed spirit above matter. Could those writings not serve as inspiration to many contemporaries and motivate them to change their approach to religion, which encouraged external rites and the display of wealth in churches, and guide them to an inner and life-changing piety? Such questions were current in the Renaissance and prompted the representatives of the new intellectual movement to take up the fight against institutions and promote a new age, a “golden age”, celebrated by the ancient poets and demanded by the New Testament in its own way – an age of peace, justice, and liberty which replaced self-centredness and thirst for power with the rule of love.

Here we must emphasize the essential Christian nature of Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Church shaped political and social life. Christian usage and ceremonies surrounded everyone from cradle to grave. Atheism hardly existed, and was certainly not expressed openly. Erasmus was occasionally labelled an atheist by his critics, but wrongly so. He represented a Christian form of humanism. Indeed, anyone reducing Erasmus to the status of a secular humanist, may still benefit from his writings, but would not do justice to the man or his time, or understand his most profound motives.

Erasmus' parents died in 1484 of the plague, that cruel epidemic which spread and terrorized many places, often decimating the population of cities and villages and resulting in economic crises and starvation. Orphaned, Erasmus was pressured by his guardians in 1487 to enter a monastery at Steyn, an Augustinian foundation near Gouda. At that time the young man was already an enthusiastic student of the new humanistic learning. With like-

minded brethren he spent day and night reading the classics he encountered in the monastery library: Ovid, Horace, Terence, Virgil, and Statius. Full of vigour, the young monks sought to bring to life the “golden age” of classical poetry. It was a time of youthful exuberance. Yet Erasmus also composed a rhetorical piece during his novitiate about the fleeting nature of the world and his own life, and wrote plaintively that he had seen nothing in his time but *civil war, starvation, and pestilence*.¹⁷ He contrasted the misery of the world with the wonderful kingdom of God: Everything passes, but God is eternal.¹⁸ This theme also runs through the poems he wrote during his time in the monastery, but being a young man, he did not draw the conclusion that one must therefore lead a life of repentance and contrition. On the contrary, his motto was *carpe diem*,¹⁹ make good use of your time while you are young. Erasmus used his time to paraphrase Vergil’s third *Eclogue*, in which Menalcas sings of his homoerotic love for the youth Amyntas, though he also mentions the beautiful Phyllis and eulogizes his patron Maecenas. Erasmus composed a new version in artful Vergilian hexameters interspersed with iambic verses, making Amyntas the speaker. Erasmus’ Amyntas jeers Menalcas, describing him as a calculating and changeable man, who wasn’t worth a flock of wool to him.²⁰ Erasmus also made use of the characters Acis, Galatea, and Polyphemus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. He composed verses about the complaints of jealous Acis (called *Rosphamus* in his poem), even though it was well understood that Galatea (*Gunifolda*) was not chasing after fat, old Polyphemus, who pursued her, and instead loved the handsome Acis, who was transformed into a river and thus united with her.²¹

The letters exchanged between Erasmus and his friends are filled with yearning and expressions of friendship. This raises the question of Erasmus’ sexual leanings. He has been labelled a homophile, but there is no cogent argument for historians to interpret the letters in this sense. Expressions of endearment were common in the letters of humanists. Indeed Ulrich Zwin-

17 ASD V–1, 56:473–80.

18 ASD I–7, nr. 108 and nr. 105.

19 See Christine Christ-von Wedel: *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Anwalt eines neuzeitlichen Christentums*, Münster 2003, 26–7.

20 Oda amatoria, ASD I–7, 330–332, nr. 103.

21 CWE 85, Poem 102.

gli, who became the reformer of Zurich, wrote in the same yearning tone to Erasmus in 1516. Zwingli, however, was decidedly heterosexual. His amatory exploits in Glarus were notorious. He contracted a clandestine marriage, which he later made official, and fathered four children. As for Erasmus, his sexuality remains in question. He was effusive about the charms of English women, calling them *nymphs of divine appearance*, and was admonished by a friend not to waste his time on love affairs,²² but he was also accused of being too close to one of his male students. In 1498 he wrote an enthusiastic praise of marriage, in which he spoke approvingly of the sex drive as a force of nature which must not and could not be suppressed, and advocated marriage for priests. In 1525 he declared that priests who could not be celibate should be allowed to marry. Yet he expressed indignation that the young leaders of the Reformation were seemingly unable to curb their sexual desires and proceeded to marry.²³ In later years, no one, not even Erasmus' sharpest critics, expressed doubts about his unexceptional celibate life. Clearly the mature Erasmus was able to sublimate his sexual desires. Could that explain the large body of his scholarly work?

²² CWE Epp 83:42 and 103:18.

²³ See Christ-von Wedel: *Erasmus of Rotterdam. Advocate of a New Christianity*, (Erasmus studies), Toronto 2013, 41–2, 186.

II: Studying and teaching

Erasmus soon made a name for himself as a writer. He had the ability to apply his readings to his own works and to phrase them in classical Latin. As a result Heinrich von Bergen, Bishop of Cambrai, summoned the young man, who had been ordained in 1492, to accompany him to Rome. He hoped that Erasmus' elegant style would further his intentions and ambitions. The planned journey to Rome came to nothing, however. Yet Erasmus did not return to the monastery. The bishop arranged for him to study in Paris, lodging him in the Collège de Montaigu, a strictly conducted residence for young students. Erasmus detested the communal, almost cloistered, life with its constraints and ascetic rules, which were mercilessly enforced even with corporal punishment. Erasmus' contemporary, François Rabelais referred to it as a *lousy college* and pitied the wretched students there who *lived a life worse than galley slaves*.²⁴ Yet we know that a generation later John Calvin, the reformer of Geneva, and Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, felt comfortable there. Erasmus at any rate was not willing to put up with the strict discipline and the rotten eggs served at the Collège, which made him seriously ill. We may credit his dissatisfaction and departure with the production of subsequent years. Leaving the Collège, he earned his living as a tutor, an activity that resulted in the publication of a number of educational texts.

In his new career Erasmus taught young men from good families and shared their boarding arrangements. Although he was poor, he showed a sense of humour. In one of his letters he caricatured his role in a tiff between the landlady and her maid: *The battle we saw today was that of a battle royal between a housewife and her maidservant. The trumpet had sounded repeat-*

24 *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, I.37.