

The life of Erasmus¹

Gerrit Gerritsoon was born most probably in 1466, in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. He later adopted a Latin name Desiderius Erasmus. He was the second illegitimate son of a physician's daughter named Margaret and a young man called Gerard who became a priest. As a priest, Gerard could not marry Margaret.

Erasmus was educated in schools run by a group called the 'Brethren of the Common Life', first in Gouda and later in Deventer. Erasmus later criticized his school days as barbaric and textbooks as antiquated. But writings through his life reflect the simple piety of the Brethren.

At 14 Erasmus was left an orphan. He was sent to another school in Bois-le-Duc, but after 2 years returned to Gouda. By this stage the money bequeathed by his parents was almost finished, so he was pressed to enter a monastery at Steyn, and later took a lifelong vow, which he afterwards bitterly regretted. The monastic discipline of prayer hindered his studies for once awake he could not sleep again and lost precious time by involuntary dozing. He was a budding classical Latin and Greek scholar, translating and interpreting works, and writing in an elegant manner. At the same time he showed an enthusiasm for Biblical studies.

In 1492 Erasmus was ordained a priest. His proficiency in Latin prompted Henry of Bergen, Bishop of Cumbrai, to employ him as a secretary to write speeches and letters. The Bishop permitted Erasmus to attend the University of Paris from 1495, to study theology, which he found boring. To his disappointment, the lecturers did not reference the so-called 'New Learning' - a new way of thinking based on the critical analysis of classical Greek and Latin scholars. He loved the classics, and Paris offered stimulation. The city was embracing the Renaissance - the Humanists aimed to recapture the spirit of ancient Rome and Greece.

Erasmus had pupils of different nationalities while at Paris (three English, two German, a Scot) - reflecting his growing fame as a scholar and teacher. However, he always had few pupils to keep commitments to a minimum so he remained free to pursue his own studies.

In 1499 Erasmus accepted an invitation by Lord Mountjoy to travel to England and was welcomed as a classical scholar. In the autumn Erasmus moved to Oxford, where he met John Colet who was interpreting the letters of St Paul through the mind of St Paul - a new approach that allowed Erasmus to broaden his own horizons. He saw that he could use his knowledge of the classics to reinterpret the writings of the early Christians so that ordinary men and women could understand them. In December 1499, he traveled back to London, and hence back to continental Europe - unfortunately all his savings were confiscated in accordance with 'currency regulations' - a loss that would have profound consequences. Back in Paris, in order to keep himself and pay for books he had to turn to classical scholarship to earn a living. Erasmus wrote his first edition of *Adages* - a work that was meant to be both amusing and useful. Each adage had a comment or criticism of society. He tried to '...mix learning with pleasure in order to refresh the wearied reader'.

¹ Information derived from:

Devonshire Jones, R., 1968. Erasmus and Luther. Clarendon Biographies.
Huizinga, J., 1952. Erasmus of Rotterdam. Phaidon Press.

During this period he would intermittently leave Paris to escape the regular outbreaks of the plague. He worked on interpreting the epistle of St Jerome and also wrote *Enchiridion militis Christiani* – a book which recommended a thorough grounding in the classics in order to prepare the mind for the message of Christ. Erasmus stressed the need for inward piety, condemned pilgrimages and the veneration of relics, and criticised the religious practice of indulgences, whereby one could buy, in advance, a parchment that a believer allowed “all your sins and offences to be washed away”. This was 16 years before Luther made a similar critical attack in Germany.

He spent the winter of 1502 in a monastery in St Omer and in the late summer of 1502 moved to Louvain, where he was offered a Chair. In order to maintain his independence, he as usual, declined. His income at this time came from gifts of various patrons, to whom he dedicated his translations of various Greek authors.

In the winter of 1504 he traveled back to Paris. The following autumn of 1505 saw Erasmus again in England, this time at Lord Mountjoy’s house in London, where he worked on his Latin version of the New Testament, and earned fees from translations and dedications of works to wealthy patrons.

His goal had for a long time been to visit Italy, and in June 1506 an opportunity arose through the Italian physician of Henry VII, who needed a scholar to accompany his two sons and their tutor on a visit to Italy. En route he stayed in Paris for a few weeks to consign his latest works to printers. The Dutchman stayed in Bologna for a year, supervising his students, and updating the popular *Adages*. He came into contact with Aldus from Venice, who was printing cheaper versions of the Greek classics, and moved to Venice to lodge with his new printer. At this time, many scholars lived in the same town as their printer in order to supervise the progress of their works through the printing process, and successful printers frequently had a large entourage of scholars, providing a lively and stimulating environment.

The winter of 1508 was spent in Padua, tutoring Alexander Stuart, the natural son of James IV of Scotland. Erasmus arrived in the spring of 1509 in Rome, where he was much impressed by the libraries, as well as the warm welcome by the prelates and scholars. He was offered an office at the papal court if he would remain in Rome, but again to avoid commitment, he moved back to England in the summer of 1509. On route he conceived the famous “The Praise of Folly” where he used satire to cleverly mock pompous and hollow institutions and behaviour.

In August 1511 he moved to Cambridge from London, and stayed another 3 years. He was offered a Chair in Divinity, a lectureship in Greek, and finally in 1513 a church benefice as Rector of Aldingham, a living which he commuted to a pension of 20 pounds, since Erasmus, who knew no English, could not be expected to minister to his parishioners. The New Learning was slowly taking hold, but classes were small. He continued his translations and interpretations of the New Testament, and wrote the third edition of the *Adages*.

In 1513, Henry VIII invaded France. The Scots were beaten by the English in battle near Flodden. Erasmus, who was a pacifist and hated war, did not share the English rejoicing. In January 1514, he departed England for Basle. His *Adages*, as well as new Latin and Greek versions of the New Testament and letters of St Jerome made him the acknowledged scholar

of northern Europe. He dedicated the New Testament to the Pope, who subsequently released him from his lifelong vows. Importantly the Pope also allowed him to accept benefices of the Church which had been offered to him, but which he was debarred from receiving on account of illegitimate birth.

Erasmus was now secure – he had a regular income, was in no danger of being recalled to his monastery, and could legally accept benefices. By December 1517, Erasmus longed for peace and retirement, but the Reformation process was beginning to turn Europe upside down, and at its centre was an obscure Augustian friar called Martin Luther. To guard his independence, Erasmus left the Netherlands in 1521 for Basle. Unlike Luther, Erasmus had no intention of becoming a martyr to the Reformation. Erasmus was forced to take a stand against Luther from his base in Switzerland, where he had gone to avoid the conflicts surrounding Luther. In 1524 he abandoned his neutral position and attacked Luther's viewpoint that a human being of his own free-will can do nothing towards his own salvation. Erasmus' Renaissance view was that man is free to determine his own fate (see *Discourse on the Freedom of Will*), while Luther's Reformation belief was that God determines everything. In 1529, with Basle on the point of civil war, the Reformer's popular rising put an end to Catholic resistance; Catholic worship was suppressed. Erasmus departed from Basle on 13 April 1529, and moved to Frieburg, Austria.

In Freiburg, the frail 65 year old Erasmus continued to write, but was worried by thieves who stole his valuables, and was disturbed by the relentless opposition of monks and theologians. He returned to Basle in 1535, and died on 12 July 1536.

Erasmus was a catalyst of the Renaissance in Europe, who contributed to scholarship by fostering the 'New Learning'. In particular, through his published work he allowed non-specialists access to the language, literature and ideals of classical antiquity. By ridiculing ignorance and superstition, and by reviving sound learning and teaching in an innovative manner, he hoped to eradicate abuse by the Church and civilize society through educational reform. As a European, Erasmus lived and traveled throughout the continent, and used the latest technology of his day (the printing press) to circulate his ideas, and make an independent living. He was an internationalist, who had no interest in destroying the unity of Europe. Erasmus' reform could only take place slowly; violence and populists had no place in his world. Finally, Erasmus and his contemporaries were able to communicate using the *lingua franca* of the day – namely Latin.

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