

Erasmus c.1447-1536

On the Fringe of the Reformation

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in the 1460s, possibly 1467. It is disputed. He was christened Herasmus, but later preferred to use Desiderius, the Latinized form. He was sent to a school in Gouda, northeast of Rotterdam, and then to the school at Deventer run by the Brethren of the Common Life, a Roman Catholic community with Pietist leanings. From there he went to the Augustinian canons at St. Gregory's, Steyn, near Gouda. Here he was exposed to the Classics and the Church Fathers. He joined the order in 1486 and in 1492 he was ordained a priest. The decision to go to Steyn might have been that of his guardians¹, because Erasmus was not suited to community life.

Things began to look up when in 1493 he became Latin secretary to Hendrik van Bergen, the Bishop of Cambrai. Hendrik was chancellor of the order of the Golden Fleece in the court of Burgundy. This move promised to be much more interesting, with the prospect of travel. But the bishop's career did not meet its promise, so, in 1495 Erasmus left for the University of Paris. There he learned that he thoroughly disliked theology.

Possibly through the offices of Bishop Hendrik, Erasmus was released from his obligations to the Augustinians.

¹ Both parents died of the plague.



Erasmus by Hans Holbein the Younger



Remnants of Medieval Rotterdam



City Hall, Gouda, 1450

University of Paris and London

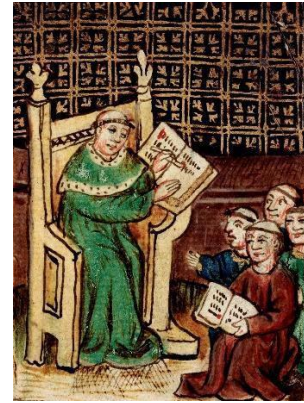
While at the University, Erasmus met William Blount, 4th Earl of Montjoy, one of the wealthiest men in England, a humanist, scholar and patron of learning. By now, Erasmus was taking students for the income, and he became Blount's tutor. Erasmus accompanied Blount to England in 1499. While in England he became acquainted with Sir Thomas More, John Colet, founder of St. Paul's School, London.

Travels

Back in Paris in 1500 Erasmus published his first collection of proverbs, *Adagiorum Collectanea*, which he dedicated to Mountjoy. Then he traveled to France and the Low Countries before returning to England where he was the guest of Sir Thomas More, with whom he collaborated on several texts. After this he was off to Venice for a publishing project, then back to England and the More house where he composed *In Praise of Folly*, printed and published 1511 by Johann Froben.

Erasmus at Cambridge

Erasmus met Bishop John Fisher (the future Catholic martyr) while in England. Fisher introduced him to Cambridge University. Erasmus lectured at Queens College, Cambridge from approximately 1509 to 1511, between travels. He was their first foreign professor (Greek) and his international reputation was a bonus. He may have begun his translation of the Greek New Testament while in residence at Cambridge.



A Parisian scholar and students
by Gautier de Metz, 1464.

*Title page
of 1511
first
edition of
In Praise of
Folly.*



Aids for Students

Erasmus' *Adagia*, first published in 1500, is an annotated collection of Greek and Latin proverbs. His *Colloquia*, first published in the 1490s, is a collection of dialogues in Latin used as exercises for his students. Between 1522 and 1533 twelve editions of his *Colloquia* appeared for use in schools.

Erasmus and the Reformation

Erasmus attempted to distance himself from the Reformation, but it was gaining strength. His allegiance to his own church was questioned by the Inquisition in Valladolid, Spain, leading him to write an *Apology*.

In *Praise of Folly* he satirized many things in the Church, and he was inclined to write questionable statements such as this in a book on the education of children: “*After you have taught them these things, and they believe what you have taught them, have repented their previous lives, and are ready to embrace the doctrine of the gospel, then immerse them in water, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*” Sounds like *believer’s baptism*.

Erasmus wrote of Luther: “*He is so great that I can write nothing against him. . . I have taught well nigh all that Luther teaches but less violently.*” Luther did not return the compliment. He wrote to Zwingli: “*[Erasmus] is the worst foe of Christ that has risen in a thousand years.*”

Words not Swords

In 1524 Erasmus wrote *Free Will* against Luther’s position, and Luther responded in 1525 with *On the Bondage of the Will*. It would appear that there was little or no sabre rattling as the Reformation proceeded while Erasmus kept to his studies.

A Special Lady



Margaret More Roper (1505-1544)

Sir Thomas More’s eldest daughter, Margaret, received a classical education in the home school set up by her father. She became quite possibly the most learned woman in England (and perhaps in Europe) for her time.

Margaret was still living at home when Erasmus’ visited her father. It would be fun to be able to listen to them converse, in Latin, of course. Erasmus dedicated to her his commentary on two hymns by Prudentius (1523). She published a Latin-English translation of Erasmus’ *Devout Treatise on the Paternoster* (The Lord’s Prayer.) She also translated the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius from Greek into Latin, among other works

How Scholars Think

Moses Hadas, in his *Ancilla to Classical Reading*, suggests that Erasmus’ reluctance to join the Reformation “*may have been motivated by a desire to protect Europe from being fragmented into disparate languages and creeds.*”

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The Great Work, Erasmus' Translation of the New Testament.

No one is sure when Erasmus first thought of a new Latin translation of the Greek New Testament to replace Jerome's venerated, and official church version. In 1514 he mentioned the idea to the printer/publisher Johan Froben, who later gave him a push. Possibly Froben learned of a polyglot (more than one language) translation of the New Testament being prepared in Alcalá (L. Complutum), Spain. It would be known as the Complutensian Polyglot and it was printed in 1514, but not published. With Froben's support Erasmus was able to have his first version both printed and published in 1516.

Erasmus took on the task bravely in the face of the reverence felt for Jerome's work, which was the official Church translation. In his published Latin translation Erasmus included the Greek text he used, and this text developed into what has been called the *Textus Receptus* (that is, the "received" or common text of the New Testament in Greek used by most scholars until the nineteenth century). This received Greek text was also used in the translation of the King James Authorized Version of the Bible. The second edition was the basis for Luther's German translation, and the third (1522) for Tyndale's.



Erasmus' 1519 translation of the New Testament printed by John Froben.



The Printer and publisher, Johan Froben, as painted by Hans Holbein.

*lumus videri) ut investigandi labor ab-
sit, utilissime dividimus. Textum er-
go habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum:
in quo nihil immutatum aut corru-
ptum damus. Qui, cum lapides ac*

“Having secured an undeserved pre-eminence, what came to be called the *Textus Receptus* of the New Testament resisted for 400 years all scholarly efforts to displace it in favor of an earlier and more accurate text.”

M. Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 1968, Oxford

As time went on a virtual parade of scholars prepared translations of the New Testament, many of these using codices far older than those Erasmus chose, but rejected by him.

Erasmus published his dialogue *Cicereonianis* in 1528, thereby securing a place among European “men of letters.” The dialogue attacked Cicero’s humanist disciples.

Erasmus moved into Johan Froben’s house in Basel, Switzerland in 1521. Whether he eventually bought a house, or remained as a permanent guest, Basle became his home and the place he returned to from his travels. Unfortunately for Erasmus, in 1529 the Protestant Reformation took over the city, forcing him to move to Catholic Freiberg.

In 1534 Pope Paul III asked for Erasmus’ help. He was planning a church council (The Council of Trent.) But Erasmus was almost seventy years of age and his strength was failing. He wrote to Cardinal Cajetan: “I desire nothing except to secure leisure to live wholly to love God, to repent of the sins of my indiscreet youth, to pore over the Holy Scriptures, either to read or write something.

Erasmus returned to Basle in 1536 to supervise a printing project, and it was there that he died.

“What I prize above all things is that which leads to the peace of the Church, rather than to my own honor.”
Erasmus

Spalentor Gate
(1400),
Basle,
Switzerland



Basle
Cathedral
Built 1019-
1500



Erasmus’ tomb in Basle’s cathedral.