

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ERASMUS, DESIDERIUS

Desiderius Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus, 'the crowning glory of Christian Humanists,' was born in the late 1460's, in Rotterdam. (German literature? Given the proximity of German to Dutch, and the porous proximity of Germany and Holland, in the Renaissance, we might call Erasmus a representative of Germanic rather than German literature. His regional greatness, in any case, ensures his position in the present encyclopedia of German literature.). Orphaned—his parents never married, and remained a lifelong source of shame to Erasmus—Erasmus grew up in poverty, yet thanks to his exceptional ability he qualified for an outstanding primary education. (His school was the first pre University school in Europe at which Greek was taught, and Erasmus' total familiarity with those two languages, in which he did most of his writing, began at this stage.) By a natural course, given his remarkable gifts, Erasmus took his vows and was ordained at the age of 25, was next entered into an Augustinian monastery, in which he was quickly disgusted, he says, by the crude manners of the monks. Through the intervention of the Bishop of Combray, Erasmus was permitted to leave the cloister, while of course still in full Catholic communion as priest, and to start on what would be a lifetime course of travels, during which he lectured and resided regularly at the best of European Universities, but meantime retained his cherished role as an independent scholar.

Life of an independent scholar. An independent, Erasmus was to write incessantly, and voluminously, and to disseminate his ideas widely among the elite of what intellectual environment he was traversing. The ideas he disseminated were those of a humane scholar, ever more aware that he was living through a period of culture-shaping importance—we would later call it the Reformation—but refusing to take a militant stance in the movement. (Erasmus turned away from the Augsburg Confession in which Luther and Melancthon, and other dissident dignitaries of the German church abjured Catholicism, and remained true to his own priesthood.) It was this independent but faithful position that Erasmus maintained, through a seventy year life of writing, teaching, and scholarship.

Erasmus travels and writes abroad. In 1492 Erasmus went to study at the University of Paris. Shortly after he accepted an invitation to teach at the University of Cambridge, where he occupied the Chair of Divinity, and collaborated on theological texts and issues with many of the outstanding intellectuals in Britain. (He complained of British weather and ale, and that there was not sufficient wine to reduce his aches and pains, but he remained.

Reading

Primary source reading

Collected Works of Erasmus, 1974-. (Ongoing project, University of Toronto Press.)

Secondary source reading

Betenholz, Peter, *Encounter with a radical Erasmus. Erasmus' work as a source of radical thought in early modern Europe*, 2009.

Further Reading

Huizinga, Johan, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, 1952. (Old but classic)

Original language reading

Garber, Klaus, ed. *Nation und Literatur im Europa der Fruehen Neuzeit*, 1989.

Suggested paper topics

Erasmus is the only non German writer—he was Dutch—to be included under German literature in the present Encyclopedia. Not all editors agree on the decision to include him in such a context. What is your feeling? How sharply is the word 'German' definable, when it comes to writers of the 14th and 15th centuries?

How would you characterize the attitude of Erasmus vis a vis the 'Church abuses' Martin Luther decries? Is Erasmus appalled by those abuses, or more 'tolerant?' What is the background for Erasmus' particular orientation?

EXCERPT from Erasmus Colloquies

http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1494033&pageno=4

AN ADMONITORY NOTE OF ERASMUS ON THE TRICKS AND IMPOSTURES OF A CERTAIN DOMINICAN, WHO HAD PUBLISHED IN FRANCE THE COLLOQUIES OF ERASMUS RIDICULOUSLY INTERPOLATED BY HIMSELF.

A Book of Colloquies had appeared, the material of which was collected partly from domestic talks, partly from my papers; but with a mixture of certain trivialities, not only without sense, but also in bad Latin,--perfect solecisms. This trash was received with wonderful applause; for in these matters too Fortune has her sport. I was compelled therefore to lay hands on these trumperies. At length, having applied somewhat greater care, I added considerable matter, so that the book might be of fair size, and in fact might appear worthy even of the honour of being dedicated to John Erasmus, son of Froben, a boy then six years old, but of extraordinary natural ability. This was done in the year 1522. But the nature of this work is such, that it receives addition as often as it is revised. Accordingly I frequently made an addition for the sake of the studious, and of John Froben; but so tempered the subject-matters, that besides the pleasure of reading, and their use in polishing the style, they might also contain that which would conduce to the formation of character. Even while the book I have referred to contained nothing but mere rubbish, it was read with wonderful favour by all. But when it had gained a richer utility, it could not escape [Greek: tôn sykophantôn dêgmata]. A certain divine of Louvain, frightfully blear of eye, but still more of mind, saw in it four heretical passages. There was also another incident connected with this work worth relating. It was lately printed at Paris with certain passages corrected, that is to say, corrupted, which appeared to attack monks, vows, pilgrimages, indulgences, and other things of that kind which, if held in great esteem among the people, would be a source of more plentiful profit to gentlemen of that order. But he did this so stupidly, so clumsily, that you would swear he had been some street buffoon: although the author of so silly a piece is said to be a certain divine of the Dominican order, by nation a Saxon. Of what avail is it to add his name and surname, which he himself does not desire to have suppressed? A monster like him knows not what shame is; he would rather look for praise from his villany. This rogue added a new Preface in my name, in which he represented three men sweating at the instruction of one boy: Capito, who taught him Hebrew, Beatus Greek, and me, Latin.

He represents me as inferior to each of the others alike in learning and in piety; intimating that there is in the Colloquies a sprinkling of certain matters which savour of Luther's dogmas. And here I know that some will chuckle, when they read that Capito is favoured by such a hater of Luther with the designation of an excellent and most accomplished man. These and many things of the like kind he represents me as saying, taking the pattern of his effrontery from a letter of Jerome, who complains that his rivals had circulated a forged letter under his name amongst a synod of bishops in Africa; in which he was made to confess that, deceived by certain Jews, he had falsely translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew. And they would have succeeded in persuading the bishops that the letter was Jerome's, had they been able in any tolerable degree, to imitate Jerome's style.