

# Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam

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Zweig is a wordy author. If you expect to get a straightforward account of the life and work of Erasmus you are bound to become disappointed. This is no biography of the man, you will learn very little about him, apart from what to be gleaned from some general sweeping remarks, and even less about his life; instead he is being contrasted with Luther and the book concerns itself mostly with the fight between him and Luther and in which Erasmus would draw the shortest straw, much to the sorrow of subsequent European history, according to the author.

Erasmus was born illegitimately but taken up by the church at a young age because of his obvious gifts as a student<sup>1</sup> His future would have been the obscurity of some monastery, the prospects of which did not excite him, but he was granted some escape as the personal assistant and secretary to a travelling prelate. He was also given leave to study theology in Paris, but an experience which disgusted him, both physically and mentally. The lodgings were primitive, and the scholastic approach to theology and arguing, rigid and infertile. Instead he was able to strike out as an independent intellectual, something which became possible at the time due to the printing press initiated by Gutenberg. He was slow to mature, and did not find his true metier until he already was in his thirties. He was the quintessential scholar, not much for the world to look at, of pale complexion, facial features of no beauty only delicacy, constantly in fragile health, or at least constantly complaining about its fragility, and only truly at home with his books. He was a man of peace with no taste for the struggle. Of a lukewarm skeptical disposition, unsuited for action or for taking decisions and choosing sides. His was a temperament of tolerance, wanting to see all sides of a question. His intelligence was not one of depth, according to Zweig, but width, he was the quintessential humanist more concerned with wide learning and general erudition than to probe a question to its roots. He traveled to England as the companion of young wealthy patrons, got introduced to the court, getting the attention of Henry VIII, as he later would get the attention of Popes and emperors, something which would be unthinkable today for a mere intellectual. He was lucky though, hitting the nerve of what was fashionable at the time. Easy erudition was at a premium among the young and wealthy and Erasmus made a collection of Latin quotes which turned out to be very much in demand for people who wanted to show off a spurious erudition (not unlike what the internet can offer nowadays). A number of further editions would appear in the years to come, greatly extended at each step. Another hit was his 'In Praise of Folly' an early satire, where the unsayable could be said by putting it in the mouth of a fool. His hard work was concerned with translations of the Bible into Latin, and there was a large demand for Bibles. And above all he was

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<sup>1</sup> Nowadays the Catholic church is no longer looking out for talent among the young but in pursuit of the tender flesh of young choir boys.

a hard worker, happiest when surrounded by his books toiling away <sup>2</sup> One thing led to another and in his forties Erasmus found himself to be a public intellectual, revered by the reading masses as well as the power elite of society. One should not exaggerate the former, literacy was far from being widespread, on the other hand the ability to read being restricted meant that those who did were more discerning and appreciative. Anyway, as has often been pointed out, without the Gutenberg invention, which spurred on a publishing industry, the phenomenon of an Erasmus would not have been possible. Luther too took advantage of it, without which the wide and speedy spread of his tracts and pamphlets would not have been possible.

Both Erasmus and Luther sought to reform the church, but as noted they were very different in temperament as to their ulterior goals and means. While Erasmus did not desire to break with the Catholic church, only to effect a modest reformation of it, Luther was far more radical. Even if he may not have wanted to go so far initially, and those few in the past who had dared to openly rebel came to grief brandished as heretics and burned on the stakes, which must have acted as a restraint. But in the case of Luther one thing came to another amounting to a gradual radicalization. And Luther would not have prevailed had it not been for the support in high places. German princes, who clearly saw the advantages his reforms might have to their own riches and hence influences, were quick to act. 'Realpolitische' considerations, which played an important rôle for the German prince but also to Northern Monarchs like the Swedish and Danish kings, trumped merely theological considerations. Take the example of Henry VIII (incidentally one of Erasmus admirers and patrons) who proceeded independently of direct Lutheran inspiration, having his own personal agenda, was at heart still a Catholic. Those people of power could thus not care less about theological niceties, which incidentally remain unknown to most Protestants. Luther was propelled to fame standing before the German Emperor in Worms prompted to pronounce his oft quoted words 'Hier stehe ich und kann nichts anders'. Luther became the very image of fearless rebellion in a way Erasmus never could have been, nor ever had any desire to. Of course, and this cannot be emphasized too much, without Luther's wordly support, not only would he had been unable to take such an heroic stand, he would not even have been given the possibility to do so.

Initially Luther sought in a humble way the support of the older and famous Erasmus, but became disillusioned when he did not receive the fulfilled and unqualified support he had at first hoped for, than expected, and finally demanded. The star of Luther was rising, that of Erasmus declining. Luther formally the unknown junior partner could at the end mount his high horse and dismiss the senior partner as irrelevant. Luther, according to Zweig was a fanatic, revelling in rebelling against authority and polemics against rivals. Erasmus was no match to him.

However, when the teaching and example of Luther took root inspiring a rebellion of peasants, Luther deserted his followers and sided with the mighty, those who had made his rise possible, and the rebellion was cruelly put down. We may see it as an act of cowardice, which it was to a large extent, but Luther was a realist, he saw what was possible and what was necessary. During the latter part of his life he became less a religious zealot

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<sup>2</sup> One characteristic remark of his was *und er erklärt selbst einmal, daß es ihm weniger Anstrengung bereite, ein neues Buch zu verfassen, als die Korrektur eines alten zu lesen.*

than a renewer of the German language. He was earthy and sensual with an uncanny sense for the emotional impact of words and expressions, and created a richness of Modern German, Erasmus would have been temperamentally unable to accomplish. Erasmus was not a Nationalist, but a globalist, more at home in Latin than in his Native language.

There were a final attempt at reconciliation at Augsburg, to wheerasmus was invited but he declined. The reconciliation did not come about, maybe with Erasmus as the leading light rather than Luther, it might have done, Zweig speculates. Open warfare did not ensue until the next century which was ravaged by ostensibly religious wars, wars which at its core were ones of physical power, but religion provided an excellent excuse.

The life of Erasmus was perambulatory forded to leave one city after another in a quest for peace and security. It did not stop at old age.

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