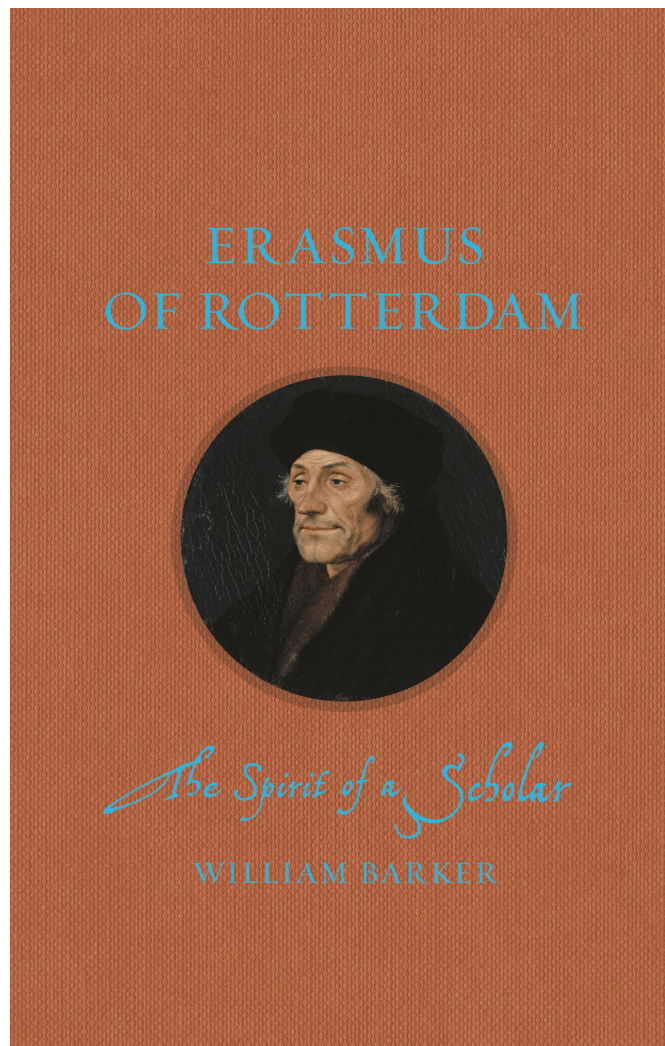


Review
William Barker:
Erasmus of Rotterdam: The spirit of a scholar
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Reviewed by Riemer A. Faber



Erasmus of Rotterdam was the most famous humanist in Northern Europe during the 16th century, and the series of *Renaissance Lives* published by Reaktion Books would not be complete without an account of the life and writings of this Dutchman. In a handsomely produced book his latest biographer, Professor William Barker, does not disappoint: taking into account the most recent scholarship, painting a colorful picture of a complex life, and writing in a fluid, highly readable style, Barker – already known to us for his fine English edition of Erasmus’ *Adages* in the series *Collected Works of Erasmus* – offers the reader a splendid introduction to the life and writings of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536).

Barker presents Erasmus as the model humanist scholar who promoted the Renaissance values of ethical behaviour in public life, of applying the lessons of history, and of eloquent writing (8-9). Taking advantage of the emerging culture of the book and the growing Republic of Letters – that is, the community of like-minded, literate scholars for whom he labored and yearned – Erasmus promoted an “unusually individual and ethical Christian faith” (11). While many of his contemporaries sought academic positions or permanent ecclesiastical offices, Erasmus maintained complete freedom of thought and expression by avoiding such restrictive appointments. He remained, in Barker’s words, “an autonomous sole operator” (13).

Erasmus believed that the most accurate picture of a writer’s life is formed from a careful reading of his written works. About the Roman orator and thinker Cicero he states: “if a man had lived in familiar discourse with Cicero (to take him as an example) for several years, he will know less of Cicero than they who do by constant reading of what he wrote converse with his spirit every day” (15). The fact that Erasmus believed the same could be said about himself is illustrated by Barker in an engaging interpretation of a well-known portrait by Albrecht Dürer: the viewer’s attention is drawn to a text in the engraving that announces that while the likeness is that of Erasmus, “his writings show him better” (17-18). Putting this conviction into practice, Erasmus is “strikingly present” in all his writings, engaged as it were in a direct conversation with his reader (17). Indeed, Erasmus perceived writing as a form of interpersonal discourse: for him the Latin *sermo* (speech, word) implies dialogue and mutual interaction. Consequently, Erasmus sought carefully to control both the content and the printing of his own works: from the learned editions of the church fathers to the smoothly crafted letters and ironic social commentary, it is Erasmus’ writing that best reveals the spirit of this scholar. For this reason, Barker is right to give ample treatment to Erasmus’ major works, including *The praise of folly* (96-108), *Handbook of the Christian soldier* (69-73), *Adages* (90-94) and the Latin-Greek edition of the New Testament (122-135). And while Erasmus carefully controlled his self-representation through his writings, so that the humanist we come to know is to

a large extent the product of his own creation, Barker does offer fleeting glimpses into his character. We learn of Erasmus' constant pecuniary concerns (80-83), his self-absorbed worrying over health or advancing years (84-5), and his hypersensitivity to criticism (169-175).

Interestingly, Barker views the events in Erasmus' life not as forming an uninterrupted, continuous narrative but as consisting of three major episodes, and he dedicates one chapter to each: 1. Preparation (1466-1500), a period of learning, travel and developing friendships; 2. Publication (1500-1516), when he pursued a program of writing and of reforming the Church; and 3. Affirmation (1516-1536), when Erasmus "doubled down" (24) through revisions of his works and the ongoing epistolary program. Regarding the first episode, what little we learn of Erasmus is mainly through his self-representation in the extant letters and other writings. We do not know much about Erasmus' early years, his parents, or his upbringing, and the few reflections that Erasmus does provide are at times contradictory. It was a period when Erasmus applied himself to the study of texts and language. During this phase he published *The antibarbarians* (45-50), which Barker describes as "a call to those who belong to the emerging Republic of Letters to work together for a new order" (48). This ideal collaboration would benefit all levels of education, encourage personal appropriation of ancient texts, and edify both state and Church. The acme of this phase of Erasmus' life was a stay in England, where he interacted with fellow humanists, including John Colet and Thomas More for whom he later published *The praise of folly* (1511).

The period from 1500-1516 was marked by further publication, and republication of revised editions and reworked materials. Now Erasmus more confidently advances his biblical learning, which he applied especially to the New Testament portion of the Latin Vulgate and which culminated in the publication of the magisterial *Novum Instrumentum* (1516). During this productive period Erasmus also wrote other works, and Barker adeptly draws the reader in as he describes the *Adages* (first edition 1500), the wildly popular and influential collection of ancient proverbs, and the *Handbook of the Christian soldier* (1503), which offers encouraging instructions in moral and religious renewal modeled on the teachings of Christ. The markedly personal and ethical tone in these writings is seen by Barker as "deceptively modern" and having a practical appeal (73).

While other students of Erasmus depict the third episode, which lasted from 1516 until Erasmus' demise in 1536, as a period of personal tragedy when Erasmus was obliged to defend himself against attacks from Protestant and Roman Catholic critics alike, Barker describes it as a time when Erasmus affirmed his humanist program through the publication of new editions: "he continued to use his own presence as a way for readers to engage with humanist ideas and Christian faith" (144). In this section of the biography a clearer picture emerges of

the personality of Erasmus from the many extant letters, the reflections and depictions of his admirers in both art and text, and from the, at times, caustic exchanges Erasmus had with his opponents – most notably Martin Luther, with whom he clashed over the freedom of the human will (amply discussed by Barker on p. 208-231).

An important theme in this biography is an underlying search for the current relevance of Erasmus' life and career. According to Barker, Erasmus' scholarship continues to resonate today "because of the ethical and spiritual framework in which it was offered" (14). In some respects, not unlike our own, Erasmus' age was a transitional one, when travel, communication, social values and religion experienced profound shifts. Throughout the book Barker seeks to show not only "what a scholar in the humanities actually does" and "how much of our current practice is descended from our great predecessor" but also "how and why we have moved away from him" (22). Erasmus anticipates the modern academic insofar as his relationship with those in power was marked by a tension between simultaneously criticizing and celebrating that power and wealth (76). And Erasmus' prolific epistolary interactions hold our interest as they form a kind of precursor to the social media networks of our own day, with their uncomfortable juxtapositioning of matters private and public (153). Thus, in the final, fourth chapter, Barker concludes that while Erasmus' Christian humanism may hold little appeal in the post-modern, post-literary age, his spirit of irony, social criticism and his sense of "moral urgency" (264) continue to inform contemporary thought. And whereas the ideals of Renaissance humanism, of a cosmopolitan, liberal life are beyond the concerns of the 21st century, the Erasmian commitment to the betterment of society through education and personal development remains an ideal.

The comprehensive biography is enhanced with illustrative materials that add to the pleasure of reading it; furthermore, a descriptive chronology recapitulates the complex itinerary of Erasmus' life and places his major publications on a handy timeline (267-270). Included also is a select, up to date bibliography of primary and secondary sources (291-297), as well as an index (302-310). In sum, this book is recommended reading for both experts and novices in the era of the Renaissance.

About the reviewer

Riemer A. Faber is professor in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada), where he teaches Greek and Latin language and literature. His research includes neo-Latin writings of the 16th and 17th centuries; he has published an edition of Erasmus' *Annotations* on the Epistles

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