

2001

Exemplarity and the use of antiquity in Erasmus

Brian W. Ogilvie

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, ogilvie@history.umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/history_faculty_pubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Ogilvie, Brian W., "Exemplarity and the use of antiquity in Erasmus" (2001). *History Department Faculty Publication Series*. Paper 2.
http://scholarworks.umass.edu/history_faculty_pubs/2

This is brought to you for free and open access by the History at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Department Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Exemplarity and the use of antiquity in Erasmus

Brian W. Ogilvie
Department of History, Herter Hall
University of Massachusetts
161 Presidents Drive
Amherst, MA 01003-9312
ogilvie@history.umass.edu

Copyright © 2001 Brian W. Ogilvie. All rights reserved. This paper, a preliminary statement of my research results, is intended for oral presentation and discussion. Please do not cite or quote it without my permission.

I have 15 minutes or so, not very much, so I need to keep it short and to the point. Figure no more than 2250 words, or 2400 at most. Right now: about 2950. Need to cut about 500.

Antiquity, for Renaissance humanists, was the measure of all things. Whether they looked back at ancient Rome with hope or despair, whether they feared that they could never rival the achievements of Scipio, Cicero, and Virgil, or strove mightily to do so, humanists took antiquity as a canon, as the rule against which achievement should be measured.¹ Precisely this separated them from their scholastic opponents, who questioned the value of reading pagan poets, with their immoral lies, and pagan philosophers, whose notion of the highest good simply displayed the limits of reason in an age of revelation.² Faced with such arguments, humanists took up their pens to defend the classics, but only after shaking their heads and muttering “barbarians!”—or as we might say, “philistines!”

Erasmus's choice of terms in his early defense of classical learning, the *Antibarbari*, is telling. His response to critics of the *studia humanitatis* is, in the first instance, an esthetic response, a matter of taste. But taste and morals were two sides of the same coin for Erasmus and other Renaissance theologians and philosophers. Esthetics would not initiate divorce proceedings against ethics until the eighteenth century, and their separation is still not complete today. Both Erasmus and his opponents saw the question of the literary and educational value of the pagan classics as intimately bound up with questions of sound—that is, Christian—ethics. Though his work occasionally provided an opening for an ethically neutral treatment of the classics, Erasmus consistently rejected this approach. For him, pagan literature was valuable insofar as it promoted a Christian ethic.

Precisely because Erasmus and his contemporaries treated questions of taste in ethical terms, and vice-versa, their attacks on and defenses of pagan literature are shot through with contradictions, from the modern point of view at least. In the next few minutes I wish to outline Erasmus's creative response to the tension between his idealization of antiquity and his Christian commitments. This study is part of a larger work in progress on the changing relationships between antiquity, morals, and taste from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, and its place within my larger project is perhaps the only justification for speaking today on Erasmus, whose works many of you know far better than I. My analysis is based chiefly, though not exclusively, on two early works, the *Antibarbari* and the *Enchiridion militis*

christiani, to which Erasmus returned later in life; they reflect the contradictory poles around which his view of antiquity revolved.

I will begin with Erasmus's praise of antiquity and its implicit moral valuation of ancient pagans. I will then turn to the problems Erasmus saw in antiquity, both in the inadequacy of pagan morals and the implicit paganism of sixteenth-century Ciceronianism. Finally, I will consider the unstable resolution that Erasmus achieved.

In the *Adagiorum chiliades*, the work that first gained him fame, Erasmus instantiated his belief that antiquity was a canonical measure of achievement.³ Even the lowly proverb, “a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn,” Erasmus claimed, “must be recommended by its antiquity and erudition alike, for that is what I call shrewd.”⁴ Such stylistic flair was natural to the ancient writers, both Latin and Greek, whose works served as the basis for the literary education Erasmus sketched in *On the method of study*.⁵ In that work, the authors he recommended as models of style were all pagans.

In some places, Erasmus suggested that stylistic guidance was all that pagan authors should provide. In the *Antibarbari*, Erasmus's mouthpiece Jacob Batt argues that if literature is to be rejected because it was discovered by pagans, Christians must also reject carpentry, metalworking, painting, agriculture, and other useful arts.⁶ In both the *Antibarbari* and the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus condemned scholastic theologians who misunderstood

that classical letters had instrumental value. Those who accused students of secular literature of “walking in the flesh,” or who cite the apostle Paul’s dictum that “knowledge puffs up, charity builds” against humanists, were guilty of twisting Paul’s words to defend their own ignorance.⁷ The apostles’ simplicity is exemplary, but it does not exclude the study of pagan literature. The Christian “should reflect the moral virtues of the apostles and at the same time the learning of Jerome. What happens is that everyone imitates the roughness of the apostles and no one imitates their lives.”⁸ Classical learning provides a polished finish to Christian morals.

But learning was much more, as Erasmus insisted repeatedly. “Learning is something that engages the entire person,” he claimed, and thus “a proper and conscientious instruction is the well-spring of all moral goodness.”⁹ The study of literature—that is, of pagan authors—contributes to forming a good mind by teaching not only style but also virtue and vice, leading Erasmus to argue—in spite of all evidence—that an educated man must *ipso facto* abhor vice more than an ignoramus.¹⁰ In other words, learning involves moral philosophy. In his stricter account in the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus held that learning is ethically neutral, but properly used it can assist progress toward the supreme goal of salvation.¹¹

Erasmus’s position required that he refute scholastic arguments that pagan books were necessarily immoral. In the first instance, Erasmus noted that many Christians whose books are approved are probably in Hell; even worse, theologians read writers like Origen who were declared heretical.¹²

Hence one can have no *a priori* reason not to read pagans. Furthermore, no less an authority than Augustine distinguished licit from illicit pagan learning, condemning superstitions but explicitly permitting the liberal arts. “Listen to what this justest of men says . . . : ‘If those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, have chanced to say things that are true, and in agreement with our faith, far from fearing these utterances we should claim them for our own, taking them over from their unlawful possessors.’”¹³ Erasmus, like Petrarch in the *Secretum*, took Augustine’s words out of context and twisted them to suit his own purposes—precisely what he had accused his opponents of doing with Paul.¹⁴ Nonetheless, he took Augustine’s words as a warrant for his own project, a defense of eloquence and of allegorical reading of pagan poets.

Even Gratian and other scholastic authorities, Erasmus noted with glee, approved the liberal arts; Gratian’s *Decretals* listed arguments against them but concluded that they were permissible; those who concluded otherwise either misread Gratian or overlooked his use of dialectical method in their partisan zeal. Other scholastic writers praised literature, condemning only its misuse. Erasmus’s conclusion is that “none of the liberal disciplines is Christian, because they neither treat of Christ nor were invented by Christians; but they all concern Christ.”¹⁵

If pagan texts were useful instruments for Christians, however, they were dangerous and had to be handled with respect. The reader must not “imbibe

pagan morals along with pagan writings,” and he should avoid the obscene poets unless he knows in advance that he will abhor their vice and thereby strengthen his virtue.¹⁶ The poets must be read allegorically, and in the case of potentially threatening texts, such as Virgil’s homoerotic second Eclogue, the allegory must be carefully considered to emphasize a moral point, not to promote vice. Done properly, allegorical exegesis focuses the reader on lofty thoughts.¹⁷

Even pagan virtues sometimes smacked of vice. Love of family is natural, and even pagans possess this virtue “by natural instinct.” But faced with a choice between serving kin and serving God, the spiritual man must not hesitate to choose God; otherwise, the soul “harkens to the harlot, that is, the flesh, [and] becomes one with the body.”¹⁸ Pagan magnanimity, one of Cicero’s four cardinal virtues, appeared to Erasmus as tantamount to the deadly sin of pride; even the pagans Cato and Brutus charged Cicero with boasting.¹⁹

Pagan poets could, Erasmus insisted, speak Christian truth. Even the lowly *Disticha Catonis*, an eclectic, late antique collection of moralizing aphorisms, taught great theology when it claimed, “If God is spirit, as poets say / With purest mind must he be worshipped.”²⁰ We might question Erasmus’s claim that this thought was worthy of Augustine or Origen. More significantly, though, Erasmus insisted that pagan wisdom was worthy of a Christian’s attention only when it squared with Christian doctrine. As Erasmus claimed in the *Enchiridion*,

The beginning of this wisdom is to know thyself, a saying that antiquity believed to have come down from heaven and that found such acceptance with the great authors that they considered it to be the epitome of all wisdom. But this teaching would have little authority for us if it did not accord with the Scriptures.²¹

Without Christian doctrine—drawn from the pure fount of the Gospels, not the crabbed *Summae* of the schoolmen—pagan wisdom was pure poison.

Erasmus had seen the effects of that poison during his trip to Italy and in the nefarious effects of Italian Ciceronianism on his fellow Burgundian, Christophe de Longueuil. In 1528, he offered his *Dialogus Ciceronianus* as an antidote. Modern critics have seen the Ciceronian controversy as a conflict between objective scholarship, which, in Michel Jeanneret's words, aims to stabilize the text and effaced the reader, and the creative appropriation of the ancients (for example, by Montaigne), which is engaged, dialogic, and creative, but not objective.²² There is certainly an element of truth in this characterization, but it fails to capture the tension over the proper use of antiquity in Erasmus's thought. More telling is the suggestion made by Erasmus himself through the character of Willem Conrad, burgomaster of Bergen-op-Zoom, in the *Antibarbari*. Conrad suggested to the other characters that opponents of the new learning may have “had some perception that there is an incompatibility between pure religion and consummate learning. Piety rests on faith, erudition uses arguments for investigation, and calls the facts into question.”²³ Erasmus prefigures here

the skepticism of the seventeenth century, but in the *Antibarbari* as it has survived he did not take up the challenge posed in those lines.

Instead, Erasmus insisted that the Italians and their allies, under the cover of Cicero's name, are trying "to make us pagans instead of Christians."²⁴ To be sure, Cicero should be in everyone's hands as the chief model for eloquence.²⁵ But students should "combine his supreme powers of expression with the faith of Christ."²⁶ The true Ciceronian, in Erasmus's sense, followed the spirit of Cicero, plucking flowers of eloquence from all the best writers and distilling them into pure nectar; the antlike Italian Ciceronian, caricatured in Erasmus's character Nosoponus with his three Ciceronian lexica, only piled together what he had laboriously gathered.²⁷

And times had changed. The ants' labors were more than useless: they were pernicious. Christians should begin their letters like Christians, not like pagans, just as painters and sculptors should represent Christ and the saints like men of their times, not ancient pagans.²⁸ The rhetorical principle of decorum, not to mention simple Christian decency, required as much. In a Christian age, it was "sheer paganism" to use pagan words to disguise Christian ideas. "The fact is," Erasmus's mouthpiece Bulephorus insists,

we're Christians only in name. Our bodies may have been dipped in the holy water, but our minds are unbaptized. The sign of the cross may have been put on our brows, but the cross itself is repudiated by the mind within. We have Jesus on our lips, but it's Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Romulus that we have in our hearts.²⁹

The Italian passion for collecting antiquities was equally culpable; indeed, it was a form of idolatry.

How we enthuse over some inscription, some epitaph discovered on a crumbling stone: “To my splendid wife Lucia who perished before her time. Set up by Marcellus and dedicated to the spirits of the dead.

Alas, why do I yet live?” This sort of thing is usually full of foolish pagan ideas, and dreadful grammar mistakes besides; yet we love it, we adore and practically worship its antiquity.³⁰

Of course, Erasmus wielded the trope of hyperbole to good effect in this passage, and we must keep in mind that the Roman god Terminus—with an appropriately Christian gloss—was Erasmus’s own emblem. Nonetheless, in the colloquium *Convivium religiosum* Erasmus emphasized that Eusebius, the host, adorned his garden with images of St. Peter and Christ, not herms and termini.³¹

Left unchecked, the study of antiquity could lead to paganism. So Erasmus concluded in the *Ciceronianus*. One could see this conclusion as the bitter fruit of Erasmus’s last decade, were it not for the earlier echoes in the *Enchiridion* and even the *Antibarbari*, Erasmus’s youthful defense of the classics. Still, Erasmus insisted throughout his life that the study of pagan antiquity was not merely pleasant, but also, as James Tracy has put it, useful and even necessary—when properly reined in. There are three main areas where Erasmus put antiquity to Christian use.

First, pagan literature supplied an idiom. So long as Christian terms were applied to Christian concepts, and slavish imitation was avoided, pagan writers could teach eloquence. By the time Erasmus died, few doubted this principle; classical Latin had triumphed over the medieval idiom.³²

Second, antiquity could be exemplary, but only when held within tight bounds. In his pietistic writings, Erasmus used examples in two main ways. On the one hand, examples of pagan virtue underscored most Christians' depravity. After all, "most Christians are superstitious rather than pious, and except for the name of Christ differ hardly at all from superstitious pagans."³³ Pagans, for instance, thought that baseness was vile *per se*, despite having no fear of a just God who would pass judgment, whereas many Christians behave shamefully despite knowing that divine judgment was swift and unerring. Pagans offer "a thousand illustrious examples of every virtue," compared with ordinary Christians' vices.³⁴ On the other hand, ancient proverbs and myths could illustrate Christian virtues. Proteus embodied the violent shifts that characterize human passions, while Aeneas showed the Christian to be steadfast in the face of imagined difficulties. Erasmus offered the patience of Hercules in his labors as a pagan counterpart to that of Job.³⁵ But these allegorical exempla were almost infinitely mutable.³⁶ Erasmus himself knew that proverbs were protean and could be tailored to any situation; if all else failed, the trope of irony, the writer's *deus ex machina*, would come to his rescue.³⁷

Third, pagan literature was an honorable, if necessarily preliminary, preparation for the coming of the Gospel. If John was the *vox clamantis in deserto*, Cicero was the *vox clamantis in foro*. This was true for Erasmus himself; by the time he finished the *Enchiridion* in DATE, he insisted that his study of the pagan classics would prepare him for his Christian mission.³⁸ It was also true in a world-historical sense: “Everything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society. He it was who supplied the intellect, who added the zest for inquiry, and it was through him alone that they found what they sought.”³⁹ This was the ultimate justification of pagan studies: God himself had sent the pagans to prepare his way.

In such wise, Erasmus defanged antiquity. His ancients were not yet the sardonic critics that Bayle and Voltaire would see in antiquity. Nonetheless, Erasmus’s writings on the proper use of the ancients reveals an underlying unease, an unease that makes him at times sound very close to the “barbarians” he attacked—in every way but one. Erasmus never claimed that the ancients, even in their least moral moments, wrote barbarously. Their words may have been good or bad, but they were never ugly. This suggests to me that Erasmus’s primary response to ancient literature was esthetic; like his predecessors for more than two centuries, Erasmus loved the classics.

That is, of course, a commonplace. But it is a commonplace that is worth a moment’s reflection. Erasmus and other humanists loved the classics

for the pleasure that reading them produced, but they did so in an intellectual culture that drew no sharp line between beauty and truth. Cicero and Quintilian had both insisted that “no one can be a good orator without also being a good man.”⁴⁰ These Roman theorists reflected the Greek philosophers’ tendency to join esthetic and ethical reflection. By the classical age, Greeks had joined “poetic greatness with epistemic value,” deeming Homer and Hesiod the foundations not only of literature but of knowledge. Plato joined beauty and morals more systematically. Beauty stirred the passions, and while in principle the results could be ethically neutral, in practice the passions most often impelled one to virtue or vice. Hence Plato’s qualms about poets. Aristotle too saw a close connection, insisting that a beautiful tragedy was *ipso facto* moral. Renaissance philosophers rang changes on these and other ancient comments on beauty and moral truth without severing their relationship.⁴¹

Hence it is not surprising that Erasmus contradicted himself on the value of antiquity and hedged it about with so many restrictions. Peter Gay’s summary of Renaissance humanism as “pagan Christianity” is compelling if one sees it as a compound of a pagan esthetic with Christian morals, in an age when philosophical language and common usage sanctioned no such division. In closing, I would like to suggest the direction my work in progress will be going: the continual engagement with antiquity by Erasmus and his successors, their struggle to reconcile their commitment to Christianity with their love of the ancients, would contribute in the end to

the separation of ethics and esthetics, at which point the ancients would be turned out of the realm of morals and relegated to that of taste.⁴²

ENDNOTES

¹ For a recent summary of this view, see Michel Jeanneret, "The vagaries of exemplarity: Distortion or dismissal?," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 565-566.

² The humanist-scholastic debate has its most subtle recent commentator in Erika Rummel, *The humanist-scholastic debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³ On the *Adages* and Erasmus's fame, see James D. Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 44.

⁴ Erasmus, *Adages: Ii1 to Iv100*, 4-7.

⁵ Erasmus, *On the method of study*, 667-669.

⁶ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 55-57.

⁷ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 75; *Antibarbarians*, 61-73.

⁸ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 112-113.

⁹ Erasmus, *Declamation on early liberal education*, 297, 301.

¹⁰ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 76, 80-83.

¹¹ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 61-62.

¹² Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 57-58.

¹³ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 94-97.

¹⁴ Book [*****] of *De civitate Dei* is in fact an extended argument against Platonism, the philosophy which was closest, in Augustine's judgment, to Christianity and hence posed the greatest threat to it. On Petrarch's use of Augustine, see most recently Carol Everhart Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance: Petrarch, Augustine, and the language of humanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 88-91.

¹⁶ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 30-33.

¹⁷ Erasmus, *On the method of study*, 683-687. See the analysis in Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From humanism to the humanities: Education and the liberal arts in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), REF.

- ¹⁸ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 52-53.
- ¹⁹ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 360, 366.
- ²⁰ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 81. On the *Disticha Catonis*, see Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 197-199.
- ²¹ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 40.
- ²² Jeanneret, "Vagaries," 566-568.
- ²³ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 25.
- ²⁴ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 337-338.
- ²⁵ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 445-448.
- ²⁶ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 338.
- ²⁷ The metaphor of the bee, adapted from Virgil [?], is found in Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, REF.
- ²⁸ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 372-373, 381-382.
- ²⁹ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 394.
- ³⁰ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 395-396.
- ³¹ Erasmus, *Convivium religiosum*, REF.
- ³² Rummel, REF.
- ³³ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 65.
- ³⁴ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 85-86, 105.
- ³⁵ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 49-50, 58, 106.
- ³⁶ Jeanneret, "Vagaries," 570-572. See also François Cornilliat, "Exemplarities: A response to Timothy Hampton and Karlheinz Stierle," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59 (1998): 613-624. Erasmus insisted that allegory was the way to interpret both pagan poetry and Christian Scripture: *Handbook*, 67-69.
- ³⁷ Erasmus, *Adages: Ii1 to Iv100*, 20-21.
- ³⁸ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 127.
- ³⁹ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 59-61.
- ⁴⁰ Erasmus, *Ciceronian*, 360, 366.
- ⁴¹ Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from classical Greece to the present: A short history* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1975), 24-25, 46-50, 67, 117.

⁴² On the latter, see Francis Haskell and Nichols Penny, *Taste and the antique: The lure of classical sculpture, 1500-1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981). Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the past: Archaeology and aesthetics in the making of Renaissance culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), suggests that the notion of art as an esthetic category emerged out of the confrontation of Renaissance sculptors with the remains of Hellenistic art. I see my project as something of a parallel in the world of philosophy and scholarship to Barkan's brilliant analysis of the emerging art world of the early sixteenth century.

Material omitted from final version?

Princes should seek a model in Christ, not pagans
Princes should seek a model in Christ. "What is more absurd than that a Christian prince should set before himself the example of Hannibal, Alexander the Great, Caesar, or Pompey. While even in these leaders there are certain virtues he cannot attain, he will imitate in particular those very qualities that should be avoided. Examples should not be drawn from those exploits of Caesar lauded by historians, but from those which are not at variance with the teaching of our Lord or are of such a nature that even though they are not to be imitated, they may incite us to the pursuit of virtue."⁴³

Example of the Fetial priests [shows limits]

When Batt begins his speech, he jokingly declares war on the "barbarian" scholastics by composing a speech that he attributes to the Fetial priests [who had the duty of declaring war in Rome]. They summon out the "Goth" and demand that he either withdraw or engage in war. When Batt continues, Erasmus [the character] interrupts, saying, "Take care you don't go too fast! You have not completed all the formalities--you have to kill a pig with a stone before you rush to arms!" Batt responds that he would like to, since there are "so many fat healthy porkers" who live idly off the people.⁴⁴

M. M. Phillips's note on the pigs records that Livy 1.24.8 describes the ceremony. This is an interesting example of a classical use being treated by Erasmus, jokingly if positively. But I don't get the sense that it is more than a joke, or that he treated the Roman practice at all seriously; had he, he would have been repulsed.

⁴³ Erasmus, *Handbook*, 100.

⁴⁴ Erasmus, *Antibarbarians*, 45-46.