



Against War

by Desiderius Erasmus



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Introduction

The Treatise on War, of which the earliest English translation is here reprinted, was among the most famous writings of the most illustrious writer of his age. Few people now read Erasmus; he has become for the world in general a somewhat vague name. Only by some effort of the historical imagination is it possible for those who are not professed scholars and students to realize the enormous force which he was at a critical period in the history of civilization. The free institutions and the material progress of the modern world have alike their roots in humanism. Humanism as a movement of the human mind culminated in the age, and even in a sense in the person, of Erasmus. Its brilliant flower was of an earlier period; its fruits developed and matured later; but it was in his time, and in him, that the fruit set! The earlier sixteenth century is not so romantic as its predecessors, nor so rich in solid achievement as others that have followed it. As in some orchard when spring is over, the blossom lies withered on the grass, and the fruit has long to wait before it can ripen on the boughs. Yet here, in the dull, hot midsummer days, is the central and critical period of the year's growth.

The life of Erasmus is accessible in many popular forms as well as in more learned and formal works. To recapitulate it here would fall beyond the scope of a preface. But in order to appreciate this treatise fully it is necessary to realize the time and circumstances in which it appeared, and to recall some of the main features of its author's life and work up to the date of its composition.

That date can be fixed with certainty, from a combination of external and internal evidence, between the years 1513 and 1515; in all probability it was the winter of 1514-15. It was printed in the latter year, in the "editio princeps" of the enlarged and rewritten *Adagia* then issued from Froben's great printing-works at Basel. The stormy decennate of Pope Julius II had ended in February, 1513. To his successor, Giovanni de' Medici, who succeeded to the papal throne under the name of Leo X, the treatise is particularly addressed. The years which ensued were a time singularly momentous in the history of religion, of letters, and of the whole life of the civilized world. The eulogy of Leo with which Erasmus ends indicates the hopes then entertained of a new Augustan age of peace and reconciliation. The Reformation was still capable of being regarded as an internal and constructive force, within the framework of the society built up by the Middle Ages. The final divorce between humanism and the Church had not yet been made. The long and disastrous epoch of the wars of religion was still only a dark cloud on the horizon. The Renaissance was really dead, but few yet realized the fact. The new head of the Church was a lover of peace, a friend of scholars, a munificent patron of the arts. This treatise shows that Erasmus, to a certain extent, shared or strove to share in an illusion widely spread among the educated classes of Europe. With a far keener instinct for that which the souls of men required, an Augustinian monk from

Wittenberg, who had visited Rome two years earlier, had turned away from the temple where a corpse lay swathed in gold and half hid in the steam of incense. With a far keener insight into the real state of things, Machiavelli was, at just this time, composing *The Prince*.

In one form or another, the subject of his impassioned pleading for peace among beings human, civilized, and Christian, had been long in Erasmus's mind. In his most celebrated single work, the *Praise of Folly*, he had bitterly attacked the attitude towards war habitual, and evilly consecrated by usage, among kings and popes. The same argument had formed the substance of a document addressed by him, under the title of *Anti-Polemus*, to Pope Julius in 1507. Much of the substance, much even of the phraseology of that earlier work is doubtless repeated here. Beyond the specific reference to Pope Leo, the other notes of time in the treatise now before us are few and faint. Allusions to Louis XII of France (1498-1515), to Ferdinand the Catholic (1479-1516), to Philip, king of Aragon (1504-1516), and Sigismund, king of Poland (1506-1548), are all consistent with the composition of the treatise some years earlier. At the end of it he promises to treat of the matter more largely when he publishes the *Anti-Polemus*. But this intention was never carried into effect. Perhaps Erasmus had become convinced of its futility; for the events of the years which followed soon showed that the new Augustan age was but a false dawn over which night settled more stormily and profoundly than before.

For ten or a dozen years Erasmus had stood at the head of European scholarship. His name was as famous in France and England as in the Low Countries and Germany. The age was indeed one of those in which the much-abused term of the republic of letters had a real and vital meaning. The nationalities of modern Europe had already formed themselves; the

notion of the Empire had become obsolete, and if the imperial title was still coveted by princes, it was under no illusion as to the amount of effective supremacy which it carried with it, or as to any life yet remaining in the mediaeval doctrine of the unity of Christendom whether as a church or as a state. The discovery of the new world near the end of the previous century precipitated a revolution in European politics towards which events had long been moving, and finally broke up the political framework of the Middle Ages. But the other great event of the same period, the invention and diffusion of the art of printing, had created a new European commonwealth of the mind. The history of the century which followed it is a history in which the landmarks are found less in battles and treaties than in books.

The earlier life of the man who occupies the central place in the literary and spiritual movement of his time in no important way differs from the youth of many contemporary scholars and writers. Even the illegitimacy of his birth was an accident shared with so many others that it does not mark him out in any way from his fellows. His early education at Utrecht, at Deventer, at Herzogenbosch; his enforced and unhappy novitiate in a house of Augustinian canons near Gouda; his secretaryship to the bishop of Cambray, the grudging patron who allowed rather than assisted him to complete his training at the University of Paris--all this was at the time mere matter of common form. It is with his arrival in England in 1497, at the age of thirty-one, that his effective life really begins.

For the next twenty years that life was one of restless movement and incessant production. In England, France, the Low Countries, on the upper Rhine, and in Italy, he flitted about gathering up the whole intellectual movement of the age, and pouring forth the results in that admirable Latin

which was not only the common language of scholars in every country, but the single language in which he himself thought instinctively and wrote freely. Between the *Adagia* of 1500 and the *Colloquia* of 1516 comes a mass of writings equivalent to the total product of many fertile and industrious pens. He worked in the cause of humanism with a sacred fury, striving with all his might to connect it with all that was living in the old and all that was developing in the newer world. In his travels no less than in his studies the aspect of war must have perpetually met him as at once the cause and the effect of barbarism; it was the symbol of everything to which humanism in its broader as well as in its narrower aspect was utterly opposed and repugnant. He was a student at Paris in the ominous year of the first French invasion of Italy, in which the death of Pico della Mirandola and Politian came like a symbol of the death of the Italian Renaissance itself. Charles VIII, as has often been said, brought back the Renaissance to France from that expedition; but he brought her back a captive chained to the wheels of his cannon. The epoch of the Italian wars began. A little later (1500) Sandro Botticelli painted that amazing Nativity which is one of the chief treasures of the London National Gallery. Over it in mystical Greek may still be read the painter's own words: "This picture was painted by me Alexander amid the confusions of Italy at the time prophesied in the Second Woe of the Apocalypse, when Satan shall be loosed upon the earth." In November, 1506, Erasmus was at Bologna, and saw the triumphal entry of Pope Julius into the city at the head of a great mercenary army. Two years later the league of Cambray, a combination of folly, treachery and shame which filled even hardened politicians with horror, plunged half Europe into a war in which no one was a gainer and which finally ruined Italy: "bellum quo nullum," says the historian, "vel atrocius vel diuturnius in Italia post

exactos Gothos majores nostri meminerunt." In England Erasmus found, on his first visit, a country exhausted by the long and desperate struggle of the Wars of the Roses, out of which she had emerged with half her ruling class killed in battle or on the scaffold, and the whole fabric of society to reconstruct. The Empire was in a state of confusion and turmoil no less deplorable and much more extensive. The Diet of 1495 had indeed, by an expiring effort towards the suppression of absolute anarchy, decreed the abolition of private war. But in a society where every owner of a castle, every lord of a few square miles of territory, could conduct public war on his own account, the prohibition was of little more than formal value. Humanism had been introduced by the end of the fifteenth century in some of the German universities, but too late to have much effect on the rising fury of religious controversy. The very year in which this treatise against war was published gave to the world another work of even wider circulation and more profound consequences. The famous *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum*, first published in 1515, and circulated rapidly among all the educated readers of Europe, made an open breach between the humanists and the Church. That breach was never closed; nor on the other hand could the efforts of well-intentioned reformers like Melancthon bring humanism into any organic relation with the reformed movement. When mutual exhaustion concluded the European struggle, civilization had to start afresh; it took a century more to recover the lost ground. The very idea of humanism had long before then disappeared.

War, pestilence, the theologians: these were the three great enemies with which Erasmus says he had throughout life to contend. It was during the years he spent in England that he was perhaps least harassed by them. His three periods of residence there--a fourth, in 1517, appears to have been of

short duration and not marked by any very notable incident--were of the utmost importance in his life. During the first, in his residence between the years 1497 and 1499 at London and Oxford, the English Renaissance, if the name be fully applicable to so partial and inconclusive a movement, was in the promise and ardour of its brief spring. It was then that Erasmus made the acquaintance of those great Englishmen whose names cannot be mentioned with too much reverence: Colet, Grocyn, Latimer, Linacre. These men were the makers of modern England to a degree hardly realized. They carried the future in their hands. Peace had descended upon a weary country; and the younger generation was full of new hopes. The *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, written soon after Erasmus returned to France, breathes the spirit of one who had not lost hope in the reconciliation of the Church and the world, of the old and new. When Erasmus made his second visit to England, in 1506, that fair promise had grown and spread. Colet had become dean of Saint Paul's; and through him, as it would appear, Erasmus now made the acquaintance of another great man with whom he soon formed as close an intimacy, Thomas More.

His Italian journey followed: he was in Italy nearly three years, at Turin, Bologna, Venice, Padua, Siena, Rome. It was in the first of these years that Albert Dürer was also in Italy, where he met Bellini and was recognized by the Italian masters as the head of a new transalpine art in no way inferior to their own. The year after Erasmus left Italy, Botticelli, the last survivor of the ancient world, died at Florence.

Meanwhile, Henry VIII, a prince, young, handsome, generous, pious, had succeeded to the throne of England. A golden age was thought to have dawned. Lord Mountjoy, who had been the pupil of Erasmus at Paris, and with whom he had first come to England, lost no time in urging Henry to

send for the most brilliant and famous of European scholars, and attach him to his court. The king, who had already met and admired him, needed no pressing. In the letter which Henry himself wrote to Erasmus entreating him to take up his residence in England, the language employed was that of sincere admiration; nor was there any conscious insincerity in the main motive which he urged. "It is my earnest wish," wrote the king, "to restore Christ's religion to its primitive purity." The history of the English Reformation supplies a strange commentary on these words.

But the first few years of the new reign (1509-1513), which coincide with the third and longest sojourn of Erasmus in England, were a time in which high hopes might not seem unreasonable. While Italy was ravaged by war and the rest of Europe was in uneasy ferment, England remained peaceful and prosperous. The lust of the eyes and the pride of life were indeed the motive forces of the court; but alongside of these was a real desire for reform, and a real if very imperfect attempt to cultivate the nobler arts of peace, to establish learning, and to purify religion. Colet's great foundation of Saint Paul's School in 1510 is one of the landmarks of English history. Erasmus joined the founder and the first high master, Colet and Lily, in composing the schoolbooks to be used in it. He had already written, in More's house at Chelsea, where pure religion reigned alongside of high culture, the *Encomium Moriae*, in which all his immense gifts of eloquence and wit were lavished on the cause of humanism and the larger cause of humanity. That war was at once a sin, a scandal, and a folly was one of the central doctrines of the group of eminent Englishmen with whom he was now associated. It was a doctrine held by them with some ambiguity and in varying degrees. In the *Utopia* (1516) More condemns wars of aggression, while taking the common view as to wars of so-called self-defence. In

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