

To Rudy Brouwer

Erasmus in: "Praise of Folly" chapter 32: "Immo hoc est hominem esse"



ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM
and
his “Praise of Folly”

2013 – 2014 - 2015

Three articles by Klaas Potjewijd

By the same author:

“Zò ontstond de “Lof der Zotheid” van Erasmus van Rotterdam”

Een Wordingsgeschiedenis. Hypothesen van Klaas Potjewijd

2009 Parthenon Almere

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CONTENTS

Preface	Page 7
I Erasmus did not write his “Praise of Folly” in “seven days” in London in 1509	Page 11
Contents Article I	Page 31
II A matter of Interaction: Erasmus of Rotterdam versus: Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola	Page 33
Contents Article II	Page 82
III Erasmus of Rotterdam and Rome in 1509	Page 85
Contents Article III	Page 111
Conclusion	Page 113

About the author:

Klaas Potjewijd - Leiden 1933 - finished his studies in History, Dutch Language and Musicology at Utrecht University in 1974. His three theses, related to the respective disciplines, focused each on a subject from the second half of the 18th century. The author is neither a Medievalist nor a Neo-Latinist. During his professional life the author was teaching history at Secondary School and at a Teachers Training College. As a pensionable he started studying Erasmus' "Praise of Folly", shortly after 2000. It resulted in the publication of a book in 2009 about the genesis of Erasmus' most famous book which also contained three hypotheses. These did not generate ample feedback; his attempts to start a discussion with a number of Erasmus-specialists in the Low Countries were not fruitful. That's why the working out of the three hypotheses in this book is published in English.

The author feels grateful to the management and the staff of Hotel "Bellevue del Golfo" – Sferracavallo - Palermo – because of their services during the many winters while his studies concerning Erasmus' "Praise of Folly" were taking shape.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Jacob Cornelisz. Van Oostsanen 1470 - 1533

Hans Holbein junior 1477 . 1543

Albrecht Dürer 1471 - 1528

Sandro Botticelli 1445 – 1510

Preface

These articles are the follow-up of a book which was published in 2009 in Dutch: "*Zò ontstond de "Lof der Zotheid" van Erasmus van Rotterdam*". I characterized my book as the story of the genesis of Erasmus' most famous book, his "Praise of Folly". Three hypotheses presented themselves in the course of my study of J.B. Kan's translation in Dutch of the "Praise of Folly" . Within the words of 2009:

- I. "The thesis seems defensible that fragments are added to the cabaret-like start of the "Praise of Folly" later. Page 33.
- II. "Polemics seem to rise with regard to the idea about the happiness of human beings and their position among other creatures as displayed by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his "*Oratio de dignitate hominis*". Page 103
- III. "Did Erasmus keep silent about the tension between his personal feelings and the religious-intellectual climate in Italy of his days?" Page 66.

In one respect the First Article makes a difference with my book of 2009. It was not a good idea to combine the chapters 40-41 of Phase II with the chapters of the Theological Part 62-67. I now like to house the chapters 62-67 in the Extension or Phase III. This is illustrative for Erasmus' switch of intention from an amusing text into an edifying one which he materialized between September 1509 and 1511. The Chapters 40-41 belong to the satiric-ironical atmosphere where Christian belief is lumped together with superstition while in chapter 66 a differentiated view on four types of Christian believers is presented and a view on their celestial felicity in chapter 67.

These articles are written by an historian who tried to connect the hypotheses, launched in 2009, with factual material so that these no longer should be hypotheses. It has not always been possible to substantiate the theses only from reading and rereading Erasmus' text, as in the case of the First Article.

Prof. Jan Papy's introduction to the translation of Giovanni Pico's "*Oratio de dignitate hominis*" by Michiel op de Coul has been a great help in working out Article II.

Without Prof. Charles L Stringer's *The Renaissance in Rome* it wouldn't have been possible to build up the atmosphere Erasmus met in Rome in 1509. Most probably this made him keep silent for many years about his personal feelings at the time, as indicated in Article III.

I The historical reality, as I see it with regard to the genesis of the "Praise of Folly", is presented within a scheme at the beginning of Article I. If two Interpolations themselves are not already conclusive of a genesis in more than one phase, this becomes evident as the Second Interpolation of Phase III damages the tricola which closes Phase I.

II. The First Interpolation, which Erasmus added to his core text in London in September 1509, opens with eight chapters - 30-37 - which make Giovanni Pico's *Oratio de dignitate hominis* the butt of his criticism. The name of Giovanni Pico as well of his "*Oratio*" is left out. These chapters form "an island" or "an intermezzo" within the "Praise of Folly" as a whole. They concentrate on opinions and not on persons as Stultitia usually does. Chapter 37 contains a description of the contrary of Giovanni Pico's "happiest of all living creatures": it is "a learned man who never really lived at all".

III. It makes no sense to try to catalogue from the data, which Prof. Stringer so abundantly delivers in *The Renaissance in Rome*, the items which might have provoked Erasmus' aversion and protest during his stay in Rome in 1509. In his *Ciceronianus* of 1528 he gives three

examples of his aversion and his dislike which climaxed in his uninhibited outburst against Nosoponus: "It is due to paganism. We are Christians only by name". We may defend the thesis that Erasmus behaved in Rome in 1509 the way he described at the end of Chapter 29 of his "Praise of Folly": "and surely it is perverse not to adapt yourself to the prevailing circumstances". After the *Sacco di Roma* in 1527 these "prevailing circumstances" were completely changed: "Not only the City, a whole world is lost" writes Erasmus in 1528. So the "*Sacco*" might have paved the way for Erasmus' freedom to speak his mind.

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I

Erasmus did not write his “Praise of Folly” within “seven days” in London in 1509

Introduction

It is an historian’s job to give historical facts a proper place in space and time, that is to define as accurately as possible the “where” and “when” of human activity. In many cases this will deal with all the doings of politicians, diplomats and others who play a role in history. This time it will deal with a text or, more precisely, with fragments of a text originating in the most famous work by Erasmus of Rotterdam, his “Praise of Folly”. The story that Erasmus wrote his little book “in seven days at Thomas More’s house in Bucklersbury in 1509” has been accepted for a long time but has also been questioned for instance by Michael Screech in his *Erasmus: Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* of 1980. 1) A.T.H. Levi writes In 1993 referring to the 1511-version of Erasmus’ book:

“It was certainly revised before publication in 1511 and the internal evidence leads one to suppose that it was considerably augmented and rewritten.” 2.)

In 2009 I published a hypothesis that the 1511-version of Erasmus’ “Praise of Folly” was conceived in at least three phases. 3.) Professor Hans Trapman classified my ideas as presumptions in *Wijze Dwaasheid*, which he published in 2011. 4.)

Since I have been confronted with factual material originating from Erasmus’ text itself, I will now try to make clear that the “Praise of Folly” came into being at different times and at different places between the summer of 1509 and the spring of 1511. There is more than one reason for it not only with regard to the form. There is also

an important argument with regard to the contents of the text as we will see. These new insights made inevitable the modification of the scheme of the genesis of the “Praise of Folly” which I published in 2009 on page 39-40 of my book. A revised scheme is presented on the opposite page.

Thanks to Clarence H. Miller it is possible to identify the additions Erasmus made to several editions of his text since 1511. This study is based on the 1511-edition. 5.)