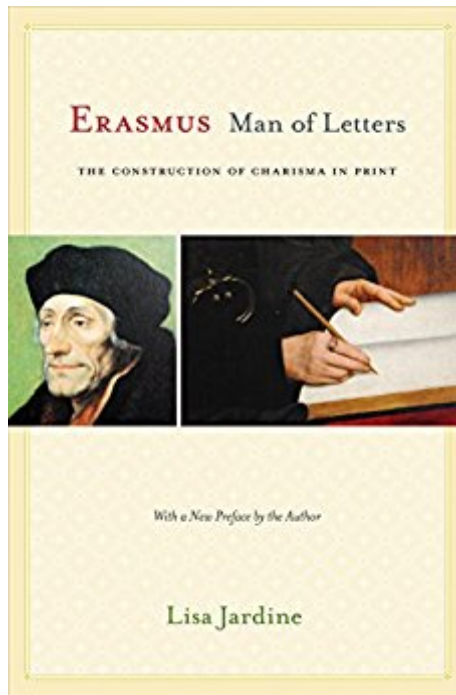




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Erasmus, Man Of Letters: The Construction Of Charisma In Print



Synopsis

The name Erasmus of Rotterdam conjures up a golden age of scholarly integrity and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, when learning could command public admiration without the need for authorial self-promotion. Lisa Jardine, however, shows that Erasmus self-consciously created his own reputation as the central figure of the European intellectual world. Erasmus himself – the historical as opposed to the figural individual – was a brilliant, maverick innovator, who achieved little formal academic recognition in his own lifetime. What Jardine offers here is not only a fascinating study of Erasmus but also a bold account of a key moment in Western history, a time when it first became possible to believe in the existence of something that could be designated "European thought."

Book Information

File Size: 28467 KB

Print Length: 294 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; Updated edition with a New preface by the author edition (June 23, 2015)

Publication Date: June 23, 2015

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00TWPCGMYY

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #425,054 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #44

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Customer Reviews

Among the outstanding figures of the Renaissance era was Desiderius Erasmus. A skilled classicist who edited the Greek New Testament that ultimately served as the reference text in the translation

efforts for the King John's Bible, he also coined many of the adages now in common parlance. He corresponded with many of the leading men of his day, including Thomas More, Martin Luther, and a number of popes. With Erasmus, scholars of the Renaissance had an individual who seemed removed from the strife of his own times, scholarly yet worldly, intelligent but commonsensical. An interesting book by Lisa Jardine, Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print, was recently reissued in an affordable paperback format and makes a compelling argument that this portrayal of Erasmus is one he consciously crafted for himself. It should be clear this book is not a critique of Erasmus in the negative sense. Ms. Jardine clearly admires the Dutch humanist and is impressed by his scholarly efforts. Erasmus in his own lifetime, however, received relatively little academic recognition. After an early teaching position while still a monk, he never again served as a professor. To compensate for the lack of an academic pedigree, he and close friends engaged in heavy correspondence, taking the first drafts for personal reference and later using the edited versions as literary epistles. In this sense, Erasmus cast himself in the mold of the religious figure he admired most, St. Jerome. He would occasionally publish reviews of his own works anonymously (or help guide the reviews of others) in order to gain favorable publicity. The students he mentored, often among the brightest figures in Europe, served as apostles to future generations of Erasmus's talent long after he died. Erasmus also consciously destroyed certain pieces of correspondence that might have cast him in an unflattering light, or requested that the recipient do so. While a reader today might be shocked at the idea that a celebrity would edit their image with an eye towards posterity, Ms. Jardine shows Erasmus engaged in the practice centuries ago. She must be given substantial credit for her detective work. As she notes early on, Erasmus engaged in constant revising throughout his life. While the editio princeps may be the one reprinted and held in the major libraries, it is the little noted subsequent editions that were tracked down and compared to prove her case. Reading this book, one might at first be inclined to view Erasmus as a bit of a showman. I do not believe that to be the case. The works Erasmus endeavored on, such as his religious or reprinting classical writers, had substantial value, and one unfortunately rarely gains acclaim from merit alone. On the whole, this is a fine biography and academic for those with an interest in the Renaissance or religious studies.

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