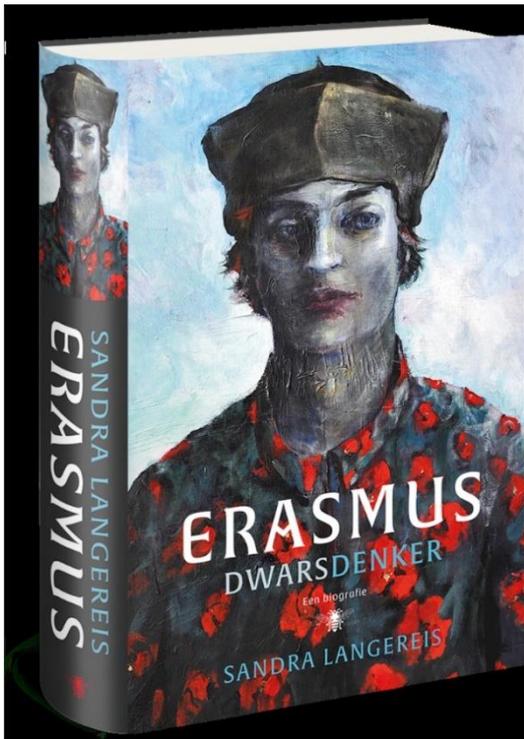


SAMPLE TRANSLATION



Sandra Langereis

Erasmus: Life Of A Maverick

*An in-depth portrait of Erasmus of
unprecedented scope*

World rights: De Bezige Bij, biography, full colour illustrations, 702 pages (without acknowledgements, notes, literature & register, 81 pages). Published in March 2021. **★Sample translation available. ★To be featured in the publication *Dutch Non Fiction* of the Dutch Foundation for Literature★**

Erasmus is one of the greatest authors of the Netherlands and Belgium, and even all of Europe. He embodies the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern day. His significance for literary and scientific history is immense. Even today, thousands of his letters on subjects such as moral constraint and freedom of press have lost nothing of their significance.

The majority of Erasmus' life and work has been neglected until now. Sandra Langereis is the first biographer who does justice to his life story by closely following his correspondence and describing the genesis of his entire literary legacy. She depicts him as the lively author of *In Praise of Folly* as well as a brazen biblical scholar who came up against inquisitors, but also Martin Luther. Erasmus' life story sheds light on an eventful era: a century of dark humour and brutal violence, of religious fanaticism and the struggle for intellectual freedom. This rich biography makes history's relevance palpable.

Erasmus has never been portrayed so smart, sharp, brave, angry, scared and – in one word – human. And never before has a biography shone as vivid a spotlight on Erasmus' day and age.

Erasmus: Life of a Maverick

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Erasmus: Life of a Maverick

Over at Dover

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The last winter of the fifteenth century was drawing to a close. At the end of the Michaelmas term, when Oxford's lecture rooms closed their doors, Erasmus left England's oldest university. After a long Christmas break in London, where he lodged with the family of Lord Mountjoy, he returned at last to the lecture theatres, libraries and printers' workplaces of Paris. He made the crossing from Dover, in a small English merchant vessel that would reach France in a day, with any luck, if the wind stayed fair. But the wind often shifted during the voyage, or fell still, causing ships to fall off course or spend days bobbing at sea before they could carry on to their destination, sometimes only to run aground on a sand bank in sight of harbour, where they were forced to wait for the tide to free

them, hopefully in one piece. Regular passenger transport did not as yet exist. It was up to travellers themselves to buttonhole merchants and negotiate terms for a passage. The fee depended on the number of masts – the more masts the faster the vessel – and on the goodwill of the skipper. Passengers had to provide their own food and a travelling bed made of wooden slats.

Erasmus had bundled all his heavy luggage into a single large pack that could be stored in the hold with the cargo, to be transferred on arrival to a barge bound for Paris. Besides items of clothing – a black mantle with a grey and black lining, a spare mantle, a pair of purple boots – it also contained notes and books, including a parchment copy of Augustine’s works and the Epistles of Paul. His leather travel bag held essentials for the voyage – a change of linen, a nightcap, a prayerbook. In the leather purse hooked to his belt he carried some small change. His savings were in his travel bag: this meant lugging a heavy weight of gold and silver coins around, as paper money had yet to be invented. Before he could even embark, though, disaster struck. His money was impounded by a customs officer.

Erasmus knew that in England the export of gold and silver currency had long been prohibited by royal decree. Travellers were only allowed a small sum to cover their travel costs. But neither he nor his English friends were aware that shortly before, the Crown had explicitly stipulated that no exception would be made for foreign valuta. In London he had changed his savings into French écus, not anticipating any difficulties when taking his belongings out of the country. In that he was sadly mistaken: the customs officer seized his bag of coins. Erasmus’ defence that it was his own money, and that he absolutely depended on it to be able to carry out important work – he was a writer, he was a theologian – made little impression. Twenty pounds sterling represented his entire fortune: he must have had nearly a hundred gold French écus with him, savings that he had scraped together with difficulty from Lord Mountjoy’s allowance, and which he needed to live off in the year ahead. He was permitted to keep one-tenth – that was laid down by law. Otherwise he couldn’t even have afforded the crossing.

What Erasmus should have done before leaving the country was convert his money into a bill of exchange. He could have done so by tendering his money to an English merchant who had credit on the Continent. Then, after having crossed the Channel, he could get a business contact of the merchant to refund his money, offering the bill of exchange as proof. That person might only require a letter from the London merchant to pay out the money on a good faith basis. But usually the contact would have to have an actual bill of exchange sent to him in advance. The document would first be cut in half with a pair of scissors. To prove that he was entitled to receive the money, Erasmus would have had to show that the jagged edges of his half of the bill exactly fitted the jagged edges of the half that the contact had received by courier from London. It remained a precarious transaction for a private individual: before you knew it, the business contact would claim a bill of exchange to be false. Back then there were no professional foreign exchange offices, and the banking families of Europe could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The emergence of a regulated cashless economy that offered people solid securities in exchange for interest lay far in the future. In the days before bank guarantees could be purchased and authorities laid down rules on money transfers, finding reliable financial agents remained a tricky issue for those having to move money. As Erasmus didn't know any merchants who could offer him a reliable exchange service, he felt – understandably enough – that it would be safer for him to escort his own money across the North Sea, unaware as he was that the export of all currency was prohibited. But his plan foundered before his ship had even left Dover harbour.

Having reached the French coast at the start of a new year and a new century, Erasmus travelled on to Tournehem Castle, near Calais, some ninety gold coins lighter and deeply dejected, to remind the Lady of Veere of his existence and her pledge to support him financially. She sent the penniless canon packing without even giving him a travel allowance for his journey to Paris. At the end of January he bade farewell to his old friend Batt, tutor to the young Lord of Veere,

and used his last ten gold coins to pay for a coach journey. When he got to Amiens, however, he decided to let the coach rattle on without him. His fear of contracting some unpleasant disease weighed stronger than his resolve to husband his resources. Disregarding the rule that required members of the clergy to travel in the company of a fellow cleric, he avoided public transport when he could, especially in the depths of winter, when it meant sitting in a coach cheek by jowl with coughing and sneezing fellow passengers.

Together with one other traveller – because to travel solo along bandit-ridden country roads was far too dangerous, and he did not as yet have an acolyte to accompany him – Erasmus hired horses so as to travel on independently. But poverty breeds anxiety, and along the way he was seized by a new worry: that the rogue he had hired the horses from would rob him of his remaining money. The man had refused to provide him with any mounts until Erasmus had showed him the entire contents of his purse, supposedly to ensure that the horse dealer's sidekick – who would accompany the two men to Paris – would be paid properly at the end of the journey. He had had to dig out all his gold coins, lay them one by one in the doctored scales of the horse dealer, and haggle endlessly about the exact weight in gold of each coin. Not a single one was heavy enough according to the horse dealer, a self-styled money gauger. He was even dismissive of the pride of Erasmus's collection – an older écu stamped with the image of a sun, dating from a time when coins contained a high percentage of pure gold. In the end he'd had to part with his very best coin for a shambling nag with a gaping neck wound.

Erasmus' mount was also overburdened, because after they set off, the sidekick had refused to walk as agreed, but instead brazenly clambered up to sit behind him. On top of that, his unwanted supercargo had the temerity to finger his purse – which kept sliding round his belt to the back – and shove it back to the front. 'Always keep your purse in sight,' the scoundrel cheekily reprimanded him. 'What difference does it make if it's empty?' Erasmus had jested. And now

it turned out that the villainous horse dealer had been following them. In the second inn he suddenly confronted them with a cock and bull story about how he'd come to take his sidekick's place, because his wife had had an accident, so he needed to hurry home. But the man didn't go home at all. That evening, he and the horse dealer sat scheming together in the inn, no doubt about the robbery they were about to commit. Erasmus passed a sleepless night in the bed he shared with his companion, still dressed and booted, with the latter's sword – a canon didn't carry a weapon – and a chainmail glove stuffed under the pillow in readiness. They arose while it was still pitch dark in order to get away before the conspirators woke. But as they were paying for bed, meal and hay, the rascally innkeeper claimed only to have a handful of small silver coins in his cashbox. Which meant that instead of paying a fraction of a gold coin for a single night, Erasmus would have to part with almost a whole écu. After a furious row with the surly innkeeper and his screeching wife, he gave up. Trading insults in good and poor French was getting him nowhere, the innkeeper wouldn't budge and he wanted to get away. To make matters worse, the horse dealer and his sidekick had now been roused by the noise. But after telling them they were going to morning mass in the neighbouring village, Erasmus and his companion took to their heels. Leaving the horses they'd paid so much for behind at the inn, they set off on foot with all possible speed. By evening they had reached Saint-Denis. The next day, Erasmus arrived in Paris, destitute and exhausted. It was 2 February. All he had left in the world was three gold coins. He found board and lodging with the wily press agent Caminade, who was only too delighted to have the writer, now worn out and squeezed dry, in his debt.

Shrewd and lewd in England

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The next year saw Erasmus crossing the North Sea once more, in response to an invitation from Lord Mountjoy. Thanks to an allowance from the busy baron – Mountjoy had by now advanced to become tutor to England's crown prince Henry – Erasmus had all the time in the world to renew contacts with old friends. One of them, John Colet, received him in the deanery of St Paul's Cathedral in London. Erasmus was impressed with the his host's spiritual lifestyle, approving of Colet's rational approach to piety. The new dean insisted on preaching himself, rather than – like his predecessors – have a curate do so, wishing to set a good example for other, laxer members of the clergy. However, he drew the line at holding a daily mass in his church, as had previously been the case. Such ritual exercises in piety bred soulless services, Colet believed. The dean held mass on feast days and kept other days free for bible study, so as to give his sermons depth. Which was effective, Erasmus noticed, because city officials and other high-ranking Londoners flocked to St Paul's, and the royal family regularly welcomed Colet to its palaces as court preacher.

It must also have been pleasant for Erasmus to meet Colet's parents: his aged father, who had been a successful merchant and Lord Mayor of London, but had had the misfortune to see nearly all his children predecease him, and Colet's mother, a wise lady with whom the Dutch humanist got on splendidly. At Colet's table he could enjoy intellectual conversations about the Bible, especially, of course, about the Epistles of Paul. But the fact they were both clerics and almost exactly the same age also made it easy to discuss personal matters. Colet was open about his weaknesses. He loved women, he loved luxury, he loved lazing around, he loved humour. The dean liked nothing better than to tell a good joke when the occasion arose – he refused to deny himself that. But the pious Colet, then in his mid-thirties, assured Erasmus that he staunchly resisted other temptations by banishing sensory pleasures from his daily life and

immersing himself in his studies. He shunned banquets with courtiers and dignitaries like the plague, to avoid drunkenness and worse, and received almost no guests himself; he had done away with evening meals, eating his one meal of the day in the afternoon, at an impossible hour when others would be caught up in work. On top of that, the one daily repast in the deanery was so frugal as to quench his fleshly lusts, Colet hoped.

Erasmus didn't approve of all that fasting. He firmly believed that it was better to eat two moderate meals a day all year round than skip entire meals and make your one meal of the day meagre into the bargain. Trying to conquer lust by downright starvation undermined your health as well as your mental acuity, he thought. Torturing yourself by fasting did no good at all, Erasmus told his English friend. Moreover, wasn't it much better to train yourself to exercise self-control at a table full of tasty dishes?

The two men didn't just discuss Colet's rigorous approach to fasting, praying and keeping vigil, but also his battle against sexual desire. Many years later, Erasmus wrote that he was prepared to believe Colet's assertion that he had always managed to remain chaste. Whatever he himself vouchsafed to Colet he did not commit to paper. But in his openhearted autobiographical letter to 'X', written in his fifties, when his enemies were trying to blacken his name, accusing him of breaking his vow of celibacy outside the monastery, he wrote that he'd never pretended to have retained his virginity. In other letters he stated carefully that in his youth he'd been tempted by lust, but that he'd never become a slave to Venus. Indeed, had he wished it, his heavy workload wouldn't have allowed him time for such frivolous addictions, he added dryly. And though he might have slipped occasionally when young, he claimed that old age had now fortunately freed him for good from the tyranny of lust.

So he did write about lust, when in his fifties. But not a word about love. Enormous though his correspondence was, it contains not a single remark to

indicate that Erasmus was ever in love with a woman, though he was often contemptuous of those who piously shunned the opposite sex – foolish bigotry, he thought. He certainly projected his physical desires on women. But ‘nymphs with the faces of saints’ – as he wrote in his first letter from England – whose main quality is that they are ‘tempting’ and ‘easy’, are not persons. They are not even objects of lust, more service providers. In his letters, women and girls are rarely given a face. And never a body. Men, by contrast, are very much visible, in all kinds of ways. Including when Erasmus was attracted to them.

There must have been opportunities in the London deanery for him to share the dilemmas of a bachelor existence with the forthright Colet. As we know, he had already written to him about celibacy many years earlier. It was a lifestyle that had been thrust upon him at much too young an age, according to Erasmus’s fictionalised autobiography. Forced into a monastery as an adolescent, he had been deprived of the chance to explore, at that crucial stage of life, what kind of man he was, and whether or not he was suited to marriage and family life. He had accepted the consequences of that past, not out of fidelity to his time in the monastery, but out of priestly duty. That sacrifice had made it possible for him to marry literature instead, though, as he was well aware.

Much later, Erasmus was to write that his English colleague had confessed to him in the deanery that he did not view celibacy as particularly important to a clerical lifestyle. He didn’t have such a problem with priests who had wives and children, Colet told Erasmus. They had sinned out of love. That wasn’t laudible, the dean thought, but he took a much dimmer view of other, more reprehensible sins common among clerics – sins that the Church was much less offended by: greed, covetousness, ambition, arrogance, pride. Why weren’t those deadly sins? Priests with children showed true Christian humility when they took their fatherly responsibilities seriously, maintained Colet, the son of loving parents. He also said that in his experience, examples of godly living were more often to be found among people with children than among childless, self-righteous priests and

monks. Erasmus didn't record his reaction to his English friend's words. But it is quite conceivable that they were consoling to a man who was the son of a Catholic priest.

After his visit to the deanery of St Paul's, Erasmus spent much of his lengthy second stay in England, from 1505 to 1506, in the urbane household of the young Thomas More and his family. The two men got on famously. More happily accepted the challenge to spend an entire autumn translating satirical dialogues by Lucian from Greek into Latin, under the tutelage of the more experienced Dutch humanist. Erasmus and More hadn't forgotten each other in the years since they had first met. Back then their interaction had taken the form of boyish intellectual sparring. Now they were finally reunited, that friendly competition took the form of a fun project that was both an exercise in translation and an exercise in friendship – an exciting friendship. Because these men were evenly matched in every respect, yet in many respects each other's polar opposites.

When they had first met, six years previously, on their walk to Eltham Palace in the summer of 1499, More had only just turned twenty. Now, having gained a law degree according to plan, the young Englishman was compiling an impeccable CV as an up and coming jurist in London, punctiliously following the path set out for him by his ambitious family. After being called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn, he was made spokesman for the Mercers' Company, a powerful London guild that monopolised trade in wool and cloth: More's very first steps in a dizzying career propelling him towards a position at court. For much of his life Thomas fulfilled his father's expectations with flair. Until he stopped being a yes man and began to say no. Intensely religious, as a young barrister he had toyed with the notion of abandoning a political career for the priesthood. For a while he had even lived in London's Carthusian monastery, a strict religious order, to test his vocation. But that proved a bridge too far: he was too worldly and too lascivious, he confided to Erasmus, and so he had opted for married life instead.

He had put his amorous escapades behind him now, having recently wed the sixteen-year-old daughter of a landed aristocrat – he had been more attracted to her younger sister, actually, but had asked his future father-in-law for the hand of his oldest daughter Jane, as that seemed to him more proper. He rented part of a respectable stone mansion known as the Old Barge, Bucklersbury, in a neatly paved street famed for its apothecaries, not five hundred yards from St Paul's and close to the Mercers' Hall. More even had his own wherry, moored just round the corner in Walbrook – an offshoot of the Thames – so that he could easily get to the city. Erasmus was welcome to use the guest room in the Old Barge, and for his part he loved visiting his young friend. Thomas was exceptionally quick-witted, socially adept and utterly charming, Erasmus thought, soon coming to regard this 'man for all seasons' as the most engaging individual he'd ever met.

One of More's talents was cracking jokes with a straight face. Even his family often didn't know whether he was being serious or mocking when he unleashed his razor-sharp wit on his conversation partner. That characteristic had already struck Erasmus during his first visit to England. Back then, More was still the sceptical student who, after submitting patiently to a scholarly lecture on how the legendary King Arthur had woven himself a cloak from the beards of giants he had slain, merely asked drily what weaving technique the king had used. More also excelled at dismissing nonsensical utterances with crisp non sequiturs – an accomplishment that Erasmus very much admired.

In suffocating social regimes like those of late medieval universities, where intellectual indoctrination was reinforced by rigid hierarchical relations, humour was a survival strategy. In later life, when More was royal adviser, irony would help him save face at court in embarrassing situations. In those circles it was the only permissible retort to the humiliations daily meted out to courtiers by their powerful superiors. And coming from More, who dispensed irony with perfect precision, it was not offensive. More drew people to him like a magnet – exactly the right kind of people. Erasmus was one of those admirers: from an early age

he'd suffered more than his fair share of intellectual oppression. He knew better than anyone that humor was the best weapon against the arrogant smugness of jumped-up blowhards, and he appreciated his young friend's polished irony because he recognised its urgency. The fact that More – like all comedians, hungry for laughs – also made members of his household the butt of jokes, mocking inferiors in a way that was demeaning to the ridiculer rather than the ridiculed was something Erasmus was gladly prepared to forgive his young friend. He himself was never the victim.

Erasmus felt strikingly at ease there in that London neighbourhood, in that animated, urbane household, where More's father would drop in with the latest political news from the city, and his father-in-law would join with More in cooking up practical jokes. Erasmus enjoyed a carefree time at the Old Barge, writing lewd epigrams with More – invariably outdone by his brilliant young friend, who shook one clever verse after another out of his sleeve, on sovereigns and servitors, burghers and beggars – and of course, women. 'Who would deny thou art a match for a man, my girl / seeing thy legs wrap themselves round a stallion?'

Meanwhile the lustful Thomas was drawing up an ambitious curriculum for the religious, literary and musical re-education of his sixteen-year-old bride. Who was also bearing a child every year. When Erasmus met More's wife in 1505 she was just seventeen and heavily pregnant with her first child. While at the Old Barge he noted the progress made by the young mistress of the house in bible studies and lute playing, and won her affection by commenting drily on her husband's singing ability. Such an accommodating young bride deserved better than a screeching crow, More's Dutch guest jested. Jane must have been happy that the lodger diverted her demanding husband's attention. She enjoyed having Erasmus to stay with them, he read in letters from the Old Barge when he was elsewhere, and she sent her greetings. In fact, the entire More family took Erasmus to their bosom. At Tournehem Castle, with his old friend Batt, he'd

never felt secure. And during his time in the austere monastery with Willem he'd had a constant sense of inadequacy. Suspicion and jealousy about the behaviour of fellow monks was rife. He'd even been infected by it himself. But in the case of More he encountered a world without reproaches. Moreover, in More he finally found a companion who, like himself, was interested in reading and translating Greek. More even turned out to be proficient at it, thanks to five years of lessons from Linacre and Grocyn. And with his dual talent for gravity and humour he shared the literary tastes of his older Dutch friend – who suggested a joint attack on Lucian. Erasmus translated six texts by the Greek author. More signed up for four.

Sample translation Jane Hedley-Prole

Sandra Langereis is a historian and biographer. Her previous biography, *The Wordsmith*, about printer and publisher Christoffel Plantijn, was nominated for the Libris History Prize and chosen as best biography and best history book of 2014 by newspapers *de Volkskrant* and *Trouw*. With *Erasmus: Life Of A Maverick*, she has once again published a committed biography that calls attention to culture's indispensability in all times.



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First press quotes:

‘Ambitious biography turns Erasmus into a man of flesh and blood.’ – *Trouw*

‘Furthermore, because Langereis does this in a highly readable way, without pomposity or endless citations, the book has not only become a wonderful

biography of Erasmus, but also an attractive and extraordinarily informative cultural history of the times in which he lived.’ – *Historisch Nieuwsblad*

‘Langereis’ biography gives a detailed picture of his life as a thinker and man of letters, but also as an intellectual beggar – as someone who was constantly dependent on the gold pieces he was thrown.’ – *Vrij Nederland*