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ERASMUS

The Education of a Christian Prince
CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Introduction

Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* and Machiavelli’s *Prince* were written within three years of one another (in 1516 and 1513 respectively).¹ In composing their treatises on how best to groom the ruler for effective government, both were responding to the political instability of the times, and the ‘moral panic’ (as one historian has characterised it) generated by a period of high dynastic aspirations and territorial ambitions on the part of the most powerful princely houses of Europe (the Medici in Italy, the Valois in France, and the Habsburgs in Spain, Germany, and the Low Countries). Reacting to the regaining of power in Florence in 1512 by the Medici family (ousted by the French in 1494), Machiavelli set out to define the qualities of princely virtuosity which will ensure that he can maintain control of the state to which he has laid claim. The precepts he devised to do so, based on the threat of punishment for misdemeanour, a commitment to territorial expansionism, and a readiness to sustain political control by force, are designed to keep the prince’s subjects in a constant state of insecurity: ‘it is much safer to be feared than loved’, for example, or ‘a prince should have no other thought or object than war and its laws and discipline’.²

¹ Machiavelli’s *Prince* was not published, however, until 1532.
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It is one of those perennial ironies of human intellectual ingenuity that the responses of the two thinkers to a shared problem in real-politik should have been so strikingly different. In The Education of a Christian Prince Erasmus takes precisely the opposite point of view. Whereas Machiavelli set out to instruct the ruler who has seized power on how best to sustain it, Erasmus is candid in his commitment to the hereditary monarchies of Europe, and forthright in his contention that the cost of disturbing the order currently in place, in terms of ensuing discord and social disintegration, is too high to be contemplated. Only outright tyranny justifies political challenge from a ruler’s subjects. The problem Erasmus sets himself in The Education of a Christian Prince, given this commitment to, and support for, the status quo, is how to ensure that those born to rule are educated so as to govern justly and benevolently, and so that the prince’s rule never degenerates into oppression.

‘A prince simply cannot exist without a state, and in fact the state takes in the prince, rather than the reverse. What makes a prince a great man, except the consent of his subjects?’ It is the formal consent of a prince’s subjects, according to Erasmus, which entitles him to exercise authority over them. A prince born into an existing hereditary line can assume that consent; a prince who gains his title by marriage must actively seek it, as must the prince who gains a territory through military action and conquest. In each case the prince is expected to make a binding undertaking to act in the best interests of his subjects.

Erasmus’s insistence on the necessity of virtuous conduct in all things on the part of the prince follows directly from this consensual model of lawful government. A body of subjects elects to submit to the rule of a prince on the strict understanding that all his actions will be for their communal good. In his dedicatory letter to Prince Charles (later the Habsburg Emperor Charles V) Erasmus proposes (following the Greek political philosopher Xenophon) that ‘there is something beyond human nature, something wholly divine, in absolute rule over free and willing subjects’. Free and willing consent both justifies and supports the rule of the Christian prince. It follows that he needs to be educated so as to recognise and pursue

\(^3\) EC\(P\), 89 (ASD iv–1, 212).
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the morally good in all things, in order to be able to take decisions correctly on behalf of his people.

As a strategic document in political thought, then, *The Education of a Christian Prince* has much more in common with another treatise in political thought published in 1516, Thomas More’s *Utopia*,4 than with Machiavelli’s *Principe*. Both authors are prepared to restrict individual freedom in the interests of a stable and orderly commonwealth.5 Both believe that a state whose dominion is designed on the basis of classically derived, liberal humanist precepts imposed on willing subjects will be fair and benevolent, stable and lasting. This means, however, that individuals are not entitled to object to personally disadvantageous consequences of the social order. Finally, both authors show a marked aversion to violence and to high and arbitrary taxation.6

Notoriously, Erasmus was a life-long pacifist, with a deep personal aversion to the kinds of alarming local partisan conflicts in which he found himself repeatedly on the verge of being caught up, as he criss-crossed Europe as a peripatetic author in search of a stable base from which to conduct and disseminate his scholarship. *The Education of a Christian Prince* includes a fervent plea for a ‘universal peace’ (though he himself argued that the inclusion in the treatise of a section entitled ‘On starting war’ proved that on occasion he could countenance military action in a just cause).7 Erasmus’s commitment to a social and political environment which supports and nurtures the individual inquiring mind led him unequivocally to advocate peace at any price. Where sectarian beliefs or partisan political commitments interpose barriers—barriers which are at their most extreme at times of actual military hostilities—the individual is necessarily prevented from holding and developing ideas freely and unrestrainedly. In the section entitled ‘On starting war’, Erasmus argues that a prince ‘will never be more hesitant or more circumspect than in starting a war; other actions

4 *Utopia* is available in the Cambridge Texts series (edited by George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams).
5 See Logan and Adams (eds.), *Utopia*, xii and xxvi.
6 As Logan and Adams point out, however, More is more inclined than Erasmus to accept war (and some pretty dirty tactics) in the commonwealth’s interests (*Utopia*, xxvi).
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have their different advantages, but war always brings about the wreck of everything that is good’.

On the eve of the Reformation, there is something rather poignant about Erasmus’s reluctance to regard even intellectual antagonism as other than an impediment to the free development of ideas—an advance indication that in the 1520s he would refuse to acknowledge the part that his own revisions of the New Testament had played in Luther’s radical thinking, let alone publicly take sides either for or against the reformer.8 Or rather, we might consider that Erasmus’s clearly stated view that, in the interests of political stability and civic harmony, loyalty to the native-born, established prince takes priority over all other commitments predetermined his attitude to Luther. Once Luther’s denunciation of the venery and corruption of the Catholic Church led to civil disturbance and unrest, Erasmus was bound to dissociate himself from the reform movement, in spite of his evident sympathy for some of the criticisms levelled at church practices. In April 1522 Erasmus wrote to Charles V’s chaplain:

Our new pope [Adrian VI], with his scholarly wisdom and wise integrity, and at the same time a spirit in our emperor that seems more than human, encourage me to high hopes that this plague [Lutheranism] may be rooted out in such a way that it may never grow again. This can be done if the roots are cut away from which this plague so often sprouts afresh, one of which is hatred of the

8 The standard view of Erasmus’s relationship to the Lutheran Reformation is to be found in E. Rummel’s introduction to The Erasmus Reader (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990): ‘By the mid-twentieth suspicions that Erasmus was a Luther supporter and disseminator of unorthodox views hardened into a general perception. Erasmus became the target of popular vitriol, such as “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched” and “Either Erasmus lutheranizes or Luther erasmusianizes.” Not surprisingly his works came under investigation by the church. In 1527 the Spanish Inquisitor General convened a conference to examine Erasmus’ writings. Although the meetings were adjourned because of an outbreak of the plague, the proceedings were soon public knowledge, and Erasmus felt obliged to defend his orthodoxy in an apologia. The prestigious faculty of theology at Paris also reviewed Erasmus’ works and condemned a number of passages as scandalous and unorthodox. When their findings were published in 1531, Erasmus was once again obliged to justify his writings. In 1532, after Erasmus’ death, the Louvain theologians joined their colleagues at the Sorbonne in condemning passages from Erasmus’ writings as erroneous, scandalous, and heretical. Ironically, Erasmus was also set upon by the Protestant camp. Keenly disappointed that he failed to join their cause, they unleashed numerous attacks on Erasmus’ (9).
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Roman curia (whose greed and tyranny were already past bearing), and along with that, much legislation of purely human origin, which was thought to lay a burden on the liberty of Christian people. All these can be easily cured, without setting the world by the ears, by the emperor’s authority and the integrity of the new pope. I myself am nobody, but to the best of my ability I do not, and I will not, fail to do my duty. Only let the emperor in his mercy provide that my salary shall be permanent, and ensure that my reputation is kept in good and sound repair against the spite of certain enemies; I shall see to it that he will not regret making me a councillor.⁹

Here, and in the flood of letters protesting his loyalty to his Emperor’s party which Erasmus dispatched during this period, that loyalty is consistently expressed in the terms set out in *The Education of a Christian Prince*: tyranny under previous papal regimes entitled Christians to rebel against unjust rule; under the current, benevolent Pope such rebellion is inadmissible. Charles V’s just rule commits his subjects to cleaving to the Catholic Church, whose cause Charles vigorously maintains.

There is one further point of contact between the views expressed by Erasmus in *The Education of a Christian Prince* and his subsequent attitude towards the religious and political ferment produced by Martin Luther and his followers. Before he became Pope, Adrian VI had been tutor to the young Prince Charles—a post which Erasmus himself possibly aspired to in 1504, but which Adrian gained in 1507. In Charles V and Pope Adrian VI, then, Europe had, so far as Erasmus was concerned, the realisation of the hopes expressed in the precepts in his 1516 treatise of ‘advice to princes’. Charles V was a Christian prince, raised according to humanistic principles and values under the guidance of the personal tutor who now reigned as God’s representative on earth—an Aristotle to Charles’s Alexander, or a Xenophon to Charles’s Cyrus. To attempt to undermine such a partnership, as Luther was doing, could, for Erasmus, only be construed as illegitimate rebellion and heresy.¹⁰

*The Education of a Christian Prince* is presented in the form of a series of precepts or aphorisms (compact, memorable summaries of

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⁹ CWE 9, 61 [ep. 1273].
¹⁰ On Adrian VI and Erasmus see Allen 1, 380.
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the key items of instruction) addressed to the enlightened ruler. Its ‘Christianity’ is substantially a question of its highly moral attitude to leadership and the rule of law. In the body of the text, the precedents on which Erasmus bases his arguments are drawn even-handedly from pagan and Christian sources. He ranges widely, with a virtuoso grasp on the political writings of antiquity, and often citing from memory. The tone is magisterial—the youthful prince is encouraged by the humanist teacher’s example to immerse himself in the writings of the past (pagan and scriptural) to develop an outlook and habits of thought that will mould him into the virtuous leader of an obedient and grateful people.

Erasmus begins with the characteristics of moderation and a balanced temperament to be looked for when a community sets out to elect its ruler. But he devotes most of the long opening section to precepts for moulding the individual destined to reign by accident of birth into suitable form as a ruler. It is above all else a humane education which makes a good prince. The people may not be able to choose their prince, but they are at least in a position to make sure that he will rule justly by their choice of those who train him for the job: ‘Where there is no power to select the prince, the man who is to educate the future prince must be selected with comparable care’; ‘To produce a good prince, these and similar seeds should be sown from the start by parents, nurses, and tutor in the boy’s young mind; and let him learn them voluntarily and not under compulsion. For this is the way to bring up a prince who is destined to rule over free and willing subjects.’

There follows a substantial section of aphorisms on how to educate the future ruler. Here, as throughout the treatise, Erasmus moves shrewdly between precepts which he proposes ought to be observed in overseeing the education of a young prince in one’s charge, and precepts laid down for the mature prince who strives to model himself for right rule. The latter kind of precept consistently presses the prince to regard dominion over a particular territory as an opportunity to serve his people: ‘When you assume the office of prince, do not think how much honour is bestowed upon you, but rather how great a burden and how much anxiety you have taken on. Do not consider only the income and revenues, but also the pains you must take; and do not think that you have acquired an opportunity for plunder, but for service.’
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Above all, the prince (and those who train the future prince) must avoid the charge of tyranny. To do so he must avoid all acts of aggression, and consistently act for the communal good, rather than for personal gain: ‘Whoever wants to bestow on himself the title of prince and wants to escape the hated name of tyrant must win it for himself by benevolent actions and not through fear and threats.’ The Christian prince and his people live in a state of mutual indebtedness and mutual service.

This crucial general section of the treatise is followed by a series of sections incorporating more directly pragmatic advice, based on moralising works like Plutarch’s essays (some of which were included with the first printed edition of the text). A prince must learn to distinguish between flatterers and friends, since the advice of those around him is indispensable for good government. Flattery of a prince does not just consist of the things said to him by those around him. It extends to statues, paintings and literature produced to honour him, and includes the honorific titles like ‘Magnificence’ used formally to address him. ‘The boy must therefore be instructed in advance to turn those titles which he is forced to hear to his own advantage. When he hears “Father of His Country”, let him reflect that no title given to princes more precisely squares with being a good prince than does “Father of His Country”; consequently he must act in such a way that he is seen to be worthy of that title. If he thinks in this way, it will have been a reminder; if not, flattery.’

The next section sets out to teach the prince the skills necessary to preserve peace in his realm. This leads directly on to a section on taxation, since resentment at raising taxes, as Erasmus points out, is a major cause of political instability. Here Erasmus shows his personal prejudice against taxation as such, rather than any grasp of fiscal matters. He reaches the inevitable conclusion that most taxation is unnecessary if the prince will only curb the expense of his personal lifestyle: ‘Much the best way . . . of increasing the value of the prince’s income . . . is to reduce his outgoing costs, and even in his case the proverb holds good that thrift is a great source of revenue. But if it is unavoidable that some levy be made, and the people’s interests demand such action, then let the burden fall on those foreign and imported goods which are not so much necessities of life as luxurious and pleasurable refinements and whose use is confined to the rich.’ There follows a brief section on the desirability of the prince’s being of a modestly generous temperament.
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Like Plato, Erasmus believes that good rule is a combination of a good prince and good laws. The next two sections of The Education of a Christian Prince are devoted, therefore, to the proper enactment of legislation under the direction of the prince, and to the choice of magistrates to see them properly upheld. Typically, Erasmus is keen to minimise the amount of interference in subjects’ lives, and is primarily concerned that a country’s laws should conform with general principles of equity: ‘It is best to have as few laws as possible; these should be as just as possible and further the public interest; they should also be as familiar as possible to the people.’

The next two sections are on the making of treaties and the formation of marriage alliances—the two principal methods available to the prince for securing peace and stability with surrounding territories. Except that Erasmus ruefully remarks (on the basis of recent experience in Europe) that marriage alliances are more likely to worsen the lot of a prince’s subjects by imposing on them a hereditary prince drawn from foreign stock. There follows a short discussion of the ways in which the prince should conduct his affairs, modestly and without ostentation, in times of peace.

In the closing section of his treatise Erasmus returns to the prince’s obligation to uphold peace and to avoid going to war except as a last resort. War always brings misery to a prince’s subjects, so that in the interests of his people the prince’s main concern should be to avoid it. ‘Although the prince will never make any decision hastily, he will never be more hesitant or more circumspect than in starting a war; other actions have their different disadvantages, but war always brings about the wreck of everything that is good, and the tide of war overflows with everything that is worst; what is more, there is no evil that persists so stubbornly.’ Where war becomes inevitable, it should be conducted in as limited a way, and as economically and expeditiously as possible. Erasmus refers his readers to the several places—in his Adages, the Panegyric and his recently completed Complaint of Peace—in his own published works where he has expressed his own commitment to pacifism.

The importance for subsequent political thought of Erasmus’s Education of a Christian Prince lies both in this strong emphasis upon virtuous conduct as the backbone of the polity, and in the continuous influence his strenuously matter-of-fact argument in support of that position has had on political writing down to the present.
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time. His closely argued case for government by consent exerted an important influence on later-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century treatments of the rights of subjects to resist imposed rule—
notably discussions in the Low Countries surrounding legitimate resistance to the imposed Habsburg rule of Philip II, Charles’s son and heir. Echoes of Erasmus are to be found, for instance, in the widely read anonymous treatise, *Defence of Liberty against Tyrants (Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos)*, published in Basel in 1579.  

Erasmus was born in Gouda in the Netherlands around 1469, the illegitimate son of a Catholic priest—the uncertainty with which he deliberately surrounded his date of birth allowed Erasmus to fudge the issue of whether his father had actually been in holy orders when he was conceived.  

On the death of his father, he was placed by his guardian in the Augustinian monastery at Steyn; Erasmus became a priest in 1492. In 1493 he left the monastery to act as secretary to the bishop of Cambrai, who was tipped to become a Cardinal, and was therefore set to travel to Rome. When the bishop failed to gain his appointment Erasmus was allowed to go to Paris to study theology at the university there. He never returned to his monastery, and in 1517 obtained a papal dispensation which allowed him to live in the world as a secular priest.  

In 1501 Erasmus returned to the Netherlands in search of patronage, settling in Louvain in 1502. It was there that he got to know Paludanus (Jean Desmarez), through whom he was commissioned to write an oration celebrating the return of Archduke Philip in 1503. Suitable patronage in the Netherlands was not, however, forthcoming, and after a period in Italy Erasmus decided to try his fortunes in England, where the accession of the intellectual and talented Henry VIII in 1509 created expectations of advancement for humanists like himself. In England he became close friends with a circle of Greek and Latin scholars which included Thomas More, John Colet, and Cuthbert Tunstall. His *Praise of Folly (Moriae encomium)*, published in 1512, was written as a literary compliment

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11 For this influential work see G. Garnett (ed.), *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos, or Concerning the Legitimate Power of a Prince over the People, and of the People over a Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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to his admired friend More. More responded in kind with the *Utopia*, which Erasmus saw through the press for him at Louvain, and for which he solicited a collection of endowing prefatory letters from major continental political and intellectual figures, which contributed to the success of More's little satire.

In 1514 Erasmus left England and returned to the Netherlands. In 1515 he settled in Basel where Froben published his enlarged and revised *Adages* and his edition of Saint Jerome's *Letters*. It was in Basel that he wrote the *Education of a Christian Prince*, encouraged by Jean le Sauvage, who was president of the Council of Flanders when they met, but who soon became Grand Chancellor of Burgundy. It was through Sauvage that Erasmus gained his appointment as Councillor to the sixteen-year-old Prince Charles. The appointment was an honorary one, but carried a handsome stipend (which, unfortunately, Charles rarely got around to paying).

Erasmus's revised translation of the New Testament was also published in 1516, and marked the beginning of his religious notoriety in Europe. Erasmus's appointment to Charles required him to reside close to Brussels, and he chose to settle in Louvain (the closest centre of learning). The Faculty of Theology at Louvain was a particularly conservative one, and between 1517 and 1521 Erasmus was obliged to defend his revisions of the New Testament in the face of considerable local hostility (led by the theologian Martin Dorp). Luther used the *Novum instrumentum* as the basis for his criticisms of orthodox Catholic teaching on scripture, and Erasmus found himself associated with the reformers. Naturally cautious and non-confrontational, he soon distanced himself from the Lutheran movement, though he never spoke out convincingly against it. He continued to publish biblical paraphrases, theological commentaries and translations of the Church Fathers. He was condemned by the Catholic orthodoxy, and his works were banned in Spain for much of the sixteenth century.

At the end of 1521, under increasing pressure from the Louvain theologians, Erasmus moved back to more liberally minded Basel, where he remained until 1529. When Basel declared itself Protestant and religious unrest once again ensued, he took refuge in Catholic Freiburg im Breisgau. He returned to Basel (the city he had come to consider his home) when order was restored in 1536, and died there a few months later, on 12 July of that year. Right up to his
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death he publicly supported the restoration of church unity. The Council of Trent of 1559, however, placed Erasmus in the first category of heretics, and put all his works on the index of prohibited books.

Erasmus’s Education of a Christian Prince was published by the Froben Press in Basel, in May 1516, and dedicated to Prince Charles on the occasion of his accession to the throne of Aragon. Erasmus had been appointed to Charles’s council a few months earlier. He records himself that he presented an inscribed copy to Charles in acknowledgement of the honour; the text is offered as a first piece of intellectual counsel, and an act of gratitude and homage. The work went through ten editions in its lifetime, and was translated into a number of vernacular languages.

The title-page to the first edition of The Education of a Christian Prince describes it as ‘distilled into the most fortifying precepts’—a work designed to instruct and morally sustain the prince to whom it is addressed. But this is not the whole story. The same title-page advertises the fact that the volume contains ‘a number of other extremely relevant works’. These include pseudo-Isocrates on kingship, and Plutarch on the importance of philosophers to princes—ancient texts to which Erasmus’s Education of a Christian Prince owes obvious debts in content and expression. But the most strik-

13 Charles had succeeded his father as Archduke of Burgundy (ruler of most of the Low Countries) in 1506. He became King of Aragon when his grandfather Ferdinand II died in 1516. Strictly speaking, he did not inherit Castile until his mother Juana’s death in 1555 (she had inherited from Isabella in 1504); however, Juana (‘the mad’) was judged unfit to rule, and relinquished her rights to her son. Effectively, therefore, the occasion for Erasmus’s treatise was Charles’s accession to the throne of a united Spain. In 1519 he succeeded his grandfather Maximilian as Habsburg emperor (though technically this was an elective office, and Charles had to contest it against other contenders, including the French King François I; on the basis of a huge cash loan from the German Fugger bankers Charles offered financial inducements to enough of the electors to ensure a comfortable victory).

14 Allen i, 44, cit. Tracy, Politics, 52: ‘Shortly after his return to Antwerp he was greeted by a letter from Sauvage, dated July 8 . . . Sauvage was conferring on him a canonry in Courtrai “forthwith”. Nor would that be all which he might expect “with sure and certain hope from the generosity of his catholic majesty [Prince Charles], my master.” Erasmus, not slow to take a hint, was in Brussels by July 10. It was presumably on this occasion that he inscribed a copy of The Institution of a Christian Prince for Charles.’

15 See ASD n-2, 106-7.

16 See notes to the text.
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...ing choice for inclusion is a reprint of Erasmus’s panegyric to the Archduke Philip (Philip the Fair), son of Maximilian, on his return to the Low Countries from Spain, a speech written in haste at the request of the Public Orator Jean Desmaré (Paludanus) at the end of 1503, delivered in person by Erasmus, and printed in 1504.

Erasmus scholars have always been inclined to disparage Erasmus’s Panegyric for Philip as a piece of dismal sycophancy, a hack oration written when the author was looking for patronage and a steady income. Philip certainly gave Erasmus a significant sum as a gift for his pains, and may have offered him a post educating his children (including the three-year-old Prince Charles). In the 1516 edition Erasmus added a phrase to the prefatory letter to the Panegyric suggesting that he had declined some significant offer of employment on the occasion of its delivery.

Actually the Panegyric sits very appropriately alongside the Education of a Christian Prince, particularly if we take into account...

17 Jean Desmaré or Paludanus (died 1525) came from Cassel, near St Omer. As well as holding the office of Public Orator at the University of Louvain, he was a Canon of St Peter’s Church. He became chief secretary or Scribe to the University in December 1504. He gave Erasmus hospitality on a number of occasions, and Erasmus always spoke warmly of him. A letter from Paludanus to Peter Gilles and some verses by him were included in the first edition of More’s Utopia, which was printed in Louvain in 1516, and seen through the press by Erasmus. Paludanus thus provides another link between the 1516 printings of The Education of a Christian Prince and Utopia.

18 See, for instance, CWE 27, xvi: ‘The problem, as Otto Hering points out in his introduction to the ASD edition, is to know why Erasmus refused to allow the Panegyricus to sink into oblivion after Philip’s death in 1506.’

19 To a cleric of the order of St Augustine, one pound [1 livre] as a gift, which his Excellency gave for his pains and the work he did in composing a beautiful book in praise of his Excellency, touching his voyage to Spain, and which he presented to him on the 9 January 1504 (Allen 1, 396).

20 ‘For already (as I hear) you [sc. Philip] are looking about in order to choose from the entire fatherland some man accomplished in morals and in letters, to whose bosom you may entrust your children, still of tender age, for the purpose of instructing them in those disciplines worthy of a prince.’ This passage could be read as an advertisement of the author’s availability for the position. If there was talk in 1504 of involving Erasmus with the education of Philip’s children, it would help account for his later assimilation of the Panegyric to the Institution of a Christian Prince (Tracy, Politics, 18–19).

21 Tracy, Politics, 18: ‘The dedicatory epistle to the Panegyric contains a statement to the effect that the archduke, when paying Erasmus for his labours on the oration, “offered much besides if I should wish to join his entourage at court.” This phrase was added in 1516 when the Panegyric was reissued as a companion piece to the Institution of a Christian Prince.’
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Erasmus’s careful contextualising of the latter treatise in his prefatory letter to that work. Erasmus insists (as he also does in the Panegyric) that the prince he addresses—a prince who is Alexander the Great’s equal in moral probity and wisdom—already fully exemplifies the precepts he has codified:

Such is your good nature, your honesty of mind, and your ability, such the upbringing you have had under the most high-minded teachers, and above all so many are the examples which you see around you from among your ancestors, that we all expect with confidence to see Charles one day perform what the world lately looked for from your father Philip [the addressee of the Panegyric]; nor would he have disappointed public expectation had not death carried him off before his time. And so, although I knew that your Highness had no need of any man’s advice, least of all mine, I had the idea of setting forth the ideal of a perfect prince for the general good, but under your name, so that those who are brought up to rule great empires may learn the principles of government through you and take from you their example.22

Charles teaches by example how the precepts of good government laid out in the Education of a Christian Prince are to be applied; his father Philip, too, according to Erasmus’s Panegyric, showed princes throughout the world how to govern well. Thus the precepts in the theoretical treatise are offered as the principles underlying the exemplary rule of two powerful Habsburg princes within whose realm Erasmus himself happens to live.

The Panegyric is not the only work reprinted as part of the volume containing the first edition of the Education of a Christian Prince which draws attention to the fact that the genre of ‘advice to princes’ is pragmatically linked to the practical project of finding a generous and committed patron. The volume opens with a translation by Erasmus from Greek into Latin of Isocrates’ ‘Precepts concerning the administration of the kingdom, addressed to King Nicocles’; and the Education of a Christian Prince and Panegyric are followed by Erasmus’s Latin translation of Plutarch’s ‘How to distinguish between flatterers and friends’, described on the volume’s title-page as ‘addressed to his Serene Highness, Henry the Eighth, King of England’. This is followed by two further short works by

22 ECP 3.
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Plutarch: ‘Learning is necessary to the prince’ (In principi recequiri doctrinam) and ‘With princes one ought especially to discuss philosophically’ (Cum principibus maxime philosophum debere disputare). This little group of didactic texts, all offering practical advice to a Prince, carries a prefatory letter to Henry VIII, exhorting him to choose his friends with care; and there is also a short letter to Cardinal Wolsey, urging him to advise the English king well.21 The entire collection of texts concerns the crucial role of men of learning in advising princes. Each dedication emphasises the direct relevance of the texts introduced to the practical business of government in the territories of the particular princes to whom they are addressed.

In consequence, the first appearance in print of Erasmus’s Education of a Christian Prince clearly and firmly associates the business of the prince’s training with actual princes and the pragmatic needs of their regimes. The work is not, in other words, presented as an idealistic, theoretical one, but as a manual for practice. Where Thomas More’s reflections on the well-run state in his Utopia are carefully distanced from contemporary life and presented in a ‘no-place’ elsewhere, Erasmus’s precepts for princes are strenuously attached to the purpose of the moment—the sustaining of a benevolent regime, for the good of the people, in the Low Countries in particular, under the dominion of Prince Charles, ruler of Burgundy and Castile and (since the death of his grandfather Ferdinand in 1516) occupant of the throne of Aragon.

Nevertheless, one might argue, the exaggeratedly flattering picture which Erasmus paints of Philip the Fair, in a purple prose which often approaches the absurd, is a far cry from the well-tempered and level-headed description of princely rule in the Education of a Christian Prince. This is, however, to miss Erasmus’s point, that the good prince knows how to ignore flattery, and concentrates on the substance of any discourse directed at him by his councillors. ‘It will be no small part of your reputation’, writes Erasmus in his dedication to Charles, ‘that Charles was a prince to whom a man need not hesitate to offer the picture of a true and upright Christian prince without any flattery, knowing that he would either gladly accept it as an excellent prince already, or wisely

21 All these letters had appeared for the first time with the first printed edition of the Latinised Plutarch texts (Froben, 1514).

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imitate it as a young man always in search of self-improvement'.24 Similarly, in his dedication to the Panegyric, addressed to Nicholas Ruistre,25 Erasmus insists that even within the generically flattering form of the panegyric, instruction can be offered on general princely conduct, by attaching the theoretical propositions to the particular example of the prince under discussion:

My preference for frank speaking made me feel a certain distaste for all this kind of writing, to which Plato's phrase 'the fourth subdivision of flattery' seems especially applicable... But there is certainly no other method of correcting princes so effective as giving them an example of a good prince for a model, on the pretext of pronouncing a panegyric, provided that you bestow virtues and remove vices in such a way that it is clear that you are offering encouragement towards the one and deterrence from the other.26

The two works together, then, offer two exercises, in two distinct rhetorical modes, demonstrating how a scholarly adviser (Erasmus himself) can usefully instruct young princes in right rule.

Taking the volume in its entirety, therefore, the first publication of the Education of a Christian Prince presents a manifesto for the crucial role of a 'philosopher' (or professional educator) in the administration of a properly run state. In 1516 the recipient of the volume, Prince Charles, had effectively already acknowledged such a role for Erasmus, by making him one of his councillors. By reprinting the oration in praise of Charles's father, with its matching insistence on the key role education played in Philip's administration of the Low Countries, Erasmus provided an additional public compliment for his new employer. We know that the compliment was taken, from a letter from Charles to Erasmus at the beginning of April 1522, on the occasion of Erasmus's dedicating to him a further work, his paraphrase of Matthew's Gospel:

We remember for our part how your many distinguished intellectual gifts have been exhibited, partly to his Majesty our father

24 ECP 4.
25 Nicholas Ruistre of Luxemburg (c.1442–1509) grew up at the Court of Burgundy and served four Dukes of Burgundy in succession, Philip the Good, Charles the Bold, Maximilian, and Philip the Fair, in senior administrative offices. He became Chancellor of the University of Louvain in 1487, and Bishop of Arras in 1501.
26 CWE 27, 7.
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of illustrious memory and partly to us. To him you offered your Panegyric, and to us your Institution of a Christian Prince, not only for the enhancement of our name but also to the great profit of posterity. We therefore reckon it part of our royal duty to show you all our gratitude as occasion may offer, for we are given to understand that it is no small part of the felicity of men of genius to find in the prince one who admires their great qualities. In the mean time we will do all we can to promote your religious undertakings and the honourable and valuable enterprise on which you are at present engaged, and will encourage whatever we learn that you have done for the honour of Christ and the salvation of all Christian people.27

Here Charles responds to the compliment to his father and himself as Christian princes by taking on precisely the role (support for the ‘man of genius’ who proffers his allegiance) advocated by Erasmus.

As early as 1517, however, it was clear that Charles did not actually intend to make Erasmus’s office more than marginal and honorary. In other words, whilst Charles was happy to claim Erasmus as his humanistic mentor, he would not commit himself to a substantial, regular salary or pension. In 1517, therefore, in his efforts to find a more generous patron, Erasmus made use of the 1516 Education of a Christian Prince volume a second time. The episode gives us a clear picture of the political function ‘Advice to princes’ volumes could perform for their authors—that of literally advertising the author’s competences, in the hope of getting him a job as adviser or secretary in the administration of a powerful prince.28

In September 1517 Erasmus sent a hand-illuminated copy of the 1516 Froben volume to Henry VIII.29 Earlier that year he had been cordially received by both Henry and Wolsey on a visit to England—even though the latter was ‘a person not generally good-

27 CWE 9, 51–2 [ep. 1270]. It was the confirmation of the relationship of intellectual subject to Christian prince offered by Charles in this letter which presumably triggered the rash of letters Erasmus sent in the following weeks to the emperor’s spiritual and secular advisers, reiterating his commitment to Charles, and the Holy Catholic Church whose cause Charles had taken upon himself to support.

28 In addition to Erasmus’s and Macchiavelli’s works in the genre, the French scholar Guillaume Budé wrote one in 1519 for the French king François I.

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natured or complaisant',\textsuperscript{30} According to his own account, Erasmus was led to believe that if he were to settle permanently in England he would receive patronage from the king in the form of a house and a stipend of around £100 a year.\textsuperscript{31} When the offer was put in writing by Wolsey, however, the stipend had shrunk to a mere £20. Erasmus continued to negotiate, but the offer apparently eventually came to nothing.\textsuperscript{32}

Meanwhile, in August 1517 Henry's Latin secretary Ammonius died, creating a significant vacancy for a scholar in the king's administration.\textsuperscript{33} It was at this point that Erasmus sent the specially prepared copy of the Education of a Christian Prince to Henry.\textsuperscript{34} In a carefully worded letter Erasmus laid out the grounds for selecting this particular work, and discreetly pressed his case for employment. Henry was an unusual king in that in spite of his own exceptional intelligence he still enjoyed 'the familiar conversation of sage and learned men' (just as Plutarch counselled). 'Above all, amidst all the business of the realm and indeed of the whole world, scarcely a day passes in which you do not devote some portion of your time to reading books, enjoying the society of those philosophers of old who flatter least of all men, and of those books especially from whose perusal you will rise more judicious, a better man and a better king.'\textsuperscript{35} In other words, Henry's conduct perfectly exemplified the advice for princely rule offered by Isocrates and Plutarch in the items contained in the gift volume.

Erasmus then draws the king's attention to the particular appropriateness for himself of the individual works in the Froben Education of a Christian Prince volume. The Plutarch orations reprinted

\textsuperscript{30} Letter from Erasmus to his friend Willibald Pirckheimer (Allen iii, 116–19, ep. 604).
\textsuperscript{31} Clough, 'Royal patronage', 130.
\textsuperscript{32} For the fact that the offer was never confirmed see the note in CWE 5, 165 (line 11).
\textsuperscript{33} Andrew Ammonius of Lucca (c.1478–1517) had come to England from Italy around 1504 in search of a prestigious secretarial appointment. In 1509 he was in Lord Mountjoy's service as a Latin secretary. He became Henry VIII's Latin secretary in 1511, and obtained a number of important rewards for his service (including ecclesiastical preferment, and the office of local tax-collector for papal taxes). He died before he turned forty, of the sweating sickness.
\textsuperscript{34} In addition to the illumination, the copy contained an inserted leaf of vellum bearing the arms of Henry VIII. See CWE 5, 109 [ep. 657].
\textsuperscript{35} CWE 5, 109 [ep. 657].
as part of the volume already carried dedications to Henry and Wolsey, recommending them for their use in counsel. Henry evidently did note and took seriously the directing of these works to his attention: Sir Thomas Elyot subsequently translated them from Latin into English for him, at Henry’s request. The panegyrical to Philip of Burgundy ‘whose memory I know that you hold sacred, seeing that when he was a young man and you a boy, you loved him as a brother, and your excellent father had taken him, not in name alone, as an adopted son’, was also (Erasmus suggested) of particular sentimental importance to Henry.36 The Education of a Christian Prince (Erasmus continues) was dedicated to Prince Charles when Erasmus joined the ranks of Charles’s advisers: ‘I thought it right to answer the call of duty from the outset with this offering, and not so much to tender counsel on this question or on that as to expose in a way the springs of all good counsel to a prince of great natural gifts but still a youth’.37 As a counsellor to his prince, then, Erasmus represents his role as that of general educator, rather than of providing policy decisions on individual issues.

Since Charles had recently negotiated a significant financial loan from Henry, and was thereby bound in princely obligation to him, it was a propitious moment for Erasmus to offer the English king a ‘memorial of two monarchs so very dear to you’, which at the same time perfectly exemplified, in its precepts, the liberal regime of Henry himself.38 Erasmus closes by reminding the English king that ‘when I was last in your country, you invited me on such generous terms’—may this gift-volume serve as a reminder (he implies) of those promises of generosity.

Erasmus did not get Ammonius’s job as Latin secretary to Henry VIII. The job went instead to Ammonius’s assistant, Peter Vannes, who was Wolsey’s preferred candidate. Nevertheless, the episode serves as a paradigm for the political possibilities Erasmus understood this volume to offer. A gift of £20 from the king reached

36 CWE 5, 112. On their way to Spain from the Netherlands in January 1506, Philip and his wife Juana were driven on to the English coast in a gale. Henry VII took advantage of the occasion to forge a personal bond with the young Habsburg, and his fifteen-year-old son became close friends with him. On Philip’s death, Erasmus wrote a letter of condolence to Henry (Allen cp. 204).
37 CWE 5, 112.
38 Ibid. On the loan, and the consequent re-alignment of Charles with the English (as opposed to the French) see Clough, ‘Royal patronage’, 136.

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Erasmus in mid-April 1518—a disappointing reward, in Erasmus’s terms, but still some indication that Henry had recognised Erasmus’s advisory talents as represented in the gift-volume, and might subsequently offer him more secure employment. In the end, however, Erasmus never managed to secure the kind of royal appointment with any of his potential princely patrons that he dreamed of—possibly the terms he demanded were never such as they were prepared to fulfil.

Curiously, it is this tight relationship between an ‘Advice to princes’ treatise and a bid for employment as just such an adviser which most closely links Erasmus’s treatise with that of Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s Prince was originally dedicated to Giuliano de’ Medici, who had assumed power in Florence when the Republic collapsed in 1512. ‘It is a frequent custom for those who seek the favour of a prince to make him a present’, Machiavelli writes; ‘I too would like to commend myself to Your Magnificence with some token of my readiness to serve you.’ In the early decades of the sixteenth century, ‘advice to princes’ manuals were apparently perceived by those who hoped for jobs in the corridors of power as the kind of portfolio of personal accomplishments in the field of political thought which could win them public office.

39 Clough, ‘Royal patronage’, 140. When Erasmus replied, thanking Henry profusely for his gift, he also accepted a (somewhat nebulous) ‘position’ in England, which he promised he would take up within four months.
40 Giuliano died in 1516, so for the printed edition of The Prince Machiavelli wrote a new dedication to Lorenzo de’ Medici.
### Chronology of the life and works of Erasmus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Biographical data</th>
<th>Major published work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c.1469</td>
<td>Erasmus born 27 October</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c.1478–83</td>
<td>Attends school of Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer</td>
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<tr>
<td>1483–6</td>
<td>Attends school at 's Hertogensbosch</td>
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<tr>
<td>1486</td>
<td>Enters Augustinian monastery at Steyn</td>
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<tr>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Ordained priest, 25 April</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1492/3</td>
<td>Secretary to Henry of Bergen, Bishop of Cambrai</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1495–9</td>
<td>Studies theology at Collège de Montaigu in Paris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1499</td>
<td>First English visit: meets More and Colet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500–2</td>
<td>Studies in Paris (visits Orléans and Netherlands)</td>
<td><em>Adages</em> (first version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1502–4</td>
<td>First stay in Louvain</td>
<td><em>Handbook of the Christian Soldier/ Panegyric</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1504–5</td>
<td>Third stay in Paris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1505–6</td>
<td>Second English visit, staying with More</td>
<td><em>Epigrammata</em> (with More)</td>
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### Chronology of the life and works of Erasmus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Work/Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1506–9</td>
<td>Travels in Italy, staying with printer Aldus Manutius in Venice, 1507–8</td>
<td>Adages (second version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1514–16</td>
<td>First visit to Basel; moves to Froben press; visits England, 1515; visits the Netherlands, 1516, appointed councillor to Charles V; supervises printing of More’s Utopia</td>
<td>New Testament/Education of a Christian Prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1517</td>
<td>Visits Pieter Gilles in Antwerp; visits England; papal dispensation</td>
<td>Complaint of Peace</td>
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<tr>
<td>1517–21</td>
<td>Second stay in Louvain, joins Theology Faculty. Visits Basel, 1518; Calais, 1520 (audience with Henry VIII); Cologne, 1520</td>
<td>Colloquies (first version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1521–9</td>
<td>Moves to Basel, end of 1521</td>
<td>Paraphrases/On Free Will/Ciceronian/On Writing Letters/Method of True Theology/Against Barbarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1524</td>
<td>Controversy with Luther</td>
<td>On Education for Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1529</td>
<td>Basel goes Protestant; Erasmus moves to Catholic Freiburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>1535</td>
<td>Returns to Basel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fisher and More executed in England</td>
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<tr>
<td>1536</td>
<td>Death of Erasmus, 12 July</td>
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<tr>
<td>1540</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Further reading

Erasmus  Collected Works of Erasmus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974– in progress)

Augustijn, C. Erasmus: His Life, Works and Influence (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992)


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Abbreviations


ASD Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami (Amsterdam, 1969–)

CWE Collected Works of Erasmus (Toronto, 1974–)

ECP The Education of a Christian Prince

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