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978-0-521-58811-9 - Erasmus: The Education of a Christian Prince

Edited by Lisa Jardine

Excerpt

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The Education of a Christian Prince

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TO THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE CHARLES,
GRANDSON OF THE INVICIBLE EMPEROR MAXIMILIAN,
FROM DESIDERIUS ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

Wisdom in itself is a wonderful thing, Charles greatest of princes, and no kind of wisdom is rated more excellent by Aristotle than that which teaches how to be a beneficent prince; for Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus* rightly considers that there is something beyond human nature, something wholly divine, in absolute rule over free and willing subjects.¹ This naturally is the wisdom so much to be

¹ *Oeconomicus* 21.12. The ancient Greek author Xenophon's treatise on household management was widely used in the sixteenth century.

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desired by princes, the one gift which the young Solomon, highly intelligent as he was, prayed for, despising all else, and wished to have seated continually beside his royal throne. This is that virtuous and beautiful Shunamite, in whose embraces David, wise father of a wise son, took his sole delight. She it is who says in Proverbs: 'By me princes rule and nobles dispense justice.' Whenever kings invite her to their councils and cast out those evil counsellors—ambition, anger, greed, and flattery—the commonwealth flourishes in every way and, knowing that it owes its felicity to the wisdom of its prince, says with well-earned satisfaction: 'All good things together came to me with her.' And so Plato is nowhere more meticulous than in the education of the guardians of his republic, whom he would have surpass all the rest not in riches and jewels and dress and ancestry and retainers, but in wisdom only, maintaining that no commonwealth can be happy unless either philosophers are put at the helm, or those to whose lot the rule happens to have fallen embrace philosophy—not that philosophy, I mean, which argues about elements and primal matter and motion and the infinite, but that which frees the mind from the false opinions of the multitude and from wrong desires and demonstrates the principles of right government by reference to the example set by the eternal powers.² Something of the sort must have been, I think, in Homer's mind, when Mercury arms Ulysses against Circe's witchcraft with the herb called moly.³ And Plutarch has good reason for thinking that no man does the state a greater service than he who equips a prince's mind, which must consider all men's interests, with the highest principles, worthy of a prince; and that no one, on the other hand, brings such appalling disaster upon the affairs of mortal men as he who corrupts the prince's heart with wrongful opinions or desires, just as a man might put deadly poison in the public spring from which all men draw water.⁴ A very famous remark of Alexander the Great points usefully in the same direction; he came away from talking with Diogenes the Cynic full of admiration for his lofty philosophic mind, unshakeable, invincible, and superior to all mortal things, and said: 'If I were not Alexander, I should desire to

² See Plato, *Republic*, 6.503.³ See Homer, *Odyssey* 10.302–6.⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia* 778 D.

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be Diogenes';⁵ in fact, the more severe the storms that must be faced by great power, the more he well might wish for the mind of a Diogenes, which might be equal to the immense burden of events.

But you, noble Prince Charles, are more blessed than Alexander, and will, we hope, surpass him equally in wisdom too. He for his part had seized an immense empire, but not without bloodshed, nor was it destined to endure. You were born to a splendid empire and are destined to inherit one still greater, so that, while he had to expend great efforts on invasion, you will have perhaps to work to ensure that you can voluntarily hand over part of your dominions rather than seize more. You owe it to heaven that your empire came to you without the shedding of blood, and no one suffered for it; your wisdom must now ensure that you preserve it without bloodshed and at peace. And 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;⁶ 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. This serves a double purpose: under your name this useful work will penetrate everywhere, and by these first fruits I, who am already your servant, can give some kind of witness to my devotion to you.

I have taken Isocrates' work on the principles of government and translated it into Latin, and in competition with him I have added my own, arranged as it were in aphorisms for the reader's convenience, but with considerable differences from what he laid down.⁷ For he was a sophist, instructing some petty king or rather

⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia* 782 A; *Life of Alexander* 14.

⁶ Philip the Fair, to whom Erasmus's *Panegyric* was addressed. He had died in 1506.

⁷ The original published volume printed Erasmus's translation into Latin of Isocrates' precepts.

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tyrant, and both were pagans; I am a theologian addressing a renowned and upright prince, Christians both of us. Were I writing for an older prince, I might perhaps be suspected by some people of adulation or impertinence. As it is, this small book is dedicated to one who, great as are the hopes he inspires, is still very young and recently invested with government,⁸ and so has not yet had the opportunity to do very much that in other princes is matter for praise or blame. Consequently, I am free of both suspicions, and cannot be thought to have had any purpose but the common good, which should be the sole aim both of kings and of their friends and servants. Among the countless distinctions which under God your merit will win for you, it will be no small part of your reputation 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 imitate it as a young man always in search of self-improvement. Farewell. [Basel, about March 1516]

1 The birth and upbringing of a Christian prince

Where it is the practice to select the prince by vote, it is quite inappropriate to have as much regard for ancestry, physical appearance, or height (a very foolish method once used, we read, by some barbarians) as for calmness and equability of temperament and a sober disposition devoid of all rashness: a prince should be neither so excitable that there is a danger that with the sudden access of power he may break out as a tyrant and refuse to accept warning or advice nor, on the other hand, so pliant as to allow himself to be led this way and that by the opinion of anyone and everyone. His experience and age must also be taken into account, for he must be neither so old as to be at risk of senility, nor so immature as to be carried away by his feelings. Some thought should also perhaps be given to his state of health so that a new prince does not have to be found very soon after, which would amount to an imposition on the state.⁹

⁸ Charles had been invested with the government of the Netherlands on 5 January 1515.

⁹ Here, right at the outset, Erasmus stipulates that the prince not born to rule must be elected by the population as the person best suited to guide the business of the

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On board ship, we do not give the helm to the one who has the noblest ancestry of the company, the greatest wealth, or the best looks, but to him who is most skilled in steering, most alert, and most reliable. Similarly, a kingdom is best entrusted to someone who is better endowed than the rest with the qualities of a king: namely wisdom, a sense of justice, personal restraint, foresight, and concern for the public well-being.

Family trees, gold, and jewels are no more relevant to governing a state than they are pertinent to a sea-captain in steering his ship.¹⁰

The people must look to the same single object in selecting a prince as the prince should in his administration, which is of course the people's well-being regardless of all personal feelings.

The harder it is to alter the person one has chosen the more carefully should the choice be made, lest the rashness of a moment cause long-lasting distress. But when the prince is born to office, not elected, which was the custom among some barbarian peoples in the past (according to Aristotle) and is also the practice almost everywhere in our own times, then the main hope of getting a good prince hangs on his proper education, which should be managed all the more attentively, so that what has been lost with the right to vote is made up for by the care given to his upbringing. Accordingly, the mind of the future prince will have to be filled straight away, from the very cradle (as they say), with healthy thoughts while it is still open and undeveloped. And from then on the seeds of morality must be sown in the virgin soil of his infant soul so that, with age and experience, they may gradually germinate and mature and, once they are set, may be rooted in him throughout his whole life. For nothing makes so deep and indelible a mark as that which is impressed in those first years. And while what we take in at that time is of great importance for us all, it has the very greatest importance for the prince.¹¹

state. It follows that fitness to rule will be a matter of temperament and intellectual and moral competence; lineage ('ancestry') is not a criterion.

¹⁰ The ironic tone Erasmus adopts for remarks like this one about the irrelevance of badges of wealth and rank to good government are reminiscent of Thomas More's *Utopia*, which was published in the same year.

¹¹ Where the prince is born to rule, by hereditary descent (and Erasmus remarks that this is the practice 'almost everywhere in our time'), his fitness to rule depends entirely on his being educated suitably to act in the best interests of his subjects (since they have not actively chosen him as an individual). This education ought logically to start from birth.

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Where there is no power to select the prince, the man who is to educate the future prince must be selected with comparable care.

It is a matter for prayer to the gods that the prince may be born of good character; but beyond this it is to some extent within our power to prevent degeneration in one who was born good and to improve by training someone born none too good.

The custom in the old days was to set up statues, arches, and plaques for those who had served the state well. But none are more worthy of such honours than those who have worked hard and conscientiously at the task of properly educating the prince and have paid attention to what would benefit their country rather than to their own personal profit.

A country owes everything to a good prince; but it owes the prince himself to the one whose right counsel has made him what he is.

No other time is so suitable for moulding and improving the prince as when he does not yet understand that he is the prince. This time will therefore have to be carefully employed, so that not only will he be kept away from evil influences for that period but he will also be imbued with some positively good principles.

Since any ordinarily sensible parents take great pains in bringing up a son who is to inherit only a few fields, then how right we are to exercise considerable effort and concern in bringing up one who is being set up, not over a mere cottage but over so many peoples, so many countries, and even over the world, either as a good man, to the great benefit of all, or as an evil one, to their general ruin!

It is a fine and glorious thing to govern well, but it is no less meritorious to ensure that one's successor is not inferior: or rather, the chief responsibility of a good prince is this, to see to it that there cannot be a bad one.¹²

Conduct your own rule as if you were striving to ensure that no successor could be your equal, but all the time prepare your children for their future reign as if to ensure that a better man would indeed succeed you.

There is no finer tribute to an excellent prince than when he bequeaths to the state someone by comparison with whom he him-

¹² One of the duties of the Christian prince is to educate his heir.

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self seems little better than average, and his glory cannot be more truly illuminated than by being overshadowed in this way.

It is the most deplorable tribute when the succession of an inferior ruler turns his predecessor, who was intolerable while he lived, into someone whose integrity and goodness are sadly missed.

The good and wise prince should always bear in mind, in attending to his children's upbringing, that those who are born to the state must be brought up for the state, and not to suit his own feelings; what is to the public advantage always takes precedence over the private feelings of a parent.

However many statues he may set up and however much he may toil over the constructions he erects, the prince can leave no finer monument to his good qualities than a son who is in every way of the same stock and who recreates his father's excellence in his own excellent actions. He does not die who leaves a living likeness of himself.

For this task, therefore, he should pick out from the whole range of his subjects (or indeed recruit from anywhere else) men of integrity, purity, and dignity; men who have been taught by long practical experience and not just by petty maxims; men whose age will win them respect, whose unblemished lives will earn them obedience, and whose pleasant and friendly manner will bring them affection and good will.¹³ This is so that the tender young mind may neither take hurt from the harshness of its teachers and thus begin to hate virtue before he understands it, nor on the other hand degenerate in a way it ought not after being spoiled by a tutor's over-indulgence.

As in all education, so indeed especially in that of the prince,

¹³ Erasmus here proposes that the choice of tutor for the heir to a hereditary monarchy is a matter of pre-eminent importance. Erasmus's appointment as a counsellor to Prince Charles shortly before *The Education of a Christian Prince* was published was supposedly in some kind of educational capacity (as Erasmus indicates in the dedicatory letter to Henry VIII attached to his translation of a short work of Plutarch's, printed in the same volume). A passage in the *Panegyric* suggests that Erasmus may have hoped for a job as tutor to Philip's heir in 1504 (Charles was then only three years old): 'For some time (I gather), you have been looking around to select a man tried and tested in personal behaviour and humane learning from amongst your many subjects, to whose loving care you can hand over these still tender nurslings so that he may educate them in those disciplines which are worthy of a prince.' (*Panegyric*, 143.)

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moderation is to be exercised in such a way that while the tutor sternly restrains the frivolity of youth nevertheless the friendly manner in which he does so tempers and mollifies the severity of his control.

The future prince's educator must, as Seneca elegantly puts it, be a man who knows how to reprimand without giving way to abuse and how to praise without giving way to flattery; let the prince at once respect him for his disciplined life and like him for his agreeable manner.¹⁴

Some princes investigate very carefully who should be entrusted with the care of a special horse or bird or hound but think it of no importance to whose care they commit the training of a son, and he is very often put in the hands of the sort of teachers whom no ordinary citizen with a little intelligence would want for his children. But what was the point of begetting a son to govern if you do not take care over training him for government?

The child born to the throne is not to be entrusted to just anyone you please even in the case of his nurses, but to women of blameless character who have been prepared and instructed for the task; nor should he associate with unselected companions, but with boys of good and respectable character who have been brought up and trained in the ways of courtesy and decency. You will have to keep at a distance from his sight and hearing the usual crowd of pleasure-seeking youngsters, drunkards, foul-mouthed people, and especially the flatterers, as long as his moral development is not yet firmly established.¹⁵

Since for the most part the nature of man inclines towards evil, and furthermore no nature is so blessed at birth that it cannot be corrupted by perverse training, how can you expect anything but evil from a prince who, whatever his nature at birth (and a good lineage does not guarantee a mind as it does a kingdom),¹⁶ is subjected from the very cradle to the most stupid ideas and spends his boyhood among silly women and his youth among whores, degener-

¹⁴ See Seneca, *Epistulae morales* ('Moral letters') 52, 'On choosing teachers'.

¹⁵ The pernicious influence of flatterers is also the subject of the minor work by Plutarch, 'On how to distinguish flatterers and friends', printed by Froben with the first edition of Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* in 1516.

¹⁶ This adage could be used as the motto for Erasmus's entire treatise. Given hereditary monarchies, a systematic Christian education is essential.

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ate comrades, the most shameless flatterers, buffoons, street-players, drinkers, gamblers, and pleasure-mongers as foolish as they are worthless. In this company he hears nothing, learns nothing, and takes in nothing except pleasure, amusement, pride, arrogance, greed, irascibility, and bullying; and from this schooling he is soon installed at the helm of the kingdom.

Since in all skills the highest are the most difficult, none is finer or more difficult than to rule well; why is it then that for this one skill alone we do not see the need for training but think a birthright is enough?

If as boys they did nothing but play at tyrants, what (I ask you) are they to work at as adults except tyranny?¹⁷

It is scarcely possible even to hope that all men should be good; but it is not hard to pick out from so many thousands of them one or two who stand out in virtue and wisdom, through whom in a short while a great many others could be made good. In his youth the prince should for quite some time be distrustful of his years, partly because of his inexperience and partly because of his impetuous spirit, and he should beware of tackling anything of great importance except with the advice of wise counsellors, especially that of the older ones, whose company he must cultivate so that the impetuosity of youth may be tempered by respect for his elders.

Let whoever takes on the office of educating a prince reflect time and again on this, that the job he is doing is in no way an ordinary one: it is both by far the greatest and by far the most hazardous of all. And let him first of all approach it in a spirit worthy of the task, considering not how many benefices he can get out of it but in what way he can give back to the country, which is entrusting its hopes to his good faith, a beneficent prince.

Bear in mind, you who are the tutor, how much you owe to your country, which has entrusted to you the consummation of its happiness. It is in your hands whether you prefer to provide your country with someone who will be a benign influence or to visit it with the destruction of a deadly plague.

Therefore the man into whose arms the state has put its son would be wise to take notice in the first place of what inclinations

¹⁷ Tyranny—that is, ruthlessly authoritarian rule without the consent of the ruled—is the extreme form of government against which the entire *Education of a Christian Prince* is directed.

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the boy already has at the time, because even at this age it is possible to recognise by certain signs whether he is more prone to arrogance and fits of temper, or to ambition and a thirst for fame, or to pleasures of the flesh, gambling, and the pursuit of wealth, or to revenge and war, or to impulsiveness and tyranny. Then at those points where he feels the boy is inclined to go wrong let him especially fortify the young mind with healthy precepts and relevant principles and try to guide its nature, while still responsive, in a different direction. Again, where his nature is found to be rightly disposed, or at any rate to have only such faults as are easily turned to a good use (ambition and prodigality are perhaps examples of this), let him concentrate all the more on these positive qualities and actively cultivate them.

But it is not enough just to hand out the sort of maxims which warn him off evil things and summon him to the good. No, they must be fixed in his mind, pressed in, and rammed home. And they must be kept fresh in the memory in all sorts of ways: sometimes in a moral maxim, sometimes in a parable, sometimes by an analogy, sometimes by a live example, an epigram, or a proverb;¹⁸ they must be carved on rings, painted in pictures, inscribed on prizes, and presented in any other way that a child of his age enjoys, so that they are always before his mind even when he is doing something else.¹⁹

The examples set by famous men vividly inspire a noble youth's imagination, but the ideas with which it is imbued are of much the greatest importance, for they are the source from which the whole character of his life develops. Consequently, if it is an untutored boy we have in our charge, we must make every effort to have him drink, from the start, from the purest and healthiest sources and to protect him in advance, as if by an antidote, against the poison of what the common people think. But if it turns out that he has already been somewhat contaminated by popular opinions, then we shall have to take the greatest care to release him from them gradually and to implant wholesome ones in place of the diseased ones that have been eradicated. For, as Aristo puts it in Seneca, it is

¹⁸ The project of Erasmus's own *Adages* is to assemble as complete as possible a collection of readily memorable maxims for guiding a good life.

¹⁹ Erasmus proposes inscriptions on gift-objects as a good way of making moral advice memorable in another educational treatise, the *De ratione studii* (CWE 24, 671).