

Manners, schooling and the education of merchants' sons

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Erasmus was also an educator, who wrote several of his most successful books for the instruction of the young. His *Colloquia*, dialogues in Latin on everyday subjects, were first published as exercises for students learning to speak Latin and grew, in successive editions printed by Froben, into a collection of lively and often satirical conversations on travel, inns, marriage, pilgrimages, religious practices, trade and war. They were used as school texts for centuries, although their satire of monks and religious practices led to their condemnation by the Sorbonne and their prohibition in Catholic schools.¹

In 1530, Erasmus published a short treatise on the manners of children, *De civilitate morum puerilium*, which taught boys how to hold themselves, how to dress, how to behave at table, how to speak to their elders and how to conduct themselves in church and in company. The book was an immediate success, reprinted and translated many times. It shaped the manners of the European bourgeoisie for generations.² The sociologist Norbert Elias used it as a key source for his theory of the civilising process, which traced the growth of self-control and refinement in European society.

The educational works of Erasmus were read in the schools that trained the sons of merchants in Basel and throughout the Protestant and Catholic worlds. They taught Latin together with a model of conduct: self-control, courtesy, moderation, discretion in speech and appearance, respect for others. These virtues were the virtues of the merchant as much as of the scholar. A merchant who inspired trust by his bearing, his speech and his reliability had an advantage in business. The manners that Erasmus taught became part of the social capital of the commercial elite.

The private bankers of Basel and Geneva, whose clients entrusted them with their fortunes on the basis of personal relationships, cultivated these

virtues with particular care. The banker's manner, reserved, courteous, discreet and reliable, was part of the service he offered. The modern financial centre, with its codes of conduct and its training programmes, continues to teach the professional manners that Erasmus described for children five centuries ago.

1 Notes

1. On Erasmus's *Colloquia familiaria* (first authorised edition Basel: Froben, 1522, enlarged in later editions), their use in schools and their condemnation by the Paris faculty of theology in 1526, see the literature on the *Colloquia*. To be verified. ↩
2. Erasmus, *De civilitate morum puerilium*, Basel: Froben, 1530; on its success and influence, see Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, 1939. To be verified. ↩

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