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► **To cite this version:**

Blandine Perona. Being Councillor and Prophet? A Puzzle for Thomas More and Erasmus. *Erasmus Studies*, 2020, 40 (1), pp.65-75. 10.1163/18749275-04001003 . hal-04328905

HAL Id: hal-04328905

<https://hal.science/hal-04328905>

Submitted on 15 Jan 2024

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Being councillor and prophet? A puzzle for Thomas More and Erasmus

Keywords: Rhetoric, accommodation, flattery, pride.

Abstract: By studying three letters of Erasmus to princes (to Charles, Archduke of Austria in 1516, to the same, became Charles the 5th in 1523 and to Francis the 1st in 1524), this present article intends to show that Erasmus constantly tries to resolve a puzzle which is central in *Utopia*'s first book. Erasmus doesn't really choose between the answers which the fictitious More and Hythlodæus give to the readers. He uses rhetorical accommodation as a way to be at the same time councillor and prophet, at the same time deferential and irreverent. In 1535, his last work, the *Ecclesiastes*, shows that during all his life he recommended the same solution. Accommodation is the way to be heard and to make words effective for princes' councillors and for preachers too.

Being councillor and prophet? A puzzle for Thomas More and Erasmus

It is well known that the *Utopia* of Thomas More and the *Institutio principis christiani* – both published in 1516 – are very similar¹. In a sense, they seek to answer the same question but by different means. How to speak to the Prince? In the *Utopia*, Hythlodæus' answer is quite radical: there's no way to tell the truth to the Prince, that's why the philosopher has to quit the court. The fictitious More thinks that it is possible to be a loyal councillor: for him, there's a rhetorical solution, which is accommodation or *decorum* in Latin². I would like to show that it is possible to read Erasmus' works like an attempt to diminish or to delete this core contradiction of the *Utopia* which is, according to Hythlodæus, irreducible. In other words, Erasmus constantly tries to be at the same time the fictitious More and Hythlodæus. This article intends to illustrate this idea with three examples of Erasmus' compromise, three letters to

¹ Edward Surtz insists on the similarity between the *Utopia* and the *Institutio principis Christiani*. According to him, they “are so much alike that the apparent idealism, aloofness, divorce from reality, and lack of practicality in the latter have induced some scholars to classify it as a political utopia rather than a political disquisition. The two works are variations on one theme: the ideal state” (*Utopia*, ed. J. H. Hexter and Edward Surtz, Yale Edition of the *Complete Works of More*, (New Haven and London: Yale University press, 1965) [from now on, *Utopia*], Introduction, p. clxxx). On contrary, according to James D. Tracy, (*The Politics of Erasmus, A Pacifist Intellectual and His Political Milieu*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, University of Toronto Press, 1978), the Christian king is not for Erasmus a fictitious character like Utopus or Hythlodæus.

² About accommodation or *decorum* in Erasmus works: see Jacques Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1982) and in particular the chapter “Veracité et accommodation” (t. 2, p. 1107-1118) ; about Christ's and teachers accommodation : Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology The Hermeneutics of Erasmus*, (Toronto Buffalo London: Toronto University Press, 1994), p. 106-112 ; Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), Chapter four, p. 64-78 ; Kirk Essary, *Erasmus and Calvin on the foolishness of God: Reason and Emotion in the Christian Philosophy*, Toronto Buffalo London, Toronto University Press, 2017, p. 79-81 and note 104, p. 220.

princes, in which it is possible to observe several rhetorical strategies. The first studied example is a dedicatory letter written in 1516 to the young Charles, Archduke of Austria. The letter seems to be very deferential, but, at the same time, Erasmus wants the young prince to look at himself in a mirror which is not accommodating at all. The second and third analysed examples are dedicatory letters sent to the most powerful princes of his time (to Charles the 5th in 1523 and to Francis the first in 1524); these letters are both an introduction to the reading of the *Paraphrases on the Gospels*. In the light of these examples, it appears that there's an obvious similarity between Erasmus and the fictitious More³. Both think that the solution of Hythlodæus' issue hinges on rhetoric. But according to me, Erasmus goes a little bit further than the fictitious More, because he seeks to give a place to the foolishness of god in a rhetorical frame, *i. e.* to be at the same time councillor and prophet⁴.

1516 - The core dilemma of the Utopia

In More's *Utopia*, in a famous part of the "Dialogue of counsel", the fictitious More and Raphael Hythlodæus disagree radically. More thinks that it is possible to be a good and loyal councillor. Raphael is convinced that it means to "accomplish nothing else than to share the madness of others⁵". At stake is the opposition between *otium* and *negotium*, and between philosophy and rhetoric⁶. To give strength to his condemnation of the court and of all councillors, Hythlodæus uses the paulinian commonplace which is central in the *Praise of the folly* and which was recently studied by Kirk Essary: "the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God⁷". Hythlodæus says:

Truly, if all the things which by the perverse morals of men have come to seem odd are to be dropped **as unusual and absurd**, we must dissemble almost all the doctrines of Christ. Yet He forbade us to dissemble them to the extent that what He had whispered in the ears of His disciples He commended to be preached openly from the housetops⁸.

Hythlodæus doesn't want to silence the truth, even if it seems crazy, even if it is hard to hear for princes' ears. He wishes to live in a land where flattery is useless, because there's no place for princes or ministers' pride. He found this land in *Utopia*. But More (the real More) and

³ Even if Erasmus "chose a life of persistent, humiliating mendicancy and patronage-hunting in preference to the riches and security that would have come to him with a permanent and active place in a prince's court" (*Utopia*, Introduction, p. xxxiv), even if he chose not to serve a prince like Hythlodæus, there's a similarity between "Morus' polite, civil and Christian ethos" (Gerard Wegemer, "The Rhetoric of Opposition in Thomas More's "Utopia": Giving Form to Competing Philosophies", *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 23, 4 (1990), p. 290) and Erasmus' ethos. Indeed, unlike Erasmus, Raphael Hythlodæus' style places clarity and candour before charity making little effort to mitigate the harsh effect of his radical proposals" (*ibid.*, p. 293).

⁴ Which is impossible according to Hythlodæus, as J. H. Hexter shows it: "[People who entered the service of their princes] were lost to something other than letters, something of greater importance, and Hythlodæus knew it; they were lost to their own cause and their true calling. For at court in the council of a prince there was no place for a prophet" (*Utopia*, introduction, p. xci).

⁵ *Utopia*, p. 101.

⁶ About this part of More's book, see Dominic Baker-Smith, *More's Utopia*, (London: HarperCollinsAcademix, 1991), Chapter 6 "The Dialogue of Counsel", p. 104-150.

⁷ 1 *Cor.* 3, 19.

⁸ *Utopia*, p. 101.

Erasmus agree: this island doesn't exist, it is nowhere, that's why they called it their "*nusquama*". Stephen Greenblatt explains that the issue that Hythlodæus points to is "what C. B. Macpherson calls a 'possessive individualism'⁹" and that everything in *Utopia* tends to diminish "the scope of the ego"¹⁰. Indeed, there's a strong link between private property and pride in the *Utopia*. Both nurture envy and jealousy: "Pride (*superbia*), says Hythlodæus in his peroration, measures prosperity not by her own advantages but by others' disadvantages"¹¹. In his important treatise about flattery (*Libellus Plutarchi de discrimine adulatoris et amici*), in order to describe almost the same thing (if it is not the same), Plutarch uses another word, which is *philautia*¹². Unlike real friends, flatterers, who are bad councillors, protect princes' pride like a treasure, because princes' *philautia* is the source of their own power. In *Utopia*, truth doesn't seem absurd or rude, partly because people are without pride and insensitive to flattery. For Hythlodæus, there is no middle-way between *parrhesia* and flattery.

1516 - The dedicatory letter of the *Institutio principis christiani*

Plutarch's treatise *De discrimine adulatoris et amici* is actually a very effective reading grid to explain the political and rhetorical dilemma which is both at the heart of the *Utopia* and at the heart of Erasmus' works¹³. How to make a prince listen to the strength and the harshness of the Gospels? In 1516, Erasmus tried already to give a practical answer by writing a dedicatory letter to Charles, Archduke of Austria, future king of Spain. Thereby, he shows his rhetorical way to perceive politics. He inherits this view of politics both from Isocrates and Plutarch. Plutarch's treatise is very present in the *Institutio*¹⁴. The second chapter is entirely devoted to the subject of flattery. Further, since 1516, the *Institutio* is often published with Erasmus' translation of the *De discrimine adulatoris et amici*¹⁵. The issue of flattery is underlined at the end of the

⁹ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* [1980] (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Utopia*, p. 243.

¹² On this notion, see Jean Mesnard, « Sur le terme et la notion de philautie », *Mélanges sur la littérature de la Renaissance, à la mémoire de V.-L. Saulnier* (Genève: Droz, 1984), p. 197-214 and *La « philautie » humaniste héritages et postérité*, ed. Anne-Pascale Pouey-Mounou and Charles-Olivier Stiker-Métral, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019.

¹³ And More certainly read it. As R. J. Schoeck remembers it, More "knew his Plutarch well. In what has been called his list of Great Books (in chapter vi of the Second Book of *Utopia*, where Hythlodæus itemizes and describes his 'pretye fardell of bookes') Hythlodæus says rather critically, 'They sett greate stooore by Plutarches bookes'" (*Essential Articles for the study of Thomas More*, ed. R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), p. 276 [first published in : *Philological Quarterly*, 35 (1956), p. 366-375]).

¹⁴ On the importance of Plutarch's treatise in the *Institutio*, see Blandine Perona, « L'"incommodité de la grandeur" – Lectures de Plutarque d'Érasme à Montaigne », *Le Mépris de la cour : la littérature anti-aulique en Europe (XVI^e - XVII^e siècles)*, *Cahiers V. L. Saulnier*, 35 (2018), ed. Nathalie Peyrebonne, Alexandre Tarrête and Marie-Claire Thomine, p. 107-123.

¹⁵ Erasmus published his translation of this treatise for the first time under the title *Quomodo pacto possis adulatorem ab amico dignoscere* (*Plutarchi opuscula*, (Basel: Froben, 1514)) and indeed, his first edition of the *Institutio principis christiani* is published with Plutarch's treatise : *Institutio principis christiani saluberrimis referta praeceptis, per Erasmum Roterodamum, cum aliis nonnullis eodem pertinentibus [Isocrates ad Nicoclem regem de institutione principis. Panegyricus gratulatorius de foelici ex Hispania reditu, ad principem Philippum, Maximiliani filium, eodem authore. Libellus Plutarchi de discrimine adulatoris et amici]*, Basileae, apud Joannem Frobenium, mense Maio 1516). About the editions of the *Institutio principis christiani*, see Mario Turchetti's

dedicatory letter. Erasmus admits that he's very complimentary and that he can be suspected of "adulation or impertinence (*vel adulationis vel procacitatis*)", but he protests that he does not have "any purpose but the common good" and that he would write differently to an older prince¹⁶. It is worth noting how clever he is in the last words of the letter:

Among the countless distinctions (*decora*) which under God your merit will win for you, it will be no small part of your reputation (*haec nonnulla pars laudum tuarum*) that Charles was a prince to whom a man need not hesitate to offer the picture of a true and upright Christian prince (*integri verique Christiani principis simulachrum*) 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-improvement¹⁷.

Erasmus seems to know how to speak to the Prince who seeks glory: he shows him that he will win true glory by accepting an unaccommodating and unflattering mirror which is the *Institutio*. In the words "no small part of your reputation", can be recognised the use of the litotes which Elizabeth McCutcheon has studied in the *Utopia*¹⁸. As she writes, it is often a sign of irony. Erasmus plays the role of a good friend more than of a servant or a slave and, contrary to Hythlodæus he doesn't think that service and servitude are synonyms. He encourages the king to make the difference between good love of himself and *philautia*, between true and fake glory. The *Institutio* will help the King to know himself and to discover where he may find real greatness. The letter gives him no choice: either he accepts the mirror and imitates it, or he will lose "no small part of [his] reputation".

1523 - The dedicatory letter to the Paraphrase on the Gospel of Matthew

The dedicatory letter to the *Paraphrase on the Gospel of Matthew* which Erasmus writes to Charles, when he is Emperor, tends to show that he was sincere in 1516. He's actually harsher with the Emperor than with the young prince. And he uses the same opposition between real and false greatness. The beginning of the letter can seem quite impertinent:

Right well I know, invincible Emperor Charles, the great respect and reverence due to all the sacred literature which sainted Fathers put forth for our benefit under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and especially to those which give us a faithful account (*quae nobis bona fide referunt*)

bibliography in Érasme, *La Formation du prince chrétien*, edited and translated by Mario Turchetti, (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015), p. 417-420.

¹⁶ "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, 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 (*publicam utilitatem*), which should be the sole aim both of kings and of their friends and servants (*amicis ac famulis*)" (CWE, 27, p. 204).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ "Denying the contrary: More's use of litotes in the *Utopia*", *Essential articles for the study of Thomas More*, p. 263-74 [first published in *Moreana*, 31-32, 1971, p. 107-121].

of all that our heavenly Father did or uttered in the person of his Son Jesus Christ for the salvation of the whole world; and I am well aware of my own unworthiness¹⁹.

The beginning of this letter written to the most powerful man in Europe creates an element of surprise. It is not the "great respect and reverence due" to Charles the 5th which is at stake, but to "the sacred literature". Even if Erasmus pretends to be unworthy of his task, he's like the sainted Fathers whom he eulogizes, he wants to give a faithful account of all that God did or uttered in the person of his son. The greatness is on his side, not on the Emperor's. Another extract of this letter opposes true to false greatness and at the same time the figure of the good and loyal councillor to the flatterers. Erasmus rewrites one excerpt of Isocrates and claims that the *Paraphrase* is an appropriate gift for an emperor, much more than "the gifts offered by those who bring precious jewels, high-mettled horses, hounds for the chase, or barbarous tapestries²⁰". Thus, he criticises the idea that luxury could be a sign of greatness and he criticises a chivalric ideal too²¹. Erasmus adds this warning: "it will be read with the greatest profit, if each person takes it up with the intention of becoming better than he was before, not of **adapting** the gospel text to fit his own affections (*nec Evangelicam scripturam ad suos accommodet affectus*) but of correcting his way of life and his desires to match the rule that it lays down". Charles still needs to be educated, and the Gospel is the best mirror he has in which to look at himself. This mirror is not more accommodating than the *Institutio* and probably even less so. This time, the accommodation doesn't mean that a text is consistent with the usual representation of reality; but it means that the king has to accommodate his behaviour to the Gospel. For Erasmus, this is the best use of *decorum*: it reveals the madness of the world which stays deaf to the call of the Gospel. The letter finishes with a prayer for peace. This prayer is more urgent when Erasmus writes to Francis the 1st. The war between Francis the 1st and Charles the 5th was formally declared in the summer 1523²².

1524 - The dedicatory letter to the Paraphrase on the Gospel of Mark

There's no doubt that the preface to Erasmus' *Paraphrase on St Mark*, in other words, the dedicatory letter to Francis the 1st is more complimentary in its beginning, certainly because Erasmus is sincerely grateful - and probably flattered (!) by his invitation to come to France. Nevertheless, the rest of the letter is ruder than Charles' one. These following comparisons are quite clear and humiliating:

It was dishonourable for Nero to contend in the theatre (*Quam vero Neroni fuit indecorum in theatro certare*) with singers and musicians or in the circus with Charioteers, and it is no less dishonourable for a king to be immersed in low and sordid business which concerns his own private interest [...] Again, it would **be improper** (*quam indecorum esset*) for a philosopher with his gown and beard to dance some part of ballet [...] and it is no less improper for a gospel

¹⁹ Ep. 1255, lines 1-6 Allen; lines 3-8 CWE.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ On this point, see: James D. Tracy, *The Politics of Erasmus, A Pacifist Intellectual and His Political Milieu*, (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 58-59.

²² About the beginnings of the war between Charles V and Francis I, see : Mia J. Rodriguez-Salgado, « Obeying the Ten Commandments : The First War between Charles V and Francis I, 1520-1529 », *The World of Emperor Charles V*, ed. Wim Blockmans and Nicolette Mout (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2004), p. 15-67.

king to wage war or engage in commerce, to mention nothing more discreditable (*tam indecorum est Evangelicum regem belligari aut mundinari, ne quid dicam inhonestius*)²³.

There's something ridiculous and absurd when a Gospel King makes war. Again, Erasmus speaks to the king's pride in order to convert him. Further, it is another interesting way to use the commonplace of the world upside-down and the rhetorical idea of *decorum*. It still means that Francis the 1st has to play his role not in the artificial and absurd theatre of the social world, but in the light of the Gospel. After that, he gives many examples of both parrhesiastic and christian characters who have dared tell the truth to a tyrant. Like them, Erasmus tells the truth and furthermore he is impertinent, as this excerpt shows: "St John was beheaded for speaking his mind; but not all princes are like Herod and not all have a wife like Herodias²⁴". Erasmus is not only ironic; he's even threatening when he writes about Babylas who was put to death by an emperor. He warns Francis the 1st that Babylas "began to be an object of fear not only to a pagan emperor but to the devils who in those days were still worshipped as gods²⁵". There's no doubt that Erasmus is completely aware of the harshness of his *parrhesia*, because he soothes it in the following sentence:

For my part, O best of monarchs, I have such confidence in the emperor Charles and you and the king of England, with your noble natures, as leaves no room for doubt that you would have all followed sound policies long ago had some counsellor arisen in whom a **proper respect and freedom of speech could be combined (si quis monitor modeste liber et libere modestus extitisset)**²⁶.

Erasmus is, obviously, not confident in these three European Princes; if he were, he wouldn't use such humiliating comparisons between a Christian king and pagan emperors. Erasmus quits a while his frankness to still be listened to. But he seems pretty sure that his words will be effective, that a good councillor can make a difference. He seems to believe that he manages to be a perfect compromise, a perfect balance between respect and freedom of speech. However, he admits in his letter that his words are a quite violent drug, and they are just an introduction to a more violent drug "the gospel hellebore". The violence of his freedom of speech is necessary, because there's something mad and rotten in the state of France²⁷. The diagnosis of the "faithful physician", who Erasmus wants to be, is the same as Hythlodæus': "Wherever ambition and the love of riches and pride (*superbia*) and anger and revenge and passion to hurt others are supreme, there I infer that the faith of the gospel is not to be found²⁸".

In the light of these three dedicatory letters, I think that the yoking of "flattery and impertinence" present in the *Institutio* can be better understood. Erasmus speaks to the Princes with the language of *philautia*, he speaks to them in terms of glory. In a sense, he plays the role of the flatterer. But at the same time, he shows that this language of pride or *philautia* is absurd. Thereby flattery is turning into impertinence. And actually, when he's saying to Charles the

²³ CWE, 10, letter 1400, p. 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122-123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁷ "This pestilence has seized even upon those whose chief duty it was to find a cure for our disastrous state" (*ibid.*, p. 125).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

fifth and to Francis the first: I trust you, it can be interpreted like a joke. The rest of the letter shows that he doesn't. He isn't confident in the princes, but he is confident in the power of his words and the Gospel's words. He is a flatterer and he isn't, that's his way to be both Hythlodæus and the fictitious More of the *Utopia*.

1535 – Ecclesiastes sive de ratione concionandi: A lifelong questioning:

Erasmus' last work shows that at the end of his life, he's still thinking that in order to make us feel the strength of the Gospel, a writer or an orator needs two things: to tell the truth and accommodate it. Like the Apostle Paul, he wanted to be Christ-like in his accommodation²⁹. The idea of accommodation is present in the *Paraphrase on the First letter to the Corinthians* in which Erasmus writes: "Discourse must be accommodated to each person's capacity³⁰". It is still present in the *Ecclesiastes* which is published in 1535 just a few months before Erasmus' death. In this rhetorical treatise, Erasmus describes Paul's eloquence in these terms:

[...] *euangelicus sermo in dispensatore non fidem modo requirit, verum etiam prudentiam. Fides ad columbinam simplicitatem pertinet, prudentia ad serpentis cautionem. [...] Prudentiae partes sunt, ex temporum, locorum ac personarum circumstantiis dispicere, quid, quibus, quando, qua moderatione sit adhibendum. Paulus, in quo videmus summam simplicitatem cum pari prudentia fuisse coniunctam, ut sese vertit in omnia, non semper expendens quid liceat, sed quid expediat, [...]!*³¹

An evangelical speech has to be always accommodated; faith only is not enough. In this excerpt, *Prudentia* (*ex temporum, locorum ac personarum circumstantiis dispicere*) is synonymous with *decorum* or *accommodation*. Another idea is worth noting in this quotation: the way to speak is not only dictated by the necessity to fit the words to the circumstances, it is above all dictated by the desire to be effective: *non semper expendens quid liceat sed quid expediat*. This idea is certainly a key to understand the three dedicatory letters too. And in 1523, Erasmus was confident in the fact that he had found the best way to be listened to; in another famous letter, [which was published under the title *Catalogus novus omnium lucubrationum Erasmi Roterodami*], he wrote:

So in this way [by writing the *Institutio principis christiani*] I first entered on the duties of a trusty councillor. [...] And yet none of the great men took offence at the freedom of this book, small as it was. Good princes tolerate freedom in their advisers; it is factious licence that they cannot stand³².

Since he wrote the dedicatory letter to Charles Archduke of Austria, Erasmus tries to maintain a balance: he wants to criticize without causing offence (*objurgare citra contumeliam*) and eulogize without flattery (*laudare citra adulationem*), but above all he wants to be effective, he wants to save the peace in Europe. In the short-term, of course, he failed. But the fact that we are still listening to his words offers a small measure of his legacy. Further, as James D. Tracy writes, his situation analysis "that nations were being thrown into war by princes (or by those

²⁹ On this idea, see Kirk Essary, *Erasmus and Calvin on the foolishness of God*, p. 91.

³⁰ Quoted by Kirk Essary, *ibid*.

³¹ *Ecclesiastes, ASD*, V, IV, p. 64, l. 579-587.

³² *CWE* 9, Letter 1341, to Johann von Hotzheim, p. 321.

who preyed on their power) in quest of personal glory – is at least plausible, and certainly not naïve³³". In his effort to solve a lifelong dilemma, Erasmus was extremely constant, to such an extent that his rhetorical solution is both theological and political. It is always a way to give voice to the folly of the Gospel. The rhetorical practice which we observed in the political letters is the same which he recommended for the preachers; accommodation is the evangelical way to preach and to speak to princes. For Erasmus, it's just one and the same thing. On contrary, Hythlodæus refuses accommodation as an unacceptable compromise. But Hythlodæus and Erasmus agree on one point, the problem is pride.

³³ *The Politics of Erasmus*, p. 45.