Erasmus' Views of More’s Paideia*

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Let me comment first on the word *paideia* in the title of my paper, for like many Greek words it is not easy to translate. The saying “The Greeks had a word for it” is not an idle one. In its earliest usage in Greek literature it meant simply “child-rearing”; Aristophanes used it when he was referring to the old disciplined education at Athens. Erasmus and his circle would have concurred, I believe, with Aulus Gellius, who in the second century A. D. wrote:

Those who have spoken Latin and have used the word correctly ... gave the word *humanitas* about the force of the Greek *paideia*, that is what we call education and training in the liberal arts (*eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*). Those who earnestly desire and seek after these are most highly humanized. For the pursuit of that kind of knowledge, and the training given by it, have been granted to man alone of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas*.

My own associations with the word *paideia* are personal and poignant. In 1941 I was Werner Jaeger’s research assistant at the Harvard Institute for Classical Studies when he was completing the second volume of his famous three-volume work: *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*. In his introduction to Volume I, Jaeger had explained that the Greeks were the first “to recognize that education means deliberately moulding the human character in accordance with an ideal,” and that for the Greeks and the Romans *paideia* meant “the process of educating man into his true form, the real and genuine human nature.” Jaeger’s last work, *Christianity and Greek Paideia*, was released by Harvard University Press shortly

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*This paper was presented originally at the Thomas More Quincentennial Conference held at Thomas More College on February 10, 1978.

1 Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 18.
2 Aristophanes, *Clouds* 961.
before his death in October 1961. In a birthday letter to me in September of that year he mentioned the forthcoming book and wrote: "Paideia means the form of the Greek mind and its impact on the form of the Christians' way of understanding their own religion, and that goes right down to the basic categories of that self-interpretation."

In the nineteen-fifties I was present at a discussion in the Howard University faculty dining-room during which four professors were attempting to define the word paideia. The best definition was offered by Franz Rapp, an art historian, who was a survivor of a Nazi prison camp. He said: "Paideia is everything you want to give to a beloved child," a statement with which Thomas More would have agreed most heartily.

In the nineteen-thirties, before I was aware of the connotations of paideia, I had the good fortune to attend a Catholic college for women, where the emphasis was on a liberal education, and a wise nun, who was the chairman of the classics department, was endeavoring to do for her students what Thomas More had done for his daughters. However, at the risk of seeming less than a feminist, I am going to concentrate this afternoon, not on the young women in the More household, but on his only son John More.

Certainly there is no need for me to remind this audience of the erudition of Margaret Roper, Sir Thomas' beloved first-born, of her translation of Eusebius, her emendation of a passage in Cyprian, of her letters which earned the admiration of Reginald Pole and so impressed the Bishop of Exeter that he insisted on sending her a Portuguese gold piece. As you know, it was her letters and those of her sisters which so impressed Erasmus that he wrote to Guillaume Budé, the famous French humanist, telling him that More's success in educating his daughters had made him change his mind about the dangers to be feared if girls should be given the same educational advantages as their brothers. You will recall, too, that seemingly with Margaret in mind, in one of his Colloquies, "The Abbot and the Learned Lady," first published in 1524, Erasmus showed what little chance a mere clergyman might have in a verbal duel with a puella docta.