The first ‘book of etiquette’ for children

Erasmus’ *De civilitate morum puerilium*

Throughout his life Erasmus concerned himself with problems of education and upbringing. Pedagogics in the strict sense of the word, the education of the young, interested him just as much as the teaching of adults. ‘People are not born but made’, was his starting-point. Whatever he was engaged in, whether the education of children or of princes, whether marriage or the struggle against war as a social evil, he always kept before his eyes the ‘philosophia Christi’, the ideal of a life full of harmony and wisdom, in the spirit of Christian- ity and the Ancients, where it was the practice that mattered, not the dogma. This magnificent teacher, however, was the reverse of a schoolmaster. The work of the classroom was not to his liking, although in his earlier years he had to submit to it in order to earn a living.

Nevertheless he was a real lover of children, and how well he understood them can be seen again and again in, for example, his most important work on education, the *Declamatio de puere statim et liberaliter instituendis*, which was published in Basle in 1529 with a dedication to Duke William of Cleves. ¹ Erasmus was living at the time in Freiburg, where he had found the peace and quiet missing in Basle where the Protestants were so dominant. One year later, in 1530, Erasmus published another educational work, *De civilitate morum puerilium*, a children’s guide to good manners. This book was dedicated to a child of eleven, whose first name Erasmus did not know at the moment when the first edition came out. The full name appears in the second edition however: Hendrik of Burgundy, Lord of Veere, who had been born in 1519 at the castle of Zandenburg. As his private tutor Hendrik had had a friend of Erasmus, Jacob Ceratinus (Teyng, of Hoorn), and after the latter’s death he went to the University of Louvain. He died at an early age.

When Erasmus wrote his dedication he must have recalled a painful episode that took place when he himself was studying. The young and promising humanist was then looking for a patron, and his expectation was that the rôle would be filled by Hendrik’s grandmother, Anna van Borssele, Lady of Veere, widow of Admiral Philips of Burgundy. ² Erasmus’ good friend, Jacob Battus, was tutor at the time to Anna’s son Adolf. Battus managed to arrange for his

¹ There is a critical edition of this work, with translation and commentary, by Jean-Claude Margolin, Geneva 1966 (Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance LX XVII).

friend to be received in 1499 at the castle of Tournehem, near St. Omer, Anna’s residence. But despite this visit and Erasmus’ efforts to influence his patroness in his favour, financial support from this quarter was short-lived. The young widow fell in love with the ‘playboy’ Louis van Montfoort. When she finally got her own way and married him, her family clamped down firmly on her income.

Nevertheless Erasmus kept up his connexion with the Lords of Veere throughout his life. In 1514 he visited Adolf of Burgundy in Bergen op Zoom where he was staying with his mother who had again become a widow. Maximiliaan, the first son of Adolf’s marriage with Anna van Bergen had just been born. In 1528 Erasmus dedicated to the same Maximiliaan his work on the pronunciation of the classical languages, De recta pronuntiatione, and in the dedication of De civilitate morum puerilium to Hendrik, Maximiliaan’s youngest brother, he calls him his pupil.

Guides to ‘etiquette’ go back at least to the Middle Ages. In the XIIIth century such texts began to be much in vogue. Manners were still pretty coarse, and their advice goes no further than this kind of thing: wash your hands in the morning, and also your face if you have time; don’t use more than three fingers for eating and don’t guzzle; and so on. Compared with this Erasmus’ rules bear witness to a high degree of refinement, even if they occasionally make us smile. As in so many other fields, Erasmus is here breaking new ground and recasting the ‘courtesy books’ in a humanistic mould. ‘Good manners’ had already engaged his attention much earlier. The De civilitate can be seen as an expansion of the brief Monitoria paedagogica which already appear in the first editions of the book which was to develop into the famous Colloquia. Despite the ordinariness of its subject, De civilitate exemplifies the characteristic features of its author’s spirit: clarity, acuteness of observation, and irony. That he, who during his peripatetic life, had suffered so much from the coarseness and dirt of monasteries and inns, should insist again and again on politeness and cleanliness, is in line with what we know of him.

In the introduction to De civilitate we read that the upbringing of children consists of four parts: the child must imbibe the principles of piety (pietas) as early as possible; it must devote itself to the ‘liberal arts’ (disciplinae liberales); it must be taught the duties of life; and finally it must learn ‘good manners’ (civilitas morum). It is this last topic with which the book concerns itself. An ‘even-tempered disposition’ (animus bene compositus) should be accompanied by an ‘outward bodily decorum’ (externum decorum corporis). The truly

1 Erasmus’ letter recounting his dangerous journey to Tournehem (4 Feb. 1499, Allen No. 88) has been translated by Busken Huet in his Land van Rembrandt. Huet was mistaken however in thinking that Anna was living at Kortgene at the time.