

9. Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus

William Haines, October 9, 2026

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Stephen Greenblatt, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, comments on Europe from around 1500:

If we say that there is a new stress on the executive power of the will, we must say that there is the most sustained and relentless assault on the will; if we say that there is a new social mobility, we must say that there is a new assertion of power by both family and state to determine all movement within the society; if we say that there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological, and psychological organization, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon these modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives.

Perhaps the simplest observation we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process. Such self-consciousness had been widespread among the elite of the classical world, but Christianity brought a growing suspicion of man's power to shape identity: "Hands off yourself," Augustine declared, "Try to build up yourself and you build a ruin."¹

¹ Greenblatt 1980, p. 1f. The reference to Augustine is to Sermon 169.

Greenblatt's observation refers to people newly fashioning themselves individually (self-cultivation)² in the context of new efforts to fashion people by the design of institutions.

After the middle ages, accompanying a new rise of city-states and many other secular authorities, and a new diversity among ecclesiastical authorities, there was a revival of interest in the thoughtful design of institutions—hence roles and relations—including the family. The thoughtful design of roles and relations means innovatively thinking up possible changes, minor and major; and then creatively imagining what life might be like with them, and debating the merits of the alternatives.

One early modern exercise in imagining how different institutions might help fashion different people was Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), published the year before Luther posted his 95 Theses. My brief account of More here relies on Greenblatt.

² In speaking of people fashioning themselves "individually," I do not mean people fashioning themselves by or toward activities that do not involve other people. I am simply distinguishing cultivation of a person by that person from cultivation of one or more people by other agencies such as institutions or parents. The term "self-cultivation" assumes individual agency at some level, because the established everyday prefix "self-" (like the pronoun suffix "-self", and the Chinese *zi* 自 and *jǐ* 己) means that the subject of the associated verb is the object; the agent and patient are the same thing.

Hence the use of such a prefix or suffix in no way refers to a special *kind of entity* that can be called "selves." Terms like "self-cultivation" and "self-fashioning" should not be parsed by analogy with "hog-raising." If they were, then my cultivation of your self would be self-cultivation, as my raising of your hogs is hog-raising. Rather, they are properly parsed by analogy with e.g. "self-referential" and all other terms with the particle "self." When we call an expression "self-referential" we do not mean that it refers to a self. My harming of your self is not self-harm. Self-cleaning ovens are not the furniture of Purgatory; a self-effacing person is not a kind of Dementor; and if you are feeling profoundly lost you cannot remedy the situation by reading a self-fulfilling prophecy or using a self-loading rifle. But the prefix is sometimes misunderstood in this way even by native speakers of English. Thus e.g. Greenblatt begins his book as follows: "My subject is self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare; my starting point is quite simply that in sixteenth-century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned" (Greenblatt 1980, p. 1).

More's island-state Utopia "offers an uncompromising vision of root-and-branch changes in the structure of society and hence in the structure of the individual."³

Utopia is "founded on patriarchal familism," but of a novel kind. The norm on the island is that everyone should marry, even priests; and the penalty for adultery is slavery or death. People in cities must live together in families of 10 to 16 people, these limits being preserved by transfers of children. Husbands are the lords and confessors of their wives, as parents are of their children. One commentator remarks with some exaggeration (and some misrepresentation of Plato), "Where Plato's ideal had involved the destruction of the family, that of More involved the destruction of all other social units."⁴ However, or therefore, in various ways the Utopian family is a somewhat impersonal institution, less welcoming of uniqueness, both in its internal relations and in its sense of its own character as one family different from others. Meals are generally taken in common halls with neighbors, not in the family house. Houses do not reflect the distinctive character of their inhabitants, and their design allows little privacy. "Above all," Greenblatt adds, "there is no family inheritance, no transfer of property, no sense of the family fortune." Because there is no patrimony, "there is no sense of the family's future across the generations."

In place of the anxious strivings of the individual, the Utopians share a powerful sense of relatedness: "The whole island is like a single family" (140). The close attention to occupations, resources, defense, and planning for the future that More excludes from the individual family is reinstated at the level of the entire community.⁵

³ Greenblatt 1980, p. 37.

⁴ Stone 1975, p. 24; quoted in Greenblatt 1980, p. 42.

⁵ Greenblatt 1980, p. 47, quoting a sentence from More. The page reference to More is to the Yale edition of More's works; the line appears on p. 62 in a more accessible edition More 2016.

Greenblatt sums up: “More has, in effect, imagined a split in the family as he would have known it, so as to preserve its disciplinary power while discarding its exclusiveness and particularity.”⁶

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)

In the same year that More published *Utopia*, Erasmus of Rotterdam published *The Education of a Christian Prince*, in which he wrote:

The good prince ought to have the same attitude toward his subjects, as a good *paterfamilias* toward his household—for what else is a kingdom but a great family? What is the king if not the father to a great multitude? He is superior, but yet of the same stock—a man, a freeman over free men, not untamed beasts, as Aristotle justly comments, and this is what those poets of remotest antiquity meant when they applied to Jupiter—to whom they assign supreme authority of the whole world and gods, as they say—these words ... “father of gods and men.” We have been taught by Christ our teacher that God is the unquestioned prince of all the world, and we call him “Father.” ... As a *paterfamilias* thinks whatever increase of wealth has fallen to any of his house is [the same as if it had been] to his own private goods, so he who has the true attribute of a prince considers the possessions of his subjects to represent his own wealth. Then he holds bound over to him through love, so that they have nothing to fear at all from the prince for either their lives or their possessions.⁷

⁶ Greenblatt 1980, pp. 42-47.

⁷ As quoted in Schochet 1988, p. 30. In *The Institution of Christian Marriage*, Erasmus lays out a somewhat different mapping: “A complete household consists of the following parts: husband and wife, who are the senate, as it were; children, who are like the equestrian order; servants, who represent the common people, and property” (Erasmus 1999, p. 377f.).

Two years after *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Erasmus published *In Praise of Marriage*, an attack on monastic and clerical celibacy. He is likely to have written it much earlier, just after his own experience as a monk. Here he spoke of the unmarried state as

a barren way of life hardly becoming to a man ... let us leave celibacy for the bishops ... the holiest kind of life is wedlock, purely and chastely observed.

But Erasmus himself never married, and he later claimed that the provocative work had been merely an exercise. Still, it was widely read and influential (and eventually Indexed by Rome).⁸

Erasmus' 1526 book *The Institution of Christian Matrimony* focuses on other issues (though he does suggest that the valuing of the chaste single life was a response to a temporary need in early Christianity⁹). The book is an elaborate guide to the nature of the married state, the legal and ecclesiastical rules that do or should surround it, the decision to whether to marry, the evaluation and pursuit of potential partners, standards of suitability, decorum in the wedding, proper conduct in the spousal relation, and the raising of children.

Erasmus holds here that because of the formative and habituating function of family life, marriage is "the main root or wellspring" of happiness for humanity, and that "the prosperity of the state" depends on it.¹⁰ Kinship is the natural root of humanity's mutual love and good will:

Nature has established no surer means of self-preservation for humanity than mutual love, and good will. To this end she has joined certain people by the bonds of kinship Close ties of kinship ensure that a sense of

⁸ MacCulloch 2003, p. 647f; the quotation from Erasmus is taken from MacCulloch.

⁹ Erasmus 1999, p. 244.

¹⁰ Erasmus 1999, p. 214f.

obligation binds parents to children, and children to parents How close are the ties of love that unite brother and sister! In fact, this natural instinct is so deeply implanted in the hearts of all peoples that the words associated with it are very widely used to convey respect, love, and concord. For example, ‘father’ is commonly used to describe someone who deserves our reverence and respect; ‘son’ someone whom we hold especially dear, and ‘brother’ someone whom we find particularly congenial. ... The whimpering infant’s wet-nurse is like a mother to him; the little child’s tutor is loved like a father. Again, schoolteachers, whose sound instruction has improved their little charges, not only feel for them a parental affection, but receive in their turn the kind of respect due a parent. ... The church has also found spiritual ways to increase the reasons for mutual good will among Christians, establishing bonds of sacred kinship between those who perform the baptism, the godparents or catechists, and those who are reborn in Christ by the holy washing.¹¹

Other virtues are seeded in the family as well. For example, one should bear one’s husband’s harshness or cruelty because “it is a kind of seed-bed of the courage a man needs when he must risk his life for his wife and children.”¹²

Erasmus stresses the unique holiness of matrimony, above all other human relations.

Among all relationships, natural, voluntary, or both, there is none closer or more holy than marriage, because it involves the complete and perpetual intermingling of two destinies, and connects, unites, and joins

¹¹ Erasmus 1999, p. 217f. Erasmus later points out the awkwardness involved in the Church’s taking the “bonds of sacred kinship” into account when defining the scope of incest as an impediment to marriage—amounting to twenty new impediments in all. For example, according to the Church it would be incestuous to marry someone whose parent had baptized you (p. 269f.).

¹² Erasmus 1999, p. 368f.

body to body, spirit to spirit in such a way that it seems to make two people one.¹³

Reviewing the pagans Aristotle, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Juvenal, he says that even “to all of these, ignorant of true religion, marriage was a sacred thing.” In a thousand pagan religions, and among peoples who barely knew any sort of deity at all, “there was none so uncivilized and wild that it did not treat marriage with a certain religious awe.”¹⁴

And while Erasmus has somewhat unusual (for a Catholic) ideas about the grounding of the idea that marriage is a Christian sacrament,¹⁵ still he regards matrimony with metaphysical wonder.

It represents that supreme mystery, which the very angels worship, whereby the divine nature joined itself to human nature by an ineffable bond; in one and the same hypostasis were joined the son of God, a human soul, and a human body, and an indissoluble link was forged between the heavenly and the terrestrial, the eternal and the mortal, the visible and the invisible, the infinite and the finite, the created and the uncreated, the highest and the lowest. What could be more divine than this alliance? Such diverse natures come together in a single being, though their essences remain distinct; but such is the harmony of this hypostatic union that one and the same being may truly be called God and man ... In both cases we observe perfect unity; in the one a single hypostasis from God and man, in the other the image of this unity: “And the two shall be one flesh.”

... The man represents the principles of form and action, the woman, of matter desiring form. See how duality is by some inexpressible means reduced to unity in God and man, in husband and wife ...¹⁶

¹³ Erasmus 1999, p. 219.

¹⁴ Erasmus 1999, p. 304f.

¹⁵ Reynolds 2016, pp. 730ff.

¹⁶ Erasmus 1999, p. 226.

Erasmus dedicated his book to Catherine of Aragon, the wife of Henry VIII of England, later known as Henry's *first* wife.

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