CLEANING UP WITH ERASMUS

THE INTELLECTUAL LABOURER AS MAINTENANCE WORKER

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In his 1516 biography of St. Jerome, Erasmus of Rotterdam singles out his subject for one laudable quality in particular: Jerome knew "how to gather gold from a dung-pit." That is, he dumpster-dove through piles of manuscripts (some of them disgustingly heretical), found hidden gems of knowledge amid all the muck, and carefully organized that knowledge for easy reader access. This skill just happens to be one shared by Erasmus himself, who, for his multi-volume *Adagiorum chiliades* (or *Adages*), combed through even more piles of manuscripts to distil thousands of ancient proverbs and commonplaces, which he then arranged conveniently for our reference, complete with helpful commentaries.

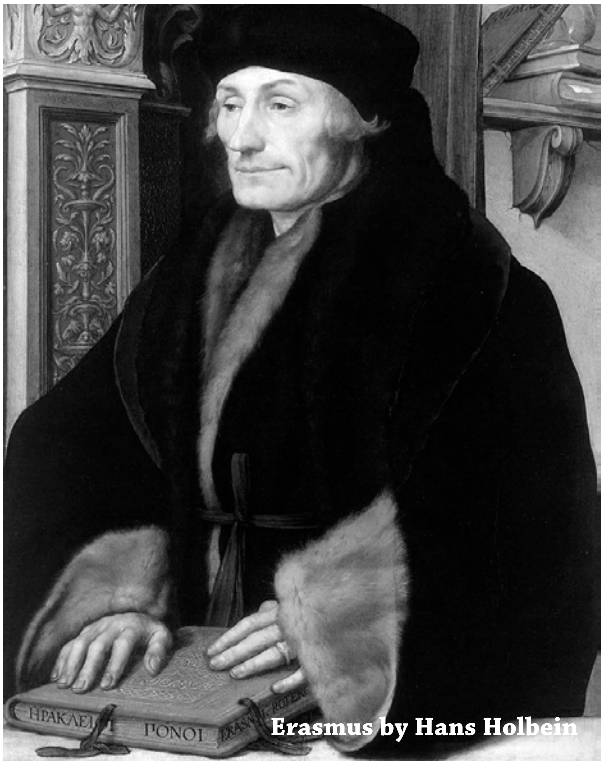
It might seem strange that one of the most shameless self-promoters of the Renaissance, whose writings crossed national borders, influenced princes, and earned him the status of the first celebrity academic, would identify with a learned saint on the basis of their shared familiarity with the proverbial dung heap. Elsewhere in the biography, Erasmus compared himself to Jerome on much loftier terms – linguistic talents, capacious memory, wide-ranging erudition – conveniently ignoring all the physical humiliations Jerome underwent. We might raise an eyebrow, as the classicist Simon Goldhill does in his book *Who Needs Greek?*, at Erasmus' bold recasting of the famously ascetic and self-flagellating desert father as the uncanny double of a Renaissance humanist, as if the "smelly, painful, lonely sufferings" that inspired Jerome's writings were anything like Erasmus' own (presumably) flagellation-free philological training. If the motivation of Jerome's retreat to the barren wilderness had been to catch up on his reading, it would have been, Goldhill quips, less like a torturous mortification of the flesh and more like a sabbatical.

It's easy to accuse Erasmus of romanticizing the lifestyles of scholars and saints alike. And yet, despite the familiar images we have of Erasmus basking in fur-robed tranquility in portraits by Metsys, Dürer, and Holbein, and despite Erasmus' direct contributions to the image of himself as a godlike hero seated comfortably above the fray, he also, at times, goes out of his way to paint his scholarly endeavours as *precisely* smelly, painful, and lonely, a sabbatical in a dung-pit. Figuring his work as both heroic and abject, Erasmus represents a problem familiar in what we might loosely call “knowledge production” today, from adjunct teaching in universities to freelance online journalism to the scanning of books for Google: How can intellectual labour be valued both as a priceless, transcendent cultural good, cordoned off from the vagaries and vulgarities of the messy material world, *and* as real work, done by real people with vulnerable bodies, often in unfavourable conditions? As I’ll suggest, this is also a problem faced, then and now, by domestic labourers whose “maintenance work” preserves cultural and practical spaces and materials. This work ensures the conditions for clearly meaningful work, but has proven difficult to understand as meaningful in itself.

> HOW CAN INTELLECTUAL LABOUR BE VALUED BOTH AS A PRICELESS, TRANSCENDENT CULTURAL GOOD, CORDONED OFF FROM THE VAGARIES AND VULGARITIES OF THE MESSY MATERIAL WORLD, AND AS REAL WORK, DONE BY REAL PEOPLE WITH VULNERABLE BODIES, OFTEN IN UNFAVOURABLE CONDITIONS?

In the *Adages*, first published in 1500 and continuously expanded until his death in 1536, Erasmus’ stated goal is nothing less than the “restoration of learning,” and we might expect his commentary there on “the labours of Hercules” to demonstrate the nobility of that goal, as this adage is elsewhere applied to Erasmus’ own celebrated labours. In Holbein’s iconic portrait, commissioned by Erasmus, our scholar sits regally with his edition of Jerome’s letters, emblazoned with the title “Labours of Hercules” in Greek, completing the picture of the scholar-hero so carefully fashioned, as the historian Lisa Jardine argued in her influential book *Erasmus, Man of Letters*, by Erasmus himself. For Jardine, Erasmus exemplifies the successful heroic self-construction to which so many Renaissance writers aspired: a far cry from the cloistered medieval monk, the new, modern scholar aimed to bask in the glow of public recognition. And sure enough, after a summary of the moral and political applications of “the labours of Hercules,” Erasmus abruptly turns to the real Hercules: Erasmus. “But if any human toils deserve to be awarded the epithet ‘Herculean,’” Erasmus announces, it would be those whose goal is “restoring the monuments of ancient and true literature” – in other words, exactly what Erasmus is doing. So far, so heroic.

But as Erasmus goes on to explain his methodology, the scholar’s toils begin to sound less epic than mock-epic: more like household chores than foreign wars, or more like Psyche sorting seeds than Hercules slaying monsters. Here the Hydra’s heads are replaced by “monstrous [scribal] corruptions,” and it is not superhuman strength but unceasing myopic squinting that is required to decode corrupt texts and unearth buried gems: “Who can make an adequate estimate of the infinite labour required to seek out such small



Erasmus by Hans Holbein

things everywhere?" The decaying heaps of text through which the compiler must wade lead, as if by contagion, to the degeneration of the compiler's body. As a result of having to "wear out your eyes on crumbling volumes covered with mould, torn, mutilated, gnawed all round by worms and beetles," any compiler can expect to develop "decay and old age" prematurely, and this at the expense of doing work in those more expansive fields where "there is often scope for using one's wits, so that there is some pleasure to be gained from creative and original thought," where "at any moment you may be able by nimbleness of mind to polish off some portion of your task." But Erasmus won't be polishing anything off here; his task, we're endlessly reminded, is never-ending. Our Hercules complains that even his well-meaning predecessors have only made his job more difficult: "An almost larger army of commentators […], some of whom by their idleness and inaccuracy and a certain number by pure ignorance (for they too must be worked through, in hopes of course of one day picking some gold off the dunghill), have added not a little to the burden of my labours." The dung-dwelling figure Erasmus is casting himself as sounds less like Hercules than like a dung beetle, the subject of another entry in the *Adages*. Or perhaps the dung beetle is more Herculean than we think. Tireless in its Sisyphean struggle of rolling balls of excrement uphill, Erasmus' scarab is notable for "its unconquerable courage and its disregard for its own life," its "lofty and titanic soul" and its "heroic mental powers." And this great-souled insect shouldn't be condemned for living in dung, for it was dung, after all, that brought fame to Hercules when, as one of his twelve labours, he cleaned the Augean stables in a single day. This levelling of high-born hero and lowly bug makes it difficult to tell if Erasmus is deflating Hercules, elevating the dung beetle, or simply reducing the very concept of heroism to absurdity.

> IN ARENDT'S SCHEMA OF THE VITA ACTIVA, THE DOMESTIC LABOURER COULD NEVER ACHIEVE SIGNIFICANCE OUTSIDE THE OIKOS, EVEN IF PUBLIC LIFE DEPENDED, INDIRECTLY AND INVISIBLY, ON HOME ECONOMICS

Erasmus had a substantial amount of support in his scholarly efforts – a small cadre of live-in domestic and intellectual labourers helped with transcription, collation, and the daily maintenance of his household – and so the idea of the world-famous scholar personally turning each mouldy, worm-eaten page is perhaps an exaggeration, just as the sublimely relaxed scholar-saint we see in portraits is also an exaggeration. But while the latter makes a certain amount of sense, the former is harder to explain. Who doesn't want to be seen as effortlessly – or, alternatively, with heroic mental effort – commanding the entire corpus of classical learning at one's fingertips? And who *wants* to be seen as an abject dung beetle, surrounded by endless mountains of waste, crushed by the weight of one's own smelly burden?

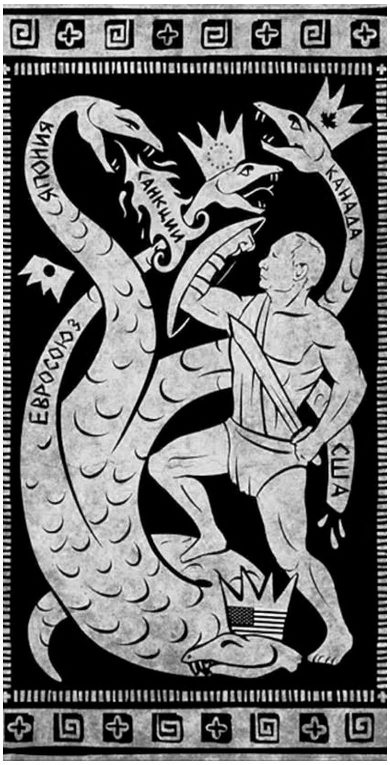
Erasmus' restoration of learning involves work that's not only illegible to the unlearned masses, but also menial, ceaseless, and poorly compensated beyond the common reader's imagination – not ethereally immaterial, but weighed down by banal materiality. His attempt to cast his editorial task as a heroic struggle ends up sounding more like a straightforwardly suboptimal allocation of human resources. His role as a scholar confined to dusty archives and degraded to secretarial status, for a public who will never appreciate him, falls almost comically short of any classical definition of heroism. To borrow categories from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Erasmus' compilation efforts sound like those of a housebound labourer, as opposed to the producer of long-lasting artefacts or the hero who performs immortal deeds. In Arendt's schema of the *vita activa*, the domestic labourer could never achieve significance outside the *oikos*, even if public life depended, indirectly and invisibly, on home economics. Limited to the mere preservation rather than the ennobling of life, labour falls short of both "work," with its durable contributions, and "action," with its potential for publicly recognizable impact.

Like Erasmus, Arendt sees Hercules' labours as illustrative of heroism. But she clarifies that these labours can be called heroic only because they were singular events, performed once and for all. Not every stable-mucker attains Herculean status:

> [T]he daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition. The Herculean "labours" share with all great deeds that they are unique; but unfortunately it is only the mythological Augean stable that will remain clean once the effort is made and the task achieved.

For Arendt, heroic deeds are defined both by risk and by freedom from the endless and degrading cycle of production and consumption: from a hero's point of view, there really is no point in cleaning your room if it's just going to get dirty again. By contrast, Erasmus' editorial labours, with his constant correction and revision undermining the finality of any published edition, stand in need of continuous maintenance and repair, or what Erasmus calls "the unpopular and unvarying toil of collecting, of sweeping together, explaining, and translating."

Even if Erasmus is redefining the classical sense of heroism, why does he emphasize the menial nature of Hercules' labours? He could have portrayed himself as a buff, militaristic modern-day Hercules who's clearly loved by the people, like Vladimir Putin, pictured in one of a series of images commissioned by his supporters, poised to behead the Hydra of Western sanctions. Instead, we get glimpses of indefinitely dirty stables and a Hydra whose heads, unlike those of the ultimately defeated mythic monster, never stop sprouting up, tiresome annoyances that must be met with "relentless repetition" rather than "courage," with the housewife's patience rather than the hero's audacity. If Erasmus' goal is to clean up completely the Augean mess that medieval commentators and the ravages of time have left behind, and to do this in a way evoking Hercules, one might think he would stress the singularity of his accomplishment, rather than its relentless seriality. Complaining of the constant, invisible labours that no one appreciates but that help preserve a body of work, Erasmus implicitly puts himself in the position of a domestic labourer, for whom "to keep the world clean and prevent its decay," as Arendt puts it, was a full-time job. His description of his tasks is punctuated with phrases like "And another thing ...," "And here is another thought I would put before you ...," reminders that a scholar's work, like a woman's, is never done. Chained to his texts like a labourer "bound to the mill," constrained to "repeat the same things three thousand times," Erasmus figures himself as just as condemned to relentless cycles of production as a slave, servant, or housewife, sustaining the survival of others.



It's true that there were forms of unproductive or servile labour that were considered respectable in early modernity, including the work done by Erasmus' own *famuli,* or "servant-pupils." But Erasmus is strangely insistent on reminding us that his labours are not only difficult and humbling but also abjectly humiliating, dirty, and physically and mentally corrosive rather than providing opportunities to flex heroic muscles or elevate the soul. At the same time, Erasmus' cleanup project does aim to do something more than "keep the world clean and prevent its decay": namely, he hopes to organize messy textual material in order to make it available, hopefully, for others to use. In this sense, too, he recalls a crucial role of the early modern housewife, one overlooked in Arendt's account of domestic labour: to maintain, through "unproductive" or minimally productive work, a store of resources for the future. Early modern domestic manuals, like John Dod and Robert Cleaver's popular 1598 *A Godly Form of Household Government*, instructed wives "to oversee and give order for all things within the house," or, more generally, "to keep the house." Housekeeping was about "keeping" in a very broad sense, applying both to the household's stockroom and its moral fibre. Housekeeping also provided an analogue for rhetorical retrieval, or *oikonomia*: the good orator, like the good housewife, should know how to manage the resources at his disposal. In both its rhetorical and its practical senses, *oikonomia* was a way of providing resources to live, speak, and act in the world.

> ERASMUS DOES IN MANY WAYS ILLUSTRATE THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF THE RENAISSANCE AS A HEROIC REVIVAL THAT LED TO PERSONAL AND CULTURAL SELF-AGGRANDIZEMENT

Erasmus does in many ways illustrate the master narrative of the Renaissance as a heroic revival that led to personal and cultural self-aggrandizement, even if he also, as I've shown, drags that narrative down to the dung-pit. But scholars often ignore the sediment of drudgery in his writing, emphasizing instead the more vibrant (if admittedly artificial) glow of heroism. In "The Labours of Hercules," Erasmus sounds, more than anything else, exhausted. He announces, soon after embarking on his commentary, that "a kind of weariness comes over me" as he thinks about how many scholarly toils have gone unappreciated. He complains of this weariness at such length that he eventually wonders if it isn't in fact the reader who is performing a Herculean feat by putting up with this whole long tirade. The scholar's activity of correcting, copying, editing, translating, and transcribing, of collecting "gold from a dung-pit," resists translation into a heroic idiom. That Erasmus nonetheless tried so hard to represent his labours as at once heroic and pathetic might prompt us to consider how even today we lack a framework for understanding domestic and intellectual labour alike as both menial and meaningful.

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