

S. UTMAN

COLLECTED WORKS OF  
ERASMUS

SPIRITUALIA and PASTORALIA

DISPUTATIUNCULA DE TAEDIO, PAVORE,  
TRISTICIA IESU

CONCIO DE IMMENSA DEI MISERICORDIA

MODUS ORANDI DEUM

EXPLANATIO SYMBOLI APOSTOLORUM

DE PRAEPARATIONE AD MORTEM

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PREPARING FOR DEATH

*De praeparatione ad mortem*

translated and annotated by  
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On 19 June 1533 Thomas Boleyn, earl of Wiltshire and Ormond, and father of Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII, wrote to Erasmus, asking him to write, as quickly as possible, a short work on the subject of preparing for death (*libellus . . . de praeparatione ad moriendum*).<sup>1</sup> The dedicatory letter of the work, addressed to Boleyn, is dated 1 December of the same year, and the work itself appeared in print in early 1534 from the Froben press in Basel, entitled *Liber . . . de praeparatione ad mortem*, 'A Book about Preparing for Death,' with a subtitle *Liber quomodo se quisque debeat praeparare ad mortem*, 'A Book on How All Ought to Prepare Themselves for Death.' Erasmus says in this letter that he had been occupied with such a work even before he received Boleyn's request. Erasmus' anticipation of Lord Thomas' wish may account for his completing the work very soon after receiving the request.

Erasmus' essay stands in the tradition of tracts which deal with the 'art of dying' (*ars moriendi*), one of the earliest of which is part of Jean Gerson's *Opus tripartitum*, composed circa 1408. The main focus of the fifteenth-century *Artes moriendi* was on the importance of the time of death for deciding the dying person's fate for eternity. What should be done by and for the dying when death is imminent occupies part of *De praeparatione ad mortem*, but, as the title indicates, Erasmus, like others before him, stresses too the need for an upright and righteous life as necessary preparation for our inevitable end. As Carlos Eire points out, 'The *Ars Moriendi* . . . is transformed into an *Ars Vivendi* and it becomes a manual to be read not just at the moment of death, but throughout the course of one's life.'<sup>2</sup> The topic involved some of the important differences between Protestant and Catholic beliefs (for example, on purgatory, the power of the sacraments, and the invocation of the saints). It is not surprising, therefore, that this 'genre' was very popular in the sixteenth century and beyond. The significance of Erasmus' essay within this tradition is treated at greater length in the introduction to this volume (xxvi-xxix above).

Although an autograph manuscript of Erasmus' work survives (Copenhagen, Royal Library GKS 95 fol), it does not reflect Erasmus' final conception of the work, as is shown by A. van Heck, the editor of *De praeparatione ad mortem* in the Amsterdam edition (see ASD V-1 328-9). The *editio princeps* carries more authority and is the basis for the translation that follows, as it is also for the text of van Heck's edition.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on Thomas Boleyn see CEBR I 161-2.

<sup>2</sup> See Carlos M.N. Eire 'Ars moriendi' in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* ed Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia 1983) 21-2, with bibliography.

The notes that accompany the translation are heavily indebted to van Heck, though in keeping with the nature of *CWE* they are briefer and more limited in scope than his annotation. Some notes, however, are new, and thanks are owed to Brian E. Daley of Weston Jesuit School of Theology for the identification of some patristic sources.

JNG