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Sommario/riassunto

During his lifetime Erasmus was one of the most controversial figures of Renaissance and Reformation Europe. In the 450 years since his death his reputation has undergone a series of fluctuations that reflect the attitudes of successive periods in European, and eventually North American, theological and social thought. Mansfield aims to relate changing interpretations of Erasmus to the historical contexts and experiences of those who wrote about him. He explores the influences in turn of the Enlightenment, romanticism, religious revival, and the emergence of liberalism. In the twentieth century, Mansfield concludes, more modern ways of studying Erasmus have emerged, notably through seeing him more precisely in his own historical context. He argues, nevertheless, that the Enlightenment liberal interpretation of Erasmus remained the dominant one through the whole period, and that despite its weaknesses, it did succeed in revealing essential aspects of Erasmus as a historical personality.