With the invention of the printing press, writers throughout Western Europe began to express the new ideas of the Renaissance in literature...

**Literature Reflects Change**

Desiderius Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, Holland, in 1469. He lived in Germany, France, England and Italy, and died in Switzerland in 1536. His travels and correspondence brought him in contact with most of the leading scholars of the day. Erasmus wrote in Latin. He often used the literary device of a conversation between two people to express his ideas.

In *The Abbot and the Learned Lady*, Erasmus held ignorant monks up to ridicule. He also showed his support for having women receive an education.

ANTRONIUS: What are all of these things I see here?
MAGDALIA: Aren’t they wonderful?
ANTRONIUS: How wonderful I don’t know. But they are certainly unbecoming to a woman.
MAGDALIA: Why?
ANTRONIUS: Because the whole place is filled with books.
MAGDALIA: Have you never seen books in a woman’s house?
ANTRONIUS: Yes, but those were French. Here I see Greek and Latin books.
MAGDALIA: Are French books the only ones that teach wisdom? Are men the only ones allowed to improve their minds and enjoy themselves?
ANTRONIUS: You confuse growing wise with enjoying yourself. It’s not feminine to be smart. A woman’s business is to have a good time.
MAGDALIA: Shouldn’t everyone live well?
ANTRONIUS: Yes, in my opinion.
MAGDALIA: How do you measure living well?
ANTRONIUS: By sleep, dinner parties, doing as one likes, money, honors.
MAGDALIA: But if wisdom were part of these things, you wouldn’t enjoy yourself?
ANTRONIUS: What do you mean by wisdom?
MAGDALIA: This: understanding that wealth and honors make a person neither happier nor better. The mind must also be improved.
ANTRONIUS: Away with that wisdom!
MAGDALIA: You may be a clever abbot, but you are a stupid thinker. What if I enjoy reading a good author more than you do hunting, drinking, or playing dice? You won’t think I’m having a good time?
ANTRONIUS: I wouldn’t live like that. I wouldn’t want my monks to spend their time on books.
MAGDALIA: But exactly why do you disapprove of this in your monks?
ANTRONIUS: They talk back by quoting from what they’ve read. I don’t like a monk who talks back. And I don’t want any of mine to know more than I do.
MAGDALIA: But why do my books displease you?
ANTRONIUS: Because the spinning wheel is the proper equipment for women.
MAGDALIA: Isn’t it a wife’s business to manage the household and rear the children?
ANTRONIUS: It is.
MAGDALIA: Do you think she can manage so big a job without wisdom?
ANTRONIUS: I suppose not.
MAGDALIA: But books teach me this wisdom!
ANTRONIUS: You strike me as a clever but false thinker because you argue so sharply.
MAGDALIA: I won’t say how you strike me!
ANTRONIUS: I could put up with books, but not Latin ones.
MAGDALIA: Why not?
ANTRONIUS: Because that language isn’t fit for women.
MAGDALIA: I want to know why.
ANTRONIUS: The public agrees with me, because it’s a rare and unusual thing for a woman to know Latin.
MAGDALIA: Why quote the public? They are the worst possible authority on conduct. Is it fitting for a German woman to learn French?
ANTRONIUS: Of course.
MAGDALIA: Why?
ANTRONIUS: To talk with those who know French.
MAGDALIA: So, why do you think that it’s not proper for me to know Latin? I can converse with many wise and learned authors. They mostly use Latin.
ANTRONIUS: Such books ruin women’s wits – which are none too plentiful anyway.
MAGDALIA: How plentiful yours are. I don’t know.
ANTRONIUS: How did I run across this woman? When you come to visit us, I’ll treat you more politely.
MAGDALIA: How?
ANTRONIUS: We’ll dance, drink as much as we please, hunt, play games, and laugh.
MAGDALIA: For my part, I feel like laughing even now.

QUESTIONS to Answer:

1. What medieval attitudes did Erasmus make fun of?

2. What medieval institutions does Erasmus criticize in his writing?

3. How do you think that the Roman Catholic Church responded to writers like Erasmus?