Erasmus is one of the authors who actively concerned themselves with the typesetting and printing of their works; he is finding himself here in the company of authors such as Vesalius, Descartes, Pope, Rousseau, Voltaire, Whitman and Shaw. Already in 1915 the great Erasmus expert P.S. Allen wrote ‘Erasmus’ relations with his printers’, followed by various articles, and in 2005 a monograph appeared: Karine Crousaz, Erasme et le pouvoir de l’imprimerie. In these publications there was hardly any mention of Erasmus’ significance in the organisation of the transmission of knowledge in printed books and of the role of graphic design therein. This is different in the voluminous thesis defended in 2007 by Alexandre Vanautgaerden, which has now been published in an impressive edition. We know the author as an enthusiastic former curator of the Maison d’Erasme in Brussels – so rich in printed works by Erasmus – where he organized a series of fascinating exhibitions and other activities, accompanied by a number of interesting publications, in terms of both content and design (as of 2012 he is Director of the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève: we are looking forward to a Rousseau typographe).

This book focuses on the ‘rhetorique matérielle’, on all aspects that contribute to the transmission of the text such as format, type faces and body sizes, layout of title-page and text-pages, headlines, initials, indication of paragraphs, leading, marginalia, para-text (including indexes), reference system. All these aspects deal with the reader’s options to navigate through the text. Erasme typographe is a well-chosen title, although there is much more to it than just graphic design. The book deals with Erasmus’ role in
the transition from the ‘medieval’ book to the ‘modern’ book, which took place in the sixteenth century.

The sources for this study comprise: the editions (including their prefaces), the correspondences between authors and printers, preserved printer’s copy. Erasmus’ editions have rightly been restricted to those (first) editions actively authorized by the author; a list of these sources has been included as an appendix.

It is a pleasure to read how in this book manuscripts and early editions are examined with regard to their typesetting and graphic design. The analysis of Erasmus’ translation of Libanius in a manuscript calligraphed by the translator himself is quite remarkable. Here the humanist is clearly also ‘graphiste’: we see forms of ‘visual typography’, such as the cul-de-lampe in the style of the printings of Aldus Manutius.

Especially interesting are those manuscripts serving as copy and bearing traces of the editor and the typesetter. As an example Vanautgaerden uses the well-known Tertullianus manuscript (now in the Bibliothèque Humaniste Sélestat), edited by Beatus Rhenanus for the edition of 1521, which however bears no relation to Erasmus whatsoever. The author offers a very fine analysis of the printer’s copy of the Vita Hieronymi of 1515-1516 (now Universitätsbibliothek Basel), which has come down to us in the handwriting of its author, Erasmus. In it we see the casting off marks made in the printer’s copy in places where in the printed edition a new page begins. Lack of knowledge of analytical bibliography, however, is the cause that the phenomenon of setting by formes has not been recognized: a simple reference to Gaskell’s A New Introduction to Bibliography would have clarified the whole passage. Related to this is Vanautgaerden’s explanation of the Latin term ‘exemplar’ which is read as ‘épreuve’, whereas in analytical bibliography it refers to ‘(printer’s) copy’, and it is exactly this definition that fits in the context of the letter of the printer to Erasmus in which the word occurs (pp. 13 and 391, cf. 245). In a few other places Vanautgaerden uses the term ‘Druckvorlage’, the German translation of ‘exemplar’, whereas ‘copie’ is the usual French term.

We see that in his manuscript of the Vita Hieronymi Erasmus marks the beginning of a new paragraph, which is then executed by the typesetter by placing a white space in the line. But it remains a mystery why Vanautgaerden does not mention what might have become a sparkling chapter of his book, the printer’s copy of the Greek text for Erasmus’ famous edition of the New Testament of 1516 (now Universitätsbibliothek Basel).

Erasme typographe can be read as a biography based on chronologically arranged overviews of the contacts between the great humanist and his successive printers: Martens, Badius, Manutius, Froben and others. The short chapters also contain the Latin text with French translation of the documents concerned (mostly prefaces to editions, etc.) and detailed annotations. The reader is frequently struck by new information and insights, especially with regard to Martens and De Keysere. Not Badius in Paris was Erasmus’ ‘imprimeur rêvé’ but Manutius in Venice: it was in Venice that Erasmus discovered the possibilities of typography. He stayed a long time in the printing house and kept writing there, while at the same time composing and printing con-
continued. Yet, it was a transalpine printer who became the most important distributor of his works: the house of Froben, to which Vanautgaerden devotes no less than 200 pages. His experiences with Aldus enabled Erasmus to adapt this Basel firm to the new era: Froben was to become the Aldus of the north, although he did not belong to the category of learned printers. The humanist from the Low Countries was the author or editor of 247 out of 289 editions published by Froben between 1521 and 1529. It was from Basel that he became the ‘écrivain vedette’ of Europe. The last sentence of this inspiring study reads: ‘La supériorité d’Erasme sur son temps n’est pas qu’intellectuelle, elle est également technique.’

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