Alexandre Vanaugaerden


Erasmus Typographe is the stimulating and provocative title by which Alexandre Vanaugaerden invites his readers to enter the world of printing in the age of Erasmus and to discover the little known role of the Dutch humanist in this domain. In the course of the work, an unexpected portrait emerges of an Erasmus who not only exercises complete control over the printing and diffusion of his works but who also tries to bend the reality of the printing process to his will as author-typographer.

The work follows a chronological order and retraces Erasmus' steps from his years of poverty and obscurity, when he was still looking for printers to publish his Adages, up to his death in July 1536 when the gout afflicting his corpusculum put an end to his labors as writer and typographer. In the course of the seven sections of the work, Alexandre Vanaugaerden explains how Erasmus was not satisfied merely to write his books but constantly thought about how they would be read. Though we may already be familiar with his mastery of the art of communication—as the works of Quentin Metsys and the portraits of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein have shown—a new dimension of Erasmus' genius emerges here. Fascinated by the publications of Aldus Manutius during his stay in Venice, Erasmus made the Aldine method, both the choice of font and the page layout, his preferred model. From that time on, he looked for printers able to imitate these publications and with whom he could reconstitute the Aldine academy which he so admired and which he believed to be the only way to insure his control over the diffusion of his works.

Yet, though he encounters printers such as Thierry Martens in Louvain and especially Johann Froben in Basel, they are not humanist printers. In other words, they print humanist works but are not themselves humanists. They are not expert Latinists and don't have workshops like Aldus, that is to say centers of industrial production which are also sites of intellectual ferment furnished with significant libraries frequented by numerous scholars. No matter. To make up for this lack, Erasmus decides to invent the printers he needs by composing prefatory epistles in Latin in their name and placing them at the head of the volumes which they print. By this sleight of hand, Martens and Froben, though undoubtedly real, become the fictional characters whom Erasmus uses to realize his dream of an academy. He single-handedly invents the figure of the Northern humanist printer. With the publication of his New Testament in 1516 with Froben in Basel, Erasmus gives the old shop, in business since 1491, its title of nobility. Froben’s printing press becomes the standard of quality throughout
Europe, and his printer's mark of a caduceus or rod entwined with two serpents, which first appeared in 1515, ends up being copied by other printers, even in Venice. The injunction "read, know, and then judge" which Erasmus added to the image made Froben's mark unforgettable. To support his demonstration, Alexandre Vanautgaarden reproduces some unpublished documents such as the three manuscript versions of a letter by Froben (pp. 321–323) revised and expanded first by Bruno Amerbach, then by Beatus Rhenanus, and finally by Boniface Amerbach. These documents help us to understand better to what degree the work in Froben's shop was a collective endeavor and how the signature of Johann Froben had a symbolic and economic value rather than a literary one.

But this is not all that is new. As Jean-François Gilmont emphasizes in his preface, "the discovery of Erasmus' work on the book reveals the critical role he played in the birth of the modern book." Erasmus is the one who imposed the Aldine model on his printers; he's the one who, by using and abusing printing for polemical purposes, enlarged its role and influence. Erasmus gives his text paragraphs, index, notes, and summary. Clearly and precisely, manipulating with great skill the manuscript evidence, Alexandre Vanautgaarden explains how the humanist indicates a paragraph to the compositors; and he uncovers the logic whereby, for example, Erasmus measures the printed text of his Life of Jerome in four em's or quadrata. He also studies the original marginal notes for the Education of the Christian Prince as a means to orient the reader, though the role of Erasmus is hard to specify here. In this way, the humanist of Rotterdam contributed to the evolution of the modern book from its invention by Gutenberg to its relative maturity in the mid-sixteenth century. Erasmus, it appears, was superior to his age not only intellectually but also technically.

The originality and interest of Alexandre Vanautgaarden's book lie not only in these new discoveries but also in the great number of unpublished documents that are reproduced here both in Latin and in French translation. The author includes quite a few printers' letters, of which he proposes a typology (title, summary, manifesto, advertisement) as well as other liminary texts. The appendix is a veritable treasury for Erasmians, offering a list of first editions of Erasmus. A bibliography of secondary sources, a typographical glossary, an index, a table of printers' letters and other documents, a table of illustrations, and a table of contents round off the admirable critical apparatus. An art historian by training, Alexandre Vanautgaarden has put together a very elegant book which recalls, for initiates, the Notulæ Erasmianæ published by Brepols under the auspices of the Maison d'Erasme in Anderlecht, Belgium. Of great originality both in form and content, Alexandre Vanautgaarden's work is both
a pleasure to read and a salutary reminder that John Colet's prophecy, *Nomen Erasmi nunquam peribit*, is in no danger of being disproved.

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(translated from the French by Eric MacPhail)
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