

PART I

HUMANISM



A BLUEPRINT FOR THE RECEPTION OF ERASMUS:  
BEATUS RHENANUS'S SECOND *VITA ERASMI* (1540)

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*Early Modern Biography, Literary Reception, and the Vita Erasmi*

Beatus Rhenanus's *Vita Erasmi*<sup>1</sup> represents an interesting case in the reception of Erasmus. It was written by a man who was not only an important humanist but also a close friend of the Roterodamus, whom he at times even regarded as his 'best friend' or 'alter ego';<sup>2</sup> a person who had lived together with him during a certain period in Basel, been his closest collaborator, and served as editor of his works, notably of his letters. Thus, Rhenanus was a person who without a doubt had tremendous authentic and inside knowledge about Erasmus's life and works, and moreover, possessed the technical, rhetorical, and linguistic skills required in order to transfer his knowledge into a well-composed and well-written biography.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Critical edition by Allen in Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, vol. I, 56–71 (quoted henceforth – with a few exceptions – after this edition, by page(s) and line(s)); Engl. transl. in Olin J.C., *Christian Humanism & The Reformation: Selected Writings; with The Life of Erasmus, by Beatus Rhenanus* (New York: 1965); German transl. in Hartmann A., "Beatus Rhenanus: Leben und Werke des Erasmus", in *Gedenkschrift zum 400. Todestage des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Basel: 1936) 11–24. For the function of humanist biographies as transmitters of published texts, including Rhenanus's second *Life of Erasmus*, see my extendend and detailed study in German, "Vita als Instrument humanistischer Wissensvermittlung: Desiderius Erasmus, Beatus Rhenanus, Guillaume Budé, Louis Le Roy und Johannes Sturm" (ca. 80 pages), in Enenkel Karl – Zittel Claus (eds.), *Die Vita als Vermittlerin von Wissenschaft und Werk. Form- und Funktionsanalytische Untersuchungen zu frühneuzeitlichen Biographien von Gelehrten, Wissenschaftlern, Schriftstellern und Künstlern*. The present article is a much revised, altered, and shortened English version of the first portion of the above-mentioned study.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, nos. 362 and 1206.

<sup>3</sup> On Beatus Rhenanus cf. Horawitz A., "Beatus Rhenanus: ein biographischer Versuch", in *Sitzungsberichte der Wiener Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse* 70 (1872) 189–244; idem, "Des Beatus Rhenanus literarische Tätigkeit", ibidem 71 (1872) 643–690 and ibidem. 72 (1872) 323–376; idem, "Die Bibliothek und Korrespondenz des Beatus Rhenanus von Schlettstadt", ibidem. 78 (1874) 313–340; idem – Hartfelder K. (eds.), *Der Briefwechsel des Beatus Rhenanus* (Leipzig: 1886; reprint 1966); Walter J., *Hommage à Beatus Rhenanus à l'occasion du quatrième centenaire de sa mort* (Sélestat: 1948); Walter R., *Trois profils de Beatus Rhenanus: l'homme, le savant, le chrétien* (Strasbourg: 1997; 2nd ed. ibidem: 2002); Scarpattetti B. von, "Beatus Rhenanus", in *Contemporaries of Erasmus* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: 2003; henceforth abbreviated CE), vol. I, 104–109; Hartfelder K., "Beatus Rhenanus" in

Small wonder that the *Vita Erasmi* has also received attention, albeit in different ways, in the large survey studies by Flitner and Mansfield on Erasmus's reception.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the *Vita Erasmi* seems to belong to a new development the genre of biography is supposed to have experienced in the early modern period, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries – a development that has drawn considerable attention in scholarly research in the last two decades.<sup>5</sup> According to Weiss, in the first decades of the 16th century biography developed from the short *curriculum vitae* into a literary genre in its own right that brought forth substantial texts.<sup>6</sup> Many scholars agree that the early modern “rise of biography” was caused by the “rise of the individual”: a vivid interest in the individual; in the individual's social, political, and religious representations; and in the search for, and formation and construction of, the individual's identity. This, of course, may be true. Nevertheless, the large number of studies in the past few decades paid hardly any attention to the fact that many early modern biographies of intellectuals – writers, poets, humanist scholars, scientists,

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*Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 28 (1889) 383–386; Laureys M., “Beatus Rhenanus”, in *Der Neue Pauly*. Supplemente, vol. Bd. VI (Stuttgart-Weimar: 2012), cols. 51–54; Hirstein J. (ed.), *Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547): Lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens. Actes du Colloque International tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 13 au 15 novembre 1998*, Turnhout 2000; D'Amico J.F., *Theory and Practice in Renaissance Textual Criticism. Beatus Rhenanus Between Conjecture and History* (Berkeley: 1988); Hirstein J., *Tacitus' Germania and Beatus Rhenanus, 1485–1547: A Study of the Editorial and Exegetical Contribution of a Sixteenth Century Scholar* (Frankfurt a.M. 1995; Studien zur klassischen Philologie, vol. 91); Beatus Rhenanus, *Rerum Germanicarum libri tres (1531)*. Ausgabe, Übersetzung, Studien, von F. Mundt, Berlin-New York 2008 (Frühe Neuzeit Bd. 127).

<sup>4</sup> Mansfield B., *Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus, c. 1550–1750* (Toronto: 1979) 17–21, and Flitner A., *Erasmus im Urteil seiner Nachwelt; das literarische Erasmus-Bild von Beatus Rhenanus bis zu Jean Le Clerc* (Tübingen: 1952) 5–10.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., among others, Backus I., *Life-Writing in Reformation Europe. “Lives” of Reformers by Friends, Disciples, and Foes* (Aldershot-Burlington: 2008); Bartuschat J., *Les Vies de Dante, Petrarque, et Boccace en Italie (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècles). Contribution à l'histoire du genre biographique* (Ravenna: 2007); MacDonald K., *Biography in Early Modern France 1540–1630. Forms and Functions* (London: 2007); Knowles Frazier A., *Possible Lives. Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy*, New York 2005; Von Zimmermann Ch., “Biographik und Individualität: Überlegungen zum Problemhorizont biographischer Schreibformen”, in Schüle A. (ed.), *Biographie als religiöser Text/ Biography as a Religious and Cultural Text* (Münster: 2002) 21–40; Martin J., *Waltons “Lives”. Conformist Commemorations and the Rise of Biography* (Oxford: 2001); Enenkel K.A.E. – de Jong-Crane B. – Liebrechts P. (ed.), *Modelling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance. With a Critical Edition of Petrarch's “Letter to Posterity”* (Amsterdam: 1998); Mayer Th.F. – Woolf D.R. (eds.), *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor: 1995); Berschin W., *Biographie zwischen Renaissance und Barock* (Heidelberg: 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Weiss J.M., *Humanist Biography in Renaissance Italy and Reformation Germany* (Aldershot-Burlington: 2010).

clerics, Protestant theologians, etc. – were not published as autonomous texts, but together with other texts, and thus in fact functioned as paratexts meant to accompany, explain, and transmit other texts.<sup>7</sup> This fact does not seem to be of marginal importance, since it may have had an impact on crucial aspects of the formation of biographies: their selection and presentation of life details, rhetorical organization and tendencies, and composition. In general, early modern biographies are persuasive texts. They try to persuade the readers of certain (historical) facts, attitudes, and visions. If they accompany the works of early modern authors, they try to guide and influence the reception of those writings.

All of this is true for Rhenanus's *Vita Erasmi*: it is not an independent or autonomous literary text, but accompanies the Basel *Opera omnia* edition of Erasmus's works of 1540 as an introduction or a preface. On the title page, the *Vita* is literally called 'a preface by Beatus Rhenanus, describing the life of the author'.<sup>8</sup> The *Vita Erasmi* goes back to a previous *Vita Erasmi* of 1536 that Rhenanus had composed as a paratext for another publication, Erasmus's edition of Origenes (Basel, Officina Frobeniana: 1536). The edition of the *Erasmi opera omnia* that was composed between 1538 and 1540 was a well-planned and extremely carefully executed enterprise that ultimately went back to directives of the author himself. Erasmus himself released an authorized catalogue of the writings he officially recognized as his authentic works.<sup>9</sup> Beatus Rhenanus had already been involved in the publication of this catalogue. When the *Opera omnia* were published, he acted as a faithful executor of Erasmus's will.

With the *Vita Erasmi*, Rhenanus provided a blueprint for the reception of Erasmus's works. Interestingly enough, the work has never been considered in this way. It is a telling detail that its function as a preface was completely ignored even in the modern editions of the text. Rhenanus presented the *Life of Erasmus* as a letter of dedication to Emperor

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<sup>7</sup> On this topic, cf. the forthcoming volume Enenkel Karl – Zittel Claus (eds.), *Die Vita als Vermittlerin von Wissenschaft und Werk. Form- und Funktionsanalytische Untersuchungen zu frühneuzeitlichen Biographien von Gelehrten, Wissenschaftlern, Schriftstellern und Künstlern*. For the function of humanist biographies as transmitters of published texts see my "Vita als Instrument humanistischer Wissensvermittlung: Desiderius Erasmus, Beatus Rhenanus, Guillaume Budé, Louis Le Roy und Johannes Sturm".

<sup>8</sup> 'Praefatio Beati Rhenani [...] vitam auctoris describens'.

<sup>9</sup> *Catalogi duo operum ab Erasmo Roterodamo conscripti et digesti* [...]. *Accessit in fine Epitaphiorum et Tumulorum libellus* [...] (Basel, Hieronymus Froben und Nicolaus Episcopi: 1536).

Charles V. However, in his edition, Allen left out the parts that belong to the letter, viz. the first and the last pages, and the English and German translators followed him.<sup>10</sup> In the German translation, Hartmann left out even more passages that are connected to the paratextual status of the *Life*. He probably considered them less relevant for what he decided its core business to be: to narrate Erasmus's life. The result of all of this is that in modern scholarship only a mutilated text of Rhenanus's *Vita Erasmi* was taken into consideration. The last time the complete text of the *Vita* appeared in print was in 1703, in the Leiden edition of Erasmus's works.<sup>11</sup>

Modern scholars have been puzzled by Rhenanus's biography of Erasmus. In their eyes, the text was not at all what it should have been. Hartmann criticized 'the strange choices' the biographer made with regard to selecting facts and topics. He registered 'manche uns befremdende Ungleichheiten in der Auslese und Gewichtsverteilung des Stoffes', which he ascribed to the author's regrettable inability to come to a harmonious judgement of Erasmus's achievements.<sup>12</sup> In Hartmann's view, Rhenanus did not really understand Erasmus, certainly not the core of his thoughts and psychological motives. Rhenanus's inability, 'um die Einordnung des Verstorbenen in größere Zusammenhänge vorzunehmen', is (according to Hartmann) due to the fact that, chronologically, he was too close to Erasmus. Because of this, he failed to mention the very works that made Erasmus famous over the centuries, i.e. the *Laus Stultitiae* and the *Colloquia*.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, one of Flitner's criticisms was that Rhenanus did not draw on his personal memories of his friend Erasmus. This all resulted, in Flitner's eyes, in a rather poor and insufficient biography.<sup>14</sup> Beat von Scarpatetti also seemed to have been disappointed by the text: he regretted that one finds nothing in it of the close personal relationship the two humanists must have had. According to his hypothesis, this may be due to an "Entfremdung" between the friends that might have taken place after Rhenanus had moved to Selestad. Von Scarpatetti also thinks that there may have been a problem of textual transmission: he wonders whether Rhenanus's text is authentic, and suggests that others may have changed it for the worse.

<sup>10</sup> In Olin, *Christian Humanism*, and Hartmann, "Beatus Rhenanus".

<sup>11</sup> *Opera omnia emendatiora et auctiora* [...] (Leiden, Pieter van der Aa: 1703; henceforth abbreviated as *LB*), vol. I, fols. \*\*\*r and \*\*\*3r.

<sup>12</sup> "Beatus Rhenanus: Leben und Werke des Erasmus" 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Mansfield, however, gave only a brief description of Rhenanus's *Life of Erasmus*, but refrained from an evaluation.

It seems worthwhile to take a different look at Rhenanus's biography of Erasmus – to analyze it by taking its paratextual status into account, and to single out its main elements and desired effects. Hopefully this will lead to a better understanding of the biography and its composition. My hypothesis is that the function of the text and its formation are closely connected.

*Reader's Perspective 1: Humanist Posterity and the Holy Roman Empire*

By 1540, Erasmus was not only a famous author but also a controversial one, whose works had as many admirers as they did critics and enemies on both sides of the confessional spectrum, among protestants and Catholics alike.<sup>15</sup> To present his works to an audience that was this heterogeneous was not an easy job. It required much caution and a certain instinctive feeling regarding how to prevent negative or polemical reactions. Therefore, it was not helpful to present “Erasmus from inside” (so to speak) or the “private Erasmus”, viz. to give as many details as possible of his inner life, true feelings, thoughts, and motives. I think that this is the main reason why Rhenanus was very reluctant to disclose his knowledge of the “private Erasmus” – why he did not draw much on the personal experiences and memories that he must have had as Erasmus's close friend. Instead, he deliberately and cautiously dwelled on the surface: the picture he wanted to draw of Erasmus was a representative and official one. Much differently from what Flitner thought, the problem was not that Rhenanus lacked distance regarding his subject; on the contrary, Rhenanus did his very best to create as much distance as possible in order guide his readers in the required direction. The overall perspective from which he constructed Erasmus's biography was that of humanistic posterity and the notion of eternal fame. This was simultaneously harmless and efficient. A humanist striving for fame was a legitimate and generally accepted idea, and above all, remained outside all confessional radicalizations.

In Rhenanus's paratextual presentation, Erasmus was an all but polemical writer, let alone a religious one; he had worked and lived exclusively

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. i.a. Mansfield, *Phoenix of his Age*; Seidel Menchi S., *Erasmus in Italia, 1520–1580* (Turino: 1987); German transl. by U. Hartmann, *Erasmus als Ketzer: Reformation und Inquisition im Italien des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Leiden-Boston: 1992); Bataillon M., *Érasme en Espagne*, 3 vols. (Geneva: 1991); Mout M.E.H.N. – Smolinsky H. – Trapman J. (eds.), *Erasmianism: Idea and Reality* (Amsterdam etc.: 1997).

according to eternal values and rules, and had always directed his writings toward the eternal posterity of humanist fame. In presenting Erasmus thusly, Rhenanus propagates a thoroughly respectful, if not devoted and admiring, reading, and he tries to incorporate Erasmus's readers – whoever they are – into the humanist *Respublica litteraria* and its dominating system of values.

Eternal posterity, of course, tends to exclude ephemeral and daily matters: for example, the image of the Erasmus who had been immensely successful finding patrons and generating income and other personal advantages through his publications. In Rhenanus's presentation, Erasmus's scholarly activity was an entirely unselfish act, an *act of charity, love, and devotion to mankind*. Rhenanus reduces Erasmus's many patrons and relationships to one single, unselfish, and highly devoted commitment to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

This is expressed especially in the two opening pages of the text that were left out by its editors Allen, Olin, and Hartmann. Moreover, Rhenanus managed to skilfully combine Erasmus's attachment to the Holy Roman Empire with the perspective of posterity; Erasmus's name and reputation with the fame and reputation of the Holy Roman Empire; and the publication of Erasmus's works with the interests of Charles V.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *LB*, Bd. I, fol. \*\*\*r: 'Quantae semper laudi fuerit apud veteres, invictissime CAROLE Auguste, cives habuisse viros insignes, ad posteros traditum inclytum illud septem Graeciae civitatum certamen satis indicat: quarum quaelibet natum apud se praeclarissimum vatem Homerum contendit. Nec iniuria. Quod enim majus ornamentum ulli, vel urbi, vel provinciae potest accidere, quam si talem progenuerit, per quem apud omnem posteritatem illustrem sit laudem consequutura? quae ex nulla re solidior obveniat atque ex litteris, quibus ad aeternitatem ipsam nihil magis durat. Hinc igitur moti Smyrnaei, Rhodienses, Colophonii, Salaminii, Ienses, Argivi, et Athenienses, certatim Homerum sibi vendicant, ut de Aegyptiis nihil dicam, qui illum suae gentis videri volebant. Quod si magni fecit Homeri natales ingeniosa Graecia, ceu omnis doctrinae parentis et fontis perennis, cur tua Majestas non merito gloriari queat, DESIDERIUM ERASMUM illum ROTERODAMUM in tua ditione certo natum et educatum, cuius industria velut postliminio revixere plenius litterae, non tantum in istis proximis Germanicarum Galliarumque regionibus, in quibus mira barbaries ante regnabat, verum etiam in ipsa nobilissima terrarum Italia, quum instructius, tum felicius huius ope florere coeperunt; ut, si fortassis ambitiosum sit, eum alterum Parentem litterarum vocare, tamen instaurator ac primarius illustrator dici et possit, et debeat. Quis enim a mille annis exstitit, qui plura scripserit, quum in sacris, tum profanis, tanta humanioris litteraturae peritia perpolitus? cuius libri in longinquas provincias frequentius exportati sint et avidius lecti? Denique quem omnium nationum eruditi magis coluerint observarintque? Nihil hic fingo, sed rem omnibus notam narro. Valebat namque stylo arguto, extemporalis, amoeno, terso, feliciterque fluente, quem assidua juvenis adhuc exercitatione sibi paraverat: nec minus iudicio valebat, quod habebat longe acerrimum. Hoc docti in eo praecipue sunt admirati, veneratique. Miraculo autem simile videatur, exactum adeo iudicium seculo tam rudi. Felicitati rarae perspicacissimi ingenii



Rhenanus blesses the Holy Roman Empire for having given birth to this world-famous scholar, and suggests that it would profit as much from him as the antique Greek town that gave birth to Homer.

In this way, posterity and eternity gain a political and legal dimension. Rhenanus uses the Roman Emperor as an authority in order to legitimize and approve the edition of Erasmus's *Opera omnia*. Charles V functions in the same way with respect to Erasmus's testament: he legalizes the humanist's will.<sup>17</sup> About 1540 the Empire of Charles V was the political structure with the largest geographical extension, seemingly covering the whole world from East to West, from Prague to the columns of Hercules and beyond, as the Emperor's motto claimed ('plus ultra'). Thus, not only eternity but also the enormous geographical extension of Charles's universal Empire was instrumentalized to guarantee the acceptance of Erasmus's *Opera* by a maximum number of readers. Not only posterity but also the Holy Roman Empire was used in order to annihilate the limitations confessional borders could bring about with respect to the spread of Erasmus's *Opera omnia*. In a more implicit way, the Empire also stands for a kind of universal, Catholic religion. Deliberately and with much caution, Rhenanus leaves out any mention of confessional matters, not least Erasmus's many polemical religious works, such as his invective against Luther, *On Free Will*, or his invectives against the Leuven theologians or the Paris theologians (e.g. Noël Beda).

Positioning him beyond all ephemeral matters, Rhenanus hails Erasmus as a cultural hero of mankind, as a kind of Hercules of the new age. In Rhenanus's view, Erasmus had sacrificed himself and had renounced all worldly goods for the sake of mankind's cultural progress. Erasmus himself had used similar strategies of self-presentation. In various ways, he identified his humanism with the *labors of Hercules*, which can be seen, for example, on the portrait he sent to his patron William Warham, archbishop of Canterbury, or in a letter of dedication addressed to the same patron. Both portrait and letter accompanied Erasmus's edition of the letters of St. Jerome dedicated to Warham. In both portrait and letter Erasmus presents himself as Herculean hero of culture.<sup>18</sup> The image of the

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ferendum acceptum, magis quam ullis praeceptoribus, si mutos illos magistros excipias. [...]'.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Vita*, I. 519.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Pabel H., *Herculean Labours. Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome's Letters in the Renaissance* (Leiden-Boston: 2008; Library of the Written Word, vol. V) 2–4; Jardine L., *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton: 1993) 4–5; 47; 59; 63; 74.

Herculean hero of culture is another strategy Rhenanus applied in order to suggest a devotional and worshipful reading of the *Opera omnia*.

*Reader's Perspective 2: Teleological Reading – Advanced Humanism*

Another important means of reader's guidance in Rhenanus's biography of Erasmus is the concept of "progress", or *advanced humanism*. In Rhenanus's presentation, humanism had reached an almost perfect state at that time – roughly the preceding three decades (1510–1540) – and the person responsible for that was Erasmus.<sup>19</sup> During Erasmus's boyhood there was hardly anybody in France or Germany who was able to write in authentic Latin and – maybe even more importantly – nobody who had sufficiently mastered Greek.<sup>20</sup> This situation changed radically due to two works by Erasmus: his *Adagia*<sup>21</sup> (2nd edition) and the treatise *De duplici copia dicendi*.<sup>22</sup> The second edition of the *Adagia* quoted by Rhenanus appeared in 1508 (in Venice), and the first edition of *De duplici copia dicendi* in 1512 (in Paris). In this way, Rhenanus dates the turning point in the development toward advanced humanism to the years 1508–1512. This development was strengthened and deepened by the foundation of two important institutes, the *Collegium Trilingue*<sup>23</sup> in Louvain (*Vita*, ll. 394 ff.), founded in 1518, and the *Collegium Regium*, *Collège Royal* or *Collège des Trois Langues* (later *Collège de France*; *ibidem*, ll. 404–409), founded in Paris in 1530. In his presentation, Rhenanus ascribes the foundation of both institutes exclusively to Erasmus; however, this is a bit one-sided, if not misleading. The *Collège Royal*, in fact, was founded by Guillaume Budé, who took the initiative, as one can see, for example, in the letter of dedication for his *Commentarii linguae Graecae* (1530) addressed to King Francis I.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita*, l. 395: 'Itaque in confesso est literarum in his provinciis incrementa potissimum Erasmo deberi'.

<sup>20</sup> *Vita*, l. 383–386: 'In Germania Galliaque mire frigeant literae; vix unus et alter Latine sciebat, Graece nullus. Et ecce statim, ut aeditae [sic] sunt *Adagiorum Chiliades* et libri *de utraque copia*, velut in nebulis coorto sole, emergere linguarum peritia coepit'.

<sup>21</sup> ASD II, 1–6; Mann Phillips M., *The 'Adages' of Erasmus* (Cambridge: 1964); Eden K., *Friends Hold All Things in Common: Tradition, Intellectual Property and the 'Adages' of Erasmus* (New Haven: 2001).

<sup>22</sup> ASD I, 6 (ed. B.I. Knott, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Vocht H. de, *History of the foundation and the rise of the collegium trilingue Lovaniense, 1517–1555* (Louvain: 1951–1955); Nève F., *Mémoire historique et littéraire sur Le Collège des Trois-Langues à l'Université de Louvain* (Brussels: 1856).

A teleological view of scholarship such as Rhenanus's is an extremely efficient instrument of reader's guidance, since it forces the reader to identify with that view. No reader likes to be considered backward. Rhenanus defined his teleological concept of advanced humanism by four main areas or directions of research: (1) textual criticism, (2) idiomatic linguistics, (3) theology, and (4) Greek studies. Also important is what Rhenanus excluded from his definition: literary activity, the very field that traditionally had been regarded as humanism's core business, ever since the days of Petrarch (\*1304).

Rhenanus's choice has a crucial impact on the reading he suggests for Erasmus's *opera*. He suppresses and excludes the literary works – partly those very works on which later Erasmus's fame was based: the *Laus Stultitiae*, the *Colloquia*, and the letters. He does his very best to prevent readers from regarding Erasmus as the skilful literary writer and virtuoso artist of the Latin language, the highly inventive and versatile master of witty narrative, and the ingenious rhetorician he actually was. He presents Erasmus exclusively as a serious, altruistic, and precise scholar – as a textual critic, linguist, theologian, and specialist in ancient Greek.

This distinctive and exclusivist blueprint – however strange it may seem to us in light of Erasmus's literary production and its later reception from the 16th to 19th centuries – goes back to Erasmus himself and his catalogue of works, which is basically still respected in the recent critical, ongoing Amsterdam edition (*ASD*). Erasmus divided his authorized *Opera omnia* into a number of *ordines*. Most noteworthy, he did not devote a certain *ordo* (or category) to the literary works; instead, he either suppressed them entirely (such as the treatise *De contemptu mundi*, the majority of the poems, or the satire *Julius exclusus*) or catalogued them in other *ordines*. In this way, the playful *Laus Stultitiae* figures exclusively as a serious work among the ethical treatises.<sup>24</sup>

Erasmus's theology is defined by Rhenanus as a kind of “new theology”. It explicitly excludes the well-known traditional academic discipline shaped by Scholasticism as it was taught at Europe's leading universities, such as those in Paris, Cologne, and Louvain. Instead, it is a mixture of patristic studies, Greek studies, textual criticism, and, more implicitly, a bit of catholic reform theology. The most “progressive” element – at least

<sup>24</sup> *ASD* IV.3 (ed. C.H. Miller). In the list Erasmus gives in his letter to Johannes Botzheim, Erasmus prescribes the following reading of the *Laus Stultitiae*: ‘*Morias encomium, qui libellus sic nugatur, ut seria doceat, ne mireris admixtum huic ordini* [i.e. the serious ethical works]’ (*Opus Epistolarum*, vol. I, 40, ll. 9–10).

in Rhenanus's *Vita* – is probably its focus on patristic literature.<sup>25</sup> Rhenanus presents Erasmus's editions of the Fathers Hieronymus, Cyprian, Hilarius, and Augustine as the new foundation of modern theology.<sup>26</sup> It is noteworthy that the biographer himself took part in this new development, among other things with his edition of Tertullian (1521),<sup>27</sup> which was inspired by Erasmus, and in Froben's editorial project of the *Autores historiae ecclesiasticae* (1523). Rhenanus regards it as Erasmus's major achievement that modern theology does not focus on the late Scholastics, such as John of Hales or John Holcott, but on the Fathers, such as St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, Cyprian, and St. Augustine.<sup>28</sup>

In Rhenanus's teleological presentation, textual criticism is probably the most important feature of modern scholarship, and it was Erasmus who played a pivotal role in its development. The biographer depicts the Roterodamus as the best textual critic ever. It is a telling detail that he adds in this respect a personal touch, viz. his enormous admiration for Erasmus's critical commentary annotations.<sup>29</sup> Rhenanus does not mention his own achievements in this field, although they were considerable: he edited more than sixty Latin texts and developed an advanced method that made more and better use of manuscript sources than contemporary Italian critics.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For a general survey, see Backus I. (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: from the Carolingians to the Maurists*, 2 vols. (Leiden-Boston: 1997); Frank G. – Leinkauf Th. – Wriedt M. (eds.), *Die Patristik in der frühen Neuzeit: Die Relektüre der Kirchenväter in den Wissenschaften des 15. – 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 2006).

<sup>26</sup> *Vita*, ll. 448–450; Olin J., “Erasmus and the Church Fathers”, in idem, *Six Essays on Erasmus* (New York: 1979).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Petitmengin P., “A propos du “Tertullien” de Beatus Rhenanus (1521) – Comment on imprimait à Bâle au début du seizième siècle”, *Annuaire de la société des Amis de la Bibliothèque Humanistique de Sélestat* (1980) 93–106; Munier Ch., “Les annotations de Beatus Rhenanus aux éditions de Tertullien (Bâle: 1521; 1528; 1539) et leur mise à l'Index librorum prohibitorum”, in Hirstein J. (ed.), *Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547): Lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens. Actes du Colloque International tenu à Strasbourg et à Sélestat du 13 au 15 novembre 1998* (Turnhout: 2000) 235–262; Petitmengin P., “Tertullien entre la fin du XII<sup>e</sup> et le début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in Cortesi M. (ed.), *Padri Greci e Latini a confronto: Atti del Convegno di studi della Società Internazionale per lo Studio del Medioevo Latino* (Florence: 2004) 63–88.

<sup>28</sup> *Vita*, ll. 448–450: ‘Sed, Deo gratia, videmus istarum admonitionum aliquem fructum. Theologorum manus pro Halesio, pro Holcoto, Cyprianum, Augustinum, Ambrosium et Hieronymum suis horis versant’.

<sup>29</sup> *Vita*, ll. 462–465: ‘Addidit plerisque locis censuras, quas ceu singularem dotem ac evidens argumentum praesentissimi perspicacissimi ingenii magis admiror quam quidvis aliud’.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. inter alia Hirstein (ed.), *Beatus Rhenanus (1485–1547): Lecteur et éditeur des textes anciens*; D'Amico, *Theory and Practice in Renaissance Textual Criticism*.



Rhenanus's construction, however, is only vaguely connected with historical fact. It is known that Erasmus had been taught at the Lebuinus school at Deventer (1478–1484), although he did not receive much instruction from Hegius, who only arrived there in 1483, soon after which Erasmus left the school.<sup>34</sup> Erasmus himself, in marked contrast with his biographer, did not claim to have mastered Greek at such an early stage. In his letter to Johannes von Botzheim, he gave a very clear and realistic picture, according to which he started with his Greek lessons when he was around thirty years old, with Georgios Hermonymos.<sup>35</sup> Rhenanus, however, does not even mention Hermonymos. This seems even more remarkable because Rhenanus knew of Erasmus's letter to Botzheim, and because Rhenanus himself was taught by Hermonymos in Paris, some years after Erasmus.

Interestingly, Rhenanus connected Erasmus's development as a linguist and specialist in proverbial expressions very closely with the Greek proverbs that were inserted in the 2nd edition, which appeared in 1508. He probably regarded Greek literature as the most important, if not the ultimate, source of proverbs. Rhenanus does not mention Erasmus's first edition of the proverbs that appeared in 1500 in Paris. In all probability, he did not regard this work as a product of advanced humanism. He applied a similar perspective to the work *De duplici copia verborum et rerum*. He remains silent about the first version of the treatise Erasmus had composed in Paris in the 1490s. This version was only about the Latin language. In the printed version of 1512, however, Erasmus discusses the Greek language as well. Greek scholarship, as presented in Rhenanus's biography, is a decisive and indispensable mark of advanced humanism.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Leijenhorst C.G. van, art. "Hegius, Alexander", in *CE*, vol. II, 173; Kronenberg H., "Wanneer is Alexander Hegius te Deventer gekomen?", *Verslagen en mededeelingen Vereeniging tot beoefening van Overijsselsch regt en geschiedenis* 29 (1913) 1–7; Kohls E.W., "Zur Frage der Schulträgerschaft der Brüder vom Gemeinsamen Leben und zum Rektoratsbeginn des Alexander Hegius in Deventer", *Jahrbuch des Vereins für Westfälische Kirchengeschichte* 61 (1968) 33–43.

<sup>35</sup> Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, vol. I, 7, ll. 19–24.

<sup>36</sup> For more details, see my "Vita als Instrument humanistischer Wissensvermittlung: Desiderius Erasmus, Beatus Rhenanus, Guillaume Budé, Louis Le Roy und Johannes Sturm", in Enenkel Karl – Zittel Claus (eds.), *Die Vita als Vermittlerin von Wissenschaft und Werk. Form- und Funktionsanalytische Untersuchungen zu frühneuzeitlichen Biographien von Gelehrten, Wissenschaftlern, Schriftstellern und Künstlern* (forthcoming).

*In Conclusion*

In our view it makes sense to analyze Rhenanus's *Vita Erasmi* as a paratext to his *Opera omnia*. It was not meant as an independent biography or as a text in its own right, nor would it be justified to regard it as an example of the "new biography" called for by Weiss, for example. Its first and foremost aim is to function as a reader's guide to the *Opera*, and therefore as a blueprint for the reception of Erasmus's works. And Rhenanus offered a very distinct reader's guide by which he, among others, excluded and suppressed a couple of Erasmus's works. The reason for this strategy is certainly not, as Hartmann thought, that Rhenanus did not understand Erasmus and his psychological motives, or that he was unable, 'die Einordnung des Verstorbenen in größere Zusammenhänge vorzunehmen', or something similar, but that he was well aware of the controversial status of Erasmus's works. In order to streamline reception and to prevent new controversies or polemics, he cautiously provided a "Leseanleitung" that would satisfy readers from all kinds of religious, confessional, and intellectual backgrounds. He tried to prevent readers from regarding the Rotterdam humanist as a clever and virtuoso literary writer and tough theological polemicist. Instead, he offered them exclusively the picture of an altruistic and precise scholar, the exponent of advanced humanism who deliberately limited himself to textual criticism, Greek studies, patristic scholarship, and idiomatic linguistics.



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