



The first authorised edition of Erasmus' 'On the writing of letters'

Erasmus, Desiderius

Rotterdam 1466? – 1536 Basel

Opus de conscribendis epistolis, quod quidam & mendosum, & mutilum aediderant, recognitum ab autore & locupletatum. Parabolarum siue similium liber, ab autore recognitus.

Basel, Johann Froben, 1522 (August)

Two parts, quarto (223 × 150 mm), (308)ff. signed a–z⁴ A–Z⁴ Aa–Ff⁴ Ee–Zz⁴ aa–ff⁴ and paginated 1–409 (*i.e.* 415, errors in numeration) (201). Woodcut compartment on title-page, two pages enclosed by borders of wood- and metalcut strip ornament, woodcut compartment on sub-title, initials from several alphabets, and printer's device on last page.

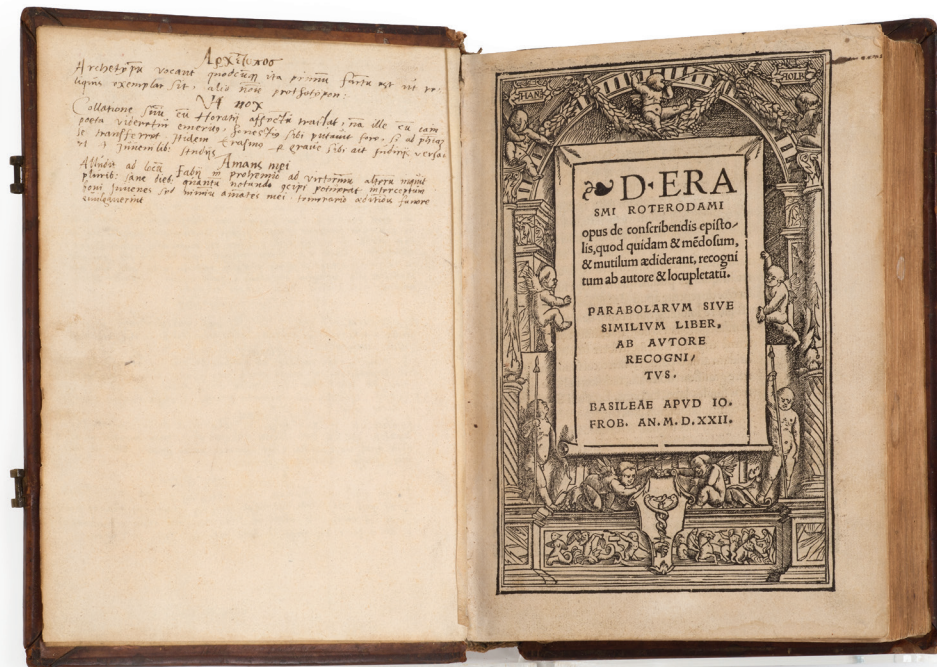
PROVENANCE annotations on front endpaper in Latin and Greek; marginalia in the same hand over the first six leaves, then attention evidently lost — inkstamp *E[gon] S[aal]* in upper corner of the front paste-down, denoting the book's former location in the Einbandsammlung (the so-called Max-Egon-Saales) in the Fürstlich-Fürstenbergische Bibliothek at Donaueschingen, but no other library stamps or markings — Reiss & Sohn, 'Auktion 68: Aus einer Süddeutschen Fürstenbibliothek, Teil 1', Königstein im Taunus, 20 October 1999, lot 56

A fresh and attractive copy in its original binding. Leather across the back of the binding partly worn away in top and bottom compartments, rubbed, small loss on lower cover, clasps lacking (catches remain), nonetheless a good specimen.

BINDING contemporary calf over wooden boards; covers decorated in blind by an anonymous 'candelabra' roll (145 × 15 mm) featuring a standing figure and cherub's head.

FIRST AUTHORISED EDITION of Erasmus' early pedagogical work 'On the Writing of letters', begun some thirty years previously, complemented by his collection of aphorisms or 'Parallels' gathered out of Plutarch's *Moralia*, Seneca, Lucian, Xenophon, Demosthenes, Aristotle, Pliny, and Theophrastus. Numerous later editions were printed of both school books;¹ however the texts printed here are the basis of modern critical editions.

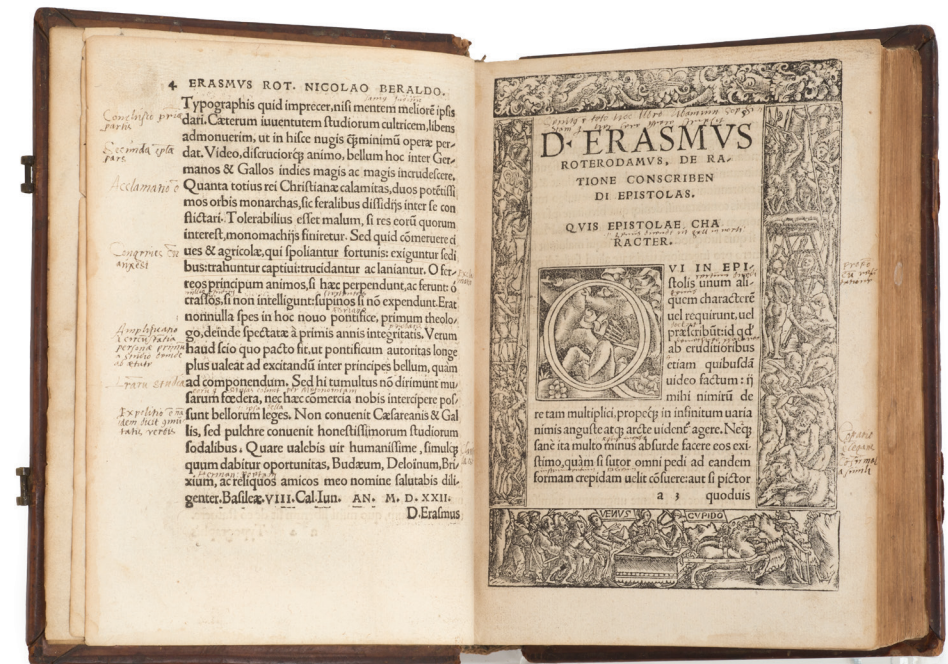
¹ Judith Rice Henderson, 'Humanism and the humanities: Erasmus's *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* in sixteenth-century schools' in *Letter-writing manuals and instruction from antiquity to the present: historical and bibliographic studies*, edited by Carol Poster and Linda C. Mitchell (Columbia, SC 2007), pp.141–177.



Title-page compartment (183 × 123 mm) designed by Hans Holbein the Younger

In the dedicatory letter of the treatise on letter-writing (dated 25 May 1522), Erasmus complains that he had been forced to take the work up again, at the insistence of friends, because of the publication of an unfinished draft in England (at Cambridge, printed by John Siberch, October 1521). For the authorised edition, Erasmus rewrote many letters, substituting fictitious for real names, suppressing personal remarks, frivolous subject-matter, and open references to contemporary events; he also composed new letters, including an 'Epistola consolatoria' (pp.250–266) and a letter of advice (pp.312–315). The text of *De conscribendis epistolis* remained afterwards fundamentally unchanged through numerous reprintings.²

² *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi*, v/2, edited by Jean-Claude Margolin (Amsterdam 1971), p.175; *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 25, edited by Charles Fantazzi (Toronto 1985), p.6.



Border ornaments by Jacob Faber and Hans Franck

The *Parabolae*, a by-product of Erasmus' revision of his *Adagiorum chiliades*, was first printed at Strasbourg by Matthias Schürer in 1514. Ten reprints followed in swift succession, only one (Louvain: Thierry Martens, June 1515) incorporating authorial corrections. In 1522, once again in Basel, Erasmus methodically revised the text for Froben, appending sixteen more *similia*, described in the colophon of our book as 'no mean addition' (*auctarium non mediocre*). Yet when Froben next printed the *Parabolae*, in 1534, one of his earlier (probably 1519 or 1521) editions was chosen as copy-text; that version reappeared in the Froben *Opera omnia* 1540, the source of Leclerc's Leiden text of 1703. Thus

Erasmus's corrections and additions of August 1522 became ignored, until restored to the canon by Jean-Claude Margolin in 1975.³

The title-page compartment (183 × 123 mm) was designed by Hans Holbein the Younger and first used in Glareanus' *Isagoge in musicen* printed by Froben in May-June 1516.⁴ The first page of text (folio a3 recto) has metalcut side-borders by Jacob Faber after Hans Holbein, 'Two Satyrs trumpeting' (134 × 116 mm) and 'Nude men attacking satyrs' (134 × 270 mm), used in conjunction with the famous 'Venus and Cupid' border by Hans Franck.⁵ On the sub-title (folio Ee1 recto) is Urs Graf's signed border 'Fool and a Satyr on columns' (168 × 106 mm), first used in Erasmus's *Moriae Encomium* printed by Froben in March 1515.⁶ The author's dedicatory letter to Nicolas Bérault (folio a1 verso) and Froben's device (folio ff4 verso) are enclosed by strips of ornament, one block signed by Jacob Faber. The printer's device is a version designed by Ambrosius Holbein and signed by the blockcutter CB, first employed in May 1517.⁷

Only four copies are traced by the writer in North American libraries, of which two are imperfect

- Cambridge, Harvard University, Houghton Library, *NC5 Er153C 1522 • New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, BEIN Gr11 g522 (imperfect: Parabolae lacking) • Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois Library, IUA04555 • Washington, DC, Folger Library, 220-608q (imperfect: Parabolae lacking)

REFERENCES British Museum, *Short-title catalogue of German books* (London 1962), p.275; Irmgard Bezzel, *Erasmusdrucke des 16. Jahrhunderts in Bayerischen Bibliotheken. Ein bibliographisches Verzeichnis* (Stuttgart 1979), no. 599; *Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachbereich erschienenen Drucke des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart 1986), E-2505 (repeated as E-3250); Lawrence D. Green and James J. Murphy, *Renaissance Rhetoric Short Title Catalogue, 1460-1700* (Aldershot 2006), p.183 no. 1532

³ Printed in an appendix to *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi, v5* (Amsterdam 1975), pp.322-327; cf. Roger A.B. Mynors in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 23 (Toronto 1978), pp.126-127.

⁴ F.W.H. Hollstein, *German etchings, engravings & woodcuts 1400-1700* (Roosendaal 1988), XIV, p.153 no. 10; Christian Müller, *Hans Holbein d.J.: Die Druckgraphik im Kupferstichkabinett Basel* (Basel 1997), p.240 no. 11.

⁵ Hollstein, *op. cit.*, XIV, p.199 nos.24a-b. The large metalcut initial (46 × 46 mm) is by Holbein; see Müller, *op. cit.*, p.314 no. 133 (alphabet reproduced pp.201-202).

⁶ Hollstein, *op. cit.* (Amsterdam 1977), XI, p.154 no. 319; Frank Hieronymus, *Oberrheinische Buchillustration, 2: Basler Buchillustration 1500-1545*, catalogue of an exhibition held in Universitätsbibliothek Basel (Basel 1984), no. 171.

⁷ Hollstein, *op. cit.*, XIV, p.22 no. 4.