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## 'A Life Locked by Ink' or Variations on a Theme – The Youth of Erasmus of Rotterdam in His Autobiographical Letters

*The life of Erasmus is very well known to us, among others from his own autobiographical letters in quite detail.<sup>1</sup> We have three autobiographical-like texts from him in total: there is one letter from 1516, remaining in a 1529 edition, addressed to a certain Lambertus Grunnius<sup>2</sup> (Lambert Grunt), a papal scribe. There is another one from 1524, which is known as *Compendium Vitae*. Moreover, there is a third one from 1524, addressed to Gerard Geldenhauer.<sup>3</sup> This paper is about the first one from 1516 and the second one, titled *Compendium Vitae* in four main parts: the first part is a brief argument about Erasmus' autobiographical letters in general. The second part is about the parentage of Erasmus, and the third one is about Erasmus' brother and their relationship according to Erasmus' own description. Last but not least the final part contains some conclusions drawn from the comparison of the autobiographical texts with each other.*

**Keywords:** Erasmus of Rotterdam, 16<sup>th</sup> century, autobiography, letter, neo-latin literature

<sup>1</sup> The most important monographies about the life of Erasmus: JORTIN (1808), SMITH (1923), MANN PHILLIPS (1949), HUIZINGA (1957), BAINTON (1969), TRACY (1972), MARKIS (1976), AUGUSTIJN (1991), TRACY (1996), RUMMEL (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Though it's a fictional name, however it certainly covers a real person. The name 'Grunnius' was borrowed from St. Jerome by Erasmus. He mentions 'the Hog that made his last Will and Testament, of which also, even S. Jerome makes mention' in the introduction of *The Praise of Folly* too. ALLEN ed. (1913: 3). Cf. ...nescio quis Grunnii Corocottae porcelli testamentum cuius et diuus meminit Hieronymus.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Geldenhauer (1482–10 January 1542) was a dutch historian and protestant reformer. He was born at Nijmegen. Between 1515 entered the service of the future Charles V and attached to Philip of Burgundy. He soon began symphatising with the ideas of Reformation, and after the death of Philip in 1525 he left Antwerp and went to Wittenberg attending the lectures of Luther. On 13 November 1526 he married. In 1532 he became professor of history and theology at the University of Marburg, where he lived quietly until his death in 1542. See also BIETENHOLZ (1986: 82–84).

## 1. Erasmus' autobiographical letters

The longest and the most detailed one is the letter to Grunnius from 1516, in which there is a quite long story told by Erasmus of a young man, named Florentius, who had been forced to make his profession and enter the convent, against his will. Practically speaking, the life of Florentius is the youth of Erasmus, which is told by him again later in the *Compendium Vitae*, though in a different arrangement. He chose a kind of form that makes it possible to change the content, performing smaller alterations and refinings in the text, without being caught at lie.

The most eye-catching difference between the letter to Grunnius and the *Compendium Vitae* is that the previous one is much longer and more detailed than the latter which is, in fact, the abridged version of the letter to Grunnius, otherwise the *Compendium* agrees with it in every detail, at least at first sight. The main question: is there any relevant difference in the content between the two texts? If there is, then in what and how can we catch out this difference?

The letter to Grunnius was published in 1529 at Froben's press in Basle. It was a text made for publishing, and for the general public. The original draft was written in August of 1516 in London, and originally it was a supplement of a request addressed to pope Leo X. Erasmus was hindered by his illegitimate birth to obtain benefices and to work up in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, since he was a bastard from the worst kind: he was born out of wedlock, and furthermore as a son of a priest.<sup>4</sup> By this time, he had enough influence and fame to apply for dispensation to the pope in London through one of his best friends, Andrea Ammonio.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Erasmus wrote the original letter to Ammonio, reminding him how to present his issue to the

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<sup>4</sup> ALLEN (1910: 292).

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Ammonio (c. 1478–17 August 1517) was an Italian cleric and Latin poet. Born in Lucca, sent to England by Pope Julius II, where he became Latin secretary first to William Blount, Lord Mountjoy from 1509, then by 1511 to Henry VIII. In 1512 he received a prebend in the Cathedral of St. Stephen, Westminster, and later received a canonry at Worcester. He had been one of Erasmus' best friends in England. See also BIETENHOLZ (1985: 48–50).

pope. Ammonio sent the letter to the pope with the help of Silvestro Gigli,<sup>6</sup> the Bishop of Worcester in September. After Erasmus' request got positive feedback, they sent a draft about the dispensation, to which Erasmus made further remarks, and they wrote the final version of the document according to his remarks, then sent him in March of 1517.<sup>7</sup> Though he already received a dispensation from pope Julius II in 1506, this document exempted him only from wearing the monastic clothes, and it was valid only in Italy. The letter written in 1516 basically was not an official document, it was not submitted as a request, but made as a justification for the request, aiming to confirm and widen his privileges, obtained earlier. He does not mention his illegitimate birth in the published letter.<sup>8</sup> He emphasizes the wearing of clothes and the obligations attached to the profession, as well as their moral, psychic and physical effects to criticize the contemporary institutional practice of monasticism.

After all, he had been campaigning with the criticism of monasticism for his own dispensation and he reached his goal. All this makes clear what influence he had, and what could he afford, even against the pope.<sup>9</sup> He embedded his message in a very carefully constructed narrative and presented it via his own life story in a plain and entertaining form, not without every didacticism. Taking everything into account, the letter to Grunnius' main object was to obtain the papal dispensation which is the returning leitmotif of the whole text: the detailed and elaborated telling of his youth, of his harms, and of the relationship with his brother serves the same goal: to support his dispensation.

The *Compendium Vitae* unlike the letter to Grunnius, specifically was written as an autobiography. It was published for the first time by Paul Merula, professor of the University of Leiden in 1607, titled *Vita Des. Erasmi Roterdami*

<sup>6</sup> Silvestro de' Gigli (1463–18 April 1521) born in Lucca. He was the ambassador of Henry VII in Rome, and from 1497 the Bishop of Worcester. See also BIETENHOLZ (1986: 97–98).

<sup>7</sup> MYNORS–THOMSON (1977: 6–7).

<sup>8</sup> This fact was either in the original draft, or was presented to the pope just orally.

<sup>9</sup> We don't know what was said presenting the request in words of course. Erasmus was very careful as was his custom, securing himself from all sides: he is indirect and circumstantial, says nothing, yet at the same time makes typically very clear allusions.

*ex ipsius manu fideliter repraesentata*. This text was also originally a supplement for another letter, sent to Conradus Goclenius,<sup>10</sup> one of Erasmus' friends on April 12 of 1524 from Basle, on the very purpose to have a guideline for his biographers in case of his death.<sup>11</sup> At the writing of the *Compendium Vitae* Erasmus was almost sixty years old, therefore he was old enough to write a reminiscence like this, before he died.<sup>12</sup> Actually the *Compendium Vitae* is none other, than the extracted, abridged version of the letter to Grunnius, however it also contains several parts from the *Spongia*<sup>13</sup> and the *Catalogus Lucubrationum*,<sup>14</sup> almost word for word.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the *Compendium Vitae* completes the letter to Grunnius, containing precise and accurate data about Erasmus' parentage, about the story of his parents, about the details of his birth (floating the fact of his illegitimate birth) and about his youth. The *Compendium Vitae* tells his life until 1516, when he settles down in Brabant. At the end of the letter, there is a brief characterization of him, and after that, the text turns into a postscript of the letter to which it was attached.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. The parentage of Erasmus

In the beginning of the *Compendium Vitae* he tells about his birth in detail. The story about the relationship of his father, Gerard, and his mother, Margaret, is fictional, and with a little exaggeration it could be an antique love-story

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<sup>10</sup> Conrad Goclenius (or in German 'Conrad Wackers' or 'Conrad Gockelen') was a Renaissance humanist, and Latin scholar. He was one of the closest confidant of Erasmus. He was born in Mengerlinghausen in 1490. When he was young he attended the school of Alexander Hegius von Heek in Deventer. In November 1510 he enrolled at the University of Cologne, then later moved on to the University of Leuven. His pedagogical methods were greatly esteemed by Erasmus, recommending them to Thomas More too. Erasmus addressed him the *Compendium Vitae*, his autobiography in 1524. He died on January 25, 1539, three years later after the death of Erasmus. See also BIETENHOLZ (1986: 109–111).

<sup>11</sup> ALLEN (1906: 575).

<sup>12</sup> RUMMEL (2004: 2).

<sup>13</sup> *Spongia Erasmi aduersus aspergines Hutteni*, Basileae per Io. Frobenium, 1523.

<sup>14</sup> *Catalogus omnium Erasmi lucubrationum*, Basileae: In aedibus Ioannis Frobenii, 1523. Its sending is also mentioned in the postscript of the *Compendium Vitae*: *Augebo catalogum operum meorum; ex hoc quoque multa colligentur*. ALLEN (1906: 52).

<sup>15</sup> ALLEN (1906: 575–576).

<sup>16</sup> ALLEN (1906: 575).

or a neo-latin short story: the lovers had been torn apart from each other unfairly by various intrigues in such a way, that they never can be together more, since the man became a priest, before he could have married the girl. Otherwise, when Erasmus writes this episode, he depicts his father basically as a positive and likable person.

Gerard betook himself to Rome. There he earned a sufficient livelihood by writing, printing not being then in use. His handwriting was very fine. And he lived after the fashion of youth. After a time he applied his mind to honourable studies. He was well versed in Latin and Greek. He was also no ordinary proficient in Jurisprudence. [...] He attended to lectures of Guarino. He had made copies of all the authors with his own hand. When his parents were informed that he was in Rome, they wrote to him that the young woman whom he had wished to marry was dead. He, taking this to be true, was so grieved that he became a priest and applied his whole mind to religion. When he returned home, he found out the deception; but she never afterwards had any wish to marry, nor did he ever touch her again.<sup>17</sup>

Here though Erasmus fakes a little, since actually his father had already been a priest, when his brother and he were born: his brother, Peter was older than him by three years or so. Therefore, both of them had illegitimate birth. In addition, it was a serious disaster at that time, they had to live their whole life with this indelible stigma. It caused serious problems not only morally, but pecuniary. Erasmus has always been annoyed by this fact. He suffered because of this his whole life making desperate efforts to get rid of this defect.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1901: 6–7). *Gerardus Romam se contulit. Illic scribendo, nam tum nondum erat ars typographorum rem affatim paravit. Erat autem manu felicissima. Et vixit iuveniliter. Mox applicuit animum ad honesta studia. Graece et Latine pulchre calluit. Quin et in iuris peritia non vulgariter profecerat. [...] Audiuit Guarinum. Omnes auctores sua manu descripserat. Parentes, ubi resciscunt eum esse Romae, scripserunt illi puellam, cuius matrimonium ambierat, esse vita defunctam. Id ille credens prae moerore factus est presbyter, totumque animum ad religionem applicuit. Reversus domum comperit fraudem. Nec illa tamen unquam post voluit nubere, nec ille unquam tetigit eam.* ALLEN (1906: 47–48).

His parents died early during the plague, and the two boys, being orphans, got guardians, who, according to Erasmus, intended them to be a monk from the beginning. And so it happened. Finishing the elementary school they were taken to a convent of the order of Saint Augustine. Otherwise, the monasticism and the monkhood were in Erasmus' black book, and he often gave voice to his negative opinion, also in his autobiographical letters. In the letter to Grunnius when he talks about the years spent between the walls of the convent, he doesn't hesitate initiating the reader into several bizarre details. For example, he talks about one of his fellows, who made use of Erasmus' extraordinary skills in latin language in such a way, that at night he had to give private lessons to that guy free of charge, by courtesy. In addition Erasmus, being a kind and faithful friend, who's prepared to do anything for his pal, did it without a word. In this part, Erasmus makes a remark: '[Erasmus] with all the sincerity of his character, loved Cantelius [sc. his fellow] with a childish and passionate love, [...] as boys of that age often conceive a violent affection for some of their schoolfellows. He did not yet know men's characters, but judged others by himself...'<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Erasmus' brother and their relationship

In the letter to Grunnius, Erasmus uses pseudonyms: he introduces himself under the name of Florentius, while his brother, Peter under the name of Antonius. After their guardians wasted the boys' inheritance, they wanted to dedicate them to God as monks, but the young Erasmus opposed it tooth and nail from the beginning. Therefore, he discussed with his brother, Peter, with whom he had been in a close and sincere relationship for long, that they must scrape together the rest of their money and then go to the University. His brother consents to it. The guardians won't even hear of it of course, so they scold and spank the little Erasmus a lot for his insolence.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1904: 351). *Amabat [Erasmus] pro nature suae candore Cantelium puerili vehementique affectu [...], ut fere solet ea aetas fervidos amores in sodales quosdam concipere. Nondum enim noverat mortalium ingenia, sed ex suo animo aestimabat omnes.* ALLEN (1910: 301).

However, his brother, Peter saves his skin, moreover ‘his story has a fine ending,’<sup>19</sup> for he submits to the yoke of the guardians<sup>20</sup> without a word. This is the very moment, when Erasmus calls Peter a traitor, calls him Judas in his autobiography. In this scene Erasmus takes the opportunity to depict a very expressive picture about his own and his brother’s character as well as their appearance. He displays his own self like this:

Florentius, like most of those who are born for literature, was unskilful and careless in ordinary buisness. Upon such subjects his simplicity was marvellous [...]. The vigour of his mind was shown only in study [...] having been a student from his early infancy.<sup>21</sup>

[...] His health has always been delicate, and consequently he has been much subject to fever. [...] His character was simple, and so averse to lying, that even as a child he hated any boys that had that habit, and in his old age the very sight of such persons caused him a shudder.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast he writes this about his brother:

As he was inert in mind, so he was robust of body, attentive to buisness and in that respect sharp and cunning, thievish in money matters, a brave tippler and an arrant rake, in fine so unlike his brother, that you might suppose him a changeling. For indeed to him, he was never anything but his evil genius.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1904: 347). *Atque illi quidem pulchre cessit res.* ALLEN (1910: 298).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ALLEN (1910: 298). *...perfidus ille prodito fratre accepit iugum...*

<sup>21</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1904: 348). *Erat Florentius, ut fere solent nati litteris, rerum communium et imperitus et negligens, atque in his mira simplicitas; [...] nec alibi quam in studiis valebat ingenium [...] ab infantiae crepundiis versatus in scholis.* ALLEN (1910: 299).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1904: 11–12.). *Valetudo semper fuit tenera; unde crebro tentabatur febribus. [...] Ingenium erat simplex; adeo abhorrens a mendacio, ut puellus etiam odisset pueros mentientes et senex ad illorum aspectum etiam corpore commoveretur.* ALLEN (1906: 51).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1904: 347). *Erat enim, ut ingenio tardus, ita corpore robustus, attentus ad rem, ibi vafer et callidus, pecuniarum furax, strenuus compotor, nec scortator ignavus; in summa, adeo minori dissimilis, ut supposititius videri posset. Nec enim unquam aliud fuit germano quam malus*

They are totally different from each other both in character and in appearance. This is how Erasmus writes about his brother in the letter to Grunnius. If we take a glance at the *Compendium Vitae*, we shall see in that letter, he takes a mention about him no more than once, only alluding to him with one sentence: 'A partner he had, who betrayed his friend.'<sup>24</sup> That's all. He completely ignores his existence. However, the two autobiographies basically do not contradict each other. The places, the dates and the main events are all in consonance. Now then, why did this character assassination of his brother? There were practical and emotional causes.

As we could see, both of them had illegitimate birth, that was their stigma suffering through their whole lives. In addition, Erasmus was greatly annoyed by this issue, therefore he left no stone unturned to erase this shameful stain of his past, or at least refine it. When he does not mention his brother in the *Compendium Vitae*, he redefines the relationship of his parents at the same time, since, according to him, his father had not been a consecrated priest, when Erasmus was born, and all the things he says about him are positive. He must save his father first to save himself. Though, pope Julius II made him free in a specific diploma from every canonical restriction he had been suffered because of his illegitimate birth, his brother did not receive these privileges, so through him, Erasmus' connection with his darkest chapter of his past remained, of which he tried to get rid in his whole life. Therefore, his brother's existence was uncomfortable and shameful in his eyes. It is not a coincidence, that in the letter to Grunnius his opinion is so negative of him, and there is not a good thing he can mention about his brother: it seems like he tries to convey the impression, that they are so different from each other, like if they are actually not real brothers. This is exactly the point of the whole character assassination he's doing in the letter to Grunnius. He is the one who draws the final conclusion, namely that they are not brothers by blood, since that is impossible. Although we do not know exactly when Peter died, in 1524 he probably had passed. Erasmus alludes to a loss of a brother which had not affected him speaking of Johannes

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genius. ALLEN (1910: 298).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1901: 9). *Habebat sodalem qui prodidit amicum*. ALLEN (1906: 49).



Froben<sup>25</sup> death in 1527. In any case this fact made it easier for him to cover up the last tracks of his brother, and to fully remove him from his life.

#### 4. Conclusions

The main question is what were the goals of Erasmus with these autobiographies? On the one hand, there was a practical, representative function: it was a kind of self-promotion, by which he supported his own self, as well as constructed his own image. Erasmus was extremely careful in his entire life, how to define himself through his texts, and consciously crafted his own portrait fitting for his own ideas. This kind of attitude of his can be found not just in his autobiographies, but in his entire oeuvre. He consciously formed not only his texts, but also his own self-portrait, realizing and using those new opportunities that were offered by the new technology of the 16<sup>th</sup> century getting more and more popular as a medium, the printing. To be an essential scholar and intellectual icon of the era, also has a huge part of it himself: he spared no effort in self-promotion.<sup>26</sup> He did this not only in the world of texts, but visually. Though he has always been unsatisfied with his own appearance, in the *Compendium Vitae* for example he makes a remark characterizing himself, that 'his friends had great difficulty in extorting from him his consent to be painted.'<sup>27</sup> However, in comparison there are several portraits, pictures and engravings of him both from his younger and from his older years. Though it was also an important part of his self-representation. Nobody saw him in person, still everybody knew what looks like.<sup>28</sup> By this, he has been developing the book into a 'multimedia tool.' On the other hand, it was self-justification. Namely just because he has illegitimate birth, he can be as good as others, moreover even better, so he is entitled to do all the

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<sup>25</sup> Froben was Erasmus' publisher and one of his closest friend. On the relationship of Froben with Erasmus see also in details SEBASTIANI (2018).

<sup>26</sup> JARDINE (1993: 5).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. NICHOLS (1901: 12). ...*vixque extortum est amicorum precibus ut se pingi pateretur*. ALLEN (1906: 51).

<sup>28</sup> JARDINE (1993: 5).

things that everyone else can do, that he had lost in the very moment of his birth. Because of a defect, in what he is innocent.

As an author he combined in himself the figure of the fathers of the church and the ancient Greek and Roman citizen by the Latin language and becoming their contemporary, modern-day representative he embodied and animated the past. He constantly shaped his texts, as well as his own character, and these were in permanent interaction with the outside world: sometimes he extended them, sometimes he abridged, if something was successful, he reissued it revised, refreshing its content, according to the current circumstances, keeping the printed text alive in this way, and did not let them to fall out from the common knowledge.<sup>29</sup> His own self-representation<sup>30</sup> was so successful, so that the radiance made by him overshadowed even his own oeuvre in the end. Shimon Markish remarks aptly in this context, that the writer's only true biography is the oeuvre itself, 'though exactly the oeuvre that is unknown to the reader about Erasmus.'<sup>31</sup>

All in all, Erasmus' autobiographical letters are carefully constructed narratives: although, he often conceals and obscures facts, but only when he feels it necessary, and only in the justified measure. We see what he wants, in such a context, that fits for him, working with very sophisticated methods. The fiction and reality mingle each other in these letters, and all of this happening in a very well-balanced form: the fictional elements serve exactly to emphasize the reality even more. That is why he uses pseudonyms, like Florentius and Antonius. However, these have also a meaning: with the name Florentius, which is from the latin word *florens*,<sup>32</sup> he alludes to the antique Roman culture, and defines himself as the most significant representative and successor of the classical Latin language in the modern era. The man of *Bonae Litterae*<sup>33</sup> who will restore Latin to its rightful place. Meanwhile, with the

<sup>29</sup> JARDINE (1993: 26).

<sup>30</sup> On the humanists conscious self-representation see also GREENBLATT (1980); JARDINE (1993); ENENKEL (2008).

<sup>31</sup> MARKIS (1976: 6).

<sup>32</sup> The meaning of the latin adjective *florens*: blooming, in bloom, flowering; flowery, bright, shining; flourishing, prosperous.

<sup>33</sup> The phrase of *Bonae Litterae* is actually untranslatable, it includes the whole classical lite-

name Antonius he alludes to Marcus Antonius, as the traitor of Rome, which intends to start flourishing again after the civil war. When Erasmus calls Antonius Judas, who betrayed Christ, and indirectly the Church, which is the successor of the Roman Empire, he makes a double allusion, and successfully connects antiquity and christianity with each other as a christian humanist.

Therefore, these letters are a kind of an official autobiography, which he wanted to publish for a wider audience from the beginning. That is why he paid attention to these documents being informative and at the same time entertaining and in literary sophisticated readings. In addition, to avoid self-serving he also filled these texts with pedagogical contents.

The early life of Erasmus until 1488<sup>34</sup>

28 October 1466. <sup>35</sup>	Born in Rotterdam.
1473.	School in Gouda.
1478–1484.	Studies in Deventer.
April 1484.	Erasmus meets with Rudolph Agricola.
1484–1487.	Erasmus in 's-Hertogenbosch with his brother.
spring 1487.	Enters the convent of Steyn.
November 1488.	Makes his profession.

The life of Erasmus of Rotterdam is well known to us from his autobiographical-letters. In one of these letters from 1516 addressed to a certain Lambertus Grunnius, he depicts a very contrasting portrait of himself and of the relationship with his older brother, Peter. However in his two later letters he doesn't mention his brother with a word, which raises interesting questions, especially in the reflection of the first letter, among others, that is why and

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ature, science and culture, and as a kind of a higher erudition it was set against the medieval thinking.

<sup>34</sup> ALLEN (1906: 584) and VREDELVELD (1993: 803).

<sup>35</sup> To Erasmus' age and date of birth see the detailed study of Harry VREDELVELD from 1993, in which he systematically examines all of the places of the erasmian legacy, where Erasmus talks about his age or alludes to it. According to his investigations he dates the birth of Erasmus to 1466.

how he tried to erase the brother's tracks from his life in a philological sense. This paper is trying to find an answer to the reasons for removing him, and why did Erasmus ignore him on purpose and what was the method used to get rid of his brother philologically once and for all?

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