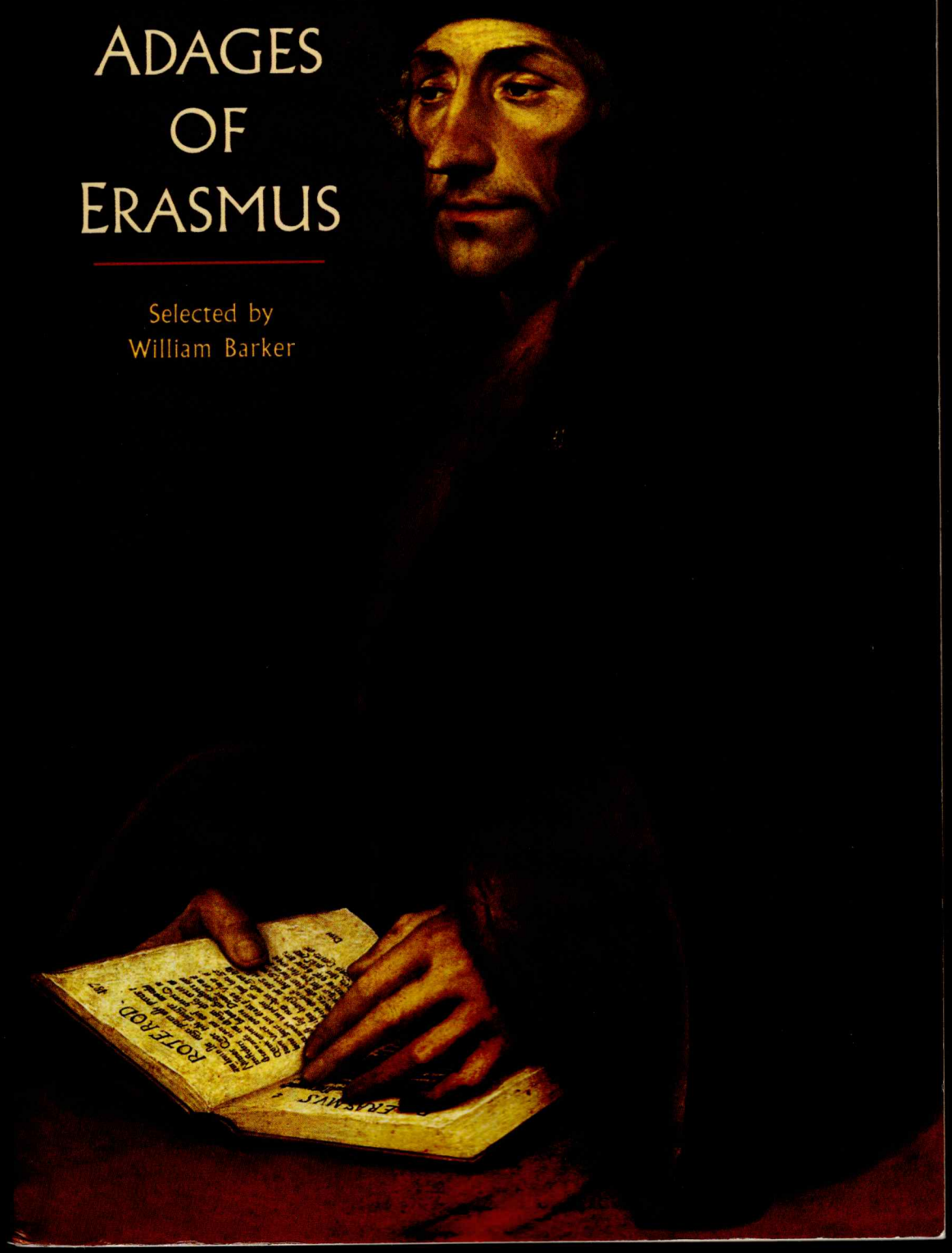
THE ADAGES OF ERASMUS

Selected by
William Barker



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Erasmus' *Adages* is a collection of 4151 ancient proverbs, each accompanied by a commentary explaining its history and possible uses. Though most of these commentaries are very short, some just a few lines of scholarly explication, others are lengthy essays on social and political topics. The most famous of these is 'War is sweet to those who have not tried it,' a major anti-war tract. Many of the proverbs have passed into modern usage ('Know thyself,' 'To give someone the finger,' 'Well begun is half done'), some even retaining their Latin form (*Deus ex machina*). And a few, as it turns out, were created by Erasmus himself through occasional misinterpretations of the ancient sources ('Pandora's box,' 'To call a spade a spade'). The massive compendium, characterized by wit, elegance, seriousness, and occasional bursts of satire, was among the most learned and widely circulated of Latin books during the early modern period. This annotated selection of 116 proverbs, which includes all the longer essays, is based on the translation in the Collected Works of Erasmus.

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Editor's Introduction

When I look at that Iliad ... of elegance in Greek and Latin that [Erasmus] calls his *Proverbs*, I seem to see Minerva's own arsenal of language.

Guillaume Budé to Cuthbert Tunstall, May 1517 (Ep 583:221–2)[1]

The *Adages* is an extraordinary work of Renaissance erudition. Into this vast compilation Erasmus gathers Greek and Latin sources for thousands of such proverbs as 'To have one foot in the grave' (II i 52), 'To be in the same boat' (II i 10), or 'To put the cart before the horse' (I vii 28*).[2] He often analyses how these proverbs might be used in a good Latin style. Most entries are quite short. Now and then, though, he expands his commentary beyond the merely philological, and writes lengthy and elaborately crafted essays on morality and religion. These essays, some of them long enough to merit separate publication, began as notes on such proverbs as 'Hasten slowly' (II i 1*), 'The Sileni of Alcibiades' (III iii 1*), or 'War is sweet to those who have not tried it' (IV i 1*).

Though dictionaries and collections of word lore are popular, a massive compilation of Greek and Latin proverbs would not today attract much of an audience outside of specialists or amateurs of the history of language. But in the early sixteenth century, when good Latin style had a social importance and could actually get you a job, the *Adages* became a best-seller and received accolades from many readers. In 1517, for instance, Niccolò Sagundino, a Venetian ambassadorial secretary, wrote to Erasmus: 'I can hardly say what nectar sweet as honey I sip from your most delightful [*Adages*], rich source of nectar as they are, what lovely flowers of every mind I gather thence like a honey-bee, carrying them off to my hive and building them into the fabric of what I write. To their perusal I have devoted two hours

a day' (Ep 590:45–9). There are other such compliments written directly to Erasmus (who would have immediately recognized the topos of the honeybee from Seneca's *Moral Epistles* 84). And, even greater testimony, there are still extant many copies of editions published in his own time, well thumbed and annotated by assiduous early readers.

As an expression of the Renaissance love of antiquity and as a work of instruction and reference, the *Adages* is unsurpassed in its sweep. It showed what an individual reader could accomplish in reading almost all extant classical literature. Even with its occasional carelessness (for Erasmus, though obsessed with accuracy, was a quick worker who sometimes was not inclined to verify his references until *after* publication – 'who does not slip up sometimes?' he asks in III i 1*), it was a demonstration of inspired scholarship. The longer essays, full of asides about both the past and the present, demonstrate an eccentricity that works against what we would today recognize as the 'objectivity' of the reference book; yet this same eccentricity gives us the voice of the author, a stylistic signature, hence its interest as a literary work to Erasmus' contemporaries and to us as well. There is a close relationship between the *Adages* and Erasmus' other widely known works, from the *Praise of Folly* to the *Colloquies*, his lively and widely published correspondence, even his writings in religion that lie at the centre of his project as a thinker. A renewed sense of language and its history informs all of Erasmus' writings, and his works are marked not only by challenging ideas, but by a confidence in the power of rhetoric and stylistic invention.

Erasmus and His *Adages*

What was to become so massive first appeared in 1500 as a modest 152-page book called *Adagiorum collectanea*, or *Collection of Adages*. Erasmus was in his early thirties (31 or 34, depending on which year of birth one accepts) and not yet a religious controversialist, still hard at work in his studies and reading through the classics. He had just acquired some proficiency in Greek, and was perfecting his deft style in Latin prose. Though none of his notebooks survives, it seems pretty clear that for part of his training he was following the practice of collecting

interesting phrases in a notebook in order to use them later in his rich and highly allusive style.

Like most of his writings, the *Adages* grew out of immediate personal circumstances. Twenty-four years later, in an autobiographical letter, he described the genesis of the book:

> when I considered the important contribution made to elegance and richness of style by brilliant aphorisms, apt metaphors, proverbs, and similar figures of speech, I made up my mind to collect the largest possible supply of such things from approved authors of every sort and arrange them each in its appropriate class, to make them more accessible to those who wish to practise composition with a view to securing a rich and ready diction. (Ep 1341A:576–82)

The book originated, he goes on to say, from a strange event. He had been staying in England, and before he left he had been given a gift of money by his youthful patron, Lord Mountjoy. But on arrival at the port of departure, to his astonishment, most of this money was confiscated by the customs officials, it being illegal to export English currency. When he arrived in Paris he was broke and unwell, and furthermore was worried that his patron, who had misinformed him about his right to export the gift, would think that Erasmus was now angry with him.

> I decided to publish something forthwith. Having nothing ready at hand, I accumulated at random from a few days' reading some sort of a collection of adages, guessing that this book, such as it was, might find a welcome among those who wish to learn, at least for its utility. This I used as evidence that my friendship had not grown cold. (ibid:603–8)

The result was quickly composed (Erasmus says he dictated from his sickbed), with a full and generous dedication to Mountjoy that was intended to maintain the relation of patronage. The book came out in Paris from the workshop of the German printer Johann Philippi as the *Collectanea*, the full title reading *A Collection of Paroemiae or Adages, Old and Most Celebrated, Made by Desyderius Herasmus Roterodamus, a Work Both New and Wonderfully Useful for Conferring Beauty and Distinction on*

All Kinds of Speech and Writing. At the beginning of the book was the letter to the young Lord Mountjoy, and at the end were added a poem on the virtue of the English king Henry VII and a letter to the young prince Henry (thus emphatically situating the work in the context of English patronage).

There were 818 unnumbered proverbs in this first edition of the *Collectanea*. They were gathered from Virgil, Terence, Cicero, the two Plinys, Quintilian, Jerome, Augustine, and others, altogether several dozen authors. Noteworthy were 154 proverbs with Greek citations, based on Erasmus' recent reading of a Greek proverb collection under the name of Diogenianus (it was actually medieval, and had been falsely attributed to a grammarian of the time of the Emperor Hadrian). Erasmus' discussion of each proverb was short, with little supporting analysis or discussion. A typical entry, *Herculei labores*, reads simply

> **The Labours of Hercules**
> Thus those labours are proverbially described, which are useful to others but bring nothing but envy to the doer.[3]

In later editions the notes grew with added citations and with commentary. This tiny note was to become a long essay (III i 1*), a labour of Hercules itself, about Erasmus' own labour in collecting and preparing the *Adages*, and about the ingratitude and envy of certain of Erasmus' readers.

The *Collectanea* was well received. Humanist education as it had been developed in Italy in the fifteenth century placed a great premium on gathering and ordering phrases for literary style. It was not enough to have the lexicon; students also needed a better sense of idiom, of turns of phrase. Proverbs (as we'll see below) were an important source of verbal authority, and so Erasmus had identified a great need. Though he liked to claim to be the first, he was not the originator of the humanist proverb collection. Polydore Vergil (Polidoro Virgilio), an Italian scholar who later moved to England, had published his *Proverbiorum libellus* (Little Book of Proverbs) in 1498. Nevertheless, with the expanded editions and epitomes of the *Adages*, Erasmus became known as the first collector of proverbs. In

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correspondence with Polydore, whose proverb book he later helped get republished (Ep 1606), he reluctantly acknowledged that the Italian had published before him, yet he still maintained he had come to the *Adages* on his own (a claim that later scholarship supports). Their little conflict shows the importance of priority in the competitive world of humanist scholarship. Ironically, neither disputant ever mentions his prior models in the many medieval florilegia or in the late-classical or medieval Greek collections by Johannes Stobaeus, Diogenianus, Zenobius, and Suidas (a name traditionally but incorrectly given to the anonymous compiler of the *Suda* or *Fortress*, a massive Greek lexicon compiled in the late tenth century), or the large mid-fifteenth-century collection of *sententiae* (or sayings) by Michael Apostolius, even though Erasmus relied heavily on these works, especially when they began to come his way in 1508 and later.[4]

A continuing dissatisfaction with his own work sets Erasmus apart from the run-of-the-mill scholar. Throughout his life he constantly revised, corrected, and expanded in all areas of his writing and research. Five years after its publication, he wrote to John Colet (Ep 181:90–5) that he regretted his 'poor and meagre' *Collectanea*, for in it there were too many printers' errors and he had not by that time read sufficiently in the Greek authors. In the years following the edition of 1500, while he prepared his other works, he gathered citations for a vastly expanded text.

The new *Adages* came to press in 1508, during his first visit to Italy. Immediately on his arrival in Venice, Erasmus attached himself to the household of Aldo Manuzio, already the most famous printer of his age. Aldus, as he is called by his neo-Latin name, had begun printing in the late 1490s. His prestige came from his skill as a printer, exemplified by the beautiful *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Francesco Colonna's *Poliphilus' Strife of Love in a Dream*, published in 1499) and by the (for then) wonderfully compact editions of the classics, produced during the first decade of the 1500s.

In a supportive workplace, surrounded by books and other scholars, Erasmus plunged into the new edition, now to be called the *Adagiorum chiliades*, or *Thousands of Adages*. Erasmus' labours during the months of production in Venice are described in another of the long essays, 'Hasten slowly' (II i 1*). Aldus had already taken as his printer's mark

the ancient symbol of the dolphin and anchor, traditionally associated with the proverb that appeared in Greek as Σπεῦδε βραδέως and Latin as *Festina lente*. The proverb was an occasion for Erasmus to write a lengthy tribute, placed quite notably at the beginning of the second thousand of the *Adages*. There he explains the great advantage of working with the famous Aldus:

> When I, a Dutchman, was in Italy, preparing to publish my book of *Proverbs*, all the learned men there had offered me unsought authors not yet published in print ... Aldus had nothing in his treasure-house that he did not share with me ... I was bringing nothing to Venice with me except the confused and unsorted materials for a book that was to be, and that material was confined to published authors. With the greatest temerity on my part, we both set to work together, I to write and Aldus to print. The whole business was finished inside nine months more or less, and all the time I was coping with an attack of the stone, a trouble in which as yet I had no experience. Just consider what advantages I should have lost, had not scholars supplied me with texts in manuscript. Among them were Plato's works in Greek, Plutarch's *Lives* and also his *Moralia* ... the *Doctors at Dinner* of Athenaeus, Aphthonius, Hermogenes with notes ... (II i 1*)

Aldus' example is set as a rebuke to unnamed scholars and printers of northern Europe who, in their ignorance, are unwilling to share. Indeed, Erasmus takes pains to show how the spirit of generosity can enrich the giver: 'Aldus, making haste slowly, has acquired as much gold as he has reputation, and richly deserves both.'

The 1508 *Adagiorum chiliades* is a new work. The earlier *Collectanea* was meant for the practical stylist, a fairly compact book that could fit in a large jacket pocket, and it continued to be revised and reprinted even after this time. The Venice edition is very different, a three-inch-thick folio, richly printed on heavy paper with ample margins. The new edition offered far more than its predecessor: elaborate histories of proverbs, now 3260 of them, sometimes with close philological discussion of sources, comparative analyses of the way a proverb is used in one author then another, interspersed throughout with witty comments on the state of scholarship and literary composition in the Latin culture of the time. It also includes an important new essay at the

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beginning of the work, analysing the nature of the proverb (Erasmus' introduction*). In this new text there is far more Greek, but now the Greek is consistently translated for the convenience of Latin readers, the translations actually imitating the verse metres of the originals wherever possible. Though Erasmus was later criticized for the translations, they were now a major feature of the *Adages*, and signalled his desire to reach more than the specialist reader. The two indexes are another important feature, the first listing the adages alphabetically, the second giving them under topical headings (*Liberalitas*, *Tenacitas*, *Profusio*, *Rapacitas*, and so on). As the work shows only a minimal internal organization, these indexes must have been very helpful for writers, and remained a standard feature in all the later full-text editions. Curiously, it was only after Erasmus' death that the editions began to include more detailed indexes by keyword and subject – from our modern perspective, essential aspects of a book like this.

Even though 1508 was an expansion, many proverbs – the majority – were still in the short form familiar from the *Collectanea*. For instance,

> **War is sweet to those who haven't tried it**
> Γλυκὺς ἀπείρῳ πόλεμος, War is sweet to those who haven't tried it. To care for dangers freely warns those who are inexperienced in things. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* gives the reason why youth is bolder and old age is more cautious, because to the former inexperience of things gives them confidence. To the latter, the experience of evils gives them fear.[5]

This tiny note is typical of hundreds of entries. Yet unlike many others, this one was to grow enormously in the edition of 1515, long enough to be often republished as a separate pamphlet, one of Erasmus' most famous works (IV i 1*).

Even though many of the adages were fairly short, they were nonetheless longer than they had been in the *Collectanea*. For instance, contrast the following:

> **Twice cooked cabbage is death (1500)**
> In Pliny, *crambe* belongs to the genus of the plant *brassica*. Suidas writes that it used to be served at banquets, mainly because it prevents drunkenness, but when recooked it brings on such nausea that it became

III i 60
Vestis virum facit / Clothes make the man

This is an interesting back-formation of a Greek proverb by Erasmus. It is actually a medieval Latin proverb (Walther 33265a, 33268a). Because of the passage in Quintilian, the proverb appeared to come from the Greek, and Erasmus translated the proverb into what seemed to be this original Greek form. This reversal was also followed by the great classical scholar J.C. Scaliger (Tosi 221; see also Otto 476). The appropriateness of one's clothing is discussed at some length in one of Erasmus' main sources, Athenaeus Doctors at Dinner *1.21c–d, but the proverb is not there and Erasmus omits this possible ancient connection in his discussion. In English as Tilley A 283.*

Εἵματα ἀνήρ, Clothes make the man. This is still a very popular and well-known saying in our own day: 'Apparel setteth out a man; / Clothe yourself as best you can.' Quintilian confirms this in book of his *Institutions*: 'To dress within the formal limits and with an air gives men, as the Greek line testifies, authority.'[1] I suppose this line which Quintilian cites to be that one in Homer, in *Odyssey* 6: 'From these things, you may be sure, men get a good report.' And a little later in the same book, the importance of care in one's dress as a means of improving one's appearance and standing is made clear enough, when he makes the maiden Nausicaa speak as follows about Ulysses: 'At first I thought his appearance was unseemly, but now he has the air of the gods who dwell in the wide heaven.' For Ulysses, who had previously been naked, is now dressed in shining garments and looks at once like a different person: 'Then went he and sat aloof on the sea-shore, a radiant figure handsome and full of grace.'

1 *Odyssey* 6.29–30, 242–3, 236–7
(cf Quintilian at 8 Proem 20)

III ii 33
Cera tractabilior / As pliable as wax

The notion of the pliable student is very old in educational writings. Erasmus plays with the images in his Declamation on the Subject of Early Liberal

Education for Children: *'As soon as it is born, a child aborbs with great ease everything that is characteristically human ... Press wax while it is softest; model clay while it is still moist; pour liquids only into a jar that has never been used before; and only use wool that has just arrived spotlessly white from the fuller's'* (CWE 26 305). *This pliability is seen in the sixteenth century as a positive quality ('Why, he's a man of wax!' says the Nurse of smoothly polished Paris in* Romeo and Juliet*). Erasmus wrote the proverb essay in 1508; the second part ('and hence the practice of using it ...' onwards) was added in two stages in 1515 and 1528. Though it was common in Greek (Suidas* K *1537) and Latin (Otto 373; Tosi 689), Mynors notes that Erasmus may also have found it in a collection of adages in an Aldine edition of Aesop (1505, col 104). Compare with* II x 42 *'A twisted branch.'*

Κηροῦ εὐπλαστότερος, As pliable as wax, was said of an exceedingly docile person, or of a lively and pliable intelligence that could be led in any direction. Horace:[1] 'Pliant as wax towards vice, but to good counsel rough.' Persius[2] in his fifth satire: 'And assumes plastic features under your hand.' Horace[3] again: 'In the moist clay will copy what you will.' It is a special property of wax to grow soft when worked in the hands, and hence the practice of using it to model various shapes. There was also a type of picture made of coloured waxes, mosaics made of pieces of stone, and various woods. Yet the unformed character of a child is more like clay than wax: it can be moulded to start with while it is still soft, but once the character is hardened, it is not easily reworked into another shape but, as Plato[4] says in book four of the *Republic*, 'There is some risk at any rate that the direction in which a man sets out from childhood will dictate all that follows.'

1 *Art of Poetry* 163
2 *Satires* 5.40
3 *Epistles* 2.2.8
4 *Republic* 4.425b

III iii 1
Sileni Alcibiadis / The Sileni of Alcibiades

This essay, very short in the edition of 1508, and radically rewritten and expanded in the edition of 1515, is one of the most important in the whole of the Adages. *The Silenus figure (ugly on the outside, beautiful when opened)*