i / What a proverb is

A proverb, according to Donatus, is 'a saying which is fitted to things and times.' Diomedeus however defines it as follows: 'A proverb is the taking over of a popular saying, fitted to things and times, when the words say one thing and mean another.' Among Greek authors various definitions are to be found. Some describe it in this way: 'A proverb is a saying useful in the conduct of life, with a certain degree of obscurity but of great value in itself.' Others define it like this: 'A proverb is a manner of speaking which wraps up in obscurity an obvious truth.' I am quite aware that several other definitions of the word proverb exist in both Latin and Greek, but I have not thought it worth while to list them all here, first because I propose as far as possible, in this work especially, to follow the advice of Horace about the brevity required of a teacher; secondly because they all tell the same tale and come back to the same point; but above all because among all these definitions there is not one to be found which covers the character and force of proverbs so as to contain nothing unnecessary and leave nothing diminished in importance.

Setting aside other things for the present, it seems that Donatus and

2 A proverb] In these definitions 'proverb' represents the Greek paroimia in Latin dress (which is much used in this introduction), and 'saying' is the Latin proverbium, which Erasmus uses normally in the Adagia when he does not use adagium. They come from two well-known sources, the Ars grammatice of Donatus 3.6 (Grammatici latini ed H. Keil, 4, Leipzig 1864, 402) and of Diomedes 2 (ibid 1, 1857, 462).

5 Greek authors] These definitions are close to those offered by the Etymologicum magnum 654.15 (ed Venice 1499) and Suidas II 733, but are not quite the same.

12 Horace] Ars poetica 335–6 'Whate'er you teach, be terse: what's brief and plain, / Your readers may learn fast, and long retain.'
Diomedes regard it as essential for any proverb to have some kind of envelope; in fact they make it into a sort of allegory. They also expect it to contain something gnomic, didactic, since they add ‘fitted to things and times.’ The Greeks too, in all their definitions, introduce either helpfulness in the conduct of life, or the outer covering of metaphor, and sometimes they join the two together. Yet you will find many observations quoted as proverbs by writers of unshakeable authority which are not hidden in metaphor, and not a few which have no bearing at all on instruction in living, and are diametrically (as they say) opposed to the nature of a sententia or aphorism. Two examples out of many will suffice. *No quid nimis,* Nothing to excess [*i 1 vi 96*], is accepted by everybody as an adage, but it is not in the least disguised. And *Quis abiet a foribus?*, Who could miss the gate? [*i vi 36*], is given the name of proverb by Aristotle, but I cannot see how it can be useful for the conduct of life. Again, not every proverb is clothed in allegory, as Quintilian makes clear when he says in the fifth book of his *institutions*: ‘Allied to this is that type of proverb which is like a short form of fable.’ This indicates clearly that there are other kinds of proverb, which do not come close to allegory. I would not deny however that the majority of adages have some kind of metaphorical disguise. I think the best of them are those which equally give pleasure by their figurative colouring and profit by the value of their ideas.

But it is one thing to praise the proverb and show which kind is best, and quite another to define exactly what it is. I myself think (pace the grammarians) that a complete definition and one suitable to our present purpose may be reached by saying: ‘A proverb is a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn.’ The logicians agree that there are three parts to a definition, and here we have them: the word ‘saying’ indicates the genus, ‘in popular use’ the *differentia* or species, and ‘remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn’ the particular characteristic.

**ii / What is the special quality of a proverb, and its limits**

There are then two things which are peculiar to the character of a proverb, common usage and novelty. This means that it must be well known and in popular currency; for this is the origin of the word *paroimia* in Greek (from *oimios*, a road, as though well polished in use and circulating), that which travels everywhere on the lips of men, and of *adagium* in Latin, as if you

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31 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 10.1 (993b5)
33 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 5.15.23; Erasmus returns to this in ii 84.
all these have given occasion for an adage. Examples of this are 'Syrians against Phoenicians' [i viii 56], *accisare* [ii 96] which means to refuse coyly what you mean to accept, 'A fox takes no bribes' [i x 58], 'Twice-served cabbage is death' [i v 56], and 'The Egyptian clematis' [i i 55].

iii / What produces novelty in a proverb

I have already mentioned novelty, and this is by no means a simple matter. For sometimes this is produced by the thing itself, as in 'Crocodile tears' [i iv 60]; sometimes the metaphor provides it, since the adage may adopt all kinds of figurative variations, which need not be followed up one by one. I will touch only on those which it most frequently assumes. Metaphor is nearly always present, but it embraces many forms. Allegory is no less frequent, though to some people this also is a kind of metaphor. An example of the first is 'Everything is in shallow water' [i i 45], of the second 'The wolf's jaws are gaping' [ii i 58]. Hyperbole is not infrequent, as in 'As bare as a snake's sloughed skin' [i i 26]. Sometimes it goes as far as a riddle which, according to Quintilian, is nothing but a more obscure allegory, as in 'The half is more than the whole' [i x 5]. Sometimes an allusion gives the proverb its attraction, as in 'Keep it up' [ii iv 28]; and 'Two heads together' [i i 51]; and 'The good or ill that's wrought in our own halls' [i vi 85]. Occasionally the dialect or idiom itself, the particular significance of a word, gives it a resemblance to a proverb, for instance 'An Ogrygian disaster' [i x 50] for an immense one. It happens sometimes that sheer ambiguity gives grace to a proverb: of this sort are 'An ox on the tongue' [i vii 18] and 'Like Mys in Pisa' [ii iii 67]. The point of this is that 'ox' means both an animal and a coin, and in the same way Mys, the Greek for 'mouse,' is the name of an animal and also of an athlete, and Pisa, the name of a town, needs only one letter added to give *pissa*, the Greek for 'pitch.' Sometimes the very novelty of an expression is what makes it into a proverb, like 'Wine speaks

iii

12 Quintilian 8.6.52
13 an allusion] The three examples given are all intended to evoke in the reader’s mind a scene from Homer.
19 An ox on the tongue] A man is silent, either because he feels suppressed by some great weight (of influence, anxiety, etc), heavy as an ox, or because he has been bribed (and the ox or bull is an early coin-type).
20 Mys in Pisa] With very little alteration in the Greek, this can mean either a mouse stuck in some pitch, or the athlete Mys, competing at Pisa where the Olympic games were held.
24 Wine speaks the truth] Literally, In wine is truth.

iv / How the proverb differs from those forms that seem to approach it closely

There are however some near neighbours to the proverb, for instance *gnōmai*, which are called by us *sententiae* or aphorisms, and *ainoi*, which among us are called fables, with the addition of *apophthegmata*, which may be translated as quick witty sayings, as well as *skōnmatēs* or facetious remarks, and in a word anything which shelters behind a kind of mask of allegory or any other figure of speech associated with proverbs. It is not difficult to distinguish these from the proverb itself, if one knows how to test them against our definition as against a measure or rule; but in order to satisfy the inexperienced as well, I am quite willing to explain more crudely and with crass mother-wit as the saying goes, so as to make it quite clear what my purpose has been in this work. In the first place, the relationship between the aphorism and the proverb is of such a nature that each can be joined to the other or again each can be separated from the other, in the same way as with 'whiteness' and 'man.' Whiteness is not ipso facto man, nor man inevitably whiteness; but there is nothing to prevent what constitutes a man being also white. Thus it not infrequently happens that an aphorism includes a proverb, but a proverb need not automatically become an aphorism or vice versa. For instance 'The miser lacks what he has as well as what he

iv

12 saying] i 37
20 for instance] The examples given are Publilius Syrus (compiler of moral maxims, each occupying a single iambic line, of uncertain date) 3, cited by Quintilian 8.5.6, and Ovid *Amores* i 15.39, which comes again in i vii 11 and iii x 96.
has not', and 'Ill-will feeds on the living but is quiet after death' are aphorisms, but not for that reason adages. On the other hand, 'I navigate in harbour' [i 46] is a proverb but not an aphorism. Again, 'Put not a sword into the hand of a child' [iv 18] partakes of the nature of both proverb and aphorism, and of allegory as well. There were those, especially among the Greeks, who willingly undertook the task of making *grammologies*, collections of aphorisms, notably Johannes Stoibæus. I would rather praise their work than imitate it.

Now to consider the rest. Aphthonius in the *Progymnasmata* calls the *aimus* simply *mythos*, a fable. It has, as he says, various secondary names, taken from the inventors: Sybarite, Cilician, Cyprian, Aesopic. Quintilian says that the Greeks call it a *logos mythikos* or apologue, 'and some Latin authors an apologue, a name which has not gained general currency.' He agrees that the fable is close to the proverb, but says that they are to be distinguished by the fact that the *aimus* is a whole story, and the proverb is shorter 'like a fable in miniature.' As an example he gives 'Not my burden: pack-saddle on the ox' [xi 89]. Hesiod used it in this way: 'Now will I tell the princes a fable, though they know it well: the hawk thus addressed the tuneful nightingale.' Archilochus and Callimachus use it in the same way, although Theocritus in the *Cynocele* seems to have used 'tale' for a proverb: 'In truth a certain tale is told: the bull went off into the wood' [i 43].

As for apothegms, they are differentiated from proverbs in the same way as aphorisms. Just as the phrase 'Who does not own himself would Samsos own' [i 82] is at the same time both an adage and an apothegm,

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27 [Joannes Stoibæus] Compiler of a valuable florilegium, about the year 300 AD, which Erasmus uses in the *Adagia*, but never saw in print. From 1520 onwards his first name was given as Nicolaus.
29 [Aphthonius] A technical writer on rhetoric, of the fourth/fifth centuries AD; *Progymnasmata* 1 (21). This was printed in the Aldine *Rhetores Graeci* of 1508. His 'secondary names' are expounded in the preface to the proverb-collection ascribed to Diogenianus.
30 [Quintilian] *Instituto oratoria* 5.11.20. The manuscripts of Quintilian give the adage which he quotes in the *form vos citellas*; both here and in i 11 84 Erasmus gives this in 1508, and in 1517 changes vos to vos. Editors of Quintilian attribute this emendation to Paris and Lyons texts of 1531.
32 [Hesiod] *Works and Days* 202–3
33 [Archilochus] A poet of the seventh century BC, frag 174 West, and Callimachus (scholar and poet of the third century BC) frag 104 6–8 Pfeiffer; both passages are quoted in the preface to the proverb-collection called Diogenianus. Erasmus adds Theocritus 14.43, where the word *aimus* is again used of a beast-fable: this he will use again in i 43.

so that remark of Simonides to someone who was silent at a banquet 'if you are a fool you are doing a wise thing, but if you are wise a foolish one,' and that well-known saying 'Caesar's wife must not only be innocent, she must be above suspicion' are apothegms but not also proverbs. Also 'You are used to sitting on two stools' [i vii 2] is both a proverb and an insult. Conversely 'My mother never, my father constantly.' That phrase of Taurianus, 'They are at the mills,' is a savage jest, but not also an adage. But there are some of this sort so aptly put that they can easily be ranked as adages, like 'I'm your friend as far as the altar' [iii 10]. Here we have brevity, aphorism and metaphor all together. I have emphasized this at somewhat too great length, so that no one may expect to find in this book anything but what falls into the category of proverbs, and to prevent anyone from thinking that an omission is the result of negligence, when I have left it on one side deliberately and on purpose. as not pertaining to the subject.

v / Proverbs are to be respected for their value

Now in case anyone should impatiently thrust aside this aspect of learning as too humble, perfectly easy and almost childish, I will explain in a few words how much respect was earned by these apparent trivialities among the Ancients; and then I will show what a sound contribution they can make, if cleverly used in appropriate places, and finally how it is by no means everyone who can make the right use of proverbs. To start with, that an

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45 [Simonides] Of Ceos, the eminent lyric poet, who flourished c500 BC, had a reputation in later centuries for winged remarks, many of them do not apocryphal; this one is from Plutarch *Moralia* 644f.
47 [Caesar's wife] The source of this is also Plutarch: *Caesar* 30.6; *Moralia* 206f, and elsewhere.
49 [an insult] Cicero had complained of close seating in the theatre: the retort suggested, not only that he was used to having more space but that he had a habit of temporizing politically between two parties.
50 [Conversely] Erasmus illustrates his point with two replies made to the Emperor Augustus, recorded by Macrobius (see i 11 21) *Saturnalia* 2.4.20 and 28 to illustrate the emperor's tolerance of such retorts. A visitor to Rome from the provinces resembled him so closely that it was thought he must be Augustus' blood-relation. 'Tell me, young man,' said the emperor; 'was your mother ever in Rome? And the man drollily threw back the imputation on his mother's chastity by replying: 'My mother never, my father constantly.' Taurianus was the owner of a band of slave musicians, whose performance pleased Augustus, but was rewarded in kind, with a gift of bread-corn, instead of in cash as usual. When he commanded another performance, the impresario replied: 'I'm sorry, sire; they're all busy grinding.'
acquaintance with adages was held to be not unimportant by the greatest
men is sufficiently proved, I think, by the fact that authors of the first
distinction have thought them a worthy subject for a number of volumes
diligently compiled. The first of these is Aristotle, so great a philosopher of
course that he alone may stand for many others. Laertius tells us that he
left one volume of Paronomai. Chrysippus also compiled two volumes on
proverbs, addressed to Zenodotus. Cleanthe wrote on the same subject. If
the works of these men were still extant, it would not have been necessary
for me to fish up some things with such labour out of these insignificant
writers, who were both careless and textually most corrupt. Some collec-
tions of proverbs are to be found under the name of Plutarch, but they are
few in number and almost bare of comment. Often cited among compilers
of proverbs, by Athenaeus in his Deipnosophist. among others, are Clearchus
of Soli, a pupil of Aristotle, and Aristides, and after them Zenodotus, who

number of volumes] More will be said on the Greek proverb-collectors in the
introductory volume of this version of the Adagia (cwr. 30).
11 Aristotel. A reference to the list of his works in Diogenes Laertius 3.26
13 Chrysippus.] Of Soli, the eminent Stoic (second half of third century BC)
compiled several books On Proverbs, of which eight fragments are collected by
incorporates six of these.
14 Cleanthe.] Another Stoic, von Arnim 1.105–99
16 Plutarch.] His name is found attached to more than one of the smaller
collections, and one was published under his name by Otto Crusius in two
Tübingen programmes of 1887 and 1895 (reprinted Hildesheim 1961); but it is
not thought that any of them are his. Erasmus gives his name to nearly fifty,
most of them in the third Chilaid.
20 Athenaeus.] His Deipnosophist. ('Doctors at Dinner') was a major source for the
Adagia, and Erasmus' own copy of the first edition, Aldus 1514, which survives
at Oxford in the Bodleian Library, is heavily annotated. The title given to it
here, which is quite unorthodox, is taken from Athenaeus 1.46, where it
belongs to a poem on gastronomy, or from Suidas 4131. For the minor collectors
mentioned by him, of whom little is known, see the relevant section of our
introductory volume (cwr. 30).
21 a pupil of Aristotle, and Aristides.] These words, and the sentence on the
proverbs of Theophrastus which follows, were inserted in 1517/8 and 1515
respectively.
21 Zenodotus.] Zenodotus seems to be the right name; Erasmus never closed his
mind to the question, and refers to it in Adagia 111 vi 88; see our introductory
volume. While awaiting a new edition of the Greek proverb collections,
without which all is dark, we use the name Zenobius, and refer by it to the
major text published by F.G. Schneidewin in the first volume of the Corpus
reduced to a compendium the proverbs of Didymus and Tarraheus. In the
brief scholia on Demosthenes' proverbs of Theophrastus are also quoted.
This makes it clear that these writers too left collections on this subject. I am
aware that this work is in circulation under the name of Zenobius. But as I
find that in the scholiast on Aristophanes there are some things attributed
to that very Zenodotus who summarized Didymus and Tarraheus which are to
be found word for word in this man's collections, I hope I shall not be blamed
if in this work I adduce him, whatever his name was (for what does it
matter?), under the name of Zenodotus. This writer refers among others to a
certain Milo as a collector of proverbs. One Daemon is also quoted, by many
others and particularly by the person who explained a number of words and
phrases in the speeches of Demosthenes; he appears to have composed
many books of proverbs, since book 40 is quoted. There are also extant the
collections of Diogenianus. Hesychius states in his preface that he has given
a fuller explanation of the proverbs which had been briefly enumerated by
Diogenianus; but the work itself seems to conflict with the prologue, since
the earlier writer claims to give a list of the authors and the subjects of the
proverbs, while the later is so brief that nothing shorter could be imagined.
From this I conjecture that this work was produced in a fuller form by the

... ... ...

Paroemographorum (Göttingen 1839). The reference to Didymus and Tarraheus
is taken by Erasmus from the Zenobius-text published by Aldus in his Aesop of
1505.
31 Daemon.] The mention of him was added to twice: 'by many others ...
Demosthenes' and 'of proverbs' were inserted in 1517/8, and 'he appears ...
has been added in 1515.
35 Diogenianus.] This means the form of the collection that passed under this name
which is printed by Schneidewin in the volume already referred to. It was the
source of almost all the Greek in the Colletier, therefore Erasmus had access to
it while he was still in Paris, and we can identify the text he used with a copy
(Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Grabe 30) which belonged to Georgius Hermo-
nymus, from whom Erasmus had Greek lessons in Paris, or with a transcript
of it (more likely the latter, as the Grabe text is in a very crabbed hand).
Hermonomy made a transcript of his Diogenianus for Guillaume Budé, which
is also in the Bodleian, ms Laud gr 7.
35 Hesychius.] Of Alexandria (fifth century AD) compiled a lexicon of rare words,
which survives in a single late manuscript, Venice Marcianus gr 52a, which was
used by Marcus Musurus as printer's copy for the Aldine edition of 1514. Here
'Hesychius ... another hand' was inserted in 1517/8. Kurt Laite discusses
Erasmus' problem on pp ix–x of the first volume of his new edition
(Copenhagen 1953–), and decides that Hesychius' copy of Diogenianus had
an abbreviated text.
Then who would dare to despise this mode of speech? When he saw that some of the oracles of the holy prophets are made of proverbs? One example of this is 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Who would not revere them as an almost holy thing, fit to express the mysteries of religion, since Christ Himself, whom we ought to imitate in all things, seems to have taken a particular delight in this way of speaking. An adage is current in Greek. 'I judge the tree by its fruit.' [Is ix 39]. In Luke we read the same thing: 'A good tree brings forth good fruit. And again, 'In Greek, Pittacus the philosopher sent an enquirer to watch boys playing with tops, so as to learn proverbial wisdom from them about taking a wife, and heard: 'Stick to your own.' [I viii 1]. Christ cites a proverb from children playing in the market-place: 'We have piped to you and you have not danced; we have mourned to you, and you have not wept.' This is very like that saying in Theognis, if one may compare sacred with profane: 'For love himself may not content us all, whether he holds rain back or lets it fall' [I vii 55].

If a motive is to be found in reverence for antiquity, there appears to be no form of teaching which is older than the proverb. In these symbols, as it were, almost all the philosophy of the Ancients was contained. What were the oracles of those wise old Sages but proverbs? They were so deeply respected in old time, that they seemed to have fallen from heaven rather than to have come from men. 'And know thyself descended from the sky' [I vi 55] says Juvenal. And so they were written on the doors of temples, as worthy of the gods; they were everywhere to be seen carved on columns and marble tablets as worthy of immortal memory. If the adage seems a tiny thing, we must remember that it has to be estimated not by its size but by its value. What man of sane mind would not prefer gems, however small, to

leat, with care, usually calls it Pandects, the title in Greek, and gives the name of the lawyer (Ulpian more often than any) whose view he is quoting. Ulpian here (Dig. 16.6.3) cites an imperial rescript on the question how far, if at all, an official is allowed to receive gifts.

63 The fathers] Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2
64 Luke [6:43]
65 Pittacus] One of the Seven Sages. The boys, as they whipped their tops, called to each other to get out of the way; the man who was looking for a wife heard this as advice to stick to his own station in life.
66 proverb] Luke 7:32
68 Juvenal] 11.27; in 1508 he was merely referred to as 'the satyrist,' but the quotation was given more fully and ascribed to him in 1523.
immense rocks? And, as Pliny says, the miracle of nature is greater in the most minute creatures, in the spider or the gnat, than in the elephant, if only one looks closely; and so, in the domain of literature, it is sometimes the smallest things which have the greatest intellectual value.

vi / The many uses of a knowledge of proverbs

It remains for me to show briefly how proverbs have an intrinsic usefulness no less than the respect in which they were formerly held. A knowledge of proverbs contributes to a number of things, but to four especially: philosophy, persuasiveness, grace and charm in speaking, and the understanding of the best authors.

To begin with, it may seem surprising that I should have said that proverbs belong to the science of philosophy; but Aristotle, according to Synesius, thinks that proverbs were simply the vestiges of that earliest philosophy which was destroyed by the calamities of human history. They were preserved, he thinks, partly because of their brevity and conciseness, partly owing to their good humour and gaiety; and for that reason are to be looked into, not in sluggish or careless fashion, but closely and deeply: for underlying them there are what one might call sparks of that ancient philosophy, which was much clearer-sighted in its investigation of truth than were the philosophers who came after. Plutarch too in the essay which he called 'On How to Study Poetry' thinks the adages of the Ancients very similar to the rites of religion, in which things which are most important and even divine are often expressed in ceremonials of a trivial and seemingly almost ridiculous nature. He suggests that these sayings, brief as they are, give a hint in their concealed way of those very things which were pronounced in so many volumes by the princes of philosophy. For instance, that proverb in Hesiod 'The half is more than the whole' [τιμία ἡ ἑτέρον] is exactly what Plato in the Gorgias and in his books On the State tries to expound by so many arguments: it is preferable to receive an injury than to inflict one. What doctrine was ever produced by the philosophers more salutary as a principle of life or closer to the Christian religion? But here is a principle clearly of the

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93 Pliny] Naturalis historia 11.2–4

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16 Plutarch] Moralia 357–364, from memory; the passages of Plato referred to are Gorgias 473 and Republic in several places.

vii / Proverbs as a means to persuasion

If it is not enough to understand something oneself, but one wishes to persuade others, to be furnished with proverbs is by no means unhelpful, as Aristotle himself makes sufficiently clear by classifying proverbs as evidence

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40 He taught] Matthew 22:40
45 Paul] Ephesians 4:4

vii

4 Aristotle] Rhetoric 1.15 (1376a1)
more than once in his principles of rhetoric: 'for instance,' he says, 'if one wishes to persuade someone not to make close friends with an old man, he will use as evidence the proverb that one should never do an old man a kindness' [1 x 32]. And again, if one were to argue that he who has killed the father should slay the children also, he will find this proverb useful: 'He's a fool who kills the father and leaves the children' [1 x 53]. How much weight is added to the power of persuasion by supporting evidence is common knowledge. Aphorisms too are of no small use; but under evidence Aristotle also classes proverbs. Quintilian too in his Institutions also mentions proverbs in several places as conducive to good speaking in more ways than one. For in book 5 he joins proverbs with examples and allows them equal force; and he rates the force of examples very high. Again in the same book he classes proverbs under the type of argument called in Greek krisis, authoritative assertions, which are very frequently used and of no mean power to persuade and move. It may be better to quote Quintilian's actual words: 'Popular sayings which command general assent will also be found not without value as supporting material. In a way they carry even more weight because they have not been adapted to particular cases but have been said and done by minds exempt from hatred or partiality for no reason except their evident connection with honour or truth.' And a little further on: 'Those things too which command general assent seem to be, as it were, common property from the very fact that they have no certain author. Examples are 'Where there are friends, there is wealth' [1 ii 24] and 'Conscience is a thousand witnesses' [1 x 91] and in Cicero 'Like readily comes together with like as the old proverb has it' [1 ii 20]: for these would not have lived for ever if they did not seem true to everyone.' Thus far I have recalled the words of Quintilian. The same author, a little later, makes the oracles of the gods follow proverbs as though they were closely related. And what of Cicero? Does he not use a proverb in the Pro Flacco to destroy the credibility of witnesses? The proverb in question is 'Risk it on a Carian' [1 vi 14]. Does he not in the same speech explode the integrity in the witness-box of the whole race of Greeks with this one proverb: 'Lend me your evidence' [1 vii 95]? Need I mention the fact that even philosophers in person are always supporting their arguments with proverbs? No wonder then if historians often seek to support the truth of their narrative by means of some adage. So true is it that what vanishes from written sources, what could not be preserved

by inscriptions, colossal statues and marble tablets, is preserved intact in a proverb, if I may note by the way this fresh reason to praise adages.

And then St Jerome shows no reluctance in confirming a Gospel maxim with the help of a common proverb: 'A rich man is either wicked himself or the heir of a wicked man' [1 ix 47]. Even Paul himself does not scorn to use proverbs as evidence in some passages, and not without cause. For if το πλεκτόν, the power to carry conviction, holds the first place in the achievement of persuasion, what could be more convincing, I ask you, than what is said by everyone? What is more likely to be true than what has been approved by the consensus, the unanimous vote as it were, of so many epochs and so many peoples? There is, and I say it again, in these proverbs some native authentic power of truth. Otherwise how could it happen that we should frequently find the same thought spread abroad among a hundred peoples, transposed into a hundred languages, a thought which has not perished or grown old even with the passing of so many centuries, which pyramids themselves have not withstood? So that we see the justice of that saying, 'Nothing is solider than truth.' Besides, it happens (how, I cannot tell) that an idea launched like a javelin in proverbial form strikes with sharper point on the hearer's mind and leaves implanted barbs for meditation. It will make far less impression on the mind if you say 'Fleeting and brief is the life of man' than if you quote the proverb 'Man is but a bubble' [11 iii 48]. Lastly, what Quintilian writes about laughter, when he says that the greatest difficulties in pleading a case, which cannot be solved by any arguments, can be evaded by a jest, is particularly applicable to the proverb.

viii / Decorative value of the proverb

It hardly needs explaining at length, I think, how much authority or beauty is added to style by the timely use of proverbs. In the first place who does not see what dignity they confer on style by their antiquity alone? And then, if there is any figure of speech that can confer breadth and sublimity on language, any again that contributes to grace of expression, if finally there is any reason for humour, a proverb, being able normally to adapt itself to all kinds of rhetorical figures and all aspects of humour and wit, will of course contribute whatever they are wont to contribute and on top of that will add its own intrinsic and peculiar charm. And so to interweave adages deftly and appropriately is to make the language as a whole glitter with sparkles from

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62. Quintilian] 6.3.8—9
Antiquity, please us with the colours of the art of rhetoric, gleam with jewel-like words of wisdom, and charm us with titbits of wit and humour. In a word, it will wake interest by its novelty, bring delight by its concision, convince by its decisive power.

ix / The proverb as an aid to understanding literature

Even if there were no other use for proverbs, at the very least they are not only helpful but necessary for the understanding of the best authors, that is, the oldest. Most of these are textually corrupt, and in this respect they are particularly so, especially as proverbs have a touch of the enigmatic, so that they are not understood even by readers of some learning; and then they are often inserted disconnectedly, sometimes even in a mutilated state, like 'Upwards flow the streams' [i iii 15]. Occasionally they are alluded to in one word, as in Cicero in his Letters to Atticus: 'Help me, I beg you; “prevention,” you know,’ where he refers to the proverb 'Prevention is better than cure' [i li 40]. Thus a great darkness is cast by these if they are not known, and again they throw a great deal of light, once they are understood. This is the cause of those monstrous mistakes in both Greek and Latin texts; hence the abominable errors of translators from Greek into Latin; hence the absurd delusions of some writers, even learned ones, in their interpretation of authors, mere ravings in fact. Indeed, I would mention some of these here and now, if I did not think it more peaceable and more suited to my purpose to leave everyone to draw his own conclusions, after reading my notes, as to the extent to which writers of great reputation have sometimes fallen into wild error. And then it sometimes happens that an author makes a concealed allusion to a proverb, and if it escapes us, even though the meaning will seem clear, yet ignorance of the proverb will take away a great part of our pleasure. That remark in Horace is of this type: 'A horse to carry me, a king to feed me' [vii 20]. And in Virgil: 'And Camarina shows up far away, Ne'er to be moved; so have the fates decreed' [i 64]. In one of these is the proverb 'A horse carries me, a king feeds me,' in the other 'Move not Camarina.'

x / The difficulty of proverbs calls for respect

If according to the proverb 'Good things are difficult' [i vi 12], and the things which seem easy are scorned and held cheap by the popular mind, let no one imagine it is so simple a task either to understand proverbs or to interweave them into discourse, not to mention myself and how much this work has cost me. Just as it requires no mean skill to set a jewel deftly in a ring or weave gold thread into the purple cloth, so (believe me) it is not everyone who can apply and fittingly insert a proverb into what he has to say. You might say of the proverb with justice what Quintilian said of laughter, that it is a very risky thing to aim for. For in this kind of thing, as in music, unless you put on a consummate performance, you would be ridiculous, and you must either win the highest praise or be a laughingstock.

xi / How far the use of adages is advisable

In the light of all this I will point out to what extent and in which ways adages should be used. In the first place, it is worth remembering that we should observe the same rule in making use of our adages as Aristotle elegantly recommended in his work on rhetoric with regard to the choice of epithets: that is to say, we should treat them not as food but as condiments, not to sufficiency but for delight. Then we must not insert them just where we like; there are some places where it would be ridiculous to put jewels, and it is equally absurd to apply an adage in the wrong place. Indeed, what Quintilian teaches in the eighth book of his Institutions about the use of aphorisms can be applied in almost exactly the same terms to proverbs. First, as has been said, we must not use them too often. Overcrowding prevents them from letting their light shine, just as no picture catches the eye in which nothing is clear in profile, and so artists too, when they bring several figures together in one picture, space them out so that the shadow of one body does not fall on another. For every proverb stands by itself, and for that reason must anyway be followed by a new beginning. This often causes the writing to be disconnected, and because it is put together from bits and pieces, not articulated, it lacks structure. And then it is like a purple stripe, which gives

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viii

15 convince ... power] These words were added in 1517/8.

ix

9 Cicero] Ad Atticum 10.10.3

25 In one of these ... Camarina] This sentence was added in 1515.

x

9 Quintilian] Perhaps a reminiscence of 6.3.6–7

xi

4 Aristotle] Rhetoric 3.3.3. (1406a19)

9 Quintilian] Institutio oratoria 8.5.7
an effect of brilliance in the right place; but a garment with many stripes in the weave would suit nobody. There is also another disadvantage, that the man who sets out to use proverbs frequently is bound to bring in some that are stale or forced; choice is not possible when the aim is numbers. Finally, when anything is exaggerated or out of place, charm is lost. In letters to one's friends, however, it will be permissible to amuse oneself in this way a little more freely; in serious writing they should be used both more sparingly and with more thought.

xii / The varied use of proverbs

Here I think it is not beside the point to indicate shortly the ways in which the use of proverbs can vary, so that you can put forward the same adage now in one shape and now in another. To begin with, there is no reason why you should not occasionally fit the same wording with different meanings, as for instance 'A great jar with holes' [i 13] can be applied to forgetfulness, extravagance, miserliness, futility or ingratitude: whatever you have told to a forgetful person slips from the mind, with the spendthrift nothing lasts, a miser's greed is insatiable, a silly chatterer can keep nothing to himself, a gift to an ungrateful man is lost. Sometimes a saying can be turned ironically to mean the opposite: if you are speaking of an arrant liar, you can say Listen to the oracle 'straight from the tripod' [i vii 90]. Occasionally it happens that the change of one small word may make the proverb fit several meanings: for instance 'Gifts of enemies are no gifts' [iili 35] can be shifted to fit gifts from the poor, from flatterers, from poets; for presents from an enemy are believed to bring ruin, and when poor people, sycophants or poets give anything away, they are fortune-hunting rather than giving. In a word, you may freely arrange this comparison in any way which it will fit. This method applies to almost every instance where a transference is made from a person to a thing or vice versa. Here is an example, applied to a person. The proverb says Not even Hercules can take on two [i v 39]; but I am Thersites rather than Hercules; how can I answer both? It can be twisted to refer to a thing in this way: 'Not even Hercules can take on two; how can I stand up to both illness and poverty?' Or the proverb can be turned the other way, as in 'It is said Not even Hercules can take on two; and do you dare to stand up against two Herculeses?' Or in this way: 'It is the opposite of the familiar

xii

Greek proverb [i ix 30]: 'I expected coals and I have found treasure.' And: 'I have exchanged, not gold for bronze but, quite simply, bronze for gold' [i ii 1]. Sometimes the adage is explained and held up for comparison, sometimes it is an allegory pure and simple which is related. Occasionally even a truncated form is offered, as when you might say to a person whose answer was quite off the point 'Sickles I asked for' [ii ii 40], and in Cicero 'Make the best of it' [iv ii 43]. At times it is enough to make an allusion with a single word, as when Aristotle says that 'all such men are potters to one another' [i ii 25]. There are other methods of varying the use of proverbs; but if anyone wishes to follow them out more closely, he may get what he wants from my compilation De duplicita copia.

xiii / On proverbial metaphors

It remains to set to work on the task of making a catalogue of proverbs, but after first pointing out some proverbial metaphors. For there are some sayings which do not much resemble proverbs at first sight, and some take a proverbial shape, so that they can easily be added to the category of proverbs. Generally speaking, every aphorism approaches the genus proverb, and in addition metaphor and in particular allegory, and among these especially such as are taken from important fields which are generally familiar, such as seafaring and war. Examples of these are: to sail with a following wind, to be shipwrecked, to turn one's sails about, to hold the tiller, to bale out the bilge-water, to spread one's sails to the wind and to take in sail. And these: to give the signal to attack, to fight at the sword's point, to sound the retreat, to fight at long range or hand to hand, to set to, to join battle, and hundreds of others of the same kind, which only need to be drawn out a little to assume the form of a proverb. In the same way there are those which are taken from well-known things and exceedingly familiar in everyday experience, as for instance whenever there is a transference from the physical to the mental, as to turn the thumb down (to show support), to wrinkle one's brow (to take offence), to snarl (to be displeased), to clear one's brow (to grow cheerful). And there are those which come from the bodily senses: to smell out (to get to know), to taste (to investigate). They normally have the look of a proverb about them, whenever expressions peculiar to the arts are used in another sense, as the double diapason from music; diametrically from geometry (another instance is words half a yard long), 'to put it back on the anvil' from blacksmiths, 'by rule' from stonemasons, 'I haven't done a stroke' from painters, 'to add a last act from the stage. Sometimes without metaphor a tacit allusion contributes something of a proverbial nature. Such an allusion will be most successful when it

7 ingratitude] The reference to the ungrateful man here and at the end of the sentence was added in 1547/8.
concerns an author or fact very famous and known to everybody. Homer for
instance in Greek and Virgil in Latin. An example of this is that phrase in
Plutarch: 'Since many good men and true are here to support Plato.' The
allusion is to a liturgical custom: at a sacrifice the priest would say 'Who's
here?' and the assembled company would reply 'Many good men and true.'
Then there is that phrase in Cicero's Letters to Atticus: 'Two heads together'
and in Lucian 'the sons of physic' used for physicians.

There is also a resemblance to proverbs in those expressions often
met with in pastoral poetry, the impossible, the inevitable, the absurd,
likenesses and contraries. The impossible is like this: 'But it were equal
labour to measure the waves on the seashore,' and in Virgil: 'Ere this the
light-foot stag shall feed in air, / And naked fish be beach-strown by the sea.'
The inevitable like this: 'While boars love mountain-crests and fish the
streams,' and in Seneca: 'While turn the lucid stars of this old world.' An
element of the absurd: 'Let him yoke foxes too and milk he-goats.' An
instance of contraries: 'E'en the green lizards shelter in the brakes, / But I— I
burn with love,' and so in Theocritus: 'The waves are silent, silent are the
gales, / But in my breast nothing will silence care.' Of likeness: 'Wolf chases
goose, and in his turn is chased / By the fierce lioness,' and in Theocritus: 'The
goat pursues the clover, and the wolf pursues the goat.'

There are two other formulae very close to the proverb type, formed
either by repetition of the same or a similar word, or by the putting together
of opposite words. Examples of these are: To bring a bad man to a bad end, an
ill crow lays an ill egg, and A wise child has a wise father. This is almost
normal in Greek drama, both comedy and tragedy. Further, The deserving get
their deserts; Friend to friend; Evil to the evil, good to the good; Each
dear to each; To every queen her king is fair. Also: Hand rubs hand, Jackdaw
sits by jackdaw. The type of opposites goes like this: Just and unjust; Rightly
or wrongly, in Aristophanes, Will he nil he, in Plato; and again, Neither

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58 our own poets] Virgil Georgics 1.505 and Aeneid 4.140
59 Valerius Maximus] Facte et dicta memorabilia 6.2.8. This is a manual of historical
anecdotes for the use of speakers compiled in the early first century AD, cited in the
Adagia twenty-seven times. These two anecdotes were added here in 1533.
60 With what justice! There is some overlap between this list and 11.24.
61 Adorned ... thanks This was added (with the Latin versions of those that
preceeded) in 1525. 'Wealth that is no wealth' in 1528.
62 glukupikros] This, and the following sentence referring to Plutarch Moralia 68.18,
were added in 1535.
63 A man no man] The most famous of Greek riddles, ascribed to Panarces, of
whom nothing is known, by Clearchus, an early collector of proverbs quoted by
is mentioned by Plato Republic 5.479c, and recorded in the De tropis, a late
rhetorical treatise ascribed to Tryphon (Rhetores graeci ed L. Spengel, Leipzig
1853–6, 5.164.16) and in Suidas A 230; see lambri eleyi graeci ed M.L West.
Oxford 1972, 2.41. Erasmus’ text seems closest to that given by Tryphon. The
answer is: A one-eyed eunuch throws a lump of pumice-stone at a bat hanging
on a tall reed, and misses it. (‘Hits’ has to represent two senses of the Greek
ballein, which normally means ‘to hit,’ but can carry a colour of ‘to throw at with
the intention of hitting.’)
stone hits and hits not. A bird no bird that on a sapling/That is no sapling
sits and sits not." This riddle is recorded both by Athenaeus, citing Clearchus;
and by Tryphon, and is also mentioned by Plato. Others of this type are:
tongue-tied chatterer, vulnerable invulnerable, hairy smooth, son that
was no son. Many things of the kind are put forward and expounded by
Athenaeus in his tenth book. The nature of adages does not rule out a
riddling obscurity, which is otherwise not recommended; on the contrary,
the obscurity is welcome, as though there was some family relationship.
An example of this would be to tell a man who was talking nonsense 'to set sail
for Anticyra' or 'to sacrifice a pig' or 'to pluck squills from the tombs';
the first of these is in Horace, the second in Plautus and the third in Theocritus.
So too many oracular responses have been naturalized as proverbs, and the
precepts of Pythagoras [I 12] clearly belong naturally among the proverbs.
One thing specially appropriate to adages as a class is hyperbole, as in
'With his arms affright the sky' and 'Cracks rocks with his clannour' and 'I
dissolve in laughter,' especially if there is an admixture of any kind of
metaphor. This can be done in various ways, either by using a proper name
or with a comparison or with an epithet. Examples are: A second Aristarchus
[I v 57]. This Phalaris of ours [I x 86]. As noisy as Stentor [I i i 37]. Like a
lioness on a sword-hilt [I i x 82]. A Scistorian voice [I i i 37]. Eloquence like
Nestor's [I i 56]. And I am quite prepared to point out some of the springs,
so to say, from which this kind of figure can be drawn.

1 / From the thing itself. The figure is sometimes taken from the thing
itself, whenever we call a very wicked person wickedness personified, or an
infamous person infamous, a pernicious one a pest, a gluton a sink, a swindler
shady, a morally vile man a blot, a dirty fellow filth, a despicable man trash,
an uncle one a dung-heap, a monstrous one a monster, a trouble-maker
an ulcer, a man who ought to be in prison a jail-bird. Every one of these
almost can be expressed by a comparison: for instance, Golden as gold

82 Others ... tenth book] Added in 1517/8
89 Anticyra] Proverbial as the source of hellebore, a drug used in the treatment of
insanity. These are three ways of dealing with madness, offered in Adages [I viii
52. I viii 55 and I i i 42.
93 hyperbole] The first example given is from Virgil [Aenid I 11.351 (Adages II IV 6);
for the third there is a parallel in Apuleius [Metamorphoses 3-7 (cf IV 186).
100 I am quite prepared] The reservoir of examples from which this cataract of
phrases flows was tapped also for the De copia (I. 1. 34-6), and we have taken
advantage of Betty I. Knott's version and notes in CW 24, 185-95, where
more references will be found. Only, as we are concerned with proverbs in
English and not with the art of writing Latin, we have adopted the English form of
the proverb; for English says 'As deaf as a post' where Erasmus writing Latin
would be bound to put 'Deafener than a post.'

110 itself. Wicked as wickedness, Blind as blindness, Garrulous as garrulity,
Ugly as ugliness, Thirsty as thirst itself, Poor as poverty, As unlucky as
ill-luck personified, As infantile as infancy. To this category belong phrases
like Father of all fames and Fount of all eloquence and More than entirely
speechless and Worse than abandoned.

2 / From similar things. Nearest to these are phrases derived from similar
things, such as: Sweet as honey, Black as pitch, White as snow, Smooth as
coil [I vii 35]. Soft as the ear-lobe [I vii 36]. Pure as gold [IV i 58]. Dull as lead,
Stupid as a stump, Unresponsive as the sea-shore [I iv 84]. Stormy as the
Adriatic [IV iv 58]. Deaf as the Ocean, Bibulous as a sponge, Thirsty as the
sands, Parched as pumice-stone [I iv 75]. Noisy as the bronze of Dodona
[I i 17]. Fragile as glass, Unstable as a ball, Accommodating as a buskin
[I i 59]. Thin as Egyptian damatis [I i 22]. Tall as an alder. Hard as a whet-
stone [I i 20]. Bright as the sun, Fair as a star, Pale as boxwood, Bitter as
Sardonic herbs [I i i 1]. Despised as seaweed, Seething as Etma, Tasteless as
beeswax [I iv 72]. As just as a pair of scales [I i v 82]. As crooked as a thorn,
As empty as a bladder, Light as a feather, Changeable as the wind, Hateful
as death, Capacious as the abyss [I i i 41]. Twisted as the labyrinth [I i x 51].
Worthless as blue pimpernel [I i vii 21]. Light as cork [I iv 7]. Leaky as a great
jar full of holes [I i x 33]. Transparent as a lantern, Dripping like a water-clock,
Pure as a crystal spring, Inconstant as the Euphris [I ix 62]. Dear as a man's
own eyes, Beloved as the light, Precious as life itself, Inflexible as a dry
bramble [I i 100]. Revolting as warmed-up cabbage [I v 38]. Bright as a
purple stripe. Licentious as the carnival of Flora.

3 / From living creatures. Similarly from living creatures: Talkative as a
woman [IV i 97]. Salacious as a sparrow, Lecherous as a Billy-goat, Long-
lived as a stag, Ancient as an old crow [I vi 64], Noisy as a jackdaw [I vi 22],

112 Father of all fames] Catullus 21.1
123 Despised as seaweed] This phrase comes, with the Sardonic herbs, from Virgil
Eclogues 7.41-2, and they stood together in the Collectanea 747 with 'tougher
than butcher's broom.' It can hardly be other than accidental that the third of
these should not appear in the Chidales at all and the second only here, while
the Sardonic herbs rate a long article (III v 1) on their own. Exact completeness
for its own sake is not part of Erasmus' programme.
125 a bladder] The Latin word ampulla properly means a bottle, especially
an oil-flask; but there is no reason why an oil-flask should be proverbially empty,
which seems to be the meaning here, and Erasmus knew that the word was
used metaphorically for 'bombast' in writing. It seems likely therefore that he
had in mind a bladder filled with wind.
128 lantern] In 1508 Erasmus wrote 'Punic lantern' as in his source, which is
Plautus Aulularia 566 (possibly meaning glass, traditionally invented by
the Phoenicians, Ponte); but the epithet was cut out in 1528; see III vi 39a.
Melodious as a nightingale, Poisnocus as a cobra, Venonous as a viper, Sly as a fox [i i 28], Prickly as a hedgehog [ii iv 81], Tender as an Acanarian sucking-pig [ii i 59], Slippery as an eel [i iv 93], Timid as a hare [i i 180]. Slow as a snail, Sound as a fish [i iv 93], Dumb as a fish [i i 29], Playful as a dolphin, Rare as a phoenix [i vii 10], Prolific as a white sow, Rare as a black swan [i i 21]. Changeable as a hydra [i i 95]. Rare as a white crow [i vii 35], Greedy as a vulture [i vii 14], Grim as scorpions, Slow as a tortoise [i viii 84], Sleepy as a dormouse, Ignorant as a pig, Stupid as an ass, Cruel as water-snakes, Fearful as a hind, Thirsty as a leech, Quarrelsome as a dog, Shaggy as a bear, Light as a water-beetle. Lucian too collects some things of the kind: While they are as irritable as puppies, as timid as hares, as favning as monkeys, as lustful as donkeys, as thievish as cats, as quarrelsome as fighting-cocks. Plutarch in his essay 'On Running into Debt' has 'As untrustworthy as a jackdaw, as silent as a partridge, as lowborn and servile as a dog.'

From the characters of the gods. These arise from the characters of the gods: Chaste as Diana, Elegant as the very Graces, Lecherous as Priapus, Lovely as Venus, Eloquent as Mercury, Mordant as Momus [i v 74], Inconstant as Vertumnus [ii ii 74]. Muttable as Proteus [ii ii 74]. Changeable as Empusa [ii ii 74].

From characters of legend. From legendary characters: Thirsty as Tantalus [ii vii 14], Cruel as Aretus [i vii 92], Savage as a Cyclops [i iv 5], Mad as Orestes, Crafty as Ulysses [ii vii 79], Eloquent as Nestor [i i 56], Foolish as Glaucus [i i 1], Destitute as Irus [i vii 76], Chaste as Penelope [i iv 42]. Handsome as Nereus, Long-lived as Tithonus [i vi 65], Hungry as Erysichthon, Prolific as Niobe [iii iii 33], Loud as Stentor [ii ii 37], Blind as Teiresias [iii iii 57], Ill-famed as Busiris, Enigmatic as the Sphinx [ii iii 9], Intricate as the Labyrinth [ii x 51]. Inventive as Daedalus [ii iii 62, iii i 65]. Daring as Icarus,

Overweaving as the Giants [iii i 93], Stupid as Gryllus, Sharp-eyed as Lynceus [i i 54], Unremitting as the Hydra [i x 9].

From characters in comedy. From characters in comedy: Boastful as Thraso in Terence, Quarrelsome as Demea, Good-natured as Micio, Fawning as Gnatho, Confident as Phormio, Wily as Davus, Charming as Thais, Misery as Euclio.

From characters in history. From historical characters come: Envious as Zolius [i v 8], Strict as Cato [i vii 84], Inhuman as Timon. Cruel as Phalaris [i v 88], Lucky as Timotheus [i v 82], Despicable as Sardanapalus [ii vii 27], Religious as Numa, Just as Phocion. Incorruptible as Aristides, Rich as Croesus [i vi 74], Wealthy as Crassus [i vii 74], Poor as Codrus [i v 76], Debauched asAESop. Ambitious as Herodatus, Cautious as Fabius [i x 20]. Patient as Socrates, Muscular as Milo [ii i 77], Acute as Chrysippus, With as fine a voice as Trachalus, Forgetful as Curio, The Aristarchus of our time [i v 57], The Christian Epicurus, A Cato out of season [i vii 89].

From names of peoples. From peoples: Treacherous as a Carthaginian [i viii 28], Rough as a Scythian [i i 35], Inhospitable as the Scythotaurians,

One of the shipmates of Ulysses who were turned into animals by Circe the sorceress in the tenth book of the Odyssey. Gryllus became a pig, and defends his situation in Plutarch's Gryllus ('Beasts are Rational').

The Hydra Of Lerna (i x 9). The word used, escorta, is thought to mean 'serpent', but it is the Hydra in Plautus Persa 3, and the Hydra was indeed 'unremitting' and grew a new head for every one that Hercules cut off.

Characters in comedy. These are all from three plays of Terence (Adelphoe, Eunuchus, Phormio), except Euclio; he is an old man in the Aulularia of Plautus, and was added in 1517-8.

Timon] The misanthrope; see for instance the Timon of Lucian.

Numa] Numus Pompius, the mythical early king of Rome, to whom the Romans attributed many of their religious ideas and practices

Athenian general of the fourth century BC

Aristides] Athenian statesman of the fifth century BC. He and the two preceding each have a life to themselves in Plutarch's Lives.

Not the writer of AESop's Fables, but a notorious spendthrift of the last century BC; Horace Satires 2.3.239

The man who in order to secure immortality burnt down the great temple of Diana at Ephesus in 356 BC — and was regrettably successful.

The eminent Stoic philosopher.

An orator in Rome particularly praised for his voice by Quintilian 10.1.119, 12.5.5. One wonders how many of Erasmus' contemporaries would have caught the allusion.

A Roman orator who died in 53 BC; Cicero illustrates the badness of his memory in the Brutus 60.215-8.

Inhabitants of the Crimea, the 'Taurian Chersonese,' who put all strangers to death
Mendacious as a Cretan [i i 29]. Fugitive as the Parthians [i i 5]. Vain as the Greeks. Drunken as Thracians [i i 17]. Untrustworthy as a Thessalian [i i 10]. Contemptible as a Carian [i v 14]. Haughty as a Sybarite [i i 65]. Effeminate as the Milesians [i iv 8]. Wealthy as the Arabs [i vi 74]. Short as a Pygmy [iv i 90]. Stupid as an Arcadian [iii iii 27].

9 / From occupations. From occupations come: Perjured as a brothel-keeper, Soft as a catamite, Boastful as a soldier, Severe as an Areopagite [i x 41]. Violent as a tyrant, Brutal as a hangman.

xiv / Of the need for careful introduction of a proverb

This may seem a tiny and negligible thing, but since I have taken on the role of a teacher, I shall not hesitate to issue a warning for the inexperienced. In making use of adages we must remember what Quintilian recommends in the use of newly-coined phrases or daring metaphors: that one should, as Greek most eloquently expresses it, προευρημένα τῷ ὑπερβολείᾳ, make an advance correction of what seems excessive. Similarly we should 'make an advance correction' of our proverb and, as it were, go halfway to meet it, if it is likely to prove obscure, or to jar in some other way. For this class of phrase, as I have pointed out just now, admits metaphors of any degree of boldness, and unlimited innovation in the use of words and unashamed hyperbole and allegory pushed to enigmatic lengths. Greek makes this 'advance correction' in ways like these: As the proverb runs, As they say (in several forms), As the old saying goes, To put it in a proverb, As they say in jest, It has been well said. And almost exactly the same methods are in use in Latin: As they say, As the old proverb runs, As is commonly said, To use an old phrase, As the adage has it, As they truly say.

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xiv 4. Quintilian 8.3.37

1 Amicorum communia omnia
Between friends all is common

Tò τῶν φίλων κοινώ. Between friends all is common. Since there is nothing more wholesome or more generally accepted than this proverb, it seemed good to place it as a favourable omen at the head of this collection of adages. If only it were so fixed in men's minds as it is frequent on everybody's lips, most of the evils of our lives would promptly be removed. From this proverb Socrates deduced that all things belong to all good men, just as they do to the gods. For to the gods, said he, belong all things; good men are friends of the gods; and among friends all possessions are in common. Therefore good men own everything. It is quoted by Euripides in his Orestes: 'Shared in common are the possessions of friends.' and again in the Phoenix: 'All grief of friends is shared.' Again in the Andromache: 'True friends have nothing of their own, but with them all is common.' Terence says in the Adelphoe: 'For there is an old proverb, that between friends all is common.' It is said that this was also in Menander, in a play of the same name. Cicero in the first book of the De officiis says 'As the Greek proverb has it, all things are in common between friends,' and it is quoted by Aristotle in the eighth book of his Ethics, and by Plato in the Laws, book 5. Plato is trying to show that the happiest condition of a society consists in the community of all possessions: 'So the first kind of city and polity and the best laws are found where the old saying is maintained as much as possible throughout the whole city; and the

1 In the Adagiorum collectanea of 1500 this was no 94, taken from Terence with the Greek added probably from Diogenes Laertius 5.76 (it is also in Zenodorus 4.79); here it has been entirely rewritten. Otto 87; Tilley 7.729 Among friends all things are common. According to Clearcres (above, xii line 791) frag 72, the original source of this saying was the Delphic oracle.

2 Socrates] Perhaps a slip of memory; in Diogenes Laertius 6.37 a similar remark is ascribed to the Cynic philosopher Diogenes. Laertius' Lives of Eminent Philosophers (perhaps early third century AD) were not printed complete in Greek until 1533, and Erasmus' many references are normally in Latin. He was presumably using the version of Ambrogio Traversari, which had been in print since 1475, but now and again he shows knowledge of the Greek original.

3 Euripides] Orestes 715; Phoenixae 253; Andromache 376-7

4 Terence] Adelphoe 803-4

5 Menander] Frag 10, cited by Suidas 1.2549

6 Cicero] De officiis 1.16.51

7 Aristotel] Ethica Nicomachea 8.9.1 (115b31)

8 Plato] Laws 5.739b-c. In the Collectanea Erasmus had written. This aphorism is cited in Plato under the name of Euripides. Maria Cytwinska in 'Erasm de Rotterdam et Marsilio Ficin son maître' Esot 63 (1975) 165-79 has shown how at the outset he depended on the Latin version of Plato made by Marsilio Ficino.