

*Collected Works of Erasmus, Volume 33: Adages II i 1 to II vi 100.* Trans. R.A.B. Mynors. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8020-5954-6. Pp. x+479.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, in applying his humanistic *ad fontes* principles, looked to the classics as a source of wisdom, written style and erudition. Seeking to improve sixteenth-century education, he utilized what he called the "commonplace" book, which was a collection of examples of well-written Latin for personal use. Such a practice seems banal today, but it was a revolutionary breakthrough in Erasmus' time.

Erasmus published his own commonplace book in several editions of *Adages*. In the present volume, the third instalment of seven volumes of *Adages*, we have 600 of the over 4000 adages collected by Erasmus. Each entry consisted of the adage itself followed by a description of its meaning and use in classical times, along with references to authors who had used it. In this translation each adage is given in the original, usually Latin or occasionally Greek, followed by the English and then the description. R.A.B. Mynors has truly captured the stylistic essence of the original in his English translation. Sadly, Mynors died before the present volume was in its final form and his notes for this translation were assembled by G.M. Story for posthumous publication.

Anyone whose task is the crafting of words will find this volume useful; it is also ideal for browsing at one's leisure. The writer or the preacher may use the book as it was originally intended, while the student of the classics will find the discussions of the adages' meanings a valuable key to understanding ancient figures of speech. Where else, for example, could one learn that "to shave a lion is applied to those who use finesse in their dealing with the fierce and the powerful?" (247) The biblical scholar will find that "battology," the word signifying "vain repetition" in the Gospel of Matthew, comes from a certain Battus, whose poetry repeated the same things over and over (70). A "cummin splitter" was proverbial for a parsimonious person. Cummin is evidently such a small plant that only a skin-flint would cut the leaves rather than giving a full one (19). Giving wine to a frog meant offering something to someone who had no use for the gift (140).

Along with such unfamiliar adages one finds figures of speech that are still in use today, although often with a slight twist. These include "Spartan brevity" (70), and "to have one foot in Charon's boat" (47), the

boat signifying the grave. "He calls figs figs and a spade a spade" comes to us from Aristophanes (132). "Sycophant" was a term of abuse literally meaning "fig-detector." Such a person would report fig thieves at a time when the fruit was expensive in Attica (178ff).

The *Adages* are carefully annotated, even pointing out a few errors on Erasmus' part. For example, under the adage "rustic hatred," in which Erasmus speaks of the proverbial hatred of rural people, Mynors points out that this was a misreading of "savage hatred" (61). In addition to expanded explanations or corrections, the notes supply classical references with more precision than the text.

Two things are wanting in this edition of *Adages*. The first is an index which would indicate where Erasmus explains a given proverb or cites a given source. A student of Aristophanes, for example, would find references to discussions of that author's works invaluable. There is a list of adages at the end of the book, which facilitates the browsing process, but a thematic index would also be helpful. Perhaps such a tool is already envisaged for the final volume of the *Adages*.

The second desideratum has to do with the cost of the book. Seven volumes at \$100 each is rather expensive for the average purchaser. Since this is really the sort of book that must be handled repeatedly, it would be a shame to see it relegated exclusively to the shelves of libraries. Perhaps two or three volumes of selected adages in a more affordable format could be prepared along the lines of Erika Rummel's *Erasmus Reader*. In this way the best of the *Adages* could reach a much wider audience and perhaps improve the collective written style of our age.

The *Adages* will appeal to a wide audience of writers, preachers, students and lovers of language. Hours of pleasure will be derived from sampling this proverbial smorgasbord of language, and one can hardly imagine how anyone's style will remain unaffected by the experience. Whoever drinks of these waters will be virtually guaranteed of never having "the eloquence of a barking dog" (208).