Implied Ethics in the *Adagia* of Erasmus: An Index of *Felicitas*

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Même si, au sein de la masse touffue des Adages, l'attention est principalement centrée sur la philologie et la rhétorique, Érasme reste profondément attiré par les thèmes éthiques. Toutefois, ces thèmes éthiques ou moraux se perdent facilement dans le vaste arsenal de cette compilation de proverbes. Comme Érasme lui-même et plusieurs de ses lecteurs l'ont fait remarquer, l'ouvrage se délecte de son propre désordre. Pourtant, les thèmes éthiques ne sont jamais perdus de vue. Comment, dès lors, aborder la question éthique — dans le but, par exemple, de dégager une position claire sur le bonheur ou la felicitas — dans un ouvrage sans ordre apparent, et au moyen d'une forme, le proverbe, qui est surtout un moyen rhétorique ? Cet article fait valoir qu'il y a moyen de trouver un sens à un thème, tel celui de la felicitas, à partir des index et des références internes, même si cet ordre n'est jamais érigé en système. Comme la plupart des autres termes moraux des Adages, celui de la felicitas surgit ici et là à travers l'ouvrage, et on peut en suivre la trace grâce à une série de références internes et d'associations d'idées ou de mots qui tout à coup s'ouvrent à la question. La felicitas apparaît dans le contexte de discussions sur le bien-être matériel, l'équilibre personnel, l'amitié et la vie collective.

The *Adagia* of Erasmus is more than a straightforward compilation of ancient proverbs. This massive work, the product of many years of Herculean labour, is often seen as an extension of Erasmus' program of educational and ethical reform, and, though largely secular in its material and its themes, even connects comfortably with his central lifetime concern with the *philosophia Christi*.

Despite its many connections with theological and philosophical positions, the *Adagia* is not intended primarily as a guide to theology and philosophy. It is above all a work of rhetoric. Nevertheless, because the *Adagia* is ultimately about the right use of language, about personal as well as social behaviour, the work has a strong ethical orientation. There is an interest throughout in proper social relations, good self-government, the exercise of will and judgement, rational thought affecting actions, the importance of peaceful relations with others, and what might even be called a godly behaviour. Yet despite introductory material and a small number of

longer adage essays that seem to highlight these ethical themes, such themes are not always obvious or terribly straightforward when we get into the work. Hence my title, that stresses the “implied” ethics of the *Adagia*.

The *Adagia* is not a textbook on moral behaviour, then, but a reference work that concentrates on some very obscure philological material. In his 4151 essays, most of them very short, Erasmus identifies adages, looks at alternatives, and cites a range of passages, never hesitating to emend his sources when necessary. He explicates obscure references, often grounding them in the lived and documented practical life of antiquity. He’s clearly interested in the way these proverbs can be used to convince people to act well. But he is only occasionally forthcoming in speaking about an adage as a source of truth or as a possible basis for a systematic way of thinking about anything.

In what follows, I begin with a very close look at the way the majority of the adage essays are constructed. In a typical essay the project is to place the adage in some kind of explanatory context—of usage, of customary behaviours, of other adages. The massiveness of this context—not least the number of adages that radiate outwards from the one under discussion—can overwhelm the reader. Indexes thus become an essential part of the system of explanation and exemplification. This is an open work and (as evidenced by marginalia in many early copies) the pathways are created by the reader, with hints from the author. What happens then, if one opens the *Adagia* to ask about a word such as *felicitas* (happiness, good fortune, etc.)? The words of Polonius come to mind. We shall “by indirections find directions out.”

RATHER THAN LOOK at the *Adagia*, as is so often done by many scholars,¹ by beginning with the prolegomenous essay or those longer moral essays positioned strategically in the 1508 and 1515 editions (such as II i 1 *Festina Lente* or IV i 1 *Dulce bellum inexpertis*), what if we just dive randomly into the work? Its disconnected nature is quickly apparent. If in the end we wish to look at a particular theme—*felicitas*—a look at the internal method of the work will prepare us for in the work that awaits us.

I have chosen three consecutive essays that are numbered IV vi 73 to 75 in the sequence, all added in the seventh edition of 1528. These essays are typical of 95 per cent or more of the work. The adages are *Extra calcem* (*Off course*), *Ex perpendicularo* (*From the perpendicular*, or to use the recently published translation by John Grant and Betty Knott, *With a plumb-line*), and *Acolo, non fico* (*Morsels, not figs*).²

iv vi 73 Extra calcem / Off course

The same author [Ammianus Marcellinus] in book twenty-one: 'So that our words will not bore the future reader, by running *Extra calcem* "Beyond the mark," as the saying goes, let us return to describing the events that had been foreseen.' I think, however, that there is a corruption here and that *extra callem* 'off the track' should be read in the sense of *extra viam*, which we have spoken of elsewhere, when anyone wanders from his intended purpose.

iv vi 74 Ex perpendiculo / With a plumb-line

The same author in the same book used the expression 'With a plumb-line,' meaning 'with precise judgment.' He says, 'He assigned the offices of the palace with a plumb-line, as it were, and under him no one who was to hold a lofty position was brought into the court suddenly or untested.' Related to this expression are those which, as well as occurring frequently elsewhere, are to be found in Gellius book two, chapter one: *ad amussim exigere* 'to demand a precise equivalent,' *librili perpendere* 'to weigh in the balance,' *ad aequilibrium aestimare* 'to estimate an exact equivalent.' Also in Pliny book thirty-six, chapter twenty-five: *ad regulam ac libellam exigere* 'to finish to rule and level.' In addition there is *Digitis metiri* 'To count up on one's fingers,' *Trutina pensare* 'To weigh in the scale,' *Ad unguem facere* 'To do something to the finger-nail' and others, some of which we have pointed out at the appropriate place. All these expressions have more charm if applied to intellectual matters. The metaphor is taken from workmen's plumb-lines, with which they check whether a floor is level or a wall is perpendicular. An *amussis* is a string with a piece of lead attached to it at the bottom, and is fixed to the middle of a measuring rule consisting of two squares. With this they test whether the ground is level. Marcus Tullius in the third speech against Verres: 'You, Verres, have nothing to do here unless perhaps you wish to make sure that the columns are exactly plumb.' They tell him that there is scarcely any column that can be exactly plumb. 'Damn it then,' he says, 'let's do it. Let us demand that the columns be exactly plumb.'

iv vi 75 Acolo, non fico / Morsels, not figs

Akolô ta cheilê, ou sukô busai, Put your lips on a morsel, not a fig. Suidas points out that this was said when good health was promised or when someone meant that one should face circumstances bravely. For in Greek *akoloi* refers to tiny pieces of food, sometimes even morsels of bread. It is derived from *mê kollasthai* 'not to be joined' because the pieces do not stick together. Hesychius says that eating *akoloi* gets rid of anger and makes one calm, while figs enflame the blood. When Italians want to get rid of bile, we have seen them eat nothing for several days except a few morsels of bread dipped in a sauce made from water and a little fresh butter. Sometimes a few herbs or roots are added. The proverb encourages us to eat modestly.

Like most of the other 4151 adages, these adages are obscure by themselves, yet they come to life through an explanatory context provided by Erasmus. *Extra*

calcem means little by itself, but the quotation from Ammianus Marcellinus makes one possible sense clear. It means we have steered wide of the mark, that we have gone off topic.

In the *Adagia*, Erasmus often pauses to ponder an emendation to his source text. Sometimes, according to modern scholarship, he's right, and sometimes he's wrong. This time he should have left the text: it really should be *extra calcem*, not *extra callem*.³ Nevertheless, Erasmus' incorrect reading leads him to speculate on the relationship between this proverb and another one, *extra viam*. But he doesn't tell us what *extra viam* actually signifies, only that the reader will find it elsewhere. That's tough on the reader, especially because it actually appears over three thousand proverbs back, inside an essay on *Tota erras via* (I i 48) and comes up again two thousand proverbs later at *Frustra currit* (III i 84). How to follow Erasmus' tracks? From the first expanded edition of 1508, indexes play a central role in making connections for the reader and these provide the missing information. It is only by using the index that we are able to pin down a sense of *Extra viam*, and consequently *Extra calcem*. Thus, hundred of pages away, we read in *Tota erras via* that the proverb "comes from travellers, who sometimes miss their way but get to their destination in the end at some expense, or sometimes miss it so badly that they are turned far aside and go in the opposite direction. So people who err from the truth are said to leave the track (*exorbitare*)."⁴ It turns out that this proverb is really about maintaining one's relationship to truth, a major ethical theme in Erasmus. Yet there is no way that the reader can pick this up without the index, which is clearly integral to the text.

That's one example of what I mean by "implied ethics." The themes are running through the *Adagia*, but Erasmus is a subtle composer. Sometimes you can barely hear the themes. Sometimes you move off the page to follow the patterns. The degree of indirection is remarkable.

Now let's turn to *Ex perpendicularo*. This adage appears to be thematically related to the preceding, because both of them concern the way an action can be related to a fixed standard, either a *calx* or a *perpendicularum*. Here is the hint of an emerging ethical theme. Yet the connection with *Extra calcem* is not thematic, but a shared source in Ammianus Marcellinus. Most of the time, the adages have no order to them at all. As Claudie Balavoine⁵ has pointed out, Erasmus seems to follow the method (if you can call it that) of Aulus Gellius, who admits that the *ordo fortuitus* of his *Noctes Atticae* comes from the random experience of reading. But now and then Erasmus surprises us, and we find strings of connected proverbs. Sometimes these are taken serially from a single author, when Erasmus is working his way doggedly through a single text. The most striking of these strings is found in Book

III, centuries eight and nine, where nearly 200 proverbs are taken from Homer. Or there are thematic strings, where one proverb seems to lead to another, related by topic. One of the best examples is the series of *adunata* or impossible or pointless task proverbs stretching from *To unravel Penelope's web* (*Penelopes telam retexere*) at I iv 42 to *You are shooting at heaven* (*In coelum iacularis*) at I iv 92. Occasional alphabetical series are found in the second and third chiliads (for instance, II ix 49 to 63 is a sequence of the letter o). There are many short strings of parallel or linked proverbs here and there throughout the *Adagia*. They continue on for a stretch, then suddenly the string is snapped, and we move off in a different direction. The links between the adage essay *Extra calcem* and *Ex perpendiculo* appear to be both author and theme. But it turns out that theme is accidental.

In *Ex perpendiculo*, we begin with Ammianus and the citation gives a good understanding of the expression, and to this Erasmus adds (in 1533) similar phrases from Aulus Gellius and Pliny. Then he directs us to some other adages—*Digitis metiri* (*To count up on one's fingers*; IV v 86), *Trutina pensare* (*Eadem pensari trutina*, *To be weighed on the same scales*; I v 15), and *Ad unguem facere* (*To do something to the very finger-nail*; I v 91). He concludes with a long quotation from Cicero's third Verrine oration. The adage, in the end, is made clear by two contexts, the way the adage is embedded in the ancient texts, and the way they fit with similar adages, and this second context is only understood again through the cross-references, again followed only through the indexes. Again, we need not just the classical context to open up the meaning, we need the context of other proverbs in the collection. Thus, *To count up on one's fingers* refers to one "who weighs up some things more carefully than he should" (such as a friend calculating favours); *Eadem trutina pensare*, *To be weighed on the same scales*, is to be subject to the same standards as others; *Ad unguem* is the well-known expression found in Horace referring to the habit of sculptors or stoneworkers who run their nail over their work to check for smoothness between the joins in the stone, in other words, ensuring that a job has been done to a precise standard. All three are about the obligation to follow the best standards, yet to apply them appropriately. But understanding them properly means that the reader must move about in the lengthy text.

By the third adage, *Acolo, non fico*, we have now dropped both the Ammianus sequence and the possibility of thematic connection. We are now into some of his Greek sources: the Suda Lexicon and Hesychius and a close philological explanation of the Greek word *akolos* (bit, morsel), followed by an observation on the way contemporary Italians overcome excessive bile. This is the most technical of the explanations. Yet the conclusion is remarkably blunt. *Prouerbium hortatur ad victum*

tenuem—"The proverb encourages us to eat modestly." Suddenly we are directed to the world of the *De civilitate*. This kind of moral intervention is unusual in the *Adagia*, though there are many instances in the longer essays where philological scholarship yields to moral commentary.

These three proverb essays take us right into the workshop. Compared with some of the famous essays, they are not on first encounter terribly interesting. Yet seen up close, the reader can sense Erasmus' engagement, not just with text citation and philological explanation, but with moral meaning. But the moral meaning is rarely declared directly. In both *Extra calcem* and *Ex perpendicularo* we are referred, via the index, to other proverbs where the meaning is enlarged. Only in the third adage, *Acolo, non fico*, is there an especially strong interpretive conclusion. But it is all necessarily fragmentary, indirect, and non-systematic.

THE ADAGE ESSAYS seen up close are highly specific in content, but connect fluidly with one another. How are we meant to proceed in our reading and use of these ancient scraps of language? I believe the best guide to reading the adages comes from Erasmus' direct example as a reader of them himself. That's where the longer essays are important, because they show how far one can develop thought—for instance, a massive critique of war from three simple words, *Dulce bellum inexpertis*. The reader needs to know ancient contexts, to approach these ancient contexts critically, to have a capacious ability to spot parallels and see similarities. He does not need to pin things down precisely, but must be able to float with the material, to move easily about, always alert and open to contradiction and irony, and must be able to spot an appropriate or applicable truth when it presents itself.

Erasmus will argue here and there that the proverb is a container and purveyor of truth, but the truth of the adage remains for him a secondary feature. As Aristotle,⁶ and Quintilian⁷ made clear to him, the adage is an ethical form—a metaphorical "witness" that speaks a concealed truth—but the truth lies less in the adage itself than in its use and context. In his introduction to the 1508 *Adagia*, he attempts to answer the question *Quid sit paroemia*? His definition is not "a saying in popular use, remarkable for its compressed wisdom" but "a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn"—*Paroemia est celebre dictum, scita quipiam nouitate insigne*.⁸ It is a rhetorical form that can contain truth, but the truth function is not dominant. For him the adage is primarily a kind of "jewel," a *gemmula*⁹ that brightens the text around itself. The adage is an ornament that decorates an argument, it is not an argument in itself.

Sometimes, in his various prefatory discussions, he approaches the idea that the proverb is a vehicle for wisdom. In his letter to Mountjoy of 1500 he claimed that the “fathers of wisdom took so little pleasure in the talkative ways of the sophist that they reduced the ancient and celebrated secrets of philosophy to a few very brief adages, deliberately adding a dash of obscurity by employing either a metaphor or a conundrum or something of the kind.”¹⁰ And he repeats this point in the 1508 prolegomenous essay, where he argues, following Plutarch, that “these sayings, brief as they are, give a hint in their concealed way of those very things which were propounded in so many volumes by the princes of philosophy.”¹¹ His most famous example is expounded in the same preface. This is the Pythagorean proverb *ta tôn philôn koina*—*Amicorum communia omnia*—*Between friends all is common*—also the opening adage in the whole collection. Erasmus concludes: “Finally, love teaches how, as the sum of all created things is in God and God is in all things, the universal all is in fact one. You see what an ocean of philosophy, or rather of theology, is opened up to us by this tiny proverb”¹²: *Vides quantum philosophiae vel theologiae magis oceanum nobis paroemia tantilla aperuit*. But here we should pause. Did our three examples *Extra calcem*, *Ex perpendiculo*, or *Acolo, non ficio* really open up an ocean of philosophy or theology?

On this view, proverbs are similar to the *Sileni Alcibiadis*, described in the *Enchiridion* as those figures that “conceal their divinity beneath a surface that is crude and almost laughable.”¹³ Daniel Kinney¹⁴ made this imaginative connection many years ago. It does go far to explain an impulse to open up, to reveal the obscure meaning in the proverb that is so central to the *Adagia*. Yet, as I have shown in the examples, this impulse to find a truth within the adage is very restrained or becomes lost in a myriad of cross-references. Truth in the *Adagia* is plural, shifting, a chameleon figure that suddenly emerges out of obscurity, and then just as suddenly disappears.

It turns out that the main interest in the proverb is not the truth it contains, so much as in its ability to persuade. Even in his essay *Quid sit paroemia?* Erasmus is far more focused on “The varied use of proverbs” [*Varius proverbiorum usus*], and the quality of the adage as *ornatum*.¹⁵ In other words the truth of the proverb makes it especially powerful in writing, but only insofar it offers an interesting moment in the composition, an element of surprise, a quick turn, a way of briskly summing up. The proverb is a means, not an end.

Perhaps Erasmus’ difficulty in the proverb lies in its apparent wisdom, yet essential unreliability. A good example is the obvious juxtaposition of *Homo homini deus* (*Man is a god to man*) and *Homo homini lupus* (*Man is a wolf to man*) at 1 i 69 and

1 i 70. Clearly opposite in meaning, yet directly parallel in construction, they provide an interesting example of the way proverbs work as truth. By themselves, each appears to be a final truth, yet together they seem to be irreconcilable. Likewise, near the end of the *Adagia*, we discover *Cunctatio noxia* (*Hesitation is fatal*; v ii 27), placed immediately before *In arduis contanter agendum* (*Go cautiously in difficult enterprises*; v ii 28), ironically both from Sophocles *Electra* (305–6 and 319–20 respectively). The parallel English versions are “He who hesitates is lost” and “Look before you leap,” both excellent though contradictory ethical guides. Separately each contains a truth, together each negates the other. Curiously, Erasmus makes no comment on the contradiction. But the proverb that follows at v ii 29, again from *Electra* (415–16), reads *E paucis verbis ingens bonum aut malum* (*A few words can be the source of great good or great evil*). In this proverb, which acknowledges the power of language and its possible ambiguities, one can see the problem of rhetoric as a guide to action.

THE MORAL THEMES in the *Adagia* are not tightly structured, yet the work is concerned with ethical material. The proverb is primarily rhetorical and contextual, not philosophical. Though ethical positions are found, they are not developed systematically, but run thematically throughout the work. I have also shown how one way to recover the implied ethics is through cross references which in turn rely on indexes and on the willingness of the reader to use them. How do we find out about a particular theme, such as *felicitas*? Must we reread the work through every time we want to approach a new subject?

The indexes are essential to the *Adagia*. You can see this from the way they appear from the expanded edition of 1508 onwards.¹⁶ Usually, in early modern books, an index appears as one or more separable gatherings that may be bound at the beginning or the end of the volume. In the 1508 edition, the index of proverbs has a fixed position at the very start of the book (the print begins on the verso of the title page, ensuring its physical location). It's clear the index is going to play an important role. This *index proverbiorum* is not a great index by our standards. It generally lists each proverb as a single unit, and does not break the proverb down under key words (there are many entries under *ad*, *in*, *pro*, but not the substantive or verbal forms; thus, *Ad unguem* is listed under “ad” but not “unguis”). Yet the index suffices to provide connections amongst the proverbs mentioned in the text. The general form of this index was retained and expanded in subsequent editions.

In the final edition (volume 2 of the 1540 *Opera omnia*¹⁷), under *felicitas* and its various forms, we find only a handful of proverbs listed: *Felices quo differant ab*

infelicitibus (*Dimidio vitae nihil differunt felices ab infelicitibus*, or *For half their lives there is no difference between the happy and the unhappy*; II i 9), *Felicitus sunt et trimestres liberi* (*How happy he who has a three-months' child*; I vii 39), *Felicitas a deo* (*Success comes from God*; IV ii 91¹⁸), *Felicitas a funibus pensilis* (*Prosperity that hangs by ropes*, in I ix 72 *De pilo pendet, de filo pendet* or *It hangs by a hair, it hangs by a rope*), *Felicitas multos habet amicos* (*Good fortune has many friends*; III v 4¹⁹), *Feliciter sapit qui periculo alieno sapit* (*Happy is he who learns wisdom at another's cost*, quoted in *Malo accepto stultus sapit*, *Trouble experienced makes a fool wise*, I i 31, *Felix Corinthus*, at *ego sim Teneates* (*Corinth is a fine town, but Tenea for me*; II v 57²⁰), and *Felix qui nihil debet* (*Happy is he that owes nothing*; II vii 98). These do not cover all the relevant proverbs. Elsewhere in the index, we also find *Ad felicem inflectere parietem* (*To lean to the lucky side*; I iii 16), *Amicitia stabilium, felicitas temperantium* (*Friendship is for the steadfast and happiness for those of moderate desires*; II iii 76), *Felicitum multi cognati* (*The fortunate have many kinsmen*; III i 88), *Obedientia felicitatis mater* (*Obedience is the mother of prosperity*; IV v 59), *Prima felicitatis pars sapere* (*Wisdom the chief part of happiness*; v i 87), *Quis parentem laudabit, nisi infelices filii?* (*Who shall praise a father except children who are failures?*; II ix 36²¹) and *Semper feliciter cadunt Iovis taxilli* (*The dice always fall out well for Jove*; I iii 9). That these other proverbs are not found under the key word *felicitas* indicates that for the early modern indexer (if not Erasmus himself, then—at least in the first enlarged edition of 1508—someone working closely with him), the proverb is to be identified more by its precise form, less by its content.

The alphabetical index of proverbs is, however, not the only way into the material. Immediately following the general index of proverbs in 1508 one finds a fresh gathering, with a half-title that offers an index of topics (*index secundum materias in quo quaecunque adagio aliquo modo conueniunt, in unum locum reducuntur*).²² There are some 276 topics (*Diuitiae, Paupertas, Munerum corruptela, Forma deformitas, Taedium ex iteratione, Iteratio citra taedium, Molesti intolerabiles, Ingrata ob uetustatem, Nupera, Iteratus error, Error in initio, Garrulitas. Breuiloquentia*, and so on), and beneath each of these *loci* are a list of relevant proverbs. Thus, if one proceeds to *Bonae fortunae copiae felicitatis aut ominis* (*Of good fortune, abundance, happiness, or good omen*), one finds in the 1508 edition 52 proverbs listed. The lists are expanded after 1508 with new proverbs as they are added. As well, in later editions, as for instance that of 1517/18, the *loci* are themselves indexed alphabetically.

There is, finally, one other index for the *Adagia*—one which would have astonished Erasmus. In 2006, there appeared from Studiolum, a small consortium of scholars, a fully searchable electronic text of the 1703 Leclerc edition of the *Adagia*.²³

This provides the fullest sweep through the *Adagia*, and the results are fascinating. There are thematically related essays to be added to the list above: II iv 29 *Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit* (*No mortal man is wise at all times*); III i 87 *Nihil est ab omni parte beatum* (*Nought is at all points blest*); IV i 69 *De tuo capite aguntur comitia* (*Your status is at stake in this meeting*); IV v 4 *Non est beatus, esse qui se nesciat* (*He is not happy who does not know it*); and IV viii 35 *Quadratus homo* (*A four-square man*). There are references to *felicitas* at the start of II i 1 *Festina lente*; a couple of references to *felicitas* in III iii 1 *Sileni Alcibiadis* and IV i 1 *Dulce bellum inexpertis*. In other words, the early modern indexes take us quite far with the search for the word *felicitas* and its related forms, but they do not exhaust the presence of the word in the *Adagia*.

All this may seem to suggest that one way to approach the *Adagia* is through the much despised route of “index-learning” (as Alexander Pope put it in oft-quoted lines from his *Dunciad*, “How index-learning turns no student pale, / Yet holds the eel of science by the tail”). And yet, that very route is clearly encouraged by Erasmus and his contemporaries. How else to find one’s way through this massive work, with such a huge range of heterogeneous materials, composed in various editions over more than thirty years? It’s clear now and then, from the kind of vague references in our samples above, that Erasmus himself was not entirely clear where he had last dealt with a proverb or proverb-concept. The indexes become crucial to the act of reading. Of course they do not provide an understanding. Yet they do provide access, and in a reference work such access is essential for anyone who wants command of the content.

Now we have ourselves gather a small bouquet of materials relating to *felicitas*, what do we make of this word in the context of the *Adages*? First of all, our approach reminds us that *felicitas* is a word that is part of a more general cluster—*felicitas*, *bona fortuna*, *copia*, *beatitudo*, and related terms. The word ranges in meaning from “worldly success” to “personal happiness,” but stops short of any extended theological speculations on happiness in relation to the soul, except in *Sileni Alcibiadis* where the *philosophia Christi* prevails.

Thus a number of examples of *felicitas* have to do with material success and worldly gain. If we trace back from the thematic list of *loci* indexed under *Bonae fortunae copiae felicitates et ominis*, we find that most of these are related to financial prosperity or material good fortune, such as I iii 29 *Mare bonorum* (*A sea of good things*).²⁴

Yet material success has its hazards, and chief amongst them is false friends. Thus III i 88 *Felicitum multi cognati* (*The fortunate have many kinsmen*) and its variant III v 4 *Felicitas multos habet amicos* (*Good fortune has many friends*) are both about

the false friends who surround rich people. Wealth leads to distorted friendships and, for the wealthy, “in adversity friends are few or none at all” (III v 4). There is a discussion of this issue earlier back at I iii 16 *Ad felicem inflectere parietem* (*Lean to the lucky side*). The proverbial injunction is to attach oneself to the wealthy. Erasmus does not approve. As he notes at the end of his essay, “Here comes in, what Aristotle in the *Ethica Eudemia*, book 7, shows to be a proverb: ‘Time shows who truly loves.’ The passage of time proves friendship, and reveals those counterfeit friends.”

The connection of *felicitas* and friendship is a recurring theme. Thus II iii 76 *Amicitia stabilium, felicitas temperantium* (*Friendship is for the steadfast and happiness for those of moderate desires*) and v i 87 *Prima felicitatis pars sapere* (*Wisdom the chief part of happiness*). The latter is found in a string of quotations from Socrates and comes from *Antigone* 1270. It is hard to see this maxim as a proverb in the usual sense. The former, with its balanced form, comes from Aristotle’s *Eudemean Ethics*. Erasmus comments: “Friendship should be founded on character, not on possessions or physical beauty, for if based on perishable things, it must of necessity itself be perishable.” *Felicitas*, though commonly tied to material success, ought to have nothing to do with physical possessions.

The proverb *Quadratus homo*, the *four-square man*, brings together the themes we have addressed. This is an interesting portrait, because it is linked so closely to the themes of changeability, outside and inside, and friendship that we have seen so far.²⁵

IV viii 35 *Quadratus homo* / A four-square man

In the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle takes issue with those who equate human happiness with external blessings, which come and go at the whim of fortune. He says that, according to this line of thought, our happy man appears as a kind of chameleon, being sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy, according as his circumstances change, just as the chameleon changes colour if placed on a different coloured background. True happiness on the other hand lies in the blessings of the mind, from which he deduces that there is no reason why the truly happy man should not remain happy all his life. He goes on: ‘For the person who will always or as far as possible act and think in a way consonant with virtue and suffer the mishaps of fortune as well as can possibly be done, in an absolutely consonant manner, will be the person who is truly good, a four-square man, free from all that can be faulted.’ (In the third book of his *Rhetoric*, he uses this same phrase, ‘a four-square man,’ to illustrate a type of metaphor.) Now a square remains a square, whichever side it falls on. In the same way, the wise man remains unchanged in his essential self, however events fall out. It will be even neater to apply the term ‘four-square’ to the actual mind of the wise man, which remains unshaken in face of fortune’s blows.

With the character-type of the *quadratus homo* there is a high degree of self-knowledge. Happiness, “as the philosophers tell us ..., consists in rational activity in accordance with the habitual practice of virtue” (*felicitas, iuxta philosophos, sita est in actu rationis per habitum virtutis*, in II i 9). Another proverb at IV v 4 can apply to the *quadratus homo* as well: *Non est beatus esse qui se nesciat* (*He is not happy who does not know it*), taken from Seneca. “The sense is that it is not enough to enjoy good fortune unless you realize you have it.” One must be aware of one’s happiness.

If we look to the Adages as a moral guide to *felicitas*, we can see that a picture begins to emerge. But it is enormously complex, incomplete, and a bit haphazard in its construction. The language of *felicitas* is hard to pin down. Even though the language itself is duplicitous, and full of hidden and changing meanings (the proverbs are Silenus-figures), it’s clear friendship must be open and sustained over time. That is the basis for the *quadratus homo*. He is similar to the *omnium horarum homo*, the man for all seasons (I iii 86), who, in a long extract quoted from Ennius, is, amongst other things, “A man of pleasant ways and power of speech, / Happy, contented with his own” (*suavis homo, facundus, suoque / Contentus atque beatus ...*)—in other words, a *beatus vir* who has found some kind of happiness in his stability and recognition of his own good fortune. Though we have moved around a lot in the *Adagia*, we have not moved far from the opening proverb on friendship *Amicorum omnia communia* (I i 1), where the words *felix* and *beatus* are used to describe the ideal community where such stability and good fortune are to be found, expressed through generosity.²⁶

ERASMUS’ *ADAGIA* IS, as I said at the start, an exemplary work, and we might conclude where we began, by the way it represents an ethic of care. This is a reference work, but a reference work with a difference. Right from the start the ethical concerns—about morality, action, and the right use of language as a form of action—are repeatedly stressed. Erasmus often presents these themes through a direct moral interpretation of the adage’s meaning. But most of the ethical material is implied, through the choice of adage, through modes of citation and explanation from the ancient sources. And the themes are expanded through the way the adage is juxtaposed with others, either through proximity in the text or through cross-referencing, through indexing, through citation of references, and through internal reference. In other words, Erasmus often uses the form of the work to manage the thematic material. The ethical material really emerges from the larger context, not from the particular reading of an individual adage.

The work is massive, and the continuous additions over the years indicate that Erasmus never properly completed, nor could complete, what he set out to do. Indeed, subsequent editors vastly expand his *Adagia*, right into the seventeenth century. The extraordinary variety and abundance of material in itself seems to remind the reader that language itself cannot, in the end, be controlled. Nevertheless, throughout this project the author is a constant presence, directing the reader forwards and backwards, correcting texts, making connections, admonishing the reader to behave. Sometimes this author disappears for a while, then resurfaces.

Despite the remarkable presence of Erasmus as moral actor in his own work, the *Adagia* in the end is what might be called in modern critical terms a writerly text, in the sense that the text takes shape through the reader's efforts to rewrite it.²⁷ The author shows us that it is up to us to reassemble the text as we wish to use it—we have to mark it up, create our own cross-references, find the parallels, take from it what we need and incorporate that material in our own creative work. On the evidence of the marked-up copies in rare book libraries today, many early modern readers undertook this task. Is it too much of a stretch to say that it is in our own Herculean labours, our engagement with Erasmus and his community of scholars, mostly ancient, that we begin to glimpse one form of a potential worldly *felicitas*?

Notes

This paper was first delivered at the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1/3, in Budapest, on 11 August 2006. Thanks to Professor Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, who insisted, graciously, on my completing it for publication. If there seems to be an obsession with indexing in this paper, that's because Professor John Grant and I are currently preparing the prolegomenous volume 30 of the Collected Works of Erasmus—which will provide lengthy indexes to the English *Adages*, volumes 31 to 36.

1. The approach is often to start with the remarkable history of the text, then turn to Erasmus' own explanations of method, then to isolate particular adage essays for closer discussion; some of the best work on the *Adages* has been done by Margaret Mann Phillips, *The "Adages" of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Daniel Kinney, "Erasmus' *Adagia*: Midwife to the Rebirth of Learning," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11.2 (Fall 1981), pp. 169–92; Jacques Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Érasme* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1981), pp. 761–82, especially pp. 771 and ff.; and, several exceptional essays by Claudie Balavoine: "Bouquets de fleurs et colliers de perles: sur les recueils de formes brèves au XVI^e siècle," *Les Formes brèves de la prose et le discours discontinu (XVI-XVII^e siècles)*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Vrin, 1984), pp. 51–71, "L'Essence de marjolaine, ou

ce que, de l'adage retint Érasme," *La Licorne* 3 (1980), pp. 159–83, "Les Principes de la parémiographie érasmiennne," *Richesse du proverbe*, ed. François Suard and Claude Buridant, 2 vols. (Lille: Université de Lille III Travaux et Recherches / P.U.L., 1984) 2: 9–23.

2. Adages are referred to by the standard numeration of volume 2 of the 1540 *Opera omnia*, the final edition; the text is reprinted in volume 2 of *Opera omnia*, ed. Leclerc (Leiden: vander Aa, 1703). All the English quotations from the *Adagia* are taken from the *Collected Works of Erasmus*, volumes 31 to 36 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982–2006), translated by Margaret Mann Phillips, Roger Mynors, Denis Drysdall, John Grant, and Betty I. Knott. The edition is commonly referred to as CWE. The Latin quotations from the *Adagia*, except when otherwise noted, come from *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi*, ser. 2, vols. 1–9 (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1981–2005), edited over the many volumes by M.L. van Poll-van de Lisdonk, Margaret Mann Phillips, Chr. Robinson, M. Cytowska, M. Szymanski, Felix Heinimann, Emanuel Kienzle, Silvana Seidel-Menchi, R. Hoven, C. Lauvergnat-Gagnière, and Ari Wesseling. This edition is cited as ASD. When I refer to sources I am using the notes in CWE and the sometimes more ample commentary of ASD, except when otherwise specified.
3. ASD II-8:63n confirms that *extra calcem* is accepted as correct, and the commentary to CWE 36:264 says "The *calx* was the finishing line of a race marked by chalk. Here it is used by synecdoche for the course itself. There is no need to emend."
4. CWE 31:98; Latin text at ASD II-1:164–5.
5. Claudie Balavoine, "Les Principes de la parémiographie érasmiennne," p. 17, citing from Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, praef. 2 (*Usi autem sumus ordine rerum fortuito*).
6. *Rhetoric*, 1.15.15/1376a, 3.11.14/1413a.
7. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 5.11.21: *quod est velut fabella brevior et per allegoriam accipitur*, "a sort of abbreviated fable understood allegorically" (trans. D.A. Russell [Loeb, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002]). Balavoine shows that Erasmus' contemporaries, Polydore Vergil and Philippus Beroaldus, were inclined to stress the wisdom (*sagesse*) of the proverb, whereas Erasmus seems to focus on the scholarship (*savoir*) ("Les Principes de la parémiographie érasmiennne," p. 15).
8. *Adagia*, Prolegomena i (CWE 31:4 ; ASD II-1:46).
9. *Adagia*, Prolegomena v (CWE 31:13; ASD II-1:60); see also Prolegomena viii (CWE 31:17–18; ASD II-: 64).
10. Letter 126 in *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, annotated by Wallace K. Ferguson in CWE, 1:263.
11. *Adagia*, Prolegomena vi (CWE 31:14; ASD II-1:60).
12. *Adagia*, Prolegomena vi (CWE 31:15; ASD II-1: 62).
13. *Enchiridion*, trans. Charles Fantazzi in CWE 66:67–8, as noted by Kinney, "Erasmus' *Adagia*," for which see following note 14. Erasmus was especially drawn to obscurity as one of the most interesting features of the proverb. In one of his more interesting asides, he comments, in a short essay on *Rudius ac planius*, *More roughly and plainly*,

I i 39 (CWE 31:87–8; ASD II-1:154), on the way speech is used to conceal, and how this very proverb is an injunction to reveal concealed truth.

I surmise that this proverb [*Rudius ac planius*] originated from the fact that in old days those great sages, *sophoi* as they are called, used to take great care to wrap up the mysteries of wisdom in certain coverings of enigma, seemingly to prevent the common herd, not yet initiated into the rites of philosophy, from following their drift. Indeed, even today there are some who profess to be expert in philosophy and theology who do the same: when they are propounding something which any woman or a cobbler might say, they have to envelop and involve it in all sorts of difficulties and extraordinary language in order to appear learned. [*Quin et hodie nonnulli philosophiae ac theologiae professores, cum ea quandoque tradant, quae quaeuis muliercula aut cerdo dicturus sit, tamen quo docti videantur, rem spinis quibusdam, ac verborum portentis implicant et inuoluunt.*] So Plato made his philosophy obscure by his numbers and so Aristotle rendered many things still more obscure by mathematical parallels.

Unlike the analysis in *Amicorum communia omnia*, here the claim seems to be that there is a perverseness to the adage form, that it is meant to hide truth, not contain and reveal it through a sudden revelation.

14. Kinney, "Erasmus' *Adagia*," p. 187.
15. On *Variis prouerbiorum usus* see *Adagia*, Prolegomena xii (CWE 31: 20–1; ASD II-1:66–8); on *ornatum* Prolegomena viii (CWE 31:17–18; ASD II-1:64).
16. The editions mentioned here were examined in copies at the Houghton Library at Harvard University.
17. The Houghton Library *Opera omnia* is a made-up set from various printings; volume 2 is dated 1542.
18. The proverb comes from Aeschylus *Seven against Thebes* 625, and translates literally as "Success comes to mortals as a gift of the gods;" CWE 35:548.
19. There is an internal reference from this essay to III i 88, *Felicitum multi cognati* (*The fortunate have many kinsmen*).
20. Corinth was a rich and busy city, whereas nearby Tenea was a nearby village, though of considerable charm.
21. In this proverb *infelices filii* is a translation of the Greek *kakodaimona tekna*.
22. In the prefatory letter to William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, dated September 1508, Erasmus says "Instead of consecutive order (if indeed there can be any order in these matters), I substituted an index, in which I arranged by families those proverbs that seemed to be of the same general stamp and to be related." (Letter 211 in *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, annotated by Wallace K. Ferguson, in CWE 2:142; for the Latin see ASD II-1:24). Claudie Balavoine comments of this thematic index, "le principe de classement reste en définitive obscur" ("Les principes de la parémiographie érasmienne," p. 18). There is an increasing rationalization of the text as it is developed in its many adaptations. This happens

early in the shortened popular editions. For instance in both the Joannes Maurus edition of 1526 and the (widely known) Theodoricus Cortehoeuius editions from 1530 onwards the proverbs are arranged under thematic categories. The Maurus text uses the same order of topics as found in the 1508 edition to present short little adage essays. The Cortehoeuius text also uses the topics, but now arranges them in alphabetical order, again with short adage essays under each category. And an additional index to each of the proverb lemmas is provided at the end of Cortehoeuius.

23. This comes on a CD-ROM from Studiolum at www.studiolum.com, prepared in 2006 by Antonio Bernat Vistarini, John T. Cull, and Tamás Sajó.
24. I iii 29 *A sea of good things* belongs to a small cluster of thematically connected adages that begin with I iii 29 *Mare bonorum* (*A sea of good things*); 31 *Acervus bonorum* (*A heap of good things*); 32 *Bonorum myrmecia* (*An ant-hill of good things*); 33 *Dathus bonorum* (*A Dathos of good things*); 34 *Thasus bonorum* (*A Thasos of good things*); and, much later in the text, II iv 92 *Bonorum glomi* (*Reels of good things*). With the exception of the last these are found with I iii 26 *Ilias malorum* (*An Iliad of troubles*); 27 *Lerna malorum* (*A Lerna of troubles*); 28 *Mare malorum* (*A sea of troubles*); 30 *Thesaurus malorum* (*A store of evils*)—the whole group providing further evidence of the potential contradictions inherent in the characteristic rhetorical form of the proverb.
25. CWE 36:378; ASD II-8:148 As CWE indicates, this proverb is related to I i 93 *Polypi mentem obtine* (*Adopt the outlook of the polyp*) and III iv 1 *Chamaeleonte mutabilior* (*As changeable as a chameleon*).
26. “Plato also says that a state would be happy and blessed in which these words ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ were never to be heard” (*Idem ait felicem ac beatum fore ciuitatem, in qua non audirentur haec verba: ‘meum’ et ‘non meum’*; CWE 31:30; ASD II-1: 84).
27. The term writerly or *scriptible*, which seems to suit Erasmus’ cornucopian text so well, is from Roland Barthes: “Le texte scriptible est un présent perpétuel, sur lequel ne peut se poser aucune parole *conséquente* (qui le transformait, fatalement, en passé); le texte scriptible, s’est nous en train d’écrire, avant que le jeu infini du monde (le monde comme jeu) ne soit traversé, coupé, arrêté, plasifié par quelque système singulier (Idéologie, Genre, Critique) qui en rabatte sur la pluralité des entrées, l’ouverture des réseaux, l’infini des langages” *S/Z in Œuvres complètes*, tome II 1966–1973, ed. Éric Marty [Paris: Seuil, 1994], p. 558.)