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DESIDERIUS ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM

On Copia of Words and Ideas
(De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia)

Translated from the Latin with an Introduction by Donald B. King
Professor of English College of Mt. St. Joseph On-the-Ohio and
H. David Rix
Formerly Professor of English Pennsylvania State University

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I.

The Works of Erasmus

On a trip to England in the summer of 1499 Erasmus met several men who were to become lifelong friends, Thomas More, John Colet, and others enthusiastic about classical literature. Particularly fruitful was his encounter with Colet, who enkindled in Erasmus what was to become a major ambition: to revivify the theology of the schools with a deeper study of Holy Scripture in the original languages and also of the works of the early Church Fathers. With this aspect of his work we are not here directly concerned. Suffice it to say that after years of preparation and after he had become the most sought after scholar in Europe he finally published in 1516 his Latin version of the New Testament together with a Greek text. The same year saw his edition of the works of St. Jerome. From then until his death twenty years later there came from his pen revised forms of his New Testament, paraphrases of large parts of Scripture, and numerous editions of the works of the Fathers of the Church. None of this work is now of serious value textually, but in its time it constituted a tremendous exploitation of the recently discovered printer's art in what Erasmus hoped would be a renaissance of Christian faith and practice springing from a return to the sources.

Upon returning to Paris from England in 1500 Erasmus published the work which more than any other was to serve as the basis for his literary reputation. This was the *Adagia*, a collection of about 800 Latin proverbs (later much enlarged) with appropriate comments by Erasmus. The *Adagia* may be said to typify Erasmus' other major ambition: to replace medieval learning with the riches of Greek and Latin letters, or as it was then called, the New Learning. Other writings of Erasmus intended to open up to his contemporaries the riches of classical style and matter include the *De copia*, its companion volume, the *De conscribendis epistolis*, and the extremely popular and witty dialogues of the *Colloquia*. As a measure of his indefatigable industry it may be recalled that the first collected edition of his works, published in 1540, four years after his death, filled twelve large folio volumes. In addition, eleven

volumes were required for the publication of his correspondence by P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen in the years from 1906 to 1947.¹

II.

The Editions of the *De Copia*

The first edition of the *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* of Erasmus was completed during Erasmus' third and most lengthy visit

¹ Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*, eds. P.S. Allen and H. M. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906-47) (hereafter cited as Allen).

to England (1509-1514). It is dedicated appropriately to John Colet for use in St. Paul's School, which he had recently opened in London. The first of many printings of the work was issued from the press of Badius at Paris on July 15, 1512 in a volume which included the *De ratione studii* and some minor writings:

D. Erasmi Roterodami de duplici Copia rerum ac verborum commentarii duo.
De ratione studii & instituendi pueros commentarii totidem. De puero Iesu
Concio scholastica: & Quaedam carmina ad eandem rem pertinentia.
Venundantur in aedibus Ascensianis.²

After Erasmus left England in 1514, he visited Strasbourg. There he gave Matthias Schurer (who had already run off a few unauthorized printings of the work) the first revised form of the *De copia* which Schurer printed in December, 1514.³ Later Erasmus went to Basle and gave the printer, Froben, a corrected copy of the *De copia* which appeared in print in 1517.⁴ Then, in 1526 he issued another revised version of the work from the press of Froben. Driven away from Basle in 1529 by the excesses of the Reformers, he retired to Freiburg. From there he sent his third and final revision of the *De copia* to the Froben press in 1534.⁵

The present translation was made from a seventeenth century copy of the *De copia* which had first been collated with a copy of the first edition of Schurer, dated January, 1513, with a copy of the first revised edition, published by Schurer in December of 1514, with a copy of the second revised edition, published by Froben in 1526, and with a copy of the 1540 Basle *Opera Omnia* edition representing the text as it appeared in Erasmus' third and last revision. No significant differences were found between the seventeenth century copy and the Basle edition of 1540.

One indication of the success of the *De copia* is to be found in a summary of its printing history.⁶ During the lifetime of Erasmus at least eighty-five editions of the *De copia* were published by a great variety of printers throughout western Europe and especially in Germany, France, and the Low Countries. After 1550 the demand for the book abated somewhat but the total number of printings during the sixteenth century was well above 150, and there were scattered editions published subsequently as late as 1824. Mention should also be

² Copy in the library of Harvard University.

³ Allen, Ep. 311.

4 Allen, Ep. 462.

5 For an account of Erasmus' habits in dealing with printers, see P. S. Allen, *Erasmus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 109-37.

6 H. D. Rix, "The Editions of Erasmus' *De Copia*," *Studies in Philology*, XLIII (1946), 595-618.

made of such works as a catechism of questions and answers on its subject matter prepared by Lucas Lossius (1508-1582). The first of several editions of this digest appeared about 1550. Then there was the *Enchiridion ad verborum copia* of Thierry Morel with fifteen or more printings between 1525 and 1551, and the *De utraque copia verborum et rerum praecepta* of Andre des Freux, S.J., with several printings during the third quarter of the century. Erasmus' writings were very popular in Spain but difficult to obtain there; one way of providing the subject matter was to reproduce it in works of a Spanish author. This was done for the *De copia* in the *Rhetorica en lengua Castellana* (anonymous) printed in Alcala in 1541 and containing a section on copia borrowed from Erasmus. In England, where several editions of the *De copia* were published during the sixteenth century, and one as late as 1823, the *Treatise on Schemes and Tropes*, 1550, incorporated a partial summary of Book II in English.

III.

Analysis of the De Copia

The general plan of the *De copia* was probably suggested to Erasmus by a passage in the tenth book of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. The first chapter of that book bore the title "De copia verborum" in editions of the work printed during the lifetime of Erasmus and the phrase "copia rerum ac verborum" (echoing a similar phrase in Book III of Cicero's *De oratore*) appears early in the chapter. Quintilian eschewed any discussion of methods for attaining copia rerum on the ground that ideas (rerum) are peculiar to a given case so that a general approach is impracticable. His treatment of copia of words, moreover, is extremely brief, most of the chapter on this subject being devoted to a critical discussion of Greek and Roman poets, dramatists, historians, orators, and philosophers from the point of view of their value in the education of orators. This left a clear field for Erasmus to supply the pedagogical details omitted by his illustrious predecessor. It will be noted that there is no mention of Quintilian in the dedicatory epistle to Colet, but rather only of some minor writers, and that Erasmus claims credit for being the first to think through and develop the subject. But of course Erasmus is not the only great writer to be silent about sources.

Book I of the *De copia*, on copia of words, opens with a general discussion on

the nature and value of copia. This leads to a chapter on the first precept of copia, that the writer's language should be pure, elegant, appropriate, Latin. That this chapter is not succeeded by others developing the second precept of copia, the third, etc., may be explained by the author's rather haphazard methods of organizing material. Instead there comes next (chapter 11) the first method of

varying by the use of synonyms. Here Erasmus is following Quintilian closely, even to the illustration, *ensis, gladius*. But before treating the second method of varying, Erasmus digresses at length on a topic arising from the first precept of *copia*, warning his readers about the use of words that are low, uncommon, poetic, and so on, through some ten categories. By far the greater part of this material on good usage appeared for the first time in the final revision of the text of 1534.

The next twenty chapters continue with methods of varying, for the key to the richness of style so highly prized in the Renaissance era was the repetition of an idea in skillfully varied diction. The particular methods that Erasmus recommends (following a suggestion of Quintilian) include the use of the traditional ten tropes metaphor, synecdoche, etc. and of other figures as well.

Here a few words may be said about the relation of the *De copia* to traditional rhetorical theory. In ancient times the training of the orator was discussed under five headings: (1) methods of generating cogent arguments (*inventio*; Books iv and v of the *Institutio oratoria*), (2) appropriate arrangement of material in the oration (*dispositio*; Book vi), (3) rules for cultivating an admirable style (*elocutio*; Books viii-x), (4) devices to help the orator memorize and (5) deliver his material effectively (*memoria and pronuntiatio*; Book xi). The treatise of Quintilian represents the rhetorical tradition, inherited by the Romans from the Greeks, at its best, free from both pedantry and meretricious display.

The political atmosphere of the later empire contributed to the decline of the oratorical ideals of an earlier age, and the emphasis in the teaching of rhetoric shifted to style. Furthermore, style came to be identified mainly with the use of figures of speech as ornaments. This emphasis is reflected in the text which served as the principal source transmitting rhetorical doctrine in the West through the medieval centuries to the renaissance period, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, long attributed to Cicero. The last of its four books, in length nearly equal to the first three combined, is devoted to style and the figures of speech receive the major attention. Erasmus borrowed material from this text for some of his illustrations.

Several different methods of classifying the figures were in vogue. Quintilian divides them into (1) tropes, the use of words in other than their normal signification and (2) figures or schemes (a) of thought and (b) of words. In the *ad Herennium* the tropes are included with the figures of words.

Classifications similar to these are found in the numerous rhetorical textbooks that appeared during the sixteenth century. Erasmus himself takes no interest in these matters. In fact, he

appears to demonstrate his independence of these systems which seldom rise above the level of pedantry. For he freely interposes among the tropes a selection of figures of words and of thoughts to suit his purpose.

Following upon the last of the methods of varying words by the use of figures, Erasmus in chapter 33 gives a dazzling exhibition of their application, writing a hundred fifty variations on the sentence, "Tuae literae me magnopere delectarunt," and two hundred on "Semper dum vivam tui meminero." In this way the greatest master of copious style demonstrates to his disciples how to put principles into practice.

The remainder of Book I is essentially a thesaurus or collection of formulas arranged under a variety of headings useful to students of composition. It is the part of the *De copia* that underwent the principal expansion in successive revisions and that is of least interest today. In 1512, Book I included 153 chapters; in 1526, the number was extended to 171 and in 1534 to 206. Since only the first 33 chapters of Book I are presented in this translation, a few illustrations from the latter part are given here. Chapters 34 to 94, which run from a half dozen lines to several pages in length, exhibit methods of varying grammatical or syntactic forms. For example, chapter 46, the longest of all, is concerned with methods of varying superlative expressions, and contains extensive lists of such phrases as sweeter than honey, more hateful than death, wiser than Nestor, etc. Chapter 66 gives about twenty-five different formulas for citing an author. Chapters 94 to 206 are shorter chapters, many of them running only a few lines, and list variations on individual words or phrases somewhat in the fashion of a modern thesaurus except that the arrangement is haphazard rather than alphabetical. Thus Chapter 159 lists these formulas for varying *solitudinis*:

He lives by himself. He talks to himself. He is alone. He is solitary. He proceeds unattended. He walks alone. It is not safe to walk in deserted places, etc.

Having employed the tropes and schemes of rhetoric to develop the methods of copia for words, Erasmus turned to the topics of dialectic for the methods of copia rerum. In Book II there is very little theory and a great deal of illustration. Thus the first method of expanding a topic by partitionis given a brief sentence or two of explanation and six different illustrations. Here Erasmus is at his favorite task of making available to readers of his day selected passages of classical literature.

The problem of organizing his subject for the convenience of the student is less to his liking. The numbered chapters of Book I have given way to a series of numbered methods of varying or expanding a theme. But this breaks down in the course of the eleventh method

the accumulation of proofs. By an easy transition from commonplaces Erasmus arrives at the exemplum and to this favorite device of the medieval preacher he devotes more than half of Book II. Among numerous subdivisions of this section appears one explaining how a student should collect and classify in his notebook exempla from his reading of classical authors for use in his own writing. For good measure Erasmus illustrates his directions with a discourse on the death of Socrates, another on sailing, and a third, several pages in length, on the theme of inconstancy. Perhaps reminded by this theme of what he is supposed to be doing, he remarks that he will now continue with the methods of enlarging upon a topic. But the plan with which he had begun Book II having long since gone by the boards, he presents but one more method—multiplication of the parts of an oration. He then brings his work to a close with some suggestions on what a student of copia should avoid. It is to be presumed that the engaging style of Book II of the *De copia* served to compensate for its at times unsystematic approach.

Much of the illustrative material, which constitutes by far the largest part of Book II, is not original with Erasmus. He does not always quote directly from the works of the author from whom he is borrowing, nor does he habitually give an indication of the source of his quotation. At times he quotes page after page from a series of authors, often without any hint that the material is not his own. A list of the writers most often quoted in the two books of the *De copia* includes: Apuleius, Aristophanes, Aulus Gellius, Cicero, Euripides, Homer, Horace, Livy, Lucian, Macrobius, Martial, Ovid, Persius, Plautus, Quintilian, Sallust, St. Jerome, Seneca, Terence, Varro and Vergil. Of these names the most important are Quintilian, from whose work come about seventy of a total of more than one hundred and fifty citations, and Cicero, whose writings supply (either directly or through quotation from Quintilian's quotations of his work) a greater number of illustrations for the *De copia* than do those of any other single author.

IV.

The Importance of the *De copia*

In his lengthy study of the school curriculum in Shakespeare's age, T. W. Baldwin⁷ discusses at great length the important place of the *De copia* in the educational pattern of the time. The schoolmasters' editions and commentaries