

The Adagia: a knowledge product and its revisions

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Erasmus's most commercially successful work was a collection of classical proverbs with commentary, the *Adagia*. The first edition, published in Paris in 1500, contained some eight hundred proverbs drawn from Latin authors, each with a short explanation of its origin and meaning. In 1508, Erasmus published a vastly expanded edition with the Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, in whose house he lived for several months, drawing on the Greek manuscripts of Aldus's circle; it contained more than three thousand proverbs. Froben then published successive editions in Basel, each enlarged and revised, until the last edition supervised by Erasmus contained more than four thousand entries.¹

The *Adagia* served several purposes. It was a work of scholarship that made the wisdom of antiquity accessible to readers without direct access to the classical sources. It was a handbook for writers and speakers, who could adorn their Latin with apt quotations. And it was a vehicle for Erasmus's own opinions: some entries grew into long essays on war, on the abuses of princes, on the corruption of the clergy and on the vanity of wealth. The essays *Dulce bellum inexpertis* and *Sileni Alcibiadis* were printed separately and circulated widely.

From a commercial point of view, the *Adagia* was a product that the author and the printer developed over time. Each new edition added material, corrected errors and incorporated the author's latest thinking. Each one made the previous editions obsolete for readers who wanted the most complete version. Readers bought new editions, whereas pirates who reprinted old editions offered an inferior product. The strategy of continuous revision, which Erasmus and Froben practised, gave them a competitive advantage over pirated editions and generated repeat sales.

This strategy is familiar to modern publishers of legal and financial reference works, whose value depends on being up to date. Commentaries on statutes, loose-leaf handbooks and databases of case law are revised

continuously, with their users paying for the latest version. The same logic applies to financial information services, compliance databases and regulatory updates. The *Adagia* was, in its way, an early knowledge product whose value lay in its completeness and currency, and whose producers understood how to maintain that value against competitors.

1 Notes

1. On the editions of the *Adagia* (Paris 1500, about 800 entries; Venice, Aldus, 1508, about 3,260 entries; Basel, Froben, successive editions until 1536, more than 4,100 entries), see the literature on the *Adagia*. Figures to be verified. ↩

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