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The 'Charm and Distinction' of Proverbs: The Duality of the Gem Analogy in Erasmus's *Adagia*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in Humanities
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Abstract

Throughout the *Adagia*, Erasmus of Rotterdam frequently compares proverbs to precious gems and gemstone jewelry. My interdisciplinary study contributes to the broader discussion of Erasmus's use of imagery by evaluating the specific qualities Erasmus associates with gemstones as analogous to the qualities he argues synonymously describe proverbs, specifically how both possess and imbue "charm and distinction." The historical use of gemstones as essential for the display of social status and political power coupled with the contemporaneous belief in amuletic and astral magical properties of gemstones reveals the complex connections Erasmus forges between the qualities of gemstones and proverbs. Erasmus's marked use of references to gemstones uncovers the social, political, and moral implications of his humanist message, advocating for the ability of knowledge from classical antiquity to bring back the golden age of learning. Ultimately, Erasmus mirrors Platonic rhetoric, in his discussion of a deceptive outer appearance, to argue for the value of a proverb's wisdom as true gems which lend real charm and distinction, while precious gemstones and jewelry are a false proxy for virtue. Erasmus advances his arguments for the value of ancient wisdom by using the gem as a relatable device capable of expressing his many points about the true nature of proverbs.

Introduction

On the title page of the *Adagiorum Collectanea* (1500), a red-lettered advert entices potential readers with the following pitch:

This book not only has originality but is also a work that will be marvelously helpful for adding charm and distinction to every genre of the written or spoken word. You will be aware of this, young men, if you are in the habit of dropping such delightful gems into your letters and everyday conversation. If you are sensible, then, you will buy this rare treasure that is on sale at such a bargain price.¹²

This upbeat, rather salesy advert on the cover of the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1467-1534) first book of proverbs, is somewhat unusual.³ First, "charm" and "distinction" can each have double-sided meanings.⁴ For Erasmus, "charm" can have a frivolous connotation, suggesting a natural ability to socially win-over others through pleasing personality traits, often used negatively to condemn the behavior of princes and nobles. Yet here, "charm" is used positively as a desirable trait. By contrast, Erasmus uses "distinction" as an *earned* compliment based on some valued action or virtuous quality. Often Erasmus uses "distinction" ironically,

¹ *Gathering of Proverbs*, trans. John Grant, in *CWE 30*, p. 4.

² It is worth mentioning that in this particular instance, the Latin word for gem, *gemma*, in the original is not specifically present, however, the Latin word *deliciis*, which simply means "delightful," is frequently translated by other translators as "delightful gems," as it is here with Grant's translation.

³ While it is not definitive who wrote the advertisement, Erasmus or the Parisian printer, Johann Philipp, Grant is the only source I have come across who credits someone other than Erasmus or words their discussion of the advert's language vaguely. Barker seems to avoid definitively commenting in either direction, see William Barker, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: The Spirit of a Scholar* (Reaktion Books, 2021), 64. Whereas John Grant credits Johann Philipp but notes that the advertisement "echoes Erasmus's own sentiments as expressed in his dedicatory letter" to Lord Mountjoy. See above citation source.

⁴ The original Latin translated as "charm," *venustare* and "distinction," *insignire*.

juxtaposing the hollow merits of rake-like rulers with their virtuous-looking attire. Immoral nobles do not “live up” to their fine image. Combining “charm” and “distinction” together elevates the notion of “charm” as attainable through learning, and at the same time, cheapens “distinction” as a mere form of flattering social popularity. For Erasmus, both “charm” and “distinction” have a good and a bad version, a duality to their applied meanings.

To illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of proverbs, Erasmus frequently employs the dualistic image of the gem, similar to what we see in the advert, throughout the editions of the *Adagia*. Erasmus describes how proverbs are analogous to gems for their initial “charming” beauty and size, for “proverbs are like little gems, so small that they often escape the searcher’s eye unless you look very carefully.”⁵ The analogy continues with craftsmanship and setting, as proverbs “only show their real beauty when they are seen inserted like jewels into the right place in a speech.”⁶ And just as gems upon closer inspection were viewed in the Renaissance as sacred containers, as protective, healing amulets, and as timeless pieces, I argue Erasmus implies that the proverb is “distinguished” with these same qualities. Building on interdisciplinary scholarship, I argue that Erasmus uses the gem as an analogy for a proverb’s valuable sartorial “charm and distinction” and at the same time, to express the “charm and distinction” of sacred ancient wisdom encapsulated within a proverb. I argue that Erasmus codifies knowledge, the wisdom of a proverb’s “authentic power of truth,” as synonymous to wealth in social value through the “charm and distinction” of gems.⁷

⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, book, ed. Margaret Mann Phillips (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 196.

⁶ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. 199. See also Eric McPhail, *Dancing Around the Well*, “Chapter 2: A Gem in its Setting” for more on the analogy of a gem’s setting and a proverb’s use in writing familiar epistles.

⁷ *CWE 31:17*, trans. John Grant. See also Eric McPhail, *Dancing Around the Well*, “Chapter 2: A Gem in its Setting,” where he paraphrases Grant’s translation of Erasmus as the “endurance of truth,” 43.

In the editions of the *Adagia*, Erasmus traces the origin and use of particular proverbs and offers reflective commentary on how their wisdom can be applied in his own day. Erasmus refers to proverbs using gem imagery to discuss the nature and definition of a proverb. At the surface level, Erasmus advises that proverbs should be “as clear-cut as gems,” and the more short and to-the-point the proverb is, the more it “adds immensely to their charm.”⁸ As with gems, one must “consider the force and significance which are contained” in a well-worded proverb.⁹ Here, Erasmus implies that words and phrases can be valued for their beauty like a gem. There are naturally well-made gems which are more costly than artificial or less-quality gems, just as there are well-worded proverbs and proverbs which are not as “worthy of use.”¹⁰

Gems represented the same qualities Erasmus saw in proverbs. Gems as precious stones set into jewelry, symbolized wealth, power, nature, and beauty in Erasmus’s time. A gem was, and is still, considered precious because of its natural and manmade beauty and its relative scarcity. Precious gems are valuable in part due to their limited quantity, which affords wealth and therefore a form of economic power. The display of this power by either wearing or describing precious gem jewelry is at once a relatable image for communicating value. The highest-quality proverbs earn an associated grand distinction and value statement of “royal” and “princely,” proverbs which should be “inscribed in gold...[in] princely halls, chased on episcopal rings, engraved on royal scepters.”¹¹ By calling proverbs gems and relating them to a value of power, Erasmus is claiming that proverbs are themselves powerful because they have the ability, like gemstone jewelry, to convey “charm and distinction.”

⁸ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 171.

⁹ *Ibid*, 171.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 172.

State of the Research

One of the great challenges to understanding Erasmus's frequent use of gem imagery is due to the separated fields of relevant scholarship. Analysis of gem imagery has, ironically, just scratched the surface. Eric McPhail, Ari Wesseling, and Andrew Hui's literary interpretations stress the significance of the setting of a proverb to the setting of a gem – for gems are to jewelry settings what proverbs are to stylish writing.¹² As “vestiges of the past,” a proverb has the unique power to outlast time through the “endurance of truth” of its wisdom.¹³ Wesseling discusses the connection between the power and beauty of nature, via Pliny's *Natural History* and medieval lapidaries, as Christian “moral instruction” from God. While these articles provide a wider analysis of imagery used by Erasmus, I offer a contribution on Erasmus's use of the gem device by analyzing how Erasmus uses the gem's dualistic qualities of “charm and distinction” to express the similar traits he sees in proverbs. The visible and hidden qualities of gems, highlighted by Erasmus, are the perfect image for Erasmus's to communicate the visible and hidden virtues he sees in proverbs.

On the other hand, while analysis of gem imagery has been lightly discusses in literary interpretations, the social and historical relevance of gemstone jewelry has been well researched. Sarah Cockram and Lisa Mansfield discuss the values that jewelry historically represented as “markers of monetary value, nobility, and inner and outer beauty.”¹⁴ Cockram and Mansfield reveal the particular ability of jewelry to promote status, identity, and highlight jewelry's essential role in socio-political display and performance. Cockram argues that jewels “in addition

¹² Ari Wesseling, “Erasmus: Peculiar Words in the Colloquies and His Concept of Proper Latin Diction,” article, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 73, no. 1 (2011): 355–65.

¹³ Eric MacPhail, *Dancing around the Well : The Circulation of Commonplaces in Renaissance Humanism*, book, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, Volume 232 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 43.

¹⁴ Sarah Cockram, “Isabella d'Este's Sartorial Politics” (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 35. ; Lisa Mansfield, “Lustrous Virtue,” in *Sartorial Politics in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 93.

to splendor and value” were “required in the display of honor” conveying significance “through the meanings attributed to different gemstones.”¹⁵ This scholarship elucidates the specific importance of gems in society and politics, as representations of honor and social standing. Using this sartorial lens, I argue that Erasmus uses gem analogies to speak to the potential of proverbs to act like gems as statement pieces of social and economic virtue. This reading of gems and proverbs, highlights the outward allure of “charm” and the visible social-performative aspect of “distinction.”

Erasmus employs dualistic images and language that readers would recognize from the rhetoric of Plato’s *Republic* to exemplify how close study reveals the difference between an initial outer appearance and another truer reality hidden within. In Erasmus’s time, gems were believed to have magical properties. Patricia Aakhaus and John Cherry discuss the continued belief during the Renaissance that gemstones could contain celestial spirits and act in amuletic ways. Cherry discusses amuletic gemstone jewelry with numerous religious designs which demonstrate “their acceptance in Christian thought.”¹⁶ Aakhaus argues that “much Renaissance art and literature can be fully understood only by considering magical thought and operations.”¹⁷ Aakhaus uses the cultural understanding of magical thought associated with gems to examine Renaissance poetry. Following Aakhaus’s example, I examine Erasmus’s gem references within the context of belief in the magical properties of gemstones. This analysis reveals the hidden aspects of gems Erasmus draws on from common cultural knowledge and employs these magical properties of gems to comparatively describe the magical properties of proverbs. These magical

¹⁵ Cockram, “Isabella d’Este’s Sartorial Politics,” 51.

¹⁶ John Cherry, “Healing through Faith: The Continuation of Medieval Attitudes to Jewellery into the Renaissance,” article, *Renaissance Studies* 15, no. 2 (2001): 154.

¹⁷ Patricia Aakhus, “Astral Magic in the Renaissance Gems, Poetry, and Patronage of Lorenzo de’ Medici,” article, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3, no. 2 (2008): 187.

qualities of gems speak to less obvious inner truths Erasmus argues are present within proverbs. These qualities describe different connotations of both “charm and distinction” which the proverb possesses.

The two-sided nature of gems and proverbs is exemplified in the language of the cover page advertisement. The advert promises to give the reader’s writing “charm and distinction” with the collected ancient knowledge within. This edition of the *Adagia* includes a dedicatory epistle to Lord Mountjoy in which Erasmus continues his gem analogies to explain the high value and many qualities of a proverb. Ironically, he uses a proverb to explain this: “a gem does not shine in a dungheap as it does in a ring.”¹⁸ Further editions of the *Adagia* include notable proverbs such as *Festina Lente* and *Herculii Labores* where Erasmus’s descriptive commentary turns personal as he draws on the gem analogy to explain the value of the classical wisdom he praises for shedding a guiding light on the destructive social and political issues of his day.¹⁹ While the glittering surface appearance of gems may initially draw attention, the deeper inner reality of their magical and amuletic qualities reveals their true value. In the same way, Erasmus compares proverbs to gems because proverbs are deceptively simple-sounding, catchy phrases with “charm” but the ancient wisdom within the proverb reveals the “distinction” of their true value.

The rhetoric of Platonic hierarchy of value based on proximity to the absolute abstract “being” of “the good,” is instrumental here. Natural gems are seen as a shadow of “the good,” whereas the wisdom within a proverb, expressed as “heavenly gems,” is a closer abstraction

¹⁸ CWE 30, see also MacPhail, *Dancing around the Well : The Circulation of Commonplaces in Renaissance Humanism*, 18.

¹⁹ “Make Haste Slowly,” and “The Labors of Hercules.” See also Erasmus, Trans. Phillips, *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 5. The “general reader, interested in the classics for what light they could throw on his own life and on the choices and struggles of his own society.”

towards knowledge of “the good.”²⁰ This rhetoric explains Erasmus’s belief that appearances are deceiving, and everything requires creative scrutiny. This metaphysical truth was the foundation of Erasmus’s understanding, and as such, it deeply affected his worldview. The gem device is a relatable tool, employed as analogies or metaphors for expressing the tension between true inner value and fallible outer appearance.

In what follows, I offer a contribution to the existing literary analysis of Erasmus’s use of imagery by focusing on the gem motif as an embodiment of the dualistic qualities of “charm and distinction” which Erasmus attributes to the proverb. First, I examine the etymology of both “charm” and “distinction,” leaning on literary scholars and Erasmus’s own use of these words to discuss their definitions. Second, I combine my literary examination of the gem motif with research in sartorial politics and magical thought to analyze the potential references Erasmus makes when he invokes the image of the gem. By analyzing the different virtues that gems represented, I offer a deeper understanding of the values Erasmus ascribes to proverbs through his analogies to gemstones.

²⁰ This analysis recalls the language and rhetoric expressed in Plato’s *Republic*.

Chapter 1: The Linguistic History of ‘Charm and Distinction’

Erasmus uses the gem image to symbolize the virtues of “charm and distinction.” To illustrate how Erasmus understands “charm” and “distinction,” an examination of precedents from key authors in antiquity is beneficial. By comparing ancient precedents to Erasmus’s original Latin in the *Adagia*, we can illuminate the special significance of these words when combined with gem imagery.

The salesy advert for the first edition of the *Adagiorum Collectanea* promises that the book will enhance the reader’s powers of expression. It is described as “a work that will be marvelously helpful for adding charm and distinction to every genre of the written or spoken word.”²¹ This description emphasizes two key qualities – *venustandum insigniendumque*, or “charm and distinction.”²² First, *venustandum*, from the verb *venustare*, means “to make something charming, to bestow charm.”²³ Literally, it means ‘to charmify.’ While relatively easy to express in Latin, this translation is grammatically awkward in standard English. The verb *venustare*, ‘to add charm,’ is less common than the noun *venustas*, or ‘charm.’²⁴ The noun *venustas* describes someone or something as ‘having charm.’ To have charm means to be “lovely, charming, pleasing, winning, agreeable, graceful, beautiful or elegant.”²⁵ Significantly,

²¹ Barker, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: The Spirit of a Scholar*, 66.

²² CWE 31, 4. Additionally supplemented with translations by Brendan C. Cook from digital scans of an original 1500’s edition of Erasmus’s *Adagiorum Collectanea* from Beatus Rhenatus’s Humanist Library in Sélestat, France.

²³ *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews’ edition of Freund’s Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the verbal form *venustare*, or to ‘charmify,’ can mean to add charm to something, whether physical or mental in nature. Already, *venustare* has the potential to apply to the outside – the ‘added charm’ beauty lends a woman, or a gem, or a proverb – or to the inside, the mental ‘charm’ of a person’s mind, or speech, which describes inner qualities. This is significant because writing is an outward expression of a person’s interior world. Indeed, Erasmus’s famous motto, present both in the portrait engraving by Albrecht Dürer and the ancient-mimicking portrait medal by Quentin Metsys, claims “his writings show him better.”²⁶ But is a person’s language “charming” or “graceful” because of the beauty of the handwriting, the tone of voice, or because of what, metaphorically, it contains within – the meanings of the words or their artful arrangement? The duality of outer appearance versus inside reality present within the uses of *venustare* connects to this dualism quality of the glittering surface of gems.

Venustare has a complex meaning even more complicated by its association with Venus. While the main meaning of *venustare* is to “add charm,” the root is derived from the noun *venustas*, or ‘Venus-like.’²⁷ Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, makes up the root of this word.²⁸ Ancient authors were familiar with this etymology. The subtle underlying connection to Venus inherent in *venustas* and its derivatives, refers to the characteristics of the goddess herself and the qualities she presides over within the domain of her powers. This is significant because the invocation of a human-looking, living being – albeit deity – is tied closely to the underlying meaning of *venustare*. There is a divine element assumed in its root definition.

²⁶ Barker, *Erasmus of Rotterdam: The Spirit of a Scholar*, 18.

See also Morgan Library and Museum’s online exhibition of these two artifacts. This quote was a famous expression Erasmus placed on his portrait medal: “The surrounding inscription relates to the long-standing humanist debate about the respective merits of images and texts. It asserts that although the portrait is ‘from life,’ and therefore reliable, Erasmus’s writings provide a truer representation of the author.”

²⁷ *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews’ edition of Freund’s Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Additionally, the association with Venus suggests a sexual appeal, an alluring quality, conjuring desire. If Erasmus's advert claims that using proverbs in one's writing will confer "charm and distinction" to an author's expressions, then it is implied that proverbs have charm in their own right. Including a proverb to bequeath elegance to one's writing only works if the proverb itself is viewed as inherently elegant on its own. If proverbs themselves have an inherent charm, then the pursuit of knowledge, and appearance of mastery, is the 'charming' quality that distinguishes the author as learned. Could Erasmus be capitalizing on his audience's desire to appear intellectually distinguished by eroticizing knowledge? The underlying association in *venustare* to Venus suggests an element of "desire" for one's writing to be alluring thus, reflecting charm on the author.

Closely following *venustare* in the advert is *insigniendum*, from the verb *insignire*, which means "to mark, to put a mark upon, to distinguish."²⁹ *Venustandum insigniendumque*, most closely translates as 'to charmify and distinctify,' or in other words, 'to add charm and distinction.' To be "distinguished," originally meant to mark something or someone as different from other things or people. *Insignire* was used by classical authors in the Latin idiom the same way it is used here by Erasmus and our English translation – to mean that someone or something is marked out, distinguished 'by a mark.' To be distinguished calls to mind medals worn for winning athletic competitions or for earning recognition in academic or military endeavors. *Insignire* suggests that it is the condition of the action, 'the marking' of something or someone that claims it is distinguished as different. Medals worn on the body are symbolic representations of honor, just as jewelry represents the economic value of gems and gold, in addition to a

²⁹ *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879.

specific style, heraldry, or other symbol the jewelry may invoke. This understanding of *insignire* is crucial for reading how Erasmus draws a connection between jewelry worn to distinguish an individual's social-political standing, and proverbs "inserted into speech" to distinguish one's writing.³⁰ This metaphor reveals a sartorial process in which, like gems, proverbs can lend their qualities to describe the possessor.

While *insignire* is often used by Erasmus to convey distinction, he also uses *distinguerere*. Both of these words are employed almost interchangeably by Erasmus throughout the *Adagia*. This is because *insignire* and *distinguere* have a very similar meaning and usage pattern in the classical Latin idiom preferred by Renaissance humanists. Whereas *insignire* means "to put a mark upon," *distinguere* means to "separate, divide, or part."³¹ Both words mean "to distinguish" however, they express this meaning through different metaphors. *Insignire* connects an association of greatness or achievement on the object described by a mark upon it, whereas *distinguere* focuses on the act of separation, of something separated to stand out, by a line, circle, cutting, or otherwise discerning between two or more things. Yet, these words both imply the same meaning when used to describe someone or something as "distinguished." Indeed, Cicero used *distincta* to describe an adorned goblet because it was "studded all over with most splendid jewels."³² Virgil used *insignire* to the same effect in the *Aeneid*, when he describes a golden shield and "graven in the gold is horned Io —wondrous the device!"³³ Like

³⁰ Erasmus, Desiderius. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d'Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32.

³¹ *A Latin Dictionary*. Founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin dictionary. revised, enlarged, and in great part rewritten by. Charlton T. Lewis, Ph.D. and. Charles Short, LL.D. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1879.

³² Cic. Ver. 2.4.62. *gemmae erant distincta clarissimis*.

³³ Verg. A. 7.790. *clipeum sublatis cornibus Io auro insignibat*.

these precedents, Erasmus uses both of these words to mean “distinguish,” both with gem imagery and without, to comment on the use of proverbs to distinguish one’s writing and speech.

Mere pages after the cover’s promise that proverbs will confer a “charming distinction,” Erasmus explains the use of proverbs in his dedicatory epistle to his patron, Lord Mountjoy. Arguing in favor of their use, Erasmus rhetorically asks:

What is more effective at adding charm to our speech through polished merriment, or adding humor to it through learned jokes, or seasoning it with the spice of urbanity, or marking it out with assorted tiny jewels of metaphor, or illuminating with the light of proverbs, or varying it with little blossoms of allegory and allusion, or sprinkling it with the sparkling lures of antiquity?³⁴

As previously noted, *distinguere* can mean “to set off, decorate or adorn,” which nicely expresses the imagery of proverbs as gems. Following Cicero’s use of *distincta* to describe the bejeweled ornamentation of a goblet, *distinguendum* in Erasmus’s epistle, here translated as “marking it out,” emphasizes how “tiny jewels of metaphor” embellish a discourse. This usage of ‘distinction’ highlights how proverbs can be gem-like when they “adorn” one’s writing or speech. “Decorating” one’s writing with the “jewels of metaphor” lends charm to one’s writing style. A charming style then comments on the qualities of the author and their inner mental world. The ability for “charm and distinction” to comment both on the outer and inner qualities is captured by the dualistic image of the gem. Because the gem represents virtues on the exterior

³⁴ *Quid enim çque conducit: ad orationem uellepida quadam festiui tateuenustandam: uel eruditio iocis exhilaradam: uel urbanitatis sale condiendam: uel translationum gemulis qbusdam distinguendam: uel sententiarú luminibus illustradam: uel allegoriarum et allusionú floseulis uariogandam: uel antiquitatis illecebris aspergendam...* Erasmus, trans. Brendan C. Cook. Dedicatory Epistle to Lord Mountjoy from the 1500’s edition of the *Adagiorum Collectanea*. Additionally supplemented with translations by Brendan C. Cook from digital scans of an original 1500’s edition of Erasmus’s *Adagiorum Collectanea* from Beatus Rhenatus’s Humanist Library in Sélestat, France.

and interior, Erasmus uses the gem as an analogy for proverbs because proverbs also contain inner and outer qualities.

Both “charm” and “distinction” are two-sided concepts. “Charming” expresses the concept of an appealing surface while also describing qualities of inner beauty. The further potential for “charming” to invoke desire and magic speaks to the basic longings of human nature and the desire for knowledge. “Distinction” describes the quality of having a mark upon the surface. Yet, this outer mark represents a mirrored inner singularity or uniqueness which is displayed through a symbolic mark on the outside. The gem device captures this quality of frivolous surface appeal and intrinsic inner value, a confusing dualism, a hierarchy of real and false value. This dualism expresses the need to first appeal visually to entice the audience to look more closely to the interior. Phillips argues that Erasmus’s “avowed intention” with his *Adagia*, “was to smooth the path to knowledge of the classics for the *mediocriter literati*.”³⁵ By capitalizing on the attention-grabbing “charm and distinction” of the appearance of fine gemstone imagery, Erasmus can develop his argument that the pursuit of ancient knowledge and the attainment of wisdom are the true gems to strive for as the real markers of “charm and distinction.”

³⁵ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 5.

Chapter Two: The “Little Jewels of Metaphor”

The gem device functions in Erasmus’s writing in four notable ways: as a lender of wealth-based social distinction, as a symbol of monetary value based on the gem’s beauty, as an amulet with magical properties, and as a precious capsule containing timeless pieces of the past. While the gem symbolizes these four qualities, it additionally imparts those qualities to the wearer of fine gemstone jewelry. Erasmus invokes this unique ability of gems to lend their qualities when he compares the gem to a proverb. To understand why Erasmus would want to compare proverbs to gems, I first offer a closer look at the historical use of gems, followed by literary analysis of Erasmus’s gem references.

The Gem As Social Distinction

Gems have long been understood as symbols of social and economic power. For “thousands of years, gems were used as tools and amulets often associated with social status and money.”³⁶ This understanding continued into the Renaissance where scholars agree that “gems moved from precious ornaments of religious devotion to secular objects of commodity.”³⁷ The commodification of gems introduced new contexts and associations possible for gemstones. Cockram describes Renaissance attire and jewelry as a system which “displayed status and

³⁶ Stefanos Karampelas et al., “Gems Through the Ages,” bookitem, in *Gems and Gemmology*, Short Introductions to Cultural Heritage Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 5.

³⁷ Andrew Hui, “The Infinite Aphorisms of Erasmus and Bacon,” article, *Erasmus Studies* 38, no. 2 (2018): 176.

wealth...through markers of monetary value, nobility, and inner and outer beauty.”³⁸ Studies in sartorial politics highlight the social significance of jewelry “and its decorative symbolism to create an impression, and to aid attempts to gain and hold influence.”³⁹ By reading Erasmus’s gem references through the “sociological and semiotic lens” of sartorial politics, the gem can be read “as an indicator, and maker, of status and identity.”⁴⁰

And indeed, we see the sartorial in Erasmus’s writing when he discusses the ways gems lend social distinction by mimicking the appearances of the wealthy nobility. The gem’s initial façade conveys charm and distinction to the wearer of fine jewelry. However, a closer and discerning look is required to determine if the virtues gem’s bequeath to the wearer truthfully describe the wearer. Erasmus critiques the outward appearance of royals and courtiers, claiming their fine jewelry is a false proxy for virtue:

...they fancy themselves the most distinguished of men. In one respect, they take the prize for modesty, because they content themselves with the gold, gems, purple robes, and other insignia of virtue while relinquishing to others all concern for the virtues themselves...⁴¹

Here, Erasmus makes a case for gems as an “insignia of virtue.” And that’s just it, they signify virtue but are not necessarily worn by those who truly live up to what it means to be virtuous in their actions. It is appearing virtuous that interests royals. Erasmus claims they are “monkeys...who stripped of their purple and gems are mere tinkerers.”⁴² The gem functions

³⁸ Cockram, “Isabella d’Este’s Sartorial Politics,” 35.

³⁹ Ibid, 43.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 37.

⁴¹ Desiderius Erasmus and Robert Martin Adams, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings : A New Translation with Critical Commentary*, 1st ed., Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1989), 68.

⁴² Erasmus, Desiderius. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d’Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32.

here as one indicator of virtue that distinguishes the wealthy ruling class from other social classes. Notably the subject wearing the gemstone jewelry is empty of true virtue but not necessarily the gems themselves. Erasmus disparages the misguided desire to appear virtuous through expensive attire and questions why this is admired. Upon closer inspection, true kingly virtues are hard to find:

You may heap up everything – public adoration, gold and jewels, statues, a pedigree drawn from Hercules...but unless you tell me of a mind far removed from vulgar foolishness, free from sordid desires for worthless things, and from the prejudices of the herd, I have not heard any praise worthy of a king.⁴³

These symbols of distinction use false-charm to appeal to the public who praise princes for qualities that are, in reality, not proper indicators of the ability to rule well. Gems stand in as signifiers of royalty because they are symbols of economic power. But just because someone may possess gems, does not make them truly royal in Erasmus's eyes. Here, the gem functions as a symbol of social distinction based on wealth and is used negatively to express the shallowness of mere monetary worth as insubstantial to true virtues.

The Gem as Economic Power

As Erasmus has demonstrated, through the display of precious gem jewelry, the ruling class signified their financial power. In this system, wealth is synonymous for power. Gems are part of the finery the ruling class wears to reinforce their power to rule over others. Just as in

⁴³ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The "Proverbs" of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 217.

previous examples, Erasmus uses the gem image as a distinguisher of monetary wealth but questions this value by presenting a double-sided question about the meaning of “fortunate”:

how much sense do you think Croesus King of Lydia had...so relying on his treasure of jewels and gold that he was angry with Solon for refusing him the name of ‘fortunate’?⁴⁴

The gem here signifies wealth and Erasmus leaves the gem’s symbolism at exactly that. Erasmus implies that the surface reading of “fortunate” is only economic wealth but a deeper look using “sense” suggests there are other, possibly better things which make a man truly ‘fortunate.’ Yet, monetary power is still power. This is why the gem is so fitting a symbol for economic and political power – the gem maintains its economic value regardless of whose possession it is within. Its value stands on its own – whether possessed by someone with real or false virtues.

The gem can only function as a symbol for monetary wealth and social distinction if it is believed to be authentic. Since antiquity, craftsmen perfected the art of counterfeiting gems and continued with advancements during the European Renaissance.⁴⁵ As Pliny notes in his *Natural History*, “there is no fraud or deception, which takes a higher profit than the forgery of gems.”⁴⁶ The demand for counterfeit gems emphasizes the importance for false jewels to appear the same as real gemstones, but in reality, be worth much less and therefore more affordable. Where there is desire and demand, there is a market. Gemmologists note that glass was a popular substitute

⁴⁴ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. 215.

⁴⁵ Karamelas et al., “Gems Through the Ages,” 81. See also Erasmus. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d’Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32. ...”when someone sold the empress glassy jewels for real ones, and she found out and demanded justice, [Gallienus] ordered the seller to be arrested as if he would be thrown to the lions. Then a cockerel emerged, and he ordered this ridiculous event to be announced to the audience by a herald; he practiced imposture and he suffered it.”

⁴⁶ Karamelas et al., 81. Referencing Pliny ch. 75, “Indeed, there is no kind of fraud practised, by which larger profits are made.”

used to make false gemstones.⁴⁷ As the counterfeit market demonstrates, it is the ability of the outer surface appearance to be convincing that determines belief in the false-gems' value. In *Praise of Folly* the eponymous speaker relates the story of a man who tricked his young, impressionable bride with false glass jewelry. Believing the stones to be genuine and “incalculably valuable,” she “kept her trifles, as if they were some immense treasure.”⁴⁸ To her they did represent economic power and social status. For anyone who was convinced by them, they functioned exactly the same as real gemstones and conveyed economic and social distinction. In this vignette, Erasmus highlights the necessity of belief which is required to value luxury items, whether real or false. While gems can substitute for a lack of real virtues to appear “distinguished,” here the “charming” beauty of gems is seen as the indication of genuine and believable quality.

This opposition of true reality versus false appearance is a distinction Erasmus invokes with the gem image when he discusses the proverb. The motif of the gem in the previous examples can be real or false, representing economic, political, and social power. The gem conveys these qualities onto those who deserve, and perhaps do not deserve, those qualities. False gems are truly “trifles,” they do not inherently have the same monetary value as real gemstones. Erasmus self-consciously admits that proverbs can seem at first like “apparent trifles.”⁴⁹ Like the “trifles” the young bride coveted, the distinction here is an issue of

⁴⁷ Karampelas et al., 81; Annibale Mottana, “Counterfeiting Gems in the 16th Century: Giovan Battista Della Porta on Glass ‘Gem’ Making,” article, *Journal of Gemmology* (1986) 35, no. 7 (2017): 652. And Marlise Rijks, “Gems and Counterfeited Gems in Early Modern Antwerp: From Workshops to Collections,” bookitem, in *Gems in the Early Modern World, Europe’s Asian Centuries* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 309–42.

⁴⁸ Erasmus, trans. Adams, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings : A New Translation with Critical Commentary*, 47. “I know a man of my name who gave his new bride some artificial gems, telling her – for he was a great practical joker – that they were not only genuine stones, but extraordinarily, incalculably valuable. I ask you now, what difference did it make to the girl if her eyes were delighted and her mind gratified by the glass? She kept her trifles, as if they were some immense treasure...”

⁴⁹ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 204.

authenticity, of false versus real value. Erasmus discusses the proverb in the same dualistic terms as the gem, as an “apparent trifle” with the implication that it is not merely what it first seems to be. By claiming proverbs may at first seem frivolous, Erasmus argues for the true value of a proverb. Erasmus claims that unlike gems which can be fabricated and empty of true worth, there is no trickery in his estimation of a proverb’s worth, the value is real.

The Proverb as a Gem

Because gems symbolize the charm and distinction of social capital, they are a frequent metaphor for proverbs. Gems have an outer “charm,” their beauty based on their size, color and luster, as well as an inner beauty, the gemological qualities of the interior structure which speak to a gem’s specific value. Gems are small but valued quite high compared to their size. Likewise, proverbs are quite small themselves. Erasmus argues that proverbs “are enhanced by such complete neatness and brevity, necessary...to proverbs, which should be as clear-cut as gems.⁵⁰ Like gems, proverbs vary in size. However, size is not wholly indicative of their value. Fearful his audience would dismiss these small sayings due to their initial appearance, Erasmus compares the disparity between the size and value of a proverb to that of a gem:

And although a proverb seems a tiny speck of a thing, we should not forget that they should be judged not by their size, but their value. Who would be so mad as to value gems, however tiny, less than the largest rocks?⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid, 171.

⁵¹ Erasmus. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d’Érasme*, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037), 2010. 32.

Though gems and proverbs may first seem miniscule in their own ways, Erasmus encourages his audience not to dismiss these proverbial sayings based on their surface appearance. Instead, he argues that both gems and proverbs have an inner value. Just as gems hold a value which is not commensurate with their size, so do proverbs hold a value in wisdom that may not be seen from first appearances. This smallness proves part of the challenge in obtaining these rare treasures. Erasmus likens his search for proverbs to the mining of gems, an activity which requires looking deep below the surface:

proverbs are like little gems, so small that they often escape the searcher's eye unless you look very carefully. They are not ready to hand but lie hidden, and it is a matter of digging them out rather than collecting them. ...searching the whole world over, as it were, for such tiny things...⁵²

It is “digging them out” and “searching through books,” understanding the origin of the proverb, which illuminates its inner qualities. Below the charming surface of gems and proverbs are real virtues which are truly distinguished.

The Amuletic and Timeless Qualities of Gems and Proverbs

In addition to wealth and social distinction, gems were valued for their amuletic associations with the divine. As Cockram notes: “In addition to splendor and value, jewels contributed to the semiotics of sartorial politics through the meanings attributed to different gemstones.”⁵³ The tradition of lapidaries, or gemological studies of gemstones, began in

⁵² Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 196.

⁵³ Cockram, “Isabella d’Este’s Sartorial Politics,” 51.

antiquity with Pliny's *Natural History*, where certain magical and religious qualities were ascribed to specific gemstones.⁵⁴ As Aakhaus notes, "the belief in the magical, amuletic, and healing effects of precious stones which was formed in the classical world continued through the Middle Ages."⁵⁵ These potentially healing and protective qualities added to the monetary value of a jewel as a "material manifestation of divine glory."⁵⁶ Notable figures such as Lorenzo Medici collected engraved gems specifically for their amuletic properties. Aakhaus argues that Lorenzo Medici's motto *le temps revient* expresses "a conviction that astral magic could bring back the Golden Age of antiquity. This return of a better past would be achieved by astral magic "through the use of engraved gems."⁵⁷ Many gemstones were themselves from antiquity and it was believed that these ancient gems could contain within spirits or essences of the past. As Aakhaus notes, there were prayers which "[ask] that the stone become 'a dwelling place for the majesty of Thy heart.'"⁵⁸ This shows the continued belief that "planetary spirits may reside in stones."⁵⁹ In these examples, the gem is seen as a precious container which can hold further sacred or precious essences. The phrase "thy heart" references the Christian god and suggests that gems can contain something sacred and pure without violating Christian dogma. These frequent references to the amuletic and magical potential of gems show that in the early modern period, "magical thought cannot be separated from politics, medicine, religion, or any other aspect of culture."⁶⁰ The potential astral and amuletic qualities of gems provide a deeper reading of Erasmus's literary gem references.

⁵⁴ Karampelas et al., "Gems Through the Ages."

⁵⁵ Cherry, "Healing through Faith: The Continuation of Medieval Attitudes to Jewellery into the Renaissance," 154.

⁵⁶ Hui, "The Infinite Aphorisms of Erasmus and Bacon," 176.

⁵⁷ Aakhaus, "Astral Magic in the Renaissance Gems, Poetry, and Patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici," 188.

⁵⁸ Aakhaus, 190. (see footnote 17 and 18.)

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Aakhaus, 188.

Erasmus describes proverbs as lending “charm” like a gem.⁶¹ “Charm” can additionally be applied to suggest these amuletic and astral magical properties of gems. Erasmus draws on this amuletic quality of the gem to express that a proverb can be viewed in this same amuletic way. Just like an engraved gem, a proverb is a relic of the past that can bring back the knowledge of antiquity. Erasmus argues that a proverb is much more valuable than just a catchy jingle of words, but more like a verbal preservation of ancient knowledge. In the *Prolegomena* to the *Adagiorum Chiliades*, Erasmus argues that the value of the proverb is its wisdom, for “in the proverbs of the ancient world is all its wisdom enshrined.”⁶² McPhail notes that this “persuasive power of proverbs insists that proverbs have the endurance of truth.”⁶³ It is this timeless truth of ancient wisdom which Erasmus wants to harness for his present. Just like Lorenzo’s wish that his collection of ancient amuletic gems could restore antiquity, Erasmus implies that the proverb’s wisdom could reinstate the golden age of learning. Through his work compiling the *Adagia*, what Erasmus offers is a book as a bridge, “a continuity between the classical world and his own.”⁶⁴ By using proverbs in their writing and speech, the readers of Erasmus’s *Adagia* are “recreating [the] mental climate” of old antiquity.⁶⁵ Erasmus’s goal was to use the potential proverbs have “to recapture...the outlook and way of life of the classical world, through its customs, legends, and social institutions...the accumulated wisdom of the past.”⁶⁶ Erasmus’s aim “to create, by way of proverbs, a window on to the ancient world,” is an expression of the value he sees in wisdom itself.⁶⁷ And so, because Erasmus sees so much value in a proverb as a

⁶¹ Erasmus, trans. Brendan C. Cook from digital scans of an original 1500’s edition of Erasmus’s *Adagiorum Collectanea* from Beatus Rhenatus’s Humanist Library in Sélestat, France.

⁶² Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 8. See (footnote 4: Prolegomena to the Proverbs, section V.)

⁶³ MacPhail, *Dancing around the Well : The Circulation of Commonplaces in Renaissance Humanism*, 43.

⁶⁴ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 3.

communicator of ancient wisdom, he expresses this value through the relatable image of the gem. A book of proverbs with a value equal to or greater than gemstones is indeed, a “rare treasure.”⁶⁸

Like a gem, a proverb is timeless. As old and timeless material, Erasmus suggests that proverbs share a connection to the past and maintain their relevancy like ancient gemstones. Gems have long been valued in human culture just like the proverb, which Erasmus claims is “from the age of Saturn, or whatever may be older than that.”⁶⁹ Phillips points out that “these proverbs show that Erasmus was dealing with imperishable material, the forms in which common experience has crystallized out.”⁷⁰ As Lorenzo’s collection demonstrates, many prized gemstones were from the distant past and viewed as “relics of the ancient world.”⁷¹ Erasmus discusses Aristotle’s belief that “proverbs were simply the vestiges of that earliest philosophy which was destroyed by the calamities of human history.”⁷² This humanist notion of the “shipwreck of human history” highlights proverbs as the surviving “fragments of antiquity [which] summon nostalgia and melancholy.”⁷³ This melancholy is due in part because “the works of the ancients, which are as it were the springs from which proverbs are drawn, are in a great part lost.”⁷⁴ Yet, “Erasmus is more optimistic: a fragment gives us a key to open the vast archives of the past.”⁷⁵ Proverbs, as windows into the past, act in amuletic ways to bring back

⁶⁸ “If you are sensible, then, you will buy this rare treasure that is on sale at such a bargain price.” *Gathering of Proverbs*, trans. John Grant, in *CWE XXX*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Erasmus, trans. Phillips. *The “Proverbs” of Erasmus; a Study with Translations*, 196.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

⁷¹ Aakhus, 188.

⁷² Andrew Hui, “The Infinite Aphorisms of Erasmus and Bacon,” article, *Erasmus Studies* 38, no. 2 (2018): 171. *CWE* 31:14.

⁷³ Hui, 172, citing his other work *Poetics of Ruins in Renaissance Literature*. Ch. 1.

⁷⁴ Andrew Hui, “The Infinite Aphorisms of Erasmus and Bacon,” article, *Erasmus Studies* 38, no. 2 (2018): 173. Hui, citing *CWE* 34:173

⁷⁵Hui, 173.

antiquity. Erasmus envisions the literary hero, demurely suggesting the title for himself, who “sets fallen learning on its feet...[as] building up a sacred and immortal thing, and serving not one province alone but all peoples and all generations.”⁷⁶ Proverbs are like gems in that the proverb ‘contains’ the knowledge of antiquity. Likening proverbs to gems in this analogy describes the gem’s quality as a precious container and applies it to the proverb. In Erasmus’s metaphor, the proverb’s concise distillation of didactic lessons and universal truths are the verbal containers of ancient knowledge, the ‘spirit’ of antiquity. And like gems, proverbs can translate across time and place.

The Importance of Setting

As Hui has noted, Erasmus “employs various images to describe the proverb’s potency.”⁷⁷ Yet, the gem in particular expresses the potency of a proverb through their shared qualities. Gems have a unique ability to change settings. “As resilient artifacts, many gems carry a provenance across historical periods and cultures, and others reveal an intersection of cultures in their design.”⁷⁸ Gems can move between cultures and time periods and be repurposed into new contexts. In this same way, proverbs have moved across time, culture, and language.⁷⁹ Since both gemstones and proverbs are crafted and shaped by man, they can be polished, recut, reset, and used again and again without losing their value. Like gems, a proverb is “a magic casement indeed, revealing and explaining so much.”⁸⁰ Just as gems are set into jewelry, proverbs can be

⁷⁶ Erasmus, trans. Phillips, 180.

⁷⁷ Hui, 175.

⁷⁸ Aakhus, 198.

⁷⁹ Erasmus, trans. Phillips, 8.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 5.

set into written or oral communication. The setting is important because, like jewelry, it highlights the value of the main object – a gem or a proverb – by providing a quality frame for showcasing. Erasmus cites Aristotle as “warn[ing] us not to place [a proverb] just anywhere.”⁸¹ But rather, there is an art to it, just as there is to making jewelry. For “just as it would be ridiculous to set gems in certain places, so it is absurd not to set a proverb in its place.”⁸² Good writing is likened to a craft, the craft of jewelry-making, in which authors are the makers of fine works where they can set precious knowledge to be shown off. But the setting is of crucial importance as “a gem does not shine in a dung heap as it does in a ring.” The setting emphasizes the importance of showcasing the gem’s qualities in the best light. The gem still shines, is still beautiful, can still be amuletic, noble, or old. But its context set in a ring allows its qualities to be dispersed to people or objects appropriate to its splendor, unlike feces, which sully it. The moment the gem is removed from that unsuitable and disgraceful context, its high qualities are lendable. Gems, as jewels set into wearable art, make a statement about their monetary value, the beauty of the craftsmanship, and the beauty of the gems themselves, showcased in the best possible way.

These qualities of gems describe how proverbs can act in sartorial and amuletic ways, yet these qualities cannot function without the appropriate setting. Good writing is just like this in the analogy Erasmus has created. A proverb’s placement in writing or oratory is described by Erasmus as a craft. Just as some jewelers are excellent at making jewelry while others are less so, Erasmus draws the same comparison between good and bad writers setting proverbs into their works. The gem is especially potent when put into a jewelry setting, as is a proverb when placed

⁸¹ Erasmus. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d’Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32.

⁸² *Ibid.*

in the right place in a paragraph. Both have the ability to lend their charm and distinction, the gem to the wearer, the proverb to the author's writing. A proverb functions like a gem in that it confers status and nobility on one's writing or speech, which ultimately reflects on the status of the author, in the way that beautiful gemstone jewelry distinguishes the wearer and the craftsman who made it. The more educated one is, the more well-read, the better material one has and familiarity with good writing to be considered "learned." Students and the intellectually curious alike wanted to emulate ancient authors, like Aristotle, and artfully weave "frequent proverbs, like gems" with "which the learned lend distinction to their writing."⁸³ Just as gems add distinction to the wearer of fine jewelry, so do proverbs lend distinction to the author who has crafted a nice piece of writing or oratory. Erasmus argues for this gem-like quality of proverbs by stating that:

part of the pleasure of writing is to treat subjects which treatment makes to shine, and which lend brilliance and eloquence to the author. But here, the matter treated is such that it only looks brilliant when it is being used, not when it is being talked about; proverbs only show their real beauty when they are seen inserted like jewels into the right place in a speech. Separate, they are lifeless, and seem petty, flimsy little things.⁸⁴

Erasmus makes a direct analogical link between gems and proverbs, using the gem-language of "brilliance" and "shine" to discuss the qualities of and proverb. This imagery connects to the statement of setting, the 'right' place for a gem or a proverb which will "show their real beauty." This dualistic idea of a fake versus real beauty is expanded by the lesson Erasmus supplies on the

⁸³ Erasmus. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d'Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32.

⁸⁴ Erasmus, trans. Phillips, 199.

setting. Looking at jewels laid on a cloth is not the same as looking at finished pieces of jewelry ready to be bought and worn. A proverb is like a gem in this same way, “the gem is bound to outlast its own setting. Consequently, it must periodically be reset: proverbs outlast their literary context and must be integrated into new contexts.”⁸⁵

Proverbs are a raw material of economic and social power that have an outer and inner beauty, just like gems and jewelry, and lend their qualities to wherever they are set, so long as the setting is appropriate for the proverb. It is not enough to simply know a few proverbs; one must additionally understand the proverb enough to know when to use it to its greatest effect. It is the hidden meaning of a proverb, the distilled lesson that is the inner ‘true’ beauty, and the concise phrasing that is the alluring, initial “charming” outer appeal. Erasmus cautions his audience in the *Adagia* that “it requires no mean skill to set a jewel in a ring...not anyone can correctly and elegantly place a proverb in a speech.”⁸⁶ Proverbs can be used like a tool to add elegance and charm to one’s writing, but skill is also necessary to use this knowledge-tool well. Knowledge alone isn’t enough without the ability to use it to further communicate the point one is making with its evocation. As Hui pithily notes, “deciphering the meaning of the aphorism requires that both the aphorism, and the reader, be brilliant.”⁸⁷ And so understanding the wisdom of the proverb and demonstrating this understanding by using the proverb well is the marker of true “distinction.”

⁸⁵ MacPhail, 43.

⁸⁶ Erasmus. Trans. Brendan C. Cook. *Les Proverbes d’Érasme, présentés par les Belles Lettres et le GRAC (UMR 5037)*, 2010. 32.

⁸⁷ Hui, “The Infinite Aphorisms of Erasmus and Bacon,” 177.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

Erasmus employed dualistic metaphors throughout his writings to discuss opposing qualities. While the gem image is one example of Erasmus's dualistic figures of speech, it is significant because Erasmus invokes the gem as tool to discuss the value of reading proverbs. The dualism of the gem image is nicely expressed as lending "charm and distinction." Erasmus specifically highlights how gems represent economic power, natural virtue, social pre-eminence, astral properties, amuletic healing, and timeless wisdom. In a humanist sense, the gem can be understood as good, real, spiritual, inward, and bad, false, earthly, outward. Additionally, the sparkling allure of gems is a metaphor both for the way that surface appearances dazzle and distract us, and as something hidden but deeply valued and precious. The gem is the perfect image and analogy for a proverb. It is a relatable image that was well understood by Erasmus's audience. Erasmus himself was famous for wearing "many rings on his fingers" but especially for his ring of Terminus, the ancient Roman god, of boundaries.⁸⁸ Erasmus in fact used this ring as a seal of assurance once forgeries of his handwritten letters began to damage his reputation.⁸⁹ The popularity of ancient gemstones was not surprisingly celebrated by Erasmus himself. Erasmus's famous ring was an engraved gem originally from ancient Rome which was reset in a band and engraved with his personal motto: *concedo nulli*, or "I yield to no one."⁹⁰ This personalized and reset ancient gemstone ring illustrates the power Erasmus placed in gems as

⁸⁸ Barker, 94-95.

⁸⁹ Erasmus, trans. Phillips, 162.

⁹⁰ Barker, 94.

sacred containers, amulets, and all of the same qualities which he advocates also describe the proverb.

Both gems and proverbs have charm, beauty and distinction, wisdom, are amuletic, and timeless. Additionally, both reflect these qualities on the possessor, whether a wearer of fine jewelry or an author or orator who skillfully uses a proverb. The gem is a symbol of the aspiration to appear distinguished and wealthy, though for many, gems were too expensive and out of their reach. The proverb, when related as a gem, conveys the aspiration to be or appear learned, to connect to the ancient wisdom and great minds of the past. However, while gems initially invoke an aspirational image of appearing charming and distinguished, they are ultimately a proxy for real virtue. Erasmus argues that it is the humble proverb, as a piece of sacred wisdom, that is the true gem and of true value. Drawing on humanist knowledge as the ultimate worthwhile pursuit, Erasmus advocates that it is instead knowledge, not wealth, which we should regard so highly. And unlike gems, as his *Adagia*'s cover page advert suggests, Erasmus's "rare treasure" of incalculably valuable knowledge is available at a "bargain price" for which you cannot buy gems. The language of the advert points to an interesting irony: that people chase after earthly jewels of lesser value when knowledge is available for the price of his book. Through Erasmus's hard work compiling the *Adagia*, the true gems of knowledge are well within one's reach. It is the collected wisdom of antiquity that makes one truly distinguished. And Erasmus hopes that after a little time with his *Adagia*, his readers will learn that knowledge is its own reward. And so, Erasmus uses the gem motif to promote the superior value of ancient wisdom, with sparkling, alluring, and truly distinguished brilliancy.

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