

Erasmus/*Erasmus* Latin as a Symbol and as a Communication Language¹

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La rete Erasmus prende il suo nome da un letterato che ha scritto esclusivamente in latino, e che è passato alla storia come educatore soprattutto grazie ad opere in cui si insegna a scrivere e a parlare correttamente in latino.

Ora, volendo riunire dei giovani europei sotto il nome di un grande letterato, pacifista e cosmopolita, perché scegliere “Erasmus” e non, per esempio, “Voltaire”? Questo sembra in contraddizione con la storia dell’Europa moderna, che ha visto nell’affermazione dell’uso delle lingue nazionali come lingue di comunicazione pubblica una delle strade verso la democrazia, e che nello stesso processo di unificazione europea ha preferito il plurilinguismo all’imposizione dell’inglese – vincente nelle relazioni commerciali e scientifiche.

In realtà, proprio negli scritti scolastici Erasmo non solo ritrae un mondo in cui è frequente che studenti (o scolari, o studiosi) di tutta Europa siedano allo stesso tavolo, o giochino agli stessi giochi, ma in cui si raccomanda di farsi delle competenze nelle lingue delle persone che si frequentano, perché comunicare con qualcuno, soprattutto se ospite, nella sua lingua materna è espressione di civiltà. In questo contesto il latino assume un aspetto diverso dal latinorum noto alla storia della cultura italiana.



Cecilia Asso studied in Florence, where she received the laurea degree in Letters, and in Pisa, where she received her specialisation degree in History at the Superior Normal School. Her research is in the field of early modern history, particularly religious history. Currently she is engaged on a project regarding the history of New Testament philology. Furthermore, with Adriano Prosperi, she is preparing a broad selection of Erasmus of Rotterdam’s works for publication (two volumes of the series are already published: *Colloquia*, 2002 e *Scritti religiosi e morali*, 2004).



It has been observed that today the name of Erasmus circulates in Europe in non-specialist circles particularly because of the university networking which allows and encourages young people to travel during their course of study, in order to broaden and improve their cultural and human horizons. Why the name of the great humanist from Rotterdam (1466-1536) was chosen to designate this European

Commission programme can be explained very simply on the basis of Erasmus’ life. He travelled continuously in almost all of Europe. He often changed his stable place of residence (where he had his books): this was in Flanders, Paris and England when he was a youth; and in Flanders again, Basel and Freiburg in old age. Furthermore, even though he complained continuously about his

poor health, he travelled a lot in order to follow closely the work of the typographers who were printing his works in Venice, Leuven, Antwerp, Basel, Paris and Freiburg. A trip which he frequently made was from Leuven to Basel and back, going up and then back down the course of the Rhein, the backbone of old Europe. And this itself would be enough to evoke a thousand themes, dramatic and pleasurable, artistic and political, all fundamental for the history of European culture.

However, I have always found it curious that the young university Europe of our days should have as its symbol the name of a man who wrote his numerous works exclusively in Latin. Furthermore, some of his most important works have as their original aim that of teaching to write, but also to speak, the classical languages, that is Greek and Latin, correctly. A rather famous case is that of the treatise *De recta latini graecique pronuntiatione* [On the way to pronounce Latin and Greek correctly], where, among other things, Erasmus showed which was the best pronunciation of Classical Greek (the so-called Erasmian pronunciation which even today is used in the schools). But other works by Erasmus too, considered important especially for the history of literature and of culture, were originally conceived with the purpose of teaching young people to speak and write in Latin. The *Adagia* [Adages] are a gigantic collection of more than 4000 proverbs and figures of speech from antiquity, which Erasmus chose from the works of Greek and Latin literature. Each saying is followed by an explanation (in Latin) which in some cases occupies just a few lines; in others it runs to many pages. Historians have underlined the importance that some of the texts have for the history of religious and political thought, and scholars today usually concentrate on this aspect when they speak of the *Adagia*. But Erasmus' intent in undertaking this immense lexicographical work was principally to offer to those who wished to express themselves in Latin the basic elements for elegant written composition, and for pleasant and civil spoken conversation. And in this way the *Adagia* were read and used for three centuries all over Europe. Their fortune and their importance in school teaching were so great that even in Italy, where from the mid 16th century on Erasmus' works were radically banned because they were considered full of heretical ideas, the *Adagia* continued to circulate, although in expurgated form and hidden under other names.

The *Colloquia* too are nowadays considered above all in view of the moral and religious, as well as literary, value of the approximately fifty conversations that constitute them. But it is also true that the original purpose, Erasmus' principle aim in writing them and publishing them, was to teach young pupils, such as he had had when he was a university student in Paris, to speak Latin properly.

And in general we can say that during his life Erasmus was in substance a *grammaticus*, a Latin teacher, so much so that this professional qualification was used against him when he wanted to deal with theology and with the reform of Christianity.

In the light of what we have said so far, if in favour of Erasmus as a European symbol there is his life as a cosmopolitan citizen, should we not also say (I ask myself) that having used and disseminated so intensely what has been defined the language of power counts against him? Why not choose instead Voltaire, who was just as much against national borders as Erasmus and who wrote equally powerful pages against war between Europeans?

Perhaps we should reconsider attentively to what extent it is true that Latin in Europe was only the language of power, or, better, try to understand how it became that.

First of all, we must keep in mind that the Humanists distinguished polemically the 'barbarous' Latin used by the Church and in the universities from the Latin that they were bringing back into use through the study and spreading the knowledge of classical writers. In their plans, Latin was supposed to constitute the foundation and the soul of a liberal education, the kind of education, that since Antiquity was destined to form free men, as distinct from slaves.

Scholars have discussed and are still discussing how much this kind of education can be considered 'democratic', or popular, suitable for every person, without distinction of social class. Some have held that the humanistic method rapidly became the educational method for the children of princes and for the dominant classes in Europe, leaving aside its original ideals of a humanity intellectually free from social differences. And on the other hand, there are those who still remember that in the course of European history, humanistic culture has kept alive an anti-authoritarian tradition which is the humus in which modern democratic thought could grow and mature.

As often happens in studies, it is probable that the most convincing answers can be found using both these lines of interpretation. In any case, since this theme is too vast for us to take it on at this time, it is best that I try to justify the question posed at the beginning, starting from my Italian point of view.

In Italy the expression *parlare latino* (speak Latin) also means "to express oneself in an incomprehensible way", as an authoritative *Vocabolario della lingua italiana*² explains. In our tradition Latin, or *latinorum*, as the people say in these cases, is often considered to be an obscure language, full of traps, used by the 'experts' to serve the power structure; the language that is useful in order to acquire esteem and respectability *a priori*, and to give lustre to an objective position of power. We will see below a few examples of this traditional conception, but first I will try to explain why this negative image of Latin is so familiar to me.

When I was a little girl the teaching of Latin in the schools was already being reduced. At the beginning of the 1960s in fact the so-called *scuola dell'obbligo* [obligatory school for all children] had been increased from five to eight years of study (five years of elementary school and three years of middle school). Before this new system was put into effect, the only obligatory school for all children was the elementary school, after which those who continued to study could go either to the technical-professional schools, or else to the middle schools where Latin was taught and where students were prepared for study at the *Licei* and the Universities. When the middle school became obligatory for all children, the study of Latin also became mandatory for everyone. If this from the point of view of a humanistic and liberal education may seem like progress, in reality in Italy (where the grave social divisions for a long time weighed heavily on the organisation of the school system) it became a further tool of discrimination between those who found in their family and in private teachers the necessary support to be able to study and those who had to deal by themselves with a direct and brutal relationship with a culture and a language (Latin, but also with literary Italian) that were completely foreign to their world and to their experience. The selection which derived from this situation was, in the majority of cases, obviously and unjustly based not on the capacity of each individual student, but rather on the different opportunities that life and chance had offered them. Thus, at the beginning of the 1970s, following the upheavals of '68, but also as a consequence of a passionate debate that involved the school world (and in which in my opinion the most interesting voice continues to be that of don Lorenzo Milani³), the Minister of Public Instruction started the gradual reduction and removal of Latin teaching in the lower middle school.



Fig. 1 Don Lorenzo Milani.

cultural horizons (from them I first heard mentioned and saw applied Linguistics, Anthropology and Psychoanalysis), but with excellent technical competences, meaning in this field Grammar, Rhetoric and Philology. But from them too I learned that the classical languages are nothing more than professional tools of those who work on the History and Literature of the Western world, that they should be studied to understand the classics and historical sources; and therefore that exhibitions of an 'active' competence, such as translations from Italian into Latin or Greek or themes written in Latin (which in Italy were and are much admired), should be considered a sort of innocuous hobby, without any real cultural value.

At the same time, studying the history of Italian literature, I found confirmation in the works of great writers that Latin had had a very powerful role as a 'barrier language' in the history of Italian culture. We could discuss this statement in an ample and articulated way, and perhaps we would come to different conclusions with respect to those of Françoise Waquet in her important book on the history of Latin in the modern age – which is based principally on French documentation. But I think that for now it is enough to read two brief but significant pages that made me reflect on the relationship that can exist between a lack of clarity and an abuse of power. The first page comes from *La mandragola* [The Mandrake Root], a wonderful comedy by Niccolò Machiavelli. I will not tell the plot in order not to ruin the pleasure of reading it for those who have not yet done so. It enough to say that in the scene we will read [Source 1] we see messer Nicia, an



Fig. 2 The Barbiana School.

For these reasons, I enrolled in the Classical Liceo (the upper secondary school which emphasised Latin, Greek and in general the humanities) with a rather vague and disquieting idea of Latin, and followed by the anathemas of my uncles who said that children who do not begin to read Caesar at eleven years of age will never really know Latin (they, as I found out later, did not know it). The history of my relationship with Latin and with classical culture has been very beautiful and naturally it has been marked by the figures of my teachers: women and men not only with broad

rather silly old man, who has a doctoral degree and an established social position, speaking with Callimaco, a young university student who is pretending to be a medical doctor. The subject of the dialogue is that messer Nicia's wife is unable to have children and he wants a cure for this. In order to be sure he is talking to a real physician, Nicia carries out a test which he considers infallible: he greets Callimaco in Latin. And since Callimaco answers appropriately, he concludes, satisfied, that the young man is indeed a doctor of medicine and of great valour. Naturally, aside from the



Fig. 3 A. Dürer, *Erasmus*.



Fig. 4 H. Holbein, *Erasmus' hands*.



Fig. 5 H. Holbein, *Erasmus*.

formulas of courtesy, messer Nicia understands very little Latin, and in fact when Callimaco tells him in Latin that his impotence might be the cause of his wife's sterility, Nicia does not react, whereas when he hears the same concept repeated in Italian he proudly objects. Messer Nicia is the victim of a plot carried out against him, but thanks to a kind of trick he himself habitually uses to deceive others.

More famous and severe is the page of the *Promessi sposi* [The Betrothed]⁴ in which don Abbondio, the parish priest who is supposed to unite young Renzo and Lucia in marriage, tries to put off Renzo, a young peasant, to whom he has just said that he cannot celebrate the wedding, but to whom he cannot tell the true reason of the impediment. Don Abbondio himself is the victim of noble violence: the local lord has sent two armed *bravi* (violent armed followers) to order him not to celebrate that marriage. But towards Renzo, young, not a member of the clergy and illiterate, Don Abbondio himself is the bully. And once again Latin turns out to be an excellent tool to fool a person, even if Renzo courageously refuses to let himself be tricked [Source 2].

Naturally, notwithstanding the strong lay orientation of Latinists and philologists inspired initially by liberal and then by socialist ideas – held by the teachers I mentioned above – in Italy church Latin continued to have great importance, and we cannot avoid considering this aspect briefly.



Fig. 6 G. Massys, *Erasmus*.

In my family a story was told about a woman who complained indignately about the narcissitic vanity of her village priest because during the mass she had heard him ask the Lord to “*fammi bello*” [make me handsome]. This was nothing but her own very personal translation of a part of the invocation *a peste, fame et bello libera nos Domine* [O Lord, free us from plague, hunger and war]. My mother, who was not only deeply religious, but also animated by a lively and active sympathy for others, feared that stories like this revealed a great unjust division between the simple faithful and the prayers made to God by a priest who spoke an incomprehensible language. Notwithstanding those doubts, I have heard her more than once remember with nostalgia the beauty and the elegant sacrality of the mass in Latin, abolished by the Second Vatican Council.

At this point we could make many observations on the small and middle Italian bourgeoisie (what once would have been called ‘the people’), on its attitude toward culture, seen as a sign and a tool of social distinction, to be approached shyly, but which gives those that possess it the right to behave arrogantly. But all this perhaps is too closely connected with Italian history to be of interest here.

If we turn to some passages written by Erasmus, after the considerations we have made, we will be able to see how strong, in his educational programme, the idea of Latin as a means of broad communication was, in an area that includes all of 16th-century Europe and which involves a social



A manuscript in Erasmus's hand.

environment much vaster than the 'student' population, which was already quite extensive. And within in this environment we clearly perceive the lively presence of the national languages.

Let us look at some pages from the *Colloquia* to verify these statements.

In a dialogue entitled *Dispar convivium* [a complicated reception] a certain Spudo asks a great expert in receptions and social events to advise him on how to organise a banquet for many people, all of very different tastes and origin. In addition to many other pieces of advice, the expert suggests that the host speak to each guest in his own language as a form of courtesy. And at the end of the banquet, for entertainment, he advises organising a pantomime show [Source 3]. Here we can glimpse a cosmopolitan environment in which single individuals speak different national languages. While, certainly, it is a form of courtesy to be able to speak the greatest possible number of these languages, in order to make everyone feel at ease, it is also evident that communication has to be guaranteed by a language that everyone knows, even if not perfectly: it is in fact advisable to organise a play made with gestures so that everyone can really enjoy it. This language which acts as connective tissue is of course Latin, which was used very much as English is used today for international communication.

The protagonists of the pieces that compose the *Colloquia* are Erasmus' young students, located in different university cities of Europe. They needed to be educated first of all in the use of 'civil conversation' even more than in the use of Latin, and through the words Erasmus places in their mouths often we get a glimpse not only of the bad opinion that their master had of the university

culture of the time [Source 4], but also of his ironic awareness of the risks that immersion in classical culture could produce, and his desire to live in the historical and geographical reality of the present [Source 5].

The Latin of religion should not be, according to Erasmus, a barrier between the people and sacred things. It serves to explain theology and the Holy Scriptures to their pastors, so that they can explain them to the people in the vernacular languages. Therefore Erasmus saw no reason not to make fun of the Latin of the church of Rome, used to write documents that guaranteed eternal life to the naive in exchange for money (these were the practices that in that period were overwhelmed by the indulgence scandal) [Source 6].

Therefore, let us wish long life for the Erasmus Network and to the values that it represents. Certainly, in placing European young people under the protection (in a lay sense, naturally) of our greatest humanist we feel a disappointment and a concern. Europe in Erasmus' mind coincided with what has been called the *corpus christianum*, that is all of those who accepted the religion which carries the name of Jesus Christ. He consciously and irremediably placed both Jews and Muslims, who as we well know are two other fundamental components of European culture, outside of civil society. Turning to the past (which is never positive *per se*) to make programmes for the present opens the way to this kind of risks. And we can react positively to that disappointment by reflecting that if our predecessors, even the best of them, had been perfect, there would be nothing left for us to do...



- ¹ This brief chapter follows the outline of my presentation at the Clionet Students' Conference held in Pisa in June 2005. The most interesting part of that presentation was the work of the students themselves, as they asked questions and made comments. I have tried to take both into account in this written version, to the extent possible, adding to the discussion and to the sources presented.
- ² *Dictionary of the Italian Language*, vol. II, *ad v.* "latino" 3.b, Rome 1987.
- ³ Don Lorenzo Milani's (1923-1967) name is linked to the Barbiana School, which he organised in Sant'Andrea di Barbiana in the province of Florence, where he was prior, for the children of the peasant and workers' families; and to some influential works on schools and education of young people. Among the latter, *Lobbedienza non è più una virtù* [Obedience is no longer a virtue] Firenze, 1967, supported conscientious objection to military service; whereas the book cited in the bibliography to this chapter, *Lettera ad una professoressa* [Letter to a teacher], was written with the pupils of the Barbiana school and published for the first time in 1967. Don Milani's pastoral, educational and intellectual activities led to his being emarginated by the church authorities.
- ⁴ Written by Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873), *The Betrothed* is the most important Italian novel in the 18th century. In Italian schools it is traditionally read as the most authoritative example of modern Italian language.



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SOURCES

1

Callimaco: *Chi è quello che mi vuole?*

Messer Nicia: *Bona dies, domine magister.*

Callimaco: *Et vobis bona, domine doctor.*

Ligurio: *Che vi pare?*

Messer Nicia: *Bene, alle guagne! [per i Vangeli!]*

Ligurio: *Se volete che io stia qui con voi, voi parlerete in modo ch'io v'intenda, altrimenti noi faremo duo fuochi. [ci separeremo]*

[...]

Callimaco: [...] *a volere adempiere el desiderio vostro, è necessario sapere la cagione della sterilità della donna vostra, perché le possono essere più cagioni. Nam causae sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in strumentis seminariis, aut in virga, aut in causa extrinseca.*

Messer Nicia: *Costui è el più degno uomo che si possa trovare!*

Callimaco: *Potrebbe, oltre di questo, causarsi questa sterilità da voi per impotenzia; e quando questo fussi, non ci sarebbe rimedio alcuno.*

Messer Nicia: *Impotente io? Oh! voi mi farete ridere! Io non credo che sia el più ferrigno ed il più rubizzo uomo in Firenze di me.*

[...]

Callimaco: *Who is that who wants me?*

Messer Nicia: *Bona dies, domine magister [Good day, my lord Master].*

Callimaco: *Et vobis bona domine doctor [And good day to you, my lord Doctor].*

Ligurio: *How does he seem?*

Messer Nicia: *Very well, by the Gospels!*

Ligurio: If you want me to stay here with you, speak so that I understand you, otherwise we will make two fires [be separated and unable to cooperate].

[...]

Callimaco: [...] in order to fulfil your desire, it is necessary to know the cause of your wife's sterility, because there can be more than one cause. *Nam causae sterilitatis sunt: aut in semine, aut in matrice, aut in strumentis seminariis, aut in virga, aut in causa extrinseca.* [For the causes of sterility are: either in the semen, or in the womb, or in the inseminating parts, or in the male member, or in an extrinsic cause].

Messer Nicia: He is the worthiest man than can be found!

Callimaco: It might be, furthermore, that this sterility is caused by your impotence, and if this is the case, there would be no remedy.

Messer Nicia: I, impotent? Oh! You make me laugh! I think that there is no stronger and more vigorous man in all Florence than I.

From: Niccolò Machiavelli, *La Mandragola*, II scene, in Id., *La Mandragola. Clizia - Belfagor*, edited by L. Russo, Florence 1943, pp. 26-27.

2

"Sapete voi quanti siano gl'impedimenti dirimenti?"

"Che vuol ch'io sappia d'impedimenti?"

"Error, conditio, votum, cognatio, crimen, cultus disparitas, vis, ordo, ligamen, honestas, si sis affinis, ..." cominciava don Abbondio, contando sulla punta delle dita.

"Si piglia gioco di me?" interruppe il giovine. "Che vuol ch'io faccia del suo latinorum?"

"Dunque, se non sapete le cose, abbiate pazienza, e rimettetevi a chi le sa".

"Orsù!..."

"Via, caro Renzo, non andate in collera, che son pronto a fare... tutto quello che dipende da me. Io, io vorrei vedervi contento; vi voglio bene io. Eh!... quando penso che stavate così bene; cosa vi mancava? V'è saltato il grillo di maritarvi..."

"Che discorsi son questi, signor mio?" proruppe Renzo, con un volto tra l'attonito e l'adirato.

"Dico per dire, abbiate pazienza, dico per dire. Vorrei vedervi contento".

[...]

"Ma via, mi dica una volta che impedimento è sopravvenuto?"

"Abbiate pazienza, non son cose da potersi decifrare così su due piedi. Non ci sarà niente, così spero; ma, non ostante, queste ricerche noi le dobbiam fare. Il testo è chiaro e lampante: antequam matrimonium denunciet..."

"Le ho detto che non voglio latino".

"Do you know what the insurmountable impediments are?"

"What do you want me to know of impediments?"

"Error, conditio, votum, cognatio, crimen, cultus disparitas, vis, ordo, ligamen, honestas, si sis affinis, ..." began don Abbondio, counting on the tips of his fingers.

"Are you making fun of me?" the young man interrupted. "What do you want me to do with your latinorum?"

"Well then, if you don't know these things, be patient, and trust those that do know".

"Come now!..."

"Come, Renzo, don't be angry, I am ready to do...everything that depends on me. I, I would like to see you content, I am fond of you. Eh!... when I think that you were doing so well, what were you lacking? Then you got this idea of getting married..."

"What words are these, sir?" broke out Renzo, with an expression between amazement and anger.

"I am just talking, be patient, I am just talking to talk. I would like to see you content".

[...]

"But come, tell me what impediment has come up?"

"Be patience, these are not things which can be clarified just like that. There will be no problem, at least I hope not; but, notwithstanding, we must make these investigations. The text is crystal clear: *antequam matrimonium denunciaret...*"
"I told you that I don't want Latin".

From: Alessandro Manzoni, *I promessi sposi*, cap. II, edited by A. Momigliano, Florence 1951, repr. 1985, pp. 37-38.

3

A.: *Inducito duos mimos, qui sine voce ridiculum aliquod argumentum gesticulatione repraesentent.*

S.: *Quor sine voce?*

A.: *Ut par sit omnium voluptas, aut nihil loquantur, aut lingua loquantur omnibus aequae ignota. Gestibus loquentes omnes pariter intelligent.*

A.: Have two mimes enter, that act without voice, only with gestures, something on a comical subject.

S.: Why without voice?

A.: In order for everyone to have a good time, they either have to not speak at all or to speak a language which no one knows. Everyone understands those who speak through gestures.

From: Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Colloquia*, edited by C. Asso, Turin 2002.

4

G.: *Ex qua tandem corte aut cavea nobis ades?*

L.: *Quid ita?*

G.: *Quia male saginatus. Quia macie pelluces totus, ariditate crepitas. Unde prodixit?*

L.: *E collegio Montis Acutis.*

G.: *Ergo ades nobis onustus literis.*

L.: *Imo pediculis.*

G.: *Pulchre comitatus advenis.*

L.: *Sane, nec tutum est nunc viatorem ire incomitatum.*

G.: *Agnosco satellitium scholasticum. [...]*

G.: What cave you come from?

L.: Why?

G.: You have a bad aspect. You are so thin that you are transparent. Where you come from?

L.: From Montaigu college.

G.: So, you are full of culture!

L.: Not at all: I am full of lice.

G.: A beautiful company!

L.: Yes, it is not safe, today, travelling alone.

G.: My compliments to the scholastic body guard!

From: Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Colloquia*, edited by C. Asso, Turin 2002, pp. 22-23.

5

Ave, praeceptor.

R.: *Equidem malim habere quam avere.*

Chaire.

R.: *Memento te Basileae esse, non Athenis.*

Quor te igitur audes Romane loqui?

"Ave" [the Roman salutation] my teacher.

R.: Well, I would prefer to have [money] than "avere".

"Chaire" [an ancient Greek salutation].

R.: Remember that you are in Basel, not in Athens!

Then, why do you speak Roman language, if you are not in Rome?

From: Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Colloquia*, edited by C. Asso, Turin 2002, pp. 14-15.

6

A.: [...] *Opinor iam esse apud superos.*

C.: *Adeone pius erat?*

A.: *Imo nugator maximus.*

C.: *Unde igitur isthuc suspicare?*

A.: *Quia peram habebat indulgentiis largissimis distentam.*

C.: *Audio, sed iter est longum in coelum, nec satis, ut audio, tutum, ob latrunculis qui obsident regionem aeris mediam.*

A.: *Verum, sed ille sat erat munitus diplomatibus.*

C.: *Qua lingua descriptis?*

A.: *Romana.*

C.: *In tuto est igitur.*

A.: *Est, nisi forte incidat in genium aliquem qui Latine nesciat. [...]*

A.: [...] I am sure he is in heaven.

C.: Was he so pious?

A.: Not at all! He was a big sinner.

C.: Then, why do you suppose this?

A.: Because he had a bag full of brode indulgences.

C.: Well, but the way for heaven is long, and not so safe from robbers who live in the middle region of the air.

A.: That's true, but he was well provided with certificates.

C.: In what language?

A.: Roman language.

C.: So, he is safe.

A.: Yes, unless he meets a little spirit that doesn't know Latin...

From: Erasmo da Rotterdam, *Colloquia*, edited by C. Asso, Turin 2002, pp. 64-65.

