Two Colloquies of Erasmus in English Verse Translation

by LAWRENCE V. RYAN

IN 1637 the English dramatist Thomas Heywood (d. 1641) brought out his Pleasant Dialogues and Dramma's, "a Miscellane of sundry straines in Poetry,"1 consisting of original works and translations into English verse of selections from various Greek, Latin, and Italian authors. Among these compositions are renderings into iambic pentameter couplets of eighteen prose dialogues, fifteen from Lucian, one entitled "Earth and Age" ("Terra et Aetas") by Ravisius Textor (Jean Tixier, Seigneur de Ravisy, d. 1524), and, as the opening pieces to the volume, two by Erasmus, Naufragium ("Shipwreck") and Procus et Puella ("Wooer and Maiden"). These dialogues, Heywood explained, "Which though I met with in Prose onely, yet upon better acquaintance, I have taught to goe upon even feet and number."2

These were not the first English versions of the two justly famous Erasmian colloquies. Earlier Nicholas Leigh had translated Procus et Puella in A modest meane to mariage (London, 1568), and William Burton had done the same for Naufragium in Seven Dialogues both pithie and profitable (London, 1606). Of the eighteen vernacular renderings of individual colloquies by Erasmus produced during Tudor and early Stuart times, however, only these two by Heywood are in verse. Why he decided to turn the prose of his original authors into English couplets he does not make clear, and his biographer, Arthur Melville Clark, though he considered Heywood's poetry better elsewhere in the collection, complains that in these "dialogues from Erasmus, Ravisius Textor, and Lucian . . . he is pedantic, heavy, uninspired and dull."3 More recently Frederick S. Boas, while on the one hand finding these efforts to be "little more than literary curiosities," observed that he could not "agree with Dr. Clark in dismissing them" so cavalierly. "Judged by Eliza-

1 Heywood's preface "To the Generous Reader," Pleasant Dialogues and Dramma's, etc. (London, 1637), fol. [A4'], as reprinted in Willy Bang's Materialien zur Kunde des älteren Englischen Dramas, 3 (Louvain, 1903). Bang faithfully reproduces the complete text of Heywood's "Miscellane." All quotations of Heywood are from Bang's reprint, in which the pagination is identical with that of the original edition.
2 Bang, fol [A4'].

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bethan standards," he went on in their defense, "they are adequately close to the originals. And, in my opinion, they show Heywood's ma-
ter of the rhymed couplet, both closed and run-on."  

Boas' conclusion about Heywood's mastery of the couplet, as will be illustrated shortly, is correct; more than that, just as Nautfragium and Procus et Puella are two of the most appealing little dramatic sketches among Erasmus' colloquies, so Heywood's translations prove in turn to be attractive playlets in quite capable verse. Whatever his reason for using couplets in his versions, he shows not only skill in his versifying, but also, since he was an experienced and able playwright for the popular stage, a fine dramatic sense in his handling of the dialogue of both sets of characters. Granted that his renderings, given the metaphorism from prose to rhymed verse, are somewhat less succinct and literal than the translations of Leigh and Burton, they are, as Boas says, "adequately close to the originals" and are by no means merely an eccentric or mis-guided exercise in metrical ingenuity.

Nor did Heywood draw upon his vernacular predecessors in creating his own versions of the two colloquies: there are no close verbal parallels between them and the earlier translations of Burton and Leigh. Although he may have relied on Latin intermediaries in Englishing Lucian, in dealing with Nautfragium and Procus et Puella he used the originals, almost certainly in the edition of the Colloquia that had been recently published by John Clarke. His intent, like that of most of the earlier British trans-

4 Thomas Heywood (London, 1950), pp. 147, 143.
5 Ironically enough, one "D. E.," in commendatory verses prefixed to the Pleasant Dialogues (fol. [A7v]), says the following, which does not quite apply to Heywood's translations:

That matter which six lines of Prose rehearse,
May fitly be contained in one Verse;
Yea, and so pithily (if well compacted)
That out of it whole Bookes may be extracted.
A President whereof if thou wouldst find,
I prethee gentle Reader bend thy mind
To what this little Volume doth containe,
And sure the fruit will recompense thy paine.

6 Bang, p. 337.
7 Colloquiorum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Familiarium Opus Avreym, ed. John Clarke (London, 1631). Bang (p. 307, n. 1) from internal evidence asserts that Heywood must have used an edition of the Colloquia based on that of François Regnault (Paris, April 1528). That