ADAGE

The term adage, which is an adaptation from the Latin name adagium, has usually been used to connote a "maxim handed down from antiquity" (OED), and sometimes been regarded as a synonym for "proverbs and proverbial sayings in general.

The term adage came into use throughout Europe after the appearance of Desiderius Erasmus' (Erasmus of Rotterdam's) edition of the classical proverb treasury, entitled Adagia (1500). In English, the term adage was first documented in 1548. The term was in frequent use in the 16th and 17th century along with the variants adagy or adagie. The Latin term adagium which was first documented in the 2nd century A.D. (A. Gallius, +130), can be traced back to two major sources: first of all, it goes back to the Old Latin name for the proverb, adagio; secondly, it was grammatically adapted to the Latin form proverbium (proverb). By the times of Varro and Cicero, i.e. in the 1st century B.C., the Old Latin name adagio had already gone out of use, and, in fact, was no longer understood. It was replaced by the more recent name proverbium; or even, occasionally, by the Greek term παράμιθει.

Etymologically speaking, adagio is a compound of the prefix ad- and the form agio, thus meaning an addition, a supplement to some speech (German Bei-/Zurede). Thus, the Old Latin name for the proverb, adagio, comes semantically very close to the Old Greek name of the proverb, παράμιθει, which in terms of its etymology, also designates an addition to a narrative. It is also very close to the Old and High German terms for the proverb: biword (biwort, biwert), bispruch or bispel, the latter term not being related to the word Beispiel (*exemplum), as was often wrongly claimed, but to the root spellspel ("narrative", "story"). Only around 1200 did the term Sprichwort, which is common in German today, come into use; most probably, it is a tautological formation meaning 'much spoken word'.

At present, the term adage is more or less out of common use; it is found in scholarly investigations as, for example, Rodegem (1972) which try to separate closely related proverbial genres such as maxim, sententia, "apophthegm, slogan, and others.


P.G.