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Le Soulier de Theramenez:
Theory and Practice of the Adage in Erasmus and Montaigne

This dissertation investigates the resurgence and development of the adage as a privileged form in 16th century texts. I first trace the emergence of Renaissance paremiography (the collection of proverbs) as a key component of humanist attempts to revive classical wisdom and eloquence, focusing in particular on Erasmus' theorization of the proverb in his monumental compilation of adages. Drawing on Terrence Cave's theory of early modern writing as performance, I show that Erasmus' staging of the adage in his theoretical works defies his own attempt to define the form prescriptively. Instead, his notion of the adage reveals itself through a network of unresolved paradoxes (expansive brevity, timely timelessness, a popular form that is also learned). I then explore Montaigne's innovative use of citation in the *Essais* and, in so doing, show that his method of interweaving textual fragments reveals a profound ambivalence towards the status of classical learning. In the third and final chapter of the dissertation, I examine the way in which Montaigne deploys the proverb against itself, thus engaging in a form of paradoxical argumentation that simultaneously "empties" the genre of its probative force and reasserts its power as a privileged tool of skeptical inquiry in the *Essais*. Indeed, I contend that Montaigne's notion of the adage is an important component of his experimentation with a "new language" that both serves the argumentative purposes of the skeptic and resists what the author sees as the natural tendency of language to dogmatically assert. My dissertation sheds light on a relatively unexplored area of Montaigne studies; it also contributes to an understanding of creative imitation in early modern texts; and it adds historical depth to contemporary investigations into the nature of the proverb as a cultural artifact. Finally, this study illuminates Montaigne's radical notion of a new philosophical language.