
AMICI USQUE AD ARAS

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DOUBTLESS SOME READERS of this journal will recognize in the words above, the title and refrain of a Yale song which has won the distinction of wider diffusion than is the lot of most such productions of undergraduate inspiration. It passed over from its earliest appearance among the songs of Yale into the collections of other colleges, and its melody was widely adapted to become the musical vehicle of the alma mater songs of several colleges, like Cornell's "Far Above Cayuga's Waters." Its origin at Yale goes back to the founding of a long since defunct Greek letter society, Phi Theta Psi of 1864, which adopted the Latin words as its motto, and then incorporated them into its fraternity song. The words are of the conventional type, conveying the assurance that the fraternal bond shall ne'er be broken by anything but death—*amici usque ad aras*, where *aras* apparently was thought of as signifying the grave or tomb, a meaning not uncommon in Latin poetical diction. The melody, like most college songs, was borrowed—from a then popular sentimental ballad, lamenting the untimely death of "Annie Lisle," in much the same vein as her more famous and more melodious sister, "Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt," who is still remembered.

This brief record is set down merely to note the rare survival into the present, so far as I have observed, of this ancient phrase or proverb. In fact I was not aware that it was "proverbial" in character, nor that it was ancient and had a history to boast, until a year or two ago, when my friend and correspondent, Professor Robert K. Richardson, of Beloit, asked me what I knew about the source and meaning of the phrase as used in the Yale song. I thereupon looked into possible Latin sources, and finding no trace of it replied with regret that I could not help him, and that as for its meaning, it would not occur to me that it could be other than as

assumed in the students' song, "faithful to the end." Fortunately Professor Richardson was not deterred from further inquiry, and a year later came back with a triumphant Eureka! From a reference given him by Mr. E. A. H. Fuchs of the editorial staff of the Merriam Co., publishers of the Webster Dictionaries, to their edition of 1909, indicating that the saying was attributed to Pericles, his suspicion of Plutarch as a probable source was aroused. The life of Pericles failed to yield it, but he had at length located it in one of the Moral Essays, where it appears as a saying of Pericles: Asked by a friend to give false witness in his behalf, he replied, *μέχρι τοῦ βωμοῦ φίλος εἰμί*, words which an early translator of Plutarch renders, *usque ad aras amicus sum*. This observation did then in fact settle the question of source, but the question of meaning in that place is still not at once perfectly clear.

On the face of it, and with the significance attached to the words in the students' song, one's first thought might well be that Pericles meant to assure his friend that he was prepared to remain faithful to him to the uttermost, even to giving false testimony under oath. Yet, as will appear, Plutarch cannot have meant to accept so dishonorable a pledge in the mouth of one of his heroes. First of all let us see what was implied to a Greek ear in a context like this in the word *altar*. The Greek word here has nothing to do with death or the tomb, as the Latin *aras* might suggest, but refers specifically to a procedure of Attic courts in swearing witnesses "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." In making oath the witness approached and touched the altar, a gesture analogous to kissing the Book, or swearing on the Book, in Christian usage. The practice is illustrated nicely by the story told (by Cicero and others) of Xenocrates, whose uprightness of life was a matter of common knowledge to all Athenians. When on occasion he was summoned to give testimony in some trial, as he advanced toward the altar to swear in the customary manner, the judges as one man cried out that he need not make oath, so confident were

they of his perfect truthfulness. The altar is thus, like our Bible, the symbol of perfect truth, or of God's law.

The treatise of Plutarch which contains this reply of Pericles bears the title *περι Δυσωπίας*, literally, "concerning shamefacedness," or as the 17th century translator quaintly renders it, "bashfulness," (*Moralia* 528C). It is defined as timidity in self-assertion pursuant to one's feeling or conviction, such as to acquiesce in another's will or judgment contrary to one's own. In section 6, proceeding from trifling to more important examples of this defect, Plutarch instances the applause that is often given by guests to manifestly bad singing, or to the hired actor who murders Menander. A man of more resolute character will at least sit quietly and not join in false praise. For if a man has not learned to express his own judgment in such things, presently he will be acquiescing in the will of others in serious matters, such as supporting a candidate for office under another's pressure, or yielding to importunity in the marriage of a daughter, or even involving himself in treasonable conduct toward the state. "For my part, (he continues) I cannot even approve of the well known saying of Pericles, who, in reply to a friend asking him to testify falsely in his behalf, said, 'So far as the altar I am your friend'; for in so saying he comes quite too close to the altar." The reservation which Plutarch here makes is explained in the ensuing words of the chapter. He recognizes of course that Pericles sets a limit to devotion to his friend's cause, and stops short of the altar; that is, of false witness. What he does censure is Pericles' willingness to promise support in any degree to a man who could make such a request. For as he proceeds to explain: the man who is known for his firm stand upon his own convictions will not become subject to dishonorable entreaties from anyone. The meaning and intention of Plutarch is beyond doubt, and obviously the saying which he cites was current in praise of Pericles, not in censure. However its language would have been clearer if it had contained some particle of restriction, like "only so far as the altar,"

which in fact is present in another version of the same saying.

This is found in the third chapter of Aulus Gellius, book I, which is devoted to the ethical problem, whether in time of need one may deviate from strict rectitude in helping a friend. Not to enter into the argument as debated in citations from Cicero and Theophrastus, who had both written *de amicitia*, he quotes (presumably from Theophrastus) the same saying attributed to Pericles, in somewhat different words: cum amicus eum rogaret ut pro re causaque eius falsum de iuraret, his ad eum verbis usus est: Δεῖ μὲν συμπράττειν τοῖς φίλοις, ἀλλὰ μέχρι τῶν θεῶν "It is to be sure our duty to lend aid to our friends, but only so far as (is consistent with) God's law." Though the content of these words is identical with Plutarch's meaning, yet them seem less like a spoken reply, than like a generalizing paraphrase of the saying itself, which one might imagine had just preceded in the context from which it is drawn, —the specific and familiar φίλος εἰμι becoming συμπράττειν τοῖς φίλοις, and the concrete βωμοῦ made universal with τῶν θεῶν, to embrace all situations which transcend right. That is, the particular instance of Pericles' reply is transformed into a general precept.

To complete the evidence for the occurrence of the phrase in antiquity, we may add its repetition by Plutarch in his *Apothegmata* of Kings and Commanders (186 C), and finally its inclusion in one of the Byzantine *Paroemiographi* (II, p. 523). This latter example is so far as I can discover the only recognition before modern times of the saying as possessing universal and proverbial character. I find no trace in Latin literature of the saying, which search in the wealth of examples, under *ara*, *amicus*, *adusque* in the Latin *Thesaurus*, would seem likely to reveal if it had been used.

The definite recognition of the saying in modern times as a proverbial expression belongs apparently to Erasmus in his *Adagia*. He apologizes for the inclusion of it, as being merely the dictum of a famous man, yet justifies it because of its genuinely proverbial quality. Under the caption *usque ad aras*

(iii, 2, 10) he cites both Plutarch and Gellius, and interprets the words as limiting the duty we owe to friends, *ne numinis reverentiam violemus*. The *Adagia* (1500 and many succeeding editions) was one of the most widely read books of the 16th century, and one may suspect that most early examples of the phrase either directly or indirectly owe their origin to it.*

The learned editors of the *Stanford Dictionary of Anglicised Words and Phrases* (Cambridge, 1892), without naming either Erasmus or the ancient sources, give two early examples, which in somewhat fuller context are worth transcribing. Thos. Elyot, himself under suspicion of faintheartedness in the cause of Protestantism, in 1536 writing to Thos. Cromwell, minister to Henry VIII, says: "I therefore beseech your good lordship now to lay apart the remembrance of the amity betweene me and Sir Thomas More, which was but *usque ad aras*, as is the proverb, considering that I was never so much addict unto hym as I was unto truth and fidelity toward my soveraigne lord, as godd is my judge" (Croft, *Life of Elyot*, p. cxxx). A second example is from a sermon of Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York, of 1585, on the character of Cornelius, "Captain of the Roman band," (Acts. 10. 21). "Neither did he fear to send for Peter to teach him the religion and faith of Christ The Romans had forbid by law that any subject should profess or receive peregrinam religionem Yet Cornelius had learned that it is better to obey God than man, that we must obey princes *usque ad aras*, as the proverb is, so far as we may without disobeying God." The situation of Cornelius was not unlike that of thousands in the time of Erasmus, who throughout Europe were daily confronted with the conflict between private conscience and public or ecclesiastical authority—a characteristic signature of the 16th century. Of nearly a century later an example from

* It may be noted here that Erasmus, in citing Gellius, whether from confusion of memory with Plutarch, or from some (improbable) variant in his text, read *μέχρι βωμῶν* in place of *μέχρι τῶν θεῶν*, the Mss. reading without variant. From this error the plural *aras* may have been derived in place of *aram*, which was to be expected.

Wm. Penn (*Fruits of Solitude*) makes lucid explanation of the phrase: "In short, choose a friend as thou dost a wife, till death separate you. Yet be not a *friend beyond the altar*, but let virtue bound thy friendship; else it is not friendship, but an evil confederacy." These last words seem to be a direct echo of Cicero (*de Offic.* iii. 44): *nam si omnia facienda sint quae amici velint, non amicitiae tales, sed coniurationes putandae sint*.

Over against these examples of the true meaning of the phrase as defined by Erasmus from the ancient sources, it became early transformed into a sense quite the opposite of its original meaning, that is, of "a friend, faithful to the end, to death, to the last extremity, etc." As early as the *Familiar Letters* of James Howell, 1645 and later, examples of this usage appear. Thus a letter which bears the date of 1635 (Jacobs, p. 420) concludes, "Farewell my dear Tom, have a care of your courses, and continue to love him who is—yours to the Altar." Again, p. 665 of the same edition, "I am yours as much as any wife can be, or rather than I may conclude with the old Roman Proverb, I am yours, *usque ad aras*, yours to the Altar."

Doubtless beyond this time many other examples of the phrase may be found, but I have looked no farther. As is the nature of proverbial sayings, their life is on the lips of man rather than in books. I should however be grateful for other examples of our phrase in either sense as it may be found in later literature, English or European generally.