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12 Proverbs in Literature

12.1 Introduction

Proverbs, it could be said, are themselves little poems. Many proverbs consist of epigrammatic rhymed couplets: *A friend in need / is a friend indeed*; *When the cat's away, / the mice will play*; *Birds of a feather / flock together*; *Different strokes / for different folks*; *If you want to talk the talk, / you've got to walk the walk*; *Les morts / ont toujours tort* [ww: The dead are always wrong]; *Morgenstunde / hat Gold im Munde*. [ww: The morning hour has gold in its mouth]. Even Latin, which in Classical times did not feature rhyme as a poetic device, eventually yielded numerous rhymed proverbs; for example: *Pater qualis, / filius talis* [ee: Like father, like son]; *Qualis rex, / talis grex* [ww: As the king is, so are the commoners]; *Orimur, / morimur* [ww: We are born, [then] we die]; *Homo proponit, / Deus disponit* – with its rhyming derivatives or counterparts *Man proposes, / God disposes* and *Der Mensch denkt / und Gott lenkt*. Countless proverbs, both rhymed and unrhymed, exhibit other *sound effects* and rhetorical or stylistic devices commonly associated with literary poetry, such as alliteration, assonance, repetition, parallelism, chiasmus, antithesis, various metrical properties, word play (*a friend indeed* or *a friend in deed*), and, of course, metaphor. The great literary critic Kenneth Burke once asked, “Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as ‘proverbs writ large’?” (Burke, 1967: 296). The folklorist S. J. Sackett has suggested that the study of familiar proverbs could be used pedagogically to introduce poetry, which students so often find daunting (Sackett, 1964: 143-53).

12.2 Proverbs in Poetry

Proverbs themselves, of course, even if they might be regarded as folk epigrams, are not really *literature*, since they belong to the province of *oral* tradition. However, proverbs bear an especially intimate relationship with written epigrams. Since ancient times, literary epigrams have sometimes consisted of little more than a quoted proverb with a minimal comment or elaboration, often for comic or ironic effect. The *Greek Anthology* (assembled in stages during Imperial Roman and early medieval times) includes many such epigrams. One distich, attributed to the satirist Lucian (second century A.D.), responds to the ancient proverb *A beard does not make one wise*: (in translation) “If you think that to grow a beard is to acquire wisdom, a goat with a fine beard is at once a complete Plato” (Paton, 1917-39: 4:276-277). A four-line poem by Palladas of Alexandria (fifth century A.D.) explicitly quotes a proverb, then

rebutts it: “The proverb says, ‘Even a pig would bite a bad man’; but I say that we should not say that, but ‘Even a pig would bite simple unmeddlesome men, but even a snake would be afraid to bite a bad man’” (Paton, 1917-39: 3:208-209). An anonymous epigram, framed (by its title) as “What Hector would say when wounded by the Greeks” applies the Aesopic proverb *Even a hare will insult a dead lion*: “Strike my body now after my death, for the very hares insult the body of a dead lion” (Paton, 1917-39: 5:160-161). In a Latin epigram, Martial (first century A.D.) urges one Faustinus to publish his work and “begin to live now” rather than hope for posthumous fame; the poem concludes with what was probably already a proverb: *cineri Gloria sera venit* [to ashes glory comes too late] (Martial, 1968: 1:44).

Energized by the great Erasmus’s magisterial *Adagia* (1500-1540), and deeply versed in proverbs by the prevailing education system, Renaissance Europe vastly enjoyed composing such proverb-epigrams, in both Latin and vernacular languages.¹⁵⁹ Most notable for its extent was John Heywoods’s *Epigrams upon Proverbs* (1550-1562), 600 poems finally. An example, responding to the proverb *A bird in the hand is worth ten (two) in the bush (wood)*: “Better one bird in hand, than ten in the wood / Better for Birders, but for birds not so good” (Heywood, 1906: 173). The sudden shift in perspective, playfully confuting the universality of the proverb’s message, reminds us that (contrary to what is sometimes supposed) proverbs are not necessarily regarded as sacrosanct epitomes of venerable wisdom; instead, proverbs – like the world that they mirror – are subject to vagaries and complexities in their content and their perceptions. They can be questioned, scoffed at, merrily reinterpreted, parodied, enjoyed. Thence their usefulness when artistically placed in literary contexts!

The same sort of reversal in point of view seen in the *bird* epigram by Heywood occurs in an epigram by the late-twentieth-century poet Shel Silverstein, meditating on the proverb *The early bird gets the worm*:

Oh, if you’re a bird, be an early bird
And catch the worm for your breakfast plate.
If you’re a bird, be an early early bird—
But if you’re a worm, sleep late. (Silverstein, 1974: 30)

Between the sixteenth and the twenty-first century, hundreds of proverb-epigrams have appeared, some anonymous, some by known authors, major or minor. A number

¹⁵⁹ Erasmus’s compilation first appeared in 1500 as a modest *Adagiorum collectanea*, then in ever-expanding editions, now titled *Adagiorum chiliades* [thousands of proverbs], from 1508 through Erasmus’s death in 1536, with the final and largest published in his posthumous *Opera Omnia* of 1540. Erasmus glossed his thousands of classical Greek adages with Latin commentaries of varying lengths (from a few lines to several pages), introducing scholars and school boys to a wealth of ‘reborn’ proverbs, many of which then emerged in neo-Latin and vernacular forms. Erasmus not only enriched the fund of European proverbs; in large measure he established the scholarly study of proverbs.

of them are represented in Janet Sobieski and Wolfgang Mieder's collection *"So Many Heads, So Many Wits": An Anthology of English Proverb Poetry* (2005). Mieder has commented on several of the short proverb-poems appearing in the anthology, many of them epigrams, under such headings as *Poems with Proverb Titles*, *Poems with Unchanged Proverbs*, *Poems Containing Personalized Proverbs*, *Poems with Proverb Allusions*, and *Poems with Proverbs Changed into Anti-Proverbs* (Mieder, 2010: 263-289; also Mieder, 1993: 71-88).

Besides epigrams, proverb-poems may be divided roughly into two groups. One group consists of poems built out of a multiplicity of proverbs, varied or modified as necessary to fit the chosen meter and rhyme scheme. The conglomerated result is supposed to yield a coherent poetic statement, although any plot or theme is usually secondary to the display of proverbial profuseness. Examples include an 85-line didactic poem in Middle English, from the fourteenth century, commonly referred to as *Proverbs of Good Counsel* (Furnivall, 1869: 68-70), and, from fifteenth-century France, the thirty-six lines of François Villon's *Ballade des proverbes*, each line of which begins with the adverb *tant* [so much or as much as], followed by a proverb or a concept related to a proverb (Villon, 1951: 127-128). Then there was John Heywood's sprawling *Dialogue of Proverbs* (1546-1562), the 2,754 lines of which actually endeavored to include "all the prouerbes in the englishe tongue," the dialog and narrative loosely centered on the subject of marriage. The Elizabethan Michael Drayton wrote a sonnet, *To Proverb* (published in 1600), that begins, "As Loue and I, late Harbour'd in one Inne, / With Prouerbs thus each other intertaine"; there follow five agonistic exchanges of proverbs between the speaker and *Love*, the dialog concluding, "And hauing thus a while each other thwarted, / Fooles as we met, so fooles againe we parted" (Drayton, 1953: 1:17; *Fools will be fools still* is a proverb). In an anonymous seventeenth-century poem, its 42 lines titled simply *Song* (1656) – a later, slightly longer, version titled *A Ballad of Old Proverbs* – a young man pleads with a maid to "grant me my desire, / For I'm thrown as the old Proverb goes, / Out of the frying-pan into the fire...." In 1680 the young woman's reply was appended: "The Youngmans Careless Wooing; and the Witty Maids Replication; All Done out of Old English Proverbs" (Doyle, 2012: 89-100). A more modern example, a truly deft and witty one, is *A Proverbial Tragedy* by Arthur Guiterman, first published in *Life* magazine in 1911; its sixteen lines tell of a journey by three *proverbial* companions:

The Rolling Stone and the Turning Worm
And the Cat that Looked at a King,
Set forth on the Road that Leads to Rome—
For Youth will have its Fling.
The Goose will lay the Golden Eggs,
The Dog must have his Day,
And Nobody locks the Stable Door
Till the Horse is stol'n away.

But the Rolling Stone, that was never known
 To Look before the Leap,
 Plunged down the hill to the Waters Still
 That run so dark, so deep;
 And the leaves were stirred by the Early Bird
 Who sought his breakfast where
 He marked the squirm of the Turning Worm—
 And the Cat was Killed by Care!¹⁶⁰

An idiosyncratic variant of the multiple-proverb-poem is Carl Sandburg's ambitious pair *Good Morning, America* (1928), which occupies seventeen pages in the *Complete Poems* of 1970, and *The People, Yes* (1936), which occupies 178 pages. Each poem contains a free-verse montage of proverbs, proverbial phrases, idioms, colloquialisms, anecdotes, and other kinds of folk speech, resulting in a panoramic and rhapsodic sense of the ingenuity, wisdom, colorfulness, and untutored eloquence of the American *people*; these lines, for example, come from *The People, Yes*:

behold the proverbs of a people, a nation:
 Give 'em the works. Fix it, there's always
 a way. Be hard boiled. The good die young.
 Be a square shooter. Be good; if you can't
 be good be careful. When they put you in
 that six foot bungalow, that wooden kimono,
 you're through and that's that. (Sandburg, 1970: 328)

The other, more numerous, group of proverb-poems consists of works that are longer than most epigrams, and often more *serious* in their intent or effect, that employ one or just a few key proverbs to focus on a central idea, incident, or mood. Perhaps the most basic of such poems (and among the oldest) are versified fables told to illustrate themes that are embodied by individual proverbs (though in some cases the proverb itself may have derived from a version of the fable, rather than the reverse). Socrates, according to Plato, versified some of Aesop's fables. Greek and Latin verse fables by Babrius and Phaedrus, respectively – both in the first century A.D. – are among the earliest Aesopic texts on record. The famous *Fables* of Jean de La Fontaine (1668 et seq.) followed the tradition. One of those fables in French verse, “L'alouette et ses petits, avec le maître d'un champ” [The Lark, Her Chicks, and the Landowner] begins – unlike its counterpart by Babrius – with a proverb: “*Ne t'attends qu'à toi seul*”, *c'est un commun proverbe* [“Don't count on others” is a common proverb], which the fable

160 The proverbs and proverbial sayings that are here quoted or alluded to (in sequence): A rolling stone gathers no moss; Even a worm will turn; A cat may look at a king; All roads lead to Rome; Youth will have its fling; Don't kill the goose that lays the golden eggs; Every dog has its day; There's no use locking the stable door after the horse is stolen; Look before you leap; Still waters run deep; Tremble (Shake) like a leaf; The early bird gets the worm; Care killed the cat.

illustrates with a wise mother bird's recognition that when the farmer intends to summon first his friends and then his kinsmen to help him mow the field, there is no need for the birds to move their nest – but when he resolves to do the mowing himself, then they must take flight promptly (La Fontaine, 1962: 128-30).

In 1974 Wolfgang Mieder, the great historian and bibliographer of proverbs and proverb scholarship, seeking to explain the “concentration of literary proverb studies on prose and drama with an unfortunate neglect of lyrical poetry,” surmised that “dramatic and prose writings” may be “more suitable for proverbial integration than lyrical poetry” (Mieder, 1974: 890). Recent scholarship (including Mieder's own) has, at least partly, remedied the perceived neglect, and called into doubt the surmise about the inhospitality of lyric poetry to the use of proverbs. For instance, the sonnets and eclogues of Edmund Spenser – who, of all poets, used proverbs most skillfully and most extensively – have been examined for their proverb use with considerable subtlety by several scholars (see Doyle, 2007: 1:330-338, and the references there). Like some other types of Elizabethan sonnets, the Spenserian sonnet ends with a free-standing couplet, which will sometimes quote or allude to a proverb, as if to clinch or sum up an argument developed in the three linked quatrains, or to offer a correlative from the larger world outside the recounted situation in the poem, or occasionally to effect a reversal or cast an ironic light on the foregoing matter – or on the proverb itself. In sonnet 37 of the *Amoretti* sequence, the persona initially praises his lady's “golden tresses,” which then become a “net of gold”; the poem ends unhappily with the explicit paraphrase of a proverb: “Fondnesse it were for any being free, / to couet fetters, though they golden bee” (Spenser, 1912: 568; the proverb is *No man loves his fetters though made of gold*). Sonnet 11 concludes with the disconsolate lover calling into the question the veracity of the proverbs *All wars end in peace* and *Great pains quickly find ease*; he laments, “All paine hath end and euery war hath peace, / but mine no price nor prayer may surcease” (Spenser, 1912: 564; for discussion of those and other proverb-sonnets, see Doyle, 2007: 1:331-333).

As for the use of proverbs in other poetic genres: Again, Edmund Spenser stands foremost. In his great unfinished epic *The Faerie Queene* (said to be the longest poem in the English language), the poet's subtle and extensive use of proverbs has received considerable notice (Doyle, 2007: 1:333-336). Indeed, the entire action of the first book of the poem – and therefore of the whole poem – commences with an outright rebuttal of the proverb *Where fire is, smoke will appear*; the wise female companion of a young knight bluntly warns him, “Oft fire is without smoke, and perill without show” (1.1.12; Spenser, 1912: 5). The allegory emphasizes the danger of attempting to ascertain spiritual or even physical realities on the basis of superficial signs.

Much less attention has been paid to proverbs in other literary epics of the Renaissance, such as the *Os Lusíadas* by the Portuguese Luís Vaz de Camões or *La Gerusalemme liberata* by the Italian Torquato Tasso or *Paradise Lost* by the Englishman John Milton.

In general, though, for their use of proverbs, Renaissance poets have been studied widely and well during recent decades; so have poets from the Middle Ages and the twentieth century (less so, with notable exceptions, for poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). An example of an insightful study of a twentieth-century poem is Wolfgang Mieder's explication of Robert Frost's famous *Mending Wall* (1914), which begins, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (Mieder, 2004: 69-78; also, at greater length, Mieder, 2005: 210-243). The poem reports a dialog between a seemingly urbane rural property owner, busy mending a wall, and his rustically stubborn neighbor, who keeps insisting, proverbially, *Good fences make good neighbors*. The poem's contemplation of the proverb – its nuances and ramifications – becomes a comment on very modern issues of boundaries and definitions, of limits and linkages in property, personal space, social classes, regions, generations, ideas – the often competing necessities of mending (or erecting) such *walls* and allowing them to crumble. Mieder comments, "The 'fence' proverb ... is a perfect metaphor for what keeps people apart or together. It is a folkloristic sign for the divergencies and convergencies of life ..." (Mieder, 2004: 74). Mieder's discussion, by focusing on the proverb, not only illuminates complexities and depths in the poem's artistry but also examines the various possible (sometimes conflicting) ways to interpret or apply the proverb itself, and explains the proverb's burgeoning popularity in the twentieth century, which has been at least partly attributable to its appearance in Frost's poem.

The desideratum of studying proverbs in literature, then, is not merely to identify the *occurrence* of proverbs in poems, plays, stories, or novels (however valuable that activity of itself can be) but rather to examine the *artistry* of proverb use in literary contexts. As early as 1939 the great proverb scholar B. J. Whiting, evidently with some frustration about the current state of affairs, exclaimed that "the excerpting of proverbs from the works of a particular author should not be undertaken unless a special purpose is clearly held in view" (Whiting, 1939: 64). There is some irony in Whiting's declaration, in that the pioneering dictionary of proverbs compiled by him in collaboration with Archer Taylor, published in 1958, consists largely of items "excerpted" from "a variety of American authors whose works were published between 1820 and 1880" (Taylor & Whiting, 1958: vii). Of course, a dictionary of proverbs is a special purpose. Otherwise, though, a multitude of studies prior to the late twentieth century merely extracted proverbs from published works, mostly sub-canonical works by regional writers, in lists that suggested nothing more sophisticated than the mere existence of individual proverbs at specific times and places. Even there, the evidence can be suspect: Literary writers are certainly free to present characters or narrators who employ archaic or non-local expressions – sometimes as stylistic features of characterization, sometimes out of the author's ignorance about his material.

More recent compilations of proverbs in the works of given authors typically – or at best – will include an examination of the actual *function* of proverbs as employed artistically in the authors' creations. Examples are the numerous studies by Wolfgang Mieder of proverbs in the works of individual authors, among them Carl Sandburg

(Mieder, 1971: 160-168; Mieder, 1973: 15-36; also Bryan & Mieder, 2003: 14-49), George Bernard Shaw (Mieder in collaboration with George Bryan; Bryan & Mieder, 1994), Eugene O'Neill (Bryan & Mieder, 1995), Charles Dickens (Bryan & Mieder, 1997), and Bertolt Brecht (Mieder, 1998b; Mieder 1999: 247-277). The opportunities for more such studies are practically limitless, if not in the form of published monographs then as journal articles or post-graduate theses or student essays—and not necessarily devoted to the corpus of an author but rather to individual literary works.

12.3 Proverbs in Prose Fiction

An exemplary scholar of the use of proverbs in prose fiction is Frank de Caro, who has subtly examined E. M. Forster's 1924 novel *Passage to India*, Graham Green's 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, and each of four short stories: Katherine Mansfield's *Bliss* (1918), Ruth Suckow's *A Start in Life* (1924), J. F. Powers's *The Valiant Woman* (1947), and Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1953) (de Caro & Jordan, 2004: 100-116). The best known of those short stories is *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, a work routinely assigned to introductory literature classes (in America, at least). The story tells of an automobile journey in the American South, with a middle-class father, a mother, three young children, and a shabbily genteel and addled grandmother. Straying from the main route, they encounter a homicidal maniac known only as The Misfit, recently escaped from prison, whereupon the family is systematically murdered. The proverb that furnishes the title of the story had been uttered previously, during a vapid conversation between the grandmother and the proprietor of a roadside restaurant, and in her dying moments the grandmother pleadingly exclaims to The Misfit, who now, in her uncertain eyes, resembles her son, "I just know you're a good man." De Caro explains,

Although the reader finds it impossible to find a good man in this plainly evil man, the grandmother finds it pathetically easy to do so, and an absurd contrast is created between the reader's perspective and that of the main character, the grandmother. [¶] The proverb/title comes to have a sort of dual usage. On the one hand, it can be taken at face value. The reader can agree with the minor character who earlier in the story utters the proverb as a judgment: indeed a good man is hard to find, if the people in the story are to be taken as representative of humanity. On the other hand, O'Connor plays with the proverb, contradicting it, showing how easy it can be to find a good man if one refuses to face up to the reality of evil... Just as the straightforward use of the proverb is countered by the ironic twisting, so are the horrifying events contradicted by the hilarity which pervades the narrative. (de Caro & Jordan, 2004: 115)

Responding to de Caro, another commentator has suggested a further ironic twist to the use of the proverb in the story:

By discerning The Misfit's "goodness," the grandmother, foolish and desperate as she may appear in worldly terms, *rejects* the Manichaen notion of "the reality of evil." Exceeding mere forgiveness, she declines to pass judgment on a child of God, who creates only good. Although readers of the story may find it (to use de Caro's phrasing) impossible to do, the grandmother triumphantly accomplishes that rare Christian act of loving the unlovable, accepting The Misfit as a "good man." (Doyle, 2012: 164)

So we see how complex can be the use of one seemingly simple proverb in a short story that, at first glance, could be mistaken for a mere comical slice of *Southern gothic* life.

Longer literary works like novels, of course, are less likely to revolve about a single key proverb. On the larger scale, much can often be learned about the development of themes and characters and attitudes by close attentiveness to the way the narrative voice and the individual characters use or adapt or misuse proverbs. As noted previously, so many of the early surveys of proverbs in novels had concentrated on minor works by minor authors, with little or no analysis. Some major novelists and their works have received attention – for instance, Charles Dickens (see Mieder, 1998a: 179-199, and works cited there; also Bryan and Mieder, 1997). Most notably, the character Sam Weller's famous use of his eponymous *wellerisms* (a phenomenon that certainly existed centuries earlier than Dickens's time) helps reveal his eccentric personality, his *character*. Also noteworthy are Kevin McKenna's several studies of proverb use by Russian novelists: Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Nabokov, Boris Pasternak, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (McKenna, 2013: 19-81 and 101-122). Wolfgang Mieder has examined the uses of proverbs in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2013: 171-226). The function of Nigerian proverbs in the novels of Chinua Achebe has received considerable scholarly attention (for example, by Adeeko, 1998).

However, a survey of Mieder and Bryan's *Proverbs in World Literature: A Bibliography* (1996) and some later bibliographies suggest that several central canonical writers of fiction have been hardly glanced at for their use of proverbs, among them: Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, George Meredith, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Kate Chopin, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Thomas Wolfe, Henry Miller, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, Ivan Turgenev, Jorge Luis Borges, Stendahl (Marie-Henry Beyle), Alexander Dumas, Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Jules Verne, Andre Gide, Anatole France, Albert Camus, Herman Hesse. Many others have been mentioned only briefly or tangentially.

As for extended fictional narratives that are not exactly novels, both François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532 et seq.) and Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605-1615) have been scrutinized by several proverb scholars (see the bibliography by Mieder and Bryan, 1996: 222 and 63-67). In contrast, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) have received little attention or none.

Nothing has been noticed about the famous American writer O. Henry (pen name of William Sydney Porter), who proverbially entitled one of his stories *The Proof of*

the Pudding (1910; the full proverb is *The proof of the pudding is in the eating*). That choice of a title suggests a handy subject for research or student writing: narratives (and other literary works) with proverbs or allusions to proverbs as their titles, like O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* or her story *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. Allusions are more common than full proverbs, since most titles do not take the form of complete sentences.

12.4 Proverbs in Plays

Detailed and subtle examinations of how proverbs are used in literary works will continue to be in demand, regardless of the genre. Drama is an especially fertile field for investigation, since (generally speaking) a play consists solely of the speech of characters, who – whether in conversations, orations, or soliloquies – can exhibit their eloquence, their wisdom, their folly, their foibles, and their quirks by their utterance or adaptation or misuse or misunderstanding of proverbs.

Elizabethan plays have provided the basis for much of our knowledge of what English proverbs existed in early times. B. J. Whiting published *Proverbs in the Earlier English Drama* in 1938. In 1950 M. P. Tilley's crucially important *Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* included a special *Shakespeare Index* (803-808). During the 1950s and early 1960s Archer Taylor presented a series of articles extracting the proverbs used by the Elizabethan playwrights John Marston, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, and Thomas Middleton (Taylor, 1960a: 193-216; 1957a: 25-36; 1957b: 39-59; 1960b: 77-100; 1959: 79-89). Partly on the basis of those earlier collections, R. W. Dent has compiled separate dictionaries: *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index* (1981) and *Proverbial Language In English Drama Exclusive of Shakespeare, 1495-1616: An Index* (1984).

As for studies that closely analyze the ways in which playwrights have used proverbs, it is not surprising that William Shakespeare occupies the first position. One conspicuous user of proverbs among Shakespeare's characters is Polonius in *Hamlet*. His lengthy advice to his impatiently embarking son is full of proverbs and other commonplaces; taken out of context, the speech can sound patriarchally sage, but in its context it becomes tedious, trite, and downright foolish—like the speaker himself. The voluble, convivial, and cowardly Sir John Falstaff, in *Henry IV, Part 1*, is also characterized partly by his blustering proverbial pronouncements. In *King Lear* the tragedy hurtles forward (or downward) from the king's petulant threat to his daughter, in the opening scene, that *Nothing will come of nothing*, with Lear's fool then spouting proverbs at a manic pace. In *Romeo and Juliet* the young lovers know more about how to speak beautiful language than about the realities and conflicts of the real world—but more of the proverbs in their play are uttered by Juliet's scatter-brained Nurse and Romeo's madcap friend Mercutio, including the mysterious wellerisms *Shake, quoth*

the dove-house (by the Nurse) and *Dun's the mouse, the constable's own word* (by Mercutio).

Otherwise, besides the mere notation of the occurrence of proverbs, the plays of Elizabethan dramatists have gone largely unexamined: Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, George Chapman, Ben Jonson, John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Francis Beaumont, John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton, John Marston, Philip Massinger, John Ford, James Shirley. The same is true of English playwrights from the Restoration period: among the prominent ones, John Dryden, William Congreve, William Wycherley, George Ethridge, Aphra Behn.

At the end of the eighteenth century in France arose the popular *proverb play* or (in French) *proverbe dramatique* or simply *proverbe*, in which the play's title will state a proverb, and then the dialogue and action will proceed to illustrate or assess the wisdom of the proverb. The most prominent authors of *proverbes* were Louis Carmontelle, Michel-Théodore Leclercq, and Alfred de Musset (Shaw, 1959: 56-76; Gipson, 2007: 153-166). The French sub-genre was anticipated by minor English plays of the Tudor era, which likewise use proverbs as titles, such as Ulpian Fulwell's *Like Will to Like, Quoth the Devil to the Collier* (1568), and William Wager's *Enough Is as Good as a Feast* (c1571). In Wager's play, the prolog announces the strategy:

Our title is *Inough is as good as a feast*,
Which Rhethorically we shall amplyfy
So that it shall appeer bothe to moste and least
That our meaning is but honestie,
Yet now and then we wil dally merily.
So shall we please them that of mirth be desirous:
For we play not to please them that be curious. (Wager, c1570: sig. A3^v)

Even Shakespeare's so-called *problem plays* *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, address, in complex ways, the proverbs pointed to in their titles. George Bryan has listed numerous other plays with proverb titles from the sixteenth century and later (Bryan, 2002: 65-74). *Proverb plays* probably owed much to the standard academic exercises during the Renaissance and eighteenth century, in which students were required to compose discourses based on assigned proverbs (Neuss, 1984: 1-18).

Much more remains to be said about proverbs in the works of the ancient Greek and Roman dramatists. The plays of Lope de Vega, Jean-Baptiste Moliere, Friedrich Schiller, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill, and Bertolt Brecht have received a fair amount of scholarly attention for their use of proverbs – those of other playwrights just a little or none at all: Pierre Corneille, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Anton Chekhov, August Strindberg, John Millington Synge, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Noël Coward, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugène Ionesco, William Inge, Harold Pinter, Jean Anouilh, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee, John Osborne, Jean Genet, Tom Stoppard, Derek Walcott, Václav Havel, Neil Simon.

12.5 Proverbs in Other Kinds of Literature

Pondering the use of proverbs in kinds of literature other than poetry, prose fiction, and drama raises the question of what, exactly, the term *literature* refers to. Should the category include personal essays? Historical and philosophical writing? Sermons and religious tractates? The verses of popular songs, operas, and stage musicals? The scripts of motion pictures (which are, after all, the most popular form a dramatic art in our time)? Radio and television programs? Speeches of statesmen and other public figures? Political and social commentary like newspaper editorials or *thought pieces* in magazines? News reporting? Letters? Folklore itself – especially items that may have been bent in the direction of accommodating literary tastes, like the Grimm brothers' *Märchen* or Bishop Thomas Percy's English and Scottish ballads?

Few will object to Mieder and Bryan's prominent inclusion, in *Proverbs in World Literature: A Bibliography* (1996), of such writers as Plato, Cicero, Erasmus, Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant, Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, or even Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Winston Churchill, and Adolph Hitler. Some of those writers, however, are *literary* in very different senses from the canonical poets, novelists, and playwrights – and from one another. Surely there is also much more to be said about proverbs in the non-fiction prose works of the following major writers, among others – works that have been largely neglected by proverb scholars: Baldassare Castiglione, Niccolo Machiavelli, William Tyndale, Jean Calvin, John Harington, Richard Hooker, Robert Burton, Thomas Browne, Isaac Walton, John Locke, Bento Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jeremy Bentham, Matthew Arnold, Charles Lamb, Thomas DeQuincey, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Henry Adams, William James, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, G. K. Chesterton, H. L. Mencken, Max Beerbohm, Jacques Barzun, Bertrand Russell, James Baldwin. Again, some of those writers' works are more *literary*, in a conventional sense, than others. For example, the *essay* is a well-recognized literary genre. It is often deemed to have been invented (and the term coined, in this special usage) by Montaigne in his famous *Essais* of 1580 (on the general subject of proverbs in Montaigne's essays, see Schmarje, 1973). An essay (in the literary sense) is a comparatively brief, often informal prose monolog on almost any subject, serious or lighthearted.

Near its beginning, Montaigne's essay *Du Pédantisme* [Of Pedantry] features the sober proverb, current in several languages, *The greatest scholars are not the wisest men*. In the essay, however, the pedants are ridiculed as *false* scholars, ignorant schoolmasters – even false pedants. Montaigne (whose first language, incidentally, was Latin) quotes the proverb not in French but in Latin, as a proper scholar, or a proper pedant, might. However, the proverb as quoted appears in ridiculously incorrect Latin: "Magis magnos clericos non sunt magis magnos sapientes" (Montaigne, 1974: 1:141-142). That is exactly how the proverb was uttered by Rabelais's ignorant

pedant Frère Jean in *Gargantua*! So, the proverb is not simply *there* in Montaigne's essay, to amplify the prose or lend a bit of authority to the discourse. Rather, in its context, the proverb calls for an active interpretation by the reader, involving several complex layers of irony. As Roger Abrahams and Barbara Babcock have said regarding another literary work, "the proverb has ironically become part of a complex literary internal cross-reference system which assumes a comprehensive experience of Western literature" (Abrahams & Babcock, 1977: 426).

Francis Bacon, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Ralph Waldo Emerson, G. K. Chesterton, George Orwell, Max Beerbohm, and James Baldwin are other foremost practitioners of the essay as a literary form. It could be argued that some entries among the thousands in Erasmus's early-sixteenth-century *Adagia* were, in effect, essays: for instance, his famous anti-war manifesto occasioned by the proverb *Dulce bellum inexpertis* [War is sweet to those who have not experienced it], and the wryly querulous discussion of his own tribulations as a proverb scholar by way of commenting on the adage *Herculei labores* [the labors of Hercules]. The leisurely discursiveness and relaxed style that tend to characterize the genre have made essays especially hospitable to the use of proverbs.

For purposes of persuasion, writers of political speeches and other polemics have found proverbs useful for connecting the argument in progress with the traditional wisdom that proverbs so often express, wisdom implicitly shared between the writer (or speaker) and the readers (or audience). Sages, humorists, and politicians have used proverbs in hopes of sounding wise or folksy—among them such figures as Benjamin Franklin in his *Poor Richard* persona, Josh Billings (pen name of Henry Wheeling Shaw), Anne Landers (pen name of Eppie Lederer) and her twin sister and rival advice-columnist *Dear Abby* (pen name of Pauline Phillips), and the U.S. president Ronald Reagan. Other writers employ proverbs in a fashion that might be called merely decorative.

12.6 Conclusion

The range of uses of proverbs in literature is manifold. Of course, in oral discourse – even in casual conversations – proverbs can also have a considerable range of uses, as, moment by moment, we endeavor to *characterize* ourselves, to create and project advantageous personas. It is a tradition that goes back to the Renaissance and beyond: the fashioning (or refashioning) of an identity, a *self* (Greenblatt, 1980). Like other aspects of language, proverbs are continually being used in that quasi-literary manner. We resemble the famous character in Moliere's play, who was delighted to discover that he could speak fluent *Prose*. We may not think of ourselves as sounding especially *literary*; however, like the great writers of our heritage, we can all speak Proverbs, and proverbs are the poetry of the people.

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