

‘Fast bind, fast find, / A proverb never stale in thrifty mind’ – parallel voices, echoes of permanence (notes concerning proverbs and proverbial expressions in the drama of William Shakespeare)

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Proverbs and proverbial expressions, an insistent resource in the oral culture of Elizabethan popular and commercial drama, can be seen as both the expression of consensual values and the site of a precarious collective wisdom in times of tribulation and change. In this they share the engaging fascination and inspiring role of founding stories and myths celebrating gods or heroes, protagonists of the community and interpreters of a common lore. The generic statement of accepted truths may thus aim simply at granting a feeling of stability and confidence in an ever-moving system of ideas and social representations but, under a more critical scrutiny, it may also expose, in the historical frame of reference and in the specific context of the action of the play, the subjective bias of the speaker and the cloaked or patent interests of groups and classes. A brief survey of the ubiquitous presence of those formulaic statements and codified principles of popular extraction can be nothing more than a prospective test of reading possibilities.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush – this is an established truth that common sense would hardly challenge. Hotspur, however, has a different opinion when against the odds he claims his unassailable fortitude and bravery, and proclaims his most genuine convictions: ‘Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety’ (**Henry IV Part One**, 2. 4. 9-10). Expediency may be a good advice when one decides to take a risk that can lead to triumph and glory; that’s why Iago has to act promptly ‘(/.../Ay, that’s the way/ Dull not device by coldness and delay’, **Othello**, 2. 3. 360-361), Macbeth longs for the perilous venture (‘Come what may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day, **Macbeth**, 1. 3. 145-146), and King Richard clears the way from any moral encumbrances (‘Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe’, **Richard**

III, 5. 6. 39-40. Sometimes wisdom and maturity, or other reasons, dictate alternative choices – ‘Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast’ says Friar Lawrence in **Romeo and Juliet**, III. 3. 94, and ‘Hasty marriage seldom proveth well’ (Richard of Gloucester to King Edward IV, his brother, in **Henry VI, Part 3**, 4. 1. 18), no matter how true the saying ‘Hanging and wiving goes by destiny.’ (Nerissa to Portia, in **The Merchant of Venice**, 2. 9. 81-82) may be. And tribulation cannot always be mitigated by imagination, ‘...for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’, the appeasing Claudius states (**Hamlet**, 2. 2. 244-245), but the exiled Bolingbroke knows too well that the real thing cannot be evaded by any figment or intellectual chimera (‘O, no! the apprehension of the good/ Give but the greater feeling to the worse’, **Richard II**, 1. 3. 263-264). Dead itself, that removes us to ‘The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns’ (**Hamlet**, 3. 1. 81-82) can be looked at with the most indifferent cynicism, because ‘The ripest fruit first falls’ (**Richard II**, 2. 1. 154), with resignation (‘The end of life cancels all bonds’, **Henry IV, Part One**, 2. 2. 157), ‘He that dies pays all debt’ (**The Tempest**, 3. 2. 126), or in horror and dismay before ‘The kingdom of perpetual night’ (**Richard III**, 1. 4. 47). ‘A bird in the hand...Wisely and slow, never hurry never hurry;’ – or should one make haste and see the future in the instant?

All these formulae, a legacy of an open and ever-changing system, only correspond, as a rule, to inconsistent and voluble assertions, or precarious generalizations: both daily experience, multifarious and evasive, and wisdom granted by memory and folklore, are often illuminated by contexts of specific import or stimulated by the subjectivism of the appealing discourse of harmony and the mysterious persuasive entanglement of the visible and the immaterial, or the haunting presence veiling what is unpredictable or unavoidable paves the way to a protective feeling that tends to curb facts and adjust them to the norm. The representation of an integrated whole, permeated by an established set of correspondences and continuities – that favors the operative role of symbols and allegories – would provide a reliable basis for reassuring systems of general truths; however, even on the territory of proverbs, maxims or aphorisms, the building exposes its fissures and contradictions.

Shakespeare’s drama is very generous in such rites and common beliefs, and Histories, Comedies and Tragedies, in their wide range of situations and characters, are a splendid source of proverbial expressions. In ‘festive comedies’ a subgenre given full theoretical citizenship by C. L. Barber in his

widely-accepted study (**Shakespeare's Festive Comedies – A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom**, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1959) dramatic action moves from the institution of conflict to the games of love in the 'green world' where paths separate, opens the grove of loss and ritual passage for young people to face and cross on their way to the fulfillment of desire and natural inclination, threatened at first by authority, conveniently reinstated in the end, that is, when society and nature celebrate harmony and mutual satisfaction. 'The course of true love never did run smooth', had stressed Lysander at the beginning of his adventure (**A Midsummer Night's Dream**, I. 1. 135), and Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, the mischievous spirit of the woods, would announce, at the end of Act I, scene 1, the undoing of tensions and the expected advent of fruitfulness and renovation – '...And the country proverb known, / That 'every man should take his own', / In your waking shall be shown. / Jack shall have Jill, / Naught shall go ill, / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well . Sometimes the proverbial suggestion is provided by the very title of the play – see the 'problem plays' **Measure for Measure**, **All Well that Ends Well**, or even **Much Ado about Nothing**; and the biblical reverberations of the first example, the truism or semantic platitudes of the others, underline, in the frame of conventions of comedy, the set of balanced forces and the web of expectations that tend to dissolve characters in levels of experience which transcend them. Without the imposing configuration of the tragic hero or the historical figure immortalized in chronicle or drama, shapes of comedy face the obscure world inhabited by allegory and symbol; maxims, proverbs, aphorisms are aiming at providing some substance and consistency to that unstable ground and at confirming or establishing patterns of life and behavior. This consistency is very often only available when formal and abstract idealism has to give way to resigned pragmatism. In **Measure for Measure** inflexible decree referred to by Escalus – 'Mercy is not itself, that oft looks so; / Pardon is still the nurse of second woe' (2. 1. In fine) – and justice in its most zealous version, as inscribed in the argumentative tensions of the dialogue interpreted by Isabella and Angelo, Act 2, scene 1, go without equity and only require the literal punitive law, but such a crude impersonal enforcement of a general command is nothing but the sheer activation of a formal measure for measure principle, of proverbial extraction, inapt before the complexity of the situations it is supposed to rule, finally ousted in the dénouement of the dramatic action – 'An Angelo for Claudio; death for death; / Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure; / Like doth quit like, and Measure for Measure. In a slight inflexion to this comic contrivance, in **All Well that Ends Well** or **Much Ado**

about Nothing proverbial inscription seems to respond to the interests of a conflict rather engaged in comic language and situation, and less inspired by controversial issues: the reason given by Lavatch, the clown, when trying to persuade the Countess, his lady mistress, to marry, include topics of saucy and provocative intention – ‘My poor body, madam, requires it. I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives (1. 3. 29) - , and Bertram’s pre-nuptial crisis has grown under the sign of the jolly absurdity that prefers the risks of war to the horrid domestic confinement – ‘Wars is no strife/ To the dark house and the detested wife’ -, which solicits from Parolles, his good fellow, a compatible answer – ‘A young man married is a man that’s marred’ (Act II, scene 3, in fine). Helen, the Countess’ nurse, may well be in the right when she gives reassurance and confidence to the partners in the ongoing conflict: ‘All’s well that ends well; still the fine’s the crown. / Whatever the course, the end is the renown □(4. 4., in fine). And Beatrice, the Countess’ nurse in *Much Ado about Nothing*, does not evade that same spirit when she gives Hero her plain piece of advice – ‘If the Prince be too important, tell him there is measure in all things’ (2. 1. 58-59) - , which joins in tone and intention the proverb inscribed in the dialogue interpreted by Don Pedro and Leonato –

Don Pedro Good Signor Leonato, are you come to meet your trouble? The fashion of the world is to avoid cost, and you encounter it.

Leonato Never come trouble to my house in the likeness of your grace, for trouble being gone, comfort should remain, but when you depart from me, sorrow abides and happiness takes his leave (1. 1. 77 ff) –,

And the same can be said, in more general terms, of Dogberry’s clumsy voice when expressing male rivalry: ‘And two men ride of a horse, one must ride behind’ (3. 5. 33) .

Proverbs in **Twelfth Night** , in spite on anxieties based on identity dilemmas, on disguise and deceit, after all the common ground of performance and theater quandaries, may be read along the same lines. When Maria rejects the naïf passes of Sir Andrew Aguecheek, verberating the foolishness and effeminacy of his awkward moves – ‘Now, sir, thought is free, I pray you, bring your hand to the buttery-bar, and let it drink (1. 3. 58-59) – the audience respond with alacrity to the comic moment, and it is certainly in a jocular vein that Olivia’s misadventures, her surrender to Cesario, that is, Viola’s charms, is to be taken: ‘I pity you’, says Viola with

some bitterness; 'That's a degree to love', replies the unfortunate maid, entangled in the wiles of an impossible hope. But comedy, as stressed above in relation to **Measure for Measure**, may depict a sinister outline. 'Fast bind, fast find/ A proverb never in thrifty mind' (**The Merchant of Venice**, 2. 5. 51-52) expresses a medieval and Renaissance view of Jews adopted by Christian Europe. One could certainly advocate the sheer extravagance and populist representation of the outcast and accordingly legitimize the brutal exorcism in the service of festive consummation. Be as it may, the contrast established by both the usurer's greed and his zealous and ascetic closure with the easy-going and unrestrained attitude kept by young aristocrats concerning wealth and money – 'So may the outward shows be least themselves, / The world is still deceiv'd with ornament', **The Merchant of Venice**, 3. 2. 73-74 – is a mark of an ethnic absolute difference, later strongly suggested by the music of spheres that Jessica and Lorenzo long to hear – and claim to look for in a kind of harmonious correlative on earth, the music of love and social integration.

In history plays proverbial expressions vibrate in unison with the very political matrix of the text and with the resurgence of images of the past deeply engaged in contemporary affairs. In **Richard II** the Queen, after the fall of her lord and king, refuses the playful diversion advised by her solicitous nurse since lawn accidents and bowling irregularities become a metaphor of the world and an image of an unpromising life (3. 4. 4). The world upside down had already been insinuated in ominous traces. Two antagonistic wills brought to trial of the single combat supervised by the king depict an opposition not to be overcome by Richard's voice:

Richard Rage must be withstood.
 Give me his gage. Lions make leopards tame.

Mowbray Yeah, but not change his spots. (1. 1. 172-174)

The nostalgic glorification of the good king **Henry V**, at a historical juncture when pains of Mankind are no more to be justified by God's design, and the vitality of natural and vegetal references dress a political context that overtly clashes against any self-condescending and erratic ruling measures.

The strawberry grows underneath the nettle,
 And wholesome berries thrive and ripen best
 Neighbour'd by fruit of baser quality;
 And so the Prince obscured his contemplation
 Under the veil of wildness – which, no doubt,
 Grew like the summer grass, fastest by night,
 Unseen, yet crevice in his faculty,

observes the Bishop of Ely, to which the Archbishop of Canterbury replies, full aware of priorities established by a time without miracles: ‘ It must be so, for miracles are ceased,/ And therefore we must needs admit the means/ How things are perfected. (Henry V, 1. 1. 67-70). The proverb is up to its calling when it is national pride to speak through the intrepid voice of the hero, struggling with obstinacy against the odds – ‘I tell thee herald,/ I thought upon one pair of English legs/ Did march three Frenchmen. (3. 7. 134-136), or in the hour of the harsh exposition, touching those cardinals that insidiously surround Catherine of Aragon, the queen fallen in disgrace, of hoods that do not make monks:

What can be their business
 With me, a poor weak woman, fall’n from favour?
 I do not like their coming, now I think on’t;
 They should be good men, their affairs as righteous-
 But all hoods make not monks (**Henry VIII**, 3. 1. 19-23)

One of the most curious examples of the operative force of proverbs and proverbial expressions is perhaps to be found in **Henry IV, Part One**, a chronicle play that displays in a variegated range of characters, situations and places, the English nation, actually the real protagonist of the play.

Lords and commons, courtiers, soldiers, outcasts and outsiders inhabit the palace and the tavern, the road and the forest, filling those stations with the impressive mark of their gestures and their language. It is there that proverbs rise and shine to defend and celebrate social attitudes and ways of life. Early in the play *Sir John Falstaff*, the cheerful knave and robber of Eastcheap and Gadshill, and the Prince's jolly goodfellow, is linked explicitly by his noble companion to the devil, providing in this way a new life to the Old Nick after his errands in the recent experience of Medieval drama – Sir John stands to his word, the devil shall have his bargain, for he was never yet a breaker of proverbs. He will give the devil his due. (1. 2. 104-106). The plump figure of the braggart soldier will have the guts to activate in due time the proverb to invoke the bandit's ethics and code – 'A plague upon it when thieves cannot be true one to the other' (2. 2. 25-26) – to advocate his vocation when travellers in the forest are about to be assaulted and robbed – 'Now, my masters, happy man be his dole, say I. Everyman to his business' (2. 2. 68-69) – and later, in the tavern, with energy that only wine can provide, to vituperate all cowards in the world – '...a coward is worse than a cup of sack with lime in it' (2. 5. 114). Before the Prince he will support with the force of talent and conviction his way of life – 'If sack and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked. If to be old and merry be a sin, then many an old host that I know is banned /.../' (2. 5. 428-430). Falstaff is the hero by 'instinct', expedient and pragmatic, the one who proclaims to his fascinated cronies in the tavern 'Watch tonight, pray tomorrow!' (2. 5. 254-255), tests with success his vital resources – 'Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. /.../' (5. 1. 131-134) – and rejoices among ruins with the boastful wisdom of the survivor – 'The better part of valour is discretion, in which better part I have saved my life (5. 4. 117-118). By then the sound and fury of Hotspur's gallant foolhardiness lay already in the past. Ready to seize honour from the deep bottom of the sea or to grasp it from the horns of the moon, no matter how gratuitous the move, the sinister Owen Glendower and his assumed esoteric and providential qualifications (to have the devil at one's service is not for sure a negligible prerogative) brings to the fore the captivating suicidal king of honour and his pattern of life – 'And I can touch thee, coz, to shame the devil/ By telling truth. Tell truth and shame the devil' (3. 1. 55-56). In the past lay also Hal's choric voice, the cold announcement of a regeneration by the clock also conveying proverbial lessons – 'If all the year were playing holidays, / The

sport would be as tedious as to work;' (1. 3. 182-183). Excess is not only the blind courage of the warrior or his intemperate vision of absolute honour – also the fatal disproportion of the body and immoderation of the vice, both finding in 'That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old-bearded Satan' (2. 5. 621-622), a monumental representation. Precision in measure has its right formulation in the lecture in politics as an art given by the King to the Prince, in a proverb that is, in many ways, an illuminating password of the play and its central intention and meanings – '...a little/ More than a little is by much too much.' (3. 2. 72-73).

In tragedy proverbs also find an operative role to play. In the opening of **Timon of Athens** the protagonist's unrestrained generosity is acclaimed by the Poet, the Painter and the Jeweller, and this view of a great patron for all seasons depicts the sense of opportunity animating the group of sycophants circulating permanently around him. Vindicated service and asserted friendship only cover vulgar interests and egoistic expectations – 'When we recompense have praised the vile, / It stains the glory in that happy verse/ Which aptly sings the good' (1. 1. 15-17). The Poet's speech is, along the same lines, the sheer convention of praise and politesse with greed and courtesan rapacity underneath. Still in the first scene Timon restores to freedom a friend in need – 'Tis not enough to help the feeble up, / But to support him after' (1. 1. 109-110) – and in the next scene releases him from debt with the exaltation of the invaluable significance of friendship – '.../You mistake my love. / I gave it freely ever, and there's none/ Can truly say he gives, if he receives. (1. 2. 8-10). The absolute indifference to material concerns will follow an iterative course, hand in hand with proverbial expressions, and the presence of accepted truths is made especially conspicuous in the company of signs of an imprudent way of life. Flavius, the faithful servant, exposes in an aside the recklessness that does not know to say friends from enemies and guides his master towards collapse and destitution – 'Happier is he that has no friend to feed/ Than such that do e'en enemies exceed' (1. 2. 197-198) –, and Apemantus, in his cynical philosophy, scourges without mercy the train of leeches that suck their host and his property; and he doesn't spare the fatal naiveté that paves the way to the hero's fall: 'I should fear those that dance before me now/ Would one day stamp upon me. T'has been done./ Men shut their doors against a setting sun' (1. 2. 135-137). The misanthrope leaves society and rebukes it with acrimony, but it is Timon, unaware and credulous, the ultimate target of his harsh criticism and vituperation, even if his attitude is refracted by the flogging of the hero's attendants, whom

he utterly despises. Apemantus will not join the guests at table because he is not used to eating lords, does not take part in the universal idolization of the prodigal host for he sees in it the embodiment of vanity and self-gratification. That is why his answer to the Poet, author of the encomiastic verses paying tribute to the patron's excellence, could not be more corrosive – 'Yes, he is worthy of thee, and to pay thee for thy labour. He that loves to be flattered is worthy of the flatterers. /.../' (1. 1. 226-228) -, and the exposure of the baseness of the courtiers steps into the same shoes: '...Friendship's full of dregs./ Methinks false hearts should never have sound legs./ Thus honest fools lay out their wealth on curtsies' (1. 2. 231-233). Apemantus' stiffness knocks down human being and relegates them to the condition of animals; this subjection of mankind will not deprive him, however, of the power to single out in the resentful and inflamed man-hater a basic limitation inexperience and judgment: 'The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends' (IV. 3. 302-303). Urbane and gracious sense of community gives way to the unassailable aggressivity kept safe by the cavern and the wilderness, nurtured by the memory of universal indignity- 'There's nothing level in our cursed natures/ But direst villainy' (4. 3. 300-301); and the curse incriminating riches and gold clashes against the traditional pastoral feeling or aurea mediocritas which recalls the loss of Eden and bitterly regrets spoilt innocence in the ways of the wide world and big cities:

What a god's gold,
 That he is worshipped in a baser temple
 Than where swine feed!
 Tis thou that riggest the bark and plougest the foam,
 Settlest admired reverence in a slave.
 To thee be worship; and thy saints for aye
 Be crowned with plagues, that thee alone obey. (.....)

Wrathful Moses flogs the Golden Calf. But he now preaches in the wilderness bursting histrionically with universal abjection. A very different response is to be found in Alcibiades: the aggrieved warrior reacts against insulting ungratefulness making his army in revolt march against the walls of Athens. Proverbs are also common in speeches that denounce or reveal what social conventions disguise, as in the case of the First Stranger, in 3. 2. 58 ff. , a choric figure that exposes ingratitude and falsehood operating behind ceremony observed in the banquet – ‘Why, this is the world’s soul, and just of the same piece/ Is every flatterer s spirit. Who can call him his friend/ That dips in the second dish? /.../ - a judgment to be gravely confirmed at the end of the scene: ‘...But I perceive, / Men must learn now with pity to dispense, / For policy sits above conscience.’ Also Sempronius, Timon’s follower in the good old days of prosperity, rejects him in time of distress with the incredible line of reasoning that orders and discriminates affections according to chronological entry and therefore relegates the hero’s request to the bottom of the list of an eligible agenda: ‘Who hates mine honour shall not know my coin’ (...). Proverbs are not absent from the conflict opposing the Senators and Alcibiades, the worthy servant of the town that tries to persuade the Elders to concede the exceptional favour of mercy and to acquit a friend of his found guilty of murder. To the entreaties and arguments of the general – ‘For pity is the virtue of the law, / And none but tyrants use it cruelly,’ – responds the punitive inflexibility of the court, for whom mercy is only liable to stimulate crime – ‘If wrongs be evils and enforce us kill, / What folly ‘tis to hazard life for ill!’ (3. 6. 8 ff). The Senators, old usurers and greedy rascals, depict at the highest level the general corruption and the degrading activities of the ubiquitous power of gold. No wonder that **Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844** and **The Capital** saw in this play a major assertion of the pervasive commodification of the human existence in the context of the growth and accumulation of wealth under the capitalist social and economic system.

Adding quotations would nothing but confirm the idea that proverbs and sententious expressions are not an accidental or episodic embellishment of speech and dramatic action – they actually qualify the voices of the characters in conflict. In Othello the villain finds the world free to bustle in – Iago’s invocation, or invention, of proverbs allegedly ratifying the degraded or voluble condition of women (see the long string of examples in the action of 2. 1. , just before the arrival of the hero), and the subjection of claimed virtues of respected ladies to the private lust of courtesans

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown (3. 3. 199-202).

His view on reputation, accordingly, is the Janus-like assertion that puts it conveniently in perspective when turning the knife in the wound of the afflicted Cassio, fallen in disgrace – ‘Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit and lost without deserving’ (2. 3. 261-263) – or cherishes its invaluable import when corrupting the protagonist – ‘God name on man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls (3. 3. 153 ff). In **King Lear** vitality of the negative figures and features of traditional wisdom interpreted by virtuous personae establish contrastive dualities favoured by the extreme nature of the feelings and attitudes depicted in the play. In **Richard III** young victims are doomed by proverbial wisdom and authority – ‘So wise so young, they say, do never live long’, is Gloucester’s aside in 3. 1. 79, insisting on the issue in the following verses - , urgency and expediency inhabit the speech of the usurper and his cronies and agents – see the executioners’ language, a variation of ‘not words but deeds’, in 1. 3. 350-351, or in 1. 4. 81 -, and the obsession with revenge captures the intense proverbial note vibrating in Margaret’s diatribe of 1. 3. ff. And in **Macbeth** phrases of proverbial import take the oxymoron as configuration – battle lost and won, weather foul and fair, etc. – and tinge places and situations with the colours of mystery, premonition and opacity. Prologues, epilogues, inductions or any ostensive formal choric voices are therefore to share their intentional role with the functional location of those formulaic expressions that profess the permanence of general truths, parallel voices in the common language of myths and their web of symbols and interpretative codes and, in a similar way, inevitably impregnated by the contingency and vested interests of contradictory views and speeches.

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Quotations are referred to the Norton Shakespeare based on The Oxford Edition (general editor: Stephen Greenblatt, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) .

These notes are an adapted version of a paper presented to an Open Seminar of the Department for Anglo-American Studies (Oporto, Faculty of Letters, February 2011).