CHAPTER VII

Proverbs: Literary Study & Universality
In *The Worthies of England*, Thomas Fuller says that a proverb is 'much matter decocted into a few words'. We presume that this 'much matter' was full of wisdom. Our attention is drawn to the proverb, 'wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them'. It is difficult to agree with the second part of this statement. Have the proverbs no use except being repeated ad nauseam by fools and witless persons?

We cannot accept this position. On the other hand, as Joanna Wilson says, 'A justification for the study of proverbs, if any is needed, may be found in its usefulness for philology, psychology, folk-lore, the history of manners, and for literary studies, to help to establish a text or interpret a meaning'. A couple of examples are given by Mrs. Wilson. In 1600, was recorded the proverb *do not spoil the hog for a half-penny worth of tar*. In 1651 hog was replaced by sheep. By 1823, sheep gave way to ship, which, as Charles Barber points out, is a shortening of sheep. The second example is the current

*I would not touch him with a barge pole*. In earlier times it was, *I would not tend him with a pair of hedging-mittens*. We wonder what will be substituted for barge pole when it does not exist any more.

Simeon Potter shows how many Norse words survive in proverbs. He says:

Some Norse words are widely known in proverbs, those succinct expressions of inherited wisdom: 'A bonny
bride is soon 

husskit (dressed, prepared) and a short horse

is soon wispit (bedecked)'; A toom (empty) purse makes a baste
(bashful, unenterprising) merchant; 'Never make toom rusie
(empty boast or brag); 'A wight (valiant) man never wanted a
weapon'. 'Better sit and rue than flit (move house) and rue';
'Hall binks (benches) are sliddery (Great men's favours are
precarious)'; 'left settle (aim), whiles hit'.

Later, Potter provides examples where dialect words
are included in proverbs:

A cold May and a Windy makes a full barr and a findy (substantial)
A man may speer the gate (ask the way) to Rome
Better fliech (flatter) a fool than fight him,
Cross the stream where it is abbest (shallowest)
Eat leeks in Lide (March) and ramsins (ramson, garlic) in
May and all the year after physicians may play.
For a tint (lost) thing care not.
He that lippens (trusts) to lent ploughs, his land will
lie ley (unploughed)
Let everyman be content with his own Revel (lot)
Mickle maun (must) a good heart thale (endure)2.

The study of proverbs is necessary not only to a
student of language but also to a student of literature.
This is specially so because many proverbs are still used by
poets and writers, though their use is not so extensive as
before. Some proverbs might have changed their form. So in
order to make our understanding perfect, we have to study
proverbs. More than in modern literature, difficulties are experienced in the study of literature of the seventeenth century and earlier. Dr. Johnson observed this of Chaucer:

"The nature of his work required the use of common colloquial language, and consequently admitted many phrases allusive, elliptical, and proverbial, such as we speak and hear every hour without observing them; and of which, being how familiar, we do not suspect that they can ever grow uncouth, or that, being how obvious, they can ever seem remote."

These words of Dr. Johnson are applicable to the writers of the later centuries also. Proverbs were parts of rhetorical training and many collections of proverbs appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These collections were used by all educated classes and also by authors, orators, politicians, religious preachers, and pamphleteers.

A well versed student of proverbs must guard against certain presumptions. Suppose he comes across a work of an anonymous author and compares it with the work of a known author. It may so happen by chance that the same or similar proverbs and proverbial expressions are used by them. It should not therefore be concluded that the same writer wrote both. Further evidence is called for before such a conclusion is arrived at. Pericles is a play of which it is believed, Shakespeare is one of the authors. In that play appears the proverb, 'The great fish eat up the little fish'. The same proverb also occurs in the works of George Wilkins. It will be fallacious to conclude that Wilkins was the part author of
Pericles. Shakespeare and Bacon shared a lot of information. They also made use of common proverbs such as, 'good wine needs no bush', and 'God sends fortune to fools'. This fact cannot be used to support the fact that Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare or that Shakespeare wrote the works of Bacon. Again we find that Spencer has used the proverbial phrase, 'to lick the fat from another's beard', in The Shephearde Calender and also in Mother Hubberd's Tale. We are not justified in concluding that both the poems were composed at the same time. Again in a sixteenth-century book we may find a reference to the cunning of the fox and the strength of a lion. We shall be wrong if we conclude that the writer is under the influence of Machiavelli. The proverb, 'If the lion's skin cannot do it, the fox's shall', was already well established having descended from Plutarch and Cicero.

We require a knowledge of proverbs for the establishment of the correct text. This knowledge helps us further to understand how a dramatic passage is to be rendered. In Othello, in the Council Chamber scene, after Barbantio has been humiliated by Desdemona's declaration of love for Othello, the Duke tries to comfort him by speaking a number of proverbs:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
To mourn a mischief that is past and gone,
Is the next way to draw new mischiefs on.
What cannot be preserved, when fortune takes:
Patience her injury a mockery makes.
The robbed that smile, steals something from the thief,
He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief.

- (Othello, I, iii, 202-209).
If the modern actor does not appreciate the proverbs, he will not be able to render the lines in the way the author intended. The necessary tone and spirit will be missing. An injustice is likely to be done to the author. This difficulty is not likely to arise so far as contemporary drama is concerned. Difficulties are likely to be experienced with literature of old times—seventeenth century or before. The following example may be cited from Webster's *The White Devil* Act V, Sc. iv,

> Now the wares are gone, we may shut up shop,
> Bless you all good people.

Again there are passages that cannot be perfectly understood without the knowledge of the concerned proverb. George Herbert's poem 'The Guiddite' provides an example. The conclusion of the poem is:

> It is no office, art, or news,
> Nor the Exchange, or busy Hall;
> But it is that which while I use
> I am with thee, and most take all.

To understand the sense we must focus our attention to the proverb *most take all*. 'Most' here is equivalent to the Almighty. The meaning is similar to the meaning of God take all. As the poet writes his verses, dedicated not to the worldly activities, pleasures and diversions, but to the service of God, the poet is with God and God the omnipotent takes full possession of him. At the climax of the poem, the
poet shows his absolute submission to God, by transforming the meaning of the word 'proverb. In the worldly sense, *most take all* will be nearer in meaning to the proverb 'The great fish eat up the little fish'.

It has been amply demonstrated that a student of literature must make every effort 'to understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise and their dark sayings' - (Proverbs, 1, vi). The study of proverbs helps us to understand the themes of many books the titles of which have been taken from proverbs. Examples are, *A Tale of a Tub*; *All is well that ends well*. On the other hand the title of Sir Thomas More's book 'Utopia' became proverbial. The search for proverbs lost can also be thrilling. A letter in *Notes and Queries*, Vol 15, No. 10, October 1968 (p. 382), quotes the following lines and seeks information on the proverb hidden in them:

*But O thing is, you know it well enough
Of Chapman, that their money is their pillow.*

Occasional appearance of such letters in scholarly journals testifies to the fact that curiosity about proverbs is still not dead. The desire to use proverbs may have lost its edge in these modern days - but the eagerness to have more knowledge about them is still in evidence.

We have discussed the relations between proverbs and literary men. Now we can pursue other lines.

The study of proverbs shows that proverbs are truly international in character. National boundaries are
transcended by a proverb and the idea finds itself enshrined in different languages in different countries. As we have already seen, a great number of English proverbs have come from Greek, Latin, French and other languages. The greatest number of borrowings are from Latin and French. This is not to be wondered at. There were many invasions of England by Rome and France and a large number of people made England their home. This had its effect on life and literature. As Simeon Potter says, 'the language of King Alfred was transformed but its life was at no time in jeopardy. For three centuries, indeed, the literature of England was trilingual - English, Latin, and French - and we must likewise make ourselves trilingual if we would study it seriously'. It follows that we can profit immensely by studying the proverbs of different nations especially France and Italy.

It is noted that various mottoes of many families are either proverbs to start with or have become proverbs subsequently. Some proverbs are associated with historical personages. Orators of the day could effectively use these sayings, thus preserving them and spreading them. When Nero was reproached for his excessive love of the fiddle, he readily answered, 'An artist lives everywhere', a Greek proverb which has, however, not found a place in English. In 49 BC, Julius Caesar decided to invade Italy, he crossed the small stream Rubicon and announced his decision by saying 'the die is cast'. This incident has yielded two proverbs.
The spirit of a proverb 'makes the whole world kin'.

We have seen that the common proverb To carry coals to New
Castle has an echo in a Persian proverb, To carry pepper to
Hindostan. The Jews recognize it as To carry oil to the city
of olives. Proverbs cut across national frontiers and show
that basically human nature remains one. Nations are parallels
of one another. While various nations may clash sometimes,
a friendly exchange of words, idioms and proverbs may take
place. History and Geography books do give us knowledge
about other nations and a scholar will point over them.
However, proverbs might illuminate some dark corners and give
us some interesting facts. Here is an example. A proverb
has preserved for us the knowledge of ancient Roman coxcombry,
the home of which was Greece. A proverb which means scratching
the head with a single finger was applied to persons who were
effeminate in their dress and manners. These persons used to
scratch their heads carefully with one finger only so that
their meticulously arranged hair might not be disturbed.

We travel to Arabia, 'proverbially'. The Arabs of
Yore led a nomadic existence, a hard unsettled existence.
He was often thirsty and to his milk was a very valuable
commodity. He had a proverb, How large his flow of milk is,
to distinguish a valuable gift. The perfect stage of repose
was described by an Arab as, I throw the rein over my back.
This is an allusion to the loosening of the ropes of the
camels, which were thrown on their backs when they were led
out to pasture.
We now come to China which had reached a high state of civilization early in human history. Large magnificent buildings were parts of the Chinese landscape. These places had imposing exteriors. It is only proper that they have a proverb, such as, *A grave and majestic outside is the place of the soul.* This proverb also testifies to their love of beauty. Their idea of government is expressed in a proverb which is couched in architectural term. They say, *A sovereign may be compared to a hall, his officers to the steps that lead to it, the people to the ground on which they stand.* The proverb is rather long - but now imaginative!

When we come to the Jews, we find their love of idolatry and their law expressed round their Temple. The proverb concerned is *None ever took a stone out of the Temple,* but the dust did fly into his eyes. They also have a proverb, *A fast for a dream is as fire for stubble.* It shows that they thought that a religious fast was precipitous to a religious dream; there was a holy mystery to fasts and dreams.

Now, we find in Spain that the people were highminded and independent. They have this proverb, *The King goes as far as he is able, not as far as he desires.* This shows that the power of the King was not unlimited. They protested against high taxation in the proverb, *what Christ takes not, the exchequer carries away.* They castigated the greedy priest by saying that he having eaten the olis offered, claims the dish.
Cervantes has given us a picture of Spanish life and culture in a very large number of proverbs, that he used in his *magnusopus*, Don Quixote.

Our 'proverbial' Odyssey now brings us to Italy. The proverbs of Italy are influenced by their deep and political genius and have a large personal element in them. Many persons of old days had a deep pride in their town. An example is the proverb, *First Venetian, and then Christian*. It shows in general terms that their city held a greater sway in their minds than did their religion. Italy was not a unified country in those days as it is now. Sometimes there were republics when people were free. At other times there were principalities which made people servile. Different proverbs displayed different situations, *The people murder one another and princes embrace one another; who knows not to flatter, knows not to reign; who serves at court dies on straw*. They have also the proverb, *The talker sows, the silent reaps*: This echoes the English proverb, *Speech is silver, silence is golden*. There are other proverbs which show a deep knowledge of human nature, for example, *Beware of vinegar made of sweet wine*. This means that we must not provoke the anger of a patient man.

The military genius of France gave the proverbs, *Link by link is made the coat of mail and the tongue strikes deeper than a lance*. The ancient spirit of Englishmen was once expressed in the proverb, *Better be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion*, that is, 'the first of the yeomanry rather than the last of the gentry'.
Our studies have revealed the fact that proverbs reflect the characteristic circumstances and feelings of people. These feelings are universal and no study of English proverbs can be complete or satisfactory unless consideration is also given to the proverb lore of other nations.

When we are deeply immersed in the study of English proverbs we find that these take wings and fly to other times and other places taking us along on the viewless wings of imagination. We reach other climes and learn a lot about other nations - their history, their geography, their folklore, their manners and custom. The study of proverbs thus triggers off study in other fields. The proverb makers, known and unknown consciously or unconsciously have not spared any field of human activity. We will now examine some proverbs relating to God, birth, marriage and death, the prime concerns of man. About God, we are told, The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice. God helps them who help themselves. Get the spindle ready and God will send the flax. God will provide. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. These enjoin upon us complete faith in God. We must fear God and keep his commandments, but also God is love, and the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. All these proverbs are a theist's delight. There are no anti-God proverbs although there is a mild note of complaint in Shakespeare's, 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods'. Proverbs in other languages also acknowledge God so we can say that the idea of God is basic to human ethos.
There are not many proverbs about birth. *Birth is much, but breeding is more,* says one. It represents a mild protest against aristocracy. *He that is born to be hanged will never be drowned,* asserts the inevitability of fate. *He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth,* shows the importance of being born in a rich family. *We are not born for ourselves,* asserts altruism. We would like to add that our 'birth is but a sleep and a forgetting' but this saying of Wordsworth has not yet attained the status of a proverb, though 'The child is the father of man' has.

The topic of marriage has spawned a number of proverbs. *It is better to marry than to burn.* It is not good that man should be alone. Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall leave unto his wife. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. All these sayings from the Bible can be read in sequence. Other proverb makers tell us that marriages are made in heaven and that hanging and wiving go by destiny. If we are to believe Shakespeare, *a man may weep upon his wedding day and a young man married is a young man mar'ld.* We are warned, *marry in haste and repent at leisure* and *first thrive and then wive.* All aspects of marriage are covered.

In a similar way, all aspects of death are also covered. *Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt Thou return.* The righteous hath hope in death. *As soon as a man is born he begins to die.* Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we
shall die. Whose the Gods love die young. These are some of the examples. We learn again that death is inevitable, our mourning for the dead is bootless and we can look for reunion in heaven. Plenty of proverbs offer us consolation and apply a soothing balm to our bruised heart when we have lost someone we love.

Our study of proverbs has repeatedly emphasized the universality of proverbs. They have 'left no stone unturned' so far as coverage of life is concerned. Many of them have now become clichés, but many of them have still a vibrant life in them. We have proverbs for all occasions. Robert Frost said, 'a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom'. Shall we say of a proverb that it begins in wisdom and ends in delight?

In an admirable essay "Literature as Equipment for Living", the eminent critic Kenneth Burke has pointed out that proverbs do not exhibit "pure" literature. They represent practical wisdom. There are proverbs for consolation, e.g. The sun does not shine on both sides of the edge at once; He is not poor that hath little, but he that desireth much. For vengeance the proverb says, The moon does not heed the barking of dogs. There are also recipes for wise living, when the fox preacheth, then beware of your geese; the wine in the bottle does not quench Thirst. Some proverbs have to do with foretelling, when the wind is in the north, the skilful fisher goes north. After thus
classifying proverbs and giving numerous examples he says:

Proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them. Another name for strategies might be attitudes.  

Burke also tries to explain the existing contrary proverbs by saying:

The apparent contradictions depend upon differences in attitude, involving a correspondingly different choice of strategy. Consider, for instance, the apparently opposite pair: "Repentance comes too late" and "Never too late to mend". The first is admonitory. It says in effect: "You'd better look out, or you'll get yourself too far into this business". The second is consolatory, saying in effect: "Buck up, old man, you can still pull out of this."

Finally, let us hear the words of Isaac D'Israeli,

Proverbs embrace the wild sphere of human existence, they take all the colours of life, they are often exquisite strokes of genius, they delight by their airy sarcasm or their caustic satire, the luxuriance of their humour, the playfulness of their turn, and even by the elegance of their imagery, and the tenderness of their sentiment. They give a deep insight into domestic life, and open for us the heart of man, in all the various states which he may occupy - a frequent review of Proverbs should enter into our readings; and although they are no longer the ornaments of conversation, they have not ceased to be the treasuries of thought.
References


