WISE WORDS

Essays on the Proverb

edited by

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GARLAND FOLKLORE CASEBOOKS

ALAN DUNDES
Series Editor

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WISE WORDS
Essays on the Proverb
by Wolfgang Mieder

For MATTI KUUSI

on his eightieth birthday

Series Introduction

The materials of folklore demonstrate remarkable variation. Each of the cultures which share a particular item of folklore, for example, a myth, a folktale, a custom, a folk belief, has its own special version of that item. Sometimes individuals within a given culture will have their own idiosyncratic variations within the larger culturewide tradition. Students of folklore who study the folklore of only their own group may fail to appreciate the range of variation in folklore. By bringing together different studies of the same item of folklore, I hope to provide a means of demonstrating both the ways in which folklore remains constant across cultures and the ways in which folklore is inevitably localized in different cultural contexts.

With respect to the distribution of an item of folklore, there are two all too common erroneous assumptions. The first assumption is that the item of folklore is peculiar to one culture. Those anthropologists, for example, who are unwilling to be comparative, typically assume or assert that a given folktale is unique to "their" people, meaning the people among whom they have carried out their fieldwork. The critical theoretical point is that one cannot tell whether or how a folktale is really unique to one culture without knowing if the same tale is found in other cultures. Once one has examined other versions of the tale, then and only then can one comment intelligently on just how a particular version of that tale reflects the culturally relative characteristics of a given society.

The second erroneous assumption, equally irritating to professional folklorists, is that a given item of folklore is universal. This is the opposite extreme from the first assumption. Rather than presuming that the item is unique to one culture, the

universalist (typically a literary or psychologically oriented student) simply posits the existence of the item in all cultures. Yet the facts do not support this position any more than the other. Most items of folklore have limited areas of distribution. For example, there are Indo-European folktales reported from India to Ireland, but most of these tales are *not* found among Australian aborigines, the peoples of Melanesia and Polynesia, South American Indians, etc. Similarly, there are folktales found in North and South American Indian tradition which are not found in Europe. If one takes the trouble to check the sources cited by universalists, he or she will normally find little if any reference to the traditions of the peoples of New Guinea, native South America, and sub-Saharan Africa among other areas.

One cannot say a priori what the distribution of a particular item of folklore might be. One needs to consult the scholarship devoted to the item before venturing an informed opinion. Chances are great, however, that the item will not be limited to a single culture nor will it be worldwide. One aim of the Folklore Casebook series then is to show by example something about the range and spread of individual items of folklore.

Questions about the geographical distribution of an item of folklore are not the only ones worth asking. Even more important are questions about meaning and interpretation. Far too often, students of folklore simply collect and report. Pure descriptions of data are surely a precondition for serious study, but they do not offer a substitute for significant analysis. Unfortunately, the majority of writings about a particular item of folklore never attempt anything more than mere description. The discipline of folklore began several centuries ago with the collection of antiquities and presumed "survivals" from earlier periods. It was not until the late nineteenth century and especially the twentieth century that the crucial study of how folklore functions in context may be said to have begun. In most cases, the application of sociological, anthropological, psychological and other theories and methods to folkloristic data has yet to be undertaken. One reason for this is that most theorists in the social sciences are just as unaware of the nature of folklore data as folklorists are unaware of the theories and

methods of the social sciences. One intent of the Folklore Casebook series is to bring data and theory together—at least for students of folklore.

Folklore has always fascinated members of many academic disciplines, e.g., scholars in classics, comparative literature, Bible studies, psychiatry, sociology, but despite its interdisciplinary appeal, the study of folklore has rarely been interdisciplinary. One can find lip service to the notion of interdisciplinary study, but scholars and their work for the most part tend to be parochial. Anthropologists cite only the work of fellow anthropologists, psychiatrists only the work of other psychiatrists. Similarly, folklorists too are not always open to considering studies of folklore made by nonfolklorists. Accordingly, students who come upon a specific problem in folklore are commonly restricted by the limited disciplinary bias and knowledge of their instructors.

One difficulty in being truly interdisciplinary involves a mechanical problem in locating the previous scholarship devoted to a problem. Folklore studies appear in an incredible and often bewildering variety of books, monographs, and professional periodicals. One needs sometimes to be a virtual bibliographical sleuth to discover what other scholars have said about the subject one has chosen to research. Yet the credo of the true scholar ought to be that he should begin *his* work where other scholars have ended theirs. With this in mind, one other aim of the Folklore Casebook series is to bring together under one cover a representative sampling of the scholarship relevant to a single item or problem. It is hoped that it will encourage students of folklore not to be parochial in outlook but rather to be willing if not anxious to explore all possibilities in investigating the folklore research topic they have selected.

The topics covered in the Folklore Casebook series are of sufficient general interest to have received the critical attention of numerous scholars. Topics such as the evil eye, the flood myth, the bullfight, Christmas, the custom of couvade, or the folktale of Oedipus would be examples of topics appropriate for casebook treatment. In most instances, whole books or monographs have been devoted to the topics. However, for the most part, the selections chosen for the Casebook have been

taken from periodicals. Assembling representative essays from a variety of sources seemed to be the best means of achieving the various goals of the Casebook series. Students who wish to explore further the topic of one of the Casebooks would be well advised to consult the book-length treatments available. In each Casebook, the editor will provide some bibliographical references for the student who wishes to go beyond the necessarily limited materials contained in the volume.

The selections included in the casebooks will be presented as they originally appeared, wherever possible. To be sure, essays written in foreign languages will be translated for the casebook, but individual words or phrases in foreign languages may be left untranslated. It is important for students of folklore to be aware of the necessity for learning to read foreign languages. Because the different selections were written independently, it is inevitable that some repetition will occur. Students must realize that such repetition in scholarship is not unusual. In folklore in particular, the repetition of data is often desirable. As indicated above, folklorists are often concerned with the question to what extent is an item of folklore in one culture similar to or different from an apparently comparable item in another culture.

The scholarly apparatus including footnote and bibliographical reference style have also been left intact wherever possible. Differences between the humanities and social sciences exist with respect to reference techniques as any scholar who has had occasion to rewrite or recast an essay to conform to the requirements of another discipline can very well attest. Leaving the footnotes in their original form also serves to demonstrate the partial nature of scholarship. Probably no one scholar ever controls all the relevant data and has read all the books and essays pertaining to his subject. For one thing, few scholars can read all those languages of the world in which germane material has been written. For another, there remains the perennial information retrieval problem which normally precludes even locating all the possible sources. Still granting the unavoidably incomplete nature of most scholarship, the student can still see differences in how well an individual scholar succeeded in finding source materials. Some writers make little

or no attempt to consult sources—almost pretending that they are the first to ever contemplate the issue under consideration. Others seem to make a pedantic fetish out of citing esoteric and fugitive sources. In the final analysis, the criteria for the inclusion of an essay in a casebook did not include counting the number of references contained in an author's footnotes. Rather the criteria concerned the clarity of the description of the data and the degree of insight attained in the analysis of the data. It should be understood that not every important essay written about the topic or theme of a casebook could be included. Some essays were simply too long while others may have been superseded by later studies.

Despite limitations, it is hoped that the sampling of scholarship presented in the Folklore Casebook series will assist students of folklore in undertaking research of their own. Whether they are stimulated to continue the study of the particular topic treated in a casebook or whether they use one or more of the essays as a model for the investigation of some other topic, the ultimate goal is the upgrading of the quality of folklore research. As the discipline of folkloristics continues to grow, its success and its achievements will unquestionably depend upon how well future students study the materials of folklore.

The subject of this casebook is the proverb genre, and accordingly twenty diverse essays demonstrating the impressive gamut of contemporary paremiology have been selected by Wolfgang Mieder, professor of German and Folklore at the University of Vermont, arguably the world's leading authority on the proverb. The essays, many fairly technical, are designed to show the serious student of proverbs what some of the most promising research trends are. From folkloristics, linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, art history, literary criticism, biblical studies, history, psychology, among other academic disciplines, the student will find representative efforts to define, trace the history, and illuminate the functions and meanings of proverbs set in an impressive variety of cultural and literary contexts.

While ideally there should have been more coverage of proverb traditions in Africa and Asia where the genre continues to thrive, the admittedly Eurocentric bias in the essays included in this casebook does necessarily reflect the indisputable fact that

the bulk of theoretical and methodological advances in proverb studies have occurred in the writing of Euro-American researchers. It is to be hoped that African, Asian, and other scholars interested in proverbs will be inspired by these essays to contribute in the future to the ongoing dialogue among international paremiologists.

As for Professor Wolfgang Mieder, it is clear that one day when the comprehensive history of paremiology is written, there will have to be at least one full chapter devoted to the extraordinary productivity and to the many exceptional achievements of this remarkable scholar.

Alan Dundes, General Editor
University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

In 1981 Alan Dundes and I edited *The Wisdom of Many: Essays on the Proverb* as the first volume in the Garland Folklore Casebook series. In the meantime numerous other essay volumes have appeared, and it is certainly fair to state that these essay volumes around certain folkloric genres, motifs, and themes have become a scholarly tradition of sorts among folklorists from around the world. Our original volume contained twenty essays on various aspects of proverb studies, but twelve years after its appearance, it has now gone out of print. Among paremiologists and other scholars interested in proverbs it has become a standard compendium of major proverb investigations, and the book will doubtlessly continue to be of use for years to come.

However, the time has also come to put together a new proverb casebook that assembles the most important research from the past two decades. The twenty essays that comprise this new volume were written by leading paremiologists and folklorists from Africa, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States, and they were published in prestigious journals or significant books between 1973 and 1993. They thus represent the best scholarship on proverbs in the English language of the past two decades, and together they give an impressive overview of the truly fascinating advances in the field of paremiology. Obviously there would have been other studies to choose from, as one glance into the three volumes of my *International Proverb Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982, 1990 and 1993) with its 4,599 entries would reveal. In fact, I started with about seventy-five essays that appeared during the last two decades for possible inclusion. It was indeed a very difficult decision to bring this

number down to the present twenty, but I hope that I have succeeded in choosing the most representative, accessible, informative, and readable articles for this book. The remaining fifty-five-odd publications have, for the most part, been included as suggestions for additional readings in the headnotes that introduce each article in the present volume. While they are not included in this book, they certainly should not be forgotten or ignored.

This is, of course, also true for the approximately 250 publications that are listed at the end of this book under "Suggestions for Further Readings." Again, this list can only be a small selection of the vast paremiological and paremiographical scholarship. For easy reference this bibliography is divided into four parts: bibliographies, proverb journals, collections of proverbs and quotations, and scholarly studies on the proverb. Students and scholars interested in proverbs are fortunate that there exists an impressive number of international, national, and specialized bibliographies concerning proverbs, and these will lead interested readers to an overwhelming number of sources for almost any imaginable subject. It must not be forgotten that proverbs relate to or comment upon literally any feature of the universe and our existence in it, and thus there also appear to be unlimited ways and means of studying this proverbial folk wisdom.

While proverbs are certainly not universal truths, they have a ubiquity about them that is truly amazing. The twenty essays selected for this volume reflect this wide scope of proverbs, and it was not easy to arrange them in any logical sequence. Nevertheless, I did not want to arrange them alphabetically by author or chronologically according to the date of publication. That would have been too simple and would hardly have served any meaningful purpose. Instead, I have tried to come up with an ordering system that places articles of related topics together. The first two essays cover definitional and theoretical questions, and they are followed by four publications on linguistic, structural, and formal matters. The next two essays consider psychological and ethnic aspects, both as they touch upon individuals and larger groups of people or even whole nationalities. The next group of three essays deals

with historical and social issues, looking especially at why certain proverbs were in use at any given time and why it is important to know them at all. Then two essays follow that investigate on the basis of field research in New Mexico and among Mayan Indians how proverbs are used and how they function as actual speech. Four subsequent essays cover the more literary use of proverbs in the Bible, Anglo-American literature, and the fable. Included are also two essays that treat a particular proverb, and finally there is one study that looks specifically at the modern use of proverbs in slogans and graffiti. Together these twenty articles touch upon the major concerns of paremiology, and they are representative results of the trends and themes of modern proverb scholarship.

Looking at the twenty articles in a bit more detail, it should not surprise any reader that the first two essays deal with theoretical questions. Shirley L. Arora argues in her essay on "The Perception of Proverbiality" (1984) that proverbiality depends upon traditionality, currency, repetition, certain grammatical or syntactical features, metaphor, semantic markers (parallelism, paradox, irony, etc.), lexical markers (archaic words, etc.), and phonic markers (rhyme, meter, alliteration, etc.). Arora also includes a discussion of a "proverb survey" which she presented to Spanish-speaking residents of Los Angeles, California. On the basis of statistical analyses of the responses by these informants to proverbs and pseudo-proverbs, the author is able to prove her claim that statements with the most "proverbial" markers will most likely be perceived as actual proverbs. Peter Grzybek takes these considerations even further by beginning his article on "Foundations of Semiotic Proverb Study" (1987) with a detailed review of major theoretical publications by international paremiologists. He analyzes proverbs as "einfache Formen" (simple forms) and explains their heterosituativity, polyfunctionality, and polysemanticity. He also considers paradigmatic, syntagmatic, logical, and structural aspects, referring in particular to the linguistic and semiotic proverb research by the Russian paremiologist Grigorii L'vovich Permiakov (1919–1983).

The group of four essays by linguists begins with David Cram's article on "The Linguistic Status of the Proverb" (1983).

For him the proverb is a lexical element with a quotational status which derives from the fact that proverbs are typically "invoked" or "cited" rather than straightforwardly asserted. All of this is explained in the three major sections of this essay on proverbial competence, proverbial performance, and proverbial logic. Michael D. Lieber follows with his article on "Analogic Ambiguity: A Paradox of Proverb Usage" (1984), arguing that proverbs are usually used to disambiguate complex situations and events. The author gives clear examples of proverbs as devices of disambiguation; he shows the paradox of analogic ambiguity of proverb usage; he treats the socio-cultural use of proverbs; and he theorizes that a proverb text is potentially as ambiguous as the situation the proverb purports to gloss. Kwesi Yankah's paper on "Do Proverbs Contradict?" (1984) continues this semantic preoccupation by explaining that the meaning of any proverb is only evident once it has been contextualized. While proverbs might contradict each other as mere texts, they function effectively as social strategies once they are used in a speech act. Of the commonly known proverb pairs as "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "Out of sight, out of mind", people will always choose that text which fits a particular situation best at a given time, while ignoring its obvious counterpart for the moment. In the fourth linguistic essay on "Proverbial Perlocutions: How to Do Things with Proverbs" (1982), Neal Norrick is also concerned with proverb performance. He looks at the perlocutionary acts that speakers perform with proverbs and argues that some perlocutionary effects are associated with all proverbial utterances because proverbs are inventorized linguistic units based on traditional folklore.

The next two articles deal with psychological concerns. Tim B. Rogers presents a detailed review of the vast proverb scholarship by psychologists and psychiatrists in his essay on "Psychological Approaches to Proverbs: A Treatise on the Import of Context" (1986). While folklorists have studied proverbs primarily in their social context, psychologists usually have dealt with them outside of any particular communicative context. Psychiatrists have developed so-called "proverbs tests" as a diagnostic tool for mental disorders like schizophrenia. But

there are also studies that deal with child development and the whole question of cognition and comprehension of metaphors. Lately proverbs have even been used by social psychologists as slogans in therapeutic communities for alcohol or drug addicts. Alan Dundes touches upon yet another psychological aspect of proverbs in his study of "Slurs International: Folk Comparisons of Ethnicity and National Character" (1975), showing that proverbs can express stereotypes, national character, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. He too reviews previous scholarship and points out that an ethnic or international slur may be a single word, a short phrase, a proverb, a riddle, or a joke. Citing numerous examples, the author calls on folklorists to examine slurs to understand what the stereotypes are, to label them as such, and to warn people of their inherent dangers.

Three essays concern themselves with historical and social topics. James Obelkevich begins his article on "Proverbs and Social History" (1987) with a discussion of the users and uses of proverbs in Europe during different historical periods. He then deals with various meanings of proverbs in their social and historical context, emphasizing in a special section how proverbs were employed by the educated class in England. He refers to major English proverb collections and explains how such authors as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, George Eliot, and others integrated proverbs into their works. Many examples are cited in their literary context with special consideration being given to their meanings as expressions of "mentalities" or worldview. Art historian Margaret A. Sullivan approaches proverbs quite similarly in her article on "Bruegel's Proverb Painting: Renaissance Art for a Humanist Audience" (1991), claiming that folklorists have looked at the *Netherlandic Proverbs* (1559) only as a picture of folk expressions without paying attention to the fact that Pieter Bruegel actually addressed a humanist audience. The relationship between Bruegel's proverbial scenes and the classical past was highly salient for his original audience. The painter most certainly was influenced by Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Adagia* (1500ff.) and other sixteenth-century proverb collections that contained both classical Greek and Latin as well as vernacular Dutch proverbs. Wolfgang Mieder takes this interest in which proverbs are particularly well