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The Poetics of the Ancient Greek Proverb

Among all the varied genres of traditional verbal folk art, the proverb is probably the most truly universal, and at the same time has the shortest form. Proverbs exist in all human cultures, serving many of the same functions and displaying similar structural features across the widest spectrum of languages and societies.¹

My concern here is with proverbs in use in ancient Greek culture. The argument is in two parts: (1) that although the proverb is difficult to define, it is a distinct, identifiable formal genre with clearly marked linguistic and stylistic features that make proverbial wording conspicuous within its surrounding context, even in a language like ancient Greek, in which we can no longer participate as native speakers; (2) that if we can become sensitive to the way proverbs are used, to the kind of statement they make and the effect they are supposed to have in the traditional cultures that use them, then we can better interpret certain passages in Greek literature in which speakers use proverbs whose force may escape modern readers who inhabit a different mental universe, in which the spoken word is less charged with power and the wisdom of ancestors less respected.

Structure, Content, Context. I define the proverb as a brief, well-shaped complete sentence, understood by its users as anonymous in authorship, existing in the language for a long time in almost invariant form, stating a general truth that everyone would accept as important and useful to recall, and, because of this antiquity and accuracy of insight, sanctioned or almost "sanctified" by the culture as wisdom of the elders that must be taken seriously, must be accorded "weight," when spoken.²

When I say a "well-shaped" sentence, I refer to several specific formal devices of artistic shaping which give the proverb its needed structure. The first dozen English proverbs that come to mind may serve as a fair sample to reveal clearly the most important of these devices: "nothing ventured, nothing gained"; "misery loves company"; "a stitch in time saves nine";

"sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander"; "look before you leap"; "business is business"; "haste makes waste"; "easy come, easy go"; "a fool and his money are soon parted"; "birds of a feather flock together"; "coffee boiled is coffee spoiled"; "two's company, three's a crowd."

These English proverbs display marked phonetic and structural devices that serve to sharpen verbal expressiveness and thereby point up the proverb's statement of truth. Most prominent are (1) rhyme, alliteration, assonance; (2) patterned rhythm, usually in the service of (3) balanced structure, usually binary and sometimes oppositional; (4) repetition of the same word or same grammatic-syntactic structure; (5) vowel harmony.³ The first question is, do Greek proverbs display all these traits, and any others besides? As in so many areas, Aristotle is helpful as a starting point. In his famous description—the nearest thing we have to a Greek definition of the proverb—preserved as a quote by Synesius, we read, "Aristotelês phêsîn hoti palaiâs eisi philosophiâs en tais megistais anthrôpôn phthorais apolomenês egkataleimmata perisôthenta dia syntomia kai dexiotêta," which I translate as, "Aristotle calls them [proverbs] the remnants of an ancient philosophy that has perished through large-scale human destruction, [remnants] preserved because of their succinctness and their adroitness" (*Calvit. Encom. c.22, p. 234 Krab. [1850]*).

Succinctness or concision, *syntomia*, is a self-evident and universal feature of proverbs. What makes them so handy, so pungent, so easy to recall and re-use, is the fact that they are short.

Aristotle's second criterion, "adroitness" or "dexterity," *dexiotês*, is more elusive but more interesting. There are several ways to interpret this term, but in this context it must be stylistic enhancement that is being emphasized. The ancient Greek proverb achieves pungency and memorability through clever arrangement of language, analogous and sometimes identical to the devices familiar to us in English proverbs. Let us document these devices of the "poetics" of Greek proverb form.

First we have rhyme, alliteration, and assonance—the "jingle" phenomenon. Since rhyme is rare, it is the other two that serve the general principle of echo or sound repetition, which is a poetic intensifying device. Many Greek proverbs show this kind of acoustic intensification. Consider (Group 1):

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| 1. isotês philotês | "equality is friendship" |
| 2. patêr anouthetês paida nouthetei | "an uncorrected father corrects his child" |
| 3. eis mikron podion hypodêma mega | "for a small foot a big shoe" |
| 4. psêksei kai petran ho polys khronos | "much time will wear away even a rock" |
| 5. peinônti hypnos ouk eperkhetai | "sleep doesn't come to the hungry (man)" |
| 6. peinôsan alôpeka hypnos eperkhetai | "sleep (does) come to the hungry fox" |
| 7. kakou korakos kakon ðon | "a bad egg from a bad crow" |

The underlinings call attention to the obvious strong alliterative patterns. Note, in addition, how often two consonants will dominate this alliteration as in the p-t of the second example, the p-m (close together as labials) of the third, and the p-k of the fourth, fifth, and sixth. Assonance is especially prominent in the i-o-ê pattern of number one, the exact vowel repetition in the two long words of number two, the many o's in three, the long o's and many short e's in six, and the total limitation of vowels in seven to a and o sounds. Finally, a special favorite of mine, a more finely-wrought version of the familiar Latin proverb *bis dat qui cito dat*, "who gives quickly is giving twice":

bradeia dosis mataia kharis "a slow giving is an empty favor"

Here the subtle vowel harmony of the ei/ai in *bradeia/mataia* is reinforced by the musical echo of the circumflex accent falling on only these syllables; and the symmetry and isosyllabism of the binary phrasing is emphasized by the exact symmetry of pitch accents (visible only in the original Greek). Finally, it should be noted that a tendency to exhibit bipartite structure, fairly isosyllabic, is evident throughout this whole group.

The only strong rhyme is in *isotês philotês*, and perhaps we may claim a weak rhyme in *dosis/kharis*. Among the many Greek proverbs I sampled, rhyme was not common; or I should say that it occurred through repetition of an entire word or an identical case ending or other inflectional ending. Many proverbs add to their assonance and alliteration the repetition of identical words in different inflected form or different words in identical inflected form. Hence (Group 2):

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| 1. ean mê pathês, ou mê mathês | "if you don't suffer, you won't learn" |
| 2. doulos pro doulou, kai despotês pro despotou | "slave for slave, and master for master" |
| 3. kheir kheira niptei | "(one) hand washes (another) hand" |
| 4. kopos kopon lyei | "toil undoes toil" |
| 5. anêr andra kai polis sôzei polin | "a man saves a man and a city a city" |

The repetition is clear even to the reader who is unfamiliar with Greek. The conclusion I draw from all these examples (Groups 1 and 2) is that the acoustic aesthetic of Greek proverbs is exactly what we would expect from what we know of Greek poetry, except that it seems even more concentrated in proverbs. This is not surprising, since proverbs are the equivalent of complete little poems, compressed into extraordinarily brief space.

The next feature to consider is rhythm. Ancient Greek rhythmic patterning may not always be obvious, because it involves the use of syllable length sometimes reinforced by pitch accent, instead of the simple stress familiar to modern languages. Rhythmic *balance* is a common phenomenon, and would seem to support an apparently universal tendency toward binary structure in proverbs.⁴ Many Greek proverbs fall easily into two halves of roughly equal length, as we saw in the first group. Parallel structure works effectively either to underline analogy or to do the opposite, to emphasize opposition in meaning. A certain amount of jingle or echo may be used here to contribute to the total effectiveness of parallel structure in highlighting similarities or opposites. An apparent word-magic is at work here, in the non-rational suggestion that sheer phonemic parallels help ensure that the *realities* named will also proceed along the course indicated—whether it be towards identity or towards opposition with one another. Hence we have Greek proverbs that approximate the strong binary patterns that are very common in English, French, German, and other modern proverbs. In Greek this is less common but clearly an identifiable type (Group 3):

1. hina gar deos, entha kai aidôs	"where there's fear, there is also shame"	2-1-2 2-1-2
2. ho autos hêlios têkei men ton kêron, ksêrainei de ton pêlon	"the same sun liquifies wax but dries out mud"	(for the pre- dicade) 2-1-1-2, 3-1-1-2
3. anthrôpos polyboulos, theos de boulêkopos	"man plans a lot, god disrupts plans"	3-4 2-1-4 (4 and 4 are strongly echoic)
4. zei khytra, zêi philia	"if the pot boils, friendship lives"	1-2, 1-3 (1 and 1 are near homophones)

At times the balance of the two halves becomes even more elegant with the addition of chiasmus (Group 4):

1. klaiei ho nikêsas, ho de nikêtheis apolôle	"the victor is weeping, but the loser is dead"
2. ouden s'onêsei bolbos, an mê neur' ekhêis	"the (aphrodisiac) bulb won't help you if you've got no sinews"

And a prize specimen of chiasmic proverb quoted by Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.21: *ou dei philein hôs misêsonta, alla mâllon misein hôs philêsonta*: "don't love as

one who is going to hate, but hate as one who is going to love." This last example achieves a distinctive rhetorical eloquence by having a chiasmic or ABBA deployment of verb forms of *philein/misein* running at cross-currents with the A-B-A-B deployment of infinitive-future participle-infinitive-future participle, so that you get: *philein-misêsonta-misein-philêsonta*.

So much for the varieties of acoustic elegance in Greek proverbs. The preferences seem to be for alliteration and word repetition most of all; then for a medium amount (compared to English) of assonance and vowel harmony (with very little rhyme); and not infrequently binary structure in roughly isometric units, to bring out parallelism and sometimes to emphasize oppositional meanings.

Now to some considerations of *content*. One of the most striking features we will note is the sometimes inverse relationship of content to stylistic embroidery. Sometimes a rather pungent and ironic message will be clothed in a plain, unelaborated style.

A large number of Greek proverbs have no striking structural features whatsoever. They make their point in plain language, through sheer economy and sharpness of insight. Such Greek proverbs reveal a certain flair for paradox, irony, and sheer tartness that may exceed any comparable tendency in modern English or European proverbs. We too have "plain" proverbs, but far fewer than Greek, since modern English has a special fondness for sound-echo. We do say, "Love is blind," and so does Greek, *typhlos ho Erôs*, with no special effects of sound in either case. And "business is business"—whose Greek equivalent, I think, could be *ta syka syka*—"figs are figs." But Greek seems—in my admittedly limited sample—to abound in proverbs that achieve their point without any special sound effects at all, but where the memorable worldly wisdom comes from combining cynical observation with succinct expression. Consider (Group 5):

1. ho khrysos ou miainetai	"gold doesn't get tainted"
2. meris ou pnigei	"a little bit won't choke you"
3. ho nebros ton leonta	"the fawn [ellipsis of verb] . . . the lion"
4. elaphê muian ou diôkei	"a deer won't chase a fly"
5. lykos aeton pheugei	"the wolf runs from the eagle"
6. lykhnon en mesêmbrîai hapteri	"he is lighting a torch in broad daylight"
7. ho mê dareis anthrôpos ou paideuetai	"the man not flayed is not educated"
8. ôdinen oros, eita myn apeteken	"the mountain had labor pains, then delivered a mouse"
9. iatre, therapeuson seauton (Luke 4:23)	"physician, heal thyself"

10. ikhthys ek tês kephalês ozein "a fish begins to smell from the head"⁵
arkhetai

Their sound may be plain, but all except the first of these proverbs are richly metaphorical, that is, have an extension far beyond their apparent or literal meaning. But the extent of this metaphoric reach must necessarily remain obscure to us when we have nothing more than a simple proverb citation that comes without context. The beauty and power of such metaphoric proverbs lies precisely in the fact that their *potential* for significance is enormous. The problem is that we cannot begin to feel this potential for meaning until we see such a proverb used in a situation. The full proverb meaning emerges only from the combination of the proverb wording with the *contextual* drama of possibilities inherent in any human interaction.

We have insufficient space here to deal with the complexities of context, this vital third aspect of proverb use. Proverb studies in linguistics, anthropology, and folklore confirm that context shapes the full meaning of a proverb as used in a living culture;⁶ but we Hellenists have difficulty recapturing the living context of ancient Greek proverb use, since we study a culture that we can never physically visit. What we *can* do, in the absence of a living culture, is to seek out situations in literature where proverbs are not merely cited as rhetorical specimens—as is the case in Aristotle's or Demetrius's scholarly discussions—but are spoken by persons expressing themselves energetically and naturally, in the flow of human interaction. Such proverbs will exhibit a high degree of integration into their context and so allow us to see more of their expanded potential for meaning and their power as social manipulators.

A *Story from Herodotus*. A perfect example is Herodotus I.6ff., the story of how the sovereignty of Lydia passed from the Heraclids to Croesus's family, the Mermnadae, through Croesus's ancestor Gyges deposing the Heraclid Candaules. The story may be summarized as follows:

King Candaules of Lydia conceived a passion for his own wife and continually praised her beauty to Gyges, his favorite bodyguard. Convinced that Gyges didn't fully appreciate her beauty, Candaules cited the proverb, "The ears are less believable than the eyes," and arranged for Gyges to hide in the royal bedroom to watch the queen undress for bed. Gyges, fearing for his safety, tried to refuse, citing two proverbs: "When a woman takes off her clothes, she takes off her modesty"; and "A person should mind his own business." But Candaules forced Gyges to comply, assuring him that the queen would not see him and he would be safe. It came to pass that she did see him but pretended not to have noticed. Afterwards she summoned Gyges and presented him with a difficult choice: either be put to death or assassinate Candaules and replace

him as her husband. The loyal Gyges reluctantly agreed to the second alternative. He hid himself in the same place again, killed the king in his sleep, married the queen and began a new dynasty for the Lydians.

This is a wonderfully structured story about the consequences of violating custom, *nomos*. Custom is denied from the outset, with Candaules conceiving an erotic fixation on his own wife, *êrasthê tèn heautou gynaika*. This is presented to us as eccentric, since royal marriages are supposed to be based on political, not sexual, advantages. Candaules' eccentric preoccupation with his wife's beauty leads him to make "illegitimate" demands on Gyges, *anoma* in Herodotus's language and later called *ou nomizomena* by the queen: the demand that Gyges spy on the naked queen. He strengthens this odd request with a proverb, "people's ears are less reliable than their eyes," *ôta gar tynkhanei anthrôpoisi apistotera ophthalmôn*.⁷ Gyges, trying to escape the royal pressure, strengthens his grounds for refusal with two proverbs: "When a woman takes off her dress, she takes off her shame,"⁸ followed immediately by a second proverb introduced by language that serves as a good definition of what a proverb is and why it should carry authority: "Long ago were the good things discovered by men, and we should learn from these. Among them is the following, 'everyone mind his own affairs.'"⁹

Well, Gyges may have more proverbs, but King Candaules has more power, and he insists that the indecent plan be carried out. The unexpected result is that the queen sees what has happened, calls Gyges to a private session and gives him the uncomfortable choice of either losing his life or joining her in a plan to kill Candaules. The queen's "propositioning" is a political offer, not a sexual one, and should be seen as a move that restores the royal alliance between the queen and her consort to its original and normal basis, political expediency, a norm from which Candaules originally had deviated in conceiving his surprising erotic passion. The poetic justice meted out to poor Candaules, the "boomerang" effect of his being destroyed through a secret plan exactly modelled on his own, called into being in reaction to his own plan, and staged in the very same location, brings home the truth that he was indeed wrong to demand *anoma* of Gyges. And the full run of events confirms the truth of Gyges' proverbs. First, the queen indeed *did* become more shameless after taking off her clothes; though of course the marvellous irony is that she was provoked to it by the conspiracy of the two men, whose actions brought about the fulfillment of their own misogynistic proverb. Second, much trouble and near civil war would have been avoided if everyone concerned had indeed "minded his own affairs," or, translated literally, "looked (only) at what was his own." The wording of that proverb carries a *double entendre*, since the verb *skopeein* means "look at,"

secondarily "look to" or "mind." It is only in the unfolding of the story that the full meaning, i.e., the double meaning, emerges.

A pendant to the story reflects the unresolved moral ambiguity of Gyges' position: regicide is clearly bad, but he was forced to do it and is therefore not fully culpable. Candaules erred first, but on a lesser level, and should therefore be less guilty than Gyges. Is it or is it not "right" that Gyges now rule Lydia? The populace itself is divided, Herodotus says, and to avoid civil war they send to Delphi for an oracle. They get two. Yes, Gyges should be king; but, no, it is not a royal line to survive past the fifth generation. This new kingship is flawed: it came into being through Candaules' repudiation of two pieces of compelling proverbial wisdom. Candaules, by rejecting this wisdom, deserved to lose all: his wife, his throne, and his life. Gyges, who knew the right proverbs but was forced to act *against* their instruction, won the throne, but with a split victory, one tainted with ambiguity, as expressed through the divided oracle.

Conclusions. This survey of proverb types and proverb usage in ancient Greece is brief but revealing. We have found Greek proverbs to follow much of the same structural patterning as proverbs familiar to us in modern languages, with a variety of structural types available, ranging from binary structure and an intense phonological organization to relatively "plain-language" proverbs that make little use of assonance, alliteration, and other forms of phonemic and grammatical repetition. If one seeks support for the thesis that different languages have certain favorite types of proverb, it could be argued—although our sampling is still very small—that ancient Greek, while fully sensitive to the seductions of the familiar "jingle" effect and its usefulness in making proverbial wisdom *memorable*, has in addition a marked interest in the highly compressed, acoustically unadorned, metaphorical statement whose inherent tension, and thereby its appeal, comes from a strong contrast or even contradiction of basic ideas, or from a strong irony. Group 5, our largest group, represents proverbs of this type, although their number should not be taken to suggest that this type is more numerous than other types. My groupings are at this stage merely provisional, and in fact several proverbs could legitimately be transferred from one group to another.

The contextual use of proverbs deserves much more study, but I doubt many scenes in literature will be found with as rich a "yield" as the scene from Herodotus. There still remains the problem of *identifying* what is proverbial with any certainty. Denied the native speaker's ear, we have to rely on a certain amount of intuition and a feeling for context. Candaules' "The ears are less reliable than the eyes" might have escaped sure identification as a proverb if we didn't already have Heraclitus's similar "eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears," *ophthalmoi gar tôn ôtôn*

akribesteroi martyres (fr. 101a) which, with its partial contradiction in fr. 107,¹⁰ suggests that we are dealing here with conventional wisdom expressed in that conventional way that we call proverbial. Gyges' statement about women's modesty is not obviously a proverb (see n. 8), but the context strengthens the likelihood that it is and allows it to *function* exactly like a proverb.

Just as the three proverbs give focus to the clash of "just" claims and prepare us for the split outcome of the story of Gyges' ascendancy, so other scenes in Greek literature may be opened up to reveal new inner structures to readers who pay attention to the way in which a speaker reaches back into the cultural "stock" to bring the full weight of tradition to bear on the issues of the moment.

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NOTES

Proverb bibliography offers a vast record of multi-disciplinary research. In the following notes I limit myself to those writings that have had a specific influence on my understanding of the form and function of proverbs.

1. The best general survey of the universality of proverbs remains Archef Taylor's *The Proverb* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1962).

2. Satisfactory complete definitions of the proverb are hard to find. Taylor, *op. cit.*, surveys many and concludes that adequate definition is ultimately impossible. B. J. Whiting, "The Nature of the Proverb," *Harvard Studies in Philology and Literature* 14 (1932): 273-307, opens his much-cited essay in a similar pessimistic vein. More recent writers have offered good descriptions that amount to acceptable definitions. See, e.g., Roger Abrahams, "Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions," pp. 119ff., in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Much attention has been recently given to structural criteria, e.g., G. B. Milner, "What is a Proverb?" *New Society* 6, no. 332 (1969): 199-202, who puts forth a theory of quadripartite structures (a fuller statement by Milner is "De l'armature des locutions proverbiales: Essai de taxonomie sémantique," *L'Homme* 9 [1969]: 49-70); and Alan Dundes, "On the Structure of the Proverb," *Proverbium* 25 (1975): 961-73, who refutes Milner's quadripartite thesis and identifies several important patterns of proverb structure.

3. Vowel harmony is more subtle than simple assonance, involving the repetition of vowels or diphthongs restricted to a narrow range. These may be close to one another (as in *coffee/boiled/coffee/spoiled* or *sauce/goose*) or may utilize the alternation of more distant vowels (as in *fool/money/soon/parted*). I owe the term vowel harmony to R. A. Rothstein, "The Poetics of Proverbs," in *Studies Presented to Professor Roman Jakobson by his Students*, ed. Ch. E. Gribble (Cambridge, Mass.: Slavica Publishers, 1968), p. 273.

4. The tendency of English proverbs toward balanced, binary structure is noted

by many writers, and set forth with exemplary clarity by Abrahams, "Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions," p. 120f. Milner's controversial claim (note 2) of quadripartite structure as the original basis for English and French proverbs is in fact a strong claim for binary structure, but in doubled form. The binary tendencies are clearly there; the quadripartite structure remains questionable. A good demonstration of the strong preference throughout many European languages for proverbs with binary structure and parallelism is the essay of R. A. Rothstein cited in n. 3 above. See also M. I. Levin, "The Structure of the Russian Proverb," in the same volume, who states that, "all Russian proverbs are bipartite" (p. 180)—although not necessarily *balanced*. Levin's concept of bipartite structure seems close to Dundes' concept of the "topic-comment" structure of proverbs, first set forth in "Trends in Content Analysis: A Review Article," *Midwest Folklore* 12 (1962): 37.

5. This is glossed as political metaphor on bad leadership in E. L. von Leutsch and F. G. Schneidewin, eds., *Corpus Poroemiographorum Graecorum* (Gottingae, apud Vanderhoeck et Ruprecht, 1851), vol. II, p. 466.

6. The vital importance of context or situation of use for determining the meaning of a proverb was noted long ago by Raymond Firth, "Proverbs in Native Life, with Special Reference to Those of the Maori," *Folk-lore* 27 (1926): 134-53, 245-70. Firth argued vigorously against the dominant trend in proverb study at that time, the essentially taxonomic model of collecting and publishing proverbs according to "topic" but in total disregard of the context of utterance. The importance of context is maintained in much modern-day scholarship, among which E. O. Arewa and Alan Dundes, "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore," *American Anthropologist* 66:6, pt. 2 (1964): 70-85, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning," *Proverbium* 22 (1973): 821-27, are prominent examples.

7. This proverb is richly alliterative, with six t-sounds (tau or theta) spread throughout five of the six words, and a p-sound (pi or phi) in each of the last three words. It also has an a-sound in each word, and the less common sound ô occurs thrice, spaced at the beginning, middle, and end of the proverb.

8. *Hama de kithôni ekdyomenôni synekdyetai kai tén aidô gynê* is a nicely chiasmic proverb, of the type collected in Group 4. The almost identical compound verbs *ekdyomai* and *synekdyetai* are placed together in the center, while the nouns that are affected by these verbs stand on either side of this center.

This proverb presents a special problem: it has no other instances in Greek and no parallels in other languages except for one Swedish example cited in R. Strömberg, *Greek Proverbs* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktr., 1954), p. 47. The Swedish equivalent is so close that it may be a borrowing or imitation. This may be Strömberg's view, hinted at by his phrasing "Hence Swedish: med kläderna avlägger kvinnan blygsamheten." Yet he offers no further comment, and his inclusion of the proverb in his book implies that he does consider it a genuine proverb. If not a proverb, it certainly is structured like a proverb, along classically chiasmic lines, and it is made to *function* like a proverb in its context.

9. A blunt proverb in plain language, of the type collected in Group 5: *skopeein tina ta heautou*, literally, "everyone look at his own."

10. *Kakoi martyres anthrópousin ophthalmoi kai ôta barbarous psykhas ekhontôn*, "eyes and ears are bad witnesses for people, when they have barbarian souls."