

SAA 2026 Abstracts

“From Commonplace Books to Databases: The Social Memory of Proverbs”

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Jonathan Baldo, “Proverbs as Linguistic Plate Armor in *Henry V*”

Most of the French knights at the Battle of Agincourt wore steel-plate armor, which was meant to protect them but which also severely hampered their mobility. In a muddy field, weighed down by heavy armor and densely packed within a narrow frontage, the French knights were unable to move nimbly to avoid the onslaught of arrows from English longbows. Their heavy armor, far from a boon, contributed to their spectacular defeat. In this paper I will explore what I take to be Shakespeare’s verbal equivalent of the plate armor worn by the French: namely, their heavy reliance in *Henry V* on proverbs and proverbial wisdom. A kind of armor against unforeseen circumstances and a potential but ultimately ineffectual way of forging unanimity within a quarrelsome group, proverbs, Shakespeare’s play suggests, can also impair cognitive mobility and reduce resilience and adaptability. Although the English have proverbial lines of their own, they rely less than the French on proverbial expressions. Their dominant mode of discourse might be described as dialogical rather than proverbial.

Erin E. Kelly, “Proverbial character”

There are quite a few mid-sixteenth-century English plays that have proverbs as titles: William Wager’s *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1570), George Walpull’s *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576), and others. In a 1984 article, Paula Neuss labels these “proverb plays,” noting how their titles encouraged audiences to reflect on moral aphorisms and arguing that this approach to playwriting likely emerged out of humanist education exercises; she then discusses these plays as forerunners to and possible influences on Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*. What has not yet been considered, however, is how proverbs and playwriting might have become inextricably interconnected for English audiences by the simultaneous mid-century publication of dramatic interludes and proverbial texts by the same named English author: John Heywood. We can track the effects Heywood creates by piling up conflicting proverbs across later “proverb plays.” Each of these Tudor plays features allegorical characters, and many include characters whose names

relate to words in the proverbial title; when these characters speak their own names or when others address them in dialogue, lines built around their names constitute proverbs. And all of these plays repeat their titles, often in the context of debates about how to interpret them peppered with other proverbs. These plays thus hold up their own language for scrutiny, calling an audience's attention to the linguistic skill of the playwright whose composition underpins the performance. Noticing this proverb dynamic suggests the complex pleasures of allegorical characters in what are too often reductively lumped together as morality plays.

Clémence Lescoutre, “*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as a commonplace book”

The Two Gentlemen of Verona exhibits an ostentatious combination of proverbs and quotes to reflect on the status of the writer as a compiler. For instance, in act 1 scene 1 (42-48), the dialogue between Proteus and Valentine reprises Pettie's adages from his *Petite Palace* “For as in the fairest rose is soonest found a canker”; “The finer wit he was endued withal, the sooner was he made thrall and subject to love” and Lyly's expressions from *Euphues* “as the canker soonest entreth into the white rose”; “love easily entreth into the sharp wit without resistance” (see Tilley and Dent C56, W576).

Shakespeare also weaves in Erasmian proverbs such as *clavum clavo pellere* (“to fight fire with fire”) and *chameleon omnem imitator colorem praeterquam album* (“the chameleon imitates every colour except white”) in act 2 and throughout the play. By mocking the humanist and scholarly tradition of collecting poetic fragments the play engages in a fiercely playful and creative poetic process leading to an oral revival on stage of a common shared culture. Often criticised for its lesser quality and treated as an early experimental play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is the first of what I call Shakespeare's “school plays” in which he carefully crafts his linguistic tool box. I will argue that it can be considered as the playwright's commonplace book and “store” of his living wit.

Jennifer Lewin, “The Role of Emblems in Advising on Sleep and Dreams”

Recalling the adage *in nocte consilium*, early in the first canto of *The Faerie Queene* Una confidently attributes “counsell best” to sleep in a speech to Redcrosse. She fatefully chooses the wrong place to do so: after endorsing her eagerly given advice, their evil host Archimago sets off a long, unfortunate chain of events whose efficacy depends on their occurring precisely under the cover of night. The circulation of proverbial knowledge here leads to the message's manipulation in this subtle new context, exposing the character's naivete in uttering it. Likewise in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet's most famous soliloquy indirectly engages this same

commonplace, my paper argues. Sleeping and dreaming in this period often appear as attractive topics for proverbial knowledge as they address the psychosomatic human condition. Here they provide Hamlet with a way to speculate about and resist endless mental agitation, not by turning toward action or escaping it, but by facilitating a temporary equation of counsel with a threatening form of rumination. My analysis thus shows the mutually illumination of commonplace studies and early modern discourse on sleep and dreams, building on the work of critics such as Ted Traeger, who notes of the Shakespearean lines that they work on “the level of the completed commonplace. They represent both the limit and its crossing—as if the mind, thinking a thought, goes beyond itself” (*Anthologizing Shakespeare 1593-1603*). The thought of sleep paradoxically generates Hamlet’s intense fears of its vulnerabilities, whose personal origins, I end by suggesting, stem from his father’s murder.

Elisabeth Lutteman, “Borrowed Stage Songs and Proverbial Culture: Exploring Snatches in Circulation”

Vocal music was an integral component of the plays that attracted London playgoers to the theatres in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Significantly, playwrights and companies frequently drew on extant musical material, circulating in print, oral tradition, or both. Shakespeare's plays offer a small but intriguing glimpse of a widespread theatrical practice through which a diverse range of songs found their way on stage in the form of whole pieces, snatches of stanzas, and fleeting sung or spoken phrases. Once on stage, they participated in and contributed to a larger web of intertextual and intertheatrical references central to the shape and experience of plays.

This paper explores how parts of songs could acquire currency beyond their initial musical context, becoming mobile elements that, like proverbs and sayings, could be rich in associations, ambiguities and dramatic possibilities. It traces interrelationships between a reference on stage and the piece that it evokes or resonates with—and, through this, probes the dramatic potential of the reference and the ways in which it might elicit recognition and associations. Situating musical borrowing or appropriation in the theatre within a wider early modern culture and set of practices, the discussion aims to open up questions on how the circulation and dramatic impact of song references might be approached through the lens of proverbial culture.

Anne Myers, “George Herbert’s *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640) and Humor”

Using George Herbert’s *Outlandish Proverbs* as a central text, this paper investigates the relationship between proverbs and wittiness in seventeenth-century culture. On the one hand, proverbs are often spoken of as expressing common and homely truths in accessible language.

As James Thorpe has written of the 1032 utterances gathered Herbert's *Outlandish Proverbs*, "The largest common denominator . . . is their relevance to the ordinary conduct of ordinary human beings on ordinary occasions." On the other hand, just because a text uses familiar language and concrete images, such as animals, food, or household items, does not mean that its meaning is transparent. We might take for instance, Proverb 545: "A scepter is one thing, and a ladle another" or 400: "An old friend is a new house." In the first example, the proverb makes literal sense, but the purpose of the comparison remains open to interpretation. In the second example, the proverb cannot literally be true, nor is the point of the metaphor self-evident.

Several seventeenth-century publications pair proverbs with jokes, riddles, epigrams, and other forms of "wit," affirming the notion that the proverb is partially inscrutable or challenging; at least, there is something there for the reader to "get." Throughout, the *Outlandish Proverbs* are often funny or strange in ways that are uncommon in Herbert's writing. This paper argues that by demanding interpretation and speculation, the humor (as much as the simplicity) of these miniature literary works plays a key part in their didactic purpose.

Andrea F. Van Nort, "The Circulation of the Commonplace: Montaigne, Lucretius, and *Hamlet*"

Thematic connections between Montaigne's *Essais* and Shakespeare's plays exhibit a discursive, epistemological query regarding the philosophical notions of action and being. This is especially true in the case of Shakespeare's knowledge of Lucretius as revealed in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. This essay will add to the existing body of work exploring Shakespeare's commonplace and proverbial borrowings from either the 1588 or the 1595 edition of Montaigne's *Essais*.