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SHAKESPEARE'S PROVERBIAL TONGUE

Martin ORKIN

Shakespeare's predilection for allusions to proverbs is well known, if still only partly understood. Certain of his more straightforward allusions reflect the Early Modern advocacy of the use of proverbs as an instrument of rhetoric in education, and more generally, the humanists' respect for its potential authority – and, beyond that, their faith in language as instrumental to truth. Other allusions, however, display the doubtful reliance placed by certain dramatic characters upon proverb idiom. Certain allusions address, relatively directly, the anxiety expressed by humanists about disjunctive and unreliable speech. Yet again, other allusions more openly question the very authority of the "truth" enunciated in proverbs' formulations. These latter usages recall present-day collocation of the Early Modern humanistic unease over language and representation with recent arguments about the slipperiness of language. However, the exact mix, in Shakespearean texts between such proverbial allusions and those more straightforwardly respectful of the authority of proverbs, more foreign to contemporary skepticism about language, would deserve closer analysis.

La prédilection de Shakespeare pour les allusions aux proverbes est bien connue, bien qu'elle ne soit que partiellement comprise. Son recours aux allusions les plus simples reflète les usages du début des Temps modernes, où l'on prônait l'utilisation du proverbe comme instrument rhétorique au service de l'éducation et où, de façon plus générale, son autorité potentielle était respectée par les humanistes, qui considéraient en outre la langue comme instrument de vérité. D'autres allusions, cependant, montrent le recours douteux de certains personnages dramatiques aux idiomes proverbiaux. Certaines allusions reflètent, assez directement, l'anxiété des humanistes face à l'incohérence et au manque de fiabilité de la langue. D'autres allusions remettent directement en cause l'autorité de la « vérité » énoncée dans la formulation des proverbes. Ces derniers usages évoquent le rapprochement actuel entre le malaise des humanistes d'antan à l'encontre du langage et de la représentation, et les thèses modernes sur le caractère insaisissable de la langue. Toutefois, le dosage exact, dans le texte shakespearien, de telles allusions proverbiales et d'autres, plus respectueuses de l'autorité du proverbe et éloignées du scepticisme contemporain à l'égard du langage, mériterait une analyse approfondie.

Umberto Eco, approaching a collection of proverbs from an earlier age with present-day skepticism about language – and aware of the potentially risible aspects of such collections – reduces an allusion to the proverb *Things done cannot be undone*, found in *Macbeth*, together with several others, to a series of unhelpful GPS messages:

Traveling by road was difficult: assuming that he who leaves the old road for the new knows what he's left but not what he'll find. U-turns were prohibited (there's no going back to where you began) as well as junctions (he who follows every path will discover many dangers).¹

But, as we know, things were very different in the Early Modern period, with a strong predilection for and recourse to proverbs. If Shakespeare's

¹ Umberto Eco, "Living by Proverbs" in Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy and other occasional writings*, trans. Richard Dixon, London, Harvill Secker, 2012, p. 163.

tongue both is and is not “Shakespeare’s tongue”, this is partly because Shakespeare’s dramatic language was, in the Early Modern manner, often peppered with allusions to proverbs drawn from contemporary Early Modern spoken or pedagogic idioms. Moreover, the Early Modern sense of what a proverb is differed from ours, as Sister Miriam Joseph pointed out long ago. For the Elizabethans, a “sharp line cannot be drawn” between the proverbs and adages that “represent the testimony of many men” on the one hand, and “apothegms or maxims, often called sentences” that represent “the wisdom of one” on the other, “since the people sometimes seize upon and popularize the wise sayings of one man.”² And “conceived in the mind for an actor’s voice, and published to the world on an actor’s lips,”³ Shakespeare’s language did not “stray far from popular idiom.”⁴ Thus, Shakespeare’s Cobbler, at the start of *Julius Caesar* responds to the patrician Murellus’ demand that he account for himself, with the help of a cluster of allusions:

Truly, sir, all that I live by is with the awl. I meddle with no tradesman’s matters, nor women’s matters, but withal I am indeed, sir, a surgeon to old shoes: when they are in great danger I recover them. As proper men as ever trod upon neat’s leather have gone upon my handiwork.
(1.i.21-26)⁵

Attuned to a love of and respect for proverbs, the Elizabethan audience would be likely to have recognised in his response an allusion to a proverb evoking worth, *As good a man as ever trod on shoe leather*, 1545 (Tilley, M66).⁶ The Cobbler would immediately have been seen by

² Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language*, USA, Hafner, 1947, p. 98.

³ G. D. Wilcock, “Shakespeare and Elizabethan English,” *Shakespeare Survey* 7, 1954, p. 12.

⁴ F. P. Wilson, “Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life,” in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1941, p. 167-197.

⁵ All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, OUP, 1991.

⁶ Head proverbs are quoted from Morris P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1966, hereafter referred to as Tilley. Following the proverb, the date of the earliest citation either in Tilley, or in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, rev. ed., F.P. Wilson, Oxford, OUP, 1970 is given, together with the number from Tilley, where there is one. Other proverb dictionaries consulted in this study are Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases From English writings mainly before 1500*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968, hereafter referred to as Whiting; G L Apperson, *English Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, London 1929; R.W. Dent, *Shakespeare’s Proverbial Language, an Index*, Berkely, University of California Press, 1981, hereafter referred to as Dent.

the audience to be making a semi-literal and humorous application of the proverb to his own shoe-making trade. At the same time the figurative meaning of the proverb underlines the worthiness of craftsmanship as well as character. By implication, the Cobbler also draws attention to the reliability with which he carries out his occupation. It is true that, in the immediate dramatic situation, the Cobbler may well be justifying himself against Murellus' somewhat aggressive questioning. But the proverb's evocation of reliability also brings forward telling tensions in a play concerned with rebellion, and with the roles that men involved in political upheaval decide to assume for themselves. The Cobbler's diction, in this reply to Murellus, would also have alerted the Elizabethan audience to *To meddle (Meddle not) with another man's matter*, 1584 (Tilley M493), and to *Let not the cobbler (shoemaker) go beyond his last*, 1539 (Tilley, C480), proverbs commending both caution and implicit conservatism.

Allusion or resort to proverbs as a special articulation of "wisdom" reflects, of course, an Early Modern humanistic faith in the potential transparency of language properly used. Early Modern humanists displayed a similar faith in the potential profundity of proverbial formulation as one means of ensuring the humanistic project of "true" speaking. Aristotle, long before the Renaissance, had recommended proverbs as evidence because "they seem right, on the supposition all the world is agreed about them."⁷ This invests proverbs with an authority of an almost mimetic kind. For Erasmus, proverbs "dooe lightly synke and settle in the mynde, so dooe thei contain more good knowelage and learning, in the depe botome or secrete priuetic, then thei shewe at [...] first vieue."⁸

Accordingly, as T. W. Baldwin demonstrated long ago,⁹ proverbs were used in grammar-school procedures of memory-work, invention and theme-making. Many of the proverbial allusions that spice the

⁷ *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. R.C. Jebb, ed J.E. Sandys (1909, 114-115), cited in Bartlett Jere Whiting, "The Nature of the Proverb" in *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 14, 1932, p. 277-8.

⁸ From N. Udall's translation of Erasmus' preface to *Apophthegmes of Erasmus*, copy in British Library, printed by Richard Grafton, dated 1542, p***1recto-***verso.

⁹ See Rudolph E Habenicht, ed, (John Heywood's) *A Dialogue of Proverbs*, University of California, 1963, p. 10; T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Small Latine & Lesse Greek*, 2 vols, Urbana Illinois, 1944; Martin Orkin, "The Poor Cat's Adage and other Shakespearean Proverbs in Elizabethan Grammar-School Education," in *Reader in the Language of Shakespearean Drama*, ed V. Salmon and E. Burness, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1987, p. 489-498.

tongues of Shakespeare's dramatic characters were first learned by Elizabethan schoolchildren – of whom Shakespeare is likely to have been one – from school dictionaries and collections such as John Withals's *A Dictionarie in English and Latin deuised for the capacitye of Children and young beginners*, or Nicholas Udall's *Floures of Terence*, or Richard Taverner's *Prouerbes or Adages gathered out of the Chillades of Erasmus*. Indeed, the proverbs alluded to at the start of *Julius Caesar*, which has just been mentioned, are all listed and sometimes extensively expanded upon, in one or other of these schoolbooks. In Taverner, Elizabethan schoolboys would, for example, have read the amplification:

Let euery man exercise hym selfe in the facultie that he knoweth. Let the
cobler medle with clowtynge his neighbours shoes, and not be a Captayne
in felde, or meddell with matters concernynge a commonwealth.
(fol.xxxiii leaf Ei recto)

It is of course true that certain scholars have, already in the twentieth century, acknowledged the allusions to proverbs in Shakespeare's language.¹⁰ But like Rosalind's [proverbial] "howling of Irish wolves against the moon" (*As You Like It*, v.ii.104-105),¹¹ this earlier work has gone relatively unheeded. It is true that editors of Shakespearian texts make a point of registering allusions to proverbs. But they rarely reflect on how Shakespeare uses the allusions they, in each case, register. What, again, may be said about the kinds of proverbial usage to be found in different plays? Or what might Shakespeare's proverbial "tongue" suggest about Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes to language? From another perspective, in the case of volumes such as John Florio's *Seconde Fruits*, can the specifically European origins, if any, of the common idiomatic currency in which Shakespeare's allusions may sometimes deal, be registered and

¹⁰ See, for example, Katherine Lever, "Proverbs and *Sententiae* in the Plays of Shakespeare," *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 13, 1938; Leonard Dean, "Shakespeare's Treatment of Conventional Ideas," *The Sewanee Review* 52, 1944; Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, USA, Hafner, 1947; Sister M. C. Felhoelter, "Proverbialism in *Coriolanus*," unpublished thesis: Catholic University of America, 1956; E. Cook, "Shakespeare's Use of Proverbs for Characterization, Dramatic Action, and Tone in Representative Comedy" unpublished thesis, Texas Technological University, 1974. For what is, to my knowledge, a relatively rare instance of more recent interest in aspects of Shakespeare's proverbial allusions, see Andrew Griffin, "The Banality of history in *Troilus and Cressida*," *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 12:2 (September 2000).

¹¹ Rosalind alludes here to the proverb *The dog (wolf) barks in vain at the moon* 1520, Tilley, D4490.

traced?¹² We are still very far from answering fully such, or innumerable other, questions.

I start, in this essay, by glancing at selected aspects of Shakespeare's proverbial tongue, with brief examples of what might be called straightforward, conventionally humanistic proverbial allusions, where the authority of the proverb's signification or meaning is taken as given. Then, I will provide instances of proverbial allusions that suggest more complicated implications for the stability of proverbs signification, for the articulation of identity, as well as for concepts of language itself. This will lead to an attempt to register the extent to which Shakespeare's proverbial tongue bespeaks an Early Modern humanistic sensibility as regards language, or, conversely, the extent to which it challenges conventional Early Modern concepts.

1

In *Hamlet*, Polonius' string of allusions, directed at Laertes in an often-quoted speech on the eve of his son's departure to Wittenberg (*Hamlet*, I.iii.57-80), offer a well-known, even notorious, example of straightforward faith in the wisdom of generalized formulations (though taken to an extreme). Polonius hurtles through *First think then speak*, 1616, *T219, Have but few friends though much acquaintance*, c1535, *F741, Keep well thy friends when thou hast gotten them*, 1580, *F752, Try your friends before you trust*, c 1536, *T595, Give not your right hand to every man*, c1535, *H68, A man should hear all parts ere he judge any*, 1546, *M299, Hear much but speak little*, 1532, *M1277, Apparel (clothes) makes the man*, c1500, *A283, Who lends to a friend loses double*, c1594, *F725, After night comes the day*, c1475, *N164*. His proto-proverb-list, famously suggests a worldly, suspicious, platitudinous cast of mind.¹³

¹² Production of collections of proverbs abounded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Together with Florio, these included the work of Pettie, Camden and Draxe. Proverb idiom is to be found in dictionaries such as Palsgrave's *Lesclarcissement de la langue* (1530), Thomas Cooper's, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae*, and Randle Cotgrave's *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611), all of which have yet to be examined regarding proverb idiom.

¹³ See, for example, N.B. Allen, "Polonius's advice to Laertes", *Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 8, 1943; J.W. Bennett, "Characterization in Polonius's Advice to Laertes," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4, 1953; Doris V. Falk, "Proverbs and the Polonius Destiny",

But respectful allusions to proverb idiom operate in various other ways. The member of Elizabeth's Parliament who, in 1601, delivered a speech consisting entirely of proverbs, did so as a sign of wit but also to persuade other members to adopt his point of view regarding a bill to avoid double payment of debt:

It is now my chance to speak something, and that without humming or hawing. I think this law is a good law; even reckoning makes long friends; as far goes the *penny* as the *penny's* master. *Vigilantibus non dormientibus jura subveniunt*. Pay the reckoning overnight, and you shall not be troubled in the morning. If ready money be *Mensura Publica*, let every man cut his coat according to his cloth. When his old suit is in the wain, let him stay till that his money bring a new suit in the increase. Therefore, I think the law to be good, and I wish it good passage.¹⁴

Proverbs may also be played with verbally, in multiple ways, by a speaker, without bringing the inherent proverb's signification into contention. When, in *As You Like It*, Orlando bursts in upon the peaceful courtiers of Arden with a threatening demand for attention, the Duke responds:

What would you have? Your gentleness shall force
More than your force move us to gentleness.
(*As You Like It*, II.vii.102-3)

He alludes here to the proverb *There is a great force hidden in a sweet command*, 1581 (Tilley, F586), rewording it and also casting the sentiment expressed into the rhetorical form of *antimetabole*. The graceful patterned form in which he presents the sentiment helps to highlight the incongruity of Orlando's stance contrasted with that of the group of leisurely courtiers. Jacques has already taken Orlando's threat that "He dies that touches any of this fruit" (*As You Like It*, II.vii.98) as casually as possible, by punning on the word "reason" (*As You Like It*, II.vii.100-1). His (courtly) verbal play in response to Orlando's threat of violence parallels aspects of the proverb's signification. Indeed, allusion to the proverb's signification offers a momentary subtle "authoritative" complement to the play's concern with nurture. Many other such instances of straightforward allusion to the authority of proverbs'

Shakespeare Quarterly 18, 1967; Joan Larsen Klein, "What is't to leave betimes? Proverbs and Logic in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Survey* 32, p. 163-176.

¹⁴ Cited in Wilson, "Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life," p. 182-3.

signification in, for example, argument, playful courtly banter or quarrelling scenes, still await detailed scrutiny.¹⁵

2

I turn now to two simple examples of the more complex implications that may result from a doubtful reliance placed by certain dramatic characters upon proverb idiom. We may preface this by noting that when, in *1 Henry IV*, Poins refers to Falstaff sarcastically as “Monsieur Remorse” (*1 Henry IV*, 1.ii.112) and mocks his affected repentance in the first tavern scene, Hal joins in:

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 Henry IV*, 1.ii.116-118)

The proverb *Give the devil his due* 1589 (Tilley, D273) is usually used to concede that even the bad are sometimes deserving of positive recognition. Hal, in his application of the proverb, displaces its usual meaning. He suggests that, despite the fact that Falstaff affects an attack of conscience and a need to repent, he will still remain true to the devil and relapse into his old ways. But Hal also frames his jest with the claim that Falstaff is “never yet a breaker of proverbs.” As part of the joke, the claim directs his audience to what, in an age steeped in proverbs, must nonetheless have been a familiar preoccupation: the extent to which age-old generalization might be reconfirmed in each particular situation, and more especially, the implications, often profound, that might result from a failure to do so. Furthermore, the “breaking” of proverbs in one or other way often challenges Early Modern humanistic faith in their transparency.

One kind of instability suggested by the use of proverbial allusion occurs when Othello, attempting to convince himself of the veracity of

¹⁵ For fuller discussion, see, for instance, Martin Orkin, “‘Every day is not holiday’ – Proverb Idiom in *1 Henry IV*,” *Unisa English Studies* XX:2, 1982, p. 1-5 and Martin Orkin, “Male Aristocracy and Chastity Always Meet’: Proverbs and the Representation of Masculine Desire in *As You Like It*,” *Journal of Theatre and Drama* 3, 1997, p. 59-79. In the quarrel and flyting scenes in *Julius Caesar* there are allusions to *Things done cannot be undone* c1460 (Tilley, T200) 4.2.9/1918, *Full of courtesy full of craft* 1576 (Tilley, C732) 4.2.21/1932, *The dog (wolf) barks in vain at the moon* 1520 (Tilley, D449) 4.3. 28/1998, *To cast (hit) in the teeth* a1500 (Tilley, T429) 4.3.99/2078, *As sweet as honey* c1475 (Tilley, H544) 5.1. 35/2367.

Iago's allegations as to an adulterous Desdemona, and, thus, to accept the unacceptable, grasps from time to time at the authority of proverb idiom. At one point, he cries:

He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n,
Let him not know't, and he's not robb'd at all
(*Othello*, III.iii.347-348)

alluding to the proverb *He that is not sensible of his loss has lost nothing*, c1526 (Tilley, L461). In citing proverbial authority, Othello attempts to elide the disjunction between his own knowledge of Desdemona, and the "knowledge" of her alleged behaviour with Cassio, which Iago has given him. His resort to the authority of the proverb posits his own inner doubt. To Othello, citation of the formulation ostensibly authorizes as credible the story of both his "ignorance" and Cassio's "theft." However, the fact that the audience knows the proverb's signification to be in this case entirely misapplied questions the putative transparency in the usage of the proverbial language counter.

Just before the moment of assassination in *Julius Caesar*, Caesar alludes to proverb idiom in a way that also suggests levels of disjunction. He structures a version of himself in the lines:

But there's but one in all doth hold his place
So in the world: 'tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshaked of motion
(*Julius Caesar* III.i.65-70)¹⁶

Caesar's allusion to the proverbial phrase *To be as flesh and blood as others are*, 1541 (Tilley, F367) appears to make a firm distinction between his view of his political function and the vulnerabilities of others. As critics have observed, this foregrounds his notion of himself as, consistently, like the "Northern star," dependable. But the proverb's signification asserts the limits of human agency and so prompts, even as he uses it, an evaluative response to Caesar's strategic claim of constancy at this crucial moment in his self-representation. Moreover, he himself is, in a moment of uncertainty, seen to invest in the authority of proverb

¹⁶ The proverbial phrase *To be as flesh and blood as others are*, 1541 (Tilley, F367) is used in other allusions in order to remark on, in the face of vanity and arrogance, human mortality, as for example in: "They so speake ... as though they were not made of fleshe and bone [a common variant] as other men be." (1565, Osorius *Pearl for a Prince*, trans. R. Shackock 38).

idiom.¹⁷ By alluding to it, he endeavours to attain or to claim for himself a point of fixity that – as his physical limitations or his hesitations in other scenes confirm – he does not readily have. Furthermore, the proverb alluded to, itself, followed as it is by the assassination, proves an unreliable piece of verbal or rhetorical armoury in terms of its purpose, *i.e.* to confirm the security for himself that he proclaims.

3

Interestingly, Robert Greene, Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare, each in a different way, address the – for the humanist – omnipresent threat of disjunctive or unreliable speaking, specifically by means of allusion to the particular proverb *Good that the teeth guard the tongue* (var. from 1578, T424). Greene, firstly, reflects conventional reliance on the authority of the proverb:

It seemeth (saith Bias) that Nature by fortifying the tongue, would teach how precious and necessarie a virtue silence is; for she hath placed before it the Bulwarke of the teeth. (1587, Greene, *Penelope's Web*, p. 221)

Implicit in this straightforward proverbial recommendation for discrete silence, may be detected, in Greene's imagery of a necessary "fortifying" of that tongue, Early Modern humanistic anxiety about its proclivity to speak the destructive, or the obfuscatory and the misleading. On the subversive potential, too, of the tongue, Jonson alludes to the proverb when he writes:

a wise *tongue* should not be licentious and wandring: but moved and (as it were) govern'd with certaine raines from the heart, and bottome of the brest: and it was excellently said of the Philosopher: that there was a Wall or Parapet of teeth set in our mouth, to restraine the petulancy of our words: that the rashness of talking should not only bee retarded by the guard and watch of our heart: but be fenced in, and defended by certaine strengths, placed in the mouth it selfe, and within the lips.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Martin Orkin, "Proverbial Allusion in *Julius Caesar*," *Pretexts: Studies in Writing and Culture* 7:2 (November 1998), p. 213-234.

¹⁸ Ben Jonson, *Timber or Discoveries, Made upon Men and Matter: As they have flow'd out of his daily Reading, or had their reflux to his peculiar Notion of the Times*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, vol 8, Oxford, O.U.P., 1970, p. 573.

Even as he recommends the “wise *tongue*,” Jonson is particularly wary of its capacity for bad or unruly speaking. Precisely because of the danger, in speech, of a “licentious [...] wandring”, there is need of “the guard and watch of [the] heart” to help fortify, fence in and control “the petulancy of our words” and “the rashness of talking.”

Shakespeare makes two allusions to the same proverb, that in each case also register problematics of language usage and of representation. In *Richard II*, Mowbray, responding to the King’s sentence of exile just meted out to him, contemplates the impossibility of using his “native English” in a foreign land:

Within my mouth you have enjailed my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips
(*Richard II*, 1.iii. 160-161).

His is a bitter semi-literal application of the proverb to his likely future inability, literally, ever to use his mother tongue when in exile. Whereas the signification of the proverb enjoins *decorum* (particularly here, in the presence of the monarch) he inverts the verbal content of the formulation, vociferously to protest against his cultural “en-jailing” or exile of his “English” tongue. What is, in the proverb, a recommendation to speak moderately is twisted by him into (an immoderate) protest at the King’s cruel punishment.

Again, when, in *Measure for Measure*, the Duke, in disguise, asks the rascal Lucio about the reasons for the Duke’s withdrawal, Lucio replies: “ ’tis a secret must be locked within the teeth and the lips” (*Measure for Measure*, 3.1 397-398). Lucio here cunningly manipulates the proverb, even as he alludes to it, as a technique of self-defence. He uses the formulation – against the disguised Duke’s teasing scrutiny – to protest his own alleged “discretion.” On the one hand, his manipulation of the proverb and its signification for his own ends may be taken as implicit evidence of conventional humanistic anxieties about the deliberate abuse of language and its consequent lack of transparency. On the other hand, Lucio’s attempts to misrepresent or rewrite himself, with the aid of proverb manipulation, underline again, as in the case of Mowbray’s allusion, the potential slipperiness, in use, of proverb formulation.

4

Proverbial allusions, during a conversation, early in *Julius Caesar*, between Brutus and Cassius, also propose unsettling of identity and, by implication, praxis. But in this instance, there is no implicit destabilizing of aspects of the authority of proverb idiom. On the contrary, the extent to which the construction of identity may be relative, dependent also upon narrative intersections with the linguistic or discursive structures available within particular locations and moments – and therefore also potentially unstable – is actually foregrounded by proverbial authority. Firstly, when, at the opening of the play, Caesar and his train have left the stage, Brutus, directly on the subject of self-representation, replies to Cassius' enquiry, "Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?":

No, Cassius, for the eye sees not itself
But by reflection, by some other things.

(*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.54-55)

Brutus alludes here to the proverb *The eye sees not itself but by reflection*, 1600 (Tilley, E321a).¹⁹ The formulation emphasizes the extent to which construction of identity is partly the result of interaction, to be found not only in the literal image of the mirror, but in the linguistic/discursive "mirror" afforded the individual by their particular social location – an apparent, seemingly uncanny, anticipation of Lacan. Moreover, a series of comparable proverbial associations, current in Renaissance writing, parallel this proverbial focus upon the extent to which "self-knowledge" is dependent upon a problematic, partly socially determined, gaze. Malone was the first to mention the resemblance between these lines and a passage in Sir John Davies's poem, *Nosce Teipsum*:

Mine *Eyes*, which (view) all objects nigh and farre,
Looke not into this litle world of mine,
Nor see my face, wherein they fixed are.

Tilley quotes some lines from *Nosce Teipsum* to illustrate an allusion to a related proverb, *The eye that sees all things else sees not itself*, a1591 (Tilley, E232):

¹⁹ I deal with Dent's reservations about the presence of an allusion to this proverb in Orkin, "Proverb Allusions in *Julius Caesar*", 232, fn 40.

Is it because the minde is like the eye
 (Through which it gathers knowledge by degrees,
 Whose ray reflect not, but spread outwardly,
 Not seeing it selfe, when other things it sees?²⁰

and he gives another citation anterior to *Julius Caesar*, also registered in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*:

How wel or ill I haue done in it, I am ignorant: (the eye that sees round about it selfe, sees not into it selfe).²¹

while Dent, in Appendix A to his *Index* adds:

Many of them are like the eye, which seeth all thinges and cannot see it selfe.

(1581, Bisse, J, *Two Sermons* A8v)

Whiting, too, lists several other formulations that may have been proverbial or at least quasi-proverbial, using related imagery which, to a present-day audience, not only expresses desire for self-knowledge, but implies the dependence of the “self”, for that knowledge, on representation. For one of these, *Who that beholds in the glass well he sees himself*, 1484 (Whiting, G126) he supplies the following citation:

For men sayn comynly who that beholdeth in the glass wel he seeth himself. And who seeth hym self wel he knoweth hym self, And who that knowith him self lytell he preyseth hym self, and who that preyseth him self lytell he is ful wyse and sage.²²

Cassius’ proposal to Brutus, a little later in their conversation, should be heard in the context of such traditionally proverbial concerns with representations of “self”-knowledge:

And since you know you cannot see yourself
 So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
 Will modestly discover to yourself
 That of yourself which you yet know not of.

(*Julius Caesar*, I.ii.69-72)

²⁰ Sir John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum*, [1599], 1622 edition in *The Complete Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed A. B. Grosart [1876] II, 20.

²¹ Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, [1584] in *Works*, R. B. McKerrow, ed., II [1904], 201, Ded.3.

²² William Caxton, *The Fables of Aesop as first printed by William Caxton in 1484*, J. Jacobs (ed) II [London, 1889], 56 [5-10].

This motif, strengthened by proverb resonances underlining the subject of self-knowledge raised between Cassius and Brutus, might be said to reflect Shakespeare's interest, in *Julius Caesar*, in the motives that prompt "moral" choice or action. But from the perspective of the illusory nature of a fixed subjectivity, which the concurrent tissue of available proverb signification raises, it is also interesting that the foregrounding of the proverbial concept early in the play, heralds what emerges in the subsequent drama as a series of vacillating representations or constructions of the "self" – in Brutus as well as in Caesar. Such early proverbial asseveration about the complexities of identity also hints, then, at problematics of representation. As John Drakakis puts it, "the 'self' (in such presentations) is not that ontologically stable 'Centre of my circling thought' of Sir John Davies's *Nosce Teipsum* but a fabrication."²³

5

Such an awareness of the potential instability of proverbs, or of a proverbial recognition of problems of representation, is of course paralleled by a concern about the unreliability of language in other ways in Shakespeare's texts, as is well known. Moreover, the Early Modern humanistic dimensions to this anxiety have famously been seen to intersect with present-day concerns about language. Thus, in his recent book on Shakespeare in French theory, Richard Wilson notes:

Fineman was struck how much "the languageness of language" is foregrounded by Shakespeare with a self-reflexiveness which anticipates post-structuralist theories of the priority of the signifier over the signified, as well as by the fact that Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of self-presence is prefigured in Shakespeare's dispersal of identity.²⁴

But in the case of Early Modern allusions to proverbs, my examples suggest so far a proverbial tongue, in the language of Shakespeare's texts, which has mixed effects. Although some allusions

²³ John Drakakis, "'Fashion it thus' *Julius Caesar* and the Politics of Theatrical Representation," *Shakespeare Survey*, 1992, p. 69. Similar paradoxical effects are powerfully evident in the allusion to the authority of the proverb *Fair without but foul within*, c1200 (Tilley F29) in *Macbeth* 1.1.10-11.

²⁴ Richard Wilson, *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 1.

propose aspects of volatility in signification or function that appear to intersect with contemporary sensibilities about language, other allusions operate in what may now remain for us a noticeably “foreign,” Early Modern humanistic way. It is true, for example that, as I have been arguing, some of Shakespeare’s proverbial allusions posit the slipperiness of the proverb seen as a not always reliable language counter or marker of identity. But, at least as often, the authority of proverb idiom is re-iterated, in matters unrelated to, as well as including, problems of equivocation or representation, in proverb argument or play. If Lucio may be said, on the one hand, to be manipulating the proverb *Good that the teeth guard the tongue* in a way that undermines humanists’ faith in its “depe botome or secret priuetic,” the allusion does, on the other hand, posit an additional irony that is not akin to twentieth- and twenty-first century skepticism about language. For the proverb Shakespeare makes him pick to mislead the disguised Duke about his own identity, also ironically redounds upon Lucio’s own lack of discretion in his unwittingly self-damaging verbosity everywhere else in their conversation. In this respect, the instance of Lucio’s use of proverbial language also provides a case in point for the truth of the proverb’s signification. This particular kind of proverb manipulation in Shakespeare has, then, complicated effects – a manipulative prevarication that challenges humanistic notions of the proverb even as it ratifies them.

There are other proverbs used at the beginnings of plays, and also sometimes throughout the plays, whose significations both test, but also often appear to anticipate, or reflect, what happens in the play. In *1 Henry IV*, Shakespeare alludes in 1.ii to *Everyone must walk (labour) in his own calling (vocation)* 1539 (Tilley, C23) (1.2.104-105) and to *Every day is not holiday (Sunday)* 1611 (Tilley, D68), proverbs whose wisdom Hal’s growth in the play appears to embody. I remarked at the beginning of this paper on the cluster of proverbs at the start of *Julius Caesar*. In *Othello*, Shakespeare allows Iago to outrageously manipulate *A sin unseen is half pardoned*, 1567 (Tilley, S472) and *Be what thou would seem to be*, c1377 (Tilley, S214) (3.3. 131-133).²⁵

²⁵ In Rosalind’s Epilogue to *As You Like It*, Shakespeare alludes to *Good wine needs no bush*, c1426 (Tilley, W462) a proverb that posits an essence for the object independent of any signifier, but, again, the conditional mood in Rosalind’s presentation of the proverb – in a play that to a degree explores the fluidity of desire – disrupts the conventional wisdom. This last allusion, however, despite elements of transgression, is further complicated by

That the authority of proverbs is in important ways reiterated in sometimes crucially positioned allusions in Shakespeare must not diminish the interest and importance of those proverbs that propose disruptive gaps between signifier and referent. Proverbial allusions in, say, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* may too, in this way, be understood to be mixed rather than unitary. Even in a play as disturbing as *Macbeth*, juxtaposed against profoundly transgressive proverb manipulations (that argue, in turn, a parallel with contemporary insecurity about language or identity) – such as *When things are at the worst they will mend*, 1582 (Tilley, T216; see *Macbeth*, IV.ii.24-25), *No man loses (wins) but another wins (loses)* c1526 (Tilley, M337; see *Macbeth*, I.i.3-4, 1.2.67) and *The face is the index of the heart (mind)* 1575 (Tilley, F1; see *Macbeth*, I.iv.11-12) – are other allusions that, in rebarbative Early Modern humanistic mode, reiterate, conventionally, the authority of the proverb significations – such as *Blood will have blood*, c1395 (Tilley, B458; see *Macbeth*, III.iv.121), *The thing done has an end (is not to do)* c1380 (Tilley, T149; see *Macbeth*, I.vii.1-2) or *Things done cannot be undone*, c1460 (Tilley, T200; see *Macbeth*, V.i.65, 3.2. 13-14).²⁶

The fact that Shakespeare's proverbial tongue reflects, at least part of the time, an engrained Early Modern humanism may not be a surprise. Nor may it be a shock to discover allusions that are more provocatively challenging to Early Modern shibboleths about language. But our understanding of the exact mix of such contrasting tendencies awaits much needed further research, of which there is at present little sign. In various relatively recent volumes on Shakespeare's language, selected at random, scholars such as Frank Kermode, Jonathan Hope or the editors of an Arden guide to the reading of Shakespeare's dramatic language, all stress its remoteness from contemporary English.²⁷

implications that bear upon the play's hierarchical gender structurations. See Orkin, "Male Aristocracy and Chastity Always Meet": Proverbs and the Representation of Masculine Desire in *As You Like It*," *op. cit.*

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of such proverb usage, see Martin Orkin, "It will have blood they say; blood will have blood" – Proverb Usage and the Vague and Undetermined Places of *Macbeth* in *Shakespeare without Boundaries: Essays in Honor of Dieter Mehl*, eds. Christa Jansohn, Lena Cowen Orlin, Stanley Wells, Maryland, University of Delaware Press, 2011, p. 189-202.

²⁷ Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 4-5, reminds us of how "the language of quite ordinary people grows strange, recedes into the past, along with other social practices and assumptions." In another recent book, admittedly on what he calls "iterative criticism" of Shakespeare's language, Jonathan Hope, concerned, as he insists, with the "Renaissance approach to language," remarks: "[t]here are some who think that Shakespeare is our contemporary and that he speaks to the universal; it should be clear from

Despite this, and without in any way bringing the actual work of such scholars into question, it remains puzzling, even astonishing that, at least in these randomly selected works, none of these scholars shows any contemporary interest in Shakespeare's use of proverb idiom. Older scholars, including M.P. Tilley,²⁸ Richard Dent,²⁹ Horst Weinstock³⁰ and Hilda Hulme³¹ may have, long ago, provided a ground-map that indicates directions for such an interest, but broader delineation of the exact and varied nature of the workings of Shakespeare's proverbial tongue still awaits journeys of discovery not yet undertaken.

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this book that what I find most fascinating and rewarding about Shakespeare is his strangeness", *Shakespeare and Language Reason Eloquence and Artifice in the Renaissance*, London, Methuen Drama, Arden Shakespeare, 2010, p. 206-207. And the editors of a recent Arden Guide to the reading of Shakespeare's dramatic language also promise to focus on "a range of approaches to the written and spoken language of the Renaissance period," *Reading Shakespeare's Dramatic Language A Guide*, eds. Sylvia Adamson, Lynette Hunter, Lynne Magnussen, Ann Thompson and Katie Wales, London, Methuen Drama, Arden Shakespeare, 2001, p. 3. Despite this recognition of the distance and multiple strangenesses of Shakespeare's language, none of these recent volumes, admittedly selected at random, even mentions proverb idiom, presumably one significant example – to present-day audiences – of that strangeness. The same dearth of interest is evident in *Stylistics and Shakespeare's Language Transdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Mireille Ravassat and Jonathan Culpeper, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*

²⁹ *Op. cit.*

³⁰ See Horst Weinstock, *Die Funktion elisabethanischer Sprichwörter und Pseudosprichwörter bei Shakespeare*, Heidelberg, 1966.

³¹ Hilda M. Hulme, *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language*, London, Longmans, 1962.