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PERVERBS AND *DETORSIO*: COMIC PROVERB MODIFICATION BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Abstract: Since antiquity, paremias and phraseologisms have always been modified for comic purpose. Latin rhetoricians and scholars used to call this type of manipulation of proverbs *detorsio*. Closer inspection reveals that the stylistic devices employed by ancient authors are the same as those found in modern perversbs, a term used to collectively describe *anti-*, *pseudo-*, *quasi-* and twisted proverbs. The aim of this article is to show how the modern concept of perversbs and the ancient one of *detorsio* correspond. To prove this thesis, I will first define the concept of perverb and that of comic *detorsio* using a few examples. Next, I will show how certain mechanisms present in modern perversbs are also present in ancient examples of comic *detorsio*. To this end, I will use the comparative method, juxtaposing ancient and modern examples. Special focus will be placed on Petronius' *Satyricon*: this 1st-century Latin novel abounds in proverbs and idiomatic expressions that are used for linguistic mimesis and characterization of the characters.

Keywords: Perversbs, *detorsio*, parody, Greek proverbs, Latin proverbs, ancient literature

1. Introduction¹

To create a comical effect, one resorts to something unexpected that may surprise the listener or reader. For this purpose, one can employ proverbs and idioms, or to be more precise, paremias or phraseologisms. This kind of manipulation is attested nowadays in the so-called perversbs, but this use of paremias and phraseologisms was also known in ancient times. In his *Rhetoric* (3.10–11, 1412a29 ff.), Aristotle states that one of the most effective means of achieving ‘the witty’ (τὸ ἄστεϊον) is the surprise, which occurs when the listener “does not hear what he expects” (οὐ γὰρ ὥσπερ ὁ ἀκούων ὑπέλαβεν). The philosopher goes on to say that ‘the witty’ can be achieved, for example, through the unexpected and unforeseen use of riddles (ἡνιγμένα), new terms (τὰ καινὰ), puns (τὰ παρὰ γράμμα σκκώματα), homonyms (ὁμωνυμῖαι) and also through the use of proverbs (παροιμῖαι). The concept is reiterated by Cicero in his treatise *De oratore* (2.258):

Saepe etiam uersus facete interponitur, uel ut est uel paululum immutatus, aut aliqua pars uersus... In hoc genus coniciuntur etiam proverbia.

[Often, to provoke laughter, a verse is also inserted, either in its complete or slightly modified form, or a part of a verse... To this genre also belong proverbs.]

The Latin pedagogue and rhetorician Quintilian (6.3.96–98) also deals with this issue:

adiuuant urbanitatem et uersus commode positi, seu toti ut sunt [...], quod fit gratius, si qua etiam ambiguitate conditur [...], seu uerbis ex parte mutatis [...], seu ficti notis uersibus similes, quae παρωδία dicitur; et proueria oportune aptata.

¹ For Latin authors and their works, I will use the abbreviations listed in the Index of the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (abbreviated: *ThLL*); for Greek authors and their works, I will use the abbreviations used in the *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell-Scott-Jones (or *L.-S.-J.*). The English translation of passages is always yours. Linguistic examples with interlinear glosses will follow the Leipzig glossing rules (see: <https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>). All translations from languages other than English are my own.

[Humour is also enhanced by appropriately placed verses, either referred to in their entirety [...], and this will be more pleasing, if it is seasoned with some double entendre [...], or with some changed words [...], either imaginary verses similar to the authentic ones – and this is *παρωδία* [parody] – or appropriately adapted proverbs].

But how did the ancients modify paremias and phraseologisms? And how do the moderns do it? Furthermore, in which cases are there similarities? These are the questions I will be exploring in this article. I will start by defining the terms ‘paremia’ and ‘phraseologism’, after which I will introduce the concept of the para-proverb. Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative and comparative approach. The corpus is deliberately limited to cases in which the underlying proverbial model remains recognizable, and the alteration can be classified according to a specific mechanism, such as addition, omission or substitution. This allows the comparison of ancient *detorsio* and modern perversbs not as historically connected phenomena, but as functionally comparable strategies of comic proverb manipulation.

2. The concept of paremia and phraseologism

From its earliest attestations in the mid-fifth century BC until at least the beginning of the Imperial period, the term *παροιμία* appears to denote concise sayings marked by an ethical orientation and by a traditional (*παλαιά*) form, which are not attributed to any specific author (Lelli 2023:144). While this definition is broadly applicable, it is not without exceptions: *παροιμιαί* may vary in length and do not necessarily possess a moral dimension. Regarding the etymology of the term, García Romero (1999: 222) states:

Si οἶμος/οἶμη es la narración [...], del mismo modo que προίμιον es “lo que precede a la narración”, el “proemio”, παροιμία significaría entonces “lo que se encuentra junto a la narración”, es decir, lo que no pertenece a la narración propiamente dicha (el preverbio *παρα-* es muy frecuente en el sentido de “fuera de”) pero se deduce de ella como corolario, como enseñanza de sabiduría universal que se desprende de un hecho concreto.

[If οἶμος/οἶμη is the narration [...], just as προίμιον is “that which precedes the narration”, the “proem”, παροιμία would then mean

“that which is next to the narration”, in other words, that which does not belong to the narration itself (the prefix *παρά-* is very frequent in the sense of “outside”) but is deduced from it as a corollary, as a teaching of universal wisdom which follows from a specific fact.]

Previously, *παροιμία* was only used for the construction of nouns and adjectives, such as ‘paremiography’ and ‘paremiographic’, ‘paremiology’ and ‘paremiological’. Due to the terminological confusion in the world of paremiology today, the term has been taken over by Franceschi (2005: IX) to mean

un elemento della struttura di quel codice linguistico naturale che consente all'uomo di esprimere le intuizioni mentali mediante strutture logiche, e che noi diciamo idioma: del quale va dichiarato strumento importantissimo.

[An element of the structure of that natural linguistic code that enables man to express mental intuitions by means of logical structures, and which we call idiom: of which it must be declared a very important instrument.]

According to the Scuola Geoparemiologica Italiana (Franceschi 2005: XII), the term ‘paremia’ possesses a broad semantic scope:

Espressione brachilogica convenzionale in forma di sentenza in sé conclusa, concettosa, allologica e polisemica, costruita secondo un'opposizione logicoritmica binaria e ricca dei tratti strutturali e formali propri della produzione orale – che mentre l'evidenziano nella sequenza del discorso, la rendono meglio memorizzabile – e che sotto l'apparenza di un particolare asserto è intesa a palesare per analogia, in modo succinto e icastico e con forte effetto retorico, un consiglio o un parere (di preteso valore universale) relativo ai più vari aspetti del vivere dell'agire umano.

[A conventional brachylogical expression in the form of a self-contained, conceptual, allological and polysemic sentence, constructed according to a binary logical-rhythmic opposition and rich in structural and formal features typical of oral production – which, while highlighting it in the sequence of discourse, making it easier to memorise – and which, under the appearance of a particular assertion, is intended to reveal by analogy, in a succinct and vivid manner and with a strong rhetorical effect, a piece of advice or

opinion (of supposed universal value) relating to the most varied aspects of human life and action.]

While the definition stated above is suitable, I argue that logical-binary opposition is not always necessary, as shown by *paremia* (0):

(0) Piedmontese from the Biella area (Soletti 2011)

I ciap asmějo aj ulle.

‘The shards resemble pots’.

The term ‘*paremia*’ is used in English in a narrower sense, specifically to indicate proverbs, sayings, or sapiential utterances (Villers 2022: 2). Here, I will use it in its broader sense as outlined above.

The Escuela Paremiológica Española makes a further distinction: it commonly uses the term ‘*paremia*’ to refer to fixed expressions that are equal to or longer than a phrase, and considers their use to fall within the scope of paremiology. Phraseology would be responsible for the study of phraseologisms or fixed expressions that are shorter than a phrase. The classification proposed by Sevilla Muñoz and Crida Álvarez (2013) is indeed coherent and useful, but it poses problems when applied to Greek and Latin paremiology. This is due to the broader meaning of the term *παροιμία* in ancient Greek. The cited authors propose its use to designate fixed expressions of equal or greater length than a sentence. However, in Ancient Greek the term includes fixed expressions shorter than a sentence, which the authors refer to as ‘phraseologisms’.² This makes its use problematic in studies of ancient Greek and Latin paremiology, because in those languages it has a broader meaning than in modern paremiology and, as a result, its use can lead to misunderstandings and ambiguities.

Furthermore, the concept of phraseologism is much broader than that of idiomatic expressions, including all expressions shorter than a phrase, such as collocations. I would currently like to focus exclusively on phraseologisms that have a proverbial

² In the classical word, it can be considered a *paremia* even a single word such as *κητιζεῖν* ‘to behave like a Cretan’, namely, ‘to be a cheat’, see López Graña 2020: 45-108.

meaning and not those that have only an idiomatic one. This type of phraseological unit can also undergo the same processes of alteration as *paremia* (1):

- (1) Ancient Greek (Stratt. fr. 57 K.-A.)
 Σαννυρίωνος σκυτίνης ἐπικουρίαν.
 ‘Sannyrion’s leather help’.

This is a parody built on the proverbial phrase shown below (2) by adding a word (Σαννυρίων ‘Sannyrion’, an Athenian comic poet of the 5th century BC) and replacing a word (σκυτίνη ‘leather’ < σκυίνη ‘fig wood’):

- (2) Ancient Greek (García Romero 2015a: 150, and 2015b: 291)
 σκυίνη ἐπικουρία.
 ‘Fig wood help’.

Fig wood is particularly fragile; therefore, the idiomatic phrase (2) metaphorically indicates weak and futile help. In contrast, due to the absence of context, it is complicated to grasp what the former phrase (1) means, but it is plausible that this is an obscene joke: we know about the existence of leather phalluses [ὄλισβοι] the most famous of which seem to be the ones produced in Miletus (see Ar. *Lys.* 107–110 and Th. 8.17.3). It is important to note that the aforementioned modified phraseologism (1) also demonstrates how multiple alteration mechanisms can coexist.

In relation to what I have written, I find an observation by Lambertini (2022: 49) very useful and insightful:

Proverbi ed espressioni idiomatiche possono essere gli uni le varianti delle altre e viceversa: sono accomunati, infatti, da un lessico simile e da allusioni reciproche. Per verificare questa ipotesi, è sufficiente confrontare le espressioni *Piangere sul latte versato* e *Fare d’ogni erba un fascio* con i proverbi *È inutile piangere sul latte versato* e *Non si può fare d’ogni erba un fascio*”.

[Proverbs and idiomatic expressions can be variants of each other and vice versa: indeed, they have in common a similar lexicon and mutual allusions. In order to test this hypothesis, it is sufficient to compare the expressions *Piangere sul latte versato* and *Fare*

d'ogni erba un fascio with the proverbs *È inutile piangere sul latte versato* and *Non si può fare di tuttata l'erba un fascio*].³

In sum, the distinction between different types of proverbial expressions is inherently fluid. For more details about the structural aspects which confer proverbiality to an expression, see Mac Coinnigh (2015). These structural aspects, called proverbial markers, are collectively referred to by Villers (2022: 10) as *ornatus*, a loanword from classical rhetoric.⁴

3. Comic deformation of proverb yesterday and today

3.1 The concept of anti-proverb, perverb and para-proverb

As Litovkina (2015: 326) states, “proverbs have never been sacrosanct”; rather, they have always been modified “as satirical, ironic or humorous comments on a given situation”. Consequently, “the so-called fixity of proverb is a myth” (Mieder 2008: 89). An extraordinary example of intentional proverbial modification is the so-called anti-proverb. An anti-proverb can be defined as “an allusive distortion, parody, misapplication, or unexpected contextualization of a recognized proverb, usually for comic or satiric effect” (Doyle et al. 2012: XI). The term comes from the German *Anti-Sprichwort*, coined by Mieder and Röhrich in analogy of words such as *Antiheld* ‘anti-hero’, *Antimärchen* ‘anti-fairy tale’ and *Antilegende* ‘anti-legend’ (Mieder 2008: 88).⁵ An anti-proverb calls into question the presumed veracity of a proverb by employing antonyms (3), by transforming

³ Regarding the expressions *fare d'ogni erba un fascio* [tar everyone with the same brush], see Pittàno 2020: 141.

⁴ Following Theophrastus, Cicero lists three main qualities of expression [*uirutes elocutionis*]:

1. *puritas*, i.e. grammatical correctness (also called ἑλληνισμός by the Greeks and *Latinitas* by the Romans);

2. *perspicuitas*, i.e. expressive clarity;

3. *ornatus*, i.e. beauty resulting from the skilful use of ornaments and stylistic devices (Mortara Garavelli, 2018: 164). Given the complex articulation of the constituent elements of *ornatus*, see Mortara Garavelli, 2018: 197-199.

⁵ For an overview of the generally positive reception of the term by the scientific community, see Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2023: 176-182.

the proverb into its opposite (4), or finally by posing a naïve question (5):

(3) English (Litovkina 2015: 327).

An exception disapproves the rule < An exception approves the rule.

(4) English (Litovkina 2015: 327; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 13–14).

A friend that isn't in need is a friend indeed. < A friend in need is a friend indeed.

(5) English (Litovkina 2015: 327; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 130–131)

If love is blind, how can there be love at first sight? < Love is blind.

Sometime even anti-proverbs may convey revealing social messages (6):

(6) English (Litovkina 2015: 327; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 37–41)

A condom a day keeps AIDS away. < An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

No ancient examples of modified proverbs conveying explicit social messages were identified.

Having said that, the anti-proverbs may also be based upon simple wordplays or puns (7):

(7) English (Litovkina 2015: 327; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 10–13)

A fool and his monkey are soon parted. < A fool and his money are soon parted.

It will be clear that, to provoke humor, the traditional proverb upon which the anti-proverb is based must be well-known, because it is only in this way that one can play with the listener's or reader's expectations (Litovkina 2015: 329). In short, regardless of the variety of modified proverbs that exist, the original

proverb must always remain recognizable (Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2023: 177).

A plethora of synonyms of anti-proverbs has been introduced over the years: e.g., *quasi-* or *twisted proverbs*, as well as *modified* or *fractured proverbs* and *perversbs*.⁶ One problem in paremiological and phraseological research is the absence of refined terminology. To complicate matters further, there is the complexity of phraseological units, where it is not easy to determine to which class they belong. Similar problems arise in relation to paremias and phraseologisms that have been modified for comic effect. Modified paremias and phraseologisms differ greatly from one another, and I believe it is appropriate to assign each type a unique name. For this reason, I have decided to limit the use of the term ‘anti-proverb’ and to apply the taxonomy as well as the hierarchical approach proposed by Madziuk (2016: 21–23; Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2023: 186–188) to traditional Greek and Latin material. The author invites us to distinguish between these terms, as shown in Figure (1):

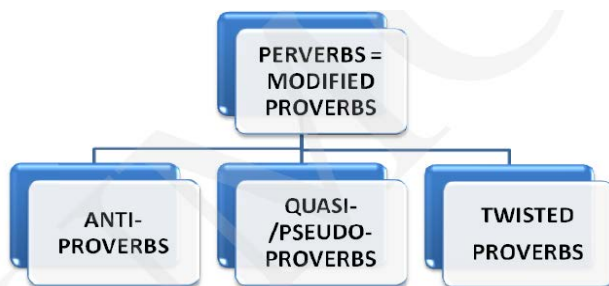


Figure 1: Classification of modified proverbs.

⁶ While ‘anti-proverb’ remains the most internationally recognized term, the academic debate regarding its prefix is still ongoing. As noted, the *anti-* prefix suggests a direct opposition that is not always present in humorous wordplay. Alternative terminologies have been proposed to better capture this nuance: for instance, *perverbe* or *proverbe détourné* in the French tradition; *paraproverbio* in Italian and Spanish scholarship (Cocco 2015; García Romero 2015), which utilizes the prefix *para-* ‘beside’; and *post-proverbials* in the Nigerian context (Raji-Oyelade 2012). For a list of terms to indicate deliberate proverb transformations, see Litovkina et al. 2021: 18–19, Hrisztova-Gotthardt et al. 2023: 175–176 and Cocco 2015: 43.

Specifically, she proposes using the neologism *perverb* for all intentionally modified proverbial expressions. The term *perverb* is a morphological blend of ‘proverb’ (from Latin *proverbium* ‘saying, adage, maxim’) and ‘perverted’ (from Latin *peruertere* ‘turn from the right way’).⁷ The term ‘perverb’ precisely and effectively defines the set of modified proverbs and their semantic twists, and deserves wider circulation within the contemporary critical lexicon.

In turn, these perverses can be divided into three subgroups. The first is the subgroup of the properly said *anti-proverbs*. As indicated by the prefix *anti-*, they express meanings that stand in opposition to those of the original versions as in example (8):

(8) English (Madziuk 2016: 23; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 147–148)

Money talks, but it doesn't always talk sense. < Money talks.

From this perspective, Madziuk’s view is consistent with that of Cocco (2015: 48–49). The second subgroup is that of *quasi-* or *pseudo-proverbs*. Their main characteristic is that they take the structure of genuine sayings, without fulfilling elementary proverbial requirements such as the features of PCW (pithy, catchy, wise):

(9) English (Mandziuk 2016: 23; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 73–77)

Early to bed and early to rise and it probably means your TV set is being repairing. < Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise

As opposed to traditional sayings, the aforementioned one is neither concise nor memorable due to the lack of stylistic device such as rhyme, which is present in the original. Finally, there are *twisted proverbs*, namely, the most productive set of modified proverbs:

⁷ For some examples of traditional Latin proverbs with modified or updated references, see Bérchez Castaño 2019: 67–68.

(10) English (Mandziuk 2016: 23; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 63–64)

Curiosity thrilled the cat. < Curiosity killed the cat.

Unlike *quasi-* or *pseudo-proverbs*, they undergo various phonological, lexical and/or conceptual modifications.

For some perversbs, several variants have been recorded. In order to get an idea of the phenomenon, let us compare *To err is human*, *to forgive is divine* with its modified versions below (11–14):

(11) English (Litovkina 2015: 328; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 213–216)

To err is human – to totally muck things up needs a computer.

(12) English (Litovkina 2015: 328; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 213–216)

To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer.

(13) English (Litovkina 2015: 328; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 213–216)

To err is human, but it takes a computer to completely fuck things up.

(14) English (Litovkina 2015: 328; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 213–216)

To error is human, but to really screw things up you need a computer.

The focus in the aforementioned *quasi-* or *pseudo-proverbs* is on information technology. After all, the anti-proverbs reflect the sociocultural context in which they arise. As Mieder (2008: 90) states, “it is the mass media more than any other vehicle that helps to spread anti-proverbs and that makes people aware of the fact that perhaps they are needed for effective communication”. Although perversbs are extremely common in the present era of mass media and the Internet, they are not a new genre at all. In this regard, Litovkina (2015: 328) cites various philosophers, writers, and poets who created anti-proverbs: Lichtenberg, Kant, Goethe, and Voltaire. However, it is possible to go further back

in time up to the proverbial *detorsio* frequently attested in ancient literature.

3.2 *The concept of detorsio*

After having defined what a proverb is, it is time to turn to the comic deformation (*detorsio*) of paremias and phraseologisms definition with some examples. Comic *detorsio* represents a deliberate shift of a proverb's original significance towards a novel purpose. This technique has ancient roots; for instance, Alcaeus redirected such expressions to serve aggressive, ironic, or sarcastic roles (Lelli 2023: 10). This practice, which impacts a wide array of well-known short forms, also plays a significant role in Greek comedy. By exploiting different levels of reception through the *detorsio* of the proverb, Aristophanes provides hundreds of witty examples (Lelli 2023: 28–29). Furthermore, based on the extant evidence, in his work *On the Ridiculous*, Theophrastus focused on this phenomenon within literary genres, such as iamb, comedy, parody, or satirical drama, that are more inclined to incorporate proverbial expressions and alter them for satirical ends (Ath. 8.348a; Lelli 2023: 40).

There is a passage in Aristophanes' 411 BC comedy, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, where the poet takes up an ancient proverb and modifies it. The original proverb is attested by the Greek sophist Zenobius (*Vulg.* 6.20): 'Υπὸ παντὶ λίθῳ σκορπίος· παροιμία· 'Υπὸ παντὶ λίθῳ σκορπίος καθεύδει [Under every stone there is a scorpion: proverb: Under every stone a scorpion sleeps]. The meaning is clear: you must always be alert. As a way of astonishing the audience's expectations, Aristophanes (*Th.* 528–531) distorts the proverb by replacing σκορπίος 'scorpion' with the word ῥήτωρ, in the sense of 'politician':

τὴν παροιμίαν δ' ἐπαινῶ
τὴν παλαιάν· ὑπὸ λίθῳ γὰρ
παντί που χρὴ
μὴ δάκη ῥήτωρ ἀθρεῖν.

[And I praise the old proverb: under every rock there is to look at, lest you be bitten... by a politician!]

Additionally, there is a pun that is lost in the English translation. By λίθος Aristophanes alludes to the βῆμα τῆς πυκνός, the tribune from which orators delivered their speeches: see *Eq.* 956 (πέτρας); *Pax* 680 (τοῦ λίθου ἐν τῇ πυκνῇ); *Ec.* 87 (λίθω), etc. (Prato 2001: 253).⁸

The relationship between comedy and proverbial imagery was also a subject of study in Alexandrian philology: one thinks of *On the Ancient Comedy* by Eratosthenes (c. 276 B.C. – c. 194 B.C.). It is possible that such reflections appear in the works of Aristophanes of Byzantium, both in his commentaries on comic authors and in his paremiological studies (Tosi 1993). In addition to those erudite men, several ancient scholars must be mentioned about whom modern scholars unfortunately know little more than their names (Lelli 2006: 24–25). Having said that, the comic distortion of proverbs to elicit ἀστεῖον ‘hilarity’, as seen in Aristophanes, is not only the preserve of comedians; it is also documented in the lyric poet Archilochus of Paros (fr. 248 West²):

Καρπάθιος τὸν λαγών· ραποιμία Καρπάθιος τὸν λαγών. διὰ γὰρ τὸ μὴ εἶναι λαγών ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ, ἐπηγάγοντο αὐτοί· καὶ τοσοῦτοι ἐγένοντο, ὥστε τὸν σῖτον καὶ τὰς ἀμπέλους αὐτῶν βλαβῆναι. τάττεται δὲ ἐπὶ τῶν ἑαυτοῖς ἐπισπωμένων κακά. ὁ γοῦν Ἀρχίλοχος ταύτην τὴν παροιμίαν ἔφη. Ἐπίχαμπος μέμνηται ταύτης ἐν Νήσοις (Zenobius *Athous* 1.80)

[The man of Karpathos and the hare. And the proverb ‘the man of Karpathos and the hare’. Since there were no hares in their land, those of Karpathos brought them from outside; and they became so numerous that their grain and their vineyards were damaged because of them. It applies to those who bring evils upon themselves. Archilochus, for example, said this proverb; Epicharmus quotes it in *The Islands* [fr. 93 Kassel-Austin].

In the corresponding gloss of Hesychius’ lexicon (κ 59) we read:

Καρπάθιος τὸν μάρτυρα· παροιμία δὲ ‘Καρπαῖθιος τὸν λαγών’ κατ’ ἔλλειπιν τοῦ ‘ἐπηγάγετο’. διὰ γὰρ τὸ μὴ εἶναι [...] ὑπ’ αὐτῶν

⁸ García Romero (2015b: 287 n. 8) is not entirely convinced by this interpretation, since the orators spoke not below [ὑπὸ] but above the tribune [λίθος].

βλάπτεσθαι. ὁ γοῦν Ἀρχίλοχος παρὰ ταύτην τὴν παροιμίαν ἔφη
 ‘Καρπαίθιος τὸν μάρτυρα’.

[The witness from Karpathos. And proverb “that man from Karpathos, the hare” by ellipsis of “brought”. For as there were no hares [...] they were damaged because of him. Archilochus, for example, next to this proverb said ‘that of Karpathos the witness’.]

Without context, we can only speculate on what the humor of the *detorsio* of the paremia consists of. Archilochus may have mockingly modified the proverb to refer to a witness who would have harmed himself or, with his testimony, the party he should theoretically have favored (García Romero 2015a: 153).

Furthermore, the comic distortion of a proverb is evidenced in Platonic dialogues (*Symp.* 174b3):

ἔπου τοίνυν, [...] ἵνα καὶ τὴν παροιμίαν διαφθείρωμεν
 μεταβάλόντες, ὥς ἄρα καὶ ἀγαθῶν [codices: Ἀγάθων’ Lachmann]
 ἐπὶ δαίτας ἴασιν αὐτόματοι ἀγαθοί.

[Well, follow me [...] so that, after changing it, we can destroy the proverb that says it is the good guys who come to the good guys’ parties of their own accord.]

There is a pun between the adjective ἀγαθός ‘good’ and the proper noun Agathon (Ἀγάθων), the organizer of the feast to whom Socrates addresses himself. Following Lachmann’s suggestion, we should correct the text transmitted by the manuscripts and read the proper noun in the dative Ἀγάθων(ι) instead of the plural genitive ἀγαθῶν: ‘to the feast with Agathon the good men flock on their own accord’. Moreover, this is not the only case in which this proverb is twisted for comic purposes: αὐτόματοι δ’ ἀγαθοὶ δειλῶν ἐπὶ δαίτας ἴασιν [to the feast of the coward the good men flock on their own accord] (see Eup. fr. 315 Kassel-Austin).

4. Mechanisms of proverb alteration

Until now, we have seen almost exclusively cases of single word replacement, but there are several other types of proverb alteration to be examined. These alterations vary according to the mechanisms employed to transform the original phraseological unit. Many techniques can be employed in the transformation of a proverb, and sometimes more than one technique is used

simultaneously. This section of the article will illustrate the most common mechanisms of proverb transformation found in both modern perverses and ancient cases of *detorsio*.

4.1 Addition in proverbs

Many proverb transformations preserve the actual text without change, simply adding one or more new words (Litovkina et al. 2021: 57–61), see (15):

(15) Italian (Marchesi 1965: 9)

Chi rompe paga. Chi corrompe paga di meno. < *Chi rompe paga.*

Whoever breaks something pays for it. Whoever bribes pays less. < *Whoever breaks something pays for it.*

The abovementioned modified proverb is characterized by a bitter taste and has a clear social message. It should be noted that corruption was a widespread phenomenon in Italy in the 1960s.

As known, metaphor is one of the most effective proverbial markers. In some perverses (16), the metaphorical meaning of a proverb is ironically twisted by putting it in a context where it is literally interpreted:

(16) English (Litovkina 2015: 335)

When one door shuts, another opens... which means that you live in a drafty house. < *When one door shuts, another opens.*

This type of proverb variation can even produce wellerisms (Litovkina et al. 2021: 61–64). This proverb form generally consists of three parts:

- 1) a statement (often consisting of a saying or proverbial phrase);
- 2) a speaker who makes this comment; and often
- 3) a phrase that places the statement in an unexpected and artificial situation.⁹

⁹ The triadic structure is undoubtedly the most prevalent, although wellerisms featuring a bipartite structure are also common. This structural diversity renders an incontrovertible definition of the linguistic entity under consideration elusive, cf. Mieder

Wellerisms are very common in modern languages; just think of meaningful introductory phrases such as the English *as the bishop said to the actress* (Smith 1975: 114). They are based either on a paradoxical opposition (e.g. *“I see,” said the blind man*), or on the summary of an amusing tale, real or fantastic, not always easy to trace. See the following example (17):

- (17) English (Litovkina 2015: 334; see also Mieder and Kingsbury 1994: 120 and Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 168)
“Out of sight, out of mind,” said the warden as the escaped lunatic disappeared over the hill. < Out of sight, out of mind.

Nevertheless, the wellerism is an ancient proverb form that can be traced back to ancient Sumer (18):

- (18) Sumerian (Unseth et al. 2017: 2)
The fox urinated into the Tigris: ‘I am causing the high tide to rise!’ [he said]

In this context (18), the fox symbolizes vain arrogance. We find examples of them even in ancient Greek (19–20):

- (19) Ancient Greek (Theocr. 15.77)
 ἔνδοι πάσαι, ὁ τὰν νυὸν εἴπ’ ἀποκλάξας
 “‘Inside all things”, as the one who locked the bride in the house said.’

- (20) Ancient Greek (Crat. fr. 251 K.)
 ταῦτ’ αὐτὰ πράττω, φάσκ’ ἀνὴρ οὐδὲν ποιῶν
 “‘That’s exactly what I’m doing,” said the man who was doing nothing.’

Similar cases are present in Latin (21–23):

- (21) Latin (Paul. Fest. p. 356 Lindsay)
Rideo, inquit Galba canterio.
 “‘I laugh,” said Galba to the nag’.

(22) Latin (Lucil. fr. 531 Marx)

Hoc aliud longe est, inquit qui cepe serebat

“‘This is something else entirely,” says the one who plant onions’.

(23) Latin (Laber. mim. 63–64 Ribbeck)

Duas uxores? Hercle hoc plus negoti est, inquit, cocio: / sex aediles uiderat.

“‘Two women? By Hercules, that’s more trouble!”, said the pedlar: he had seen six aediles’.

The popularity in the classic world of these formulas can probably be attributed to their reuse in genres such as mime and atellana.

In Petronius’ *Cena Trimalchionis*, there is another interesting example of wellerism. Ganymedes, a freedman at Trimalchio’s table, has created a mood of gloomy pessimism with his bitter outbursts. Thus, another freedman, Echion, replies to him that one must take things as they come (24):

(24) Latin (Petron. 45.1)

‘Modo sic modo sic’ inquit rusticus; uarium porcum perdid- erat.

‘A bit like this and a bit like that,” said the farmer, he had lost his spotted pork’.

The persuasiveness of the wellerism lies in inserting the described opposition into alienating contexts with often desecrating results: according to Vannini (2011: 72), Echion ridicules Ganymede by comparing his dissertation on the economic crisis to the vague way in which a farmer describes a lost pig.¹⁰

4.2 Omission in proverbs

As well as additions, there are the omissions. According to Litovkina et al. (2021: 77–80), the omittable part of the original proverb may vary from one or more phonemes (25) to one (26) or more words (27):

¹⁰ The image of the colourfulness, notes Marmorale (1948: 60–61), recurs in Plautus’ comedy: see Plaut. *Epid.* 17–18, *Mil.* 216, *Pseud.* 145–148, and *Poen.* 26.

(25) English (Oleneva 2023: 60; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 216)

Too many cooks oil the broth. < Too many cooks spoil the broth.

(26) English (Oleneva 2023: 60; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 83–84)

Familiarity breeds. < Familiarity breeds contempt.

(27) English (Oleneva 2023: 60; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 95–96)

He who fights and runs away, lives. < He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.

In ancient Greek, an example very similar to the proverb (25) would be the aforementioned substitution of σκυτίνη for σκυίνη in the text by Strattis (1). This type of proverb alteration can extend to a complete reordering of the original structure; for instance, in example (28), where only *an apple a day* is retained:

(28) English (Oleneva 2023: 60)

“I’m worried. My girl is running around with that new doctor in town.” “Feed her an apple a day.” < An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Litovkina et al. (2021: 82–83) refer to cases of mere allusion to the original proverb (or, in this instance, the original phraseologism).

Having said that, it is time to comment a proverb-based joke (29) pronounced by the rich freedman Trimalchio during his famous feast:

(29) Latin (Petron. 34.5)

Aequum Mars amat.

‘Mars does love equality’

The passage has generally been interpreted as a wordplay related to *aequo Marte* (Friedländer 1906: 232; Schmeling 2011: 121). The allusion to Mars’ equity does not sound misplaced, even if it seems to be a blunder, since in this context an invocation to Dionysus, god of wine, would have been more appropriate. How-

ever, on closer inspection, it is evident that Trimalchio has organized the dining room as a battlefield, where all the guests are metaphorically ‘well-armed’.¹¹ He is intent on astonishing his guests, not only offering excessively elaborate dishes, but also by showing off his bogus *philologia* [culture] (39.4). In a sense, he sets himself up as a champion of his social class – the rich but illiterate *liberti* [freedmen] – against the class of his guests – the freeloading but well-educated *scholastici*. Despite his efforts, Trimalchio constantly makes gaffes, demonstrating his illiteracy.¹² On one occasion, however, he mentions *Aeneid* (39.3): *sic notus Ulixes?* [Do you know so little about Ulysses?].¹³ It can be inferred that such quotes were widespread. Consequently, it should not be surprising that they are also present amongst the speeches of the illiterate.¹⁴ For these reasons, it cannot be excluded that Trimalchio echoes some Homeric passages. Cucchiarelli (1998: 586–591) connects the motto *aequum Mars amat* to νῦν δ’ ἔρχεσθ’ ἐπὶ δεῖπνον ἵνα ξυνάγωμεν Ἄρηα [now, therefore, get your noonday meal, in order that (ἵνα) we may join the battle] (Hom. *Il.* 2.381). Here, it may transpire a Petronius’ touch of

¹¹ As Marmorale (1948: 22) observes, all the guests have been equipped by the host, Trimalchio, with “armi proprie uguali a quelle degli altri. Per tale motivo ha assegnato a ciascun convitato una mensa personale oltre ad allestirne una comune” [their own weapons equal to those of the others. For this reason, he has assigned (to them) a personal table, in addition to having prepared a common one]. This interpretation can be integrated with Ciaffi’s explanation (1967: 116-17 n. 52): “Oltre alla solita tavola quadrata in mezzo ai tre letti [...], ciascuno dei convitati aveva a disposizione un tavolino a lato, per tenerci sopra le stoviglie”. [In addition to the usual square table in the middle of the three beds [...], each of the guests had a small table to the side to hold their dishes on].

¹² Talking of epic poetry, he is firmly convinced that Ulysses was hurt by the Cyclops Polyphemus (48.7); he confuses Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess, blessed with foresight but cursed never to be believed, with Medea, the sorceress and murderer of her own children (52.1).

¹³ Obviously, it is not enough to look well educated, because “l’emistichio virgiliano (Aen. II, 44), con cui Laocoonte mette in guardia i Troiani, doveva essere diventato proverbiale, come dire di qualcuno ‘non è un semplicione’” [the Virgil’s hemistich (Aeneid II, 44) with which Laocoön warns the Trojans must have become proverbial, as if to say ‘he/she is simpleton’] (Ciaffi 1967: 125 n. 70).

¹⁴ For instance, a servant of Abinnas – another freedman – quotes a Virgil’s verse (Petron. 68.4 = Verg. *Aen.* 5.1) (Friedländer 1906: 243; Marmorale, 1948: 39; Smith, 1975: 88). Schmeling (2011: 150) vaguely mentions an inscription from Pompeii showing various Vergil’s verses turned into paremias over time.

irony, given that during the feast, there will be no lack of fights. Furthermore, this is not an isolated example of συνουσία [being with] which falls apart in ancient literature.¹⁵ My belief is that ξυνὸς Ἐνυάλιος, and consequently *aequo Marte*, is more fitting in this scenario, because it sounds more sententious, and the adjective ξυνὸς better conveys the idea of equality.

4.3 Replacing of one word

One of the most common techniques to coin perverbs is replacing a word (Litovkina et al. 2021: 96–99); see (30):

(30) English (Mac Coinnigh 2015: 121; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 99)

Hair today, gone tomorrow. < *Here* today, gone tomorrow.

In the Greek sphere, the *Suda* reports a paremia (32), which, in classical literature, only appears in Herondas' *Mimes* (31) with a tasty comic *detorsio* (Tosi 2017: 32):

(31) Ancient Greek (Herod. 7.49–50)

ἀλλ' οὐ λόγων γάρ, φασίν, ἡ ἀγορὴ δεῖται
χαλκῶν δέ.

'However, they say, the assembly actually needs **money**, not words.'

(32) Ancient Greek (*Suda* o 906)

ὐδὲ λόγων ἀγορὰ δεῖται Ἑλλάδος, ἀλλ' ἔργων

'The assembly of Greece needs **deeds**, not words.'

According to an old proverbial motif, a woman's oath is not to be trusted and, therefore, her words should be written on water.¹⁶

¹⁵ The most paradigmatic episode is the fight at the wedding feast of King Pirithous between the Centaurs and the Lapiths, a legendary people of Greek mythology. The *casus belli* would have been Ares' revenge for being the only uninvited god. Servius, the well-known commentator of Virgil, describing this episode in a gloss about *Aen.* 7.304. See Putnam, 1990.

¹⁶ See Catull. 70.3–4: *sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti, | in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua* [But what a woman says to her eager lover should be written in the wind and running water].

This concept is attested to in a fragment by Sophocles (34) and is parodied by several comedy writers, including Xenarchos (33):

- (33) Ancient Greek (Xenarch. fr. 6 K.–A.)
 ὄρκους δ' ἐγὼ γυναικὸς εἰς οἶνον γράφω.
 'Woman's oath, I write it on the **wine**.'
 (34) Ancient Greek (S. fr. 811 Radt)
 ὄρκους ἐγὼ γυναικὸς εἰς ὕδωρ γράφω.
 'Woman's oaths, I write them on the **water**.'

In Xenarchos' fragment (33), we can even track an allusion to the proverbial motif about women's passion for wine (García Romero 2015^a: 149–150, Tosi 2024: 31).

In Petronius' *Satyricon*, there might be almost two cases of replacement of a single word, both uttered by Trimalchio. The former is collocated in the section, where he describes each sign of the zodiac.¹⁷ Trimalchio was born under the sign of Cancer (*in*

¹⁷ The passage does not lack assonances with what has been handed down to us by the ancient astrological tradition: e.g. the reference to the strains of slaves when discussing Virgo, since as Manilius writes (4.190) this sign is tightened by a knot (the autumnal equinox); or, finally, the reference to the squints when discussing those born under the sign of Sagittarius (Firm. Mat. *math.* 8.27.11). Despite such premises, the astrological digression presents inconsistencies with the ancient astrology: the landlord begins by illustrating how, under the sign of Aries, *plurimi [...] scholastici nascuntur et arietilli* [many scholars and little rams are born] (39.5); this statement is not found in any other text, "ma qui l'interesse di Trimalchione è aprire il suo discorso con un accenno agli ospiti di riguardo, che in quanto uomini di cultura non avrebbero certo schifato un segno di testa (cfr. Man., II, 456 seg.; IV, 704), come dimostrano poi subito i loro applausi" [But here Trimalchio's interest is to open his speech with a mention of the distinguished guests, who as men of culture would certainly not have scorned a headed zodiac sign (cf. Man., II, 456 f.; IV, 704), as their applause then immediately shows] (Ciaffi 1967: 126 n. 72). In addition, at other times his dissertation is prompted by easy puns: speaking of Capricorn (39.12), he does not hesitate to say that under that sign the poor (*aerumnosi*) are born with horns (*cornua*). The pun is transparent for Italian speakers: indeed, the Italian phraseologism *avere le corna* means 'to be to be cheated on'. Unfortunately, as there are no other parallel places of our saying in the ancient world, it is unclear whether the horns are those of betrayed husbands (Firm. Mat. 8.28.5) or the fleshy excrescences of the so-called Campanian disease (Hor. *sat.* 1.5.58–63), see Ciaffi 1967: 127 n. 76. The discourse, which began with the masters of rhetoric, ends with the *rhetores* (39.12): in this it agrees with Firm. Mat. *math.* 8.30.7, which places lawyers under the nineteenth degree of Pisces; however, the juxtaposition of the latter with cooks (*obsonatores*) is bizarre.

cancro ego natus sum). In antiquity, those born under this constellation were attributed with a propensity for lucrative activity, specifically mercantile professions of all sorts:

*Cancer ad ardentem fulgens in cardine metam, [...]
attribuit uarios quaestus artemque lucrorum:
merce peregrina fortunam ferre per urbes
et gravia annonae speculantem incendia uentis
credere opes orbisque orbi bona uendere posse
totque per ignotas commercia iungere terras.*
Manil. *Astr.* 4.162 sgg.

[The sign of Cancer, shining on the axis near the fiery median point, [...] attributes the different trades and the art of earning money: to bear the lot from city to city with foreign trade and, taking into consideration the grave burdens of rising prices, to risk capital in storms and to be able to sell goods to the whole world and establish trade relations for many unknown lands.]

In the light of what he states, Trimalchio seems to adapt the proverbial locution *omni pede stare* [to stand alert] to the zodiac sign of Cancer, replacing *omni* [each] with *multis* [many/much]:

(35) Latin (Petron. 39.8)

ideo multis pedibus sto.

‘Therefore, I stand upright on many feet.’

The original locution is proverbial and comes from the peasant world (Otto 1890: 275 s.v. *pes* 3), as Quintilian (12.9.18) testifies: *itaque in his actionibus omni, ut agricolae dicunt, pede standum est* [Therefore, in these actions, it is necessary to remain, as the farmers say, always alert]. In our case, the freedman modifies the proverb by indulging the suggestion given to him by the image of the crab and its many legs (Friedländer 1906: 244; Marmorale 1948: 41; Schmeling 2011: 153–54).

Additionally, after talking about the Corinthian bronze, he tells of a blacksmith who is said to have invented unbreakable glass in Caesar’s time.¹⁸ After a silly play on words (50.4), namely

¹⁸ The tale, famous in the imperial period and the Middle Ages, is also reported by Plin. *HN* 36.195 and Cass. Dio 57.21.6–7, who make Tiberius the protagonist. Isidore

that his Corinthian bronze is authentic (*Corinthea uera*) because the bronzer he uses is called Corinth (*Corinthus*), Trimalchio sets out to tell the true story of the said material. When the inventor of infrangible glass shows his product to the emperor, he is so enthusiastic that he thinks to have everything under control:

(36) Latin (Petron. 51.5)

Putabat se coleum Iouis tenere,

‘He thought to have Jupiter by the balls.’

This passage contains an extremely vulgar expression that scholars have long attempted to remedy. The primary concern is that while the *Satyricon* refers to gods frivolously (Petron. 44.17), it rarely does so blasphemously. Furthermore, the use of *coleus* in the singular is problematic (Smith 1975: 137–38), as the term typically appears in the plural (e.g., Petron. 39.7). To resolve these issues, several corrections have been proposed: John of Salisbury suggested correcting *coleum* [testicle] to *caelum* [sky]; similarly, Heinsius proposed *solium* [throne], a correction accepted by Smith (1975) and Müller (1995). This restores the frequently attested nexus *solium Iouis tenere* [to hold the throne of Jupiter], a widespread formula in Latin literature, see: Plaut. *Truc.* 940–941; Verg. *Aen.* 12.849; Hor. *Epist.* 1.17.34; Ov. *Fast.* 6.353; Stat. *Silv.* 3.1.25–26; and Suet. *Calig.* 57.3 (Vannini 2011:69).

Despite various emendations, many critics defend the manuscript reading (*coleum*). Marmorale (1948: 54) rejects these ‘trivializations,’ arguing that the coarse phrasing reflects a vital popular reworking of language. Aragosti (2011: 248) shares this view. From a textual perspective, the principle of *lectio difficilior* supports this defence: it is difficult to imagine that the common term *solium* could have been corrupted into the vulgar *coleum*. It is far more likely that the opposite occurred during attempts to normalise the text. To resolve the grammatical issue of the singular usage, Schmeling (2011: 213) interprets *coleus* as *scrotum*.

of Seville (*Etymologiae* 16.16.6) manipulates the Petronian text but also names Tiberius; finally, John of Salisbury (*Policraticus* 4.5, p. 232) paraphrases and expands the text of the *Satyricon*.

In my view, the expression is best understood as a twisted proverb or para-proverb. Rather than a scribal error, it is a deliberate, comical distortion of the phrase *solium louis attingere*, an idiom which, like the modern expression “being in seventh heaven,” originally denotes reaching a state of supreme bliss. Through this *detorsio*, the replacement of the majestic ‘throne’ (*solium*) with a vulgar anatomical reference achieves a maximum shock-humor effect. Furthermore, it subtly alters the meaning of the pemia: while the original refers to divine happiness, the new para-proverb takes on the sense of “having everything under control”, reflecting the materialist attitude of the speaker.

4.4 Substitution of two or more words

Another way to parody a proverb is by substituting two words. Indeed, proverbs with binary structures have become formulas upon which countless proverb variations are built (Litovkina et al. 2021: 100–103). For instance, plenty of anti-proverbs are modelled on *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*. We have already seen an example (6), to this we can add the following (37):

(37) English (Litovkina 2015: 333; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 37–41)

A joint a day keeps reality away. < *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.*

At present, I have encountered only one case of an ancient proverb with two words replaced. The aforementioned verse by Sophocles (31), according to which women’s oaths should be written on water, was in fact parodied by Philonides as follows:

(38) Ancient Greek (Philonid. fr. 7 Kassel-Austin)

ὄρκους δὲ μοιχῶν εἰς τέφραν ἐγὼ γράφω.

‘Oaths of adulterers, I write them in ashes.’

The reference to ash is not accidental, since burning ash was used to remove the pubic hair of adulterers caught in the act, as a form of mockery.

4.5 Changing the second part of the original proverb

Frequently, there are perverses where the second part of the original proverb is completely changed (Litovkina et al. 2021: 103–106). One for all (39):

(39) English (Litovkina 2015: 334; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 105–108)

*If at first you don't succeed, **blame it on your wife**.* < If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

It must be noted that 65 parodies of this Anglo-American proverb have been recorded. The complete changing of the second part of the original paremia does not seem to be attested in ancient literature.

4.6 Changing the first part of the original proverb

On the other hand, it is much rarer for the first part of the proverb to be completely changed (Litovkina et al. 2021: 106–107):

(40) English (Litovkina 2015: 337; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 37–41)

***A patient without health insurance** keeps the doctor away.*
< An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Not even the entire modification of the first part of the original paremia seems to be attested in ancient literature.

4.7 Blending (or contamination) of proverbs

It sometimes happens that two proverbial expressions are mixed up (Litovkina et al. 2021: 121–134); see (41):

(41) English (Litovkina 2015: 337)

A penny saved gathers no moss.

< A penny saved is a penny earned + A rolling stone gathers no moss.

In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, a 2nd century Latin novel, a brand-new proverb is created by the author (42):

- (42) Latin (Apul. met. 9.42)
De prospectus et umbra asini.
 ‘About a donkey’s peek and shadow.’

In this case, we are faced with the fusion of two Greek paremias (43–44), both indicating events of little importance:

- (43) Ancient Greek (Luc. On. 45, see also Menandr. fr. 189 Kassel-Austin)
 ἐξ ὄνου παρακύψεως
 ‘About a donkey’s peek.’
 (44) Ancient Greek (Ar. V. 191 and Plat. Phdr. 260c)
 περὶ ὄνου σκιᾶς
 ‘About the donkey’s shadow.’

The origin of the two proverbs seems to be different: the former (43) would refer to a donkey who, after sticking his snout in a potter’s window and destroying many vases, is sued by the craftsman for stretching his neck to peek (Cf. Zenob. *Vulg.* 5.39); the latter (44), which was also the title of an Archippus’ play (frr. 35–36 Kassel-Austin),¹⁹ would refer to the anecdote about a man who, after renting a donkey, took to sleeping under its shadow to avoid the heat and was therefore brought to court by the owner of the animal who insisted that he had rented the donkey and not its shadow (Cf. Zenob. *Vulg.* 6.28; *Paroemiogr.* 2.566, 566 Leutsch-Schneidewin; Otto 1890: 41 s.v. *asinus*, *asellus* 8). This last anecdote is related by Demosthenes during a capital trial before judges who were bored with the case, but who were so interested in this futile anecdote that they earned the speaker’s reproach (Mattiacci 1996: 178). The episode seems to be inspired by a passage from Lucian of Samosata’s *Lucius or the Ass* (chap. 45). As usual, Apuleius renews the starting model, turning the saying into a para-proverb.

4.8 Repetition of identical words

Word repetition is a common device both in proverbs and perverbs (45):

¹⁹ For commentaries about these fragments, see Miccolis 2016: 204–213.

(45) English (Litovkina 2015: 336; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 134–137)

The man who lives by bread alone, lives alone. < Man doesn't live by bread alone.

Less frequently, we encounter case of triplication or downright quadruplication (46):

(46) English (Litovkina 2015: 336; see also Mieder and Kingsbury 1994: 76 and Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 80–81)

"Every little helps", said Mr. Little and took the six little Littles out to help him saw a pile of wood. < Every little helps.

This technique does not appear in ancient literature either.

4.9 Word-order reversal

Sometimes, the word-order of the standard phraseological unit is inverted, see (47):

(47) English (Litovkina 2015: 337; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 52–53)

Better never than late. < Better late than never.

This is also the title of a Chika Unigwe's collection of short stories about exile and the meaning of being migrants in search of a better future, with a focus on the role of women in a patriarchal culture. I have not found this stylistic device in the ancient sources I have consulted.

4.10 Playing with ambiguity of word

Some perverbs play with the ambiguity of a single polysemous word or two homonymous words (48):

(48) English (Litovkina 2015: 336; see also Mieder and Litovkina 1999: 231–232)

Where there's a will, there's an inheritance tax. < Where there's a will, there's a way.

There is no shortage of instances where the ambiguity of words is played out in classical literature. Again, in the *Satyricon*, Phileros, another freedman, speaking of a fellow, exclaims (49):

(49) Latin (Petron. 43.6)

Numquam autem recte faciet, qui cito credit.

‘He will never get one right, he who immediately lends his trust.’

This proverbial expression (Otto 1890: 97 s.v. *credere* 2) is also found in Ov. *ars* 3.685–686: *nec cito credideris: quantum cito credere laedat / exemplum uobis non levis Procris erit* [Don’t be gullible: Procris’ example of how harmful it is to be gullible will be important to you] (Friedländer 1906²: 255, Marmorale 1948: 53; Pianezzola 1993: 413). According to Smith (1975: 105), through the addition of *utique homo negotians* [especially a businessman], the freedman makes a pun based on the two main meanings of *credere*, ‘to believe’ and ‘to lend’. As proof of this, the English scholar quotes two passages; see Cic. *Att.* 1.16.10: “*mihi uerum*”, *inquam*, “*XXV iudices crediderunt, XXXI quoniam nummos ante acceperunt, tibi nihil crediderunt*” [“To me seriously”, I say, “twenty-five judges gave credit, to you, on the other hand, thirty-one did not, so much so that they wanted to pocket the money first”]; Sen. *Suas.* 7.5: *credamus Antonio, Cicero, si bene illi pecunias crediderunt faenatores* [Let us believe in Antony, or in Cicero, if the money lenders lent him money willingly].

There is no shortage of anti-proverbs which tend to combine a sexual meaning with a non-sexual one (50), constituting clear examples of double entendre:

(50) English (Litovkina 2015: 336)

Buggers can’t be choosers. < Beggars can’t be choosers.

Let us return once again to the *Satyricon*.

(51) Latin (Petron. 24.7)

Post asellum diaria non sumo.

‘After a delicacy, I do not eat common food.’

The term *asellus* can refer to both a delicious fish and a small donkey. Given that this proverbial expression is uttered by Quartailla, the nymphomaniac priestess of Priapus, many commentators have thought that these words allude to the sexual vigour or penis size of the *asinus* [donkey] (Schmeling 2011: 73–74).²⁰

5. Conclusion

I would like to raise the following three considerations regarding the specific terminology to be used, the universality of proverb alteration mechanisms, and the coexistence of alterations. In this paper, I have demonstrated how many cases of proverb manipulation are present in both modern proverbs as well as in ancient paremias and phraseologisms that have undergone comic *detorsio*. Starting from a standard proverbial expression, it is possible to create a plethora of variants of proverbs: concerning modern languages, see the examples based on *An apple a day keeps the doctor away* (4 and 35) or the ones based on *To err is human to forgive is divine* (9, 10, 11 and 12); on the other hand, for ancient Greek and Latin, see the examples based on ὄρκους ἐγὼ γυναικὸς εἰς ὕδωρ γράφω (31 and 36).

Due to the complexity of the linguistic phenomenon described, more precise terminology and classification are required. In this regard, the concept of the “paraproverb” proposed by García Romero (2016) and the taxonomy developed by Mandziuk (2016) have proven to be consistent and useful. Regarding the universality of mechanisms, most of the stylistic devices for the formation of modified proverbs, identified by Litovkina (2015)

²⁰ According to Trimalchio, among those born under the sign of Gemini, there are those *qui utrosque parietes linunt* [who plaster two walls at the same time] (39.7). This is a proverbial image (Otto 1890: 265–266 s.v. *paries* 1) of Greek origin (δύο τείχους ἀλείφειν) that Cicero (*fam.* 7.29.2) renders as *duo parietes de eadem fidelia dealbare* [to whitewash two walls with the same bucket]; see Marmorale 1948: 41 as well as Garbarino and Tabacco 2008: 272 n. 5. It bears interesting similarities to the German saying *wer auf beiden Achseln trägt, schwarz und weiß aus Tiegel malt* [who carries on both shoulders, paints black and white from a pot]; see Friedländer 1906: 244. This expression is used in reference to those who are said to be opportunists and have a foot in both camps. Smith (1975: 90) suggests that the proverb is euphemistically addressed by Trimalchio to those who are equally prone to both homosexual and heterosexual relationships. To prove his assertion, he refers to 43.8: *omnis Mineruae homo* [a man skilled in every art of Minerva].

and Oleneva (2023), are also present in classical languages. The most commonly used stylistic devices in classics appear to be:

1. addition of words, especially in wellerism formation (17–22),
2. omission with a complete reordering of the original structure (27),
3. replacement of one word (29, 31, 33 and 34),
4. substitution of two or more words (36),
5. blending of two proverbs (39),
6. playing with word ambiguity (46), even with sexual allusion (48).

Unlike modern perversbs, ancient modified proverbs, based on our current knowledge, appear to lack explicit social commentary.

These devices are rather frequent in Greek comedies, but they are not exclusive to this literary genre, as the Latin novels shows: especially in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*, where the presence of paremias and phraseologisms is abundant, we have found some examples of modified proverbs. We have also found one, though significant, case of blending two Greek proverbs in Apuleius' novel *Golden Ass*. However, no cases were found involving substitution of the first and/or second part of the proverbs, word repetition, or reversal of word order. The analysis confirms that, both in modern and classical languages, these mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and can coexist, as in the passage from Aristophanes (*Th.* 528–531) cited at the very beginning of my article (where word substitution and semantic ambiguity are combined).

The comparison between modern perversbs and ancient *detorsio* has shown that comic proverb modification is governed by recurrent and remarkably stable mechanisms. Although the terminology and literary contexts differ, both traditions rely on the recognizability of the underlying proverb and on its deliberate semantic or structural distortion for humorous effect. The present study does not claim exhaustive coverage of the phenomenon but rather proposes a preliminary comparative framework that may help connect contemporary paremiological categories with ancient evidence. Further research on larger corpora will be

necessary to refine this model and to test its applicability to other genres and languages.

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