CHAPTER 10

Proverbs and Princes in Post-Reformation England

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Introduction

Proverbs could serve a serious function as mnemonic oral repositories for ideas, from weather and animal husbandry to the metaphysical, and might, thus, explain natural and unnatural worlds. They conveyed gnomic explanations for the joys, sorrows, frustrations, perplexities and functions of everyday life and in their oral and later written articulation they enabled dissent. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, proverbs were on the lips of those people whom the Tudor jurist and political theorist Sir Thomas Smith said ‘have no voice nor authoritie in our common wealth’. But proverbs provided a voice for this multitude, a voice heard at the highest levels of society as oral proverbs could be written down in works circulated by literate elites amongst each other. In Coriolanus, proverbs were ‘sigh’d forth’ by the multitude (1:1:205) during a period of social and political unrest which the play documents. This allusion suggests how proverbs could offer criticisms of established order and pinpoints their origin in the lower levels but their audibility at all levels of society.

This paper will follow a proverb which discussed the condition of church and state from catch phrases on the streets of London up to the conceptualization of princely authority at the most elite levels of English society. It questions how proverbs, seemingly humble and quotidian, could challenge institutions. Proverbs were not the language ‘of authority’ that inculcates obedience, but rather were the language ‘about authority’ that might undercut obedience and could offer an affront to early modern England’s controlling institutions. According to the historian of orality James Öbelkevich, proverbs are ‘strategies with authority’, meaning that they proposed ideas and courses

1 Wolfgang Mieder (pp. 2–3) argues that there ‘are over 700 “universal” proverb types’ across cultures and nations; see Mieder, Proverbs: A Handbook (Westport, CN, 2004), pp. 22–25.
3 Among the proverbs used in the play are ‘That hunger broke stone walls, that dogs must eat,/ That meat was made for mouths, that the gods sent not Corn for the rich men only’.
One particular proverb will be the focus of analysis. It was current on the streets of London by about 1605 and clergy were quoting it in their sermons. It reads:

Henry the 8. pulld down abbeys and cells,
But Henry the 9. shall pull down Bishops and bells.

Where many proverbs express immemorial insights, every point of this proverb is compellingly topical. Just one year earlier, with new Canons, the state had regulated the bells that hung in the towers of England’s parish churches, meaning that the idea of reforming this aspect of the auditory world of early modern England was of recent discussion and debate. In this proverb, bells (meaning those rung out from belfries, not liturgical sacral bells which had not been heard in England for nearly 60 years by the time of this proverb) are not our focus. Of greater moment is the allusion to the young man who had recently become the Prince of Wales: Henry Frederick (d.1612), eldest son of James VI and I. The bishops of the Church of England were also highly topical. In 1604 Henry’s father convened the Hampton Court Conference hoping to settle long-standing disputes within the Church of England about bishops and opposition to them resounded from newsheets, pamphlets, street cries, ballads, sermons and other sources.

This proverb leaves two traces on the historical record, in two separate periods and in two separate formats. In 1605, or perhaps already 1604, people attending church in London or simply walking the streets of the city heard this catchy rhyme and repeated it. Among them was Sir John Harington (d.1612), who avidly collected proverbs and who wrote this one down. In this instance however, he did not record the proverb as part of his antiquarian or literary interests. Instead he had a scribe write it down on the title page of the 1608

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6 BL Royal MS 17.B XXII, fol. 403. These words are cited in G.P.V. Akrigg, Jacobean Pageant, or the Court of James I (London, 1962), p. 135.
7 ‘By Canon 67 (1603), “when any is passing out of life, a bell shall be tolled, and the minister shall not then slack to do his duty. And after the party’s death (if it so fall out), there shall be rung no more than one short peal, and one other before the burial and one after the burial”’; R. Burns, Ecclesiastical Law (edn. of 1773), 1, 476–484, cited in F.G. Emmison, Elizabethan Life: Morals and the Church Courts (Chelmsford, 1973), p. 174. We are grateful to Dolly Mackinnon for this reference.