

**EARLY ENGLISH PROVERBS,  
CHIEFLY OF THE THIRTEENTH AND  
FOURTEENTH CENTURIES, WITH  
ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATIONS**

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Early English proverbs, chiefly of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with illustrative quotations by Walter W. Skeat

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**WALTER W. SKEAT**

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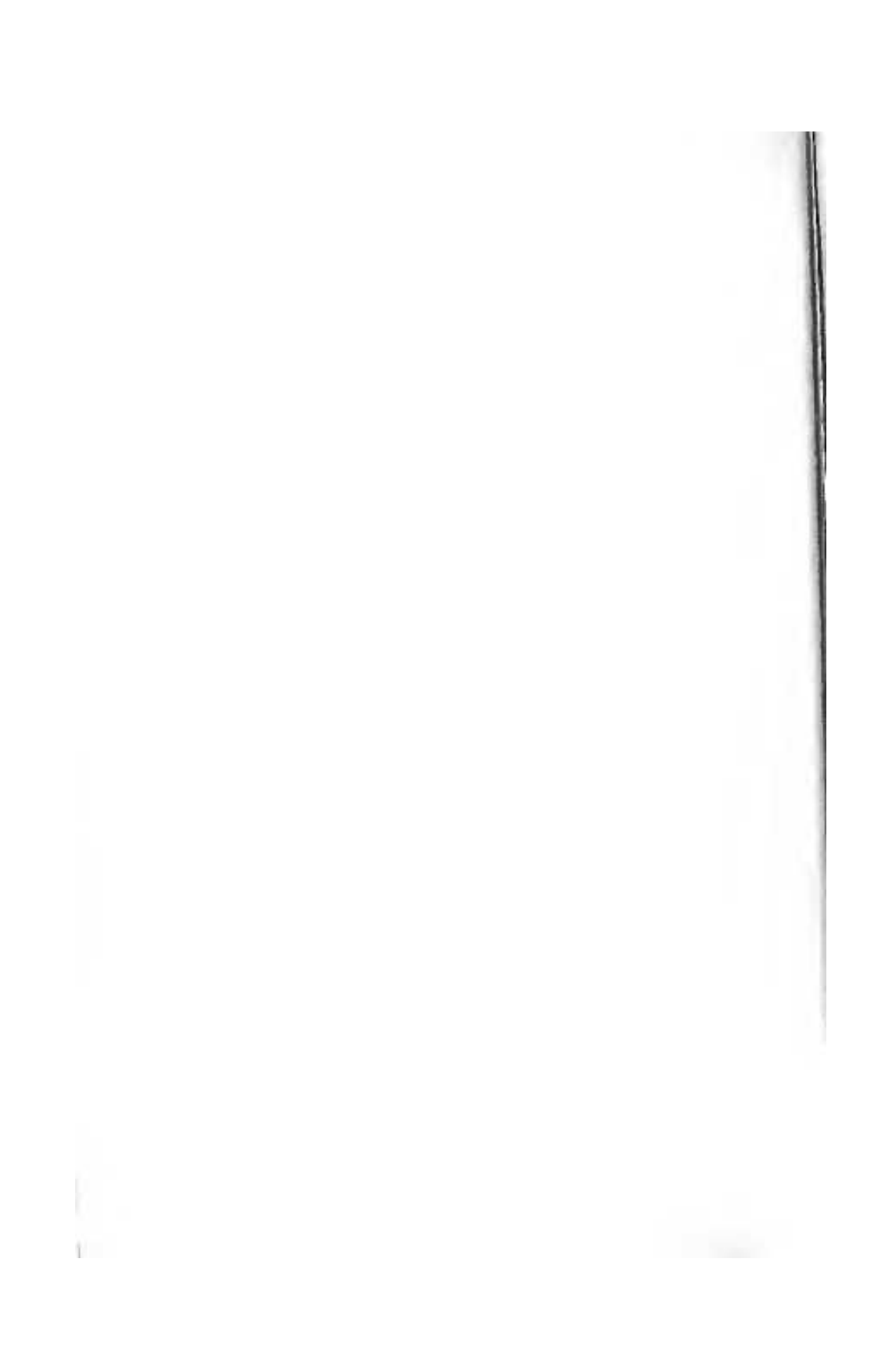


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## PREFACE

If it be true, according to the proverb, that 'good wine needs no bush,' there is not much necessity for a lengthy introduction to the present collection. I have simply endeavoured to gather together such Middle-English Proverbs as happen to have attracted my attention. I do not pretend that the collection is exhaustive, but it gives a fair idea of the use of proverbs in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, sufficient to show that many of those with which we are still familiar are met with at a rather early date. No example has been admitted that is later than the year 1400.

I can find no clear proof that the bulk of them, or even a large number of them, were already familiar to our ancestors in the days before the Norman Conquest. Indeed, most of our Old English writings contain nothing of the kind. On this point the reader may consult Kemble's work entitled 'Solomon and Saturn,' in which the subject is considered; at p. 257, we read that 'proverbs, strictly so called, are very rare in Saxon books, their authors being for the most part more occupied with reproducing in English the wisdom



of the Latins, than in recording the deep but humorous philosophy of our own people.' At pp. 258-269 of the same work, Kemble published a short collection of 'Anglo-Saxon Apothegms,' with a translation. They are eighty in number, but not one of them has a familiar ring.<sup>1</sup> Of those in the present collection, I know of only three that are as early as the tenth century, viz. nos. 3, 26, and 158. No. 3 occurs in Thorpe's edition of Ælfric's Homilies, ii. 106; but it is really of Biblical origin, being merely translated from Eccles. iii. 30. No. 26 occurs in an Anglo-Saxon homily entitled *Be Gecyrrednyse* (Concerning Conversion) in the form—'Nu-þa sceal ælc mon, þæt he to Gode ge-cyrre þa hwile þe he mæge, þe læs, gif he nu nelle þa hwile þe he mæge, eft þonne he late wille, þæt he ne mæge'; i. e. Now ought every man to turn to God while he may, lest, if he will not now (do so) while he may, afterwards, when he at last will, he may not (*Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen*, cxxii. 259). The explanation is easy; for, as Max Förster points out, the homily in question is little else than a translation from a sermon by

<sup>1</sup> Two proverbs occur in the A.S. Chronicles, under the dates 1003 and 1130; but neither is now in use. The first is—*Donne se heretoga wacað þonne bið eall se here swiðe gehindred*; i. e. when the leader is cowardly, then will all the army be greatly hindered. The second is—*Man seið to biworde, hæge sitteð þa acres dæleth*; i. e. they say by way of proverb, 'hedge abides that fields divides.' This seems to be the only passage in which the A.S. *biword*, 'a by-word,' 'a proverb,' occurs.

St. Augustine, and the above proverb runs, in the original Latin, as follows:—'Corrigant se, qui tales sunt, dum vivunt, ne postea velint et non possint'. (*Opera*, ed. Migne, xxxviii. 1095.)

The third example (158) is more satisfactory; for it refers to the same idea as that expressed in the Anglo-Saxon Gnostic Verses i. 17 (ed. Grein):—'efen-fela bega, þeoda and þeawa,' i. e. an equal number both of countries and customs. This is, in fact, one of the favourite proverbs that are well known in most of the European languages, as, for instance in German, Dutch, English, Danish, Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian, Latin, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, in more than sixty forms.

It will be seen that the first three Proverbs, as well as nos. 89, 247, and 284, are taken from very early twelfth-century Homilies; and this suggests that one of the ways in which proverbs were formerly popularized was by their use in sermons delivered in the vernacular. It is also fairly evident that others were at the same time in use by Norman writers, and were either of French origin, or furnished French parallels to native sayings. The number of proverbs in the present collection which have French originals or equivalents is at least forty-six<sup>1</sup>; and many of these must have been taken from Latin sources.

Many proverbs have equivalents in other languages,

<sup>1</sup> For the list see under 'Cotgrave' and 'French Proverbs' in the List of Books Quoted.

so that it is frequently difficult if not impossible to trace them. But it is clear that there were two principal sources whence they were either introduced or reinforced. One of these was the Latin or Vulgate version of the Bible (including the Apocrypha), whilst others were taken from well-known classical authors or from 'fathers' of the early church.

Of Biblical proverbs, there are fully fifty,<sup>1</sup> of which seventeen are from the Proverbs of Solomon (so called), and thirteen from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which in the Middle Ages was far better known than it is at present. It must certainly sometimes happen that similar expressions occur in different authors independently. Thus no. 24 may have been suggested by *Gutta cavat lapidem* in Ovid; but it may equally well be derived from *Lapides excavant aquae*, the Vulgate version of Job xiv. 19. The latter must be one of the earliest proverbs known.

Such as are possibly due to classical sources are mostly from the famous poets. Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Terence, Plautus, Claudian, Juvenal, Lucan, and Propertius may account for about thirty-seven; and others may be found in Cicero, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and Pope Innocent III. Three are from the *Disticha Moralia* of Dionysius Cato, an obscure writer of uncertain date, and two are from the *Sententiae* of Publilius (otherwise Publius) Syrus. At least

<sup>1</sup> See under 'Bible' in the List of Books Quoted.