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A Turkish Proverb Poem by Şerifi

INTRODUCTION

THROUGHOUT the Ottoman period, Ottoman poets assembled Turkish, Arabic, and Persian proverbs in proverb poems, designed as guides to conduct and compendiums of wisdom and experience. In the proverb poem by Şerifi translated below from a slightly shortened version of the seventeenth-century original, more than thirty proverbs are incorporated, including well-known proverbs like *As you sow, so shall you reap* and *One butcher does not fear many sheep*, and less-well-known ones like *Whosoever you see kindred, make much of a friend* and *It is not necessary to light a candle to the sun*. For the original text of the poem see Vasfi Mahir Kocatürk, *Saz şiiri antolojisi* [Anthology of lute poems] (Ankara, Matbaası, 1963, 132–33). Collections of Turkish proverbs can be consulted in Ömer Asım Aksoy, *Atasözleri sözlüğü* [A dictionary of proverbs] (Ankara, Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1971), and in Aydın Su, *Açıklamalı atasözleri* [Explanations of proverbs] (Istanbul, Hür Yayınevi, 1971). A list of some of the original Turkish proverbs used in the poem (with the appropriate English stanza number and an English translation) is given below.

Almost nothing is known about Şerifi, except that he lived in the second half of the seventeenth century. In the original of the poem here translated he frequently employs two or even three proverbs in a single stanza, as for example in the following:

Akil akillerden alır sayacağı,
Cahil söz anlamaz, delik kulağı.
Subhadek kimsenin yanmaz çırağı,
Çark-ı-felek durmaz döner demişler.

The wise man from the wise takes his esteem,
The stupid don't understand, keep your ears open.
Nobody's candle burns at sunrise,

The wheel of fortune turns without stopping, they say.

With the exception of the first stanza, which is rhymed ABAB, all of the remaining stanzas are rhymed CCCB, DDDb, etc. The last line of each stanza ends with *demişler* , "they say." As was the custom, in one of the concluding stanzas of the poem Şerifi refers to himself by name:

Şerifi! Uzatma sözü insana,
Darbimesel sığmaz nice divana.
Elin attığı taş gider yabana,
Akrabadan gelir zarar demişler.

Şerifi! Don't carry on so,
How many proverbs can you put in a divan?
The stone thrown by a stranger hits a stranger,
That which comes from a relative hurts, they say.

A PROVERB POEM BY ŞERIFI

- 1 Take note, friend, of the sayings
Assembled here today;
Let wisdom be your master,
Hear what the proverbs say.
- 2 Good counsel never comes amiss,
They say it has no price;
Good counsel never comes too late,
Take heed of this advice.
- 3 Be enemy to no man,
Let none be so to you;
One enemy, too many,
A hundred friends, too few.
- 4 Should you make an enemy,
Be he a tiny ant,
Treat him with the same respect
You'd show an elephant.
- 5 Learn only from the wise man.
When all is said and done,
Who except a fool would light
A candle in the sun?

- 6 Do not say your garner's full,
Such boasting never pays;
As you sow, so shall you reap,
That's what the proverb says.
- 7 A still tongue makes a wise head,
Empty boxes rattle:
That is what the proverbs say,
Foolish men will prattle.
- 8 Words cut more than swords, they say,
A good tongue speaks no ill;
Least said is soonest mended,
Say well and then be still.
- 9 If true love were a market
Who would not shop therein?
Faults are thick, so they do say,
Wherever love is thin.
- 10 Be noble but be humble,
Humility's a crown;
However high the mountain,
The other side runs down.
- 11 Do not be discontented,
Try not to play the fool;
As they say of many sheep,
One butcher slaughters all.
- 12 Consider these old sayings,
Their truth you can't deny;
Consider these old proverbs,
They very seldom lie.
- 13 Begin at the beginning,
Make sure you take a guide;
As they say, the strongest strap
May break on a hillside.
- 14 Not all advice is heeded,
Too oft men go astray;
The willow and the poplar
Will bear no fruit, they say.
- 15 The bad man seeks out evil,
As merchant muck and truck;

- There never was good apple,
Found on a sour stock.
- 16 Don't try to teach the stubborn,
It really doesn't pay;
Though mules be bred of horses,
Yet they will kick, they say.
- 17 Don't waste your time with liars,
They never will speak true;
If you do good to others,
Good will be done to you.
- 18 There is no use complaining,
You cannot change the world;
A fly is drawn to honey,
A sieve is never filled.
- 19 Fortune rules the lives of men,
You can't make your own hap;
For some will have good fortune,
And some stick in the gap.
- 20 They say that Fortune's fickle,
On that you may depend;
Whenever you see kindred,
Make much of a true friend.
- 21 Şerifi! Don't carry on,
You know what people say:
The stone thrown by a stranger
Falls always far away.
- 22 But the stone thrown by a friend
Comes always near the mark.
Such is my final proverb,
And such my last remark.

TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF THE PROVERBS

- Stanza 4: Hasmın karınca ise, kendini merdane tut.
Though your enemy be an ant, consider him valiant.
- Stanza 5: Subhadek kimsenin çırağı yanmaz.
Nobody lights a candle during daybreak.
- Stanza 6: a) Tarlada izin olmıyanın harmanda yüzü olmaz.

- He who does not appear in the field will not be seen at the harvest.
- b) Ne ekersen onu biçersen.
As you sow so shall you reap.
- Stanza 7: Sofrada elini mecliste dilini kısa.
At the table stay your hand, at the council hold your tongue.
- Stanza 8: Dilden gelir başa keder.
A loose tongue causes trouble.
- Stanza 9: Aşk olmayınca meşk olmaz.
Without love there is no mastery.
- Stanza 10: a) Su alçağa akar.
Water runs downhill.
b) Dağ nekadar yüce olsa yol üstünden aşar.
However high the mountain there is always a way down.
- Stanza 11: Nekadar çok olsa sürüde koyun cümlesin bir kasap kırar.
However many sheep there may be in a flock, one butcher slaughters them all.
- Stanza 13: a) Kılavuzsuz yola çıkan yolunu şaşırır.
He who sets out on a journey without a guide will quickly lose his way.
b) Emanet hayvamın kuskunu yokuşta kopar.
On a pack animal, the strongest strap may break on a hill.
- Stanza 14: Söğüt mayva vermez kavak nar.
Neither the willow nor the poplar bear fruit.
- Stanza 17: İyilik eden iyilik bulur.
He who does good will find good.
- Stanza 18: Pegmezin olsun sineği Bagdat'tan gelir.
Pegmez (grape juice boiled to a heavy syrup) attracts flies, even from as far away as Baghdad.
- Stanza 19: Felek kimine kavun yedirir kimine kelek.
Fate feeds sweet melons to some, and unripe melons to others.
- Stanza 20: Akrabanın akrobaya akrep etmez ettiğin.
A scorpion does not do the harm one relative does to another.
- Stanza 21: Elin attığı taş uzak düşer.
The stone thrown by a stranger falls far away.