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FOLK WIT IN PROVERBS AND RIDDLES

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The great part of proverbs and riddles among any folk is of international dissemination. One must, therefore, be very cautious when he speaks about wit and wisdom of a certain people, and makes conclusions based on its proverbs or riddles. We can, however, use another criterion and try to find out which proverbs are especially liked by a certain people and used as maxims of life. A few of typical and most current proverbs and popular sayings among the Lithuanians may be mentioned here.

The Lithuanians love their native country very much and often they say: "Everywhere is good [to live], however, best is at home" (*visur gerai, namie geriausia*). The farmer loves his soil and the necessity to sell his land means the un-happiest event to him. Therefore about one who is very much disturbed about something, the proverb says: "He is sad like one who sold his land" (*nuliūdo, kaip žemą pardavęs*). A good horse is the pride of every young man, and another proverb says: "He is happy like one who got a steed for present" (*apsidžiaugė, kaip žirgą dovanotas*). The caution preaches the following proverb: "You must first measure nine times, and then cut off" (*devynis kartus atmatuok, tada nukirpk*). Exaggerated caution leads to conservatism, typical to the peasant population.

Boasting is considered as a shameful thing, and a proverb says: "Boasting pot is not greasy" (*pagyrų puodas netaukuotas*). Another proverb strikes the bragging person with a biting sarcasm: "Who else will lift a dogs tail if not itself" (*kas pakels šuniui uodegą, jei ne jis pats*). The meaning of the proverb is this: if one wants to be praised and nobody does it, then he cannot do anything else, but praise himself. To a person who tries to achieve impossible things, the people say: "You cannot jump higher than your navel" (*aukščiau bambos neiššoksi*). Similar meaning have the proverbs "You cannot blow against the wind" (*prieš vėją nepapūsi*), and "With your head you cannot break a wall" (*galva sienos nepramuši*). The last two proverbs express the resignation when one meets the unjust action of powerful persons and cannot resist. "Be not too bold, you will burn your eyes; be not too slow, you will lose your share" (*nebūk per drąsus - akis išdegsi, nebūk per lėtas - dalies neteksi*). The proverb praises moderation. Good hope expresses the saying: "Whatever may happen the Lithuanian will not perish" (*kas bus, kas nebus, bet lietuvis nepražus*). Some proverbs are enigmatic, e.g.: "God, take it in shirt and give me one in fur" (*šė tau, Dieve, su marškiniais, duok man, Dieve, su kailiniais*). The explanation: the wife is dead and about to be buried in chemise only; the husband wants to get another rich wife. Or: "The bear is dead, throw away the trumpets" (*mirė meška, mesk šalin ir dūdas*). The meaning is: when the wife is dead, it is the end of relationship with her kinsfolk.

The well known proverbs sometimes get a very interesting form in Lithuanian. The Roman Cato was the first who used the phrase "The calm water is deep". The Lithuanians say: "A slow sow digs out a deeper root" (*lėtoji kiaulė gilesnę šaknį knisa*). The meaning is the same: you cannot trust a man who looks to be very quiet. The German proverb "Small children - little worries, big children - great worries" got a more picturesque form: "small children press your knees, big ones - your heart" (*maži vaikai spaudžia kelius, dideli - širdį*). Instead "It fits like the fifth wheel to a wagon", the Lithuanians say: "It fits like a fifth foot to a dog" (*tinka, kaip šuniui penkta koja*). Such working over of international proverbs happens quite often among the Lithuanians.

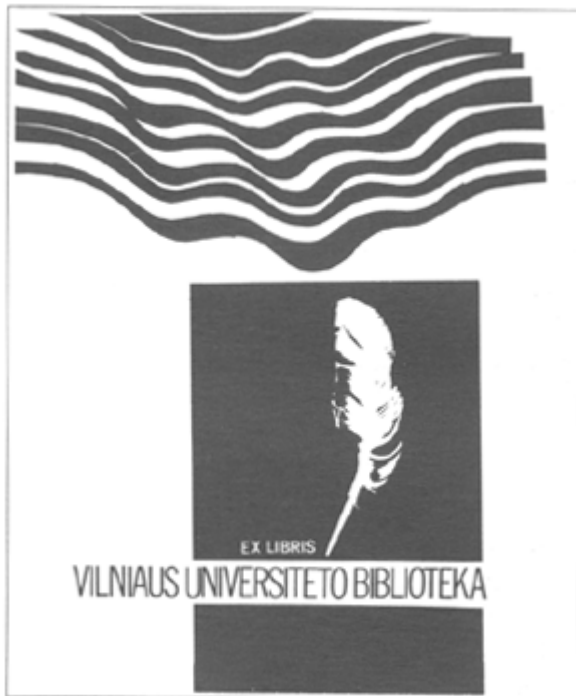
Similar practice is used for the riddles, too. Prof. Archer Taylor in his outstanding work *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (University of California Press, 1951) has often stressed the ingenious character and originality of some Lithuanian riddles. A few examples may be repeated here.

Our riddle for a bell is "An iron stallion with a flaxen tail neighs through the heavens"; it shows more of enigmatic conception than the French "The more one pulls it, the more it cries out." The riddle for "bed, door, window" has such an interesting variation: "One waits for day, one waits for night, and the third says: 'It is always the same for me' ". The

ingenious Lithuanian riddle for writing is "Level fields, gray sheep, the herdsman has the whip behind his ears". (Cf. shorter form of Modern Greek "White field and black goats"). There are several well built riddles for rowing and boat: "I ride, I ride, no tracks are left; I chop and chop, there are no chips left"; "A little rose with snubnose goes riding; neither tracks nor wheels, nor the tracks of the horse are left"; "When I was alive, I fattened live ones (the oak tree, its acorns were used -for fattening of sows); when I was dead, I carried living ones (men), and more living ones were walking beneath me (fish under the boat)". The last riddle was recorded by Praetorius about A.D. 1690.

Very interesting are the riddles about happenings in nature. Riddles for thunder are: "A steed neighs far, its bridle sounds near", and: "Above is the little God (dievaitis), below is a Samogitian; the little God will fell and kill the Samogitian." Riddles for dew: "I went at night and lost my buckle; the moon found it, but the sun caught it"; or: "I lost my ring under a copper bridge; the moon found it, and the sun destroyed it."

It is amazing to learn about folk with listening to their proverbs and riddles.



Vytautas O. Virkau, Ex libris Vilniaus Universiteto biblioteka, 1974