Name Clues in Proverbs

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THE SEARCH FOR THE ORIGIN AND MEANING of an obscure proverbial allusion to a personal name is generally a rather hopeless undertaking. The passage of time has usually obliterated all the clues and even a broad search through pertinent works on history and legend or through literary sources will yield hardly more than an occasional precarious conclusion. Yet in rare instances patience combined with a goodly portion of luck may lead to a definite identification and explanation of one of these long forgotten allusions. In other instances we may be able to illustrate the influence of popular etymology on the rise of curious new onomatic connotations, by tracing the course of semantic or phonetic changes of names in the contextual pattern of proverbial use.

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* lists the saying "I will make him fly up with Jackson's hens" from a late seventeenth-century source as having been used proverbially in the sense of 'I shall undo him' and adds that the variant "to fly up with Jackson's hens" is still current in Southern Cheshire County in the related sense of 'to be bankrupt.'[1] No explanation is offered for this curious allusion to the name of Jackson, and in view of the rustic setting of the metaphor one might easily assume that the original bearer of this name has been some typical English farmer.

The striking similarity between our English proverb and a much older Low German saying, "Upflagen mit Sankt Jacobs hönern"[2] (to fly up with St. Jacob's hens) provides the clue to the original meaning and reference of the English proverb. The first documentation of the German proverb dates from the end of the sixteenth

[1] W. G. Smith and J. E. Hesseltine, *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Oxford, 1935), p. 301.

[2] See K. Schiller and A. Lübben, *Mittelniederdeutsches Wörterbuch* (Münster, 1931), Vol. 2, p. 396; O. Schütze, *Holsteinisches Idiotikon* (Hamburg, 1801–1806), Vol. 2, p. 154; K. F. Wander, *Deutsches Sprichwörterlexikon* (Leipzig, 1867–1880), Vol. V, p. 835.

century when it was used in the sense of 'to depart in an unusual manner.' At present it is used when someone blushes, a drastic change of meaning which must be attributed to the obliteration of the original reference. In the original meaning of the Low German form of our proverb, we can identify, however, a meaningful allusion to one of the most popular legends of the cult of St. James.

St. James — in German St. Jakob — was one of the most highly venerated saints of the medieval Church. His shrine in Compostella ranked as a place of pilgrimage hardly second to Jerusalem or Rome. There are several legends that describe the miraculous resurrection of pilgrims who died during their pilgrimage to Compostella.[3] Our proverb alludes to a dramatic incident in one of the most popular of these legends. As told in the Dutch folksong "Een liedeken van sint Jacob" which dates from the year 1544, two pilgrims, father and son, stop on their arduous journey to Compostella at an inn. The innkeeper's daughter falls in love with the younger pilgrim and tries to dissuade him from continuing on his pilgrimage. The older pilgrim intervenes and says: "My son with me and I with him. We shall seek St. James as pilgrims good and true." In revenge the jilted girl hides a silver cup from the inn in the older pilgrim's knapsack. When the two pilgrims are apprehended and found guilty of stealing the cup, the son shoulders the guilt for his father and is hanged. The father completes his pilgrimage to Compostella and implores St. James for help. Returning by the same route, he finds his son miraculously still alive on the gallows. He rushes to the inn and tells the innkeeper about the miracle whereupon the latter exclaims in disbelief: "This is as true as that these roast chickens will fly out of the door." No sooner said than the chickens fly up and away. By this miracle the real culprits are exposed. The innkeeper is hanged and his perfidious daughter is buried alive.[4] The original meaning of the English proverb 'to undo one' as the innkeeper and his daughter were undone by the miracle clearly alludes to the main incident of the legend. The subsequent substitution of the similar sounding, typical English name Jackson for Jacob must have

[3] See K. Kistener, *Die Jakobsbrüder*, ed. by Karl Euling, (Breslau, 1899), *passim*.

[4] See L. Uhland, *Antwerpener Liederbuch* (Stuttgart, 1845), Vol. 12, pp. 803 to 807; L. Uhland, *Alte hoch- und niederdeutsche Volkslieder* (3rd ed., Stuttgart, 1893), no. 303.

occurred at a time when the original allusion to the legend of St. James was no longer understood.

Actually the chain of name substitutions in connection with the reanimated chickens can be extended still father back. Child's collection of *English and Scottish Ballads* lists our legend as a variant of the legend of St. Stephen and Herod which is still current in English and Scandinavian tradition.[5] According to this older version King Herod when he learned from St. Stephen, his steward, about the newborn king in Bethlehem exclaimed in disbelief: "This is as false as the claim that this rooster in the dish before me would ever rise and crow." And the rooster rose and crowed that Christ was born, and Herod despaired and ordered St. Stephen to be stoned.

According to Child, the ultimate source of the miracle of the reanimated rooster is to be found in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus which describes it as the decisive incident of the fateful events that culminated in the death of Judas Iscariot by his own hands. Judas, we are told, returned to his home after he had tried in vain to return the thirty pieces of silver, and found his wife roasting a cock on the spit. When he told her that he was going to hang himself because Jesus, his master, whom he had betrayed, was to be put to death but would rise again from the grave and then woe to them, his wife replied scornfully: "I do not believe you; for this rooster on the spit before me will as soon crow as Jesus rise again." And ere she had finished these words, the rooster flapped his wings and crowed twice. Then Judas was fully convinced, made a noose from a rope and hanged himself.

This odd chain of name substitutions in reference to a striking incident, starting with Judas and ending with the irrelevant allusion to an unknown Jackson, has its antithesis in some interesting examples of the evolution of meaningful proverbial allusions to names through phonetic and semantic changes that can be attributed to popular etymology.

The German saying "Einen krummen Lorenz machen" (to make a crooked Lawrence) is widely used as a contemptuous reference to boorish manners in the sense of 'to bow' or 'to dance awkwardly.' The saying is first documented in a novel by the North German

[5] See F. J. Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (London, 1882), Vol. 1, pp. 233–242.

author Johann G. Müller at the end of the eighteenth century.[6] Shortly afterwards it is found current in such widely separated regions as the Lower Palatinate, Swabia, Silesia and Holstein.[7] An expanded variant, "Giv din best Hand, kraz achterut un mak en krummen Reverenz" (Hold out your best hand, scrape and take a crooked bow) which is commonly used in Holstein, provides the clue to the origin of this proverbial reference to the name of *Lorenz.* The substitution of *Reverenz* (reverence) for Lorenz in this Low German variant suggests that the saying had its origin in a popular association of the name with the French word *révérence* which in Low German is often mispronounced as *Leverenz.*[8] Popular etymology then accounts in turn for the transition from *Leverenz* to *Lorenz.* Support for this hypothesis is found in a German farce of 1620, in which the verb *laurenzen* is used as a German corruption for French *faire la révérence.*[9] Changes in either the literal or the metaphoric meaning of our saying should be noted in Silesia and Swabia where the vernacular Low German link to French *révérence* is missing. In Silesia the phrase is now used both in the related sense of 'to make an obligatory social call' and in the new sense of 'to clean one's plate with the bent finger.'[10] Lack of familiarity with the French roots of the saying manifestly accounts for a completely new interpretation of the phrase in Swabia, a predominantly Catholic region, where it is linked to the story of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence.[11] According to legend, St. Lawrence is supposed to have been roasted on live coals, and our saying is regarded as an allusion to the picture of the saint in his last agonies and convulsions, just as the English expression "Lazy Laurence" is said to allude to the

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[6] J. and W. Grimm and others, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig 1854ff.) Vol. 6, p. 1151.

[7] See A. Edeln von Klein, *Deutsches Provinzialwörterbuch* (Frankfurt, 1792), Vol. 1, p. 261; K. Rother, *Die schlesischen Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (Breslau, 1928), p. 259; O. Schütze, *op.cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 50.

[8] G. K. Andresen, *Über deutsche Volksetymologie* (6th ed., Leipzig, 1899), p. 135.

[9] See *Die Schauspiele der Englischen Komödianten in Deutschland*, ed. by J. Tittmann (*Deutsche Dichter des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts* Vol. 13), p. 43 and footnote on the same page.

[10] K. Rother, *op.cit.* pp. 97ff.; H. Fischer, *Schwäbisches Wörterbuch* (Tübingen, 1904ff.), Vol. 4, p. 1286.

[11] See E. Nied, *Heiligenverehrung und Namengebung* (Freiburg i.B., 1924), p. 52; H. Fischer, *loc.cit.*

Saint's stubborn refusal to turn over while he was consumed by the searing flames.[12]

The most amusing of these semantic changes of names through proverbial use is found in the case of the widely current German saying, "Den heiligen Ulrich anrufen" (to invoke St. Ulric). It is used euphemistically in the sense of 'to vomit.' This irreverent sense was obviously derived from the use of the name Ulrich in imitation of the sound produced by regurgitation. The earliest documentation of this saying dates from the late sixteenth century.[13] There is evidence, however that it originated at least a century before this time. The name of the second fool in the woodcut of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff* (1494) is Uli (short for Ulrich) von Stouffen. The editors of the *Narrenschiff* consider Uli von Stouffen to personify a 'gay drinking companion.'[14] This indication of an early association of the saint's name with the connotation of insobriety is supported by an expanded version of our saying, "Sanct Ulrich und sein Compan ruffen die vollen bawren an" (the drunken peasants invoke St. Ulric and his mate) which is listed in several proverb collections from the seventeenth century.[15] Since there is no historical basis for the notion that St. Ulrich, the worthy bishop of Augsburg, ever did bless excessive drinking, we must attribute the saint's incongruous role as patron of the inebriates to the currency of our proverbial allusion to his name.

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[12] Smith and Hesseltine, *op. cit.*, pp. 355f.

[13] See K. Albrecht, *Die Leipziger Mundarten* (Leipzig, 1881), p. 266; G. K. Andresen, *op. cit.*, p. 118; W. Borchardt and G. Wustmann, *Die sprichwörtlichen Redensarten im deutschen Volksmunde* (6th ed., Leipzig, 1925), p. 482; H. Fischer, *op. cit.*, Vol. 6, p. 80; F. S. Hügel, *Der Wiener Dialekt* (Wien, 1873), p. 170; J. A. Schmeller, *Bayerisches Wörterbuch* (Stuttgart, 1823–1837), Vol. I, p. 63.

[14] See *Sebastian Brant's Narrenschiff*, ed. by F. Zarncke (Leipzig, 1854), p. 307.

[15] K. F. Wander, *op. cit.*, Vol. 4, p. 1407; Grimm, *op. cit.*, Vol. 11, 2, p. 759.