

***Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb.* Garland Folklore Casebooks 6. By Wolfgang Mieder (ed.).(New York: Garland, 1994. Pp. xxiii + 582, bibliography, \$75 US, ISBN 0-8153-0942-2.)**

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**Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb.** Garland Folklore Casebooks 6. By Wolfgang Mieder (ed.). (New York: Garland, 1994. Pp. xxiii + 582, bibliography, \$75 US, ISBN 0-8153-0942-2.)

This compilation of previously published articles is the second Garland casebook on proverb scholarship. Like the first casebook (Mieder and Dundes 1981), the present edition comprises twenty articles (written between 1973 and 1993), and a bibliography of suggestions for further reading (p. 563-80). Also like its predecessor, this edition presents articles which are good representatives of current paremiological research. Truly a "son of" book, *Wise Words* continues Mieder's greatest hits of proverb scholarship: "the most representative, accessible, informative, and readable articles" (p. xvi).

With the exceptions of Mieder and Dundes, none of the contributors from the 1981 casebook are found in this compilation — perhaps indicating the march of scholarly progress; several of the 1994 contributors, however, are important modern paremiologists: Arora, Grzybek, Yankah, Norrick, and, of course, Mieder. Others will be familiar to anyone steeped in folkloristics: Dundes, Briggs, Gossen, Abrahams and Babcock, Barnes, Carnes, and Friedman; and some of these contributions are well known recent classics of proverb scholarship. Names less familiar to folklorists make contributions from their own fields: Cram (linguistics), Lieber (anthropology), Rogers (psychology), Obelkevich (history), Sullivan (art history), Fontaine (theology), and Nierenberg (folklore).

Mieder groups the articles according to approach: definitional and theoretical questions, structural/linguistic approaches, psychological/ethnic aspects, historical/social questions, field research, literary treatments, case studies of specific proverbs, and a final essay on proverbs and graffiti. I will not describe these studies, except to note that they are all rigorous and thought-provoking. Mieder adds a short preface to each of the contributions, surveying cognate studies. We can be in no better hands than Wolfgang Mieder's — Dr. Proverb, if anyone ever deserved such an appellation.

The proverb represents, perhaps better than any other genre, the frustrations of conducting modern folkloristic studies. While easy enough to study as an isolated, decontextualized text, the proverb is extremely difficult to collect in the field. Requesting people to list proverbs they know, or asking people to explain the meaning and usage of proverbs, is a poor substitute for catching the use of these small poems in "natural" conversation. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the studies in *Wise Words* deal with proverbs removed from their conversational context: the definition of proverbiality (Arora), its

semiotics, syntax, semantics, and communicative frequency (Grzybek, Cram, Lieber, Mieder), its use in psychological testing (Rogers), its use in written and graphic forms (Obelkevich, Sullivan, Fontaine, Abrahams and Babcock, Barnes, Carnes, Friedman, Mieder again, and Nierenberg).

Dundes' 1975 articles on ethnic slurs is only marginally concerned with proverbs, concentrating rather on multi-national ethnic jokes — and again, steering clear of conversational contexts for these slurs. The articles by Yankah and Norrick explore the variability of proverb meaning within conversation, but are not contextual studies in themselves. Only anthropologists Gossen and Briggs directly confront the conversational use of proverbs. Gossen's study of Tzotzil *k'ehel k'op* examines the social functions and conversational contexts of this verbal form, partly in order to show how it is both like and unlike the scholarly category, "proverb." Briggs' 1985 study, reprinted from *American Anthropologist*, is a classic in paremiology, wherein he analyzes the use of two Mexicano proverbs in specific contexts. Yet Briggs' analysis concerns conversations which he had with a particular woman, and although they are truly spontaneous conversations, the lack of distance between the researcher and the proverb performer makes these conversational contexts somewhat different from usual conversations in this New Mexican village. Of course, the observer will always affect what is observed, but this kind of participant observation within a conversation does a particular kind of "damage" to the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, Briggs' article is the only one which approaches the kind of study regularly seen in folkloristic scholarship on song, music, narrative, ritual, or material culture — the observation of performance in its usual social context. I am not criticizing *Wise Words* in this respect, but simply pointing out the difficulties of conducting the kind of research on proverbs which we have come to expect from studies of other folklore genres.

My only criticism of this worthwhile compilation is a complaint which applies to all Garland casebooks. The introduction by the general editor of the series, Alan Dundes, is the same in all of the casebooks, with the addition — in the present volume — of three small paragraphs at the end, which add little to proverb scholarship. Mieder's introduction is largely a synopsis of the twenty studies, and again, adds little to paremiological knowledge. His bibliography is, of course, useful, representing the also-rans which were rejected from the final selection; but Mieder's annual bibliographies in *Proverbium* are a fuller survey of proverb scholarship, and should be the starting points for anyone conducting research in this area. My main complaint is the lack of an index. As useful as the individual articles are, an index would

connect them thematically and conceptually, and add that extra layer of association which any compilation of previously published articles needs.

Small quibbles perhaps. But no review should be too laudatory. *Wise Words* is an excellent survey of current proverb scholarship, and we all await the next compendium thirteen years hence.

### Reference Cited

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*Saving Graces: Images of Women in European Cemeteries*. By David Robinson. Introduction, Joyce Carol Oates. (New York: Norton, 1995. 128 p., bibliography, technical notes, \$19.99, ISBN 0-393-03794-0 cloth, 0-393-31333-6 pbk.)

The beauty of this volume is its simplicity. Neatly sandwiched between two short, concise pieces of text are fifty-two extraordinary images of women carved in stone. Despite the innate lack of embellishment, there is nothing halfway here. Even the use of glossy paper to present the text and photographs only serves to enhance the beauty and power of the pictures.

Robinson's photography is skillful and his presentation more so. As Oates said in the introduction, the images themselves function as a narrative (p. 1) and Robinson is wise enough to let them. Outside of a small notation as to each location, he does not interfere.

Nor does he attempt to equal or surpass the power of his photographs with elaborate, mind-numbing prose. Instead he gives a clear, concise rundown of how he came to the project, of erotica and death and what the images may mean — to others as well as himself. While I disagreed with certain of his conclusions — i.e., equating the overt sensuality of the Graces with being "sexy" (p. 119) — that is more on a subjective level than any reflection on his work.