

Melville's Iroquois proverb: Where did it come from?

Peter Unseth, Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics professor

Abstract: In his book of Civil War poems, *Battle-Pieces*, Melville quoted a proverb that he credited to the Iroquois. A number of scholars have taken its Iroquois label at face value. However, there is no record of this proverb outside of Melville's poem. Based on the fact that there is no record of other Iroquois proverbs and that Melville had created proverbs for foreign cultures in his other books, it is proposed that Melville created this proverb for his literary needs.

1. The unknown origin of Melville's Iroquois proverb

Melville's use of proverbs in his writing has been widely noted (e.g. Babcock 1952 on nautical proverbs and other sayings, Hayes 1999 on proverbs generally, Laufer 2004 on one specific proverb). However, previous proverb studies have not paid attention to a proverb that Melville credited to the Iroquois, and I have only recently found one author discussing the actual source of this proverb. This study examines two lines of evidence related to the source of this proverb and proposes a source for this ostensible Iroquois proverb.

In his book of poems about the Civil War, *Battle-Pieces*, Melville included his poem "Apathy and Enthusiasm" which spoke of different viewpoints toward fighting the war. In this poem, Melville quotes what he identifies as a "forest proverb, The Iroquois' old saw":

*But the elders with foreboding
Mourned the days forever o'er,
And recalled the forest proverb,
The Iroquois' old saw:
Grief to every graybeard
When young Indians lead the war.*

Most authors writing about this poem seem to have taken its Iroquois identity at face value, e.g. Day (2002), Dryden (2004), Huston (1981), Milder (2005), Montague (1956), Rollyson, Paddock, & Gentry (2007), Strauss (2008), Warren (1946). Frank Day concludes "Melville probably got the idea for this poem from a New York Times editorial of April 16, 1861, titled 'The Resurrection of Patriotism'... [However] The sentiments of the second stanza, with its conclusion, 'Grief to every graybeard /When young Indians lead the war,' owe nothing to the Times editorial" (2002:4). This emotional creativity in the second stanza of the poem is Melville's, but where did the proverb come from?

Two authors have not accepted the proverb's putative Iroquois origin. Cohen (1963:212) rejected its Iroquois origin but proposed no source, and Renker (2014) also believed it to be a fiction.

2. Lack of evidence

I have found no trace of this proverb outside of Melville's poem, neither in English tradition nor in Native American traditions. Its identification as being from the Iroquois is automatically highly suspect: we find very little evidence of proverbs from any Native American languages. They are so rare that Wolfgang Mieder (1989) once even offered a cash prize for a good manuscript documenting a body of proverbs from a Native American language – there was no winner. Mieder's two-volume bibliography of proverb studies lists nothing under "Iroquois" (2009), nor does his bibliography of proverb collections cite anything from "Iroquois" (2011). I failed to find anything like this saying in

Zona's collection of Native American "proverbs" (1994).¹

I have also searched in multiple collections of English proverbs and found no evidence of this proverb. I have not found this proverb cited anywhere except in relation to Melville's poem. If it were indeed a "forest proverb" or an "Iroquois' old saw", we would expect to find some record of it in outside of Melville's poem.

The use of the word "graybeard" in the saying also raises questions. The Iroquois were essentially beardless. Cohen observed, "Whatever the source of 'the forest proverb,' it does not derive from the beardless Iroquois" (1963:212). However, it is possible, if it were indeed a genuine Iroquois saying, that in Melville's quotation, the translator (likely not Melville himself) used the term "graybeard" simply to mean "old man". It is not irrelevant that the word "graybeard" has a strong stress on the first syllable, fitting the meter of the couplet; Melville was a poet, not only a novelist.

We see then that there is no corroborating evidence that the saying is actually from the Iroquois (nor any other Native American group), nor is the proverb cited by any source except Melville.

3. Melville's proverb creation elsewhere

We now turn to the significant evidence of Melville's practice of proverb creation in his fictional prose. In his books about Polynesia, Melville created two sayings he specifically labeled as "proverbs" and put them into the mouths of characters from the semi-fictional Pacific societies that he described. "He made some up. And why not? An imaginary voyage deserves imaginary proverbs" (Hayes 1999:30). In his novel *Mardi*, a character named Babbalanja quotes "the old proverb — 'Strike me in the face, but refuse not my yams'" (1970:573). Also from *Mardi*, "Throughout the Archipelago this saying was a proverb- 'You are lodged like the king in Willamilla'" (1970:231). This was not a trivial statement, "To be lodged like a king in Willamilla means to live in luxury, but at another level it means to be a prisoner for life" (Hayes 1990:30).

In addition to these two sayings labeled as proverbs, he also referred to a proverb being spoken without actually giving the exact form of it: "I clearly comprehended Kory-Kory. But there was a singular expression he made use of at the time, enforced by as singular a gesture, the meaning of which I would have given much to penetrate. I am inclined to believe it must have been a proverb he uttered" (1968:173).

Also, Melville put other sayings into the mouths of his Polynesian characters that were not specifically labeled as "proverbs" but sound very proverb-like. For example, the sagacious Babbalanja reassures an upset king, "Fierce flames are ever brief" (1970:499); note the repeated instances of <r> and <f>, consonant repetition being common in proverbs.

4. My proposal

We see then that Melville is known to have created proverbs and ascribed them to "exotic" cultures. And we have previously seen evidence that the putative Iroquois proverb cannot be traced to the Iroquois, nor indeed to any other attested source.

This leads to an answer to the question of the source of the proverb: the origin of this saying is not among the Iroquois but it is a creation of Melville himself. For literary reasons, he ascribed it to the Iroquois. As he had done earlier when describing cultures in the South Pacific, Melville here invented a

¹Zona's book contains a variety of sayings that he attributes to different Native American tribes. Whether they are all truly proverbs and whether they have all been in traditional use among North American (such as a Navaho proverb about a vineyard (1984:78), it is only important to note that the book did not include any saying even faintly resembling Melville's "forest proverb" of the Iroquois.

proverb and ascribed it to a culture that Americans were aware of, but not familiar with.

I assume that Melville wanted to give the sentiment in his poem more gravity by citing it as a proverb, rather than simply expressing the idea in his voice as a poet. For the purposes of this poem, he chose to attribute it to the Iroquois (in the public mind seen as warriors) from America's north. In this poem regarding Northerners' feelings about advancing the Civil War, Melville the poet chose to attribute this proverb to a trisyllabically-named *northern* tribe, not a trisyllabic *southern* tribe, such as the Cherokee. Also, it is likely that his readers would rhyme "Iroquois" with "saw".

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Melville acknowledged the Native Americans as being equal in human value to European-descended Americans: "We are all of us—Anglo-Saxons, Dyaks, and Indians—sprung from one head, and made in one image. And if we regret this brotherhood now, we shall be forced to join hands hereafter... Let us not disdain them... And wherever we recognize the image of God, let us reverence it" (Melville 1849:291).² Clearly he harbored some positive attitudes toward the Native Americans, Iroquois and other. "By populating his early fictional realms with other textual sources that he celebrated as ethnic, Melville cultivated such difference as a literary resource. Laying claim to the ethnic enabled Melville to assault the ethnocentrism of his readers" (Marr 2001:7). In ascribing his proverb to the Iroquois, Melville was crediting this ethnically distinct group with wisdom and restraint. And he also found an appropriate source with which to credit his created proverb.

5. Renker's proposal

Elizabeth Renker, an established scholar on Melville's poetry (1996, 2000, 2013, 2014), notes that "Hennig Cohen's indispensable 1963 edition of *Battle-Pieces* proposes as a 'major source for this poem' an editorial from the 16 April 1861 *New York Times* called 'The Resurrection of Patriotism,' reprinted in *The Rebellion Record*" (2014:138). Renker is not convinced (2014:139,140) and rather sees Melville's poem as a reaction to multiple writers of his time. She observed, "Once we see Melville in active conversation with poems like Cutler's [The Resurrection of Patriotism] — indeed, once we see that his poem is founded upon and *built out of* [emphasis in original] this conversation — it is easier to understand why Melville marked the opposition to soldierly zeal as 'Indian.' That is, the idea of an 'other' voice here, figured as the 'Indian' proverb, is a racial marker for the poem's idea of a counter-hegemonic discourse" (2014:141).

I do not claim Renker's depth in analyzing Melville's poetry. But we both agree that Melville created the proverb, not the Iroquois.

6. Conclusion

I discovered Renker's recent article and her conclusion about Melville's invention of the proverb after I had drafted this piece. We arrived at the same general conclusion, but by different paths of reasoning. I approached the question of this proverb's origin from the point of view of a proverb scholar. Renker approached this poem and the proverb from the point of view of literature studies. Using complementary methods, Renker and I have reached the same conclusion: Melville himself created this proverb, ascribing it to the Iroquois as part of his poetic technique in this poem.

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²Ramsey (1980) has argued that claims of Melville's "Indian-hating", drawing on passages from Melville's *The Confidence Man*, are based on incorrect interpretations of Melville's complex writing style.

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