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Fishing In Troubled Waters: A Cross-Cultural And Historical Study Of A Persistent Proverb

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Abstract: This study examines the historical development, cultural diffusion, and semantic evolution of the proverb "It is good fishing in troubled waters." Drawing on evidence from ancient Greek texts, medieval Latin collections, and numerous European vernacular traditions, the analysis demonstrates that the proverb consistently encodes themes of opportunism, social disorder, and political manipulation. Although some versions clearly result from literary borrowing, others suggest partial independent emergence shaped by local cultural contexts. The proverb's longevity reflects its grounding in practical fishing knowledge combined with highly adaptable metaphorical potential. Its recurrence in political commentary, moral discourse, and everyday communication highlights a dynamic interplay between literal experience and figurative interpretation. Overall, the proverb serves as a productive lens for understanding broader processes of paremiological transmission and cross-cultural meaning-making.

Keywords: Proverb, paremiology, metaphor, opportunism, cultural diffusion, proverbial expression, figurative language, political discourse, folklore, cross-cultural communication, semantic evolution.

Introduction: The study of a single proverb may appear deceptively simple, yet it often reveals an unexpectedly rich network of linguistic, cultural, and historical complexities. Proverbial expressions, even those seemingly transparent in meaning, tend to accumulate layers of interpretation as they travel across languages and centuries. The proverb "It is good fishing in troubled waters" offers a compelling example of such complexity, demonstrating how a brief formulaic text can serve as an analytical lens for political discourse, folkloric transmission, and cultural practices. Its earliest Western attestations in medieval Latin already show variation in form and interpretation, indicating an established familiarity with the imagery of muddy or disturbed water. As the proverb spread into English, Romance, Germanic, and Finno-Ugric traditions, it underwent semantic and functional shifts that reflect differing cultural attitudes toward profit, opportunism, and social disorder. The metaphor also intersects with the practical knowledge of fishing techniques, which in turn influenced the proverb's figurative usage in political, social, and moral contexts. Classical Greek sources, particularly Aristophanes and Aesopic fables, further demonstrate that the conceptual link between disturbed water and opportunistic gain is far older than its medieval textual record. These early antecedents suggest a long-standing cultural understanding of chaos as a condition that benefits certain actors. By tracing these trajectories, the present study aims to show how the proverb functions not merely as a linguistic artifact but as a dynamic cultural symbol continually reshaped by new contexts. Ultimately, the proverb's endurance and adaptability highlight the broader value of studying proverbs as repositories of collective experience and as vehicles of cultural memory.

The evaluative component, i.e., the approving or disapproving judgment inherent in the meaning of a phraseological unit, constitutes the main aspect of its connotative meaning due to its sociolinguistic nature (Balyasnikova, 2025, p.84).

Perhaps the first western record of the proverb "It is good fishing in troubled (muddy) waters" is found in

Walter Map, De nugis curialium, which was written not long before 1200 in England. Here it has the form "In aqua turbida piscatur uberius" (Smith & Heseltine,1948, pp.207-208). This is much the same as "Piscatur in aqua turbida" without an adverb which Burton E. Stevenson cites as a "proverbial Latin phrase" without giving a source (Stevenson,1948, p.334). The proverb is reported again about the same time as Map was writing as "Vulgo enim dicitur, aqua turbida piscisior" (Map, 1983, p. 191) in the writings Peter of Blois, who was archbishop of Bath by Henry II's appointment. The proverb did not win a place in contemporary school collections and other anthologies of moralizing proverbs. We find it only once in a late medieval collection and then in the very different form, "Flumen confusum reddit piscantibus usum" (Werner,1966, S.53). Jakob Werner and after him Hans Walther quote this from a continental European anthology that calls for special study. Its sources are obscure and its connections remain to be discovered. While it would be interesting to go farther and attempt some comparison of the number and nature of proverbs derived from fishing and those derived from hunting, the task would lead us some¬what afield. The first category rarely identifies the species of fish and the latter category almost always identifies the animal.

From the beginning the adjective "troubled" (turbida) or "muddy" is standard English usage. It implies a contrast with fishing in clear water or fishing in the sea. In 1509 John Fisher described this manner of fishing but did not actually cite the proverb: Lyke as fysshers do whan they be aboute to cause fysshe to come into theyr nettes or other engyns, they trouble the waters to make them avoyde and flee from theyr wonte places (Fisher,2002, p.124).

One could hardly wish for a better description of this manner of fishing. The oldest allusions to it are those made by Aristophanes, one in the Knights, which will be cited later, and this line in the Wasps, "You are muddying the water before you catch fish" (McMordie,1997, p. 50.). The first vernacular allusion that has been found dates from 1568 and emphasizes the advantages of such fishing: "Their persuasions, which always desyre your unquietnesse, whereby they may the better fishe in the water when it is troubled" (Stevenson,1948, p.334). We shall content ourselves with quoting only the more important or interesting later versions, especially "Jeroboam had secretly troubled these waters, that he might fish more gainfully" (Stevenson, 1948, p.335). A century later W. á Winschooten cited this explanation of intentionally disturbing the water in a Dutch collection (1681). Somewhat earlier Samuel Butler is more specific, when he says, "Trouts are tickled best in muddy waters" (Stevenson, 1948, p.335). "According to the advice that I get from anglers, this is not the best practice in fishing for trout, which prefer clear water. It may be successful in tickling them. Bass, I am told, can be caught in muddy water and also eels. The importance of this will appear later." A nineteenth-century American allusion very probably refers to fishing of some sort. Samuel Haliburton says, "That leaves politics to them as likes dabblin' in troubled waters" (Abrahams& Mieder, 2002, p.72). We may have here a new invention rather than a continuation of the tradition of the proverb. We can perhaps see references to this sort of fishing in "We angle in the reeds and catch a frog" (Stevenson, 1948, p.340) with other allusions to catching frogs. The Brown collection of North Carolina folklore includes the advice: "To catch catfish, go fishing when the water is muddy from a freshet" (McMordie,1997, p.51). It is stated that everybody in central Pennsylvania "knows" catfish and eels are best caught thus. This knowledge is general, for Professor Matti Kuusi cites a saying of the Ovambo, a Bantu tribe of southwestern Africa: "Fish is caught best in muddy waters (Many people stir it up). Comment: Being alone does not render sufficient help." This interpretation has no parallel in the European texts that will be cited. We can infer that the Ovambo proverb has arisen inde¬pendently.

Dryden does not show himself to be an experienced angler when he writes in Absalom and Achitophel (Stevenson,1948, p.341):

Who rich and great by past Rebellion grew

And long to fish the troubled Waves anew.

One can, to be sure, regard "Waves" as synonymous with "waters" but it is awkward to do so. In a later edition Dryden remedied the difficulty by writing

And long to fish the troubled streams anew (Tilley, 1950, p.87).

We can deal briefly with subsequent English examples. It was picked up twice by James Howell in 1659 (Tilley), once from William Camden, Remaines concerning Britaine (1614) and once from an unidentified col¬lection. In A Complete Collection of Scotish Proverbs James Kelly has Good to fish in muddy Waters (Kelly, 2009, p.117).

A cursed Saying, of them who expect to find their private Interests, in the public Disturbance.

It is uncertain where Kelly found this. He did not take it from earlier Scottish tradition, which for more than a century had known the pro¬verb in the form "to won vantages be fisching in dromly watters." B. J. Whiting cites this and eight more examples with "dromly" or a variation of this word from before 1600. Thomas Fuller, who printed "It is good fishing, in troubled Waters,"

soon after in his Gnomologia, no doubt found it in the collection of a predecessor. Such excerpting of earlier collections as we see in these instances is characteristic of encyclopedic collections and especially of those just mentioned. A modern allusion may conclude this account of English examples. It is worthy of notice for its unusual application and for its suggestion of a practice evidently familiar to the user. It is "Men fished for women and women for men, in muddy waters, and drink was the bait they used."

The large German collections contain far too many quotations of their predecessors. There is of course no ob¬jection to the practice when the source is given, but such a book as Simrock, Deutsche Sprichwörter, which lacks any indications of the time and place of use, tells us only that the proverb in question exists or has existed in German and no more. Much the same may be said about the Dutch collections from which the standard modern Dutch collection assembles a score of references to the proverb. We may conjecture that the old Swedish "God fiskja i up rört vatten" (Wolf, 1966, S.152) is also one more example of excerpting a predecessor. A modern parallel "I grumliga vatten är godt at fiske" (Ström,1939, p. 314) may, to be sure, be evidence of popular acceptance and use, but Ström cites no source and the fact that the largest collection of Swedish proverbs in oral tradition does not include it raises doubt. The agreement of the first Swedish version, which has just been quoted — it is found in C. L. Grubb, Penu proverbiale, an encyclopedia collection of 1665, which may have taken it from a foreign source — and the Danish "I oprort Vand er godt at fiske" found in Ped er Syv's collection of 1682 is sufficiently striking to suggest that Syv may have borrowed it. And again the lack of a parallel in either the largest collection of Danish proverbs from printed sources (E. Mau) and the largest collection from oral tradition (Ewald Tang Kristensen) raises doubt.

Wander cites the Hungarian "Jobb halászat esik a zavaros vizben (Better fishing falls in troubled waters)" with some errors in spelling and the curious use of "esik (falls)." There is the phrase "zavaros vizben halasik (he fishes in troubled waters)" in Hungarian.

The emphasis on profit or gain that has already been pointed out in Latin and English texts is characteristic of the Romance tradition from Portugal and France to Roumania. The standard French dictionary cites "Pescher en eau trouble Est gain triple ou double" without giving a parallel, but this did not enjoy any popularity — perhaps because the effort to obtain a rhyme is too conspicuous (Olivier &Militz, 1984, p.57). Walter Gottschalk has collected many examples of the phrase "pêcher en eau trouble" from 1656 on, but these are found in collections and therefore prove little regarding actual use. The Portuguese "Na água revolta, pesca o pescador" and many Spanish examples from the one in II Corbacho on: "Va el rio del todo buelto e ally es la ganancia de los pes¬cadores" are good evidence with their minor variations of a saying firmly established in traditional use. Judeo-Spanish parallels support this, especially an example collected in Salonica (Saporta y Beja, 1957, p. 271):

Rio (Entre) y rebuelta. En las situaciones alborotadas los malos encuentran siempre modo de aprovechar. Est alocución quiere también decir: es una situation desordenada, favorable a aprovecharse.

We may note also that this phrase is known in the southwestern United States. All of these texts from the Portuguese example with All of these texts from the Portuguese example with which we began to a somewhat divergent Rumanian version cited by Gott¬schalk are allied to "Flumen confusum reddit piscatoribus usum."

We come finally to the oldest texts that can be associated in one way

or another with the proverb. The first of these texts has the subject in common but a connection in traditional use is unlikely. The second involves a very old tradition that, perhaps by bookish tradition, can be connected with the Romance proverbs that have been already illustrated at length. The first of these is an allusion in Aristophanes, Knights, "If the lake is clear, one catches nothing, but, if one stirs the mire, one catches eels" that shows that the practice of fishing in muddy waters was familiar in ancient Greece (Aristophanes,1998, p.867). Aristophanes makes a political application of this scene, and this is its ordinary use. Erasmus picked it up in the last revision of the Adagia and commented on it in this spirit. Whether knowledge of the Aristophanic passage survived in oral tradition is hard to say. It seems unlikely that this was the case, for his plays were scarcely known in western Europe before the Renaissance. Nor can we say whether the vernacular Modern Greek "It is in troubled waters that one catches eels", to which Professor Demetrios Loucatos draws attention, continues an ancient classical tradition or whether it is the proverb coined anew. He tells furthermore that "I fish in troubled waters," that is to say, "I seek to draw an advantage from a muddled or unclear situation," is in current use. More than a century ago P. M. Quitard noted the passage in Aristophanes and T. Vogel-Jorgensen found in it a source of modern idioms.

A second very old Greek reference that must be discussed here is the Aesopic fable,

The Fisherman Who Beat the Water

A fisherman was fishing in a river. When he had laid his nets and cut off the stream from bank to bank, he tied a stone to a piece of cord and began to beat the water so that the fish would make a reckless attempt to get away and become entangled in the mesh. One of the men who lived thereabouts saw him doing this and complained of his roiling the river and preventing them from drinking clear water. The fisherman said, “Well, if the river isn’t troubled like this, I’ll die of starvation.”

Moral: So it is with demagogues in politics. They accomplish the most when they lead their states into strife (Aesop,2002, p.59).

Although this was included in the oldest collection of Aesopic fables, it does not often appear in the Renaissance and modern excerptings. This fact has no doubt contributed to a general unfamiliarity with it. Yet it has obviously had a large share in the origin and dissemination of the proverb. It is found, for example, in the proverbs collected and published by Petrus Godofredus in 1555. These were extracted and published in some subsequent editions of Erasmus, Adagia. Thus, it is found in the edition published in Paris in 1579, col. 1320:

Piscatur in aqua turbida

De eo, qui, dum alij inter se rixãtur, ipse sibi & suis commodis consulit: quern nihil morantur, sed iuuant potius aliorum incommoda. Piscatores turbidam aquam obseruare solent. vt ex ea decipuli magis nesciam facilius captent praedam. Hue spectat Erasmi pro. Anguillas captare, & apologus AEsopi de eo qui aquam turbabat vt plures caperet pisces.

Here Gothofredus is citing “Piscatur in aqua turbida” as a proverb and mentions that Erasmus had already commented on it and that it is an Aesopic fable. Here is the source of Stevenson’s description of “Piscatur in aqua turbida” as “The proverbial Latin phrase,” a description which is not quite correct and is easily misunderstood (Lloyd, 1961, p.104).

The examination of the proverb “It is good fishing in troubled waters” confirms that even the shortest traditional texts demand nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches. Across its many historical and cultural manifestations, the proverb consistently encodes ideas of opportunism, manipulation, and social tension. At the same time, its figurative uses remain closely tethered to literal knowledge of fishing practices, demonstrating a unique interplay of practical experience and symbolic meaning. The proverb’s persistence from ancient Greece through medieval Latin and into modern European and global traditions shows how deeply its core conceptual metaphor resonates across societies. Its reappearance in political commentary, moral discourse, satirical writing, and everyday speech illustrates a remarkably flexible semantic range. Moreover, the variations identified in Romance, Germanic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and African contexts suggest at least partial independent emergence rather than simple diffusion. This diversity reinforces the notion that proverbs often articulate universally recognizable social patterns while simultaneously acquiring culturally specific nuances. The ancient Greek evidence, especially Aristophanes and Aesopic traditions, provides a strong foundation for understanding the proverb’s long-standing association with political critique. Contemporary linguistic and paremiological scholarship likewise affirms the proverb’s relevance for the study of metaphor, social cognition, and cross-cultural communication. In conclusion, the proverb’s intricate history exemplifies how a single traditional saying can illuminate broader issues in folklore transmission, cultural contact, and the dynamics of meaning-making across time.

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