

Omens, Proverbs and Tales: Genre Fluidity in Folklore

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The starting point for this study is the omen. Omens are a specific genre of folklore. They preserve knowledge by codifying it in concrete and objective form. Omens are found in every known folklore tradition. In contemporary Ukrainian folklore scholarship, omens are considered a minor genre, often relegated to the field of paremiology, and studied in isolation.(1) Following Pavlov, we can define the omen as a paremiological unit whose primary function is prediction.(2) Further, we can apply the formula proposed by Elie Koingas-Maranda and Pierre Maranda:(3)

“If A, then B, if not C” where $C=0$

We can then define the omen by the formula: “If A, then B”, where one half of the equation is the phenomenon that does the forecasting and the other half of the equation is the thing forecast. For example:

<i>Bahato komariv - bahato iahid.</i>	Lots of mosquitoes - lots of berries.
<i>Bahato moshky - bahato hrybiv.</i>	Lots of gnats - lots of mushrooms.
<i>Iakyi rik na bdzholy - takyi i na vivtsi.</i> (4)	If it's a good year for bees, it will be a good one for sheep.

But the purpose of this study is to show that omens do not exist in isolation. Indeed, they can be transformed into other units: they can be interpreted as another paremiological type, namely the proverb, and they can even be expanded into short narratives, prose of the non-magic tale variety.

Permiakov, one of the founders of cliché theory in contemporary folklore scholarship, believes that omens are monosemantic; that they are an analytic form of the cliché and possess properties that characterize them alone. These properties include:

- 1) a single and unambiguous meaning which arises from the meanings of the constituent parts.
- 2) an absence of the use of imagery, metaphor, and other devices; all words are used in their primary meaning.
- 3) a requirement that all constituent parts of the omen be equally unambiguous.(5)

If any of these traits is absent, then we no longer have an omen, but an homonymous proverb; that is, a proverb which has the same form as the omen, but has a broader, metaphorical meaning. Some examples are:

<i>Sylnyi doshch dovho ne ide.</i> (6)	A heavy rain does not last long.
<i>Soloveiko spivae poky v iachmeni kolosu ne mae.</i>	A nightingale sings as long as there is no barley.

*Iak pokazavsia kolos, todi propav ioho
holos.(7)*

As soon as the ears of barley
appear, his voice disappears.

If the above texts are given a straight-forward and monosemantic interpretation, then they are omens. That is, in a certain context, these texts could be interpreted as presenting information about the duration of heavy rain and the duration of a nightingale's song and, because omens have a single and unambiguous meaning, that information alone. By the same token, these two texts can be understood as proverbs. Here, concrete images (rain in one case and the nightingale and barley in the other) are used to make statements about abstract ideas: the relationship between duration and force in general, or the relationship between inspiration and how long it lasts. These abstract concepts are applicable to any situation. If applied to a human being, these texts could be commenting on a person who begins something with great enthusiasm, but does not exhibit great tenacity, or someone whose inspiration lasts only as long as there are not distractions (the ear of barley). If read this way, the texts can only be categorized as proverbs. Proverbs demand realization as metaphors; they cannot have a straight, monosemantic meaning. Thus, a reading that relies on literary device assumes that the texts are proverbs. It should be noted that, if read as proverbs, the two texts are essentially synonymous.

Another important trait of omens is that they are fixed and exhibit virtually no variation from one telling to the next. To facilitate their memorization and hence their fossilization, omens have been endowed with a wealth of formal features: unusual and striking word order, rhythm, rhyme, assonance. Some examples are:

<i>Chaika sila na vodu-chekai dobroj pohody</i>	If a seagull has landed on water, good weather is on the way.
<i>Doshch z ranku-nadivai dranku ta pohaniai u pole,</i>	If it rains in the morning, put on old clothes, and drive (your horses) out to the field,
<i>Doshch v obid-zapriahai ta i dodomu iid'.(8)</i>	If it rains at noon, hitch up (your horses) and go on home.

Omens of this type are strikingly similar to proverbs in appearance and form. But if we keep in mind that the function of omens is to predict the future and that omens have only a single meaning, then the above texts are clearly omens. It should be noted again that prediction and monosemantic function are the features that distinguish omens from all other paremiological units. Commenting on the highly structured and polished nature of the omen, Greenblatt hypothesized that the information contained in omens was at one point conveyed by much more loosely structured utterances. He further hypothesized two lines of development: a metaphorical and proverbial one which capitalized on the greater freedom of expression which had once characterized the transmission of forecasting clues and a fossilization of the information that still had a direct, non-metaphorical meaning into the ornate,

polished omens we see today.(9)

If we now look at the phenomenon of “free” expression, we see that this, too, is still connected to omens. Our initial definition of an omen is that it is a paremiological unit with the structure “If A, then B” which serves to predict the future. Certain omens, in the course of their existence, lose their characteristics as paremiological units and come to approximate non-magic tale prose. Thus the transformation of the traditional omen/paremiological unit can go in a number of directions. Very often, an omen is expanded, while still conveying the same information. When this happens, an important role is played by elements which serve to delineate a phenomenon more narrowly, or provide motivation, or further interpret the original paremiological unit. Let us examine variants of an omen about Candlemas (February 2/ February 15, old style):

<i>Koly na Stritennia moroz buvae,</i>	When it is below freezing on Candlemas,
<i>to medvid' svoiu budu rozbyvae.</i>	then the bear destroys his lair.
<i>Koly na Stritennia moroz, medvid'</i>	When it is below freezing on
<i>rozbyvae</i>	Candlemas, the bear destroys his burrow,
<i>svoiu havru, a koly vidlyha, to napravliaie.</i> (10)	but if there is a thaw, he repairs it.

These two variants of a single omen demonstrate expansion of the underlying paremiological unit. The pivotal element in first omen is a temperature that is below freezing. Logically, this can be contrasted with its opposite (thaw) and then the results of the opposite, namely the thaw, can be conjectured.

The example above contains only minimal expansion. Furthermore, the second text, though more lengthy, is still the same type of paremiological unit as the first; it is still an omen. Next, let us examine the incomplete omen:

Na Stritennia zyma z litom zustrichaiut'sia.(11) At Candlemas, winter and summer meet.

We also find instances where this text has been expanded into its complete form:

<i>Na Stritennia zyma z litom sia strityla.</i>	At Candlemas winter and summer meet.
<i>Koly na Stritennia moroz peremozhe teplo,</i>	If cold conquers warmth on Candlemas,
<i>to borshche bude lito.</i>	then the summer will be all the more vigorous
<i>Koly teplo peremozhe moroz,</i>	If warmth conquers the cold,
<i>dovshe poderzhyt zyma.</i> (12)	then it will be winter a while longer.

Theoretically, a text of this type could continue to be expanded, producing an infinite number of variants.

The above examples show that, no matter how a calendary omen (as in the above case) is expanded, it still remains a paremiological unit. But if a “complementary and explanatory plot” develops on the basis of an omen, in which the omen appears in a narrative about a single event, then the text breaks out of the paremiological category. An example is the following:

Strichalisia zyma z litom, v p'iatnytsiu vony pobylysia i lito prozhene zymu, lito kazalo do zymy: tikai, uzhe hodi tobi pakuvaty, vzhe zzila vse, shcho ia prystaralas', zyma stala plakaty i tikaty. (13)

Winter and summer met. They quarreled on Friday and wagered whether summer could defeat winter. Summer said to winter: flee quickly. You have hung on long enough. You have already eaten everything which I stored away. And winter started to cry and flee.

The transformation that we see in the above text cannot be explained by a simple, unilateral accumulation of changes. In fact, we have tried to show that an omen can undergo a complete category shift. Here, the material is no longer a paremiological unit, but the nucleus for the plot of a prose text.

The goal of this study was to demonstrate how an omen can be transformed and reinterpreted to become another paremiological unit, namely a proverb. In this case, the transformation can hinge on something as minimal as context. It is possible that if the basic traits of an omen, namely that it foretells the future and has a monosemantic meaning, are ignored then the same words can be taken metaphorically to have a more general and abstract proverbial meaning. The other aspect of this study has been an attempt to show that a so-called minor genre, the omen, can be transformed into one of the major genres: narrative prose. Here we see that an omen is perhaps more open-ended than previously supposed. Explanatory, motivating, and other materials can be added to an omen even as it retains its status as a paremiological unit. At the same time, if an omen becomes the subject matter of a narrative built upon it, then it transcends the narrow confines of the paremiological unit and becomes an element of narrative prose.

Notes

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3. E. K. Koingas-Maranda, P. Maranda, "Structural Models in Folklore," Midwest Folklore, Vol. 12, 1962, pp. 133-192; reprinted in Zarubezhnye issledovaniia po semiotike fol'klora, Moscow, 1985, pp. 241-243.
4. Prysliv'ia ta prykazky: pryroda, hospodars'ka diial'nist', liudyna. Kyiv, 1989, p. 384.
5. Permiakov, G. L. Ot pogovorki do skazki. Zametki po obshchei teorii kilshe. Moscow, 1970, pp. 85-86.
6. Permiakov, G.L. Osnovy strukturnoi paremiologii, p. 47.
7. Hrinchenko, B.D. Etnograficheskie materialy sobr. v Chernigovskoi i sosednei s nei guberniakh, vyp. 2, Chernigov, 1896, p. 6.
8. Prysliv'ia ta prykazky, p. 35.
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10. Prysliv'ia ta prykazky, Kyiv, 1989, p. 387.
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12. Agapkina, p. 157.
13. Agapkina, p. 158.