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“A NIGHTINGALE CANNOT SING IN A CAGE” – OR CAN IT? A PROVERB AND ITS RELATED BELIEFS

Abstract: The international proverb “A nightingale (or other bird) cannot (does not, will not) sing in a cage” is several centuries old—prevalent in English since the eighteenth century—though rebuttals or exceptions to the proverb, both popular and “scientific,” have also been common. In modern times a special application of the proverb occurs in the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and in the prose and verse of Maya Angelou.

Keywords: international proverbs, proverbs in English, popular beliefs, songbirds, Aesop, William Caxton, African American literature, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Maya Angelou.

In my five decades of teaching Shakespeare to English majors, I have almost always included the tragedy *King Lear* on the syllabus. Near the end of that play, the insane (but finally serene) king welcomes his beloved daughter Cordelia to accompany him as his traitorous enemies lead him into captivity: “Come, let’s away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage” (Shakespeare 1974, 1291). In class, typically, I would ask the question, “Where else might we encounter an expression about captive birds and singing?” No student has ever proffered a proverb in response, but in recent years, many of them have mentioned the title of Maya Angelou’s 1969 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which is commonly assigned or recommended in the public schools of Georgia, where I live and work.

From late classical times to the present, little consensus appears as to whether various kinds of birds *do*, in fact, sing in captivity—or, if they do, what their warblings might import. A Greco-Roman zoologist in the second century of the Common Era wrote, “It seems that the Nightingale passionately loves its freedom, and for that reason when a mature bird is caught and confined in a

cage, it refrains from song and takes vengeance on the birdcatcher ...by silence” (Aelian 1959, 3: 200-201). That motif or concept would survive the Middle Ages in an Aesopic connection, traceable to the early-twelfth-century Latin fables of Petrus Alfonsus. In 1484 William Caxton’s *Historyes and Fables of Esope*, one of the first books printed in England, gave an English translation of a French translation of a German translation of the Latin narrative, “The Labourer and the Nyghtyngale.” A rustic has captured a nightingale in order to enjoy hearing its song. But the bird tells the rustic, “Certaynly in vayne thou has payned and labored / For / for no good I wylle syng whyle that I am in pryson” (Caxton 1967, 202). That is the earliest expression of the motif in English.

In proverbial form, the idea may have appeared as early as the third century, when the Greek historian Philostratus told of a certain sophist who declined an invitation to reside and lecture in a particular city that he regarded as oppressive. The sophist quipped, “The nightingale does not sing in a cage” (Philostratus 1952, 74-75). That terse and metaphoric expression has all the marks of a proverb.

The proverb has survived—or been reinvented—in English and other languages. In the form “The nightingale cannot sing in a cage” it entered English proverb dictionaries in 1732 with Thomas Fuller’s *Gnomologia* (13), and collections from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries sometimes give the variant “A nightingale won’t sing in a cage.” The *won’t* versions possibly suggest the bird’s willful refusal rather than its inability to sing, as the *cannot* versions would imply

Prior to its first being recorded as such in English proverb dictionaries—and frequently since then—the concept has been applied or explained or elaborated or simply alluded to—sometimes with *nightingales* replaced by other species of birds, sometimes by *birds* generically. From 1995: a character in a novel bluntly advises, “A nightingale cannot sing in a cage, or tethered by a foot to a perch. You would do well to remember that” (Lackey 1995, 27). From 1935, in an anonymous column in the magazine of the Massachusetts SPCA: “It is authentically reported that a nightingale will not sing in a cage” (“Apples of Gold” 1938, 135). From 1908, in a speech by a Christian divine: “It is said that the nightingale will not sing in a cage—she must have her God-given liberty ere her sweetest and highest note can be sounded” (Barrett

1908, 164). From 1820, the poet John Keats writing to his beloved Fanny Brawne: “I will be as obstinate as a Robin, I will not sing in a cage” (Keats 1958, 2:270)

The caged bird’s inability or unwillingness to sing often becomes a metaphor for the suppression of poetic or other creative talents. In 1991 an essay on modernism and poetry mused, “Poetry itself should be free enterprise, unpaid, circulated by hand, never official. The nightingale will not sing in a cage” (Ipsissimus 1991, 2:187). From 1986, in a country-and-western song by Michael Johnson: “Give me wings / Don’t be afraid to fly / A bird in a cage will forget how to sing” (Folsom 1993, 78). From 1952, quoting Ezra Pound “when he was confined to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, and he refused to record his poetry for Caedmon,.... He always said, ‘Caged birds won’t sing’” (Parry 2002, 5). From 1913: a character in a novel says, “Larks can’t sing in a cage:...why should an artist be able to work under all conditions?” (Benson 1913, 1:307). From 1906, in reference to Oscar Wilde’s emergence from jail: “He suffered from a complete mental atrophy. A nightingale cannot sing in a cage. A genius cannot flourish in prison” (Grolleau 1906, 109). From a novel of about 1867: “A nightingale cannot sing in a cage—Judith Mazingfor cannot write in prison” (Riddell c1867, 265). From a 1686 poem by Edmund Waller: “Though slaves, like birds that sing not in a cage / They lost their genius and poetic rage” (Waller 1686, 265)

A particularly brutal variant has occurred, although rarely. From 1886, in notes for use in a sermon: “Even the nightingale will not sing in its cage unless you first *put out its eyes*. And man’s eyes must be put out before he can sing in a cage” (Pierson 1886, 12:217; italics as shown). The same author elaborated six years later: “Human slavery has been the fatal foe of the best good of the race; equally bad for master and slave. The nightingale will not sing in a cage until its eyes are put out. The light of man’s intelligence must be quenched, the eyes of his intellect be blinded, before he will submissively wear his bonds” (Pierson 1894, 164)

Occasionally an anti-proverb will comically respond to the proverb, playing on the slang term *jailbird* for “prisoner.” In 1883 a Texas newspaper quipped, “Our jail birds still sing in their cage” (*Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, 15 Dec 1883). In such jesting conceits, the verb *sing* often plays on the sense, in criminal argot, of “confess” or “reveal to the authorities incriminating information about

the jailbird's collaborators"—that is, *rat on* them. A Florida newspaper in 1993 lengthily titled an article, "The Caged Bird Doesn't Sing for 20 Years: Sheldon Yavitz Was Lawyer to South Florida's Drug Smugglers, Thieves, and Murderers. And Now That He's behind Bars, He Still Won't Rat on His Former Clients" (*Sun Sentinel* [Ft. Lauderdale], 24 Jan.). Later that same year, reporting that the felonious financier Charles Keating had cancelled his scheduled testimony regarding the savings-and-loan scandal, an article was titled "The Caged Bird Doesn't Sing" ("Washington Watch" 1993, 11). In 1999 a Scottish newspaper titled its review of the television series *Jailbirds*, "Why the Caged Birds Don't Sing" (*Herald* [Glasgow], 22 Mar). In 2010 a published collection of unattributed witticisms included this: "You've heard the old saying, 'A caged bird never sings?' If you believe that, you've never spent time with a police interrogation team" (Lisby 2010, 306)

Sometimes, perhaps in a rebuttal (implicit or explicit) of the proverb or of the popular belief that the proverb expresses, it is noted that caged nightingales *will* sing. In Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, one of the Lords exclaims, "Hark. Apollo plays, / And twenty caged nightingales do sing" (Shakespeare 1974, 112). An anonymous essayist in 1854 remarked, "There is an idea generally entertained in England and partly here [in Italy] that nightingales will not sing in cages. Never, while memory lasts, shall I forget the first proof I received of the erroneousness of this idea" ("My Aviary" 1854, 35: 638). By that date, ornithologists had prominently recorded the fact that nightingales and many other kinds of birds can and will sing in cages. For instance, in 1839 a three-volume *History of British Birds* mentioned an occasion on which a caged nightingale had sung "upon one hundred and fourteen successive days" (Yarrell 1842, 1:276). As far back as 1787 it had been noted, specifically of Virginia nightingales, "They will sing in a cage, and are frequently brought to England in a state of confinement..." (*Natural History of Birds* 1787, 3:75)

Even if caged birds do in fact sing, the singing may be less satisfactory than that of their free-ranging counterparts. From 1658, in a scriptural commentary by Thomas Hall: "A wicked man at best is but sad, or if he sing, 'tis like a bird in a cage." From a Scottish children's poem of the early nineteenth century: "For birdies are like bairnies, / That dance upon the lea, / And they

winna sing in cages / So sweet's in bush or tree" (Smart 1844, 22). In a novel of 1896, the issue is likewise the *quality* of the singing: "The nightingale will not sing its best in a cage, and without its song the nightingale is a poor thing" (Moore 1896, 333). The diminution of the song's quality—rather than its absence—seems to have been the emphasis in a German version of the proverb from as far back as the sixteenth century: "Die Nachtigall singt im Käfig nie so schön als im Freien" (Wander 1873, 3:851)

Somewhat rarely, the singing of a caged bird is actually deemed superior to that of a bird at large. A three-volume zoology compendium of 1803 reports, "... [A] caged nightingale sings infinitely more sweetly than those we hear abroad in the spring" (Bingley 1803, 2:268). An anonymous naturalist in 1844 noted, "Nightingales may either be allowed to fly about the room, or confined to cages; the latter plan most promotes their singing" (*Natural History of Cage Birds* 1844, 150). It is unclear whether the verb *promotes* refers to the quality or to the abundance of the singing

Most often, though, the issue is not the mere occurrence of the bird's singing or the degree of skill in its performance but rather the *tone* of the song—the singer's intent (so to speak). As the poet William Blake wondered in the 1790s, "How can a bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing [?]" (Blake 2008, 31)

Sometimes the bird cage represents submission, as in the case of a person bound (for better or for worse) in matrimony. In a tragedy by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, William Alexander, a disconsolate queen uses the image to compare even a royal marriage with slavery: "As birds, whose cage of golde the sight deceives, / Do seeme to sing whilst they but waile their state: / So with the mighty matcht, made glorious slaues, / We happy seeme whilst we but curse our fate" (Alexander 1607, sig. K4^v). In a satiric pamphlet of about 1735 a wife addresses "the right worshipful the Batchelors of Great Britain" in an ironic vein: "... I am content with my Station, and can bill, and sing in my Cage, (as you call it) both with more Pleasure, and Security, than among the wild Beasts of the Forest" (Nab c1735, 66). In an opera of 1794 a woman sings, "But when my dear freedom's resign'd, / Good-nature my heart must engage; / The linnet, though closely confin'd, / If cherished, will sing in the cage" (Arne 1764, 42). From 1924, a character in a novel remarks, "That's what most marriages

consist of, trying to influence the other person to do something he or she doesn't want to do. That's why a good many birds won't sing in a cage" (Taylor 1924, 146).

The conceit of the caged bird singing—or not singing—can have other applications. For example, an anonymous song from 1767 employs the conceit for a bit of jingoism and political polemic: "Let the French hop and sing, and a cage relish best, / Like Birds who their freedom have lost from their nest; / But Britons, deserving a much better fate, / Should they chance to be caught in the lime-twigs of state, / Are birds that have fled and sweet liberty known, / Whose songs are no more when their freedom is gone" (*London Songster* 1767, 361-52). An "emblem" poem from 1766 construes the bird as the human soul incarcerated in an earthly cage: "Imprison'd in this Cage of Flesh, / We earnestly Enlargement wish; / In Hopes that God Relief will bring, / The caged Bird its Song will sing." (Quarles 1766, 146).

It is a measure of King Lear's lingering madness that he can anticipate melodious happiness while imprisoned with his daughter: In ancient Britain, rival claimants to a would-be tyrant's throne did not sing—they died! From an anthropocentric perspective, a caged bird's song, however pleasant to hear, must be expressing or disguising sadness or yearning—or agony or rage. In the tragedy *The White Devil*, by Shakespeare's contemporary John Webster, a speaker opines, "Wee thinke cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie" (Webster 1995, 1:241). In an early nineteenth-century edition of *The White Devil*, the annotator quotes a couplet that he attributes (erroneously, it would seem) to Sir Walter Scott: "Who shall say the bird in cage / Sings for joy and not for rage[?]" (Dodsley 1825, 313). In a short story from 1899, the narrator observes, "So the wise bird sings in its cage; and if it be a home-sick song, a heart-sick song, a soul-sick song, it is all the sweeter" (Gilmore 1899, 330). In a 1911 novel, a character muses, "The captive bird sings in its cage, but I often wonder if it is not the way it has of expressing its longing for its mate and native air" (Brown 1911, 142)

So: Why *does* a caged bird sing? Maya Angelou's title, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, seems to promise an answer to the question that has so many generations of proverbs and beliefs underlying it. The autobiography does not actually furnish an answer, though—not explicitly, at least.

Less widely known than Angelou's autobiography itself is the fact that the title quotes, without attribution, from the pioneering African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, from his poem "Sympathy," published in 1899. Here is the final stanza:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, —
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
 I know why the caged bird sings! (Dunbar 1899, 40-41)

Nowhere in the autobiography does Angelou explicitly refer to the poem, even though she does recall that during her Arkansas childhood, Dunbar was one of the writers for whom she had a strong passion: "Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B Du Bois' 'Litany at Atlanta'" (Angelou 1969, 14).

An explicit answer from Angelou herself had to wait a few years. In 1983 she published a poem titled "Caged Bird":

A free bird leaps
 on the back of the wind
 and floats downstream
 till the current ends
 and dips his wing
 in the orange sun rays
 and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
 down his narrow cage
 can seldom see through
 his bars of rage
 his wings are clipped and
 his feet are tied
 so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
 with a fearful trill

of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on a distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Angelou 1989, 16-17)

In Angelou's poem, it is the free bird that does not sing at all, even though he grandiosely "dares to claim the sky" and "names the sky his own," while comically (and less grandiosely) he looks down on "the fat worms waiting" for his breakfast. Indeed, even uncaged, he is not altogether free; he can float downstream on the wind only "till the current ends." The caged bird sings of imagined freedom, of course, just as Angelou, protagonist of the autobiography, chronicles the several stages of her anticipated liberation from childhood disappointments and delusions. Her voice, recounting some of the episodes, laments the destructive "bars of rage" that impeded the clarity of her vision. The image of the caged bird standing "on the grave of dreams" seems to acknowledge unfulfilled hopes in the struggle toward true emancipation of the generations of Angelou's forebears. More personally, she experiences the "fearful thrill / of things unknown / but

longed for still” as she grows toward adulthood, a development that culminates in the birth of her child, when the narrative ends. The memoir itself, like Dunbar’s poem to which its title alludes, is a song of freedom—freedom dreamed of, hoped for, but not yet fully realized.

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