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## “In Aqua Scribere”: The Evolution of a Current Proverb

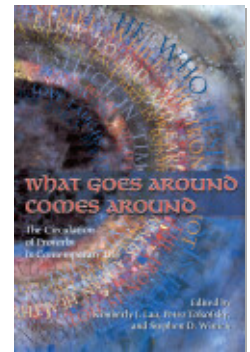
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# “In Aqua Scribere”

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## The Evolution of a Current Proverb

Charles Clay Doyle

The name Wolfgang Mieder is not written in water. Like the names Archer Taylor and B. J. Whiting, it will long endure wherever paremiologists labor—if not chiseled in granite or cast in bronze, then firmly inked on high-quality acid-free paper. However, if Wolfgang Mieder did assert, with unmerited modesty, that his name might prove to be “written in water,” what would be the implications, proverbially speaking?

The old expression is much alive at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A well-read portion of English speakers may associate the phrase specifically with the poet John Keats, who is reported to have asked, on his early deathbed in 1821, that his epitaph read, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” Even as a literary aphorism, however, the expression has been subject to the variability that tends to characterize proverbs and anecdotes. For instance, references to the epitaph often give the form “writ *on* water”—a small variation indeed; yet the difference between the two prepositions can suggest a fundamental difference in the imagery. With the preposition *on*, we imagine Keats’s name being inscribed on the surface of a pool or stream. With the preposition *in*, the expression can be interpreted that same way, but “writ *in* water” also permits us to imagine the name being written on paper with a pen dipped in water instead of ink. Either way, of course, “writ in water,” like “writ on water,” signifies invisibility or (symbolically) oblivion for the name and fame of the individual whose appellation is so scripted.

Keats’s wish was carried out. Carved in the stone over his anonymous grave in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome appears

this inscription: “Here lies One/Whose Name was writ in Water” (a legible photograph appears in Rogers 1957, facing 33). The story of the poet’s deathbed utterance depends on a letter of 14 February 1821—Keats died February 23—from his friend Joseph Severn to Charles Armitage Brown; the two of them oversaw the design and placement of the stone (Brown 1937, 85; see also Brown 1966, 91).

There persists some question as to whether Keats actually requested “writ in water” and not “writ on water”—both of these forms, with “writ” often modernized to “written,” are still current in writing and in oral tradition. Prior to the carving of the gravestone, Keats’s friend and publisher John Taylor reported the poet’s request in the form, “Here lies one whose Name was writ on Water” (Blunden 1940, 88). A fragment of poetry by Keats’s confidant Shelley, possibly intended for some version of the elegy “Adonais,” bears the title, “On Keats who desired that on his tomb should be inscribed ‘Here lieth one whose name was writ on water’”; it appeared in Mary Shelley’s posthumous edition of her husband’s verse (1969, 82), sent to the publisher in 1823, prior to the erection of Keats’s gravestone.

Innovator of expressive images though he was, Keats hardly invented the conceit of writing in (or on) water. In English, the expression was prevalent in Elizabethan times, while Latin and Greek versions extend back to antiquity.

Pivotal between those two ages was the great polymath Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose *Adagia* transported (and translated) so much of ancient learning to the culture of a newer Europe. Following the procedure used throughout his magisterial compilation, Erasmus gave the adage in Latin—whether or not it was current in that form at the end of the Middle Ages—followed by one or more versions from the Greek.

In 1500 he included the proverb “In aqua scribes” in the first of the many expanding editions of his *Adagia* (Erasmus 1993–, 1:450; my English translations are based on Erasmus 1974–, 1:359). The Latin translates καθ ὕδατος γράφεις or (alternatively) εἰς ὕδωρ γράφεις. Next, Erasmus quoted and translated (into Latin) a Greek analog from Lucian: “Are you joking, Charon, or are you, as they say, writing on water . . . ?” [. . . *in aqua, quod aiunt, scribes*]; one from Plato: “Will he not then write these things carefully on black water, sowing with his pen?” [. . . *in aqua scribet*]

*nigra seminana calamo*]; one from “the Greek maxims” [*sententias Graecas*], of Menander: “You should write the oaths of wicked men on water” [Hominum improborum inscribe iusiurandum aquae]; a version “misquoted” [*deprauat*] by Xenarchas, which Erasmus added in the edition of 1517–18: “. . . a woman’s oath is written with wine” [Inscribo vino si qua iurat foemina]; Erasmus may have been unaware that Xenarchas was parodying a line in a fragment by Sophocles, which gives the normative “water” version (Sophocles 1994–96, 3:362–63); and finally an occurrence in the Latin of Catullus, added in the 1520 edition: “What a woman says to her ardent lover should be written on the wind and running water” [*in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua*].

Not included by Erasmus were some other early versions (cited by Lahr [1972–73, 17–18] and corrected by Woodman [1975, 12–13]; both of those Keats scholars were apparently unaware of the central role Erasmus would have played in transmitting the proverb to educated English speakers): In the Greek prose of Philostratus, “. . . this is no dream, nor are you writing this love of ours in water” (Philostratus 1921, 160–61); and in the Latin of St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, purporting to translate the Greek of Porphyry, who consulted Apollo regarding the means to convert his previously Christianized wife back to paganism—the oracle declares, “You may perchance more easily write in lasting letters on water [*in aqua impressis litteris scribere*], or spread light pinions and fly like a bird through the air” (Augustine 1957–72, 6:214–15).

Versions of the Greek adage can also be found in the second-century collection of the Greek paremiographer Diogenianus (adages 2.59 and 5.83), in a group of sayings ascribed to Plutarch (adage 5), among the “paroimiai” of Macarius (adages 4.95 and 5.50), among the proverbs of Mantissa (adage 1.74), and in the tenth-century lexicon associated with the name Suīdas (adages 3283 and 327); the adage also appeared among the late-fifteenth-century *Apothegmata* of Michael Apostolius (adages 6.56 and 6.80) (Leutsch and Schneidewin [1839–87] 1958–65, 1:344, 2:27, 176, 184, 267, 379, 387, 756; Suīdas [1928–38] 1967–71, 2:431, 543). Erasmus had access to at least some of those compilations. (A few other early versions are cited by Boissonade [1829–33] 1962, 1:5, 96, 394.)

Erasmus interpreted the adage “In aqua scribes” [You write on water] to mean “You are wasting your time” or, more literally, “You

are doing nothing” [*nihil agis*]. However, some of the examples that he (and I) have quoted pretty clearly carry the more recent sense of “Your utterance, your resolve, or your reputation is transitory, ephemeral,” an application that Erasmus acknowledged when he glossed the same proverb in another place: “*de re euanida*” [of something that will vanish] (Erasmus 1993–, 2:128). Other quotations illustrate the meaning, “Your words are unreliable, not to be credited.” St. Augustine used the proverb as a paraphrastic expression of impossibility—like numbering the stars or counting the sands of the beach.

Regarding the ambiguity of the English wording “writ in water”: No such ambiguity exists in Latin. With the Latin preposition *in*—as in Erasmus’s main entry, “*In aqua scribis*”—the phrase means “You write *on* water.” With the noun *aqua* alone, the ablative case (or, less commonly, the dative *aquae*) signifies “by means of”—that is, without the preposition, “*Aqua scribis*” means “You write with water (instead of ink).” As the quotations show, both versions—both images, presumably—occurred in antiquity.

The disparate imagery appeared again when Elizabethan Englishmen adopted or adapted the old saying. The two earliest known instances in English both appear in publications from 1580. Austin Saker, in *Narbonus: The Laberynth of Libertie*, obviously thought of water as a substitute for the ink that a document would ordinarily be written *with*: “. . . my warrante shall bee written with water, and sealed with sauce: put into the Paper of obliuion, and deliuered with the hande of forgetfulnesse” (Saker 1580, 119). In the same year, 1580, the proverb appeared with the other sense in John Lyly’s *Euphues and His England*: “. . . the care that I haue had of thee . . . hath beene tried by the counsaile I haue always giuen thee, which if thou haue forgotten, I meane no more to write in water[:] if thou remember imprint it still” (Lyly 1902, 2:187; cited by Tilley 1950, W114). The edition of 1597 alters (corrects?) the last phrase to read “imprint it in steele” (Lyly 1916, 412); this more concrete antithesis clarifies that water is the medium written *on*. Whether he intended “still” or “in steele,” Lyly contrasts remembrance with the forgetfulness of writing on water.

In 1598 Nicolas Ling, in *Politeuphuia: Wits Common Wealth*, gave—in the category of aphorisms concerning oaths—“Wicked mens oaths are written in water” ([Ling] 1598, fol. 146<sup>v</sup>; Tilley

[1950, W114] cited the 1597 edition, which does not contain the saying—nor is Tilley’s attribution of the book to John Bodenham to be credited).

Dating sixteenth and seventeenth century proverbs can be problematic. The composition of a book, which would be the date of the actual use of a proverb, could precede the publication date by some years. For plays, the situation is more complicated still, since early performances would probably have omitted matter that appears in the texts that were eventually published. Be that as it may, the next datable instance of our proverb occurs in an epilog, “To the Reader,” after Ben Jonson’s *Poetaster*, published in 1616 (Jonson 1981–82, 2:226; cited by Dent 1984, W114):

. . . I could stamp  
 Their foreheads with those deep and public brands  
 That the whole company of barber-surgeons  
 Should not take off, with all their art, and plasters.  
 And these my prints should last, still to be read  
 In their pale fronts: when, what they write ‘gainst me,  
 Shall like a figure, drawn in water, fleet,  
 And the poor wretched papers be employed  
 To cloth[e] tobacco. . . .

In this passage, the fleeting “figure” can be interpreted according to either reading of “in water.”

In some lines traditionally ascribed to the poet and musician Thomas Campion (an attribution that Campion’s modern editor deems “doubtful”), first published about 1623, a lovelorn singer laments, “My object now must be the aire, /To write in water words of fire, /And teach sad thoughts how to despaire” (Campion 1969, 455). With a probable pun on “aire” (in the sense of “song”), the poet embellishes the proverb with further elemental imagery to create the paradox of writing “in water” (in the sense of “on water,” most likely) “words of fire”—suggesting not only the invisibility of his professed passion but also its inevitable cooling.

In Beaumont and Fletcher’s tragedy *Philaster*, published in 1620, the title character exclaims, “Your memory shall be as foule behind you /As you are living: all your better deeds / Shall be in water writ, but this in Marble” (Beaumont and Fletcher 1966–96, 1:469); the parallelism suggests that *in* means *on*. A similar sentiment occurs in *Henry VIII* by Shakespeare, probably in collaboration

with Fletcher, first printed in the 1623 folio of Shakespeare's plays: "Mens euill manners, liue in Brasse, their Vertues / We write in Water" (Shakespeare 1968, 579; cited by Dent 1981, W114). In 1630 appeared another version of the proverb with the "water"/"brass" antithesis; John Taylor (nicknamed the "water poet") paid tribute to King James I in a "funerall elegie": "His anger written on weak water was,/His Patience and his Loue were grau'd in Brasse" (Taylor 1630, 324 [2nd series of pagination], sig. Iii [1st such signing] 2").

A year earlier, in 1629, an English poem loosely adapting or paraphrasing a long epigram from *The Greek Anthology* (epigram 9.359, where the adage itself does not appear) was published in Thomas Farnaby's *Florilegium epigrammatum Graecorum*; the lines have been attributed to Francis Bacon: "The world's a bubble. . . / Who then to fraile mortality shall trust, / But limmes the water, or but writes in dust" (Farnaby 1629, sig. A5<sup>v</sup>). To make a connection with Keats's circle of acquaintances: Mary Shelley employed the quoted couplet as the epigraph to volume 1, chapter 10 of her novel *Lodore* in 1835 (1996, 6:54).

The same connection between inscribing water and the equally futile attempt to write on another substance occurs in Philip Massinger's play *The Maid of Honour*, published in 1632: "but all that I had done,/My benefits, in sand or water written,/As they had never been, no more remember'd!" (Massinger 1813, 4:101). Separate instances of the proverbial phrase "to write in sand" have been recorded; both Tilley (1950, W114) and Dent (1981, W114; 1984, W114) consider it the same proverb as "to write on water." Another paralleling of images occurs in a poem titled "The Expostulation," which has been attributed to both John Donne and Ben Jonson, first published in 1633; like the Roman Catullus—behind whom stood Xenarchus and Sophocles—it focuses on female fickleness: "Are vowes so cheape with women, or the matter / Whereof they're made, that they are writ in water,/And blowne away with wind?" (Donne 1965, 94). Catullus had likewise linked the images of wind and water. Still another proverbial association occurred in 1635 in John Reynolds's *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge*: "But this is to write upon the water, and to build Castles of vaine hopes in the ayre" (Reynolds 1635, 364). In 1638, Henry Adamson's *The Muses Threnodie* said of nations, "Yet time hath overturn'd them, and their names/Are past, as Letters written

on the streames,/To tell us, here we have no constant biding” (Adamson 1638, 84).

The traditional antifeminist application of the proverb is reversed in *Argalus and Parthenia* by Henry Glapthorne, published in 1639, where a female character decries male infidelity: “And let their words, oaths, teares, vows, passe,/As words in water writ, or slippery glasse” (Glapthorne 1639, 35; cited by Tilley 1950, W114). Those lines are quoted (with attribution) as one of the “Formulae Majores. Or, Common Places” in Thomas Blount’s *The Academy of Eloquence*, 1654 (115–16). In a play of doubtful authorship, *The False One*, which first appeared in the 1647 folio of Beaumont and Fletcher, a character employs the “wine” variant anticipated by Xenarchus’s parody of Sophocles: “And though I had killd my Father, give me gold,/I’le make men swear I have done a pious Sacrifice/ . . . /And my brave deed shall be writ in wine, for virtuous” (Beaumont and Fletcher 1966–96, 8:149). In a play published in 1654, *Revenge for Honour*, doubtfully attributed to George Chapman, we return to the antifeminist use of our proverb (this time spoken by a female character): “Of what frail temper is a woman’s weakness!/Words writ in waters have more lasting essence/Than our determinations” (Chapman 1961, 2:726).

By 1658 the proverb was demonstrably familiar enough to be adapted in a wittily allusive way: “Write in water” is used to mean “paint in watercolors,” as an anonymous poet (in a commendatory poem) praises a treatise on painting by Sir William Sanderson, in the process explicitly identifying the expression as a proverb and recording one of its applications, one that specifically anticipates Keats’s epitaph on the meaninglessness of a writer’s life: “Your fame shall (spite of *Proverbs*) make it plain, To write in Water’s not to write in vain” (Sanderson 1658, sig. b1<sup>v</sup>). In 1659 Henry More’s treatise *The Immortality of the Soul* gave an innovative twist to the old “water”/“wind” pairing: “For when a man is so fugitive and unsettled, that he will not stand to the verdict of his own Faculties, one can no more fasten any thing upon him, then he can write in the water, or tye knots of the wind” (More 1987, 24). In 1692 Richard Hollingsworth, paying belated tribute to King Charles I (beheaded in 1649), echoed the “limming” version of the proverb in the 1629 epigram attributed to Bacon; during his trial, the king had “minded them of what he had done . . . and wherein can it justly be blam’d? Especially considering



all he had done, was but a kind of Limming the Water, to them” (Hollingsworth 1692, 73).

Between the seventeenth century and the death of Keats in 1821, I can find no record of the proverb, except as it appeared in translations of Catullus or in *The Restauration* by George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, first published in 1715 (though Villiers had died in 1687); Buckingham’s play, however, is nothing but an adaptation of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster* (Villiers 1715, 1:64). This seeming absence may result, partly, at least, from three factors: 1) compilers of proverb dictionaries have more assiduously searched medieval and Renaissance works for English proverbs than works from the eighteenth century; 2) the invaluable online databases of full-text documents represent the nineteenth and twentieth centuries more abundantly than earlier periods; 3) my own literary expertise lies in the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To be sure, nineteenth-century men of letters were well read in literature of earlier times, and they could have revived an archaic or dormant saying. However, the prevalence of the proverb—apparently independent of Keats’s influence—in nineteenth-century records suggests that it had remained in oral tradition, if not much in literary use, during the interim.

Although I know of no interesting examples of the proverb from 1700 to 1821, I have on file some fifty instances from the remaining decades of the nineteenth century, the majority of them American—a predominance, again, which may result from the bias of the available databases or scholars’ sampling procedures—even though the saying has no entry in Archer Taylor’s 1958 *Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases, 1820–1880*. About a third of the nineteenth-century mentions make direct reference to the death or the grave of Keats or allude to Keats in some other obvious manner. The remainder suggest that the proverb was going along its own way, as if in uninterrupted popularity.

In 1829 Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, like several of her early predecessors—but unlike Keats in 1821—used the proverb in an antithesis: “But it should be remembered that though the human heart is like water when we would write thereon lessons of virtue, it is like the rock to retain the impressions of vice” (Hale 1829, 55). Other nineteenth-century writers vary the terms of the antithesis:

. . . The figures, the motions, the words of the beloved object are not like other images written in water, but, as Plutarch said, “enamelled in fire.” (1841—Ralph Waldo Emerson 1971–, 2:102)

[Of the “Negro” race:] Our slightest faults are engraven on stone, and our brightest virtues written on water. (J. H. Perkins 1849, fol. 1’)

“Crowns and sceptres,” says one, “do not secure us from the inconsistency of changes; and we may better trust unto the wind, or to letters written upon water, than unto human felicity.” (Rev. J. Leonard Corning 1857, 156)

The angels are so near us in our infancy, that the troubles of the world, which are afterward engraved in marble, are then only written in water. (William Henry Holcombe 1870, 19)

Woman’s love is writ in water!  
Woman’s faith is traced on sand!  
(William Edmonstoune Aytoun circa 1870, 140)

The men who group around Leicester square are the exiles without a fame, . . . the men who come like shadows, and so depart; the men whose names are writ in water, even though their life-paths may have been marked in blood. (Justin McCarthy 1872, 202)

The name of the man who so beautified and enriched this city [Paris] that he loved is writ in water, while that of the great scourge of his country is carved in the hearts of his people. (Helen B. Mathews 1877, 63)

One lesson the rubric of conflict has taught her [the city of Boston]:  
Though parted awhile by war’s earth-rending shock,  
The lives that divide us are written in water  
The love that unites us cut deep in the rock.  
(1880—Oliver Wendell Holmes 1892–1908, 13:230)

In 1833 Theodore Fay seems to have playfully literalized the proverb’s metaphor to suggest impossibility: “A person standing on the brink of a running stream on a cold day, seriously employed in ‘writing his name in water,’ would be accounted insane—the attempt to write munificence and generosity on the coachman’s mind is equally futile” (Fay 1833, 2:147). Like Fay, other nineteenth-century writers enclosed some version of our expression in

quotation marks, presumably thus marking it as either proverbial or allusive: for example,

She loved—he deserted her—she followed him to a great city and died there. That was all the father could tell. But her name was not “written in water,” so far as he was concerned. (William H. Bushnell 1867, 15)

. . . The good men who labored to give us equitable laws and happy homes[:] . . . Let not our children search for their names and find them “writ in water.” (J. Ross Browne 1875, 347)

There are those to whom the work might well be one of love . . . telling us something also of the men whose names were “writ in water”—in the most shifting, quickly-running stream that flows. (E. L. Burlingame 1877, 406)

Again like Theodore Fay in 1833, several nineteenth-century writers ironically made the image in the proverb somewhat literal, as if assuming the readers’ familiarity with the expression in its standard, figurative sense:

[Explaining a whaler’s ability to “track” his prey:] . . . This hunter’s wondrous skill, the proverbial evanescence of a thing writ in water, a wake, is to all desired purposes well nigh as reliable as the steadfast land. (1851—Herman Melville 1967, 453–54)

A stream or a fountain survives many successive buildings, and a local superstition attached to either has the best chance of permanence. A tradition, to be lasting, must be writ on water. (William George Clark 1858, 286)

[When the stalwart Warwick has dissolved in a none-too-manly fit of weeping:] He yielded to it, letting the merciful magic of tears quench the fire, wash the first bitterness away, and leave reproaches only writ in water.” (1864—Louisa May Alcott 1991, 131)

And mark how full of grace and ease the running water is. . . . The motion of the brook, indeed, is music written in water. (N. H. Chamberlain 1865, 209)

In most of these quotations, whether in the form “on water” or “in water” (“in” construed in either sense), the proverb—like

Keats's epitaph—expresses impermanence or oblivion. So do other instances:

That race upon whose sepulchre we rear  
Our temples and our hearth-stones, and whose names  
Written in water, still as Time rolls on  
Are deep ingulphed within the rushing stream,  
Whose sweep is onward to Eternity.  
(Gretta 1849, 291)

. . . Men's lives for the most part have been written in water, and that of the muddiest. (Samuel Phillips 1852, 19)

. . . Those grand ideas . . . are small beside the simple Bible truths . . . that shall stand for ages, while others will prove to have been written in water. (Mary A. Denison 1863, 72)

. . . This little waif makes me feel that the story of human life and hope is writ in water. (Theodore Tilton 1874, 264)

A kindness shown seems written in water. (Thomas Dunn English 1894, 637)

It is more than conceivable that important discoveries in experimental physics were made by men whose names and works were written on water. (Rev. George McDermot 1900, 392)

One particular sense of the proverb, which became increasingly prevalent in the twentieth century, was anticipated by early uses in reference to the promises of lovers or of "wicked men": An insincere vow or resolve—or an unenforceable command or rule—consists of words "written in water":

. . . There will come a time in these colonies when the king's commands will be as if written in water, and the king's threats will make no man tremble. (Mary A. Denison 1860, 145)

His sudden impulse, his enthusiastic vow, were not as words written in water. ("A Son of the Crusaders" 1873, 434)

. . . let the glorious name be said,  
Lest mine oath in the water be written, and I wake up, vile and betrayed,

In the arms of the faint-heart dastard. . . .  
(1876—William Morris 1910–15, 211)

. . . But these pledges as we know were writ in water. (James D. Phelan 1896, 108)

The popular currency of the saying has continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, although it failed to gain entry into Whiting's *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (1989). With the more extensive availability of searchable full-text databases (articles in newspapers and popular magazines, law-review articles, judicial decisions, scholarly articles, literary works) and the World Wide Web itself, I have collected more than a hundred "modern" examples, about a third of them (again) making some fairly clear allusion to Keats. Among the remainder, a few uses of the phrase "write on water" that were formerly rare seem to have gained prominence—although the *Oxford English Dictionary's* assertion that it can mean "to spend money" (2d ed., s.v. "water," sb. 1f) has never been exemplified at all, as far as I can ascertain.

Frequently encountered is the concept that the words one writes, literally—not just one's name or reputation—will prove especially ephemeral because of the genre in which the writer works. In the first of these, the metaphor is oddly mixed:

The [newspaper] editor, no matter how distinguished, writes in water; his page is a palimpsest on which he expends all his talents, wit, learning and judgment for the day alone, to be erased with the next sun. (Allan Nevins 1928, v)

. . . Like all the words of man, our own words [those of historians] will be writ on water. (J. H. Hexter 1954, 221)

"I used to say reporters write on water, but now I see that we write on paper. Which crumbles." (Richard Stout, quoted in Kernan 1978, B1)

"My efforts with Hollywood are like things written in water," she said. (Brian D. Johnson 1992, 66)

As someone once said, theater is written on water. (Jackie Campbell 1994, 26D)

Potter dedicated himself to the medium at a time when to write for television was to write in water. (Allison Pearson 1995, 15)

Even more prevalent—accounting for about a fourth of all the non-Keatsian references—is the use of the proverb to suggest the unenforceability or disregard of a rule, law, agreement, or other written promise—adapting the conceit which extends back to antiquity (and taking more literally the image of writing) that a lover’s vow is like words written in water:

The trial has often been made[,] and the agreements which have been elaborated, signed, ratified, seem to have been written in water. (James Brown Scott 1908, 128–29)

If the Court does not abide by its Rules, how can it expect the bar to do so? Standards must be enforced to be respected. If they are merely left as something on paper, they might as well be written on water. (Felix Frankfurter 1957, 352 U.S. 521)

No one would want a presidential decision written in water. Yet must it be carved in stone? (“Adrift from Sea Law” 1982, 24).

Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction requirements were written on water and are about to be relaxed. (George Will 1987, 82)

It allows for flexibility, precisely because arrangements are “written on water” rather than in stone. (Rachel Kelly 1994, 43)

Unless the Constitution is “fixed,” its limits are writ on water. (Raoul Berger 1997, 524)

His pronouncements [Buffalo’s mayor’s] are written on water, not carved in stone. He’s got a preservation policy nobody follows, a residency policy everybody ignores. . . . (“Pick a Mayor” 2002, B1)

In reference to the arid American West, “written in water” (or “with water,” but not “on water”) has acquired a distinctive new meaning, figurative in a wholly different way: It means “determined by (or in regard to) the availability (or absence) of water.” About 1940 the Colorado poet Thomas Hornsby Ferril wrote, “Here is a land where life is written in water”—a line now engraved on a plaque in the Colorado state capitol (a photograph can be seen at

<http://www.archives.state.co.us/cap/murals.htm>). In 1995 The Newsletter of the Colorado Water Resources Research Institute published an article with the punning title, "Agreements Written with Water: Prospects for Integrated Watershed Management in the Cache Le Poudre Basin" (Graf and Williams 1995, 17). A newspaper report from Oregon in June 2002 notes, "The history of the American West is written in water, and no federal agency has had a greater role in writing it than the US Bureau of Reclamation" (Brad Knickerbocker 2002, O2).

So the dying poet Keats spoke a proverb in a particular verbal and situational context, and such were the pathos and power of his request that the proverb has often clung to Keats, in ironic contradiction to the prophecy and wish expressed by him. Perhaps Keats's reported inclusion of the already-archaic verb form helped perpetuate the frequent occurrence of the word "writ" in the phrase even today. However, in that version and others, the proverb—already old when Keats uttered it—has continued to function in a variety of changing contexts.

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