PROVERBS ARE NEVER OUT OF SEASON

Popular Wisdom in the Modern Age

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INTRODUCTION

Even though some scholars and popular writers have claimed repeatedly that proverbial language has passed from usage in contemporary American culture, it remains an easily proven fact that proverbs are not passé and definitely not dead. They have not lost their well-established popularity, and they continue to be ever present, even in a modern technological society like that of the United States. This has recently been made abundantly clear by the thousands of proverbs registered in *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) edited by Stewart A. Kingsbury, Kelsie B. Harder, and myself. These texts were collected in this country from oral use during the forty-year span from 1945 to 1985, and they are ample proof of the vitality of proverbial wisdom in the twentieth century. It would be absurd to proclaim the twilight of the proverbs when they are in fact thriving in a manner that appears to match the frequent use of proverbial language during the sixteenth century. This golden age of the proverb abounded with traditional proverbs that continue to be in common use today.

Yet it would also be a mistake to assume that all proverbs in circulation at the present time must by definition be old bits of wisdom. Scholars have shown that the time of proverb creations is by no means over. While we continue to use many of the proverbs that can be traced back to classical times, the wisdom literature of the Jewish and Christian tradition, or the widely disseminated vernacular wisdom of the Middle Ages, we must not forget that new proverbs have been created at all times. This is also true for a modern society characterized by technology, mass culture, and rapid urbanization. Even the most sophisticated and best educated people appear to be in need of the pithy wisdom contained in metaphorical proverbs. While such old proverbs like "Hanging and wiving go by destiny" or "One knife whets another" might be dropping out, new ones have been and continue to be created to reflect our changing value system. Thus, the relatively recent proverb "Different strokes for different folks" from the mid-twentieth century is a truly new American proverb with wide currency. It expresses the liberating idea that people ought to have the opportunity to live their lives according to their own wishes. For once we have a proverb that is not prescriptive or blatantly didactic. Instead, it expresses the American worldview that individ-

uals have the right to at least some free choice. Another example of a modern proverb would be "Garbage in, garbage out," indicating clearly its origin in the computer world. But of course this proverb does not have to be interpreted only literally as a comment on the frustrations that everybody has felt at times with computers. The text has long taken on the metaphorical meaning of cause and effect, that is, if you don't provide good information, the result will certainly be negative as well.

Proverbs, both old and new, continue to serve us well as concise statements of apparent truths. We might ridicule or parody them at times, but we are governed at least to some degree by their insights into human nature and the world as such. To be sure, some proverbs appear rather one-sided or even narrow-minded, but it must be remembered that proverbs are *not* absolute or universal truths. This is abundantly clear from such opposing proverb pairs as "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "Out of sight, out of mind." Proverbs only make sense in a given situation or context, and we will always choose that proverbial text that happens to suit us best. And if we can't find a particular proverb for the right occasion, it has become customary to simply change existing proverbs through additions or alterations of certain words. These manipulated proverbs might be called anti-proverbs, but such varied texts as "A new broom sweeps clean, but the old one knows the corners" or "You can't judge a car by its paint job" indicate a fascinating interplay of tradition and innovation in proverb use. Varying the common proverb "If the shoe fits, wear it," it could well be argued that we employ proverbs according to the maxim "If the proverb fits, use it." Proverbs are flexible and adaptable to ever new contexts and interpretations, because their metaphorical language is not limited to specific contexts. They contain plenty of truth, wisdom, and knowledge, which they express in a few colorful words. The message of the proverb is communicated quickly and to the point, making it a very useful tool in oral speech, political rhetoric, newspaper headlines, book titles, advertising slogans, cartoon captions, and so on. If used to manipulate people economically or politically, proverbs might even become dangerous weapons as expressions of stereotypical invectives or unfounded generalizations. But, for the most part, it can be said that if used consciously and perhaps somewhat sparingly, proverbs remain to the present day a most effective verbal tool. Proverbs are indeed very much in season in America today, and the statement "A proverb is worth a thousand words" will continue to be true for generations to come.

The ten chapters of this book all address the question of how proverbial wisdom survives in the modern age, that is, they deal with historical questions while at the same time emphasizing today's use and function of proverbs. While their titles and explanatory subtitles speak for themselves, the following paragraphs will serve as a short general overview of their content in order

to introduce the reader to the specific issues addressed in them. The first four chapters range from definition problems, questions of form, structure, and content to considerations of how proverbs relate to cultural literacy and how they are used in the modern age. Next come two chapters that investigate the origin, history, and use of two specific proverbs, notably "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" and "A picture is worth a thousand words." Two additional chapters discuss the subgenre of medical proverbs and regional Vermont proverbs. This is followed by a chapter showing how an old German proverb has become a very popular expression in the United States as "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water." Finally, there is the special chapter on "Proverbs in Nazi Germany" which is included to show the danger in the misuse of folklore in general and proverbs in particular. A detailed bibliography summarizes all publications on proverbs, both collections and studies, that are contained in the extensive notes to each chapter, and name, subject, and proverb indexes are also provided.

The first chapter on "The Wit of One, and the Wisdom of Many" presents a general discussion on the nature of the proverb. It is argued that proverbs are exactly not simple but rather complex verbal expressions. Several scholarly and popular definitions are analyzed, stressing the difficulty of establishing the traditionality and currency of proverbs that are definitely part of the characteristics of proverbiality. Some of the more easily recognizable markers of this proverbiality are certain structural aspects as well as external and internal markers. To the former belong such poetic and stylistic features as alliteration, rhyme, parallelism, ellipsis, and repetition, while the latter include personification, hyperbole, paradox, and metaphor. It is also pointed out that proverbs as metaphorical speech depend on the social context and function for their meaning. In fact, proverbs exhibit a kind of semantic indefiniteness because of their hetero-situationality, poly-functionality, and poly-semanticity. In addition to comments on various functions and the content of proverbs, this chapter also includes a detailed discussion on the origin of proverbs, that is, classical antiquity, Biblical wisdom literature, medieval Latin and vernacular proverbs, and so on. Above all, the point is made that proverbs always originate with an individual and there are usually variants until a standard form becomes traditional through a collective selection process. This is what Lord John Russell in the nineteenth century meant by defining the proverb as "The wit of one, and the wisdom of many."

While it is one thing for scholars to attempt an inclusive definition of the proverb, it is obviously also of interest to see what the actual folk thinks about proverbs. Thus, the second chapter with the popular definition of "A Proverb Is a Short Sentence of Wisdom" as its title deals with the popular views of the proverb. Fifty-five definitions formulated by students, friends, and acquaintances are analyzed and augmented by a discussion of what au-

thors of general magazine and newspaper articles have had to say about proverbs. There is also a look at proverbs about proverbs, such as "Proverbs are the children of experience" and "All the good sense of the world runs into proverbs." In addition to registering and discussing many definition attempts, it is also shown that just because proverbs contradict each other, they cannot be dismissed as useless for people of the modern age. Proverbs have never claimed to be universally true, but they are correct in certain given contexts and situations. To argue that proverbs are passé because of such obvious limitations strikes us as uninformed intellectual snobbery. Imperfect as these bits of traditional wisdom might be, they continue to flow freely into our oral and written speech on all personal and professional levels. Lord Chesterfield's famous dictum that "A man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs and vulgar aphorisms" is as wrong today as it was in the year 1749 when he tried in a letter to dissuade his son from using proverbial wisdom.

The question of what proverbs have a particularly high frequency in American speech is answered in the third chapter on "Proverbs Everyone Ought to Know." Scholars throughout the world, but especially in the Soviet Union, Germany, and the United States, have attempted in the last twenty years to find out what the paremiological minimum for their respective languages might be. As folklorists, sociologists, psychologists, or psycholinguists, they have attempted to establish lists of those proverbs that have a high frequency or currency by using modern demographic methods including sophisticated questionnaires. We now know that proverbs like "Where there is a will, there's a way," "Practice makes perfect," "The early bird catches the worm," "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," and "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" are especially well known in the United States. As such they make up part of the cultural literacy of English speakers, and the most common of them form a minimum of proverbial knowledge that one must have to communicate effectively in the English language. This fact is of great significance for lexicographers involved in writing foreign language dictionaries or for teachers who teach English as a second language. Realizing that there are so many non-native speakers in countries where English is the primary language, it is of much value to establish such meaningful paremiological minima so that we may assure meaningful metaphorical communication.

The fourth chapter on "Old Wisdom in New Clothing" is an attempt to show how traditional proverbs are used in an innovative fashion in modern communication. It is pointed out that seemingly antiquated proverbs can be adapted very well to new contexts by changing and twisting them to fit the modern age. The chapter is made up of four major sections, each treating a particular phenomenon of proverb use on a diachronic and synchronic level. The first part shows how traditional proverb illustrations can be traced from medieval woodcuts to Pieter Brueghel's famous oil painting of "Netherlandic

Proverbs" (1559) and on to modern cartoons, caricatures, and comic strips. At each given period in time these illustrations of proverbs reflect the mores and worldview of the people using them for serious or also humorous communication. The second section depicts how proverbs are often misogynous, expressing chauvinistic ideas and sexual stereotypes. Such proverbs as "Diamonds are a girl's best friend" or "A woman's place is in the home" still abound today, but there are now also noticeable liberating reactions against such sexual politics. Especially in some innovative advertisements and cartoons we can recognize conscious parodies of older proverbs, as for example "A Ms. is as good as a Male." The third part of this chapter deals with proverbs and their critical variations in lyrical poetry, citing poems by John Heywood, John Gay, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Eliza Cook, Vincent Godfrey Burns, Arthur Guiterman, W. H. Auden, John Robert Colombo, Ambrose Bierce, and others. And the final section investigates the popularity of the originally German proverb "Who does not love wine, woman, and song, will remain a fool his whole life long" in the English language. It is shown that William Makepeace Thackeray around 1862 was instrumental in getting this proverb known among English speakers. By now it has become so popular that it is often used in the truncated form of "Wine, women, and song" in headlines, slogans, cartoons, and also on T-shirts. Many times proverbs continue to be used in their traditional wording, but quite often their wisdom is being questioned and they are parodied or perverted into anti-proverbs. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that such playing and punning with proverbs is only possible if the original texts are also somehow still known. The juxtaposition of traditional and innovative proverb texts is what makes the modern use of proverbs in the mass media, literature, and oral speech so fascinating and worthy of serious study.

There exists a long tradition of investigating the origin, history, and use of individual proverbs, and the fifth chapter of this book on the proverb "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" follows this scholarly model. It is shown that Benjamin Franklin did *not* coin this particular proverb when he used it in his *Poor Richard's Almanack* in 1735 and again in 1758 as part of his famous essay on "The Way to Wealth." Early variants of this proverb go back to the fifteenth century, and it appeared as early as 1639 in exactly the wording that Franklin employed in John Clarke's bilingual proverb collection *Paroemiologia Anglo-Latina.* But Franklin helped to popularize the proverb, and so much so, that Mark Twain reacted to it with splendid irony and humor several times. Other parodies from George Ade, Groucho Marx, and literary authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are reviewed, and the chapter also includes a whole list of humorous reactions to this deeply ethical proverb that appeared in newspapers, advertisements, cartoons, comic strips, and greeting cards. The chapter con-