

Editorial: Book of Proverbs

Oscar Wilde coined epigrams; Chesterton and Shaw devised paradoxes; Lichtenberg filed aphorisms; Dorothy Parker etched wise-cracks. Dr Johnson made *remarks*, while a sage or wise man (unlike a wiseacre or a wise guy) is remembered for his *sayings*. A full taxonomy of pregnant dicta would have to define the apophthegm, or at least to describe the borders of its indefiniteness, and there might need to be sections or subsections on *aperçu*, riposte and repartee.

All these have in common that they are manufactured by identifiable speakers or writers. Another species that should loom large in such a survey is the proverb, which typically has no author but the common consciousness of mankind, and yet goes beyond the limits of common sense both in its memorability and in its often astringent content. Of those who have thought about proverbs, many have been critical or even caustic about the incoherence of the content of proverbial wisdom. If it is true that *too many cooks spoil the broth*, can it also be true that *many hands make light work*? As you look before you leap, you will have time to reflect that he who hesitates is lost. John Simpson, editor of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, recently published in paperback at £2.95, is conscious that such complaints are plausible:

Proverbs could thus become an easy butt for satire in learned circles, and are still sometimes frowned upon by the polished stylist. The proverb has none the less retained its popularity as a homely commentary on life and as a reminder that the wisdom of our ancestors may still be useful to us today. . . . It is a reflection of the proverb's vitality that new ones are continually being created as older ones fall into disuse. Surprisingly, neither *A change is as good as a rest* nor *A trouble shared is a trouble halved* are recorded before the twentieth century; the popular saying *A watched pot never boils* first occurs as late as 1848. The computer world has recently given us a potential classic, *Garbage in, garbage out*, and economics has supplied us with *There's no such thing as a free lunch*. Proverbs continue—as the early collectors never tired of stating—to provide the sauce to relish the meat of ordinary speech.

The fuller and more philosophical defence is given by Aristotle. When he surveys the sayings of 'the many and the wise' he notices that one sage clashes with another, and that the opinion of the many

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often contradicts that of the wise man and sometimes contradicts itself. He nevertheless found his review of the *endoxa* a fruitful starting point and a source of maturer understanding. That there are verbal or even real conflicts between various current opinions does not mean that they cannot jointly help us in characterizing the world or life about which, taken individually or selectively, they would mislead or simply confuse us. If Aristotle had considered proverbs separately he would surely have remarked on the need for common sense in the selection of a proverb to fit an occasion. The *pepaideumenos* or person of instructed judgment will recognize that this is an occasion for looking, not leaping, while that quite different case is one of those where hesitation may incur too high a price.

The concise edition will prove both useful and agreeable. The full *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* is too formidably comprehensive for the general reader, and the shorter work gives us the oases without the gritty deserts of the unmemorable. It is also welcome for a reason that the editor and the publishers cannot have foreseen. It has reinforced our growing sense of the need for a collection of philosophical proverbs to match Professor Daniel Dennett's *Philosophical Lexicon* (see *Philosophy*, April 1976, p. 129, and October 1979, p. 571). Here is a case of a dozen samples as an invitation to readers to increase the stock:

First catch your hare.

Anscombe is as anscombe does.

Too many hooks spoil the froth.

All that gellners is not sold.

Strife begins at rorty.

Moore haste, less speed.

Do not let your rasp exceed your geach.

Two whites make a black.

A katz may look at a quine.

A flew and his opinion are soon imparted.

Every pitcher edits an anthology.

Out of sight, into *Mind*.