Women through Anti-proverbs
Anna T. Litovkina (2019)
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Reviewed by Chunrong Wang

With an in-depth exploration from a multitude of sources, *Women through Anti-proverbs* reveals social attitudes towards women in a world dominated by men. The main aim of the book is to look into stereotypical qualities, traits and behaviours of women (in different roles and professions) as represented in Anglo-American anti-proverbs (i.e. proverbs produced by changing the wording of traditional proverbs or by adding something to traditional proverbs for various purposes). It also attempts to find out whether fairer proverbs are being created to the advantage of women with their rise in society. The idea of this book stems from Litovkina's personal interest in the representation of women in anti-proverbs, and more importantly, her collaboration with Wolfgang Mieder in editing two collections: *Twisted Wisdom: Modern Anti-Proverbs* (Mieder and Litovkina 1999) and *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify: A Collection of Anti-Proverbs* (Litovkina and Mieder 2006).

The twelve-chapter book is divided into three parts, followed by the conclusion and index. The first part (Chapters 1 and 2) serves the purpose of introducing the research rationale and some fundamental information on the topic. Litovkina points out that since earlier times, many proverbs have been used against particular groups of people, among whom women have never been absent. With this in mind, she presents an overview of American proverbs about women in various roles (wife, mother, daughter, widow, mother-in-law, grandmother, etc.) they frequently play in their daily lives. In these anti-feminist proverbs, *women* are described as dominant, bossy,

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vain, quarrelsome and very difficult to please and satisfy. Therefore, they are considered as the main cause of all problems and troubles of men. Litovkina also highlights proverbs about female sexuality (such as lovemaking and adultery) and some female professions and occupations appearing in proverbs (in particular, a housewife and a whore), in which women are depicted as easy to seduce, disloyal to marriage, inferior in abilities to men, and so on. This chapter is most helpful in providing the reader with a general idea of how proverbs can be used as an entry to reveal social attitudes towards women. In everyday language use, some proverbs are transformed and repeatedly used in certain contexts for various purposes. These are termed as anti-proverbs, also known as deliberate proverb innovations, alterations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, fractured proverbs, or proverb mutations. For example, the new proverb *Where there is a woman, there is gossip* is created out of its traditional form *Where there is a will, there is a way*. In order to further impress the reader, Litovkina reviews the background of anti-proverb research and discusses the occurrence of anti-proverbs, together with different mechanisms of proverb variation. She also discusses and illustrates with examples the most frequent types of proverb alteration (e.g. adding a tail to the original text, replacing a single word, substituting two or more words, melding two proverbs, and reversing word order) as well as the most common themes (i.e. sexuality and professions). What Litovkina does in the following chapters is to deal with the old topic of anti-feminist sayings from the perspective of anti-proverbs.

The second (and the main) part of the book comprises eight chapters (Chapters 3–10), aiming to explore how women in various roles are represented in Anglo-American anti-proverbs. As a start, Litovkina discusses the general attributes of women depicted in Anglo-American anti-proverbs, including women's looks (age, sex appeal and weight), materialism (hunger for money), talkativeness, stubbornness, dominance, vengefulness, strong will and weak intellectual abilities, etc. We cite an example here: *A woman never puts off till tomorrow what she can say today* (Esar 1968:791). They are also portrayed as quarrelsome and having the characteristics of wickedness, curiosity, infidelity, greed, inability to be on time, lack of thrift, strangeness, duplicity, etc. On the whole, their roles depicted in anti-proverbs are mostly negative and inferior (to men).

Chapters 4–10 deal with women in various roles, including young women/girls, spinsters, wives, widows, mothers, mothers-in-law, etc. Young women in roles (such as daughters, young girls, fiancées and brides) are generally portrayed as attaching too much importance to superficial beauty such as appearance, clothes, jewellery and other status symbols. They are also regarded as having low intellectual abilities. Besides, young

girls are associated with female sexuality, promiscuity, lustfulness and seductiveness, with which they court and are courted, and look for their husbands. A spinster (or old maid), on the contrary, is portrayed as lonely and depressed, leading a dull and unfulfilled life and being considered a complete loser. What she wants most is to have a husband or life partner, even at the expense of contacting (including sexual) criminals. Compared to her, a wife, whose life purpose is to serve her husband and children, is considered as talkative, stupid, quarrelsome, demanding, greedy, critical, conflicting, noisy, aggressive and irritable. A woman whose husband has passed away is thought to have known the meaning of marriage and tends to be very critical of males when she wishes to remarry.

Unlike the stereotypes we hold towards mothers, they are depicted in numerous anti-proverbs as complaining, nagging, lecturing, critical and dominant, which may be due to the fact that their duties of raising children and doing housework seem tiring and endless. When they deal with their sons- or daughters-in-law, they are seen as overcritical, quarrelsome and bossy. Accordingly, we can find many anti-proverbs that see mothers-in-law as ruining the lives of their children-in-law by causing a lot of tension among young spouses. Chapter 10 concludes Part II by demonstrating that whatever roles women play, they are described as having poor intellectual abilities and showing constant worries concerning aging and losing their sex appeal as they grow older.

Chapter 11 in the third part of the book turns to sexual anti-proverbs about women, such as sex acts, female parts of body, culturally taboo erotic pleasures, monogamy, adultery, bigamy and pregnancy. In these anti-proverbs, women become the target of masculine erotic lust. Finally, the book is concluded by a review of anti-proverbs about various female professions, occupations and activities, such as housewife, actress, whore, driver, maid, babysitter, teacher, secretary, hairdresser and beautician. We can see many negative evaluations towards female occupations, such as fickleness, poor abilities and eagerness to please others (especially men), etc.

The book is an important contribution to the critical linguistic analysis of social attitudes towards women. From a feminist perspective, the author approaches the old topic of anti-feminist sayings with a new genre, and reveals how women are subject to ridicule and mockery in earlier times and modern age despite the rise of their social status. The author may impress the reader from the following aspects. First, she draws in a wide range of ages of women with different marital status including young girls, single mature women, wives and widows, providing a comprehensive view of social stereotypes of women at various stages of life. It is noteworthy that even mothers who are conventionally deemed as loving, considerate, patient

and tender are often portrayed as critical, complaining, irritable and bossy. Second, she looks into various female professions and occupations appearing in anti-proverbs and reveals that professions associated with women do not require complex intellectual abilities and therefore are considered insignificant and trivial. Even women doing the same job as men are considered less competitive and inferior (to men). Third, she uses a big corpus of anti-proverbs on which her study is well grounded. These numerous transformations come primarily from American and English written sources, including hundreds of books and articles on puns, wisecracks, aphorisms, maxims, epigrams, graffiti, etc. Many of the anti-proverbs can be also found in her collaborative works with Mieder (Mieder and Litovkina 1999; Litovkina and Mieder 2006) mentioned at the beginning of the review. In order to confirm or argue with some statements conveyed in anti-proverbs, she cites American proverbs throughout the book, the vast majority of which are quoted from the largest dictionary of American proverbs, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* edited by Wolfgang Mieder and his colleagues (1992), and Lois Kerschen's book *American Proverbs about Women* (1998). Although the author focuses on anti-proverbs, she also quotes proverbs with their original texts as a punch-line of jokes or proverbs used in wellerisms. Fourth, in order to justify her position that social stereotypes about women are not limited to the American context, she also cites some examples from other cultures, as collected in *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from Around the World* (Mineke Schipper 2003), to impress readers that social stereotypes about women are a universal issue that is worthy of further study.

Reading through the book may evoke not only amusement but also deep thinking. If proverbs, which have long been used as one of the means to ridicule women, serve as a mirror to reflect how they were traditionally evaluated in the past, anti-proverbs are used for the same purpose in modern times. Certainly, some anti-proverbs about women are just created and used for joking rather than doing harm to them. But it implies in a modest way that women are subject to becoming the target of ridicule and mockery. The negative attitudes towards women indicate that such proverbs and anti-proverbs are created and used by men and that we still live in a male-dominated world, in which women are considered as the second sex and inferior to men in many aspects.

At the same time, the author calls our attention that despite all the anti-feminist sayings, some transformations in favour of women have appeared, such as *A woman's place is in the White House* and *Behind every successful man there's a woman—competing for his job*. Women are struggling for their independence, liberalism and equality, as represented in *All work and*

no play makes Jack a dull boy; all work and no spree makes Jill a dull she (Mieder et al. 1992:674). But it is obvious that they still have a long way to go.

Litovkina's personal interest and dedication to proverbs and anti-proverbs about women contribute to this well-grounded and substantially supported book. The book is thought provoking in that it arouses readers' awareness of the reciprocal impact of language and social attitudes. Readers will find it informative and useful for their understanding of the issues in question. Despite a couple of typos and syntactic inaccuracies, the clear layout and high readability make it accessible to both professionals and other readers. The big corpus of proverbs and anti-proverbs can serve as a useful reference for readers and researchers interested in this field. This engaging work will appeal to students and scholars of paremiology, humour studies, gender studies, cultural studies and sociolinguistics alike.

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