“Where There’s a Will There’s a Lawyer’s Bill”:
Lawyers in Anglo-American Anti-Proverbs

Introduction

1. Anti-proverbs

Proverbs have never been considered sacrosanct; on the contrary, they have frequently been used as satirical, ironic or humorous comments on a given situation. For centuries, proverbs have provided a framework for endless transformation. In the last few decades they have been perverted and parodied so extensively that their variations have been sometimes heard more often than their original forms. Wolfgang Mieder has coined the term “Antisprichwort” (anti-proverb) for such deliberate proverb innovations (also known as alterations, parodies, transformations, variations, wisecracks, mutations, or fractured proverbs) and has published several collections of anti-proverbs in German and English.¹

Like traditional gems of wisdom, anti-proverbs appear in a broad range of generic contexts, from personal letters to philosophical journals, from public lectures and sermons to songs, from science fiction to comics and cartoons, from fables to poetry. They are also found in great abundance on the Internet, in advertising slogans, in the titles of books and articles, and in magazine and newspaper headlines. Anti-proverbs are commonly quoted in collections of puns, one-liners, toasts, wisecracks, quotations, aphorisms, maxims, quips, epigrams and graffiti. There is no sphere of life where they are not used. It should be noted that while some anti-proverbs negate the “truth” of the original piece of wisdom completely [for example, Crime pays—be a lawyer {Crime doesn’t pay}], the vast majority put the proverbial wisdom only partially into question, primarily by relating it to a particular context or thought in which the traditional wording does not fit. Typically, an anti-proverb will elicit humor only if the traditional proverb upon which it is based is also known. Otherwise, the innovative strategy of communication based on the juxtaposition of the old and “new” proverbs is lost. Anti-proverbs may contain revealing social comments. More often than not, however, being based on mere wordplay or puns, they are playful texts generated primarily for the goal of amusement.

All’s fair for anti-proverbs: there is hardly a topic that they do not address. As Mieder states, “Just as proverbs continue to comment on all levels and occurrences in our daily life, so do anti-proverbs react by means of alienating and shocking linguistic strategies to

¹ Ph.D., Tomori Pál College, Center of Foreign Language Teaching, H-6300 Kalocsa, Szent István király út 2–4.
E-mail: litovkin@terrasoft.hu


² For the reader’s ease all anti-proverbs are followed by their original forms, given in { } brackets.
everything that surrounds us”.

There is a wide range of professions and occupations subjected to mockery in Anglo-American anti-proverbs, embracing politicians and doctors, accountants and policemen, teachers and writers, whores and housewives, among many others:

- Politics makes strange bedfellows—rich.
- What can’t be cured supports the doctor.
- Those who can do; those who can’t, teach; and those who can’t do anything at all, teach the teachers.
- Crime doesn’t pay, except for the writers of detective stories.
- You can lead a whore to culture but you can’t make her think.
- All work and no pay makes a housewife.

Without any doubt, the lawyer is the most popular target of Anglo-American anti-proverbs.

2. Lawyers as object of people’s scorn and butt of American lawyer jokes

In “Legal Ethics: A Comparative Study” common complaints about lawyers from around the world were classified into five general categories:

- abuse of litigation in various ways, including using dilatory tactics and false evidence and making frivolous arguments to the courts;
- preparation of false documentation, such as false deeds, contracts, or wills;
- deceiving clients and other persons and misappropriating property;
- procrastination in dealings with clients; and
- charging excessive fees.

As has been pointed out by Anna T. Litovkina in a previously published analysis of American lawyer jokes from the Internet (collected from hundreds of websites in spring 2009), the greatest anger and irritation in the jokes is directed at lawsuits, the high income

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6 In the early 1980s, a new joke cycle appeared in the USA, and has continued to flourish ever since. This is a lawyer joke cycle. Lawyer jokes have been published in book form, and have also been displayed on various American websites. According to a 1997 Internet search by a legal journalist, 3,473 sites were devoted to lawyer jokes (see Yas, D. L.: First Thing We Do Is Kill All the Lawyer Jokes. Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly, 1997, 20 October, 11). For more, see T. Litovkina, A.: Law is Hell: Death and the Afterlife in American Lawyer Jokes. Acta Juridica Hungarica, 50 (2009) 3, 311–328.