# IDIOMS FROM 17-18TH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

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*Abstract: Some poems are more popular or more widely known than others and quite a few of their lines or phrases have proved so inspired and fitting that at some point in time they seem to have started a separate life of their own: they entered the main flow of the language by becoming idioms in their own right. Sharing the fate of such linguistic elements, they are often employed to convey a certain meaning without their user being aware of their origin. Tracing them to their source and rediscovering their original context can be an interesting 'expedition' into linguistics, poetry and literary history.*

*Keywords: idiom, poem, language*

Poetry is so much more than an artificial refinement of natural speech; it is 'the eldest sister of all arts, and parent to most,' according to William Congreve. As a 'kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language' (Laurence Perrine), it has been not only a constant source of joy and enchantment that broadens our understanding of ourselves as human beings, but also a fountainhead that has provided the mainstream of language with new words and expressions. As Lord Byron describes the 'process' in Canto III of what many consider his masterpiece, *Don Juan*:

"But words are things, and a small drop of ink, / Falling like dew upon a thought, produces / That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think." Certain lines or phrases from different poetical works have proved so inspired and fitting that at some point in time they seem to have started a separate life of their own by becoming idioms in their own right. Idioms are present in speech and writing alike, but not many of those who employ them to convey a certain meaning are aware of their origin. Most of them, however, can clearly be traced to their source; and rediscovering them in their original 'habitat' – besides the pleasure of savouring the poems themselves – could help the reader to understand better how they acquired their current meaning.

***fresh fields and pastures new*** = new opportunities; new areas of activity; new places to work or live in

"And now the sun had stretched out all the hills, / And now was dropped into the western bay. / At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue: / Tomorrow to *fresh woods, and pastures new*."

The current form of the expression is by now firmly established in the language, a misquotation in fact of the last line in John Milton's *Lycias*. The pastoral elegy written in 1637 is dedicated to the memory of Edward King, a learned friend and former Cambridge colleague of Milton's, who unfortunately drowned off the coast of Wales when his ship sank while crossing the Irish Sea from Chester.

***trip the light fantastic*** = to dance



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It is in fact a strange alteration of the words in two lines from John Milton's *L'Allegro* (Italian for "the happy/ cheerful man"): "Haste thee, Nymph, and bring with thee / Jest, and youthful Jollity, (...) / Sport that wrinkled Care derides, / And Laughter holding both his sides. / Come, and *trip it as you go / On the light fantastic* toe."

The pastoral poem published in 1645 describes the delights and joys provided by a pleasant spring day first in the countryside in the midst of nature and then at the theatre in the town.

The author refers to the movements often associated with dancing as 'light' (sprightly, effortless, agile) and 'fantastick' (fanciful, inventive or even extravagant). Drawing on these characteristics, the phrase is usually applied as a humorous replacement for 'to dance', but has lately also been used in other contexts where skilful 'footwork' can be observed – from football to athletics to politics.

*An Essay on Criticism*, published anonymously in 1711, is Alexander Pope's first ambitious work. It is a verse essay in heroic couplets, a didactic poem outlining (in the best tradition of authors since ancient times) his 'Ars Poetica' both as writer and critic – in an age when the literary world was engaged in a critical debate on its governing ideals: whether poetry should be 'natural' or based on 'artificial' imitation of the classics. The next three phrases are all from this work.

***a little learning/ knowledge is a dangerous thing*** = a small amount or just partial knowledge of a subject is more dangerous than knowing nothing at all about it because such knowledge might be used wrongly and can result in more serious mistakes. Pride can mislead people into thinking that they are more expert than they really are.

"*A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing*; / Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring: / There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain, / And drinking largely sobers us again."

The reference is to the sacred spring in the Pierian Mountains in Central Macedonia (near Mount Olympus), home to the Muses of Greek mythology.

***to err is human (to forgive, divine)*** = everybody makes mistakes occasionally because human beings are neither perfect nor infallible – usually said as an excuse or an apology, suggesting that you shouldn't punish too harshly the person at fault.

"Ah ne'er so dire a Thirst of Glory boast, / Nor in the Critick let the Man be lost! / Good-Nature and Good-Sense must ever join; / *To err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine*."

The Latin original, attributed to Seneca, is longer: "Errare humanum est, sed in errare perseverare diabolicum", that is: To err is human, but to persist in error (out of pride) is diabolical.

***fools rush in where angels fear to tread*** = people with little experience or knowledge often try to do such dangerous or difficult things which wiser or more experienced people would never even consider doing

"No Place so Sacred from such Fops is barr'd, / Nor is Paul's Church more safe than Paul's Church-yard: / Nay, fly to Altars; there they'll talk you dead; / *For Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread*.

(such fops = literary critics)



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The line has not only become a much-used phrase in language, but has also inspired further literary works and several products of popular culture.

***hope springs eternal (in the human breast)*** = human beings never stop hoping; people are always optimistic, even in the face of severest adversity

"*Hope springs eternal in the human breast*: / Man never Is, but always To be blest: / The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home, / Rests and expatiates in a life to come."

*An Essay on Man* by Alexander Pope was published in 1734. The poem is a rationalistic effort to 'vindicate the ways of God to man', popularising the optimistic philosophy both in England and in Europe. The subtitle of the first epistle that contains the quotation is *Of the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to the Universe* and concerns man's position in the whole of creation, the "Vast chain of being".

***damn with faint praise*** = to praise something or someone in such half-hearted or ironically favourable terms as to imply censure or suggest disapproval

"View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes, / And hate for arts that caus'd himself to rise; / *Damn with faint praise*, assent with civil leer, / And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer; / Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike, / Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike".

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* from 1735 is a satire in poetic form by the same Alexander Pope. He wrote the verse letter to John Arbuthnot, his physician and long-time friend when he found out about his illness and imminent death; and described it as "the best memorial that I can leave, both to my Friendship to you, & of my own Character being such as you need not be ashamd of that Friendship."

In the epistle Pope defends his practice of writing satire directed against the iniquities of his society, and caricatures those contemporaries who had been his detractors during his career.

***from China to Peru*** = all over the world

"Let Observation with extensive View, / Survey Mankind *from China to Peru*; / Remark each anxious Toil, each eager Strife, / And watch the busy scenes of crouded Life"

Samuel Johnson wrote *On the Vanity of Human Wishes: The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated* in 1749, during one of his periodic depressions and while he was also busy working on *A Dictionary of the English Language*. The complex and melancholy poem is concerned with philosophical concepts and the processes of history. Like in Juvenal's satire, the main theme is the futility of human endeavour for greatness, and the tragedy of political hope. When faced with the choice between Stoicism and Christianity as two possible faiths to live by, however, Johnson asserts the importance of Christian values and virtues.

***far from the madding crowd*** = in a quiet, peaceful and secluded place; private and removed from public notice; not disturbed by other people or the general turmoil of the world. The today only poetical 'madding' meant either behaving in a crazy, frenzied way, or something that made a person or an animal behave like that. (The line was chosen by Thomas Hardy for his novel published in 1874.)



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***noiseless/ even tenor of their way*** = the general (continuous, unwavering) course, tendency or mood of something; a calm, sedate way of life or overall attitude

"*Far from the madding crowd*'s ignoble strife, / Their sober wishes never learned to stray; / Along the cool sequestered vale of life / They kept *the noiseless tenor of their way*."

Thomas Gray was probably inspired to start working on *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* after the death of his close friend, the poet Richard West in 1742, but it was only published in 1751. Although entitled 'elegy', the style of the poem resembles more that of odes; it is a meditation on human mortality, death and subsequent remembrance, along the lines of the classical 'memento mori'. The past lives he considers, however, are not those of the great or the famous, but of the obscure, common, lowly 'rude forefathers of the hamlet' – and he praises them for their honest simplicity.

***(an) aching void*** = a melancholy yearning or longing for something or somebody once held dear but now lost, the desolation and bleakness their absence left in one's heart and soul

"Where is the blessedness I knew / When first I saw the Lord? / Where is the soul-refreshing view / Of Jesus and his word? // What peaceful hours I once enjoy'd! / How sweet their memory still! / But they have left an *aching void*, / The world can never fill."

William Cowper, an outstanding poet immensely popular in his time, can be considered the 'bridge' between two generations of English poets, that of A. Pope and of W. Wordsworth. *Walking with God* is the first of his sixty-seven contributions to the *Olney Hymns*, written in collaboration with the Evangelical Reverend John Newton at Olney between1771-72.

***Variety is the spice of life*** = new and exciting experiences, trying many different things, often changing what you do, meeting all kinds of people can make life more interesting and delightful

"*Variety's the very spice of life, /* That is all its flavour. We have run / Through every change that Fancy, at the loom / Exhausted, has had genius to supply; / And, studious of mutation still, discard / A real elegance, a little used, / For monstrous novelty and strange disguise."

The passage is from the second part of *The Task: A Poem, in Six Books* by the same William Cowper, which was published as the result of a year's work in 1785. The introductory 'Advertisement' is the author's own description of how the whole poem originated: "The history of the following production is briefly this: A lady (Lady Austen), fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the Sofa for a subject. He obeyed; and having much leisure, connected another subject with it; and, pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of the trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair – a volume." In a conversational discursive style unusual for his age he meditates on an impressive range of subject matters in the six books: 'The Sofa', 'The Timepiece', 'The Garden', 'The Winter Evening', 'The Winter Morning Walk' and 'The Winter Walk at Noon', expressing his vision of the world and his reflections on man, nature and society.



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***the best laid schemes of mice and men*** = even the most carefully arranged plans often fail or go wrong

Robert Burns wrote *To a Mouse, on Turning Her up in Her Nest with the Plough* in 1785 and published it the next year in Kilmarnock, Scotland, in the collection of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. The situation in which the speaker addresses the 'subject' of the poem is clearly outlined in the full title, possibly with the not irrelevant addition that winter is about to set in. It is not typical of farmers to worry overmuch about the well-being of field mice on their land at any time of the year – yet here is one who feels such friendly concern and deep compassion for the "wee beastie" in its present plight that he apologises for the disaster he caused in the name of all humankind. What's more, he sees the creature as his "earth born companion / An' fellow mortal" whose predicament is shared by any man or woman at some point or other in their life:

"But Mousie, thou art no thy lane, / In proving foresight may be vain: / *The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men* / *Gang aft agley*, / An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain / For promis'd joy!"

The final sad conclusion is that in spite of everything; Mousie is still "blest" compared to the poet: while mice live only in the present, humans have the 'ability' to feel regret and remorse when they look back at the past and fear the uncertainty of the future.

***an/ the albatross round/ about someone's neck*** = a reminder of something one has done wrong sometime in the past and is now with one all the time as a heavy burden and a constant trial

In his long narrative poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (originally *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*, 1798, in *Lyrical Ballads*) Samuel Taylor Coleridge relates how the Mariner, a grizzled old sailor, stops a young man who is going to a wedding with his companions and starts to tell him the strange story of a voyage during which he shot and killed an albatross that had helped his ship escape from the frozen waters of the Antarctic. The initial relief did not last long, more terrible fate befell the ship and the crew blamed the Mariner and made him wear the dead bird around his neck as a punishment and a penance.

"Ah! Well a-day! what evil looks / Had I from old and young! / Instead of the cross, *the Albatross* / *About my neck was hung*."

After watching all the other crew members die, he came to appreciate the beauty of the sea creatures and was eventually able to pray again in true repentance, upon which the corpse of the albatross fell from his neck. Following a series of supernatural events the Mariner eventually got back to land, but is still consumed with guilt and has to wander from land to land, telling his story as a lesson for those he encounters, to warn from cruelty and advocate the love for God's creatures. Having listened to the tale, the Wedding Guest no longer feels in the mood for celebrating and goes home instead. The final lines are the source of the expression ***sadder and/ but wiser***, that is, having learned from (usually a difficult or unpleasant) experience:

"He went like one that hath been stunned, / And is of sense forlorn: / *A sadder and a wiser man*, / He rose the morrow morn.



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