THREESOMES IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

Ildikó Gy. ZOLTÁN[1]

Abstract

Three is a magic number: the three sons or daughters of the king, three wishes, three obstacles to overcome, third time lucky, etc. Thee-element enumerations have a kind of finality about them. In idioms, threesomes can be made up of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverb or names. As with other idioms, we also have to consider the eternal human fascination with rhythm, rhyme and alliteration.

Keywords: idiom, phrase, three, word, origin.

The general tendencies of present-day English are towards more idiomatic usage. Therefore it is important to remember that idioms are not only colloquial expressions associated with conversation and informal language, a separate part of the language, which one can choose either to use or to omit: they form an essential part of the vocabulary of English. They appear in formal style as well as in slang, in poetry, in journalism and magazines, where writers are seeking to make their articles and stories more vivid, interesting, and appealing to their readers. Idioms help speakers and writers to be fluent and to get their opinions across effectively, as they have an important role in conveying evaluation and in developing or maintaining interaction.

Pairs of words are fairly common in idioms: *Jack and Jill* (or *Gill* in the older variant), *odds and ends*, *toss and turn*, *high and mighty*, *to and fro*, and the list could continue almost indefinitely. Threesomes are less frequent, but they can be made up of the same kinds of elements. Names, both first or last: *Tom, Dick and Harry* or *Brown, Jones and Robinson*; nouns: *lock, stock and barrel* or *hook, line and sinker*; verbs: *beg, borrow or steal* or *eat, drink and be merry*; adjectives: *cool, calm and collected* or adverbs: *left, right and centre*. Three is a magic number: the three sons or daughters of the king, three wishes, three obstacles to overcome, third time lucky, etc. Pythagoras considered it the perfect number that expresses 'beginning, middle, and end'. Thee-element enumerations have a kind of finality about them. As a rhetorical device, the name of such phrases is 'tricolon'. In English, the most common form of tricolon is the ascending variant, that is, the elements are enumerated from the shortest to the longest: *the butcher, the baker, the candle-stick maker*; *hatches, matches and dispatches*; *good, bad and indifferent* or *here, there and everywhere*. As with other idioms, we also have to consider the eternal human fascination with rhythm, rhyme and alliteration.

lock, stock, and **barrel** = the whole of anything; everything; completely, in its entirety

The three items might sound like something you would find in a hardware shop, but the origin of the expression is in the language of firearms. The phrase refers to the three main parts of a gun, originally a musket. The *lock* is the firing mechanism that ignites the charge of a gun, the *stock* is the wooden handle and framework into which the barrel

[1] Assistant, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureș.

BDD-A20525 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:33:32 UTC)

and lock are set and which rests against the shoulder when the gun is fired, and the barrel is the metal tube through which the bullet is expelled. Walter Scott uses a different form in a letter written in 1817: "Like the High-land-man's gun, she wants *stock, lock, and barrel* to put her into repair." This word order only gave way to the one we know today around the middle of the 19th century.

hook, line, and **sinker** = completely, totally; in every way

The idiom is synonymous in meaning with the previous one, but the reference here is to angling, more exactly, the three basic parts of the fishing gear. The phrase usually appears as *to swallow* or *to fall for it hook, line and sinker*, which means to accept or believe (something untrue) in every detail and be completely deceived. The allusion is to a person's extreme gullibility: like a hungry but not very bright fish that does not recognise the bait on the *hook* for what it is, and trustingly – voraciously – swallows not only that, but also some of the *line* and the *sinker* (the lead weight) of the fishing tackle.

bell, book, and **candle** = an inordinately elaborate ritual

The phrase enumerates the instruments formerly used in the Latin Christian ceremonial excommunication by anathema from the Roman Catholic Church of people who had committed an exceptionally grievous sin. A bishop and twelve priests with candles participated in the ceremony, the former solemnly pronouncing sentence, the formula of the anathema ending with the words: "Wherefore in the name of God the All-powerful, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, of the Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and of all the saints, in virtue of the power which has been given us of binding and loosing in Heaven and on earth, we deprive him and all his accomplices and all his abettors of the Communion of the Body and Blood of Our Lord, we separate him from the society of all Christians, we exclude him from the bosom of our Holy Mother the Church in Heaven and on earth, we declare him excommunicated and anathematized and we judge him condemned to eternal fire with Satan and his angels and all the reprobate, so long as he will not burst the fetters of the demon, do penance and satisfy the Church; we deliver him to Satan to mortify his body, that his soul may be saved on the day of judgment." After the reply of the priests ("So be it!" three times) a bell was tolled as for someone who had died, the holy book was closed and the candles extinguished by being thrown to the ground. The ringing of the bell symbolises spiritual death, the book is the book of life and the quenching of the candles stands for the darkness of the soul when removed from the sight of God. The practice was introduced around the 8th century and the expression appears in Old English in the 14th century, later in Shakespeare's *King John* (1595) he has the Bastard say: "Bell, book and candle shall not drive me back,/ When gold and silver becks me to come on."

(every) **Tom, Dick,** and/or **Harry** = everyone or anyone, especially ordinary people without any advantages or powers, persons unworthy of notice

BDD-A20525 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:33:32 UTC)

Ordinary folk have ordinary names and in several idioms, sayings and proverbs the names typical of the class stand for the common working man or woman. Shakespeare presents them going about their daily tasks in *Love's Labour Lost* (1595): "When icicles hang by the wall,/And *Dick* the shepherd blows his nail,/ And *Tom* bears logs into the hall, .../While greasy *Joan* doth keel the pot." Generic pairs of mail names in Elizabethan times were *Jack and Tom*, *Dick and Tom*, or *Tom and Tib*. *Jack* has stood alone for his gender and class, as well as coupled with *Jill* or *Gill* since the 15th century: *every man Jack*, *Jack of all trades and master of none*, *Jack is as good as his master*, *all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*; *every Jack has his Jill* or *good Jack makes good Jill*. An apparently random selection of common names is used to stand for 'common people' in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part I* (1596): "I am sworn brother to a leash of Drawers, and can call them by their names, as*Tom, Dicke* and *Francis*." Since it is Prince Henry (also known as Harry) who speaks these lines, the author might have been making a play on the phrase.

Later in a statement by King James I, quoted by Thomas Fuller in his *Church-History of Britain* (1655) we have a different combination thrown together: "Then *Jack*, and *Tom*, and *Will*, and *Dick* shall meet and censure me and my Council." Two years later John Owen, English theologian, told a governing body at Oxford University that "our critical situation and our common interests were discussed out of journals and newspapers by every *Tom, Dick,* and *Harry*" and by the eighteen century they were the winning trio that eventually emerged and has been with us ever since.

Brown, Jones and **Robinson** started out as representatives of the 'man in the street' since, together with Smith, they are some of the most common English surnames. However, due to their frequent appearance on the pages of *Punch* magazine (established in 1841) they become better known as caricatures of the privileged Victorian young men, who enjoyed a comfortable, leisured lifestyle both at school and later on their travels. This reputation is firmly established after the publication by *Punch* caricaturist Richard Doyle of the cartoon book *The Foreign Tour of Messrs. Brown, Jones, and Robinson* in 1853. In these sketches they are ridiculed as representations of the middle-class vulgar rich: extravagant, conceited, gauche, insular and snobbish, looking down their nose at anything foreign that differs from their own manners and customs.

the **butcher,** the **baker,** (and) the **candlestick-maker** = everybody and anybody

These three tradesmen come from a children's poem which probably goes back as far as the 14th century and has known different variants, the best-known today being: "Rub-a-dub-dub,/ Three fools in a tub,/ And who do you think they be?/ The butcher, the baker,/ The candlestick maker./ Turn them out, knaves all three!"

However, the original recorded in *Christmas Box* (London 1798) and in *Mother Goose's Quarto* or *Melodies Complete* (Boston, Massachusetts 1825) had a different wording: "Hey! rub-a-dub, ho! rub-a-dub, three maids in a tub,/And who do you think were there?/ The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker,/And all of them gone to the fair."

BDD-A20525 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:33:32 UTC)

Researchers of nursery rhymes have suggested that the allusion is to three respectable townspeople, most probably stalwart pillars of the community, being caught watching a less than decent sideshow on the sly at some local fair. In the best of Victorian tradition, by the middle of the 19th century the rhyme was bowdlerized, the 'maids' eliminated for the sake of decency and propriety and replaced by 'men'.

neither **fish**, nor **fowl**, nor good red **herring** = neither one thing nor the other

The various form of the idiom include: *neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring*; *neither fish, flesh nor fowl* or shortened forms like *neither fish nor fowl* and *neither flesh nor fowl*. It refers to some kind of foodstuff that is suitable for no class of people: not fish, which would be suitable food for the monk, not flesh (or fowl), which would be food for people in general, nor yet red herring, the staple diet of the poor.

hanged, drawn and **quartered** = very severely, even cruelly punished

The allusion is to a gruesome form of torture and execution used in England from the 13th century until 1790. The sentence was passed on those guilty of High Treason on the principle that the worst imaginable crime should be punished accordingly with the utmost severity. The traitor was drawn (*detrahatur*) to the place of execution on a wooden frame or hurdle, or sometimes at a horse's tail. He would then be hanged by the neck (*suspendatur*) until almost dead, but taken down from the scaffold while still alive, emasculated and disembowelled (*devaletur*), then finally beheaded (*decapitetur*) and quartered (*decolletur*). Then the five part of the body were put on public display in different prominent places of the city (or throughout the country) as deterrents for would-be traitors, with the head usually exposed on the Tower of London. Famous examples of men who suffered this fate include William Wallace (August 1305) and the conspirators of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) except for Guy Fawkes himself, who managed to jump to his death from the scaffold with the noose around his neck and 'escaped' the rest of the sentence. This method of execution was eventually completely abolished in 1870.

eat, **drink** and **be merry** (for tomorrow we die) = enjoy yourself now

The expression has its origin in the Bible, but it is the combination of two or even three quotations: "Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die" in Isaiah 22:13; "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry" in Ecclesiastes 8:15; and finally "If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die" in 1 Corinthians 15:32.

The phrase is often humorously used as advice, implying that life may soon become worse or less carefree. It was a traditional saying of the Egyptians who, according to Plutarch, used to exhibit a skeleton in a prominent position at their banquets to remind the guests of the brevity of life.

BDD-A20525 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:33:32 UTC)

Bibliography

Flavell, Linda & Roger 2002, *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins*, London: Kyle Cathie Ltd.
Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.
Seidl, Jennifer and W. McMordie 1991, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1998, Longman Group UK Limited
The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 2005, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms 2006, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase & Fable 2004, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.
dictionary.reference.com
http://en.wikipedia.org
http://www.phrases.org.uk/

BDD-A20525 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.25 (2026-09-15 09:33:32 UTC)