THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 152:
AS THE SAYING GOES

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 152: As The Saying Goes. In this episode, we're going to explore two developments that took place in the first half of the 1500s in England. The first is the collection of popular sayings and words of advice by several notable writers during this period. Many of those sayings and proverbs had been around for centuries, but around this time, they started to be assembled into extensive collections to illustrate and wit and wisdom of the ages. The other development concerned a new type of dramatic performance. For centuries, English drama had been confined to religious and morality plays, but during the early 1500s, a new type of drama emerged that was both secular and humorous. Both of these developments had one thing in common, and that common element was a poet named John Heywood. He was both a playwright who contributed to the development of English comedy and a proverb collector who assembled the first great collection of English sayings and proverbs. In this episode, we'll look at both of those developments. And we'll also look at the final years of the reign of Henry VIII.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, we looked at sickness and disease in Tudor England. And in that episode, we revisited the concept of the four humors – the four bodily fluids that determined one's health. It was a concept that extended all the way from the ancient Greeks to the early modern era. But in the first half of the 1500s, the word ***humor*** started to acquire a new sense. The word was applied to the general state of mind or mood of a person. If the humors were in balance and the person was in good health, the person might be said to be in 'good humor.' And from there, the word ***humor*** came to refer to something that caused a person to be happy.

Of course, people in the Tudor period loved humor and entertainment, just like people today. And one place where they sometimes found humor and entertainment was in collections of popular sayings and proverbs. People have always been interested in these little sayings, but in the early age of print, some writers started to collect them and assemble them into books that could be published. In fact, you might remember from an earlier episode that the first book that William Caxton published in England was one of these collections called 'Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres.' It was an English translation of a French book, but the French version was ultimately based on an old Arabic text composed in the 11th century. Caxton published the English version in 1477. So the first book ever printing in English on English soil was a collection of ancient sayings and proverbs.

This type of collection contained sage advice that had been passed down over the centuries. Many proverbs can be traced back to antiquity. And around the year 1500, another massive collection of proverbs was assembled by the well-known Dutch writer Erasmus, who I have mentioned in prior episodes. He prepared a Greek edition of the Bible, and he encouraged the translation of the Bible into local vernaculars. Like other humanists of the period, he studied the

writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and early in his career, he assembled this massive collection of sayings or proverbs from the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Erasmus's anthology was written in Latin, and it was called 'Collectanea Adagiorum,' which literally meant 'Collection or Anthology of Adages.' He revised and expanded the work several times over his lifetime. By the time of his death in 1536, the collection had expanded from around 800 proverbs to over 4,000 proverbs. [*SOURCE: John Heywood, by Greg Walker, p. 242, OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.] Those collections are generally known as the 'Adagia,' which is just the original Latin version of the term ***adages***. The collections were very popular among early consumers of books, and they helped to popularize many of those old sayings. They contain the Latin version of common English sayings like 'to kill two birds with one stone,' 'to squeeze water out of a stone,' 'to leave no stone unturned,' and 'the grass is greener on the other side of the fence' as well as many, many others.

Well around the current point in our overall story of English in 1539, an English writer named Richard Taverner translated a small portion of Erasmus's proverb collection into English. Taverner's book contained only 187 of the proverbs, so it was just a sampling of the larger collection, but it showed that there was interest in producing a version in English for readers who didn't speak Latin. [*SOURCE: Richard Taverner's Interpretation of Erasmus in Proverbes or Adagies, by Olive B. White, PMLA, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1944), p. 930.*]

But as I noted, Erasmus's collection was mostly derived from the sayings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Some were also culled from the Bible or other ancient sources. Although some of them could be found in English, many were ancient and obscure sayings that were largely unknown in English. But a collection of decidedly English proverbs was just around the corner.

The man who eventually produced that collection was named John Heywood, but in the late 1530s, he was actually well-known for something else – his plays. Heywood was a poet and a playwright who lived at a time when medieval drama was evolving into the art form that become so popular in Elizabethan England, and ultimately produced writers like Shakespeare. That transition occurred over the course of the 1500s, and Heywood was one of the early writers who contribution to that change.

So in order to explain what I mean by that, I think we should consider what drama was like prior to the 1500s. In Europe, the story really begins with the ancient Greeks. The Greeks loved drama and theatrical performances. And in fact, many of the basic terms we associate with drama today come from the Greeks, including ***theater***, ***prologue***, ***protagonist***, ***antagonist***, ***scene***, ***episode***, ***thespian***, and ***dialogue***. The Greeks also gave us the words for the primary types of theatrical performances – ***comedy***, ***tragedy***, and ***drama***. The words ***comedy*** and ***tragedy*** can be found in late Middle English, but ***drama*** is first recorded in English in the 1520s, so it was a relatively new word in English at the current point in our overall story. Today, we tend to associate the word ***drama*** with serious or emotional stories, but it originally referred to any kind of theatrical performance. So it encompassed both comedy and tragedy, and I'm going to use the word ***drama*** in that broader sense in this episode.

Now, as we know, the Romans were heavily influenced by Greek culture, and the Romans embraced Greek drama as well. Roman playwrights contributed several important plays in the classical Roman period.

But then the early Christian Church was established, and it frowned upon such performances. As a result, the dramatic arts largely disappeared in western Europe during the early Middle Ages. [*SOURCE: A History of English Literature, William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, p. 90.*] During that period, people sometimes put on folk plays on special occasions, like celebrations associated with the changing of the seasons. But those productions mostly consisted of informal or improvised skits. And none of the dialogue from those plays was preserved.

It wasn't until the late Middle Ages that drama finally started to make a comeback in Europe. The Church started to embrace the art form as a way to teach people about the Bible. Certain stories from the Bible were sometimes acted out for congregations. At first, those performances were presented on special occasions like a depiction of the birth of Jesus at Christmastime. But over time, these types of short vignettes were composed for most of the well-known stories in the Bible, and on certain special holidays, the local craft guilds would perform them. Those plays became known as 'mystery plays,' and during those special holidays, the guilds would perform each scene on a large open cart or wagon that was pulled through town. Each cart would stop at certain points along the way and perform the scene, so it was like a combination of a play and a parade. Both the movable platforms and the plays that were performed on them were called ***pageants***. The word ***pageant*** was borrowed from Latin and French, but the original meaning of the word is disputed. One theory is that the word is derived from the same Latin root as the word ***page***, and ***pageant*** referred to the pages of dialogue that had to be memorized for the performance. An alternate theory is that the word ***pageant*** is derived from a term that referred to the platform itself, and over time, the word was extended from the platform to the performance that was presented on top of it. At any rate, in Modern English, the word ***pageant*** has to come to refer to any spectacular display presented on a stage.

Now I said that one theory connects the word ***pageant*** to the word ***page*** because the dialogue was usually written down on pages for the performers to memorize. Well, some of the scripts from those mystery plays performed in the 1400s have survived the centuries. I actually talked about one of those plays called the Second Shepherd's Play back in Episode 130. I discussed that play because it featured a character who spoke in a regional English dialect, but it also happens to be one of the oldest surviving plays composed in English.

That particular play is also well-known because it featured a comedic scene in which one of the characters steals a sheep and takes it home, and then his wife tries to hide it by placing it in a crib and pretending it's a baby. Even though mystery plays were religious in nature, they often featured those types of added scenes. Of course, those amusing scenes weren't part of the traditional stories in the Bible. They were just a little something extra that was added in to entertain the audience. Some people equated those extra bits to the mincemeat or stuffing that people ate at dinner. Mincemeat or stuffing was a kind of cheap filler. The French word for that type of food was ***farce***. It's a term that can still be found in a word like ***forcemeat***, which is a type of chopped meat used as a stuffing. Well in the early 1500s, that culinary term was

extended to the comedy scenes that were added as filler to these Bible stories in those mystery plays. And that's how the word ***farce*** evolved within English from a type of food to a type of broad comedy.

By the early 1500s, the popularity of the mystery play had started to give way to a new type of performance called a morality play. Those plays weren't based on specific stories in the Bible, but they were designed to teach a moral or ethical lesson. The characters were allegories who represented specific concepts and ideas. So for example, the plays featured characters like Truth, Mercy, Charity and Peace, and they exchanged dialogue with each other to present a moral lesson.

Well, the morality plays of the early 1500s were very popular in places like England, and even though they were sanctioned by the Church, they represented a step away for the literal stories of the Bible that had been performed previously.

Then the influence of the Renaissance and the Reformation led to a further evolution of the art form as it moved in a more secular direction. In the early 1500s, performers at the royal court started to perform short skits and sketches that didn't have anything to do with the Church at all. The performances usually occurred during breaks between other activities, and were called ***interludes***. They weren't intended to teach a lesson or provide a moral message. They were strictly entertainment and were presented for the delight of the audience. These types of plays were soon performed for the general public in churchyards and town squares. And again, this new style of play proved to be very popular with audiences, and it marks the point when English drama began to take shape outside of the confines and limitations of the Church. There were no permanent theaters or formal companies of actors yet, but both of those would start to appear over the next few decades.

I noted that these new types of plays were called ***interludes***. The term originally referred to those short sketches or skits performed at royal banquets or celebrations, but it soon came to be used for just about any type of play that was produced during this period. And one of the most popular writers of those plays was the man I mentioned earlier – John Heywood.

He originally joined the court of Henry VIII as an entertainer. The surviving court records identify him as a 'singer,' but he was also a musician and a composer of music. After Heywood had been in the king's service for about a decade, he began to write scripts for those new sketches or interludes that were being performed at the royal court. Some of his plays touched on politics and religion, but they can generally be described as farces. [*SOURCE: A History of English Literature, William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, p. 86*.]

One of Heywood's most well-known plays of this period was called 'The Four PP.' The four P's referred to the four characters in the play – a palmer (or pilgrim), a pardoner who sold indulgences and religious trinkets, a peddler or merchant, and a 'pothecary,' which was an 'apothecary' or druggist, but the word was sometimes rendered with the 'a' at the front. In the play, the palmer, pardoner and pothecary debate which one of them is more important, and then the pedlar arrives and suggests that they resolve the argument by seeing who can tell the most

elaborate lie. The pardoner lies about the holy power of his trinkets, the pothecary lies about the healing power of his cures, and the palmer or pilgrim tops them all by claiming that he had never met an angry woman in all his travels – the implication being that all women tended to be angry about something most of the time. Misogyny was a common theme in the literature of this period.

Heywood's plays were written in rhyming verse, and he loved to play around with words. We get a good example of that type of word play in a passage from The Four PP where the peddler arrives and tries to sell the other three men some goods. The men aren't interested in buying anything, but the peddler says he enjoys their company, and he suggests that they devise a game to pass the time, and that he will win because he is the best at most games. The apothecary responds with a snide question asking if the peddler is the best at drinking and winking or falling asleep. The peddler assures them that he is quite good at both because drinking and sleeping are usually linked. He uses the terms ***winking*** and ***pinking*** to refer to his eyes closing. By the way, the term ***pinking*** has largely disappeared from English, but it can still be found in some local English dialects where it refers to the late afternoon or early evening when the day grows dark, like when someone closes their eyes. Here's a performance of that passage from Heywood's play performed by the Beyond Shakespeare Company, and again, note the word play:

PEDLAR: ..Devise what pastime that ye think best,
And make ye sure to find me prest.
'POTH: Why, be ye so universal,
That ye can do whatever ye shall?
PEDLAR: Sir, if ye list for to oppose me,
What I can do, then shall you see.
'POTH: Then tell me this: are you perfit in drinking?
PEDLAR: Perfit in drinking? As may be wished by thinking.
'POTH: Then, after your drinking, how fall ye to winking?
PEDLAR: Sir, after drinking, while the shot is tinking;
Some heads be swimming, but mine will be sinking,
And upon drinking my eyes will be pinking:
For winking to drinking is alway linking.

As you can hear, these interludes were both plays and poetry, but they were often playful poetry, and they were intended as light-hearted entertainment. Again, this was one of several plays composed by John Heywood in the late 1520s and early 1530s.

Shortly after Heywood completed the last of those plays, they were all printed in 1533. That was another important development because it meant that his plays could now be read by the general public. Someone who purchased the plays could experience them without actually attending the performance. This marks a point when plays started to emerge as a specific type of literature in themselves. And again, we see how that process laid the groundwork for the great playwrights of the upcoming Elizabethan period. [*SOURCE: John Heywood: Comedy and Survival in Tudor England, Greg Walker, p. 154. OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.]

Now, it was around this same time in the mid-1530s that Henry VIII demanded that people throughout England swear an oath recognizing him as the head of the Church of England. Well, John Heywood was a devout Catholic, so he apparently made the decision to lay low during this period. He largely stopped writing plays, and he returned to his earlier role as a singer, musician and musical composer. [*SOURCE: John Heywood: Comedy and Survival in Tudor England, Greg Walker, p. 162. OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.]

As we saw in an earlier episode, Henry's demand that people swear an oath recognizing him as the head of the English Church led to many notable executions, including the execution of Henry's chancellor, Thomas More. Well John Heywood was actually married to Thomas More's niece, so he had a close connection to the More family. And that may have also played a factor in Heywood's decision to step away from the limelight.

When Thomas More resigned as chancellor, he was replaced with Thomas Cromwell. As we saw last time, Cromwell emerged as Henry's new right-hand man, and he was the one who orchestrated the dissolution of monasteries. Cromwell was a committed Protestant, and he used his position to push through many Protestant reforms. But certain events around the current point in our story led to Cromwell's fall from grace. That fall is usually attributed to Cromwell's role in arranging Henry VIII's fourth marriage which turned into a bit of a disaster.

It had been a couple of years since Henry's third wife Jane Seymour had died shortly after giving birth to their son Edward. With Henry now a widower, Cromwell saw an opportunity to promote an alliance with the Protestant states of northern Europe. By that point, many of the princes in the northern part of the Holy Roman Empire had become Protestants, and that included the duke of Cleves in the northwestern part of modern-day Germany. The duke had a sister named Anne, and Cromwell thought that she would make a good wife for Henry. He thought that it would help forge a strong alliance between England and the Protestant states across the Channel, and it would also create a fracture within the larger Holy Roman Empire ruled by the powerful Habsburg emperor Charles V.

Despite Cromwell's plans, Henry was reluctant to marry a woman he had never met, but he was finally convinced by a portrait of her painted by Henry's court artist Hans Holbein. [*SOURCE: Medical Downfall of the Tudors: Sex, Reproduction & Succession, Sylvia Barbara Soberton, p. 189.*] With the marriage agreed to, Anne of Cleves arrived in England in December of 1539. Henry decided to ride out to meet her before she reached London, but he decided to play a little prank. Before meeting Anne, he disguised himself by taking off his royal garments and putting on the clothing of a messenger. Well, Anne didn't recognize him as the king. She thought he was a messenger, and she was apparently unimpressed by what she saw. Henry took offense, and apparently never recovered from that first impression. He later complained that Anne was ugly, though contemporary sources suggest that that wasn't the case. Regardless, Henry wanted nothing to do with her, but he felt compelled to go through with the marriage anyway. The marriage was doomed from the start, and within six months, Henry had negotiated an annulment with her. He gave Anne several large estates to obtain her consent, and she retired to live in relative luxury for the rest of her life.

By that point, Henry had already fallen for Anne's maid of honor named Katherine Howard. And just nineteen days after his annulment from Anne of Cleves, he married Katherine who became wife number five.

But Henry had to buy his way out of a disastrous marriage to marry Katherine, and he wasn't willing to forgive Thomas Cromwell for his role in arranging that marriage. On the same day that Henry married Katherine Howard, Thomas Cromwell was executed for treason.

Cromwell's role in arranging the marriage to Anne of Cleves was certainly a major factor in his execution, but as the saying goes, 'it was probably just the straw that broke the camel's back.' Cromwell had made a lot of enemies through some of his radical policies like dissolving the monasteries. And those critics finally convinced Henry that Cromwell needed to go. [*SOURCE: Tudors, Peter Ackroyd, p. 149*.]

Henry also came to realize that the alliance with the Protestant states of northern Europe wasn't really necessary. He had feared that Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, was making an alliance with the French king. That kind of combined power would have been dangerous for England, so that was part of the reason why Henry had tried to forge an alliance with the northern Protestant states. It would have divided the Holy Roman Empire along religious lines, and it would have weakened Charles's position in Europe. But it soon became apparent that Charles was not going to form an alliance with the French king after all, so Henry didn't really need that Protestant alliance. [*SOURCE: The Tudors, Peter Ackryod, p. 149.*]

In fact, Henry would soon look to Charles for a renewed alliance against France. But in the early 1540s, Charles had a lot on his plate. Remember that Charles was the Habsburg emperor, so his realm not only included the Holy Roman Empire in central Europe, it also included Spain and the Spainish territories in the New World. Well, the Spanish exploration of the New World was continuing during this period, and it was revealing a massive continent in the north as well as the south.

In 1539, Charles had given his consent for the establishment of the first printing press in the New World. The press was installed in modern-day Mexico City, and it began publishing government documents, religious manuals and school books. And that development shows the extent to which the Spanish had begun to establish permanent settlements in the New World by this point.

In the same year that the printing press was put into operation in modern-day Mexico, a Spanish explorer named Hernando de Soto landed in Florida looking for gold. He traveled north and west through modern-day Georgia and Alabama, continuing westward all the way to the banks of the Mississippi.

The following year, another Spanish explorer named Francisco Vazquez de Coronado lead an expedition out of Mexico and headed northward. The expedition traveled into the western part of the modern United States. His men encountered the Grand Canyon, as well as the native Pueblo people who lived in some of those western regions. The idea that North America was a

narrow strip of land that could be easily crossed by Europeans on their way to Asia proved to be wrong. It was a massive continent separate and apart from South America.

And speaking of South America, in the year after Coronado's expedition in the north, another Spanish explorer named Francisco de Orellana made an important discovery in South America. Orellana launched an expedition out of modern-day Ecuador in the western part of South America. He had discovered a river to the east of the settlement that flowed in an easterly direction, so he decided the follow the course of the river to see where it led. For over half a year, his men followed the river almost due eastward until they finally reached the mouth of the river at the Atlantic Ocean. As the expedition neared the mouth of the river, his men came under attack from a native tribe that lived in the region. During the attack, the women of the tribe fought alongside the men. The reports of the women who fought alongside the men harkened back to a warlike tribe of women who appeared in Greek legends. The Greeks had called the female warriors Amazons, and that term was soon applied to this South America river which was supposedly defended by female warriors who fought alongside the men. And that's how the largest river in South America got its name.

In the 1990s, Jeff Bezos adopted the name of the river for his online retail company because the name conveyed a sense of largeness and grandeur. Of course, Amazon is one of the largest retailers in the world today. And it even plays a role in podcasting. If you're listening to this podcast on Audible, you're listening on a subsidiary of Amazon. By the way, here's an interesting note. In the last episode, I talked about the word ***abracadabra***. Well, before Bezos adopted the name ***Amazon*** for his company, he originally planned to called it 'Cadabra' based on the sense of magic and wonder that the word conveyed. But apparently, he was talked out of the name Cadabra because it sounded too much like ***cadaver***. So it was much better to be named after a large South American River than a dead body.

And speaking of dead bodies, that takes us back to England and Henry VIII. As we know by now, Henry was responsible for a lot dead bodies. By the early 1540s, executions for treason were commonplace in England. And no one was spared. Not a close advisor or even a wife. And Katherine Howard was about to become the second of Henry's wives to be executed.

In the summer of 1541, rumors emerged that Katherine had been involved in an intimate relationship with a man before her marriage to Henry. Since the accusations involved a relationship prior to becoming queen, it wasn't necessarily treason, but it did require a formal investigation to determine if the relationship had continued beyond the marriage. The investigators questioned the old boyfriend named Francis Dereham. He confirmed the prior relationship, but he denied that the relationship was on-going because he said that Katherine had moved on to another man named Thomas Culpeper. And that's when the investigation took a turn. When Katherine was confronted with the evidence, she denied a relationship with Culpeper. But Culpeper's belongings were searched by the investigators, and the investigators found a letter from Katherine which suggested that there was in fact an on-going sexual relationship between the two of them. Either way, it was unacceptable for the queen to be involved in such a questionable relationship with another man, and it was even more unacceptable for her to have

secret late night meetings with a male member of the court. [*SOURCE: Medical Downfall of the Tudors: Sex, Reproduction & Succession, Sylvia Barbara Soberton, p. 240-1.*]

In late 1541, both of the men, Dereham and Culpeper, were charged with treason and executed. And then Katherine was charged with adultery and executed a couple of months later in February of 1542. Katherine became the second wife of Henry VIII to be executed on charges of adultery.

You might think Henry would have given up on marriage by this point, but he didn't. He seems to have had a love-hate relationship with the women in his life. That also applies to his relationship with his daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, whose relationship with Henry was often strained. In retrospect, Henry seems like one of those men who would have uttered that old adage about women – 'you can't live with them, and you can't live without them.' And it's theoretically possible that he could have said something like that because his old friend Erasmus had included a version of that adage in his collection of Latin proverbs. In one of the passages, he referenced a quote from the Roman statesman Cato about wives. He wrote, "life with wives is uncomfortable, but without them one cannot live at all." Well, that could have been Henry VIII's motto.

And interestingly, a few weeks after Henry had his fifth wife executed, Erasmus's proverb collection was published in English. The translation was prepared by an English writer named Nicholas Udall. And unlike the limited translation I mentioned earlier, this was an extensive translation of Erasmus's work.

In addition to the many proverbs, Udall's translation is interesting because it provided the first recorded use of several words in English. We find the first use of the word ***straighten*** based on the Old English word ***straight***. We find the first use of the Latin word ***civic***. We find the first use of the word ***pixie*** for a fairy. ***Pixie*** has an uncertain origin. Both Celtic and Norse origins have been suggested. The translation also contains the first use of the word ***twang***, which originally referred to the sound made by someone plucking a stringed instrument. It was used in reference to a minstrel who was 'the worst that ever twanged.' It developed into a common English adage in the 1500s and 1600s. Someone might refer to a person who was very good at something as 'the best that ever twanged,' and a person who was bad at something as 'the worst that ever twanged.' The term was later applied to a person with a nasally voice that resembled the twang of a plucked string, and then came to be applied more generally to certain accents or manners of speech. You might think I speak with a twang. Well, that term originated with Nicholas Udall's translation of Erasmus's proverb collection in 1542.

The translation also contains the first recorded use of certain Greek words in English – words like ***oligarchy***, ***rhapsody*** and ***sophist***. It isn't surprising that the translation uses a lot of Greek terms like that because Erasmus worked from ancient Greek sources when he was assembling the proverbs. He translated them from Greek into Latin, and then Udall translated them from Latin into English.

Erasmus was considered to be one of the leading Greek scholars in Europe, but even he sometimes made a mistake when he was translating those Greek words. And one of those mistakes gives us a very common English proverb – 'to call a spade a spade.' It means 'to say it

like it is' or 'to use blunt language.' The proverb refers to a digging tool with a word that goes all the way back to Old English. And it refers to that digging tool thanks to a mistake made by Erasmus which was then carried forward by Nicholas Udall in his English translation. Here's what happened.

The original Greek version referred to a someone who would call 'a fig a fig, and a trough a trough.' So it was a way of saying that the person was plainspoken and used straight-forward language. And the saying used the Greek words for a fig and a trough because those items both were very common in ancient Greece. Well, the Greek word for 'trough' was ***skaphe***. It meant a trough or basin or something hollowed-out. But when Erasmus translated the phrase, he mistook the word ***skaphe*** meaning a 'trough' for the Greek word ***skapheion*** which meant a 'digging tool.' The two words were almost identical except for the extended ending in the second word. Since he misinterpreted the word to mean a digging tool, he rendered the phrase in Latin with the Latin word ***ligo*** which also meant a spade or digging tool. Then Nicholas Udall took Erasmus's version, and he translated the Latin word ***ligo*** into English with the word ***spade*** which had essentially the same meaning. And that gave us the modern phrase 'to call a spade a spade,' when it should really be 'to call a trough a trough.' But that's how little mistakes can shape the language over time. By the way, the original version of the proverb is apparently still common in Modern Greek. And it still uses the Greek word for ***trough***.

Urdall's English translation of Erasmus was published in the year 1542. And within a few months of that publication, Henry VIII was planning his sixth and final marriage. The sixth wife was Catherine Parr – a member of the household of Henry's daughter Mary. That's where she caught Henry's attention. He soon proposed to her, and in July of 1543, the two were married. Catherine was very well educated. She spoke several languages including French, Latin and Italian. She was also very devout and a committed Protestant, and a couple of years after marrying Henry, she published a book called 'Prayers or Meditations.' It was one of the earliest English books written by a woman to be printed in England.

But even though Catherine was Henry's wife, she still had to tread very carefully around him. There were many within Henry's court who didn't like her outspoken Protestant views. There is even one report that a prominent bishop named Stephen Gardiner tried to bring heresy charges against her, but after Catherine profusely apologized to Henry, Henry dismissed the charges. [*SOURCE: The Tudors: Peter Ackroyd, p. 174-5.*] It was a reminder that Henry was still a tyrant who demanded complete obedience, and anyone could find themselves in Henry's cross-hairs.

Around the time that Henry married Catherine Parr, someone else found himself in Henry's cross-hairs. And that was John Heywood – the poet and playwright who wrote many of those early interludes or plays that were so popular at the time. Well, I noted earlier that he was a devout Catholic, and he took a low profile when Henry started to demand that people swear an oath recognizing him as the head of the English Church. Well, in late 1543, Heywood was arrested and imprisoned for refusing to swear that oath. He remained in prison until the following year. Finally, facing execution for his refusal, Heywood backed down and swore the oath. He was released from prison in the spring of 1544. [*SOURCE: 'John Heywood,' Greg Walker, p. 237. OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.]

Interestingly, after Heywood's legal problems and near execution, there was a bit of a resurgence of interest in his earlier works. Some of the plays he had written a decade earlier were re-published with his name prominently featured on the title page, suggesting that there was renewed interest in his writings. [*SOURCE: 'John Heywood,' Greg Walker, p. 241. OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.]

But it appears that Heywood no longer had a passion for writing plays. His interest had turned to something else – proverbs. Much like Erasmus, Heywood was intrigued by proverbs. But unlike Erasmus who focused on the sayings of emperors, kings and ancient philosophers, Heywood was more interested in the common sayings that he heard on the streets of London. He started to keep a record of all the ones he heard and all the ones he could think of. His goal was to document all of the proverbs that were in common use in English at the time. And he began to assemble them into a long extended poem.

The poem concerned a young man who is faced with a dilemma. He has the option of marrying two different women. One is a pretty young maiden who is very poor; the other is an old unattractive widow who is very rich. The young man poses his dilemma to the narrator of the poem and asks for the narrator's advice. This provided the jumping-off point for the many proverbs that Heywood had collected.

The work was published in the year 1546 under the very long title "A Dialogue Containing the Number in Effect of All the Proverbs in the English Tongue, Compact in a Matter Concerning Two Manner of Marriages." Given that long title, the book is sometimes simply referred to 'The Proverbs of John Heywood.'

The extended poem contains literally hundreds of proverbs. Many of them have fallen out of use over time, but a lot of them are still common today. Since Heywood was a collector of proverbs, many of the sayings can also be found in earlier documents. But there are also a few proverbs that are recorded for the first time in this particular poem.

Now for obvious reasons, the poem is important to historians of English because it attempts to record every common proverb that was in use in the language at the time. But it's also important for another reason. The published version of the poem was very popular. Four editions of the book were published in the fifteen years that followed its initial publication. And the popularity of the book may have helped to preserve some of these proverbs, and it may have contributed to the widespread use of some of these proverbs over the following centuries.

As I noted, there are hundreds of proverbs in the poem, so I'm not going to go through all of them. In fact, the majority of them are rarely heard today or have disappeared from the language altogether. But there are also a lot proverbs that we still use. So I want to give you a sense of the poem and the way Heywood incorporated the proverbs into the narrative. To do that, I'm going to take you through part of the poem – roughly the first third or so.

Again, the poem is structured in the form of a conversation between a young man seeking advice on marriage and the narrator who supplies him with anecdotes and sage advice. In an early passage, the narrator warns the young man against rushing into marriage. He says:

Som thingis that prouoke young men to wed in haste,
Show after weddyng, that hast maketh waste.

Of course, this is the well-known adage that 'haste makes waste.' This was a very old saying that Erasmus had included in his Latin collection, and which Nicholas Udall had translated into English four years earlier.

A little later in the same chapter, Heywood includes the following passage:

Thus by these lessons ye may learne good cheape
In wedding and all things to looke ere ye leape.

Of course, this is an early version of the phrase 'look before you leap.' Heywood used 'look ere ye leape' – ***ere*** (e-r-e) being an old word meaning 'before.' The modern version 'look before you leap' with the word ***before*** is found a few decades later in the late 1500s. The Oxford English Dictionary also records essentially the same proverb in the prior century in the line "First loke and aftirward lepe.' So again, this is an old idea which Heywood applies to someone who rushes into marriage.

At this point, the young man responds to the narrator's sage advice by noting that if he is to marry the wealthy old widow, he cant afford to take his time because she might die before the marriage, and then he wouldn't inherit her wealth. So the man is a bit of a gold-digger. He says:

When the Sunne shineth make hay; which is to say,
Take time when time comth, lest time steale away.
And one good lesson to this purpose I pike
From the smith's forge, when th' iron is hot, strike.

Then he adds:

Time is tickle; and out of sight, out of minde;
Than catch and hold while I may, fast binde fast finde.

And he concludes:

I hopping without for a ring of a rush,
And while I at length debate and beate the bush,
There shall steppe in other men and catch the burdes.
And by long time lost in many vaine wurdes,
Betweene these two wives make sloth speed confound,
While betweene two stooles my taile goe to the ground.

So within these lines, we find the adage ‘When the Sunne shineth make hay,’ which is an early version of ‘Make hay while the sun shines.’ Hay needs to be harvested when it is dry, so a farmer has to take advantage of a sunny day to do the work. This is the first known use of that proverb in English. Of course, it means essentially the same thing as ‘to strike while the iron is hot,’ which Heywood included in the following line. He had to re-word the phrase to make the rhyme work, so he rendered it as ‘when th’ iron is hot, strike.’ Of course, the phrase refers to the fact that iron has to be heated to make it soft and pliable, and in order to forge it, the blacksmith has to strike it and hammer it while it is hot before it cools down.

The passage I read also includes the phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind.’ This was a proverb also recorded by Erasmus earlier in the century, and it’s a phrase that can be traced all the way back to Homer and the Odyssey.

The passage also included the proverb ‘beat the bush,’ or as we know it today, ‘beat around the bush’ or ‘beat about the bush.’ I discussed this saying in an earlier episode, but you might recall that it refers to the hunters who would beat a bush to drive the birds out so other hunters could catch or kill them while they were fleeing. The implication was that the person ‘beating the bush’ had the easy job, and was doing something preliminary to the real job which was catching or killing the birds. So to ‘beat around the bush’ was just a preliminary activity, which led to the sense of the phrase as ‘a pointless delay.’ That original sense is fully captured here when Heywood writes, “And while I at length debate and beate the bush, There shall steppe in other men and catch the burdes.” That was also a play on words because the word ***bird*** was also a slang term for a woman or maiden. So while he is beating around the bush – or debating which woman to marry – other men are catching the birds or getting married.

Heywood concluded the passages I read with the line ‘While betweene two stooles my taile goe to the ground.’ This is an early version of the phrase ‘fall between two stools’ meaning ‘unable to choose between two alternatives.’ If someone can’t decide which stool to sit on, he or she may try to sit in the middle of both of them and fall to the ground. That adage ‘To fall between stools’ is more common in the UK than the US, but it’s found here, and it can be traced back even further than that to the 1300s.

In a later passage, the young man says, “Of two ils chose the least,” which is an early version of “choose the lesser of two evils.”

The young man then makes a case for the old widow with the following passage where he expresses the basic idea that beauty is skin deep::

To take lacke of beauty but as an eie sore,
The fayre and the foule by darke are like store.
When all candles bee out all cattes be gray;
All things are then of one colour, as who say:
And this proverbe sayth, for quenching hot desire,
Foule water as sone as fayre will quench hot fire.

Where giftes be given freely, East, West, North or South,
No man ought to looke a given horse in the mouth.

So in this passage, we find an interesting proverb, 'When all candles are out, all cats are gray." Again, that's just another way of saying that beauty is skin deep. He then includes another proverb that was apparently popular in the 1500s – 'Foul water will quench a fire as well as fair water.' Again, it isn't the style of thing that matters, it's the substance of the thing that is most important. Then he concludes the passage with the line, 'No man ought to looke a given horse in the mouth,' which is just an early version of 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth.' This proverb is an old adage that can be found in the Latin Bible where the Latin version is translated as 'Never inspect the teeth of a given horse.' The phrase comes from the fact that is was once common for people to inspect a horse's teeth to determine the age of the horse. So if someone gives you a horse, be grateful and accept it. Don't inspect its teeth to see if its too old. And from that notion we got the idea that one shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

We then come across a passage where the narrator recalls the marital problems of a couple who were his neighbors. The couple consisted of a young man and a poor maiden. He recalls how there was marital bliss at first. Then we have the following passage:

Yea, there was God, (quoth he), when all is doone.
Abyde, (quoth I), it was yet but hony moone;

Believe it or not, this is the first recorded use of the word ***honeymoon*** in an English document. ***Honey*** and ***moon*** are both Old English words, so this compound term was formed within English. It probably reflects a notion that there was a period of about a moon cycle or a month in which there was a period of sweetness in the marriage. So that was the ***honeymoon***. It's a sense that we still have in a phrase like the 'honeymoon period' meaning the period when everything is new and fresh and when people are getting along with each other before they start to get on each other's nerves. Of course, today we associate the word ***honeymoon*** with a trip that a married couple takes after the wedding ceremony to celebrate the marriage. The word almost certainly pre-dates John Heywood, but again, we find it for the first time here.

The narrator then tells us that after that period of marital bliss, the couple started to argue. Without money, they ran into financial problems. The narrator says that he advised the husband, and then the wife, to seek help from their relatives. He recalls addressing the wife with the following passage:

And if your husbande will his assent graunt,
Goe, he to his uncle, and you to your aunt.
Yes, this assent he graunteth before, (quoth she);
For he ere this, thought this the best way to be;
But of these two thinges he would determine none
Without aid. For two heads are better then one.

That concluding line contains the first known use of the phrase ‘two heads are better than one’ in the English language.

The narrator then recalls that the young wife went to her aunt’s home to ask for help, but the aunt’s daughter Alice got in the way. The wife says of her cousin Alice:

To tell tales out of schoole, that is her great lust.
Looke what shee knowth, blab it wist and out it must?

This is the first known use of the phrase ‘tell tales out of school’ in the English language. The young wife is saying that her cousin couldn’t keep a secret, and was prone to spreading gossip.

The aunt then criticizes the young wife by saying that her humility masks her indiscretions and bad behavior. She says:

There is nothing in this world that agreeth wurse,
Then doth a Ladies hart and a beggers purse.
But pryde she sheweth none, her looke reason alloweth,
She lookth as butter would not melt in her mouth.
Well, the still sow eats up all the draffe? Ales.
All is not gold that glisters, by told tales.
In youth she was toward and without evill;
But soone ripe, soone rotten; young saint, old devil.

So here the aunt says that the wife looks as if ‘butter would not melt in her mouth.’ It’s a proverb that refers to someone who looks innocent and calm, but is usually used – as here – to imply that the person is hiding some bad behavior. The sense is that the person is so cold that butter wouldn’t melt in his or her mouth. We also have the phrase ‘all is not gold that glisters,’ which is an early version of ‘all that glitters is not gold.’ The original wording of the phrase in the early sources is ***glisters*** – not ***glitters***. And the passage concludes with proverbs like ‘soon ripe, soon rotten.’ and ‘young saint, old devil.’ Again the idea is that something that was innocent in youth can turn bad over time.

The young wife’s aunt refuses to give her anything with the following passage:

Hold fast whan ye have it, (quoth she); by my lyfe,
The boy thy husband, and thou the girle, his wife,
Shall not consume that I have labored fore.
Thou art yong ynough, and I can worke no more.

The narrator then recalls asking the young wife where her uncle was while this discussion was taking place. Here’s that passage:

Forsooth, (quoth I), ye have bestird or roused ye well;
But where was your uncle while all this fray fell?
Asleepe by, (quoth she), routing lyke a hogge;
And it is evill waking of a sleeping dogge.

So this passage contains an early version of the proverb ‘let sleeping dogs lie’ – meaning 'to leave well enough alone.’ In this case, it was better to let her uncle sleep than to arouse him and have him add to the fray.

And that concludes the portion of poem about the young wife. The poem continues on from there. Again, that’s roughly the first third of the poem. In the end, the young man who was considering which woman to marry ultimately decides to marry neither one. But along the way, we are introduced to lots more proverbs, including several more that are recorded for the first time in English, including ‘A rolling stone gathers no moss,’ ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained,’ ‘One good turn deserves another,’ ‘the worse for wear,’ ‘tit for tat,’ ‘There’s no fool like an old fool,’ ‘To know which side your bread is buttered,’ and ‘You can’t have your cake and eat it too.’

Heywood also gives us the first use of the phrase ‘the hair of the dog that bit you’ to refer to a sip of alcohol to help soothe the symptoms of a hangover. The phrase comes from the medieval belief that someone bitten by a rabid dog could cure the infection by applying some of the same dog's hair to the wound. So in this case, the affects of excess alcohol can be tempered by taking an extra sip or two of the same alcohol.

In the end, John Heywood’s book of proverbs proved to be his most popular work. And in fact, it was one of the most popular books printed in England during the 1500s. It was published ten different times during the second half of the century.

A few months after Heywood’s book of proverbs appeared in 1546, Henry VIII became sick in what would prove to be his final illness. Over the prior two years, he had launched another massive invasion of France which proved to be costly and unproductive. Henry had inherited a lot of wealth from this father, and he had seized even more wealth during his reign. But at the end of his life, he was in massive debt. By late 1546, he was weak, tired, severely overweight, and suffering from recurring fevers. By January of 1547, it was clear that Henry was dying, but his own doctors were afraid to tell him that because it was treason to even talk about the king’s death. [*SOURCE: Medical Downfall of the Tudors: Sex, Reproduction & Succession, Sylvia Barbara Soberton, p. 265.*] Henry VIII finally died on January 28, 1547. And the crown passed to his nine-year old son Edward.

At the time of Henry’s death, John Heywood was just starting to enjoy the second phrase of his career as a proverb-collector. Over the next couple of decades, he continued to collect proverbs, and published additional collections. All in all, Heywood documented about 600 proverbs and idioms that were in common use in English in the mid-1500s. [*SOURCE: John Heywood, by Greg Walker, p. 248. OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition*.]

Interestingly, Heywood never showed much interest in returning to his roots as a playwright, even though he had been a key figure in the development of English drama – and especially in the development of secular plays and farces.

By the way, England wasn't the only place where important developments were taking place in the realm of drama, and especially in the art of comedic performance. Around this same time, in the mid-1500s, a new type of comedy started to appear in Italy. It featured certain stock characters who performed sketches that were partly improvised. This new type of comedy was called commedia dell'arte, which literally means 'art comedy.'

The performances usually consisted of a general plot to guide the actors, but much of the dialogue was improvised and tailored to the specific audience that was watching. Much of the action was physical and featured miming, pranks and other physical comedy. Sometimes one character would beat another character with a prop stick called a ***batacchio***. It was made of two slats of wood, and when an actor would swing the device, the pieces of wood would smack together and create a loud slapping sound. It was often used when one character would pretend to beat another character with it. Well, in English, that device or batacchio was called a ***slap-stick***. And that term ***slap-stick*** came to refer to a broad style of physical comedy. The word entered English in the 1800s, but it can be traced back to the Italian commedia dell'arte of the 1500s.

Again, the characters were largely the same from one performance to the next. There were a handful of stock characters, and they usually wore masks. By the way, the word ***mask*** was a new word in English in the mid-1500s with origins in the Italian word ***maschera***. The same word is also the root of the word ***mascara***, which originally referred to cosmetics used by actors to highlight their eyes.

Well, this particular form of Italian comedy become so popular across Europe that it influenced theater in other countries as well, including England. And some of those stock characters also had a cultural influence that has persisted to this day.

For example, the stock character called Arlecchino was a servant, but he usually presented as a type of clown who wore a colorful costume with a diamond-shaped pattern. The character name was rendered in English as Harlequin, and it contributed to the development of the modern clown. By the way, ***clown*** is another word that entered English in the mid-1500s. Some modern playing cards use a joker design that is modeled on the character of Harlequin. And speaking of jokers, the DC comic universe features the character Harley Quinn, whose name is derived from Harlequin.

Harlequin was one of several stock characters who were tricksters and played the role of servants. These types of characters were called the ***Zanni*** – apparently a Venetian rendering of the name ***Giovanni*** in much the same way that English used the name ***Jack*** as a general term for a man. Well those Zanni characters were clown-like, and the Italian word ***Zanni*** eventually made its way into English in the late 1500s as the word ***zany***. If something is ***zany***, it's foolish and hilarious.

Another stock character who was also a Zanni was a character called Pulcinella (/pul-che-nella/), which the English rendered as Punchinello. It was later shortened to Punch, and it evolved into the character featured in the Punch and Judy puppet shows which became popular in England in the 1600s.

Another stock character was called Scaramuccia. I mentioned him way back in Episode 119. He was a rogue and a braggart whose name meant 'little sword fighter' in Italian. In English, it became Scaramouch, and it was apparently the source of the term used by Freddie Mercury in the operatic section of the song Bohemian Rhapsody.

In that earlier episode, I also mentioned the stock character called Pantalone – a merchant and miser who only cared about money. You might remember that the character's costume almost always featured a pair of red leggings, which ultimately developed into the English word ***pantaloon*** for long trousers. And within American English, the word was shortened to ***pants***. So the word ***pants*** originated with a popular character in the Italian commedia dell'arte of the 1500s. But ***pants*** didn't emerge as a distinct word until the 1800s. So ***pants*** is a relatively modern word in that regard. But there's something very interesting about the word ***pants***. Even though it's less than a couple of centuries old, it has produced quite a few sayings and idioms in Modern English.

The head of a household is the one who 'wears the pants in the family.' To be caught off guard is 'to be caught with your pants down.' To dominate someone in a game is 'to beat the pants off of them.' To have sex with someone is 'to get into their pants.' And to do something instinctively without planning is to do it 'by the seat of your pants,' originally in reference to pilots who flew planes by responding to the vibrations and feel of the plane itself.

That shows how prone we are to coining new phrases and idioms and proverbs within English. Language change never stops. Old sayings and proverbs routinely disappear, and new ones enter the language. And that's why John Heywoood's proverb collection from the same time period as the commedia dell'arte is so valuable to historians of the English language. It captures the sayings and proverbs that were common in the language at the time and, in doing so, it shows us how much the language has changed since then.

Next time, we're going to move the story into the second half of the 1500s, and we're going to look at one of the great debates in the history of English – the so-called Inkhorn Debate. By the mid and latter part of the 1500s, English writers were starting to debate the nature of the language – what it should sound like, how it should be written, and in the case of the Inkhorn Debate, what words should be used. Should the language continue to embrace loanwords from Latin and Greek, or should it focus more on its native vocabulary? It was a fascinating debate because it presented an alternate version of the language, and had that alternate version been accepted, it would have produced a very different form of English than the one we have today. So next time, we'll look at that debate.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.