THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 156: BEGGARS, CHEATS AND THIEVES

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 156: Beggars, Cheats and Thieves. In this episode, we're going to explore the language of the Tudor underworld. Throughout the 1500s, England saw a significant rise in the number of vagabonds and beggars. Those who couldn't survive by simple begging often turned to thievery, gambling and fraud. This subculture had its own social structure, and it also had its own vocabulary. And in the mid-1500s, several books were published in an attempt to highlight the lifestyle and language of these people who lived on the fringes of society. Those books give us an early look at English slang and are arguably the precursors of our modern dictionaries. So this time, we'll look at those developments, and we'll also look at the beginning of the Elizabethan era in England.

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 let's turn to this episode, and let's pick up where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at a series of scholars in the mid-1500s who recommended the use of plain English in place of fancy loanwords. This was the beginning of a scholarly debate which became known over time as the 'inkhorn debate.' And it reflected a growing unease with the large number of loanwords that were pouring into English at the time. In fact, most of our episodes during the Tudor period have focused the influx of Latin and Greek loanwords and the way in which scholars and academics embraced those words.

But now, we're going to shift our focus and look at what was happening at the other end of the social spectrum. Historians of English have a tendency to focus on the writings of academics and scholars because their writings comprise such a large portion of the surviving documents from earlier periods of English. But as we move into the mid-1500s, we suddenly find a new type of English literature sometimes called 'rogue literature.' This new type of literature focused on the criminal underworld of Tudor England. Through a series of books and pamphlets, writers wrote in great detail about gamblers, cheats, pickpockets, beggars and vagabonds. This literature popped up around the current point in our story in the 1550s, and it was primarily written as a guide to expose the activities of these people. They were basically guidebooks to help people to identify the cheats and thieves so they could avoid being scammed and victimized.

Part of that educational process involved the language of this growing underworld. Many of the people who operated in those circles used a type of slang or jargon that most other people couldn't understand. Some people called it 'Peddler's French.' Others called it the 'Canting tongue.' ***Cant*** is old term for the secret language of vagabonds and thieves. That type of slang was very extensive in the Tudor period, and these books and pamphlets that appeared in the mid-1500s often included glossaries that defined those canting terms so people could interpret what was being said on the streets. So in these books and pamphlets, we have English terms being defined in English. Some scholars consider those glossaries to be the precursors of modern English dictionaries.

So for example, the people of Tudor England had common words like ***steal*** and ***rob***. ***Steal*** is an Old English word, and ***rob*** is an early French loanword. They also used the word ***nim*** to mean the same thing. You might hear someone refer to 'nimming' a piece of jewelry or some other thing of value. ***Nim*** is actually an Old English word related to the word ***nimble***. ***Nimble*** originally meant 'to grasp or take something very quickly,' and it later evolved a more general sense of moving very quickly. But the word ***nim*** retained its original meaning as 'steal or rob.'

During this period, you might also hear someone on the street use the word ***poll*** in a similar way. If someone was 'polled' of all their money, it meant that they had been robbed or cheated. It came from the word ***poll*** in its meaning as 'head,' which I've talked about before, like in the term 'poll tax' which meant a tax on every head or on every person. Well, from the sense of head, it came to refer to the process by which the hair on the head or the head itself was removed. And that sense of removing someone's hair or head was then extended to the sense of removing someone's valuables. So ***poll*** became another word meaning 'to rob or steal.'

Well, the same idea was captured in another term – to 'fleece.' Of course, ***fleece*** referred to the hair or wool of a sheep. It's an Old English word, and it evolved into a verb 'to fleece' meaning to remove the wool from a sheep. Well, by the mid-1500s, it had started to be used as another word for steal or plunder. In the same way that a sheep was deprived of its wool, an unsuspecting victim might be deprived of his or her personal belongings. And that sense of the word ***fleece*** meaning 'to cheat or defraud someone' still survives in the language today.

You might have heard all of those terms on the streets of London in the mid-1500s, but if you were in the company of thieves who were speaking in their own unique jargon, you might have also heard them use the word ***cozen*** – 'c-o-z-e-n.' 'To cozen' someone was to cheat or defraud them. And a cheater was a ***cozener***. Like many of these so-called canting terms, the origin and etymology of the word ***cozen*** is unclear.

Another slang term for cheating or swindling someone was to ***rook***. If you 'rooked' someone, you took advantage of them and stole their money. The cheater was also sometimes called a ***rook***. It was apparently derived from the word ***rook*** in the sense of a crow. Crows were considered dirty birds, and sometimes a disreputable person was called a crow. And that led to the association of the word ***crow*** with cheating and deception.

Another similar term derived from the word for an animal was 'to fox' someone. Again, it meant to cheat or swindle. Some people used the phrase 'to play the fox' in much the same way. It was derived from the popular perception of the fox as a clever and cunning animal. And it still survives in the term ***outfox***. If you 'outfox' someone, you use your cunning and wit to defeat them or take advantage of them.

Another term for a petty thief was a ***prig*** or ***prigman*** or ***prigger***. And to steal or cheat was 'to prig.' Again, the origin of that term ***prig*** is unclear.

Another term that thieves would have used at the time for their craft was 'to lift.' Of course, it was derived from the literal sense of lifting something or picking it up. But by the mid-1500s, it was being used to refer to the process of picking something up that didn't belong to you. It is still used today to refer to stealing, and in fact, we still have it in the term ***shoplift***.

So some of these canting terms have survived into Modern English, while others have largely disappeared over time.

But again, in the mid-1500s, during the short reign of Mary I, these types of words could be heard in taverns and inns and alleys and brothels throughout England. They were the words of the criminal underworld, and the country was teeming with thieves and cheats and vagabonds during this period. And for the first time, this so-called canting jargon began to emerge from the confines of those seedy establishments, and it started to be recorded by mainstream writers who wanted the upstanding citizens of England to understand the scams and the language of this ever-growing subculture.

So what was it about this particular time that led to so much literature about the bandits and rogues that the plagued the country? I mean beggars and thieves had been around forever. Well, part of the answer is that there had been a significant increase in the number of those people in England. They were no longer a small group of people living on the fringes of society. They seemed to be everywhere, roaming the countryside and teeming throughout the cities, looking for handouts and often resorting to crime. And there are several reasons for that increase in the 1500s.

I've alluded to some of these reasons and causes in prior episodes. For example, a couple of episodes back I talked the land enclosures in the countryside. For more than a century, common lands had been fenced in by wealthy landowners and turned into pastures. It started as a necessity immediately after the Black Death when there weren't enough peasants to till the land, so the landowners shifted from growing crops to maintaining flocks and herds of animals. Once enclosed, very little labor was necessary. But by the 1500s, the population of the country had recovered, and now there were lots of peasants in the countryside with no work available. As I noted a couple of episodes back, this situation contributed to riots during the reign of Mary's older bother Edward VI. Some of those homeless vagabonds roamed the highways begging and stealing. And many of them moved to local towns and cities to find work or to beg and steal if no work was available.

Another major factor in the growth of this sub-culture was the overall growth in population in the 1500s. Like much of Europe, England had started to recover from the Black Death. The population of England doubled during the 1500s. [*SOURCE: Rogues, Vagabonds and Study Beggars, Arthur F. Kinney, Ed., p. 22.*] The population had been a little over two million at the beginning of the century. By the end, it was around four million. But there was no mechanism in place to deal with the needs and demands of all of those new people. [*SOURCE: The Time Traveler's Guide to Elizabethan England, Ian Mortimer, p. 47.*]

Another factor was the Protestant Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII. Monasteries had been a source of charity and social support during the Middle Ages. Now, most of them were gone. And the people who worked in them like the cooks, and butchers, and bakers, and gardeners were all kicked out and forced to find some other way to make a living.

There were also a variety of other factors that contributed to the problem. People who became injured and disabled couldn't work anymore, so they had to find other ways to get by. Many women who lost their husbands, and many children who lost their parents, had few options other than begging and stealing.

Added to all of this was another new development in the 1500s – the arrival of people from Europe who were commonly known as ***Egyptians***. Within the criminal underworld of England, they were called ***moon men***. They were the descendants of people who had originated several centuries earlier in South Asia, probably in India or Persia. They appeared in Greece in the 11th century, around the time of the Norman Conquest of England. Over the course of the Middle Ages, their descendants roamed around western Europe developing a distinct culture of their own, often making a living by telling fortunes and sometimes engaging in petty crimes. By the early 1500s, they had reached England. In England, their lifestyle and appearance led many people to assume that they were Egyptian, even though their ultimate origin was probably South Asia – not Egypt. Nevertheless, the term ***Egyptian*** stuck, and it was soon reduced to just 'gyptian,' and then to ***gypsy***. Elements of that culture still exist, and in recent years, that term ***gypsy*** has started to fall out of use. Today, many people consider it to be a derogatory or pejorative term. Other terms are preferred like the ***Romani***. But regardless of the term that is used, the origin of this subculture in England can be traced back to the Tudor period.

The net result of all of this is that England had a large and growing underclass during the reign of Queen Mary. According to some estimates, at least thirty percent (30%) of the population lived at or below the subsistence level during mid-1500s. [*SOURCE: Elizabethan Society: High and Low Life 1558-1603, Derek Wilson, p. 78.*]

This problem was concentrated in cities like London. As I noted, the population of England doubled throughout the 1500s. Well, the population of London tripled during that period. That growth reflects that fact that people were pouring into the city looking for work. By the end of the 1500s, it had a population around 150,000 people. Estimates suggest that about 20,000 of them were vagabonds, beggars or thieves. [*SOURCE: Rogues, Vagabonds and Study Beggars, Arthur F. Kinney, Ed., p. 16.*] Some writers from the period suggested the number was closer to 30,000. [*SOURCE: The Time Traveler's Guide to Elizabethan England, Ian Mortimer, p. 45.*] So that was basically 10 to 20% of the city's population. There may have been another 10,000 such people roaming the highways in the countryside. [*SOURCE: The Time Traveler's Guide to Elizabethan England, Ian Mortimer, p. 45.*]

That was the context for all of those books and pamphlets that focused on this element of society in the mid-1500s. They described the common scams and schemes used by thieves and petty criminals. They were sometimes called 'coney-catching pamphlets' based on the slang term

coney. A ***coney*** was a victim or mark or gullible person targeted by thieves. And a ***coney-catcher*** was the thief who preyed on them. ***Coney*** literally meant a rabbit. So a thief targeting a gullible victim was like someone hunting rabbits. The 'coney-catchers' staked out their victims and used a variety of frauds and schemes to take advantage of them. A moment ago, I referred to these coneys or victims as ***marks***. That was another bit of canting jargon that emerged during this period for a person who was the target of a scam.

Well, as these criminal activities grew, more and more people wanted to learn about those scams so that they didn't become victims. A little bit of knowledge went a long way when dealing with thieves and scam artists. And that's why so many of these books and pamphlets were produced during the mid and late 1500s. They exposed the tricks and methods of the criminal underworld, and they also described the type of people who carried out those scams so that they could be easily recognized and avoided.

One of the earliest pieces of this type of literature was a pamphlet published during Mary's reign by a man named Gilbert Walker. It was called 'A Manifest Detection of the Most Vile and Detestable Use of Diceplay, and Other Practices Like the Same.' As the titled indicates, it was mainly about scams involving dice, but it also discussed people who cheated at playing cards. The exact date of manuscript is uncertain, but it is generally agreed that it was produced in the mid-1550s. The book is structured as a dialogue between two men. One of them casually strolls through St Paul's Cathedral when he is approached by another man who turns out to be a cheat – or cozener or coney-catcher. They strike up a conversation, and the cheat proceeds to explain some of the terminology and tricks of the trade employed by dice and card players.

Now the fact that Walker set this encounter and dialogue in St. Paul's Cathedral in London is very notable. At the time, St. Paul's was located at the center of the old walled city. But it wasn't just a church. Most days, the courtyard also served as a bustling market and fair. It was also a place where people posted job openings and passed on the latest news and gossip. In many ways, it was the heart of London, and anyone arriving in London would usually head straight to the cathedral to see what was happening. The crowds that gathered there and passed through the courtyard were prime targets for thieves and pickpockets. Criminals tended to hang out wherever there were crowds, and there was always a crowd at St. Paul's. So it became known as a haven for criminals.

These urban criminals often operated in gangs or groups. Some of them specialized in targeting certain kinds of victims or carrying out specific types of scams. For example, some of them preyed on women as they went to and from the markets. They would approach the women and either beg for money or steal what they had. This type of criminal was called a ***frater***. The word ***frater*** was also a common term for a monk. It is the Latin word for 'brother,' so monks were also sometimes called ***fraters***. And it appears that that term was appropriated to describe these particular beggars and thieves.

Perhaps the most common type of thief found in crowds like those at St. Paul's was the pickpocket. The term ***pickpocket*** also dates from this period in the mid to late 1500s. The term ***pickpocket*** was well-known, but fellow criminals often referred to that type of thief as a ***foist*** or a ***diver***.

As I noted, many of those thieves worked in groups, and very often, a pickpocket or diver had an assistant who would distract or stall the victim. So that assistant was known as a ***stall***.

Now we have to keep in mind that modern pockets were still a relatively new feature of clothing in the 1500s. It was still common for people to wear their purse as a separate pouch attached to the clothing with a string. So skillful thieves mastered the art of cutting those purse strings while the person was distracted. Not surprisingly, that type of thief was called a ***cutpurse***. Other slang terms for a cutpurse included a ***snap*** or a ***cloyner***.

The act of cutting a purse was called ***nipping***. And a purse was sometimes called a ***bong*** or ***bung***. So in the canting language of the day, 'to nip a bong' meant 'to steal a purse' by cutting the string that secured it.

Since the heist usually involved two people working together – the cutpurse and the stall – they usually ended up dividing the stolen money between them. Each person's share or take was called the ***snappage***.

Again, this type of crime was common wherever crowds gathered, and as I noted, St. Paul's Cathedral became a haven for pickpockets, cut-purses and other thieves. And that's why Gilbert Walker used it as the setting for his book about people who cheated at dice and playing cards.

In the book, the thief described how gamblers used a variety of false dice to deceive their victims. Some dice were weighted, some had uneven sides, and some had double sides with the same number of dots on each side. The thief character then mentioned a slang term to describe this type of false or deceptive dice play. He called it a ***cheat***. At the time, the word ***cheat*** was just a canting or slang term used by gamblers and thieves. And the use of the word in this particular book to refer to deceptive dice play is the oldest recorded use of the word ***cheat*** with its modern meaning.

Now those gamblers didn't make up the word ***cheat***. It was derived from an old legal term – the word ***escheat***. And I actually talked about the evolution of that term way back in Episode 85. You might remember that ***escheat*** was a French term used in property law during the feudal era. Whenever a vassal defaulted on some particular obligation to his lord, the lord could retake or reclaim the property that had been placed in the vassal's possession. So when property escheated, it reverted back to the lord or the king from which it came. By the way, that term is still used in the law to this day. If there is any unclaimed money or property, it will eventually revert back to the government treasury under the same basic principles.

Well, in the Middle Ages, some lords who wanted to reclaim their property would engage in fraudulent or deceptive practices to force the vassal to default, thereby forcing the property to revert back to the lord. And that's how the word ***escheat*** became associated with fraud. And by the mid-1500s, gamblers and thieves had appropriated the term ***escheat*** as simply ***cheat*** meaning a type of deceptive game, specifically deceptive dice play in this particular book by Gilbert Walker.

Walker also gave us the first use of the word ***cheater*** meaning one who engages in cheating to win a game by false pretenses.

Before the word ***cheat*** passed from thieves' jargon into the general lexicon of English, it gained quite a bit of currency. In fact, within the criminal subculture of England, it was often used very generally to mean a 'thing.' For example, a person's nose was a 'smelling cheat.' An ear was a 'hearing cheat.' A pig was a 'grunting cheat.' And a cow was a 'lowing cheat.' So you can see how the word ***cheat*** was sometimes just used a synonym for thing.

In Walker's book, the thief explains that cheaters have their own apprentices that they select and train – just like any other profession. In selecting a student, he says that the cheat looks for someone who is desperate and down on their luck – and willing to do whatever is necessary. He says that the cheater looks for a student who "had from some wealth and plenty of things made so bare and brought to such misery that he will refuse no labor nor leave no stone unturned to pick up a penny underneath." Now I mention that passage because, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, that's the first recorded use of the phrase "leave no stone unturned" in the English language. Again, it occurs when the cheat says they the potential apprentice is one who will 'leave no stone unturned' to pick up a penny underneath. That phrase is actually a very old phrase. It goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks. And over the prior centuries, it could be found in collections of Latin proverbs and sayings, but it isn't found in an English document until this point in this particular book about dice play.

And speaking of dice play, the cheat says that one type of false dice is called a ***langret***. It's a die that appears to be a cube, but it actually has uneven sides with one side being a little larger than the other so that it affects how the die lands when it is thrown. Dice that were weighted on one side to make them unbalanced were called ***fullams***. False dice that tended to turn up high numbers were called ***high men***, and those that tended to turn up low numbers were called ***low men***. To cheat at dice was called ***cogging***. So 'to cog a die' was to use fake dice in a way to give yourself an advantage.

The cheat usually introduced the fake dice into a game by palming them so that the other players couldn't tell that a switch had been made. That type of secret move was called a ***foist***. It could also refer to a doctored playing card that was palmed and secretly introduced during a card game.

Though it isn't mentioned in this particular text, I should note that dice were sometimes called ***bones***, which was a canting term that went back to the prior century.

In the book, the thief then observes that ". . .the contagion of cheating is now so universal that they swarm in every quarter."

He then turns to a brief discussion about cheating at cards. He notes that some gamblers 'play upon the prick,' which meant that they used marked cards. He said that some cheats pinch a specific card or turn up its corner to mark it. Some even put very small dots of ink on the back of certain cards to mark them.

Separate from this particular book, we know that gamblers during this period sometimes referred to playing cards as ***books***. They also called a pack of cards a ***deck***. That slang term actually passed into general use in later American English where people today usually refer to a 'deck of cards.' In the UK, a 'pack of cards' remains more common.

Of course, card cheats didn't rely simply on marked cards. They also used accomplices. In Walker's book, he describes scenarios where accomplices position themselves so they can see the other players' cards, and then pass secret signals to the cheat. He even describes one type of fraud where a lady sits at table sewing a piece of fabric while the game is being played. She secretly observes the other players' cards and passes signals to the cheat through the way she moves the needle through the fabric.

In the book, the man who is describing these schemes warns that it is almost impossible to beat the gamblers who use them, so he advises that it's best to avoid engaging with the gamblers altogether. And that was really the purpose of these types of books – to educate people so they didn't become victims of these frauds and deceptions.

Of course, dice and playing cards are still around today. But there were unique games in the Tudor period that have largely disappeared over time. In some cases, the games have disappeared, but the words associated with the games have survived. For example, if you ever refer to someone playing 'fast and loose' with something, you're actually using a term that's derived from a cheating game that was popular in the 1500s. The game was called 'fast and loose,' and it was game of chance that was often manipulated by the person running the game so that the other players rarely had a chance to win.

Now today when we say that someone is behaving in a 'fast and loose' manner, we usually mean that they are being inconsistent or unreliable. And that meaning is actually derived from the game itself because the game was a high risk game. Since the phrase is 'fast and loose,' you might assume that it refers to something being very quick and out of control. But that's not the case at all. The term was actually based on the word ***fast*** in the original sense of the word meaning to be fixed in one place like in the word ***steadfast***. And ***loose*** referred to something being detached and unrestrained.

The game itself typically involved the use of a long thin chain like a long necklace. The person running the game would lay the necklace on the table and twist it, and double it, and configure it in a way that it formed the shape of a figure-8. So it basically had two-loops that were connected in the middle. The person playing the game was directed to place his or her finger on the table

inside one of the two loops, and the person running the game would pull the chain. The chain was arranged in such a way that if the finger was placed in the loop on one side, the finger would stop the chain when it was pulled so it would wrap around the finger and the finger would hold the chain fast – or hold it in place. But if the finger was placed in the loop on the other side, the chain would actually come free around the person's finger, so it would come loose. Thus the term 'fast and loose.' So depending on which side the finger was placed, the chain would either be held fast or come loose, thus there was a 50/50 chance of winning if the goal was to hold the chain in place.

But here's the thing. Through a very subtle turn of the wrist when laying out the chain, the cheat who was running the game could ensure that the chain would come loose no matter which loop the player selected. Now this was a very visual trick, and it is almost impossible to describe in a podcast, but there are some great videos on Youtube that illustrate how the game worked and how it could be manipulated by the person running it. If you're interested, I recommend searching for 'fast and loose con game,' and there is one particular video by Brian Brushwood called 'Fast and Loose' that shows how easy it is to manipulate the game.

But the larger point here is that the name of the game gave us the phrase 'fast and loose' to refer to something that's inconsistent or unreliable. And in fact, the first recorded use of that phrase occurred in a collection of poetry published in the year 1557 called 'Songes and Sonettes.' The publication of that work in June of that year coincided with an important political development in England. In that same month, England declared war on France. And that takes us back to the end of the last episode where I discussed the reign of Queen Mary.

You might remember that Mary's husband was Philip of Spain. And Philip found himself at war with France, so he had returned to England to get Mary to provide him with money and troops. England joined the war effort, and Philip returned to the continent – never to see Mary again.

Well, the war proved to be a bit of a disaster for Mary and England. Early the following year, England actually lost the one bit of territory that it still held in France going all the way back to the Hundred Year's War. That was the port city of Calais on the northern coast of France. The loss of Calais was a major military, as well as psychological, defeat.

Meanwhile, Mary was once again experiencing a false pregnancy. She was experiencing pain in her abdomen, and she was convinced that it was being caused by a baby. She had experienced the same phenomenon earlier in her reign. But once again, nine months passed, and she never delivered a child. Though she didn't produce an heir, it seems that her pains were very real. Most scholars today think she suffered from some type of stomach cancer. Mary's condition worsened over the following months, and in November of 1558, she finally died from the condition.

Mary had never delivered a child, so the throne now passed to her younger half-sister Elizabeth – the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth was just 25 years old. She may have been young, but she wasn't naive. She was very-well educated, and spoke several languages, including Latin, Italian, French, Spanish and Greek. She also apparently learned to speak Welsh since

Wales was part of her realm. [*SOURCE: This Realm of England: 1399-1688, Lacey Baldwin Smith, p. 86.*] Her knowledge of those languages meant that she didn't need to rely on a large group of translators like most of her predecessors did. [*SOURCE: Tudors, Peter Ackroyd, p. 295.*]

Elizabeth was also a very active letter writer, and many of her letters survive to this day. She was also an enthusiastic translator. She personally translated several Latin classics into English, and again, many of those translations survive and show her skills as a translator. Those letters and translations are interesting because they provide some insight into how she actually spoke. For example, she loved to use the word ***sluggy*** instead of the more common word ***sluggish***. Her translations include several uses of the former, though it was very rare in other texts of the period. [*SOURCE: Royally adorned: The discovery of a translation of Tacitus by Elizabeth I, by John-Mark Philo.*]

The main point here is that Elizabeth was very much a product of the Renaissance. She was well-educated and highly literate. She was savvy and rarely acted on impulse or passion. She tended to weigh all of her options before making a tough decision – sometimes to the point of being indecisive. And when she became queen, she inherited a country that was experiencing a lot of problems. It had just lost its last foothold in France, the coinage had been debased, inflation was high, the country was in debt, and vagabonds and thieves roamed the highways and streets of the country. There was also the fact that the people were still divided by religion, and a large portion of the population didn't even consider Elizabeth to be the legitimate heir to the throne.

Remember that Catholics never accepted Henry's marriage to Elizabeth's mother Anne Bolyen. Since the Pope had never consented to the annulment of Henry's first marriage, they considered that second marriage to be illegal, and that meant that they considered Elizabeth to be illegitimate. For those reasons, it seemed pretty clear that Elizabeth wasn't going to maintain Mary's Catholic policies. To do so would bring into question her own legitimacy as queen.

Between the time of Mary's death and Elizabeth's coronation two months later, Elizabeth issued a proclamation which required certain prayers and other parts of the standard Church service to be conducted in English. That itself was a clear break from Mary's insistence on the traditional Latin service. [*SOURCE: Elizabeth I, Anne Somerset, p. 76.*] In that regard, it is notable that one of Elizabeth's first proclamations – before she was even crowned as queen – concerned the English language.

Elizabeth considered herself to be a Protestant, but she was also attracted to many of the traditional rituals and ceremonies of Catholicism. So she looked for a compromise solution whereby Protestantism could be reintroduced without offending Catholics.

Following her coronation in January of 1559, Elizabeth issued what became known as the Elizabethan Settlement, which was designed to formalize the practices and doctrines of the Church of England. It was fundamentally Protestant in that it rejected the supreme authority of the Pope. The monarch remained the head of the English Church, but rather than calling herself the 'supreme head of the Church,' she was now called the 'supreme governor.' It was a title that

was less offensive to Catholics and less offensive to the more extreme Protestants who considered Christ to be the head of the Church. The English Book of Common Prayer was also re-introduced, but some of its more anti-Catholic provisions were either removed or re-worded. On matters where Protestants and Catholics fundamentally disagreed, the new Book of Common Prayer sometimes had language that was vague and subject to differing interpretations. As a result, English once again became part of the regular Church services, but there was also a general acceptance that there would be some variation in the way people chose to worship. [*SOURCE: A History of England: Volume 1, Third Edition: Prehistory to 1714, Clayton and David Roberts, p. 292.*] As long as people attended Church services or paid a fine for not attending, the government made no effort to question their inner beliefs. [*SOURCE: Elizabeth I, Anne Somerset, p. 80-1.*]

In the end, the Elizabethan Settlement did what it was intended to do. It returned Protestantism to England without offending most Catholics. It was a delicate balance that worked – for a while. For the first decade of Elizabeth's reign, much of the religious in-fighting was pushed to the back burner, but it didn't stay there. While many moderates were satisfied with the settlement, some of the more hardline Catholics and Protestants complained. Those more extreme Protestants became known as Puritans, and over time, their criticism of Elizabeth proved to be just as strong as that of Catholics. But for now, the more moderate voices won the day.

I should also note that Elizabeth was aided by the wise counsel of William Cecil – her principal secretary of state. I mentioned him in passing in the last episode, and he now became Elizabeth's closest advisor. He remained by her side for the rest of his life, and he will become a very important part of our story as we move forward. Like Elizabeth, he favored a moderate and pragmatic course of action when it came to government and religion.

Those religious divisions posed a constant challenge because they touched almost every aspect of English society, including the printing industry. Some printers used their presses to promote either the Protestant or Catholic cause. That included a Protestant printer named John Day. During Mary's reign, he had been sent to the Tower of London for publishing Protestant books and pamphlets. But now, with Elizabeth as queen, he was back in good favor again. He was also close with Elizabeth's advisor William Cecil. And thanks to his connections to the royal court, John Day received a valuable patent to print a text by a physician and astrologer named William Cunningham. The text was called 'The Cosmographical Glasse,' and it was published in 1559 during Elizabeth's first year as queen.

Now you may be wondering why I'm telling you about this particular publication. Well, John Day did something very interesting – and very notable – when he set the type for that book. In certain places where a sound was usually left silent in a word, he marked the silent letter with an apostrophe. So for example, in a passage that read "we see the partes of th' earth but moones age," the words 'the earth' were spelled 't-h-[']-e-a-r-t-h' because in normal speech people tend to say 'th'earth' instead of 'the earth.' That first 'e' tends to be silent. So he dropped the 'e' and put an apostrophe in its place. It's the same thing we do today in contractions like ***it's*** for 'it is,' and ***can't*** for 'cannot,' and ***I'm*** for 'I am.' And the reason why that publication by John Day is so notable is because, according to scholars like David Crystal, it was the first publication in

English to use an apostrophe. That common little punctuation mark didn't exist in English before this particular text.

Now John Day didn't invent the apostrophe. It had been used by French printers to indicate a missing letter for about 30 years prior to this point. So Day was just the first printer to adopt that practice in English. And for the next century or so, that was the only way the apostrophe was used in English. It was simply a mark of omission.

But of course, today we also use the apostrophe to indicate possession. We use ['s] after a noun to indicate that it has possession of the thing that follows. So we add it to a name like ***Mike*** when we refer to 'Mike's car,' and we add it to the word ***elephant*** when we refer to an 'elephant's trunk.' But that use of the apostrophe didn't really occur until the late 1600s – about a century after the current point in our story. [*SOURCE: The Language Wars, Henry Hitchings, p. 265.*]

Now there is some disagreement about why the apostrophe came to be used to indicate possession at that later date. One theory is that it was simply an extension of the idea of using it to indicate a missing letter. And this theory makes sense if you understand the history of that 's' sound that we attach to nouns to indicate possession. Today, in most cases it's simply an 's' sound. So ***Mike*** becomes ***Mike's*** and ***dog*** becomes ***dog's*** and ***boat*** becomes ***boat's***. So they all remain one syllable words. But in Old and Middle English, that ending was a distinct syllable. In Old English there was actually several different syllables that could added to the end of the noun to indicate possession, depending on the grammatical context. Remember that Old English had a lot of different inflectional endings that did most of the grammatical work. But by the time of Middle English, they had mostly been reduced to a generic syllable that was pronounced as /es/. So in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the Reeve's Tale includes a reference to a "beddes" feet rather than the 'bed's' feet. Two syllables – not one. And it includes a reference to "Goddes" heart, instead of 'God's' heart. And it mentions the "milleres" daughter rather than the 'miller's' daughter and the "carpenteris" wife rather than the 'carpenter's' wife. So as you can hear, that ending was once a distinct syllable at the end.

But by the time of early Modern English, that distinct syllable has been slurred and worn down to a simple /s/ sound at the end of the nouns. That may explain why printers started to add an apostrophe before the letter S to indicate possession. It basically marked a letter E that had disappeared over time when the pronunciation of the ending evolved from /es/ to /s/.

Now the only problem with that theory is the timing. Again, I mentioned earlier that the apostrophe didn't begin to be used to indicate possession until the late 1600s – a century beyond the current point in our story. And it's use was very inconsistent even then. So if that apostrophe was marking the letter E that had become silent, it was doing so a couple of centuries after the fact. The printers would have been basing that apostrophe on a historical sound change that had taken place many years earlier.

Another theory is that printers introduced the apostrophe to mark possession because it provided a convenient way to distinguish the various ways in which 's' sounds were added to words in English. Of course, we also add an 's' sound to the end of a noun to indicate plurality. So the same 's' sound can serve multiple purposes in Modern English. For example, if you're a cat lover, you might refer to your two Persian 'cats,' or you might refer to the 'cat's whiskers.' When speaking, we just say 'cats.' Two cats, three cats, one cat's whiskers, two cats' whiskers. It's just 'cats.' We pronounce it in the same way in all of the situations, and we let the context distinguish them. But when writing down those phrases, we spell plural cats – 'c-a-t-s.' And we spell one cat's whiskers as 'c-a-t-[']-s.' And we spell two cats' whiskers as 'c-a-t-s-['].' So the use of that apostrophe, and the placement of that apostrophe, makes it clear in writing how we're using the word ***cats***. And it's possible that printers in the late 1600s felt the need to use the apostrophe in that way to distinguish those situations in writing. It clearly distinguished possession from plurality. Again, the ultimate reason for that extended use of the apostrophe is unclear, but it is clear that its use began around the current point in our overall story as a way to indicate that a letter was missing from a word because it had become silent.

And speaking of things going missing, that takes us back to the thieves, cheats and vagabonds that roamed the streets and highways of England in the mid-1500s. Lots of things tended to go missing when they were around. Theft and robbery plagued the country, and a few months after John Day used those first English apostrophes, another printer named John Awdeley published a pamphlet in which he attempted to define many of the common slang terms used in the criminal underworld. His short manuscript was called 'The Fraternity of Vagabonds,' and it was printed in the year 1561. It was another piece of rogue literature that intended to expose the language and schemes of the criminal subculture of England.

The pamphlet is mostly a list of canting or slang terms, together with either short definitions or long explanations. Now this approach was still unusual in English documents. There were translation guides that provided English definitions for words in other languages like Latin or French. But we still have not encountered a proper English to English dictionary where English terms are defined with English words. Now, we have seen some early indications that there was a need for such dictionaries. For example, we looked at Andrew Boorde's medical text a couple of episodes back where he provided English definitions for medical terms that were derived from Latin or Greek. But even then, the words he was defining were ultimately from other languages.

Well, here we have a manuscript where John Awdeley attempts to define some of that canting slang in plain English. And even though the origin of many of those terms is uncertain, some of them are certainly native English words. So some scholars consider this text and some similar manuscripts that followed to be early proto-types of modern dictionaries. Of course, the terms that were defined were obscure even at the time, and the text doesn't provide definitions for a broad range of English words, so we still need wait a few more decades for the first proper English dictionary. But we're getting close, and we're seeing this tendency to produce books that define words in plain English.

In Awdeley's book, he gives us terms like the 'upright man,' who was essentially the head of a gang of thieves or the person in charge of a particular area or region. Everyone else in his group or in his region had to answer to him. He usually carried a staff called a ***filtchman***. And he received a share of the other thieves' takings.

Awdeley also describes the ***ringfaller*** – a particular kind of thief who would drop a worthless ring on the ground, and when an innocent person stopped to pick it up, the ringfaller would rush in and claim that he saw the ring first. The thief would gush over the supposedly valuable ring, and would suggest that the two men split the value between them. He would recommend that the other fellow pay him for half the value of the ring, and that way, the man who picked up the ring could keep it and sell it later for its full value. So the thief got paid, and innocent fellow walked away thinking he had a valuable ring, only to find out later that it was worthless when he tried to sell it.

The book also explains the term ***prigman***. A prigman was a thief who walked around with a stick – and he used it to steal clothes from a hedge or steal anything else that he can reach with the stick. That was actually a very common practice, and there were lots of slang terms for people used sticks to steal things. Another common term at the time was a ***hooker***; not the modern term meaning a prostitute, but an older term that referred to a thief who used a stick with a hook on the end. The stick and hook could even be used to reach inside of an open window and grab something of value. The hook was sometimes called a ***curb***, and another term for a person who used that type of device was a ***curber***. Another slang term for that type of thief was an ***angler***.

Again, an angler or curber or hooker tended to walk the streets and highways looking for things to steal. And there were lots of thieves that roamed the highways of England. They were essentially highway robbers. In fact, the term ***highway robber*** is recorded for the first time in English in the mid-1500s. A highway robber was also sometimes called a ***highwayman***. Those were common terms, but in the secret canting language of the thieves, a highway robber was called a ***high lawyer***. Those who walked around and operated on foot, as opposed to horseback, were called ***footmen***, or ***footpads*** or ***padders***. Some of them would lie down in the road and pretend to be injured. When someone approached, the thief would jump up and rob the good Samaritan. That type of thief was called a ***washman***.

A related term which Awdeley included in his pamphlet was a ***ruffler***. A ruffler was a road thief who pretended to be an injured or maimed soldier so that other people would feel sorry for him. He would beg for money, but would also steal from his victims when he had the opportunity.

Now Awdeley's manuscript was relatively short, but it inspired other writers who composed much more extensive collections of these types of canting terms. One of the most comprehensive collections was a work by a man named Thomas Harman called 'A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds.' It was published about five years after Awdeley's pamphlet, and in fact, in one passage, it appears to make reference to Awdeley's earlier work. Harman's text built on that earlier work, and is considered to be one of the most comprehensive treatments of the terminology and practices of the criminal subculture at the time.

Now you may have noticed from the title of Harman's book that he used the word ***cursitor***. Again the title was 'A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds.' ***Cursitor*** was a common word at the time for a tramp or vagabond. It literally meant someone who wanders about the country. It's actually cognate with words like ***courier*** and ***current*** – both in the sense of something that moves. But notice that Harman says that cursitors were vulgarly called ***vagabonds***. So he considered the word ***vagabond*** to be a more rustic and casual term. The word ***vagabond*** is a French and Latin loanword that had been in the language for more than a century by this point, but Harman wrote that he had looked through the old statute books, and he couldn't find the word anywhere. But he did find other terms for vagabonds in those statute books like ***faitours***, ***Roberdsmen***, ***draw-latches***, and ***valiant beggars***. He concluded his introduction by stating that he chose to use plain words to discuss the criminal underworld so that "the whole body of the realm may see and understand their lewd life and pernicious practices . . ."

Unlike Awdeley's short definitions, Harman chose to include extended descriptions of each term. He included a lot of the same terms that Awdeley had mentioned like the ***ruffler***, the ***upright man***, and the ***hooker*** or ***angler***. But he also included a lot of terms that were not in that earlier work. And after discussing those I just mentioned, he described a particular kind of beggar or thief with a name that has survived the centuries. That term was a ***rogue***. A rogue was a thief who made his living on the highways. It originally described someone who was more of a traveling beggar, but over time, it became associated with traveling thieves. Again, there was a very fine line between a beggar and thief in Elizabethan England.

A particularly violent or brutal rogue was called a ***wild rogue***. Someone who stole horses was a ***prigger of prances***. Harman wrote, "A Prigger of Prancers be horse stealers, for to prig signifieth in their language to steal, and a Prancer is a horse, so, being put together, the matter is plain."

Some vagabonds pretended to have epilepsy, or as it was known as the time, 'the falling sickness.' They would pretend to have a seizure and foam at the mouth in order garner sympathy and receive donations of money. The canting or slang term for that type of vagabond was a ***counterfeit crank***. Harman wrote, "These that do counterfeit the Crank be young knaves and young harlots that deeply dissemble the falling sickness. For the Crank in their language is the 'falling evil.'" He then adds that they "never go without a piece of white soap about them, which, if they see cause or present gain, they will privily convey the same into their mouth and so work the same there that they will foam as it were a Boar."

Harman also includes a variety of terms for female beggars and thieves. A young unmarried woman who lived on the road was called a ***dell***. She might be there because her parents had died and she had nowhere else to go. If she was born as a vagabond, she was called a ***wild dell***. Another term for a female vagabond was a ***mort***. If she was single, she was called a ***walking mort***. If she was married, she was called an ***autem-mort***. ***Autem*** was a slang term for a church, so ***autem-mort*** meant that she had been married in a church.

A ***bawdy-basket*** was a woman who carried a basket full of trinkets like laces, and pins and needles that she tried to sell. A ***demander for glimmer*** was a woman who begged for money because the she claimed her home had burned to the ground. Under English law, a person could actually obtain a legal licence to beg if his or her home had been burned, but a demander for glimmer usually carried a fake or counterfeit license. By the way, ***glimmer*** was a slang term for fire.

Now I mentioned earlier that the head of a group of criminals was called an upright man. Well, he pretty much had the pick of any female in the group, and once they had been with him, they became known as ***doxies***. The term ***doxy*** was sometimes used more generally to refer to any female companion of a thief. And it could also be used to mean a prostitute.

And this takes us to an issue that Thomas Harman didn't really address in his book about vagabonds. That's the matter of prostitution and brothels. You've probably heard prostitution referred to as the world's oldest profession, so it certainly wasn't new in the 1500s. But it did have its own unique jargon at the time. A brothel was called a ***stew***. It was a term derived from the steam baths which were often havens for prostitution. Another term for a brothel was ***trugging-house***. ***Trug*** was a slang term for a prostitute.

Another term for a prostitute was a ***punk***, and that word has survived into the modern era. Today, that term usually refers to petty criminal or thug, but it actually began as a canting term for a prostitute in the mid-1500s. The sense of the word evolved over time from a prostitute to worthless or despicable person. And from there, the meaning evolved in American English into the modern sense as a hoodlum or thug. In the 1970s, the term was extended to a type of music and the associated subculture. So today, you might be a fan of punk music. But it all began in the brothels of Tudor England.

By the way, the word ***pimp*** also dates back to this same general period, but a slightly earlier canting term for a pimp in the early 1500s was an ***apple-squire***.

Prostitution itself was known as ***sacking***, and in the vicinity of London, it was mostly found across the river from the main part of the city in the region of Southwark. That was really the main brothel district of London. And here's something else interesting about those brothels in Southwark. Many of them were owned by the same men who built the first free-standing theaters there. In fact, theaters were closely associated with brothels in Elizabethan England. The theater was not held in the same high regard that it is today. It was associated with seedy characters, and in fact, most of the early actors were also vagrants. They didn't have regular jobs, and they often begged for money to get by. The city officials of London banned them from London proper, so they went across the river to Southwark, where many of the other characters we've looked at this episode tended to hang out. It was ultimately the combination of lax laws, banned actors and the brothel owners that led to the construction of some of those early theaters in Southwark. And of course, Shakespeare's famous Globe Theater was later built in the same part of town. [*SOURCE: The Elizabethan Underworld, Gamini Salgado, p. 48.*]

Now returning for a moment to Thomas Harman's book on vagabonds, he concluded the book with a general glossary of canting terms that were common at the time. Now this glossary is interesting because it included some terms that are still familiar to us today. For example, hose or leg coverings were called ***drawers*** – a term that still survives in some English dialects. By the way, this glossary defines the term ***drawers*** as 'hosen' – not 'hose' or 'hoses.' It was still common at the time to use the old 'e-n' plural suffix for that word like we still do with words like ***children***, and ***brethren***, and ***oxen***. That suffix only survives in a handful of words today, but it could be found in a lot of other words in the 1500s.

The glossary also mentioned a canting term for clothes. That term was ***duds***. Of course, that word has also survived into Modern English. At the time, that word would have probably been pronounced more like /doods/. But around the time that Harman was writing his book, you would have probably heard some people around London pronouncing it as /duds/. And that's because that vowel sound was starting to change in the south of England around this point in the mid to late 1500s. So /doods/ became ***duds***, and /loove/ became ***love***, and /coop/ became ***cup***, and so on. But this vowel change only occurred in the southern part of the country. The northern part retained the older vowel sound. And that geographical divide still exists to this day. And it is one of the classic ways to distinguish a southern English accent from a northern English accent. I'll have more to say about this particular vowel change in a future episode, but I just wanted to note its origins around this point in our overall story.

Harman's glossary also notes that thieves and vagabonds had a special term for beer and ale and other types of drinks. Those drinks were called ***booze***. And that's another canting term that has survived into the modern era.

The very end of Harman's text contains a very interesting passage. In order to illustrate the canting jargon of vagabonds and thieves, he included a sample dialogue between two criminals using that jargon. And he also included a direct translation into the common English of his day. I thought it might be interesting to read part of that dialogue to you. The conversation takes place between a rogue and an upright man. Remember that an upright man was the person in charge of a criminal gang or in charge of a specific territory.

In reading this, I'm going to give you Harman's translation first, then I'm going to read the same passage in the canting jargon of the thieves. We pick up the conversation after the two men have had a few drinks:

Now we have well drunk, let us steal something.
Now we have well boused, let us strike some cheat.

Yonder dwelleth a hoggish and churlish man. It were very well done to rob him.
Yonder dwelleth a queer cuffin. If were beneship to mill him.

Nay, let us go hence to the highway; the woods is at hand.
Now big we a waste to the highpad; the ruffmans is by.

So we may chance to set in the stocks, either be whipped, either had to prison-house, and there be shackled with bolts and fetters, and then to hang on the gallows.
So we may happen on the Harmans, and cly the Jarck, or to the queer-ken and scour queer-cramp-rings, and so to trining on the chats.

A turd in thy mouth! The devil take thee!
Gerry gan! The ruffin cly thee!

What! Hold your peace, good fellow, and speak better words! And go we to London to cut a purse; then shall we have money for the alehouse. And when we come back again into the country, we will steal some linen clothes off some hedges, or rob some house for a buck of clothes.
What! Stow you bene, cove, and cut benat whids! And bring we to Rome-vill, to nip a bung; so shall we have lour for the bousing-ken. And when we bring back to the dewse-a-vill, we will filch some duds off the Ruffmans or mill the ken for a lag of duds.

Harmon concludes the dialogue with the following passage:

"By this little ye may wholly and fully understand their untoward talk and pelting speech, mingled without measure. And as they have begun of late to devise some new terms for certain things, so will they in time alter this, and devise as evil or worse."

That's a particularly insightful view of language change. Language does indeed change over time, and looking back now some five centuries later, we can see that some of those terms disappeared, but others found a way to survive to the present day.

Now in that dialogue I just read, the one criminal referenced the punishment that they would receive if they were caught. He mentioned being whipped, or being placed in prison, or being hanged in the gallows. So I want to conclude this episode by looking at the way the English government tried to deal with the problems of vagrancy and petty crimes.

Throughout this period, the government struggled to distinguish between the needy poor and honest beggars on the one hand and vagrants and criminals on the other hand. As I noted earlier, there was often a fine line between the two because honest beggars often resorted to stealing and cheating just to get by.

I mentioned earlier that the government issued licenses to certain beggars so that they could beg for money without fear of punishment. Those licenses were limited to a few situations – like a person who had lost his or her home in a fire. And those licenses were often counterfeited and forged by criminals. Those counterfeiters were called ***jarkmen***. [*SOURCE: Rogues, Vagabonds and Study Beggars, Arthur F. Kinney, Ed., p. 41.*]

Outside of those licenses, most beggars were treated like petty criminals. In some cases, they could be locked up in jail or prison. In London, many of those prisons were located across the river from the main part of the city in that same region of Southwark that I mentioned earlier.

That included one particular prison called The Clink, which is the source of the modern slang term for prison. If you ever hear of someone getting locked up 'in the clink,' it's a term that goes back to that particular prison. But in the 1500s, confinement in prison was not generally a form of punishment in and of itself. In most cases, people were put in prison while they were awaiting trial. But if found guilty, they received some other form of punishment.

They could be whipped or placed in the stocks. In some cases, a vagrant or beggar was punished by having a red hot iron jammed into their ear. If the person was found guilty three times, he or she could even be executed. Vagrancy and begging were treated as crimes, and punishments could be severe.

But in 1563 – just four years into the reign of Elizabeth – a new law was adopted that took an entirely different approach to the problem. For the first time, poverty and unemployment was treated as a social problem, not just a criminal problem. The law required all young people to seek apprenticeships under local masters who could train them in a specific profession. It was designed to encourage a more skilled labor force that wouldn't resort to begging and thievery. The law also levied a tax for the first time to help provide financial support for the poor. The money was to be used to provide assistance to sick and poor beggars who obeyed the law. Vagrants and thieves were still subjected to severe punishment, but this particular law is considered to the first of what became known as the Elizabethan Poor Laws. Later in Elizabeth's reign, a more comprehensive law was adopted which provided the basis for dealing with the problem of poverty well into the 1800s. Prior to these laws, help for the poor was mostly confined to the Church and the private sector. But during Elizabeth's reign, that type of assistance became more of a public concern which was at least partially addressed by the government itself. These laws are sometimes overlooked when we look back to the Elizabethan period, but they are important because they came at a time when the old feudal social structure had broken down and a new social structure was emerging. Those changes called for new ideas and new approaches when dealing with old problems. And for the first time, we see a new way of addressing the long-standing problems of unemployment, poverty and vagrancy.

Next time, we're going to turn our attention away from England, and we're going to explore some interesting developments that were taking place in other parts of the British Isles and in continental Europe, as well as in the New World. These developments will help us to understand Elizabethan England's position in the wider world. And they will also shed some interesting light on the development of English during that period.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.