What Goes Around Comes Around
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The English author known as Patrick O’Brian (1914–2000) was prolific and accomplished in many literary genres. (His real name was Richard Patrick Russ, and he invented his “Irish” background.) “O’Brian” wrote short stories, novels, poetry, biographies (including a notable one of Pablo Picasso), and reviews; he edited anthologies, and he made numerous English translations of French works. But Patrick O’Brian’s masterpiece, a series of twenty maritime novels set during the Napoleonic War, published from 1969 to 1999, is what earned him the enthusiastic praise of critics along with legions of devoted readers around the world (e.g., Prial 1998, Lapham 2000). The novels’ complex and historically accurate action occurs from 1800 to 1815 with some allusions to earlier events. The setting is on ships of the British Royal Navy in oceans and ports around the globe (with occasional returns to England), and the two main characters who link the series are the nautical odd couple Captain Jack Aubrey and ship’s surgeon Stephen Maturin.

Captain Aubrey is a huge, hearty, and ruggedly handsome man who has spent most of his life at sea; a brilliant navigator, commander, and naval tactician; and an officer who lives his dangerous life with gusto and optimism, despite suffering many setbacks to his career and injuries to his person. Dr. Maturin, in contrast, is a plain, even rather ugly, unkempt, but vastly learned, man; a naturalist (or “natural philosopher”) boundlessly curious about the world around him, an enthusiastic collector of botanical
and animal specimens, as well as a physician; and a covert British intelligence agent who does not hesitate to eliminate in cold blood enemies of the empire who stand in his way. Stephen Maturin, of mixed Irish and Catalan background, speaks several languages, including fluent Latin and Greek, but is often grumpy or even pessimistic and remains woefully ignorant of the customs and jargon of the sea. He learns—and often unlearns—much navy lore in the course of his many voyages with Aubrey, but he remains awkward—even dangerous to himself and others—when around any kind of waterborne vessel. The sailors on Jack’s ships take elaborate care of The Doctor as he moves about the moorings, deck, and rigging.

Different as the two men are in looks, talents, and personalities, Aubrey and Maturin are close friends and share the same general background of classical and scientific education of the time. They are united in their hatred of Napoleon and their love of music, which they often enjoy during evenings at sea in The Captain’s cabin, Jack playing violin, Stephen ‘cello (O’Brien always wrote the word with an apostrophe). Indeed, the two characters meet on the first page of the first novel, *Master and Commander*, at a concert in the governor’s house at Port Mahon on the island of Minorca in the Mediterranean Sea, listening to four Italian musicians performing “Locatelli’s C major quartet.”

Patrick O’Brien’s stylistic control in the Aubrey-Maturin series of period speech patterns, class dialects (including profanity and obscenity), regional and ethnic expressions, foreign-language quotations and allusions, technical naval terms and slang, and even the dense bureaucratic prose of the British Admiralty Office is remarkable. Especially interesting to the folklorist is his use of proverbs and proverbial speech. Merely a collection of these proverbial items could constitute a substantial article, or a small book, in itself, but something more than a simple dictionary (which I will compile eventually) should be even more interesting.

O’Brien was well aware of the proverb as a traditional form of expression; he (as the books’ narrator) refers to the genre by name, as well as by other terms like “saying” (or “wise saying”), “adage” (or “old adage”), “expression,” “saw,” “figure,” “tag,” and “epigram.” In one passage, he lists the usual range of shipboard conversation as “flights of naval wit, flabby puns, traditional
jokes, proverbs, [and] saws” (FW, 95). In another book, he quotes a captain, speaking to his wife, who begins to use the expression, “There is a tide in the affairs of men . . .” but, after being interrupted, then attempts to complete and explain the saying: “. . . what the proverb means is that you must make hay while the sun shines but not force things. The minute your luck begins to turn sullen you must strike your topgallantmasts down on deck directly, and take a reef in your topsails, and prepare to batten down your hatches and lie to under a storm staysail if it gets worse” (RM, 12).

In studying O’Brien’s use of proverbs, one is tempted to follow the lead of the conversation during one dinner-table scene and look for English national character as revealed in their proverbs. The observation one navy officer makes over dinner is this:

There is very little good in the French: it is said that you can learn a great deal about a nation from its proverbial expressions, and when the French wish to describe anything mighty foul they say, “sale comme un peigne” [i.e., “dirty as a comb”], which gives you a pretty idea of their personal cleanliness. When they have other things to occupy their mind, they say they have other cats to whip, a most inhuman thing to do. And when they are going to put a ship about, the order is “à-Dieu-va,” or “we must chance it and trust in God,” which gives you some notion of their seamanship (LM, 30).

Dr. Maturin himself encouraged studying English national character in proverbs in another passage when he meditated upon “the stream of small merriment, long-established jokes, proverbial sayings and more or less droll allusions that made up so large a part of his shipmates’ daily intercourse.” Maturin believed such light conversation to be “a particularly English characteristic [which] he often found wearisome,” although he did concede that this sort of traditional speech “had a value as a protection against morosity and that it encouraged fortitude” (DI, 5). But we are warned away from seeking clues to national character in O’Brien’s English proverbs by the well-known comment of B. J. Whiting:

The “national” proverbs do not offer problems which we can safely attack with our present knowledge. We cannot hope to discover the characteristics of the Englishman, the Frenchman, or the German
by making a collection of proverbs, for here the danger of permitting a preconceived idea to determine our methods of collecting is too difficult to overcome. (Whiting 1994, 106)

Wolfgang Mieder issued a similar warning, explaining to an interviewer that “paroemiologists following that road [i.e., searching for national character in proverbs] have hit a dead end,” and declaring by way of example, “I could put together a bunch of proverbs that show Americans are materialistic, and I could put together another collection showing that Americans really value friendship and love” (Wolkomir 1992, 118).

There is an obvious and attractive alternative topic for study in these fine novels, namely, Captain Jack Aubrey’s constant comical misuse of everyday expressions, allusions, quotations, and especially traditional proverbs. This endearing personality trait—so opposite to the captain’s superb command of his professional skills—is a major factor in humanizing and rendering believable the heroic (if somewhat overweight) figure of this beribboned and often gloriously uniformed British naval officer. Who cannot love a character who says things like “‘Tis an ill wind that spoils the broth, you know” (DI, 35), or “Any stick will do to hang a wicked dog” (FW, 157), or “Never count the bear’s skin before it is hatched” (SM, 232), or “There’s a good deal to be said for making hay while the iron is hot” (TH, 331)?

O’Brien seems to have developed the idea gradually, while the novels were under way, of having The Captain misuse common expressions. Except for the misquotation “Alas poor Borwick” (i.e., Yorick) in the first volume (M&C, 146), Jack utters no fractured proverb until well into the second volume, when we read this: “You must make your bed and lie on it.’ He paused, with a feeling that this was not quite the epigram that he had wished” (PC, 243); this is followed in that same volume by The Captain’s slightly off-kilter observation that Stephen Maturin has, in his opinion, “a singular genius for hiding [his] talent under a bushel” (PC, 410). (The Biblical injunction mentions hiding a candle, although some quote it as a light or a lamp.) By the third volume in the series, and constantly thereafter, Captain Aubrey says things like “A bird in the hand is worth any amount of beating about the bush” (HMS, 157), and “They have chosen their cake and must lie in it” (HMS, 191). At this last remark, Stephen asks, “You mean,
they cannot have their bed and eat it?” This then becomes the first in a series of incidents where The Doctor playfully corrects or questions The Captain’s attempted witticisms.

Jack Aubrey seems to have particular problems with proverbs that mention birds. Besides the one just quoted, he also says, “There you have two birds in one bush” (HMS, 307). He refers to “birds tarred with the same feathers” (HMS, 317) and speaks of “beating two birds with one bush . . . or even three” (TMC, 67), as well as killing “three birds at one blow” (SM, 165), and he is quoted by Stephen Maturin as saying, “A bird in the hand waits for no man” (DI, 61). Yet again struggling with the “killing bird” proverb, Jack is later quoted, “This would be killing both birds . . .’ He paused, frowned, muttered ‘over one stile’, and went on, ‘Well, never mind . . .’” (FSW, 236).

Many of Captain Aubrey’s confused quotations and sayings reveal simple errors of mishearing or disremembering an original word, as in the “Alas poor Borwick” comment, and there is often a certain logic in these errors. For example, when he speaks of a “palm in Gilead” (HMS 50), or Napoleon “killing the golden calf” (FW, 214), or Solomon having a thousand porcupines (TGS, 9), or ironically refers to Stephen as “a true Job’s muffler” (TGS, 156), or compares himself, when briefly wealthy, as having “Crocus [for] my second name” (COM, 6), or when he twice says that he feels “as proud as Pompous Pilate” (COM, 207; YA, 117), or mentions “Damon and Pythagoras” (PC, 406), he is merely reaching for and slightly missing the terms or names: balm, golden goose, Solomon’s concubines, Job’s Comforter, Croesus, Pontius Pilate, and Pythias. Similarly, when The Captain describes The Doctor as being “obstinate as a bee in a bull’s foot” (HMS, 74), it is evident that he has misheard the old saying about not knowing a B (i.e., the letter) from a bull’s foot, which doesn’t make much more sense that way, either (see RM, 24). In another well-intentioned but muddled Shakespearean reference, The Captain once cries, “Lead on, Macbeth,” upon which a sailor who happens to be named Macbeth springs forward and asks in a thick Scottish dialect, “Wheer tu sirr?” When Jack corrects himself—“Lead on Macduff”—the cry immediately goes through the ship, “Macduff to the quarterdeck at the double,” and Jack must rephrase his order literally: “Belay there. . . . Scrub it. No, no. My meaning is, the officers may go over the side as soon as they please” (FSW, 50)."
The mental processes by which The Captain arrives at some of his other fractured proverbs are often quite obvious. When he quotes, “If only pigs had wings, we should have no need for tinkers’ hands, as they say” (DI, 126), he is combining two things that “they say,” first about impossibilities (“If pigs had wings”), and second about necessity (“If ‘ifs’ and ‘ands’ were pots and pans, there were little need for tinkers”). When Aubrey compliments “a fellow . . . who ran like a hare, without beating about the mulberry bush, or making any bones about it” (SM, 77), he is just mixing three traditional metaphors. He does it again when he says, “He is the kind of lamb that lies down with the lion in wolf’s clothing” (LM, 134). Jack’s remark, “Many a stitch saves time” (SM, 230), although a fractured saying, applies pretty well to his hoisting extra sails for more speed. Even his remark, “There are two ends to every pudding” (IM, 126), is at least as good a phrase as the usual “two sides to every question.” Likewise, “There’s many a slip twixt the cup and the sip” (COM, 268) is not quite right but means about the same as the original. Once, in anger, Aubrey tells an officer, “You shall sow what you have reaped” (TT, 182), reversing the usual terms. Sometimes the correct proverbial expression is quite obscure, as when Jack remarks that an officer is “all wool and no cry” (PC, 304) and again that some supposed omens are “all cry and no wolf” (SM, 275); here he is half remembering the fable about the boy crying wolf and confusing it with the Wellerism, “All cry and little wool,’ as the Devil said while shearing the hog.”

As a sort of counterpoint to errors like this streaming from The Captain’s mouth are such mangled expressions occasionally spoken by other characters, particularly the common sailors. When Stephen brings a potto, a kind of lemur, on board, one of the marine officers says, “My servant Joe Andrews tells me that many of the old African hands say there is nothing like a potto for luck: and, after all, there is a potto’s field in the Bible, is there not?” (COM, 242). When The Captain takes a letter by dictation from a Sicilian-born woman writing to her imprisoned husband, a British naval officer, he puzzles over her request to include the statement that she has been true to him and “would not ply the oar”; Aubrey thinks it over, then he writes carefully, “‘play the whore’. . . smiling secretly as he did so” (TH, 65).

The Doctor, although he has mastered the nautical term “sailing both by and large” by the end of the first book (M&C, 411),
continues to puzzle over some expressions throughout the series. He refers to someone who “passed [an examination] with sailing colours,” which is corrected by The Captain to “flying colours,” to which Stephen replies, “Let us not be pedantical, for all love” (IM, 303). Other examples can easily be found, for, as we read in one scene,

Jack looked at Stephen with affection: Dr. Maturin could dash away in Latin and Greek, and as for modern languages, to Jack’s certain knowledge he spoke half a dozen; yet he was quite incapable of mastering low English cant or slang or flash expressions, let alone the technical terms necessarily used aboard ships. Even now, he suspected, Stephen had difficulty with starboard and larboard (RM, 21–22).

Perhaps the best example of Stephen’s problems with English proverbial expressions is his uncertainty when someone tells him that “the shipwrights will go through her [i.e., the ship] with a fine tooth comb” (LM, 205). The Doctor asks,

This tooth-comb, now, this fine tooth-comb that the worthy shipwrights will be using—we often hear of it; it appears in daily speech. And yet who has ever combed his teeth, in this or any other day?

When it is explained to him that “the fine qualifies the tooth rather than the comb . . .” (i.e., “fine-tooth comb”), The Doctor responds,

“Of course, of course” . . . clapping his hand to his forehead. “This is not my most brilliant hour, I find.”

What is, perhaps, Stephen Maturin’s most brilliant witticism comes when he offers the joke that the so-called dog watches, which are shorter than the other watches aboard ship, were so labeled because they are “cur-tailed” (PC, 428). It takes a moment before the others understand it, but eventually a midshipman explains the joke: “He said, cur-tailed: the dog-watch is cur-tailed.” This little pun, which O’Brien evidently found in an 1867 book about sailor’s language (King 2000, 208) becomes a running gag in the series, being repeated with much hilarity at least four times in later novels (IM, 123; RM, 127–28; NC, 147; COM, 166).
Returning to The Captain’s own wit, what is termed by the narrator as “perhaps the best thing Jack had ever said,” is a complicated double pun, hardly worth explaining, based on naval slang and English place names: “I must warn you that Plush often leads to Folly” (YA, 230). Much better—and a proverb parody to boot—results from The Captain’s trick of forcing The Doctor to choose between two weevils found crawling through some ship’s biscuits; when Stephen, puzzled by the request to choose, selects the larger of the weevils, Jack gleefully exclaims, “There I have you . . . you are bit—you are completely dished. Don’t you know that in the Navy you must always choose the lesser of two weevils?” (FW, 54–55). This joke is thrice repeated in later books (SM, 218; TT, 148; COM, 117).

One should not assume that Captain Jack Aubrey is always wrong about his proverbs or only utters proverb parodies; at times, he hits the nail squarely on the head with an apt proverbial expression. For example, commenting on an instance of one man’s cruelty toward another, he says, “When one sea-officer is to be roasted, there is always another at hand to turn the spit,” explaining to Stephen that this is “an old service proverb” (PC, 105). Similarly, The Captain provides The Doctor with a plausible naval explanation for the common expression (often metaphorically applied), “the Devil to pay and no tar [or no pitch] hot” (TMC, 280; the expression also occurs in IM, 138; TH, 311; and HD, 11 and 105). Once, having a problem with an officer under his command, Jack observes, quite appropriately, that the man is “cutting his coat according to his cloth” (DI 175). When Stephen objects mildly to Jack’s taking some albatross eggs for their breakfast, we read this: “You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs,’ said Jack quickly, before the chance should be lost for ever.” To this, Stephen replies, “I might say something about pearls before swine—the pearls being these priceless eggs, if you follow me—were I to attempt a repartee in the same order of magnitude” (DI, 293; see also SM, 32). Even, on one occasion, when The Captain ashore has had a few too many drinks at a party, his wits are clear enough to retaliaate to a rival for a lady’s attentions by quoting, aptly, a line from Dryden: “None but the brave deserve the fair,” even singing the line as a sort of refrain “in his deep, surprisingly tuneful voice” (SM, 56).
Comes Around

In fact, Captain Jack Aubrey on a few occasions is surprisingly good at adapting proverbial expressions in new and interesting ways. I believe it is an original idea when he converts a familiar proverb into a kind of riddle, saying that one of his prisoners is “rather like the creature that was neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring but partook of each: the Sphinx” (WDS, 36). Another effective transformation occurs one dark and stormy night when The Captain observes, “Not a fit night out for man or beast, as the Centaur observed, ha, ha, ha!” (YA, 219). It also seems right, though certainly unconventional, when Jack refers to Stephen as a man whom “Lucifer could not hold a book, bell, or candle to for pride” (NC, 169–70).

But most often, Captain Aubrey’s attempts at wit, quotation, metaphor, or proverbial wisdom are somewhat fractured, and frequently these lapses are noted by listeners, as when he remarks while speaking to an admiral that many of his loyal officers and men had “followed me since my first command . . . in one fell sloop.” The admiral asks, “What sloop, Aubrey?” to which Jack lamely replies, “. . . I do not mean any specific vessel: it was an allusion to the Bible” (FW, 17). It should be noted, also, that earlier in the same conversation, when the admiral refers to the French ship *La Flèche* as being “quick as an arrow,” Jack does not catch the bilingual pun but must be reminded that “*flèche* is the French for an arrow, Aubrey.” “Oh, indeed? I was not aware. Very good, sir. Capital, upon my word. Quick as an arrow—I shall repeat that.” “I dare say you will,” the admiral responds dryly, “and pass it off as your own, too” (FW, 16).

Sometimes the intended corrections of Jack’s remarks are as confused as the original error; when he is warned by yet another admiral to be careful in his dealings with certain people, Jack promises, “I shall speak to them like a sucking dove,” and the admiral corrects him, “Pig, Aubrey: sucking *pig*. Doves don’t suck” (RM, 25). In this instance, Jack is correctly quoting Bottom the Weaver in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1.2.85) who, however, is himself misquoting the phrase “like a soughing [i.e., a cooing or moaning] dove”; pigs and sucking have nothing to do with any of this.

O’Brien filled his novels with this sort of clever ambiguity; just to cite one further example, in a conversation with his wife Sophie, Jack admonishes her, “Sweetheart . . . you might as well save your breath to cool your porridge.” Sophie asks, “What porridge?”
and Jack explains, “Why, porridge—burgoo. It is what people say, when they mean to give you a hint that it is no use carping on the same string” (DI, 67). The proverbial phrase “to save one’s breath to cool one’s porridge,” although sometimes spoken as “cool your broth” or “cool your soup,” was originally “cool your pottage” (a sort of stew) and occurs in writings by Plutarch, Rabelais, Cervantes, and others. But O’Brian most likely had in mind a remark made by Elizabeth Bennet to Mr. Darcy in Chapter 4 of Pride and Prejudice, one of his favorite books. Elizabeth remarks, “There is a fine old saying, which every body here is of course familiar with—‘Keep your breath to cool your porridge,’—and I shall keep mine to swell my song.” As for burgoo, that was, indeed, an oatmeal gruel or porridge served to sailors, although it has no real connection to the proverbial phrase. As for “carping on the same string,” Jack means harping, of course, and that form of the saying was used by Shakespeare, Cervantes, and a host of ordinary people expressing their dislike of hearing the same old complaint over and over again. Part of the humor in this scene obviously derives from Sophie being even less aware than her husband of such conventional expressions and their meanings.

Many of The Captain’s fractured proverbs are either mixed-up versions of two or more sayings or else apt remarks that he is not quite able to finish. Here are some examples of the proverb blends: “The fall very nearly came before the pride,’ he said to himself . . .” (FW, 94); “Let us cross that peacock when we come to it” (FW, 219); “. . . a heavy frigate with a bite worse than her bark” (SM, 294); “I am afraid there is no room for two nightingales in one bush” (TH, 173); “The best-laid mice gang oft astray” (TH, 174); “Do you know what a lame duck does? . . . It attempts to pull wool over your eyes” (TH, 200); “I am not one to fling a hundred thousand dollars in a gift-horse’s teeth” (FSW, 234); “At least it is better than rushing at a bull in a china-shop without a plan” (LM, 150); “I cling to it day and night, like a bull in a china-shop. But promises are made of pie-crust, you know” (YA, 237); “A needle in a haystack would not bear the comparison, on such a thick night; but a stitch in time saves nine, as you know very well” (LM, 169); “No humming and whoring, no barking about the wrong bush” (TGS, 96); “Better a dead dog than a lead lion” (NC, 47); “The wish could so easily be farther than the thought” (NC, 147); “My tongue took the bit between its teeth, so I was laid by the lee again . . .”
“I am afraid I have been like a bear in a whore’s bed” (WDS, 122; Jack is probably thinking of the saying “like a bear with a sore head”); “We must not sell the bear’s skin before we have locked the stable door” (WDS, 231); “What an early worm you are to be sure” (YA, 24; he is thinking of the early bird that gets the worm); “We are the very pink [peak?] of perfection” (YA, 211); and “I shall rest my laurels on that” (YA, 240).

One of Jack’s most glorious mixed-up proverbs occurs in his thoughts as he considers his longtime servant, Preserved Killick: “Killick was in many ways a wretched servant, fractious, mean, overbearing to guests of inferior rank, hopelessly coarse; but in others he was a pearl without a thorn. For a moment Jack passed some other expressions in review, and having reached bricks without price he went to sleep” (NC, 151).

When The Doctor joins in trying to find the right expression, it is evident that mostly he is mocking The Captain’s attempts at wit without letting on. Consider this exchange:

“... you may say it is buying a dog and barking at the stable door yourself—”
“The stable door after it is locked,” said Stephen, holding up his hand.
“Just so: the stable door after it is locked, yourself. But there are more things than heaven and earth, you know. . . .” (FSW, 137)

Later in the same novel, Jack tries the expression again, and it comes out like this: “That would be locking the horse after the stable door is gone . . .” (FSW, 293).

Here are some of The Captain’s unfinished proverbial expressions: “... A good woman is a’—there is something in the Bible I don’t quite recall, but it hits the nail on the head, as you might put it” (SM, 112); “What is sauce for the duck . . .’ began Jack . . .” (FSW, 84); “I may be able to cook two geese with one—” (RM, 66); “That is surely selling the bear . . . that is surely counting your bears . . .’ he hesitated . . .” (LM, 175); and “I find that I had counted my geese without laying their eggs—that I had killed my geese—that is to say . . .” (TGS, 277).

Again, when The Doctor realizes that Jack is fishing around for just the right conventional term, he “helps” with some tongue-in-cheek suggestions, like this example (with The Captain speaking first):
"...I could see him as plain as...

"The ace of spades?"
"No. Not quite that. As plain as a... God damn it. As plain as the palm of my hand? A turnpike?"
"As Salisbury sphere? A red herring?"
"Perhaps so..." (FSW, 106).

They never do agree on the rest of the saying, which may have been “plain as day... as your hand... as the nose on your face...” etc.

As noted, the most charming instances of fractured proverbial uses in the novels, and those that best reveal character, occur when Stephen Maturin comments upon Jack Aubrey’s vagrant way with witticisms, sometimes correcting him, sometimes agreeing (or pretending to). Stephen is often referred to as The Captain’s “particular friend,” and as such he feels free to speak his mind, just as Jack does; neither one usually takes any offense from whatever is said (although they do twice come close to dueling over a perceived slight). At any rate, these exchanges between two old friends, several of which have been quoted already, are wonderfully written. Here are some further examples, with The Captain always beginning the conversation:

"Perhaps you could tell him to judge the pudding by its fruit."
"You mean prove the tree by its eating."
"No, no, Stephen, you are quite out: eating a tree would prove nothing" (IM, 292).

* * * * *

"It is no good carrying your pig to market and finding..." He paused, frowning.
"It will not drink?"
"No, that ain’t that neither."
"That there are no pokes to be had?"
"Oh well, be damned to literary airs and graces..." (TGS, 114)

* * * * *

"Only this morning I was thinking how right they were to say it was better to be a dead horse than a live lion." He gazed out of the
scuttle, obviously going over the words in his mind. “No, I mean better to flog a dead horse than a live lion.”

“I quite agree.”

“Yet even that’s not quite right, neither. I know there is a dead horse in it somewhere; but I am afraid I’m brought by the lee this time, though I rather pride myself on proverbs, bringing them in aptly, you know, and to the point.”

“Never distress yourself, brother; there is no mistake, I am sure. It is a valuable saying, and one that admonishes us never to underestimate our enemy, for whereas flogging a dead horse is child’s play, doing the same to a lion is potentially dangerous, even though one may take a long spoon.” (FSW, 307; Stephen alludes to “He who sups with the Devil must have a long spoon.”)

* * * * *

“. . . let us hope that the first plan . . . comes to root. That is to say . . .” He paused, frowning.

“Rules the roost?”

“No . . . no.”

“Takes fruit?”

“Oh be damned to it. The trouble with you, Stephen, if you do not mind my saying so, is that although you are the best linguist I was ever shipmates with, like the Pope of Rome that spoke a hundred languages—Pentacost come again . . .”

“Would it be Magliabechi you have in mind?”

“I dare say: a foreigner, in any case. And I am sure you speak quite as many, and like a native, or better; but English is not one of them. You do not get figures quite right, and now you have put the word clean out of my head.” (NC, 130)

* * * * *

And a final example of one of these exchanges that involves a literary allusion:

He paused for quite a while and then in the tone of one quoting an aphorism he went on, “The heart has its reasons that the . . . that the . . .”

“Kidney?” suggested Stephen.

“That the kidneys know not.” Jack frowned. “No, Hell and death, that’s not it. But anyhow the heart has its reasons, you understand.”
“It is a singularly complex organ, I am told.” (YA, 59; see also YA, 94)\textsuperscript{10}

The richness, variety, and humor created by all the proverb use and misuse in the Aubrey-Maturin novels lends itself very well to parody, and it is no surprise to find lists both of the original misquotations and also parodies of them circulating nowadays, either in print or on the Internet. The quotation that forms part of my title is taken from The Aubrey Coat-of-Arms, an image available as a JPEG file from one of the Patrick O’Brian Web sites, where the motto is actually given in Latin as “Avis matutina duas in dumo par est.” One can download the image and convert it to use as a poster, letterhead, name tag, T-shirt, whatever.\textsuperscript{11}

A book-length parody titled \textit{The Port-Wine Sea} (Wenger 1999) includes a number of renderings of fractured proverbs similar to The Captain’s (here named Jack Audibly), including these: “Don’t eat the horse before the cart” (p. 23), “Uneasy lies the head that wears a frown” (p. 23), “deaf as a post-captain” (p. 35), “The road to heaven is paved with good inventions” (p. 70), and “When in Rome eat the sauce of the gander” (p. 115). It may be debated whether these euphemisms are as good or better than the epigrams coined by O’Brien himself, but they are certainly pretty close to the march and not to be despoiled, nor looked scantily at, since a rolling stone butters no parsnips, as they say.

In the figure of Captain Jack Aubrey, Patrick O’Brien (who himself inhabited something of an invented persona) created a memorable character who is superb in his professional role at sea, somewhat less successful on land (especially when it comes to investments and politics), and altogether convincing as a believable personality. An important part of his credibility as a literary character comes from the language he speaks—rich in the technicalities and jargon of early nineteenth-century sailing, but made more human by his earnest efforts to find appropriate proverbial and other traditional expressions for his feelings, even when (or especially when) he gets the sayings not quite right. These delights provide just one more reason to read what one reviewer called “the best historical novels ever written.”\textsuperscript{12}
Appendix: More Fractured Speech
(Spoken by Jack Aubrey, unless otherwise noted)

“. . . and I must remind you that Fortune is bald behind”
[spoken by R. T. Farquhar, a colonial administrator] “What is this that Farquhar tells us about fortune? Is she supposed to have the mange?” [asked by Jack] “I conceive he was referring to the old tag—his meaning was, that she must be seized by the forelock, since once she is passed there is no clapping on to her hair, at all. In the figure she ships none abaft the ears, if you follow me.” [reply by Stephen] (TMC, 235)

“There is something to be said for making hay while no clouds obscure the sun; and that it is your rolling stone that gets the worm” (DI, 62; spoken by Stephen to Jack).

“. . . as you know, one man may lead a horse to the water, but ten cannot make him think” (FW, 176; spoken by Stephen to Jack).

“You are not to suppose that they are all tarred with the same feathers” (RM, 61).

“I was just wondering whether the infernal ptarmigan [i.e., termagant] was there when Sam called at Ashgrove Cottage . . .” [Jack explains to Stephen] “Ptarmigans are those contentious forward cross overbearing women you come across only too often” (RM, 87,88).

“He [Jack] was turning parsnips, butter and soft-words over in his mind in the hope that something brilliant might come of it . . .” (RM, 122; the narrator describing Jack).

“. . . although Fanny Harte may be neither Scylla nor Charybdis, they are very, very fond of one another, and when all is said and done, that is what really signifies” (LM, 63).

“. . . dirty dogs ate hungry puddings—that is to say, hungry dogs ate dirty puddings . . .” (LM, 229).
“Upon my word, Jack, that woman is as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of Nile” (TGS, 73; spoken by Stephen).

“Two precautions are better than one” (TGS, 288).

“Do you know, I very nearly said a good thing just now, about your cock and hen turtles. It was on the lines of sauce—sauce for the goose being sauce for the gander, you understand. But it would not quite take shape” (NC, 19).

“He counted his chickens without reckoning with his host,” said Stephen” (NC, 91). “He counted his chickens without his host, by God” (WDS, 249).

“. . . so there is a Roland for your. . . . The name Oliver floated up out of a score of others. . . .” (NC, 180; Preserved Killick suggests that the saying may refer to “Roland . . . gunsmith off of the Haymarket; and . . . Oliver’s Warranted Leadenhall Sausages.”)

“. . . roar like a bull in a basin” (NC, 222).

“‘Here’s a pretty kettle of fish,’ cried Jack. ‘An elegant God damned kettle, upon my word’” (TT, 32).

“May I take it this is so, or is the fish wather to—that is to say . . .” (TT, 46, referring to “The wish is father to the thought.”).

“‘Let them gather their peasecods while they may,’ said Jack, ‘Old Monday he’s a-dying’” (TT, 54).

“. . . a childhood memory to do with Satan and idle hands floated there, but he could not quite fix it . . .” (TT, 108; the narrator describing Jack).

“. . . as Captain Aubrey often says, ‘You cannot both have a stitch in time and eat it’” (COM, 135; spoken by Stephen).

“‘Scylla and Charybdis ain’t in it, with a strong southwester and a falling tide,’ said Jack. ‘Nor the Gorgonzola’” (YA, 108).
“I shall sleep . . . like a crew of hedgepigs in an ivy-tuft . . .” (YA, 165).

“‘I never said a word,’ cried Jack. ‘I was as mute as a swan’” (HD, 141).

“. . . a near impossibility, like. . . .’ He searched for the word. ‘Making a mountain out of a molehill?’ [Stephen asks] ‘Even worse, Stephen, even worse’” (BAM, 49).

Notes

1. The Aubrey-Maturin novels, their dates of first publication, and the abbreviations used for reference are as follows:

M&C  Master and Commander (1969)
PC    Post Captain (1972)
HMS   HMS Surprise (1973)
TMC   The Mauritius Command (1977)
DI    Desolation Island (1978)
FW    The Fortune of War (1979)
SM    The Surgeon’s Mate (1980)
IM    The Ionian Mission (1981)
TH    Treason’s Harbor (1983)
RM    The Reverse of the Medal (1986)
LM    The Letter of Marque (1988)
TGS   The Thirteen Gun Salute (1989)
NC    The Nutmeg of Consolation (1991)
TT    The Truelove (1992; published in England as Clarissa Oakes)
WDS   The Wine Dark Sea (1993)
COM   The Commodore (1994)
YA    The Yellow Admiral (1996)
HD    The Hundred Days (1998)
BAM   Blue at the Mizzen (1999)

All of my page references are to the W. W. Norton & Company U.S. editions, which began in 1990 with the reissue of Master and Commander and Post Captain, then continued through the series.

2. The essential reference works for historical, biographical, geographical, naval, military, musical, scientific, philosophical, gustatorial,
linguistic, and a host of other technical details in the Aubrey-Maturin novels are these:

Bowen Kerrihard’s Aubrey/Maturin quiz book. 1998. South Bend, Ind.: Quill Communications Services.


3. This detail is typical of O’Brien’s sense of history and humor, for as Anthony Gary Brown writes in his indispensable reference (1999), “Pietro Antonio Locatelli (1695–1764) was an Italian violinist and composer, famous as a great virtuoso and technical innovator. Although many of his works for both solo violin and string quartet survive, the ‘great C major quartet’ . . . is not among them, appearing to be a happy invention by O’Brien (as is the trio of HD, 3)” (1999, p. 195).

4. In a fairly attentive second reading of the series, I noted 472 proverbial expressions, an average of 23.6 per book. The low number was 11 (in WDS), the high, 44 (in DI). Probably a close third reading would bring the total to more than 500 items.

5. Although the characters Jack Byron and Tobias Barrow in O’Brien’s novel The Unknown Shore (1959) are prototypes for Aubrey and Maturin, resembling them in many ways, Jack in the earlier book never misquotes or utters fractured proverbs.

6. The Captain may also be confusing Yorick/Borwick with two different ships mentioned in the novels named Berwick, one French, the other British.

7. O’Brien’s biographer notes an instance during World War II when “a lanky Harvard-educated American [possibly Archibald MacLeish] . . . in a conversation corrected Patrick’s misquotation of some Shakespeare lines” (see King 2000, 93).

8. Plush and Folly are place-names in Dorset, and officer William Harding inherited a small estate between the two villages, which
prompted Jack’s witticism. *Plush* was also the naval term for the grog left over after the regular measure had been served out, which by custom belonged to the cook. Thus, as the narrator explains, “unless he had a good head for rum, this often led him to commit a foolish action.”

9. Stephen is alluding to Antonio Magliabechi (1633–1714), a bibliographer and linguist said by his contemporaries to be “a living library,” according to the note in Brown’s lexicon (1999, p. 204).

10. The aphorism Jack tries to quote here is from the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal (1623–62): “The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know.”

11. The JPEG file is available at http://www.hmssurprise.org/Coat.html

12. Richard Snow writing in the *New York Times*, and quoted on the covers of the Norton paperback editions of *Post Captain* and *The Surgeon’s Mate.*

References


