

Where Does It Come From?

Idioms in Verse with Pages to Colour

All verses and drawings by
Tannis Ewing



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Let the Cat Out of the Bag

Buy a Pig in a Poke

Circa 1580, two idioms apparently arose from several incidents much like the following:

“This suckling pig to market goes,”
The farmer told his lad.
“’Tis yours to sell. Be on your toes.
You’ll deal with good and bad.”

So placing pinkish pig in poke -
A poke is just a sack –
The lad thought how he’d play a joke
Behind his master’s back.

He whistled to a saucy cat
Who followed on his heels.
She later, unsuspecting, sat
And watched his market deals.

The pig was sold, the sack was bare.
Its bottom beckoned blue.
He stuffed the startled cat in there
And pulled the drawstrings through.

The cornered cat, imprisoned sat -
Drowning in her fear –
Her hair on end – her tail quite bent -
She felt her death was near”.

The farmer’s lad showed no remorse
In either glittering eye,
And hyper, vengeful, strong, with force,
He swung the sack up high.

“Buy a pig in a poke,” he called.
The cat meowed inside.
“The poke comes with the pig. It’s free
For the pig will need a ride.”

In time a man, whom our lad met,
Recognized the gag.
“’Tis not a pig,” he scolded, “Let
The cat out of the bag.”

The cat leapt quickly from their view,
Avoiding future woe.
Our lad turned home, despondent, blue,
No pig, no cat in tow.

P.S. Don’t put your cat in a bag.
You could hurt it.

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:

To buy a pig in a poke: to buy a thing without seeing it or knowing its value.

Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable Revised Edition ©1981

A pig in a poke: A blind bargain. The reference is to a common trick of yore of trying to palm off on a GREENHORN a cat for a sucking-pig. If he opened the poke or sack he “let the cat out of the bag”, and the trick was disclosed. The use is referred to in Thomas Tusser’s *Five Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie* (1580)



Hocus Pocus

“Not just bread but sumptuous feast – Hoc est corpus,” says a priest.
“This is the body of our Lord – raised to Heaven and much adored.”

In 1600 or thereabout, a sorcerer, with little doubt
Received communion in some church, and heard such words from the
clergy’s perch.

To each believer sitting there, the bread became Christ’s body fair;
“Hoc est corpus” - Latin for “This is the body” we all adore.

Later, this wizard, who loved to rebel, offered his friends a powerful spell.
“Hocus pocus” (his story unfolds) could turn their lead to glittering gold.

“Hoc est corpus” – Latin for “This is the body” – a Christian core.
“Hocus pocus” flaunts with bliss – “lead to gold” in a language twist.

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:

Hocus-pocus: used as an formula (sometimes with allusion to an assumed derivation from “hoc est corpus”) 1632



White Elephant

'T was in the dawn's first morning light
When the gift was brought to me.
A courtly bearer hove in sight,
With a retinue of three.

Before him walked a Siamese jewel –
An elephant all white -
He fanned the beast to keep it cool.
His speech was erudite:

“The Siamese king sends you this gift,
A show of his esteem –
An elephant that will lift you up -
A sacred beast - supreme.

Don't put this elephant to work
For dirt on white will show.
Angry gods will go berserk,
If he stubs his sacred toe.

Just feed him all the food he wants –
Five hundred pounds a day.
Follow him on his daily jaunts
And guard against his play.”

I shuddered and the sun's last rays
All shrank behind a cloud
To envelope my remaining days
In the shade of a daemon's shroud.

I had earned the wrath of the Siamese king
So he gave this gift you see –
An honor supreme with a fatal sting -
In order to punish me.

For who but a king could afford the cost
Of a beast of no employment?
Good-bye to my hopes, so painfully lost -
To my visions of future enjoyment...

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:

White Elephant: a burdensome or costly possession given by the Kings of Siam to obnoxious courtiers in order to ruin them.



T.L. Ewing

Take the Cake

Yes, it's round and around in a circle you go -
Full of grace - with the lift of each knee.
You are lissomely flying then fluttering low,
For your spirits are happy and free.

The harvest is taken. It's crop-over time
And you dance in the cool of the night.
Through the day you are slaves, but tonight you will climb,
With your music, to rhythmic heights.

Your bodies will sway to the beat of the bones,
The sweep of the fiddle in flight,
And the tallow-dip candles and pine knots will moan
As they burn with a flickering light.

Your golden-brown faces are high-lighted orange
In an aura of torchlight and stars.
A banjo twangs on, through the notes of its range.
It's a pulsing caress to your scars.

The slave-mistress stands with a cake in her hands
That she crafted from cornmeal and cabbage.
This is the Cake Walk. Your grace is so grand -
In this moment, you soar from her bondage.

In the end, she picks from your "hobbledehoy".
She awards her prize on a plate.
She chooses the couple who brandish a joy
Of jigging that **takes the cake!**

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable Revised Edition ©1981

To Take the Cake: To carry off the prize (ironically). That beats everything. The reference is to the Negro cake walk, the prize for which was a cake. The competitors walk around the cake in pairs while the judges decide which couple walks the most gracefully. From this, a dance developed which was popular in the early 20th century before the coming of Jazz.



T.L.Ewing