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"WEARING ONE'S HEART ON HIS SLEEVE": THE FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF A (SHAKESPEAREAN) PROVERBIAL PHRASE

Abstract: The proverbial phrase "wear one's heart on his sleeve" derives from a line in Shakespeare's *Othello*. It has taken on a variety of meanings and acquired variants in wording, most notably, the common substitution of an abstract noun for the metaphorical *heart*, and the frequent replacement of *wear* with *hang* or *pin*. The image of *pinning* to the sleeve has its own history, which antedates Shakespeare's play.

Keywords: English proverbs, historical study of proverbs, Renaissance proverbs, modern proverbs, William Shakespeare, Thomas More

In the first scene of Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, written about 1603, the villainous Iago explains to his sidekick Rodrigo how he intends to undermine and destroy his military commander, Othello, by insinuating himself into the noble Moor's confidence and feigning loyalty. "I follow him to serve my turn upon him," Iago confides. He continues:

> In following him, I follow but myself;
> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
> But seeming so, for my peculiar end;
> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In complement extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
> (1.1.42-65; Shakespeare 1997, 1252)

The contorted, reverse way of expressing the point could easily baffle an audience in the theater—not to mention the weak-minded Rodrigo, whom Iago addresses. The sense is that if Iago were ever to be found serving Othello with *true* loyalty and honesty (like never!), then he will be seen wearing his heart on his

sleeve, deserving for the to be contemptuously pecked by *daws* (or jackdaws, birds resembling crows)—though in the first published text, a quarto of 1622, the word appears as *doves* ("doues").[1] Perhaps Iago's very reluctance to express the point straightforwardly is to be seen as a mark of his deviousness.

So familiar nowadays is the expression "wear one's heart on his sleeve" that we might assume Shakespeare was himself employing a proverbial phrase. The evidence, however—or rather the lack of evidence—suggests otherwise. We know, of course, to be cautious in crediting the Bard with the actual coining of words or phrases, but in this case, no earlier instance of the saying has been discovered.

During the next two centuries, the phrase "wear one's heart on his sleeve" occurred frequently enough, but almost always as an acknowledged quotation or a definite allusion to its Shakespearean source—for example, with the coda "for daws to peck at" still attached, as in the anonymous satire *Advice to a New Member of Parliament* in 1784: "To avoid betraying a sense of your own *demerits*, you must seem to '*wear your heart upon your sleeve for daws to peck at*'" (9). Even though Shakespeare's pronouns have been altered, the expression is placed inside quotation marks (and italicized as well!). There we notice a subtle shift: For all his deceptiveness, Iago had disdained even to *appear* to "wear his heart upon his sleeve." From the mid-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, wearing one's heart on his sleeve frequently implied a *dishonest* display of sincerity or candor.

Perhaps the earliest instance of the expression that lacks any specific suggestion of the Shakespearean source appeared in Thomas Delamayne's gallery of satiric sketches titled *The Senators*, 1772 (with at least five editions that year). In contrast to the corrupt English parliamentarian James Townsend, the verses present the innocent though credulous John Sawbridge,

> with easier, gentler manners grac'd;
> Possessed of candour, rectitude, and taste;
> Above all art to flatter or deceive,
> Hangs out his honest heart upon his sleeve. (9)

During the nineteenth century, the expression "wear one's heart on his sleeve" continued floating free of its Shakespearean association—and continued to shed the cynical assumption evident in the

one of the eighteenth-century instances just cited, that any such cardiac display must be hypocritical. In 1839 an anonymous story in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* practically defined the application of the phrase to genuine sincerity: "Here the philanthropist may wear his heart upon his sleeve—there is no selfishness, trickery, or falsehood to wound him here—all is candour, truth, and honour" ("Some Account of Himself" 1839, 355). Also in 1839, a biographer praised the comedian Charles Mathews: "…[H]e wore his heart on his sleeve, and was thoroughly known and greatly prized on a very short acquaintance" (Mathews 1838-39, 4:443). In 1832 a writer in the Richmond *Enquirer* had lauded President Andrew Jackson: "It is new and irresistible proof that this man does not flinch from responsibility—that he 'wears his heart upon his sleeve'—that he will not see a public servant unjustly persecuted" ("The President's Letter" 1832). In 1823 a writer in *The London Magazine* said of a habitual exaggerator, "He has no sly and indirect means of lulling our suspicion and cheating us into belief. He may have his lies, but they are lies which wear their hearts on their sleeves" (R. A. 1823, 9). In 1811 an anonymous "character sketch" of one "Candidus" (or 'the candid man') in *The Monthly Mirror* remarked with approval, "It is a maxim with him to wear his heart upon his sleeve, and he courts his associates to imitate his example, and to let each look freely into the inmost workings of the other" ("Character of Candidus" 1811, 103).

Sometimes, however, such candor could seem tiresome, even unmanly. In 1864 Thomas Carlyle wrote admiringly of the emperor Leopold: he "had wells of strange sorrow in the rugged heart of him—sorrow and still better things—which he does not wear on his sleeve" (Carlyle 1858-65, 4:101). In 1841 Carlyle had turned the phrase into an aphoristic piece of advice: "If [Oliver] Cromwell was not open to all, a man must not wear his heart on his sleeve" (Carlyle 1841, 359-60). Indeed, in his 1952 collection of North Carolina proverbs, B. J. Whiting gave as a proverb, "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve," as if to encourage stoicism or virile reserve, even secretiveness (Whiting 1952, 422). Wolfgang Mieder's *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1996, 292) also gives "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve" as a proverb (Mieder et al. 1992, 292).

It seems as if the Shakespearean expression "wear my heart on my sleeve"—and the proverb and proverbial phrase deriving from it—paraphrase or expand an older idiom, "show one's heart," in

approximately the same sense: ‘be forthright, candid, truthful’. Shakespeare’s (or Iago’s) imagery makes the concept more vivid—not just abstractly revealing the thoughts and feelings in one’s “heart” but actually displaying the heart itself, visibly attached to the sleeve. Attached *how*? Until the nineteenth century, occurrences of the proverb, echoing the Shakespearean *wear*, did not usually specify. However, some popular phrasing from earlier than Shakespeare’s heyday suggests a germ that sprouted into the image of specifically wearing or hanging the heart on the sleeve by *pinning* it.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a traditional formula spoke of pinning one’s soul or conscience or salvation or judgment to the sleeve of *another*, in the sense of foolishly forfeiting one’s autonomy or gullibly trusting someone else in matters of ultimate personal importance. Occasionally that imagery has appeared in the form of a proverb or aphorism. For instance, from 1589 we have this advice: “Look wel about you in time. Pin not your faith vppon another mans sleeue” (Ocland 1589, sig. C4^{v}). Similar proverbial statements have continued to occur. From an anonymous book titled *Advice to a Father*, 1664: “…[G]ood men may erre, the best are but men; do not pin thy faith upon anothers sleeve...” (sig. I5^{v}). Somewhat surprisingly, Mieder’s *Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1996, 196) enters the archaically worded “Pin not your faith on another’s sleeve” as a proverb.

In phrasal form, the imagery is apparently older. In 1567 a religious tractate warned, “Consider wel of it [,] Christian Reader, how safe it is for thee…to pinne thy faith on M. Jewels sleeue...” (Harding 1567, sig. 3M2^{r}). In 1588 a pamphlet said, “But I thinke it the duetie of a Christian still to endeuour to informe himself how hee ought to serue God, and not to pinne his soule on another mans sleeue” (G. D. 1588, sig. B4^{r}). In 1592 an anti-Catholic treatise urged, “…[S]ee [,] I pray you, these mennes faith is pinned vpon Popes sleeues... . But doe you not thinke that these iollie Popes... haue a priuiledge not to erre in faith?” (Willet 1592, sig L6^{r}). In 1602 a satire imagined a Jesuit declaring, “We professe to obey the Generall of our Order, blindfolde,... and wee are bounde to pinne our consciences to his sleeue...” (Pasquier 1602, sig. C3^{v}). In 1603—as Shakespeare was busy scripting *Othello*—an anti-Catholic pamphlet inquired rhetorically, “Why should you pin your faith vpon the Popes sleeue?” (Willet 1603, sig. A4^{r}).[2]

So the recombinant materials were present for Shakespeare (or Iago) to arrange into the phrase “wear one’s heart upon his sleeve.” The *heart*, a metaphor for sincerity and honesty (or perhaps a metonymy, as Elizabethans would have regarded the trope) replaces *faith* or the *soul* or another intangible quality to be figuratively pinned (or otherwise attached) to the sleeve.

But the *sleeve* itself may have been a belated arrival in the traditional phrasing. The earliest discovered instance of the phrase in any variant comes from a letter to her stepsister, dated 1534, by Margaret Roper, daughter of Sir Thomas More. There, another’s *back* is specified as the site of pinning. Margaret had implied to her father, now in prison for refusing to take a certain oath demanded by King Henry, the possibility that his most esteemed friend and closest ally, John Fisher, might now consent to take the oath, and suggested that More himself could then follow suit. Thomas More (as Margaret has quoted him) responds, “Verely, Daughter, I neuer entend (God being my good lorde) to pynne my soule at a nother man’s backe, not euen the best man that I know this day liuing; for I knowe not whither he may happe to cary it” (More 1947, 521). That 1534 letter was first printed in the long introduction to More’s *English Works*, 1557. In 1561 the image was less specific: An anonymous translation of Erasmus’s *Enchiridion* noted, in a marginal gloss, “We mai not hange our faith on other men” (Erasmus 1561, sig. F3^{v}). In 1662 it was another person’s *shoulders* where one’s faith should not be hung; that would be as if one should “put out his own eyes, and live by another’s sight, and hang his faith upon another’s shoulders” (Howgill 1662, sig. E3^{v}).

Thomas More’s *pin-to-the-back* version of the saying persisted, somewhat sporadically. For instance, in 1564 a religious treatise inquired sarcastically, “Am I [,] thinkest thow, he, that will pinne my faithe to anie mans backe what so euer he be?” (Dorman 1564, sig. Q4^{v}). However, by the end of the sixteenth century the image of the *sleeve* had come to dominate. Even an early biography of Thomas More himself, about 1599, changed More’s wording: “. . . [V]erilie, daughtyer, I never intended to pinne my soule to another mans sleeve, not even the best man that I know this day living; for they may for favour, feare, or other respect goe awrie” (Ro: Ba: 1950, 205). Thereafter, through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Thomas More was regularly reported to have said “pin my soul to another man’s *sleeve*.” In 1656, John Beadle

declared, "I will not pin my faith upon any mans sleeve, (saith Sir *Tho. More*) because I know not whither he will carry it'" (sig. T7v). In 1674 Edward Calamy was quoted: "It was a saying of the learned Sir Thomas More, I will never pin my Faith upon the sleeve of another man, for he may carry it where I would be unwilling to follow" (Calamy et al. 1674, sig. B5v).

By the late nineteenth century, the altering of Iago's saying to include the image of *pinning* had become common, even when the Shakespearean allusion is clearly intended. For instance, John Ruskin in 1884 remarked, "It is certainly true that I have not the least mind to pin my heart on my sleeve, for the daily daw, or nightly owl, to peck at..." (Ruskin 1884, 95). And from a novel of 1887: "'Proud as Lucifer,' was Sir Joseph's mental comment [about a young woman]; 'doesn't pin her heart on her sleeve for daws to peck at'" (Leroy 1887, 3:180).

In 1899 an anonymous and untitled epigram or detached stanza, credited to the *Detroit Journal*, playfully literalized the metaphor:

> Did she pin her heart upon her sleeve,
> Even her friends must own,
> She'd probably forgot it
> When next she changed her gown.
> ("Poetry" 1899, 7)

In 1941 a character in a story is frustrated by her male friend's lack of perceptiveness: "…[D]o I have to pin my heart on my sleeve for you, Johnny?" (Pentecost 1941, 90). In a western novel of 1942 the narrator calls a certain cowboy "a smooth one and no kind of guy to pin his heart on his sleeve" (Nye 1993, 87). In 1967 President Lyndon Johnson orated, "It is easy to agonize and moralize, to pin your heart on your sleeve or a placard and think you are helping stop war" (Reed 1967). In 1990 the narrator of Stephen King's *The Stand* said of a character, "…[T]he convincing would entail showing him what her own true feelings were. She thought she would have to pin her heart to her sleeve, where he would see it" (King 1990, 551). In 2000 a music reviewer commented, "…Bono pins his heart on his sleeve and sings as if he fears it might be for the last time" (Sweeting 2000).

The writer there did not mean to suggest that Bono was being especially candid or un-deceptive but rather that he was singing with great emotional intensity, with "all his heart," as it were. We

see what has become a common shift in the meaning of the proverbial phrase. The college football star Johnny Manziel declared in late 2012, prior to an important game, "I'm going to play with my heart on my sleeve every single play" (Sherrington 2012)—even, we must suppose, when he was faking handoffs or otherwise deceiving. Even more recently, the basketball coach at Immaculata University said of her players, "They all hang their hearts on their sleeve, and it's not just basketball, but a commitment to a program and a university" (Geoghegan 2013). Well, basketball uniforms don't even *have* sleeves!

In recent decades, a great variety of attributes—besides *hearts*—have been worn or hung or pinned on figurative sleeves. Variants of the proverbial phrase have featured such nouns as *personality*, *attitude*, *feelings*, *emotions*, *passion*, *religion*, *patriotism*, *problems*, *anger*, *confidence*, and *faith*—among others.

To summarize: The proverbial phrase "wear one's heart on his sleeve" derives from a line in Shakespeare's play. However, it has taken on meanings and uses beyond what the phrase meant when Shakespeare's character first uttered it, and it has acquired variants in wording, most notably, the frequent substitution of an abstract noun for the metaphorical *heart*, and the frequent replacement of the verb *wear* with *hang* or *pin*—the image of figuratively pinning to the *sleeve* having its own history that reaches back to a time earlier than Shakespeare's play.

Notes:

[1] *Dawes* is the reading in the First Folio, 1623. For the 1622 Fist Quarto, it is easy to imagine a typesetter's mistake if a manuscript read something like "dauues"; attested early spellings of *dove* include "douue," "duue," and "dow." In Elizabethan parlance, the word *daw* could contemptuously designate a foolish person, a simpleton.

[2] The second edition of John Ray's famous *Collection of English Proverbs* in 1678 inserted "I'll not pin my faith on your sleeve" (342)—not really a proverb but just a sentence containing the proverbial phrase. Likewise, Thomas Fuller's *Gnomologia: Adagies [sic] and Proverbs*, 1732, has "He pins his Faith upon another Man's Sleeve" (79). Tilley (1950, 200) gives Fuller's form as the main entry, "He pins his faith on another man's sleeve." Wilson (1970, 626) repeats the form of Tilly's main entry (except with *upon* in place of *on*). Whiting's dictionary of early American proverbs (1977, 143-44) has the phrase "To pin one's Faith on another's sleeve" as a main entry.

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