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## “TO SEE THE ELEPHANT”: MEANINGS OF THE PROVERBIAL PHRASE, AND ITS AGE

**Abstract:** Lexicographers and paremiologists have been struggling with the American proverbial phrase “to see the elephant” since the 1840s, attempting to establish its history and elucidate its meanings. Often those attempts have resulted in erroneous information and fanciful conclusions. At least two instances of the expression can be identified from early-modern England.

**Keywords:** American proverbs, English proverbs, historical lexicography, historical paremiology, California gold rush, American Civil War.

### ***1. Introduction***

The idiom or proverbial phrase *to see the elephant* (or *be shown the elephant* or *get a look at the elephant*) has not lacked for lexicographical attention. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, scholars and literate amateurs have busily pondered its meanings and its putative origin. Standard compilations of American proverbs include it. So do dictionaries of American slang and American dialects, as well as more general dictionaries.

However, several points of uncertainty and confusion remain. I shall briefly address some of those points. Then I shall reveal that the expression, thought to have originated in nineteenth-century America, has parallels as old as Elizabethan England.

The earliest philological notice of the phrase appeared in the first edition of John R. Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms* in 1848. Then it appeared in the 1860 edition of John Hotten’s *Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words* (which calls itself the second edition; there were numerous editions), in Maximilian Schele de Vere’s *Americanisms: The English of the New World* (1872); in Albert Barrère and Charles Leland’s *Dictionary of Slang, Jargon, and Cant*, vol. 1 (1889); in John Farmer’s *Americanisms, Old and New* (1889); in Farmer and W. E. Henley’s *Slang and Its Analogues*, vol. 2 (1891); in James Maitland’s *American Slang Dictionary* (1891); in Sylva Clapin’s *New Dictionary of Americanisms* (1902); and in R. H. Thornton’s *American Glossary* (1912). Some of those dictionaries borrowed heavily from their predecessors, and occasionally one compiler’s error or casual speculation became a later compiler’s confidently asserted fact.

According to Bartlett (1848: 290), the expression “means, generally, to undergo any disappointment of high-raised expectations.” Farmer (1889: 224) glossed it, “to see the world; to gain knowledge by experience. The cost is oftentimes understood to be more than the thing is worth.” Maitland (1891: 102) presented this definition: “to ‘do’ the town; to see the sights, especially those of an immoral character.”

More recently, the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy et al. 1985- , s.v. *elephant* 1) gave a tripartite definition: “To see what there is to see; to experience something to the end; to become jaded or disappointed.” J. Rea, in an article in *Western Folklore* (1969: 22-25), carefully differentiated four related senses of the expression, which may be summarized this way: [**a**] ‘see all there is to be seen’; [**b**] ‘paint the town red; go on a boisterous spree’; [**c**] ‘have enough; become jaded or disillusioned’; [**d**] ‘survive hardships’. Another sense, which had been plausibly given by Hotten (1860: 136), can be further distinguished: [**e**] ‘be knowing, not “green.”’ Jonathan Lighter’s *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (1994-97, 1:702) designated just two main senses, which do not seem wholly distinguishable: [**1**] “To see or experience all that one can endure” and [**2**] “to gain worldly experience or to learn a hard lesson from experience; lose one’s innocence; (hence) to see remarkable sights.” As a specialization

of the last sense, Lighter also gave [2.b] “(Mil.) to see combat, esp. for the first time.” Jonathon Green, in *Green’s Dictionary of Slang* (2010), has identified three senses: [1] “to see the world or something spectacular within it; usu. To have become bored and jaded by doing so; to be disappointed in one’s optimistic expectations”; [2] “to seek out excitement, esp. in the context of going slumming in poor and/or dangerous urban areas”; [3] “to be seduced, to be fooled.” The *OED* defines the phrase concisely: “to see life, the world, or the sights (as of a large city); to get experience of life, to gain knowledge by experience.” Other scholars (as we shall see), especially the early ones, have proffered other meanings, but those are problematical.

One early instance of the expression is a complete outlier. In *Christy’s Plantation Melodies, No. 2*, compiled by Edward Pearce Christy (c1853: 32), appeared a song titled “Poor Old Joe” (not to be confused with Stephen Foster’s song “Old Black Joe,” which sometimes goes by the title “Poor Old Joe”). Here is the final stanza:

Oh, where’s that old grey darkey gone, that used to work the hoe,  
 In Massa’s field to till the ground, long time ago?  
 You ask us where that darkey’s gone, that good old darkey, Joe—  
 He’s gone to see the elephant, down, down below.

No other reference to such a subterranean, post-mortem elephant seems to exist.

## **2. Can “see the elephant” specifically mean ‘drink (alcohol)’ or ‘get drunk’?**

Bartlett (1848: 290) illustrated the expression with the summary of a court case from 1842, concerning “a man brought before the Recorder of New Orleans, charged with having been found drunk the previous night.” The hung-over defendant pleads, “Here I am in town without a rock in my pocket, without a skirt to my coat, or a crown to my hat; but, Squire, I’ll say no more, *I’ve seen the elephant*” (italics as shown). However, “I’ve seen the elephant” evidently refers here not just to the boozing binge per se but rather to the whole experience of coming to the city, succumbing to its exotic charms, and suffering the consequences. Though

unattributed and undated, Bartlett's quotation comes from the volume *Portfolio of the Reports of the New Orleans "Picayune,"* published in Philadelphia (*Picayune* 1846, 31).

Barrère and Leland (1889-90, 1:334-44) also obliquely associated the expression with alcoholic imbibery. They mentioned an unspecified review of a book titled *Seeing the Elephant*, "devoted to describing 'life' in New York," by the humorist Mortimer Thomson (pseudonym "Doesticks"). The reviewer is reported to have "remarked that the *elephant*, according to Mr. Thompson [sic], appeared to be bad brandy." The book is actually titled *The History and Records of the Elephant Club*, coauthored by Thomson and Edward F. Underhill (pseudonym "Knight Russ Ockside") in 1856; the leaf following the title-page announced, ". . . containing also the exultant record of their memorable success in eventually obtaining, each and every one, a sight of the entire and unadulterated Animal" (New York itself being the "metropolitan elephant" that out-of-towners came to "see"). The volume recounts a series of comical episodes of carousing, drinking, brawling, and other convivial behavior on the part of various members of the fictitious Elephant Club. The reviewer's remark, as quoted by Barrère and Leland, seems like a deliberately playful, ad hoc interpretation of the proverbial expression—not a gloss on it.

A joking quality also pervades a passage that Farmer and Henley (1890-1904, 2:357) quoted from the New York magazine *Puck's Library*: "Forepaugh says that elephants have a natural liking for whiskey. We have often wondered, when a man went out to SEE THE ELEPHANT, why he always brought back such a strange odour with him. This seems to explain it" (upper-case as shown). That is a facetious way of linking a reported oddity of elephant behavior with an oddity of American phrasing, ostensibly to explain a common observation about human life. Indeed, the joke is based on the speaker's prior unawareness (real or assumed) that *seeing the elephant* can entail alcohol consumption.

Berrey and Van den Bark (1942, §280.7) listed *see elephants* (but not the singular *see the elephant*) as a phrase meaning 'drunk'. That entry may have influenced Burton Stevenson. In a section of his *Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases* headed "Drinking," (1948: 630) he quoted from

the American writer O. Henry's story "The Higher Abdication" (1907): "The drivers were scattered about town 'seeing the elephant and hearing the owl.'" Except when paired with *see the elephant*, the expression *hear the owl* is not well attested as a proverbial phrase. Perhaps it is related to the proverbial comparison *drunk as an owl* (*OED*, s.v. *owl* 2b, from 1764; Taylor 1954: 36) or the enigmatic "Drunk as a boiled owl" (Taylor and Whiting 1958: 272), which Barrère and Leland call a "very favourite simile for intoxication." Or, *hear the owl* could merely suggest *nocturnal* behavior, an embellishment of *see the elephant* in the sense of 'paint the town red'.

A query in *American Notes and Queries* asked about the linked expressions "I have seen the elephant; I have heard the owl," which, the author speculated, was "surely folk and perhaps political" in origin. He continued: "Although I have been familiar with the words all my life, I have not the remotest idea of their actual meaning. To me it means: I have been to the ends of human experience and am familiar with everything" (Hartin 1966: 56). Mac E. Barrick (1967: 120) replied, as regards *see the elephant*, by mentioning the entries in the *Dictionary of American English* (Craigie and Hulbert 1938: 44) and Taylor and Whiting's *Dictionary of American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases 1820-1880* (1958: 119). Barrick also quoted an example of the linked expressions from the popular American television program *The Richard Boone Show* (NBC) for 14 January 1964: "I've been around. Ma'm, I have seen the elephant. I have heard the owl." Lighter (1994-97, 1:702 and 2:734) has included four instances of *hear the owl* linked with *see the elephant*, from 1893, 1968, and 1979 (and more of them unlinked). Neither Lighter's entry nor Hartin's query nor Barrick's reply suggests a specifically alcoholic interpretation of either *see the elephant* or *hear the owl*. Nor does O. Henry's story require such an interpretation of the phrase.

It is interesting to note that Benjamin Franklin in his *Drinker's Dictionary* (1737) listed *see the bears* in the sense of 'be drunk' (Franklin 1987: 267) and *see the French king* in the same sense (269). In 1622 Edward Taylor (nicknamed "The Water Poet"), in a booklet titled *The Water Cormorant*, gave a long, rhymed list of euphemisms for 'drunk': "You may not say hee's

drunk, though he be drunke, / For though he be as drunke as any Rat, / He hath but catcht a fox, or whipt the cat, / . . . / Or seene the Lyons . . .” (sig. B4<sup>v</sup>).

In certain contexts, then—like parallel expressions featuring other fauna (owl, fox, rat, lion, French king)—a statement that someone was *seeing the elephant* might import that the person was tipping, or tipping along with other rowdy or dissipating activities. The same could be said of synonymous phrases like *painting the town red*, *living it up*, or even, simply, *having fun*. Of itself, the expression *see the elephant* probably never specifically denoted ‘drink’ or ‘get drunk’.

We must wonder, however, whether the idiom (or euphemism) *see pink elephants*, meaning ‘be drunk’ or ‘suffer delirium tremens (as a consequence of alcoholism)’—which Stuart Berg Flexner in *I Hear America Talking* (1976: 128) dated from the 1890s and the *OED* (s.v. *pink elephant*) from 1901—is related to the seemingly older expression.

### 3. Can “see the elephant” mean ‘act unchastely’ or ‘be seduced sexually’?

In 1889 Barrère and Leland (1:343-44) commented euphemistically, “Montaigne strangely enough seems to suggest that ‘to see *the elephant*’ was in his time connected with experience of life” (italics as shown). They concluded, “a girl is said to ‘have seen *the elephant*’ when she has lost her chastity” (italics as shown). They also cited a French expression *avoir vu* (or *connaitre*) *le loup* ‘seen the wolf’ in the same sense (cf. Farmer 1896: 176, s.v. *loup*). In another sense, *seen the wolf*, from classical times forward in several European languages, including English, has signified ‘being struck mute or otherwise suddenly becoming vocally impaired’; Stevenson 1948, 2554:1). Farmer and Henley (1890-1904, 2:356-57) appropriated Barrère and Leland’s information, glossing *see the elephant* as “To be seduced” and citing the lupine parallel in French. In 1916 Henry Nathaniel Cory’s *The Slang of Venery and Its Analogues* included this entry: “To see the elephant—To be seduced” (cited by Lighter 1994-97, 1:702). Berrey and Van den Bark (1942, §362) likewise gave the sense ‘be seduced’, as did Partridge (1949, s.v. *elephant*).

Alluding to that sense, Tamony (1968: 24) asserted, “in modern Europe, *to see the elephant* seems first to have been put into print in 16th century France by Montaigne (1533-92).”

No direct evidence exists that *see the elephant* has ever been used in the specific sense of ‘be (sexually) seduced’. Prior to Barrère and Leland (1889), such a sense was not recorded in any dictionary. Nor does it appear in modern dictionaries that are based on cited instances. Nor is that sense implied in any of the illustrative quotations given in the many dictionaries of proverbs or in my own files. Attributing the sense ‘be seduced’ to the expression *see the elephant* is not an observed usage but rather an artifact of lexicographical tradition that extends back to Barrère and Leland.

Furthermore, the purported Montaigne “source” for the phrase is bogus. Montaigne wrote:

Aux Indes orientales, la chasteté y étant en singulière recommandation, l’usage pourtant souffrait qu’une femme mariée se pût abandonner à qui lui présentait un éléphant; et cela avec quelque gloire d’avoir été estimée à si haut prix. (Montaigne 1967: 351)

In the East Indies, although chastity is singularly valued there, custom suffers a married woman to give herself to any man who presents her with an elephant—and not without glory for being so highly prized. (Montaigne 1991: 981-982)

Montaigne was explicitly paraphrasing a history of Alexander the Great by the Greco-Roman Arrian (C.E. 96-c180):

For the elephant in India is a royal mount . . . Their women, such as are of great modesty, can be seduced by no other gift, but yield themselves to anyone who gives an elephant; and the Indians think it no disgrace to yield thus on the gift of an elephant, but rather it seems honourable for a woman that her beauty should be valued at an elephant. (Arrian 1929-33, 2:357)

Certainly no equivalent of the phrase *see the elephant* occurs in Montaigne’s sixteenth-century French, any more than such an expression can be found in the second-century Greek of Arrian. Probably Farmer and Henley mistook a little encyclopedic digression by Barrère and Leland for information concerning com-

parative philology—and Partridge, Tamony, and others neglected to scrutinize and verify the assertions of their predecessors.

#### ***4. Can “see the elephant” specifically mean ‘indulge in gambling’?***

As far as I am aware, no commentator has asserted that *see the elephant* can denote ‘gamble’ (as distinct from loose behavior in general). It may be worth mentioning, however, that the expression has occasionally been linked with *fight the tiger*, which does mean ‘gamble’—as derived from the game of faro, in which the “house” is referred to as the *tiger*. The *Dictionary of American English* (Craigie and Hulbert 1938, s.v. *tiger* 2b) quoted from the *Santa Fe Republican* for 17 September 1847, “Have you seen the *Elephant*, or fought the *Tiger*?” (italics as shown); and also from the *New York Commercial Advertiser* from c1877, “Strange, isn’t it, that so many countrymen who come to New York to ‘see the elephant’ will go and fight the tiger.” In an anonymous jocular essay of 1877, titled “The American Language,” in the New York magazine *Puck*, an uncomprehending (and caricatured) Englishman reports that some “American young spwigs asked me, while I was having dinner at my club, if I would like to ‘fight the tiger’ or ‘see the elephant.’ Now, how vewy widiculous, to be sure, as if I were so jolly gween as never to have seen an elephant . . .” (11). In 1879 an anonymous article “A Night on the South Platte,” in *Baily’s Monthly Magazine of Sports and Pastimes*, reports, “In those days the correct thing for the average English traveller, when he was injected for the first time into one of the eastern seaports [of America], was to see the elephant, fight the tiger, learn the ropes, and go the rounds of the city” (280).

*See the elephant* refers to loose or rowdy behavior of unspecified sorts. So it is no surprise to find the expression used in contexts that involve gambling as well as drinking and perhaps sexual disports. Furthermore, the preceding discussion has shown a tendency—perhaps motivated by a sense of parallelism—for both scholars and normal users of the language to associate the expression with other verb phrases featuring zoological objects. Later parts of this discussion will illustrate associations with *see the lions*, *see the king*, and other such phrases.



### 5. Can “see the elephant” specifically mean ‘engage in military combat’?

In 1987 Robert Hendrickson’s *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* treated the phrase *seeing the elephant* in this way (the entire entry is here quoted):

Soldiers in the [American] Civil War [1861-1865] adopted these words to describe their discovery of the savagery of combat, their experience of action for the first time. The phrase came from the language of farmers, who after attending a traveling circus often spoke awesomely of *seeing the elephant*. (472)

That entry is odd: An initial reading, in a volume purporting to explain phrase *origins*, implies that the phrase *originated* with the Civil War usage. Of course, the second sentence does acknowledge that the Civil War application was derived from earlier uses (perhaps *adopted* in the first sentence should read *adapted*). Still, Hendrickson’s entry leaves the impression that the earlier rustic use had a purely literal signification, and the soldiers in the 1860s were the first to apply the expression metaphorically to non-pachydermal concerns—even though Hendrickson had access to authorities from Bartlett (1848) forward who had quoted numerous figurative usages from the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s.

The earliest of those, Bartlett (1848: 290), illustrated the expression with an application to the Mexican War of 1846-48, fifteen years prior to the Civil War: “For instance, men who volunteered for the Mexican war, expecting to reap lots of glory and enjoyment, but who instead found only sickness, fatigue, privations, and suffering, were said to have *‘seen the elephant’*” (italics as shown). Bartlett’s *for instance* reveals that he did not intend experience in combat as a specific, denotative reference of the phrase; he followed with the instance (quoted above) regarding a catastrophic night-on-the-town in New Orleans and still another concerning a trip to New York City by “merchants from the South and West.”

Without question, the expression was used in the Civil War. Taylor and Whiting (1958: 119) quoted from the diary of a Union colonel at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862: “The Twenty-fourth Ohio Volunteer Infantry had seen the elephant [i.e., been in battle] several times, and did not care about seeing him again unless

necessary” (the bracketed interpolation is Taylor and Whiting’s). Frank and Reaves’s monograph *“Seeing the Elephant”: Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh* (1989: 2, 84, and 98) quoted four additional uses of the phrase from diaries and letters of 1862. Frank and Reaves (1989: 1-2) also surmised that the American writer Ambrose Bierce (1909-12, 1:235) was alluding to the expression when he recollected his own experience at Shiloh: “At the same instant was heard a dull, distant sound like the heavy breathing of some great animal below the horizon.” Jan Brunvand (1961, s.v. *animal*) cited a comparable battlefield allusion from 1848: “He thought he had seen the ‘big animal.’”

Lighter (1994-97, 1:702) has mustered a further instance from the Mexican War, three from the Civil War era, and some later ones referring to the Civil War, by way of illustrating the definition “to see combat, esp. for the first time.”

In a military context, then, *see the elephant* could certainly mean ‘engage in combat’ or ‘experience the horrors of battle’, as an application of any of three of the customary senses identified at the beginning of this discussion: ‘become disillusioned’, ‘survive hardships’, or ‘be knowing’. Even in a military context, however, the meaning was not necessarily limited to affairs of combat per se; in one instance cited by Taylor and Whiting (1958: 119), a wide-eyed Union recruit used the expression in reference to the remarkable scenes he viewed from the train en route from his mustering site in Ohio to the theater of operations in Maryland (Wiley 1952: 36). So, whether the military application of the phrase should be regarded as denotatively specific must remain an open question. I shall return to that question in the discussion of whether the idiom is now obsolete.

### **6. Does a proverbial phrase “to see the king” exist as a synonym—or as a variant—of “to see the elephant”?**

The 1874 edition of Hotten’s *Dictionary of Modern Slang* (though not earlier editions) noted that “a modification of” *see the elephant* is *see the king* (156). Maitland (1891: 234) began his entry, “*See the elephant* or *See the king*.” Farmer and Henley (1890-1904, 2:356-57), in turn, reported that *see the elephant*, in the sense of ‘see the world’ (but not in the sense of ‘be seduced’),

is “sometimes” *see the king*. Partridge (1949: 743) echoed Hotten (whom he cited): *see the king*, glossed as “to be very experienced, knowing, alert,” is “an English [i.e. British] modification” of *see the elephant*. Partridge associated the dates 1870-90 with *see the king*, probably because in the early 1870s Hotten added the expression to his discussion of *see the elephant*, and most twentieth-century dictionaries did not record *see the king*.

Hotten, Farmer and Henley, and Partridge have all regarded *see the king* as a variant of *see the elephant*, just as *see the elephant* is possibly a variant or parallel of *see the lions*, an expression in use since the sixteenth century; in 1590 Robert Greene called it an “old proverb” (Greene 1881-86, 8:68; cf. Tilley 1950, L322, and Dent 1984, L322). In reference to *see the elephant* Tamony (1968: 24), echoing the *OED*, remarked, “An analogue in 16th century England was *to see the lions*. In that era, lions were chained in the Tower of London and became noted objects of curiosity, as kings have been, such being memorialized in *to see the king*.” However, while citing authorities who print actual instances of *see the elephant* and *see the lions*, Tamony did not direct his reader to any specific occurrences of *see the king*.

Tamony assumed that *see the king* would refer metaphorically to seeing a rare, spectacular, or interesting sight (like lions, or an elephant). Yet Hotten (1874: 155-156), who apparently initiated the association of *see the king* with *see the elephant*, offered a very different explanation: “When a man becomes aware that he has been cheated or imposed on, and does not mean to stand it any longer, he is said to have seen the king, i.e., to have seen his adversary’s best card, and to be prepared for it.” That explanation would be inapplicable to the alleged correspondence of *see the king* with *see the elephant*—and, in turn, with *see the lions*.

Except in its dubious association with *see the elephant*, no dictionaries or proverb collections appear to record or illustrate the expression *see the king* (not counting Benjamin Franklin’s *see the French king* ‘be drunk’, cited earlier). However, a bit of dialog in a Jacobean drama does suggest a connection. In Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Augures*, published in 1621, the character Notch boastfully declares, “I ha’ seene the Lyons ere now, and he that hath seene them, may see the King” (Jonson 1925-52, 7:629). This yoking of the proverbial *see the lions* with the par-

allel *see the king* moves Jonson’s character Slug to respond with a warning: “I thinke he may; but have a care ye go not too high . . . ; there is as much danger <in> going too neer the King, as the Lyons” (bracketed insert as shown). Slug is elaborating on the proverb “It is dangerous to play with lions,” found in English as early as 1564 (Dent 1981, L321.1; Dent 1984, L321.1). If Ben Jonson’s characters were swapping proverbs, then the likelihood increases that *see the king* itself was proverbial. Even if Notch intends *see the king* literally, his paralleling of that expression with *see the lions* seems noteworthy.

To compare danger from proximity to lions with danger from proximity to kings has its own history—aside from the point that both were rare and interesting sights. Thomas More’s Latin epigram titled “Ad Aulicum” (‘To a Courtier’), published in 1518, begins this way, in the standard modern translation (More 1984: 204-205):

You often boast to me that you have the king’s ear and often have fun with him, freely and according to your own whims. This is like having fun with tamed lions—often it is harmless, but just as often there is the fear of harm. Often he roars in rage for no known reason, and suddenly the fun becomes fatal. (More 1984, 204-205)

In 1524 a Latin colloquy by Erasmus, titled “Convivium Fabulosum” (‘The Fabulous Feast’), counseled:

It’s not safe, as I understand, to bandy jests with kings. For as lions sometimes submit quietly to stroking, they’re lions when the mood takes them—and goodbye playmate! In like fashion do princes grant favors. (Erasmus 1965: 262)

In fact, the Aesopic fable that underlies the English expression *the lion’s share*—in which a lion denies the other beasts in the hunting party any portion of the cooperatively slaughtered prey—was construed as a warning against imprudent association with the great. William Caxton in his 1483 English translation of Aesop moralized the fable thus: “this fable techeth to al folk / that the poure ought not to hold felauship with the myghty / For the myghty man is neuer feythfull to the poure” (Aesopus 1967: 77). Similarly, in 1624 John Brinsley declared that the fable is

about the “danger of dealing with mighty men” (Aesopus 1624, sig. B1).

### 7. Is “*see the elephant*” obsolete?

Partridge in 1949 (256) labeled the phrase *see the elephant* (in both of the senses he identified, ‘see the world’ and ‘be seduced’) “ob[solete].” The *OED Supplement* in 1933 (s.v. *elephant* 1d) and the *Dictionary of American English* (Craigie and Hulbert) in 1940, while neither specifies obsolescence, had both given as the latest instance a sentence from O. Henry’s story “Man about Town,” published in 1906. Rea in 1969 stated, “O. Henry in 1906 seems to have been one of the last to use it” (26). In fact, Rea could have discovered by consulting Stevenson (1948: 630 and 675) that O. Henry used the expression in two later stories, “The Higher Abdication” in 1907 and “The Passing of Black Eagle” in 1909.

Recording the expression in *Dialect Notes* in 1922, G. L. Hanford implied that *see the elephant* was still current at that date (174). In December 1925 an anonymous editorial in the *Kourier Magazine*—official organ of the Ku Klux Klan—bore the title “Seeing the Elephant” (17). Interestingly, the author assumed that the expression refers to the parable of the blind men and the elephant—in which each man “sees” the elephant differently. The racist editorial writer does not make clear whether any of the blind men saw a white elephant, but his confusion may give evidence that by 1925 the meaning and customary use of the expression was fading.

Nonetheless, B. J. Whiting, in *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases*, (1989, E62), gave a proverbial instance from 1959: “People said of him that he had been around. They also said that he had seen the elephant.” Tamony (1968: 25 and 27) cited four occurrences of the phrase in publications from 1949-55; each of those uses, however, specifically looked back to the California Gold Rush of 1849, an episode of American history that saw a great efflorescence of the saying.

### **8. *The California Gold Rush (and Other Western Connections)***

Taylor and Whiting (1958: 119) cited no examples of *see the elephant* from earlier than 1855. However, the *Dictionary of American English* (Craigie and Hulbert 1938-44, s.v. *elephant* 1) quoted two instances (1849 and 1850) from participants in the gold rush. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy et al. 1985-2013, s.v. *elephant* 1) has added a third (from 1851), and Lighter (1994-97, 1:702) a fourth (from 1854). H. Lee Scamehorn et al. (1989: 77 and 86) gave two instances from 1849 diaries. J.S. Holliday (1981: 131, 149, 158, 165, 170, and 264) quoted six from 1849 diaries, and he asserted that "this special phrase" was "used by almost every gold rush diarist" (116). The expression also appears in numerous collections of letters from Forty Niners. Two contemporaneous cartoons featuring the California "elephant" (both dated c1850) have been reprinted: one by Tamony (1968: 26), by Layton (1976: 255), and by Axon (1976: 43); the other by Johnson (1974: 78), by Layton (1976: 256), by Reid (1980: viii), by Levy (1990, frontispiece), and by Kirk (1998-99: 175). A song titled "Seeing the Elephant" was published in a California songster about 1855 (Tamony 1968: 25); the song has been reprinted by Dwyer and Lingenfelter (1965: 53-55). Even prospective prospectors who took the ocean route to California seem to have used the phrase. Thornton (1912: 1:286) cited the title of an 1851 magazine article, "A Glimpse of the Elephant," which recounted the arduous crossing of the Isthmus of Panama; that, of course, was before the canal was constructed, and many ocean bound voyagers from the eastern states and Gulf states sought, by traversing the isthmus or even Mexico, to avoid the long and dangerous navigation around the "horn" of South America to the California coast.

Rea (1969: 21-22) established that a musical comedy titled *Seeing the Elephant*—a satiric adaptation of an earlier play of the same title, which had appeared in New York in 1848—opened in San Francisco in 1850. However, Rea exaggerated the influence of the comedy in popularizing the expression: "After the success of *Seeing the Elephant* at the Dramatic Museum on July 4, 1850, 'seeing the elephant' became a part of the slang of California and the West" (1969: 22). As illustrated in the preceding paragraph,

the expression already enjoyed wide use among gold-rushers in 1849.

In connection with the gold rush and other westward journeyings, the expression has perhaps remained more-or-less alive, at least among history-buffs, journalists, and followers of current *belles lettres*. Countless books and articles about nineteenth-century California, in their titles or their texts, refer to the proverbial phrase.

The year 1993 marked the sesquicentennial of the opening of the Oregon Trail, a route that many Forty Niners and other pioneers took to California. Numerous journalistic accounts of commemorative pageants, reenactments, and other celebrations during that year quoted and commented on the phrase—most prominently Charles Kuralt on his “Sunday Morning” television and radio show (CBS) 1 Aug. 1993, a segment titled: “The Trip West Was Called ‘Going to See the Elephant.’”

So, even though the instances just referred to (which could easily be multiplied) come from modern sources, they are used in connection with events of the 1840s and 1850s. Even modern uses that do not specifically refer to the gold rush or other migrations still often occur in more general reference to the American frontier or the “Wild West.” In 1980 Forrest G. Robinson titled a scholarly article in the journal *American Studies* (21: 43-64) “‘Seeing the Elephant’: Some Perspectives on Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*.” A play by Karen Hansel and others, which premiered in southern California in 1986, was titled *Going to See the Elephant*; it is based on diaries of pioneer women of Kansas in the early 1870s (“‘Elephant’ Drama Realistically Staged at GWC [Golden West College],” *Orange Coast Daily Pilot*, 27 Nov. 1986). The play has since enjoyed considerable success on the stages of several American cities. In their dialogue the characters explain the proverbial expression.

In 1989 the play *Abundance*, by Beth Henley (acclaimed author of *Crimes of the Heart* and *The Miss Firecracker Contest*) premiered in Los Angeles. Set in the Wyoming Territory in the late 1860s, it features a female character named Macon Hill, who remarks to a new acquaintance, “After all, you’re like me. You’ve come out west to see the elephant. Hey, true or no?” (Henley 1992: 209-10). Bess answers, “Elephant. No.” Macon endeavors to clar-

ify: “To see what’s out there; whatever’s out there . . . It’s gonna be a whole new experience. We’re dealing with the lure of the unknown. Yeah, we’re hunting down the elephant! Bang! Bang! Bang!” The assumption here seems to be that the expression derives from elephant hunting—though, of course, both the phrase and the setting of the play antedate the vogue of big-game hunting in Africa or India by Europeans and Americans.

A 1989 newspaper story tells of an unemployed Ohio family who had recently moved to California in a wagon: “When people in the 1850s hitched their wagons and headed west, their friends and family who stayed behind asked why they wanted to leave. Unable to put their feelings into better words, the pioneers would reply, ‘To see the elephant’” (“Traveling Back in Time,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 Aug.).

On 5 February 1991, Richard M. Price of Control Data Corporation delivered a widely-cited speech at the International Business Conference in Durham, North Carolina; the speech was titled “Facing the Elephant” (Price 1991: 1-6):

The question, and the subject before this conference, is An Asian Trading Block [sic] Led by Japan: Opportunity or Threat? [¶] In thinking about that question, I was reminded of the phrase Seeing The Elephant. That’s a phrase that came into the American vocabulary in the mid-nineteenth century in the days of the expanding Western Frontier. It’s a phrase not many people use any more, but still, on hearing it, most people intuitively grasp its meaning . . . [¶] The elephant we face as we look West is no less daunting, no less real, than that “seen” by our predecessors more than a century ago. Now that we’ve seen “The Elephant,” are we willing to take the necessary risks? . . . [¶] With resourcefulness and determination in pursuing these priorities, we[,] like those westward venturers before us, can face “The Elephant” and turn threat into opportunity.

There is no evident awareness here that disillusionment commonly followed the westward venture of gold seekers and other pioneers—and that the expression often bespoke disappointment!

In 1993 the sportswriter Blackie Sherrod, discussing Notre Dame football—the “Irish”—used the paired-expressions dis-



cussed earlier: “In the words of some forgotten world-weary pioneer, I have seen the elephant and I have heard the owl . . . . I have borne witness to three Games of the Century” (“Irish’s Play Doesn’t Need an Encore,” *Dallas Morning News*, 17 Nov.).

In such modern instances, the saying is usually accompanied by some indicator that the writer expects present-day readers *not* to recognize and possibly not to understand the expression *see the elephant*: an explanation, a synonymous expression, an attribution, or surrounding quotation marks. Likewise, a survey of book reviews of modern publications with titles containing the expression (or an allusion to it) reveals that most often the reviewer pauses to explain the reference. Comparatively seldom is it regarded as current and familiar.

An interesting exception occurs in Dee Brown’s 1989 review of Ian Frazier’s *The Great Plains*: “One of the common characters of folklore is the wanderer who returns from some distant quest with a tale to tell, who may have seen the elephant and needs an audience to unburden the weight of the experience” (*Chicago Tribune*, 28 May). While the expression here may be obliquely related to pioneers or gold miners, there is little to suggest that, in the author’s assumption, the usage was anything other than current and familiar. Even here, though, the meaning can perhaps be roughly inferred from the context.

One possibility needs to be kept in mind: individuals sometimes *learn* old expressions from reading them—or encountering them on television, in motion pictures, in recorded songs—and then commence using the expressions orally, forgetful of their bookish or archaic character. From those individuals, other speakers may then learn the expressions. Oral tradition does not always exist as a linear continuum. Like individual words, proverbial sayings (as well as lengthier folkloristic texts) can dwindle from oral currency into the domain of literary or even scholarly usage—but from there be recovered orally and gain new currency.

As with the uses that relate to the settling of the American West, modern instances of *see the elephant* in reference to the Civil War continue to occur with some frequency—but again most often with indicators that the present-day reader may well be unfamiliar with the expression.

Evidence exists that the phrase *seeing the elephant* as applied to military activities has survived or been renewed in the Vietnam War era. Tom Dalzell’s *Vietnam War Slang: A Dictionary on Historical Principles* (2014, s.v. *elephant*) glosses *elephant* simply as ‘combat,’ noting, “usually in the phrase ‘see the elephant.’”

### 9. *How old is the expression “see the elephant”?*

The earliest occurrence of the expression cited by any of the authorities is in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes*, 1835 (6). There it took the form of a wellerism: “That’s sufficient, as Tom Haynes said when he saw the Elephant” (Whiting 1945: 7). As with many wellerisms, the attribution invites us to imagine a prior narrative that culminates with the saying—in this case, with a character named Tom Haynes seeing an *actual* elephant and exclaiming, “That’s sufficient.” Possibly Tom had been relentlessly seeking (to purchase?) a larger and stronger farm animal when he finally encountered the elephant. It should be noted that the comic aspect—the *wit*—of a wellerism often results from the literal application of an expression that would ordinarily be used metaphorically. If such is the case here, then Longstreet’s narrator would be looking back to a still earlier, familiar use of the proverbial phrase.

The very next year the wellerism appeared in *Colonel Crockett’s Exploits and Adventures in Texas*, a fictional, pseudo-autobiographical memoir of the famous frontiersman David Crockett (1786-1836) often attributed to Richard Penn Smith. However, the entire episode containing the wellerism (Smith 1836: 35) is directly plagiarized from Longstreet.

It is not clear which—if any—of the recognized senses of *see the elephant* the wellerism would illustrate. That is, notwithstanding the information given in many reference works, the 1835 wellerism may not exemplify the proverbial phrase at all.

Bartlett, the first lexicographer to record the expression *see the elephant*, was evidently unaware of Longstreet’s Georgia wellerism. Bartlett included the expression itself in a group of phrases about which he remarked, in the first edition of his *Dictionary of Americanisms*, “The metaphorical and other odd expressions used first at the West, and afterwards in other parts of

the country, often originate in some curious anecdote or event” (1848: xxii). But evidence for the existence of such an “anecdote or event” remains scant.

The next recorded instance of *see the elephant* gives a rare and rather detailed account of an individual’s first encounter with an unfamiliar expression. George W. Kendall was a Northeasterner who founded the New Orleans *Picayune* newspaper in 1837. In 1841, eager “to make a tour of some kind upon the great Western Prairies” in order “to find new subjects upon which to write” (Kendall 1844, 1:13), he joined an expedition across Texas, which resulted in his *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition*, published in 1844. On the night of 21 July 1841 Kendall learned a new proverbial phrase (1:108-10):

There is a cant expression, “*I’ve seen the elephant*,” in very common use in Texas, although I had never heard it until we entered the Cross Timbers, or rather the first evening after we had encamped in that noted strip of forest land. I had already seen “sights” of almost every kind, animals of almost every species . . . ; but I knew very well that we were not in an elephant range, and when I first heard one of our men say that he had seen the animal in question, I was utterly at a loss to fathom his meaning. I knew that the phrase had some conventional signification, but farther I was ignorant. A youngster, however, was “caught” by the expression, and quite a laugh was raised around a camp fire at his expense.

After recounting the youth’s naïve reaction to the expression and the mirthful response of his more savvy elders, Kendall confessed:

. . . I, too, joined in the merry outbreak yet in all frankness I must say that I did not fully understand what I was laughing at. The meaning of the expression I will explain. When a man is disappointed in anything he undertakes, when he has seen enough, when he gets sick and tired of any job he may have set himself about, he has “*seen the elephant*.”

Even though Kendall’s account assumes that Texans were generally acquainted with the expression, it was new to at least one other member of the party—and for all Kendall could have known, others besides himself might have remained covertly

clueless. Clearly he assumed that most readers of his account would be unacquainted with the phrase.

The New Orleans incident mentioned earlier, with its repartee that includes the proverbial phrase, occurred in 1842. Bartlett (1848: 290) quoted an account (indirectly) from the *New Orleans Picayune*, an article that was reprinted in *Spirit of the Times* for 3 Sep. 1842.

The *Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1994-97, 1:702) cites Lt. J. Henry Carleton's logbook of the U.S. Army's "dragoon campaign to the Pawnee villages in 1844" (Carleton 1983: 1). For 18 August, Carleton recorded: "Once fairly out of the Nemaha trap, we feel much lighter in spirits. No body has seen the 'Elephant' yet, although sometimes several were on the point of doing so—Mr. Jackson in particular . . . . We think at the rate *he* has gone on, he will probably see that animal tomorrow" (Carleton 1983: 33; italics as shown). Either Carleton himself or an early editor of his accounts (which first appeared in newspapers) asterisked the word *Elephant* and gave this footnote: "When one gets tired of the journey, and wishes to turn back, he has 'seen the Elephant'—a cant phrase used by all voyageurs of Western Prairies" (1983: 33). On the one hand, the presence of that footnote attests to the general *unfamiliarity* of the phrase to readers of the 1840s; on the other hand, the note itself insists on the *commonness* of the phrase among Western travelers of the time.

The early popularity—if not the origin—of the expression is generally related to touring circuses, which attracted rural and small-town Americans to view the most exotic of beasts (Hammond 1964: 4-7; Tamony 1968: 23-29). As rustic Americans journeyed to the cities and eastern Americans migrated westward, *see the elephant* became a metaphor for encountering new circumstances and experiencing new ways of life. The California Gold Rush of 1849 and its disillusioning aftermath gave particular impetus to the proverbial saying in its expanded, figurative meanings (Rea 1969: 21-26).

Barrère and Leland (1889-90, 1:344-45) conjectured:

The phrase seems to have originated in an old ballad of a farmer who, while driving his mare along the highway, met with a showman's elephant, which knocked him over, and spilt his milk and

destroyed his eggs. The farmer consoled himself for his loss by reflecting that he had at least “seen *the elephant*.”

And he said, “Now in future no one can declare  
That I’ve not seen the elephant—neither mare.”

Regrettably, Barrère and Leland did not cite the source of their “old ballad” or date it; however, there is no reason to doubt its existence—especially in light of the quoted couplet. But it seems likely that the narrative was *alluding to* the expression *see the elephant*, not *originating* it. In other words, the comically undaunted farmer *plays on* the expression, wittily making literal what would customarily be a metaphor—in the same way that a writer in 1848 playfully literalized another figurative idiom when he titled a story “Fighting the Tiger”; the story, which is about an encounter with an *actual* tiger, ends, “Strangers, I thought I should a flummoxed right on the spot; but I got over it, and feel none the worse for ‘fighting the tiger’” (Oehlschlaeger 1990: 130-33). Also in 1948, an Amherst, New Hampshire, newspaper, the *Farmer’s Cabinet* for 13 January, ventured to explain “the origin of the now common and expressive phrase . . . .” There follows a lengthy account of a disastrous attempt to construct a life-size imitation elephant for a dramatic production in Philadelphia. The structure collapsed during the performance, resulting in uproarious laughter from the audience, “shrieking between every breath ‘*Have you seen the elephant?*’” (italics as shown; reprinted in the *Evansville [Indiana] Weekly Journal* for 18 May). It seems obvious that the unruly crowd was not *coining* the expression but rather using a *familiar* idiom in a taunting, unconventional way.

*Picturesque Expressions: A Thematic Dictionary*, by Laurence Urdang and his collaborators (1985: 324), asserted that “this American colloquialism probably stems from an old ballad,” and then summarized the ballad that Barrère and Leland referred to, presumably without corroborating the information.

Elisabeth Margo, in *Taming the Forty-Niner* (1955: 3), summarized a very similar (though rather witless) shaggy-elephant narrative, “a story going the rounds,” she reported, “just over a hundred years ago” (3); the source is not cited. In that version, apparently in prose, the farmer is preoccupied with a *lit-*

*eral* desire the see an elephant at a nearby circus; so when the accidental collision occurs, he exultantly exclaims, “I have seen the elephant.” Margo commented, “Both the forty-niners and the men who stayed home saw in this story a symbol of the gold rush; ‘seeing the elephant’ became contemporary slang for going to California.” It isn’t clear whether Margo was asserting that the expression itself or just certain applications of it originated with the story. Perhaps William W. Johnson, in *The Forty Niners* (1974: 80), misinterpreted Margo; recounting the same story, he specifically claimed that the expression “was said [*by whom?*] to originate in an old story about a farmer.” In any case, Margo’s 1955 dating of the story “just over a hundred years ago” would seem to place it later than the early 1840s, from when the expression is elsewhere abundantly attested.

In the absence of more information, we should probably not assume that the proverbial phrase *see the elephant* derived from the punch-line of a comical narrative in prose or verse.

### ***10. Two Early English Analogs***

Without insisting on any direct or evolutionary connection, I wish to point out two far earlier parallels of the nineteenth-century American expression *see the elephant*.

The Elizabethan poet Sir John Davies (1569-1626) wrote a humorous or satiric epigram titled “In Titum” (Davies 1975: 132):

Titus the brave and valorous young gallant,  
Three yeeres together in this towne hath beene,  
Yet my lord Chauncellors tombe he hath not seene:  
Nor the New water worke, nor the Elephant.  
I cannot tell the cause without a smile,  
He hath beene in the Counter all this while.

The poem was not published in Davies’s lifetime. Most of his epigrams that can be dated come from the interval 1593-99. (One wonders what the rhyming of *gallant* with *elephant* suggests about the pronunciation of either word!)

Davies’s modern editor, Robert Krueger, noted that an elaborate tomb for the chancellor Sir Christopher Hatton at St. Paul’s Cathedral was completed in 1591, and that a new “water work”

to convey Thames water to private houses was built in 1594 (Davies 1975: 383). Anyone who had “seen the sights” of London in the mid-1590s would have been familiar with those two notable structures. Davies’s character Titus, however, has spent his London years in a debtors’ prison. Krueger assumed that the elephant was just another well-known London “sight,” and he mentioned several seventeenth-century references—but not sixteenth-century references—to elephants on exhibit (Davies 1975: 383-84). Quite possibly Davies’s remark that Titus “hath not seene . . . the Elephant” should thus be taken literally. Nonetheless, the fact that *seeing the elephant* was already being used as a metonymy (if not a metaphor) for ‘seeing the sights’ or ‘experiencing the cosmopolitan world’ or ‘being in the know’ is remarkable.

Several years later the minor poet William Basse, who died in 1653, wrote an undatable poem titled “The Walnut-Tree of Borestall”—a series of comical obsequies on a dead walnut tree, spoken by other trees. One section narrates the magical journey of a mighty oak tree to the site of the deceased walnut (Basse 1893: 336):

The youth of these our tymes, that did behold  
This motion strange of this vnweildy plant,  
Now boldly brag with vs, that are more old,  
That of our age they no advantage want,  
Though in our youths we saw the Elephant,  
And hee’s no novice that did neuer see  
The Lyons, if he saw this walking tree.

The linkage of “saw the Elephant” with the demonstrably-proverbial “see The Lyons,” in a similar sense, is especially noteworthy. And for a talking tree to say “in our youths we saw the Elephant” perhaps makes better sense figuratively than it does literally. The more figurative the usage, the farther such an expression had moved toward becoming proverbial.

## ***11. Conclusion***

I did not set out to study the proverbial phrase *to see the elephant* on account of any special difficulties entailed in discerning its evolution or its meanings. The expression has received more attention

than most sayings, and lexicographers and paremiographers have succeeded in assembling a great number of printed examples from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

In fact, I began at the other end. In the course of my academic work, I do a lot of reading in the sub-canonical literature of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries as it appears in such places as jestbooks, collections of fables and exempla, compendiums of *sententiae* and proverbs, miscellanies of epigrams, and textbooks that gathered ancient and modern wisdom for the delight, edification, and stylistic improvement of fledgling scholars. So I came across Sir John Davies’s epigram that uses—or anticipates—the proverbial expression *see the elephant*. Then I found the analog in the verses by William Basse. Then, knowing of the nineteenth-century expression that parallels the earlier phrase, I began examining what the available scholarship reveals about the age, the history, and the uses of the expression.

It was then that I realized how much interesting uncertainty and confusion prevail in the commentaries on the phrase.

We must keep in mind that the collectors and commentators have differed greatly one from another in their knowledge of folklore and philology, their diligence in finding evidence, and their skill in assessing the evidence. Sometimes proverbial expressions seem to fall through the crack that divides (or unites) the fields of linguistics and folklore, with lexicographers not knowing quite what to do with expressions comprising several words, and folklorists often not so expert in stating definitions or investigating etymologies.

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