

Dictionary of Received Ideas

Gustave Flaubert

Translated and Edited
by Gregory Norminton



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Dictionary of Received Ideas

Vox populi, vox Dei.

Wisdom of Nations

One can wager that every popular notion, every received idea, is a piece of stupidity, for it has been accepted by the majority.

Chamfort, *Maxims*

A

ABELARD* – Unnecessary to have the faintest idea of his philosophy, or even to know the titles of his works. Allude discreetly to the mutilation operated upon him by Fulbert. The tomb of Heloise and Abelard: if someone proves to you that it is a fake, cry out: “You are robbing me of my illusions!”

ABROAD – Enthusiasm for everything that comes from abroad: proof of a liberal mind. To denigrate everything that is not French: proof of patriotism.

ABSALOM – Had he worn a wig, Joab would not have been able to kill him. A facetious name to give a bald friend.*

ABSINTHE – Extra-violent poison: one glass and you are dead. Journalists drink it while writing their articles. Has killed more soldiers than the Bedouins.

ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE – Denigrate it, but attempt to belong to it if possible.

ACCIDENT – Always deplorable or unfortunate (as if one could ever find in misfortune a cause for rejoicing...)

ACHILLES – Must be accompanied by “fleet-footed”; this suggests that you have read Homer.

ACTRESSES – The ruin of many a good son. Frighteningly lewd, they give themselves up to orgies, destroy fortunes and end up in the poorhouse. Excuse me! Some of them make excellent mothers!

ADMIRAL – Always courageous. Only ever swears by “blistering barnacles”!

AGE (of revolutions) – Always ongoing, since every new government pledges to bring it to an end.

AGENT – A lewd term.*

AGRICULTURE – One of the udders of the State* (the State is masculine, but never mind). One should encourage it. Lacks manpower.

AIR – Always beware of draughts. Invariably, the weather front is in contradiction to ambient temperature: if the latter is warm, the former is cold, and vice versa.

ALABASTER – Serves to describe the loveliest parts of a woman's body.

ALBION – Always preceded by white, perfidious, no-nonsense. Napoleon came jolly close to conquering it. Sing its praises: England the free.

ALCIBIADES – Famous on account of his dog's tail. A kind of debauchee. Visited Aspasia.*

ALCOHOLISM – Cause of all modern illnesses (see ABSINTHE and TOBACCO).

AMBITION – Always preceded by “mad” when it lacks nobility.

AMBITIOUS – In the provinces, any man of reputation. “Me, I'm not ambitious!” indicates an egoist or an incompetent.

AMERICA – Fine example of injustice: Christopher Columbus discovered it and it takes its name from Amerigo Vespucci. Without the discovery of America, we would not have syphilis or phylloxera*. Praise it nonetheless,

especially if one has not been there. Inveigh against self-government.

AMUSING – Must be attached to all remarks: “How amusing!”

ANDROCLES – Refer to the lion of Androcles when discussing lion tamers.

ANGEL – Sounds good in love and literature.

ANGER – Stirs the blood; healthy to indulge in it from time to time.

ANIMALS – Ah! If animals could speak! There are some that are more intelligent than men.

ANTICHRIST – Voltaire, Renan...*

ANTIQUITY (and everything connected to it) – Commonplace, tedious.

ANTIQUITIES – Are always of modern manufacture.

ANTS – Good example to cite to a wastrel.* Inspired savings banks.

APRICOTS – We’ll have none again this year.

ARCHIMEDES – Say after his name: “Eureka! Give me a lever and I will move the world.”

There is also the Archimedes screw, but one is not required to know what it consists of.

ARCHITECTS – All imbeciles. Always forget to include the household staircase.

ARCHITECTURE – There are only four kinds of architecture. Naturally one does not count Egyptian, Cyclopean, Assyrian, Indian, Chinese, Gothic, Romanesque, etc.

ARMY – The buttress of Society.

ARMY IRREGULAR – More terrifying than the enemy.

ARSENIC – Can be found everywhere (remember Madame Lafarge*). That said, there are nations that eat it.

ART – Leads to the poorhouse. What's the use of it, since we're replacing it with machines that do better and work faster?

ARTISTS – All triflers. Praise their financial disinterest (archaic). Be surprised to find them dressed like everyone else (archaic). Earn insane fortunes but throw them out the window. Often invited to dine in town. A female artist can

be nothing but a strumpet. What they do can hardly be called work.

ASP – Creature familiar from Cleopatra’s fig basket.

ASSASSIN – Always cowardly, even when he has been intrepid and audacious. Less blameworthy than an arsonist.

ASTRONOMY – Admirable science. Is useful only to the navy. While on the subject, laugh at astrology.

ATHEIST – A nation of atheists would be unable to survive.

AUTHOR – One must be “familiar with authors”; no need to know their names.

B

BACCALAUREATE – Thunder against.

BACHELOR’S FLAT – Always in disorder, with women’s trinkets lying about here and there. Smell(s?) of cigarettes. There must be extraordinary things in there.

BACHELORS – All egoists and rakes. They ought to be taxed. Are setting themselves up for a sad old age.

BACK – A slap on the back can make one consumptive.

BAGNOLET* – Place famous for its blind people.

BALDNESS – Always premature, is caused by the excesses of youth or the thinking of lofty thoughts.

BALLADS – The singer of ballads is attractive to women.

BALLOONS – With balloons we will end up going to the moon. We shan't be able to navigate them any time soon.

BANDITS – Always ferocious.

BANKERS – All rich. Crooks, fat cats.*

BANQUET – There reigns among the guests the frankest cordiality. One retains of it the happiest memories, and one never parts without having given rendezvous for the following year. A wit must say: "At the banquet of life, unfortunate guest..."* etc.

BARBER – Visit the barber's mate, go to Figaro.
The barber of Louis XI.* They used to bleed people in the olden days.

BARQUE – Every little boat that carries a woman.
“Come into my barque!”

BASILICA – Pompous synonym for church. Is always imposing.

BASQUES – The fastest runners.

BATHING COSTUME – Very exciting.

BATTLE – Always bloody. There are always two victors, the winner and the loser.

BAYADERE* – Word which transports the imagination. All women from the Orient are bayaderes (see ODALISQUES).

BEAR – Is generally called Martin. Cite the anecdote about the cripple who, seeing that a watch had fallen into its lair, went into it and was devoured.

BEARD – Sign of strength. Too much beard makes the hair fall out. Useful for protecting neckties.

BEDCHAMBER – In an old castle: Henri IV always spent a night there.

BEER – One must not drink any, it gives one a cold.

BEETHOVEN – Do not pronounce “beat oven”.
Swoon with pleasure when one of his works is played.

BEGGING – Ought to be forbidden and never is.

BELLOWS – Never use them.

BELLTOWER (of the village) – Makes the heart pound.

BELLY – Say abdomen when ladies are present.

BIBLE – The oldest book in the world.

BILL – Always too high.

BILLIARDS – Noble game. Indispensable in the country.

BIRD – Wish to be one, and say with a sigh:
“Wings! Wings!” Sign of a poetic soul.

BLACK – Always preceded by “pitch”.

BLACK WOMEN – Looser than white women
(see BRUNETTES and BLONDES).

BLEEDING – Have oneself bled in the spring.

BLONDES – Looser than brunettes (see BRUNETTES).

BLUE STOCKING – Term of contempt to indicate any woman who interests herself in intellectual matters. Quote Molière in one's aid: "When her mind's capabilities puff themselves up..." etc.*

BOARDING SCHOOL – Say *Boarding School*,* when it is an institution for young girls.

BODIES – If we knew how our bodies are made, we would not dare make a move.

BOIL – See SPOTS.

BOOK – Whatever it is, always too long.

BOOTS – In very hot weather, never fail to refer to the boots of a gendarme or the walking shoes of a postman (permitted only in the country, in the open air). Only with boots can one be well shod.

BREAD – One has no idea what nasty things end up in bread.

BREATH – To have a strong-smelling one gives an air of distinction. Avoid references to flies and insist that it comes from the stomach.

- BRETONS – All decent folk, but obstinate.
- BRISTLES – If one cuts the hairs, they bleed.
- BRONZE – Metal from antiquity.
- BROOCH – Must always contain a lock of hair or a photograph.
- BRUNETTES – Looser than blondes (see BLONDES).
- BUDDHISM – “False religion in India.” (Definition from Bouillet’s dictionary, 1st edition).*
- BUDGET – Never balanced.
- BUFFON* – Wore cuffs in order to write.
- BULL – Father of the calf. The bullock is only its uncle.
- BURIAL – Say of the deceased: “And to think that I dined with him only eight days ago!” Termed obsequies when it involves a general, inhumation when it involves a philosopher.
- BUSINESS MATTERS – Come before everything. A woman must avoid discussing hers. What matters most in life. Everything is there.
- BUTCHERS – Are terrible in times of revolution.

C

CABINETMAKER* – Worker who specializes in mahogany.

CACHET – Always followed by “entirely of its own”.

CALIBRE – Disagree about the pronunciation of the word.

CAMEL – Has two humps to the dromedary’s one. Or else the camel has one hump and the dromedary has two (one gets confused).

CAMARILLA – Become indignant when this word is uttered.

CANDOUR – Always fetching. One is full of it or one has none whatsoever.

CANE – A walking stick must be made of it.

CANNONADE – Changes the weather.

CANNONBALL – The gust from a cannonball makes one blind.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT – Complain about women who go to watch it.

CARRIAGES – Handier to rent than to own: thus one avoids the inconvenience of servants, as well as of horses that are always sick.

CARTHUSIAN MONKS – Spend their time making liqueurs, digging their tomb and saying: “Brother, everyone must die.”

CARTRIDGE POUCH – Holster for every marshal’s baton.*

CATHOLICISM – Has had a most favourable influence on the arts.

CATS – Cats are traitors. Call them lounge tigers. Cut their tail to prevent staggers.

CAVALRY – Nobler than the infantry.

CAVES – The typical homes of robbers. Are always full of snakes.

CEDAR – The one in the Jardin des Plantes was brought back in a hat.*

CELEBRITIES – Concern oneself with every detail of their private lives, in order to be able to denigrate them.

CENSORSHIP – Has its uses, say what you will.

CERUMEN – “Human wax”.* Do not to remove it as it prevents insects from entering one’s ears.

CHAMBERMAIDS – Prettier than their mistresses. Know all their secrets and betray them. Always dishonoured by the scion of the household.

CHAMPAGNE – Distinguishing feature of a formal dinner. Pretend to detest it, while saying that “it is not wine”. Provokes excitement among the lower classes. Russia consumes more of it than France. It has been the means of spreading French ideas throughout Europe. Under the Regency, people did nothing but drink it. However one does not drink, one “quaffs” it.

CHATEAUBRIAND – Known chiefly for the steak dish that bears his name.*

CHEAP GOODS – Attractive sign for a shop, in that it inspires confidence.

CHEESE – Cite Brillat-Savarin’s* aphorism: “A dessert without cheese is a beautiful woman with only one eye.”

CHESS (game of) – The essence of military tactics. All the great soldiers were good at it. Too serious to be a game, too futile to be a science.

CHESTNUT – Female of the conker.*

CHIAROSCURO – One does not know what it is.

CHILBLAIN – Sign of health; comes from having warmed oneself up after having been cold.

CHILDBIRTH – Word to avoid; replace with “event”. “On what date are you expecting the event?”

CHILDREN – Affect a lyric tenderness towards them, when people are about.

CHIMNEY – Always smokes. Subject for discussion in relation to heating.

CHIMNEY SWEEP – The swallow of winter.

CHOLERA – Melons cause cholera. One heals oneself by taking a great deal of tea with rum.

CHRISTIANITY – Emancipated the slaves.

CHRISTMAS BOX* – Object with indignation.

CHRISTMAS EVE – White pudding makes a Christmas Eve.

CIDER – Spoils the teeth.

CIGARS – Those sold lawfully are “all revolting”.
The only good ones are contraband.

CIRCLE – One must always belong to a circle.

CIVIL SERVANT – Inspires respect whatever the
function he fulfils.

CLARINET – Playing one causes blindness. Ex-
ample: all blind people play the clarinet.

CLASSICS (the) – One is meant to be familiar
with them.

CLEANSING – Used only in relation to the cer-
emonial washing of feet.

CLOAK – Always the same colour as the wall for
gallant escapades.

CLOGS – A wealthy man of humble origins al-
ways came to Paris in a pair of clogs.

CLOTH – All cloth comes from Elbeuf.*

CLOWN – Has been dislocated since childhood.

CLUB* – Infuriating topic for conservatives. Con-
fusion and debate concerning the pronuncia-
tion of the word.

COBBLER – *Ne sutor ultra crepidam.**

COFFEE – Imparts wit. Tastes good only when it comes from Le Havre. At a formal dinner, must be taken standing. Drinking it without sugar, very fashionable, makes it seem as if one has lived in the Orient.

COGNAC – Very harmful. Excellent against quite a few diseases. A good glass of cognac never did anyone any harm. Taken on an empty stomach it kills intestinal worms.

COITION, COPULATION – Words to avoid.
Say: “They had relations...”

COLD – Healthier than the heat.

COLLEGE, Lycée – Nobler than boarding school.

COLONIES (our) – Affect a mournful countenance when they are discussed.

COMEDY – In verse, no longer suits our age. At the same time, one must respect high comedy.
*Castigat ridendo mores.**

COMETS – Laugh about people who feared them.

COMPASS – He sees straight who has one in his eye.*

- COMPETITION – The essence of commerce.
- CONCERT – Well-to-do pastime.
- CONCESSIONS – Never make any. They destroyed Louis XVI.
- CONCILIATION – Always preach it, even when both sides are irreconcilably opposed.
- CONCUPISCENCE – Clergyman’s word to express the desires of the flesh.
- CONFECTIONER – Everyone in Rouen is a confectioner.*
- CONFLAGRATION – Spectacle worth seeing.
- CONGRATULATIONS – Always sincere, hearty, cordial, etc.
- CONGREGATIONALIST – Knight of Onan.*
- CONSERVATIVE – Fat-bellied politician. “Blinkered conservative!” – “Indeed, sir, blinkers serve as safeguards.”
- CONSERVATOIRE – One simply must have a subscription to the Conservatoire.
- CONSPIRATOR – Conspirators are in the habit of inscribing their names on lists.