

***AMBROSE
BIERCE***



***THE DEVIL'S
DICTIONARY***

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Ambrose Bierce

The Devil's Dictionary

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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The Devil's Dictionary was begun in a weekly paper in 1881, and was continued in a desultory way at long intervals until 1906. In that year a large part of it was published in covers with the title *The Cynic's Word Book*, a name which the author had not the power to reject or happiness to approve. To quote the publishers of the present work:

"This more reverent title had previously been forced upon him by the religious scruples of the last newspaper in which a part of the work had appeared, with the natural consequence that when it came out in covers the country already had been flooded by its imitators with a score of 'cynic' books—*The Cynic's This*, *The Cynic's That*, and *The Cynic's t'Other*. Most of these books were merely stupid, though some of them added the distinction of silliness. Among them, they brought the word 'cynic' into disfavor so deep that any book bearing it was discredited in advance of publication."

Meantime, too, some of the enterprising humorists of the country had helped themselves to such parts of the work as served their needs, and many of its definitions, anecdotes, phrases and so forth, had become more or less current in popular speech. This explanation is made, not with any pride of priority in trifles, but in simple denial of possible charges of plagiarism, which is no trifle. In merely resuming his own the author hopes to be held guiltless by those to whom the work is addressed—enlightened souls who prefer

dry wines to sweet, sense to sentiment, wit to humor and clean English to slang.

A conspicuous, and it is hoped not unpleasant, feature of the book is its abundant illustrative quotations from eminent poets, chief of whom is that learned and ingenious cleric, Father Gassalasca Jape, S.J., whose lines bear his initials. To Father Jape's kindly encouragement and assistance the author of the prose text is greatly indebted.

A.B.

A

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ABASEMENT, n. A decent and customary mental attitude in the presence of wealth or power. Peculiarly appropriate in an employee when addressing an employer.

ABATIS, n. Rubbish in front of a fort, to prevent the rubbish outside from molesting the rubbish inside.

ABDICATION, n. An act whereby a sovereign attests his sense of the high temperature of the throne.

Poor Isabella's Dead, whose abdication
Set all tongues wagging in the Spanish nation.
For that performance 'twere unfair to scold her:
She wisely left a throne too hot to hold her.
To History she'll be no royal riddle—
Merely a plain parched pea that jumped the griddle.

G.J.

ABDOMEN, n. The temple of the god Stomach, in whose worship, with sacrificial rights, all true men engage. From women this ancient faith commands but a stammering assent. They sometimes minister at the altar in a half-hearted and ineffective way, but true reverence for the one deity that men really adore they know not. If woman had a free hand in the world's marketing the race would become graminivorous.

ABILITY, n. The natural equipment to accomplish some small part of the meaner ambitions distinguishing able men from dead ones. In the last analysis ability is commonly found to consist mainly in a high degree of solemnity. Perhaps, however, this impressive quality is rightly appraised; it is no easy task to be solemn.

ABNORMAL, adj. Not conforming to standard. In matters of thought and conduct, to be independent is to be abnormal, to be abnormal is to be detested. Wherefore the lexicographer adviseth a striving toward the straiter [sic] resemblance of the Average Man than he hath to himself. Whoso attaineth thereto shall have peace, the prospect of death and the hope of Hell.

ABORIGINIES, n. Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber; they fertilize.

ABRACADABRA.

By *Abracadabra* we signify

An infinite number of things.

'Tis the answer to What? and How? and Why?

And Whence? and Whither?—a word whereby

The Truth (with the comfort it brings)

Is open to all who grope in night,

Crying for Wisdom's holy light.

Whether the word is a verb or a noun
Is knowledge beyond my reach.
I only know that 'tis handed down.
From sage to sage,
From age to age—
An immortal part of speech!

Of an ancient man the tale is told
That he lived to be ten centuries old,
In a cave on a mountain side.
(True, he finally died.)
The fame of his wisdom filled the land,
For his head was bald, and you'll understand
His beard was long and white
And his eyes uncommonly bright.

Philosophers gathered from far and near
To sit at his feet and hear and hear,
Though he never was heard
To utter a word
But "*Abracadabra, abracadab,
Abracada, abracad,
Abraca, abrac, abra, ab!*"
'Twas all he had,
'Twas all they wanted to hear, and each
Made copious notes of the mystical speech,
Which they published next—
A trickle of text
In a meadow of commentary.
Mighty big books were these,
In number, as leaves of trees;
In learning, remarkable—very!

He's dead,

As I said,
And the books of the sages have perished,
But his wisdom is sacredly cherished.
In *Abracadabra* it solemnly rings,
Like an ancient bell that forever swings.
O, I love to hear
That word make clear
Humanity's General Sense of Things.

Jamrach Holobom

ABRIDGE, v.t. To shorten.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary
for
people to abridge their king, a decent respect for the
opinions of
mankind requires that they should declare the causes which
impel
them to the separation.

Oliver Cromwell

ABRUPT, adj. Sudden, without ceremony, like the arrival
of a cannon- shot and the departure of the soldier whose
interests are most affected by it. Dr. Samuel Johnson
beautifully said of another author's ideas that they were
"concatenated without abruption."

ABSCOND, v.i. To "move in a mysterious way," commonly
with the property of another.

Spring beckons! All things to the call respond;
The trees are leaving and cashiers abscond.

Phela Orm

ABSENT, adj. Peculiarly exposed to the tooth of
detraction; vilified; hopelessly in the wrong; superseded in
the consideration and affection of another.

To men a man is but a mind. Who cares
What face he carries or what form he wears?

But woman's body is the woman. O,
Stay thou, my sweetheart, and do never go,
But heed the warning words the sage hath said:
A woman absent is a woman dead.

Jogo Tyree

ABSENTEE, n. A person with an income who has had the forethought to remove himself from the sphere of exaction.

ABSOLUTE, adj. Independent, irresponsible. An absolute monarchy is one in which the sovereign does as he pleases so long as he pleases the assassins. Not many absolute monarchies are left, most of them having been replaced by limited monarchies, where the sovereign's power for evil (and for good) is greatly curtailed, and by republics, which are governed by chance.

ABSTAINER, n. A weak person who yields to the temptation of denying himself a pleasure. A total abstainer is one who abstains from everything but abstention, and especially from inactivity in the affairs of others.

Said a man to a crapulent youth: "I thought
You a total abstainer, my son."

"So I am, so I am," said the scapegrace caught—
"But not, sir, a bigoted one."

G.J.

ABSURDITY, n. A statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion.

ACADEME, n. An ancient school where morality and philosophy were taught.

ACADEMY, n. [from ACADEME] A modern school where football is taught.

ACCIDENT, n. An inevitable occurrence due to the action of immutable natural laws.

ACCOMPLICE, n. One associated with another in a crime, having guilty knowledge and complicity, as an attorney who defends a criminal, knowing him guilty. This view of the attorney's position in the matter has not hitherto commanded the assent of attorneys, no one having offered them a fee for assenting.

ACCORD, n. Harmony.

ACCORDION, n. An instrument in harmony with the sentiments of an assassin.

ACCOUNTABILITY, n. The mother of caution.

"My accountability, bear in mind,"

Said the Grand Vizier: "Yes, yes,"

Said the Shah: "I do—'tis the only kind

Of ability you possess."

Joram Tate

ACCUSE, v.t. To affirm another's guilt or unworth; most commonly as a justification of ourselves for having wronged him.

ACEPHALOUS, adj. In the surprising condition of the Crusader who absently pulled at his forelock some hours after a Saracen scimitar had, unconsciously to him, passed through his neck, as related by de Joinville.

ACHIEVEMENT, n. The death of endeavor and the birth of disgust.

ACKNOWLEDGE, v.t. To confess. Acknowledgement of one another's faults is the highest duty imposed by our love of truth.

ACQUAINTANCE, n. A person whom we know well enough to borrow from, but not well enough to lend to. A degree of friendship called slight when its object is poor or obscure, and intimate when he is rich or famous.

ACTUALLY, adv. Perhaps; possibly.

ADAGE, n. Boned wisdom for weak teeth.

ADAMANT, n. A mineral frequently found beneath a corset. Soluble in solicitate of gold.

ADDER, n. A species of snake. So called from its habit of adding funeral outlays to the other expenses of living.

ADHERENT, n. A follower who has not yet obtained all that he expects to get.

ADMINISTRATION, n. An ingenious abstraction in politics, designed to receive the kicks and cuffs due to the premier or president. A man of straw, proof against bad-egging and dead-catting.

ADMIRAL, n. That part of a war-ship which does the talking while the figure-head does the thinking.

ADMIRATION, n. Our polite recognition of another's resemblance to ourselves.

ADMONITION, n. Gentle reproof, as with a meat-axe. Friendly warning.

Consigned by way of admonition,
His soul forever to perdition.

Judibras

ADORE, v.t. To venerate expectantly.

ADVICE, n. The smallest current coin.

"The man was in such deep distress,"
Said Tom, "that I could do no less
Than give him good advice." Said Jim:
"If less could have been done for him
I know you well enough, my son,
To know that's what you would have done."

Jebel Jocordy

AFFIANCED, pp. Fitted with an ankle-ring for the ball-and-chain.

AFFLICTION, n. An acclimatizing process preparing the soul for another and bitter world.

AFRICAN, n. A nigger that votes our way.

AGE, n. That period of life in which we compound for the vices that we still cherish by reviling those that we have no longer the enterprise to commit.

AGITATOR, n. A statesman who shakes the fruit trees of his neighbors —to dislodge the worms.

AIM, n.

The task we set our wishes to.

"Cheer up! Have you no aim in life?"

She tenderly inquired.

"An aim? Well, no, I haven't, wife;

The fact is—I have fired."

G.J.

AIR, n. A nutritious substance supplied by a bountiful Providence for the fattening of the poor.

ALDERMAN, n. An ingenious criminal who covers his secret thieving with a pretence of open marauding.

ALIEN, n. An American sovereign in his probationary state.

ALLAH, n. The Mahometan Supreme Being, as distinguished from the Christian, Jewish, and so forth.

Allah's good laws I faithfully have kept,
And ever for the sins of man have wept;
And sometimes kneeling in the temple I
Have reverently crossed my hands and slept.

Junker Barlow

ALLEGIANCE, n.

This thing Allegiance, as I suppose,
Is a ring fitted in the subject's nose,

Whereby that organ is kept rightly pointed
To smell the sweetness of the Lord's anointed.

G.J.

ALLIANCE, n. In international politics, the union of two thieves who have their hands so deeply inserted in each other's pockets that they cannot separately plunder a third.

ALLIGATOR, n. The crocodile of America, superior in every detail to the crocodile of the effete monarchies of the Old World. Herodotus says the Indus is, with one exception, the only river that produces crocodiles, but they appear to have gone West and grown up with the other rivers. From the notches on his back the alligator is called a sawrian.

ALONE, adj. In bad company.
In contact, lo! the flint and steel,
By spark and flame, the thought reveal
That he the metal, she the stone,
Had cherished secretly alone.

Booley Fito

ALTAR, n. The place whereupon the priest formerly raveled out the small intestine of the sacrificial victim for purposes of divination and cooked its flesh for the gods. The word is now seldom used, except with reference to the sacrifice of their liberty and peace by a male and a female tool.

They stood before the altar and supplied
The fire themselves in which their fat was fried.
In vain the sacrifice!—no god will claim
An offering burnt with an unholy flame.

M.P. Nopput

AMBIDEXTROUS, adj. Able to pick with equal skill a right-hand pocket or a left.

AMBITION, n. An overmastering desire to be vilified by enemies while living and made ridiculous by friends when dead.

AMNESTY, n. The state's magnanimity to those offenders whom it would be too expensive to punish.

ANOINT, v.t. To grease a king or other great functionary already sufficiently slippery.

As sovereigns are anointed by the priesthood,
So pigs to lead the populace are greased good.

Judibras

ANTIPATHY, n. The sentiment inspired by one's friend's friend.

APHORISM, n. Predigested wisdom.

The flabby wine-skin of his brain
Yields to some pathologic strain,
And voids from its unstored abysm
The driblet of an aphorism.

"The Mad Philosopher," 1697

APOLOGIZE, v.i. To lay the foundation for a future offence.

APOSTATE, n. A leech who, having penetrated the shell of a turtle only to find that the creature has long been dead, deems it expedient to form a new attachment to a fresh turtle.

APOTHECARY, n. The physician's accomplice, undertaker's benefactor and grave worm's provider.

When Jove sent blessings to all men that are,
And Mercury conveyed them in a jar,
That friend of tricksters introduced by stealth
Disease for the apothecary's health,
Whose gratitude impelled him to proclaim:
"My deadliest drug shall bear my patron's name!"

G.J.

APPEAL, v.t. In law, to put the dice into the box for another throw.

APPETITE, n. An instinct thoughtfully implanted by Providence as a solution to the labor question.

APPLAUSE, n. The echo of a platitude.

APRIL FOOL, n. The March fool with another month added to his folly.

ARCHBISHOP, n. An ecclesiastical dignitary one point holier than a bishop.

If I were a jolly archbishop,
On Fridays I'd eat all the fish up—
Salmon and flounders and smelts;
On other days everything else.

Jodo Rem

ARCHITECT, n. One who drafts a plan of your house, and plans a draft of your money.

ARDOR, n. The quality that distinguishes love without knowledge.

ARENA, n. In politics, an imaginary rat-pit in which the statesman wrestles with his record.

ARISTOCRACY, n. Government by the best men. (In this sense the word is obsolete; so is that kind of government.)
Fellows that wear downy hats and clean shirts—guilty of education and suspected of bank accounts.

ARMOR, n. The kind of clothing worn by a man whose tailor is a blacksmith.

ARRAYED, pp. Drawn up and given an orderly disposition, as a rioter hanged to a lamppost.

ARREST, v.t. Formally to detain one accused of unusualness.

God made the world in six days and was arrested on the seventh.

The Unauthorized Version

ARSENIC, n. A kind of cosmetic greatly affected by the ladies, whom it greatly affects in turn.

"Eat arsenic? Yes, all you get,"
Consenting, he did speak up;
"'Tis better you should eat it, pet,
Than put it in my teacup."

Joel Huck

ART, n. This word has no definition. Its origin is related as follows by the ingenious Father Gassalasca Jape, S.J.

One day a wag—what would the wretch be at?—

Shifted a letter of the cipher RAT,

And said it was a god's name! Straight arose

Fantastic priests and postulants (with shows,

And mysteries, and mummeries, and hymns,

And disputations dire that lamed their limbs)

To serve his temple and maintain the fires,

Expound the law, manipulate the wires.

Amazed, the populace that rites attend,

Believe whate'er they cannot comprehend,

And, inly edified to learn that two

Half-hairs joined so and so (as Art can do)

Have sweeter values and a grace more fit

Than Nature's hairs that never have been split,

Bring cates and wines for sacrificial feasts,

And sell their garments to support the priests.

ARTLESSNESS, n. A certain engaging quality to which women attain by long study and severe practice upon the admiring male, who is pleased to fancy it resembles the candid simplicity of his young.

ASPERSE, v.t. Maliciously to ascribe to another vicious actions which one has not had the temptation and

opportunity to commit.

ASS, n. A public singer with a good voice but no ear. In Virginia City, Nevada, he is called the Washoe Canary, in Dakota, the Senator, and everywhere the Donkey. The animal is widely and variously celebrated in the literature, art and religion of every age and country; no other so engages and fires the human imagination as this noble vertebrate. Indeed, it is doubted by some (Ramasilus, *lib. II., De Clem.*, and C. Stantatus, *De Temperamente*) if it is not a god; and as such we know it was worshiped by the Etruscans, and, if we may believe Macrobius, by the Cupasians also. Of the only two animals admitted into the Mahometan Paradise along with the souls of men, the ass that carried Balaam is one, the dog of the Seven Sleepers the other. This is no small distinction. From what has been written about this beast might be compiled a library of great splendor and magnitude, rivalling that of the Shakespearean cult, and that which clusters about the Bible. It may be said, generally, that all literature is more or less Asinine.

"Hail, holy Ass!" the quiring angels sing;

"Priest of Unreason, and of Discords King!"

Great co-Creator, let Thy glory shine:

God made all else, the Mule, the Mule is thine!"

G.J.

AUCTIONEER, n. The man who proclaims with a hammer that he has picked a pocket with his tongue.

AUSTRALIA, n. A country lying in the South Sea, whose industrial and commercial development has been unspeakably retarded by an unfortunate dispute among geographers as to whether it is a continent or an island.

AVERNUS, n. The lake by which the ancients entered the infernal regions. The fact that access to the infernal regions was obtained by a lake is believed by the learned Marcus Anselmo Scrutator to have suggested the Christian rite of baptism by immersion. This, however, has been shown by Lactantius to be an error.

Facilis descensus Averni, The poet remarks; and the sense
Of it is that when down-hill I turn I
Will get more of punches than pence.

Jehal Dai Lupe

B

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BAAL, n. An old deity formerly much worshiped under various names. As Baal he was popular with the Phoenicians; as Belus or Bel he had the honor to be served by the priest Berosus, who wrote the famous account of the Deluge; as Babel he had a tower partly erected to his glory on the Plain of Shinar. From Babel comes our English word "babble." Under whatever name worshiped, Baal is the Sun-god. As Beelzebub he is the god of flies, which are begotten of the sun's rays on the stagnant water. In Physicia Baal is still worshiped as Bolus, and as Belly he is adored and served with abundant sacrifice by the priests of Guttledom.

BABE or BABY, n. A misshapen creature of no particular age, sex, or condition, chiefly remarkable for the violence of

the sympathies and antipathies it excites in others, itself without sentiment or emotion. There have been famous babes; for example, little Moses, from whose adventure in the bulrushes the Egyptian hierophants of seven centuries before doubtless derived their idle tale of the child Osiris being preserved on a floating lotus leaf.

Ere babes were invented

The girls were contended.

Now man is tormented

Until to buy babes he has squandered

His money. And so I have pondered

This thing, and thought may be

'T were better that Baby

The First had been eagled or condored.

Ro Amil

BACCHUS, n. A convenient deity invented by the ancients as an excuse for getting drunk.

Is public worship, then, a sin,

That for devotions paid to Bacchus

The lictors dare to run us in,

And resolutely thump and whack us?

Jorace

BACK, n. That part of your friend which it is your privilege to contemplate in your adversity.

BACKBITE, v.t. To speak of a man as you find him when he can't find you.

BAIT, n. A preparation that renders the hook more palatable. The best kind is beauty.

BAPTISM, n. A sacred rite of such efficacy that he who finds himself in heaven without having undergone it will be unhappy forever. It is performed with water in two ways—by immersion, or plunging, and by aspersion, or sprinkling.

But whether the plan of immersion
Is better than simple aspersion
Let those immersed
And those aspersed
Decide by the Authorized Version,
And by matching their agues tertian.

G.J.

BAROMETER, n. An ingenious instrument which indicates what kind of weather we are having.

BARRACK, n. A house in which soldiers enjoy a portion of that of which it is their business to deprive others.

BASILISK, n. The cockatrice. A sort of serpent hatched from the egg of a cock. The basilisk had a bad eye, and its glance was fatal. Many infidels deny this creature's existence, but Semprello Aurator saw and handled one that had been blinded by lightning as a punishment for having fatally gazed on a lady of rank whom Jupiter loved. Juno afterward restored the reptile's sight and hid it in a cave. Nothing is so well attested by the ancients as the existence of the basilisk, but the cocks have stopped laying.

BASTINADO, n. The act of walking on wood without exertion.

BATH, n. A kind of mystic ceremony substituted for religious worship, with what spiritual efficacy has not been determined.

The man who taketh a steam bath
He loseth all the skin he hath,
And, for he's boiled a brilliant red,
Thinketh to cleanliness he's wed,
Forgetting that his lungs he's soiling
With dirty vapors of the boiling.

Richard Gwow

BATTLE, n. A method of untying with the teeth of a political knot that would not yield to the tongue.

BEARD, n. The hair that is commonly cut off by those who justly execrate the absurd Chinese custom of shaving the head.

BEAUTY, n. The power by which a woman charms a lover and terrifies a husband.

BEFRIEND, v.t. To make an ingrate.

BEG, v. To ask for something with an earnestness proportioned to the belief that it will not be given.

Who is that, father?

A mendicant, child,

Haggard, morose, and unaffable—wild!

See how he glares through the bars of his cell!

With Citizen Mendicant all is not well.

Why did they put him there, father?

Because

Obeying his belly he struck at the laws.

His belly?

Oh, well, he was starving, my boy—

A state in which, doubtless, there's little of joy.

No bite had he eaten for days, and his cry

Was "Bread!" ever "Bread!"

What's the matter with pie?

With little to wear, he had nothing to sell;

To beg was unlawful—improper as well.

Why didn't he work?

He would even have done that,
But men said: "Get out!" and the State remarked: "Scat!"
I mention these incidents merely to show
That the vengeance he took was uncommonly low.
Revenge, at the best, is the act of a Siou,
But for trifles—

Pray what did bad Mendicant do?

Stole two loaves of bread to replenish his lack
And tuck out the belly that clung to his back.

Is that *a//* father dear?

There's little to tell:
They sent him to jail, and they'll send him to—well,
The company's better than here we can boast,
And there's—

Bread for the needy, dear father?

Um—toast.

Atka Mip

BEGGAR, n. One who has relied on the assistance of his friends.

BEHAVIOR, n. Conduct, as determined, not by principle, but by breeding. The word seems to be somewhat loosely used in Dr. Jamrach Holobom's translation of the following lines from the *Dies Irae*:

Recordare, Jesu pie,
Quod sum causa tuae viae.
Ne me perdas illa die.

Pray remember, sacred Savior,
Whose the thoughtless hand that gave your
Death-blow. Pardon such behavior.

BELLADONNA, n. In Italian a beautiful lady; in English a deadly poison. A striking example of the essential identity of the two tongues.

BENEDICTINES, n. An order of monks otherwise known as black friars.

She thought it a crow, but it turn out to be
A monk of St. Benedict croaking a text.
"Here's one of an order of cooks," said she—
"Black friars in this world, fried black in the next."

"The Devil on Earth" (London, 1712)

BENEFACTOR, n. One who makes heavy purchases of ingratitude, without, however, materially affecting the price, which is still within the means of all.

BERENICE'S HAIR, n. A constellation (*Coma Berenices*) named in honor of one who sacrificed her hair to save her husband.

Her locks an ancient lady gave
Her loving husband's life to save;
And men—they honored so the dame—
Upon some stars bestowed her name.

But to our modern married fair,
Who'd give their lords to save their hair,
No stellar recognition's given.
There are not stars enough in heaven.

G.J.

BIGAMY, n. A mistake in taste for which the wisdom of the future will adjudge a punishment called trigamy.

BIGOT, n. One who is obstinately and zealously attached to an opinion that you do not entertain.

BILLINGSGATE, n. The invective of an opponent.

BIRTH, n. The first and direst of all disasters. As to the nature of it there appears to be no uniformity. Castor and Pollux were born from the egg. Pallas came out of a skull. Galatea was once a block of stone. Peresilis, who wrote in the tenth century, avers that he grew up out of the ground where a priest had spilled holy water. It is known that Arimaxus was derived from a hole in the earth, made by a stroke of lightning. Leucomedon was the son of a cavern in Mount Aetna, and I have myself seen a man come out of a wine cellar.

BLACKGUARD, n. A man whose qualities, prepared for display like a box of berries in a market—the fine ones on top—have been opened on the wrong side. An inverted gentleman.

BLANK-VERSE, n. Unrhymed iambic pentameters—the most difficult kind of English verse to write acceptably; a kind, therefore, much affected by those who cannot acceptably write any kind.

BODY-SNATCHER, n. A robber of grave-worms. One who supplies the young physicians with that with which the old physicians have supplied the undertaker. The hyena.

"One night," a doctor said, "last fall,
I and my comrades, four in all,
When visiting a graveyard stood
Within the shadow of a wall.

"While waiting for the moon to sink
We saw a wild hyena slink
About a new-made grave, and then
Begin to excavate its brink!