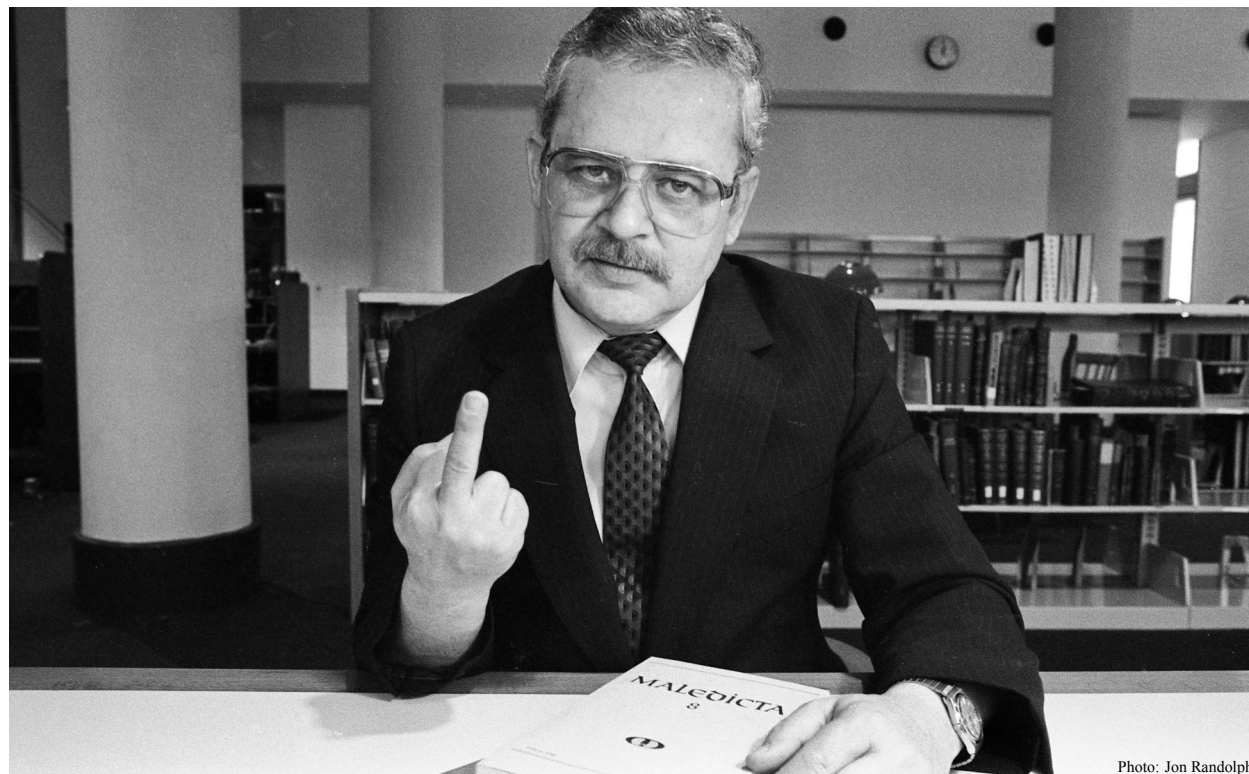


## THE ORACLE OF OPPROBRIUM: REINHOLD AMAN, 1936–2019

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Reinhold Aman, known as “the oracle of opprobrium”, “the Noah Webster of verbal aggression”, and “the world’s foremost authority on swearing”, died on March 2, 2019 at the age of 82. Aman was the founder and president of Maledicta: The International Research Center for the Study of Verbal Aggression, and served as the full-time editor of its eponymous journal. For nearly three decades, *Maledicta* published collections and studies of some of the most vile and vulgar, but oftentimes also the most creative, uses of human language. Aman himself penned many of the journal’s articles, as well as a number of standalone books on wordplay and slang.

### **Chemistry, curses, and cacademia**

Reinhold “Rey” Aman was born on April 8, 1936 in the Bavarian market town of Fürstenzell. A chemical engineer by training, he emigrated to North America in 1957, but in 1961 he gave up a lucrative career in the petrochemical industry to obtain a teaching degree in German from the University of Wisconsin. He went on to postgraduate studies at the University of Texas, earning a doctorate in medieval German literature in 1968. His 275-page dissertation analyzed the 151 battle scenes in *Parzival*, a heroic epic of the 13th century. In 1968 he returned to the University

of Wisconsin (later split off into the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee) to serve as Assistant Professor of German.

Already as a doctoral student, Aman had found his research interests drawn towards verbal abuse. During a seminar on dialectology, he had come across a 19th-century list of German words and phrases and began translating them into his native dialect. Among the entries was the threat, “*Ich schlage dich gleich mit dem Kochlöffel um die Ohren, du Affe.*” (“I’m going to knock you on the ears with a cooking spoon, you monkey.”) Aman’s interest was piqued. “Why call a human being a monkey?” he asked himself. “That night,” he later recalled, “I compiled from memory a list of 200 other animal metaphors in my native Bavarian language.” As a faculty member, Aman revised and expanded this list of zoonymic slurs into the *Bayrisch-österreichisches Schimpfwörterbuch*, a 206-page dictionary of Austro-Bavarian curse words that was published in 1973. The book was a success in Europe, going through five further editions and remaining in print to this day.

Aman meanwhile broadened and deepened his research into verbal aggression, accumulating a vast archive of books, theses, scholarly articles, press clippings, and other materials, all meticulously catalogued on nearly 5000 index cards. His reputation as an expert on cursing became such that, at the height of the Watergate scandal, he was quoted by journalists on the profanities redacted from Nixon’s White House tapes. His teaching methods, too, attracted interest, from students and pedagogical experts alike. In February 1971 he launched *Laugh and Learn*, a magazine aimed at making second language learning more enjoyable through the use of humour and wordplay. As Aman explained in *The Modern Language Journal*, the scholarly organ of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations,

Presently, our students are fed literary, edifying, or encyclopedic material mainly—hardly the correct approach to stimulate genuine interest in learning a language. What we need more of in class is a good belly laugh.

Having experimented with German jokes, puns, limericks, riddles, etc. in my Conversation and Composition classes, I enjoyed watching the students’ appreciation of this kind of material; they do not bewail getting away from pattern drills based on snippets of Thomas Mann’s writings. By their inherently greater appeal, short jokes, etc.—containing of course all grammatical topics from vocabulary and syntax to everyday idioms—are superior to all edifying material. To get students to talk freely, and to enjoy doing it, short humorous material is ideal: many students memorize the jokes just for the fun of it, and so that they can tell them to their friends and families.

Aman’s University of Wisconsin colleagues were unimpressed with his unorthodox research focus and teaching methods. In 1974 the executive committee of the German department fired him, claiming that his conduct had been detrimental and demoralizing and that his research was of insufficient quality and quantity. Aman didn’t buy any of it. “It’s pure professional jealousy,” he told one reporter on the eve of his dismissal. “I’ve been denied tenure because I’m trying to improve our program.” To another, he reflected, “A professor should be an excellent researcher and teacher, but there was instead an importance placed on committees.” The experience imbued in him a lifelong bitterness toward academia in general and his *alma mater* in particular, which he often expressed through clever coinages such as “cacademia”.

## Cunning linguist, lewd logologist

Determined to continue his life's work, Aman immediately founded *Maledicta: The International Research Center for the Study of Verbal Aggression*, a loosely structured society of scholars and intellectuals, and its publishing arm, Maledicta Press. These operations, which he ran from his home office in Waukesha, Wisconsin, became his full-time occupation and the sole means of support for his young family. Aman personally handled all aspects of the business, including editing, proofreading, and even typesetting its books and journals, as well as tirelessly promoting it in the mass and scholarly media.

The Center's flagship publication, *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression*, was the first and only journal devoted entirely to the study of aggressive language, including obscenities, blasphemies, profanities, curses, insults, slurs, put-downs, and bawdy or offensive humour. As with its contemporary *Word Ways*, which then-editor Ross Eckler described as "lying on the midpoint of a spectrum from popular magazine to scholarly journal", Aman's aim was to print material that was at once erudite and entertaining; sagacious but not self-absorbed. As he wrote in his inaugural editorial,

...we must never let *Maledicta* be perverted into another cacademic bore. While precision and thoroughness are a *sine qua non*, I will not let this human province be dehumanized by silly pseudo-scientific statistics, show-offish footnotes or other cacademic claptrap aimed to impress impressive Executive Committees, Cacademic Administrators, and other biodegradable nitwits. Wit, in every sense of the word, always will be welcomed to provide comic relief, as it were, in this essentially depressing work which documents human intolerance and nastiness the world over.

Accordingly, the journal's content was provided by an impressively broad array of contributors—not only linguists, philologists, psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and sociologists, but also lawyers, doctors, filmmakers, actors, novelists, and comedians. Vulgar language being one of the most fertile grounds for linguistic creativity, *Maledicta* printed a great number of articles on rhymes, puns, spoonerisms, nonce terms, and other forms wordplay—articles that, but for their focus on the lewd and the offensive, would have been just as at home here in *Word Ways*. And indeed, there was a rather healthy measure of cross-pollination between the two journals, with many authors (including Joseph T. Shipley, Leonard R. N. Ashley, Allen Walker Read, and Richard Lederer) contributing material to both. Aman himself was a frequent correspondent to our own "Colloquy" department, and its *Maledicta* counterpart, "Inter-Curse", printed the following letter of appreciation from Eckler in 1980:

I find *Maledicta* interesting because I see many parallels in our efforts to single-handedly publish journals in new, neglected fields of intellectual endeavor. My first reaction to *Maledicta* was: is there enough material in this field to support a journal? The answer to this is emphatically yes, and in fact I now suspect that you have picked a field of research that is far too large for one man to handle. Verbal aggression was and is practiced in all times and cultures, and a comparative study of this boggles the mind! If you could collect all the relevant material in one place, it would fill a library of considerable size, and keep hundreds of people busy for years piecing together the relationships. Still, one must start somewhere.

Originally, I was somewhat put off by the rather vituperative tone of parts of *Maledicta*, particularly your repeated attacks on academia (though, heaven knows, you seem to have had ample provocation). I now view this as a McLuhanesque device—the medium is the message; what more appropriate place to illustrate verbal aggression than a journal examining its characteristics?

I do have one worry, voiced by other readers: by studying and perhaps popularizing swear-words and the more taboo forms of abuse, you take away the very power that makes them attractive to the user—new ones will have to be devised, which in turn must be discarded when they become less shocking. (A bit like quantum mechanics, perhaps?) Still, the worry may be needless—most readers and contributors to your journal are white-collar types, whereas most of the verbal abuse takes place in very different circles.

Keep up the good work; you're codifying (no pun intended) a little-understood area on the border of linguistics and psychology. The more neglected the field, the more significant are the discoveries that can be made.

Aman's interest in linguistic creativity was not limited to expressions of abuse, however. As previously mentioned, he was an avid reader of *Word Ways* and mailed in comments on all a manner of logological phenomena, from garden-variety puns, puzzles, and palindromes to exotic foreign figures of speech. *Maledicta* itself included a wealth of standalone linguistic and typographical jokes that Aman would use to bookend articles or fill otherwise unused space in the front and back matter of each issue. This particularly witty example appeared after the table of contents of the Summer/Winter 1982 issue:

### A Message for Hyphenation-Freaks

Although I typeset *Maledicta* very carefully and with much love, the bloody typesetting computer hyphenates some words awkwardly. It can't be helped.

In 1973 and 1974, Aman authored and self-published three volumes of what he termed “wordplays”, but which might more properly be called concrete poems or calligrams—typographical arrangements of words that form thematically related images. Below are some of his tamer examples, playing on the German words for “balloon” and “scales”:

                  O  A  
b a l l   n   W A   G E

Aman also helped popularize a genre of Tom Swifty-style, sexually suggestive puns: “Lawyers do it *on a trial basis*”, “Cardiologists do it *heartily*”, and so forth. He compiled and published a bound collection of these, *How Do They Do It? A Collection of Wordplays Revealing the Sexual Proclivities of Man and Beast*, in 1983. Regrettably, the promised second volume never materialized.

## Notoriety and fame

While *Maledicta* was warmly and enthusiastically received by the logological community, it caused quite a stir in academia proper. To give just one example, in “The Smut Smiths”, a scathing review that took up nearly half a *Times Literary Supplement* broadsheet, esteemed British linguist Randolph Quirk mercilessly railed against the nascent journal:

The aim of the new journal is to “publish any material sufficiently ‘offensive’ to be rejected by the standard scholarly journals”, and the editor, Reinhold Aman, is to be congratulated for demonstrating so conclusively that this aim can be fulfilled. More than fulfilled, indeed, since most of the pieces in the first number would probably have earned rejection on virtually any grounds... The *Maledicta* contributions are characterized chiefly by an orgiastic indulgence in uninhibited smut, a *richesse* without *embarras* of the corniest porn that could be dredged up. And all with the rather mystifying air of being outrageously audacious.

Aman, for his part, seemed to relish the controversy, hitting back at Quirk with irreverent rebuttals and even a few dirty tricks. “Just what possessed that hitherto respected scholar to expose himself worldwide as an *asinus britannicus*?” Aman wrote to the *TLS* editor. “Abhorred, he screeches about the ‘filthy’ rectum and genitals of our baby, incapable of lifting his eyes to see the body, limbs, head, mind and soul of the newborn journal.” To Aman’s immense satisfaction, *TLS* printed his invective-laden letter in full. As if that weren’t enough, for many years Aman ran advertisements for *Maledicta* that prominently quoted Quirk’s review, twisting the words into a ringing endorsement:

“...the editor, Reinhold Aman, is to be congratulated...” RANDOLPH QUIRK, Professor of English, University College London (*Times Lit. Suppl.*, 1977:1004).

Decades later, Aman still delighted in taking responsibility for the first known appearance of the word “cunt” in *TLS*, which Quirk’s review had quoted from *Maledicta*, and which had triggered a flurry of reader complaints.

The over-the-top pooh-poohing of *Maledicta* by academic bigwigs served only to cement Aman’s public reputation as the world’s foremost authority on aggressive language. *Maledicta* came to be featured in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and assorted newswire stories, and its editor’s wittily expressed expertise was frequently solicited for talk shows, news stories, and documentary films on swearing, slurs, and other naughty words. Even some academic communities—particularly those in emerging or marginalized fields of research—came to recognize the importance and usefulness of Aman’s work. *Maledicta* was appreciatively reviewed by scholars in *American Humor*, *Aggressive Behavior*, *The Journal of Sex Research*, and *Library Journal*, who praised it for filling a lacuna in their respective fields. (“And, as you know, there is no greater satisfaction than filling a lacuna, or having a lacuna filled,” Aman had once presciently quipped.) As the journal’s popularity grew, Aman received and accepted invitations to deliver lectures and keynotes for the World Humor and Irony Membership (“Dingbat, Dungheap and Dunce: Metaphoric Terms of Abuse in English and Other Tongues”), the International Society for General Semantics (“Pshitt, Fockink and Dunk: How Not to Name Your Product”), the American Name Society (“Terms of Endearment and Abuse for Women’s Breasts and Other Naughty Body Parts”), and other scholarly associations.

## *Maledictus interruptus*

To Aman, who was not simply a scholar but also a skilled practitioner of abusive language, cursing was a psychologically and socially useful activity. “Cursing and swearing drains off that steam we build up inside ourselves,” he explained in one interview. “It’s better to drain off by words than by knives. An invective is the civilized equivalent of a club.” But this point of view, despite also having been expounded by such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, did not serve him well in the aftermath of his acrimonious divorce. Following a trial on division of assets and the issuance of the divorce decree in 1992, Aman sent his ex-wife, her lawyer Charles Phillips, and the trial judge Marianne Becker a series of nasty letters and postcards which they interpreted as threats on their lives. One of the letters read in part:

But I will have the last laugh by exposing the corrupt Wisconsin legal system to the world and I will devote the rest of my life to destroy those two slimebags, Becker and Phillips.

Speaking of destruction of foul legal scum, one reads more and more news stories about judges and lawyers being killed (in courtrooms) by decent people driven to extremes by such corrupt legal slimebags. Every time I read news about yet another nasty judge or disgusting shyster killed, I rejoice: “Great! One less piece of shit to terrorize us decent people!” After having been fucked over mercilessly by Wisconsin legal slime, I can now fully understand and sympathize with such “killers,” who really should receive an award for cleansing our world of legal vermin.

Shooting Old Bitch Becker and Filthy Phillips would be too fast and too painless. Those two bastards must die a very slow and painful death, so that they can appreciate all the suffering they have inflicted on others. If there is a God or Just Fate, those two pigs—now protected by their immoral legal buddies—won’t be able to get protection from all the Waukeshit storm trooper cops but will rot away like diseased sewer rats and burn forever in deepest hell, punished by a Power higher than those hypocritical, corrupt, self-important little gods at the Appeals Court and Supreme Court of Wisconsin.

On March 23, 1993, Aman was arrested at his home by seven agents of the FBI. He was charged with five counts of mailing threatening communications, and despite his protestations that the letters were harmless, hyperbolic pranks that had been taken the wrong way, he was convicted of three of these counts. For each count he received concurrent sentences of 27 months in federal prison (later reduced on appeal to 18 months) plus three years’ supervised release. Throughout the trial and for the rest of his life, Aman was steadfastly unrepentant. “I’m not ashamed of it. I committed no crime,” he proclaimed in his first post-release interview. “I was just trying to get rid of a horrible judge and a slimebag lawyer, and I stepped on one too many legal dicks.”

Needless to say, Aman’s incarceration had resulted in an abrupt and very lengthy hiatus for *Maledicta*. His finances having been depleted by the divorce and criminal trials, he had just \$500 in the bank upon his release in February 1995. In order to resume publishing the journal, he was obliged to cash in part of his retirement savings and to scrounge loans and donations from long-time subscribers. This proved just enough to get volume 11 of *Maledicta* off the presses by the end of 1995.

It was followed in 1996 by a short book, *Hillary Clinton's Pen Pal*, Aman's satire-tinged study of prison life and lingo. (The book is written under the guise of a letter to Hillary Clinton, who Aman believed to be destined for federal prison herself for her role in the Whitewater scandal.) The same year saw the launch of *Maledicta's* online presence. "As to the Internet, I'm not yet connected," Aman explained in *Maledicta 12*, "but friends have set up web sites for *Maledicta*."

Little did Aman know, but his own entry to the online world would retard the progress of *Maledicta* even more than his five-year criminal case did. For thirty years, Aman had pedestaled verbal aggression as a psychosocial imperative, and the virtually limitless opportunities for practising it on the Internet proved irresistible to him. He became a fixture on the online discussion forums of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and while many of his contributions there were genuinely helpful and insightful, he engaged in some exceptionally hostile behaviour toward those who crossed him. There were repeated calls for his banning from the electronic mailing list of the American Dialect Society. The situation was even worse on the alt.usage.english and sci.lang newsgroups, his online flame wars sometimes spilling over into real life. His propensity to hurl abuse so riled one a.u.e. contributor that she reported him to the US Department of Justice, hoping (and nearly succeeding) to get him arrested for violating the terms of his probation.

"I call my daily work avoidance of wasting endless hours on the Net and in newsgroups 'self-destructive fucking off'," Aman once told me. But it was only years later that he came to realize just *how* self-destructive and addictive his behaviour was. "The World Wide Web and newsgroups almost killed off *Maledicta*," he later admitted. "I wasted about seven years engaging in non-productive nonsense on the Net."

## **A last hurrah**

It wasn't until 2004, after quitting the newsgroups cold-turkey and overcoming a string of crippling health problems, that Aman was finally able to get his journal back on track. *Maledicta 13*, bearing a cover date of 1997–2004, was finally published in 2005. True to form, the volume features a panoply of bizarre and fascinating articles. Among these are contributions on Swahili street slang, West Indian latrinalia, and Australian terms of misogyny, as well as Aman's own "'JEW MOTHERFUCKER' and 'NIGGER': The Foulmouthed & Lying Clintons", in which he meticulously documents instances of racist and anti-Semitic language by the former first family. But despite Aman's claim that he had amassed "material for at least 20 more volumes", *Maledicta 13* was to be the last. In debt to the tune of \$10,000, evicted from his beloved home, and largely abandoned by his subscribers, he could no longer finance publication of the journal. His last years were spent pursuing his other enduring interest: caring for abandoned and feral cats, in part through Forgotten Felines of Sonoma County, an animal shelter near his new Santa Rosa home.

Reinhold Aman was and remains a polarizing figure. Notwithstanding his mutual excommunication with the academic establishment, he is to be credited with breaking new ground in the scholarship of aggressive and abusive language. On the other hand, his unchecked propensity to wield such language against others harmed not only his perceived enemies but also his own reputation and, for two long spells, his very ability to pursue his life's work. Within recreational linguistics, Aman will be remembered for lending an air of respectability to the study of the darker and more ribald forms of wordplay; for providing a much-needed publication platform for this research to

flourish; and for his own writings, both serious and whimsical, on puns, metaphors, euphemisms, spoonerisms, slang terms, and other logological phenomena.

## Selected bibliography

The annotated lists below include those works by Aman (either as author or editor) that I think are most likely to be of interest to recreational linguists. Where the publisher is not given, the work was (presumably) self-published by Aman.

### Periodicals

- *Laugh and Learn* (1971–1974), a pedagogical language journal in three editions (German, French, and Spanish). Articles presented ideas for teaching or learning language informed by humour and wordplay.
- *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* (Maledicta Press, 1977–2005), a quasi-scholarly journal devoted to cataloguing and studying aggressive language.
- *Maledicta Monitor* (Maledicta Press, 1990–1992), a sort of “mini-*Maledicta*” containing short notes and bibliographies but no articles.

### Books

- *Sinnliches* (1971), a tiny booklet of German “wordplays”, dedicated to concrete poet Ernst Jandl
- *Löcherliches: Bildwörter* (1973), another collection of German wordplays.
- *Cuss Along with Dick; Or, Expletives Restored* (1973), an analysis of the profanities expurgated from the transcripts of Nixon’s Watergate tapes. The title is a play on *Sing Along With Mitch*, the 1960s TV and record series by Mitch Miller.
- *Pornographia: Picturesexed Words* (1974), a collection of English wordplays. Limited edition of 95 copies.
- *NIXLER: The Prosaic Poetry of Richard Nixon and Adolf Hitler* (1974), a comparative analysis of political rhetoric.
- *Bayrisch-österreichisches Schimpfwörterbuch* (Süddeutscher Verlag, 1973), a slang dictionary of Austro-Bavarian insults, including a 53-page treatise on the psychological, linguistic, and literary aspects of swearing. Subsequent editions of the book were published in 1978, 1983, 1986, 1996, and most recently in 2005 by Allitera Verlag.
- *How Do They Do It? A Collection of Wordplays Revealing the Sexual Proclivities of Man and Beast* (Maledicta Press, 1983), containing 2000 sexual puns by *Maledicta* contributors and subscribers.
- *The Best of Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* (Running Press, 1987), an anthology of articles from the journal.



- *Talking Dirty: A Bawdy Compendium of Abusive Language, Outrageous Insults and Wicked Jokes* (Robson, 1993; Carroll & Graf, 1994), another *Maledicta* anthology, this time focusing on the more lighthearted and less scholarly articles.
- *Opus Maledictorum: Insults, Curses, Slurs, and Other Bad Words from Around the World* (Da Capo Press, 1996), the third anthology of material culled from *Maledicta*.
- *Hillary Clinton's Pen Pal: A Guide to Life and Lingo in Federal Prison* (1996), a satire-tinged lexicographical study of prison life and language.