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## Reinhold Aman, 1936-2019

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Reinhold Aman, the celebrated and controversial expert on vulgar and offensive language, died on March 2, 2019 at the age of 82. Aman was best known as the founder and editor of *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression*, whose notoriety played a small but important role in the founding of the International Society for Humor Studies.

Reinhold Albert Aman was born on April 8, 1936 in Fürstenzell, a small Bavarian market town near the Austrian border, and was raised in nearby Straubing and Oberschneiding. He studied chemical engineering in Augsburg and worked as a chemical analyst in Frankfurt and Munich before emigrating to North America in 1957. After spending several more years in the chemical industry in Montreal and Milwaukee, he embarked on a new course of studies, obtaining a Bachelor's degree in German and Secondary Education from the University of Wisconsin in 1965 and a Ph.D. in German Language and Literature from the University of Texas in 1968. His doctoral thesis analyzed the myriad battle scenes in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, a 13th-century Arthurian epic. In 1968 he joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where he taught German, philology, and medieval literature.

It was in a 1966 seminar on structural dialectology that Aman's study of aggression began its shift from the physical to the verbal. Aman was translating the original 1876 phrase list for Georg Wenker's *Deutscher Sprachatlas* into his native Straubinger dialect; included in the list was the phrase, "*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.") Why, Aman wondered, would anyone call another human being a monkey? And what other animal names do we use as insults? Aman hit the books, and before the night was over, he had compiled over 200 further offensive metaphors. This list became the basis of his *Bayrischösterreichisches Schimpfwörterbuch*, a 206-page lexicon of Austro-Bavarian insults that was eventually published in 1973. In the intervening years, Aman broadened and deepened his research into verbal aggression, enthusiastically collecting, cataloguing, and analyzing over 4000 articles, books, chapters, dissertations, and other materials on the subject.

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Senior colleagues at the University of Wisconsin took a dim view of Aman's newfound research focus, branding it "undignified". Despite having netted several research grants and a teaching award, he was effectively forced out of the school in 1974 when he was denied tenure. The experience cemented in him a lifelong hostility to the academic establishment, for which he coined the epithet "cacademia". Undeterred, Aman immediately founded Maledicta: The International Research Center for the Study of Verbal Aggression, and its publishing arm, Maledicta Press, both of which he ran from his home in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Despite grandiose plans to establish a program of annual conferences and competitive research funding, the Center never grew beyond a loosely structured society of scholars and intellectuals. However, within three years it had launched its eponymous organ, *Maledicta*, the first and only journal devoted entirely to the study of aggressive language.

In the vein of *Word Ways: The Journal of Recreational Linguistics*, to which he was also an occasional contributor, Aman positioned *Maledicta* firmly on the midpoint of a spectrum from popular magazine to scholarly journal. As he wrote in the 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 impressible 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.

*Maledicta* became Aman's full-time pursuit; he regularly wrote articles and personally handled all the editing, proofreading, typesetting, mailing, promotion, and subscription management. But the bulk of the journal's content was provided by an impressively broad array of external contributors. These included, for the most part, academic linguists, philologists, psychologists, anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, and humour researchers (among them Don Nilsen, Victor Raskin, and Leonard Feinberg), but also many notable creative professionals, including filmmaker John Hughes, actor Scott Beach, and author Tabitha King. The journal's 5000-strong subscriber base was equally diverse, including 250 university libraries, *Oxford English Dictionary* lexicographers (who eagerly mined the journal for quotations of dirty words), and celebrity fans like George Carlin and Stanley Kubrick.

*Maledicta*'s scope extended to any and all forms of derogatory, abusive, offensive, and aggressive language, including insults, slurs, curses, obscenities, and profanities, regardless of their origin and application. And aggression being

a basis of humour, or at least certain types of it, the journal ended up serving as a venue for the dissemination of some notable humour research. This included articles on humour theory (Feinberg's "The Secret of Humor", simultaneously published as a monograph), practice ("You're Ugly, Your Dick is Small, and Everybody Fucks Your Mother!: The Stand-Up Comedian's Response to the Heckler"), and folklore ("Things Better Left Unsaid: Photocopy Humor"), as well as collections and case studies of various genres of lewd, aggressive, or offensive jokes ("Teenage Jokesters and Riddlers: A Profile in Parody", "AIDS Jokes: Or, Schadenfreude Around an Epidemic", "Fallout from Chernobyl: Radioactive and Irreverent Polish Humor"). Maledicta was thus frequently listed in directories of humour journals, including David E. E. Sloane's American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals, Glenn C. Ellenbogen's Directory of Humor Magazines and Other Humor Organizations in America, and Don Nilsen's occasional bibliographies in HUMOR.

Scholarly reaction to *Maledicta* was polarized, to say the least. It was warmly received by reviewers in *American Humor, Anthropos, Aggressive Behavior, The Journal of Sex Research, International Social Science Review, The Dictionary Society of North America Newsletter, 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.) Other reviews were scathing, even apoplectic. Esteemed British linguist Randolph Quirk fulminated at great length against <i>Maledicta* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, dismissing it as "orgiastic indulgence in uninhibited smut". *The International Journal of American Linguistics* flat-out refused to review the journal, its associate editor Eric P. Hamp vowing that he would "not soil another coprotome on the tired pornorrhea that Randolph Quirk has already tastefully consigned to the cloaca it never should have emerged from."

By contrast, the journal's reception in the mass media was uniformly positive. *Maledicta* was featured in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and assorted newswire stories, as well as on various news programs and talk shows on ABC, NBC, PBS, and the BBC. Aman himself became somewhat of a media darling. Hailed by journalists as "the oracle of opprobrium" and "the Noah Webster of verbal aggression", Aman's wittily expressed expertise was frequently solicited for news stories on blasphemies, slurs, and naughty words. In 2005 he was featured prominently in Steve Anderson's *FUCK*, a Hollywood documentary all about the titular cussword.

It was on the basis of *Maledicta*'s reputation, both among scholars and the lay public, that Don and Alleen Nilsen invited Aman to give the keynote address at the first conference of the World Humor and Irony Membership (WHIM) at

Arizona State University in 1982. Not unexpectedly, Aman's presence at the conference caused a moderate media sensation, which the Nilsens credit with helping kickstart the nascent humour studies community:

Because it was April 1st (April Fools Day), the state and national news services were covering our conference, and during our entire conference we could always tell where Reinhold Aman was because he was always surrounded by a bevy of newspaper, radio, and television reporters. Rey Aman's attendance at this conference was an important factor in giving us the news coverage we needed in order to later become the International Society for Humor Studies.

To Aman, who was not only 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 having been shared by such luminaries as Freud and Lichtenberg, 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, and the trial judge a series of nasty letters which they interpreted as threats on their lives. Aman was arrested by the FBI and indicted in federal court on five counts of mailing threatening communications. He was convicted of three of these counts and sentenced to 27 months' imprisonment (later reduced on appeal to 18 months) plus three years' probation. Throughout the trial and for the rest of his life, Aman remained unrepentant, insisting that the letters were harmless pranks that had been taken the wrong way.

His divorce and legal bills having left him in a precarious financial situation, Aman had just \$500 in the bank when he was released from prison in February 1995. In order to resume publishing *Maledicta*, he was obliged to cash in part of his retirement savings. Along with some generous loans and donations from long-time readers, this was enough to get the journal's eleventh volume off the presses by the end of the year. It was followed in 1996 by a short book, *Hillary Clinton's Pen Pal: A Guide to Life and Lingo in Federal Prison*—the result of Aman's anthropological and linguistic study of prison life—and *Opus Maledictorum: A Book of Bad Words*, a compilation of articles from *Maledicta*. Despite Aman's claim in *Maledicta* 11 that he had "material for at least 20 more volumes", with more manuscripts pouring in weekly, only two further volumes were published, in 1996 and 2005. In debt to the tune of \$10,000, evicted from his home, and largely abandoned by his subscribers, he could no longer finance publication of the journal.

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 a long time, his freedom to pursue his life's work. Within humour studies, Aman will be remembered for lending an air of respectability to the study of ribald humour, clever put-downs, and offensive jokes; for providing a much-needed publication platform for this research to flourish; and for helping us gain the publicity and momentum we needed to establish ourselves as a wellorganized, international research community.

## **Bionote**

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Tristan Miller is a research scientist in the Language and Interaction Technologies Group of the Austrian Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence. Since 2018 he has been co-convener of the Humor and Artificial Intelligence panel at the International Society for Humor Studies conferences.