

— BOOK I —

THE EROTIC TONGUE

Words to the Wise



Welcome to *Bawdy Language*—everything you wanted to do but were afraid to say. Most people are only slightly familiar with the argot, primarily through a small group of words which polite society considers taboo. These words often evoke a hysterical response; they are symbols of a deeper, darker side of ourselves that we'd rather not acknowledge.

The Moral Majority considers them obscene. Feminists point out their aggressive character and the contempt they show toward women. Children love them, however, finding them useful for dramatic effect, for capturing the attention of the adult world and making it more responsive to their presence. Adults also find occasion to deploy these words as a declaration of independence, an editorial statement against the forces of restraint and convention, or as one commentator described their use, “an oral fart of sorts.”

But there is much more to the lexicon than the four-letter words and their friends. We also have technical and scientific words, as well as those that are refined and even border on the poetic.

Euphemisms (from the Greek “to sound well”) make up a good part of *Bawdy Language*. They are neat little rhetorical devices by which we cloak otherwise naked thoughts.

We take a taboo word and rephrase it with sufficient taste and delicacy as to make it acceptable. There are many ways to euphemize a word: We can render it somewhat abstract; we can make up words that are longer and more complex, bigger being better; we can understate, use indirection, or simply substitute a foreign word. Euphemisms, however, are not without their problems. They can be uninspiring, unimaginative, and escapist. Another difficulty

*Banish the use of those four-letter words
Whose meanings are never obscure.
The Angles and Saxons, those bawdy old birds,
Were vulgar, obscene and impure.
But cherish the use of the weak-kneed phrase
That never quite says what you mean;
Far better to stick with your hypocrite ways
Than be vulgar or coarse or obscene.*

—Anon., “Ode to Those Four-Letter
Words,” 20thC

