

A Guide to Eighteenth-Century English Vocabulary

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This is nothing like a comprehensive dictionary; don't think for a minute you can do without a desk dictionary and the OED. But many once-common words don't appear in modern dictionaries, or have senses different from their modern equivalents, and may not be glossed in modern editions of eighteenth-century works. Since the OED isn't always available (and is sometimes overkill), a quick-and-dirty guide might help you read the literature of the period. Simple definitions are my only objective, though I sometimes take the opportunity to provide additional background information on eighteenth-century literature and culture.

I make no pretense to completeness. I don't include words, even difficult ones, that appear in modern desk dictionaries (I like the *American Heritage Dictionary*), so start there. I limit my efforts to words that are common in eighteenth-century literature, so you won't find *neoterick*, *incrassative*, or *vermiculation*. And many words have more senses than are listed here. I haven't tried to give unimpeachably exact definitions, just ballpark guides.

Spelling was notoriously changeable, especially before mid-century. Variant spellings appear only when they aren't obvious: it's easy to recognize *chuse*, *musick*, and *chear* as *choose*, *music*, and *cheer*, but you might need help in recognizing *chirurgion* as *surgeon* or *goal* as *jail*. I don't bother glossing most changes in grammar: *you was*, for instance, was a typical eighteenth-century usage and is now obsolete, but it's easy to understand without help. Writers at the time would say a book is *printing*, whereas we'd say it's *being printed*, but again, it's not likely to confuse anyone.

For more extensive and precise information, start with the OED, a book anyone in an English class should get to know. And if you can, check out both Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) and Edward Phillips's *New World of Words* (1658), which will give you a more contemporary perspective on how the words were used. For low and slang words, check out Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785)—not only a useful reference book, but always good for a laugh.

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&C.—A form of *etc.* *Et cetera* is Latin for “and other things”; the ampersand stands for the *and*—Latin *et*. (The ampersand is an old way of writing *et*; you can almost make out the *e* and the *t* in the italic ampersand: *&*.)

ABIGAIL—Sometimes used for female servants. See also *Betty*.

ACCOMPT—An old spelling for *account*.

ADMIRE—To wonder, marvel, be amazed, not necessarily approvingly.

AGAINST—In addition to its modern meanings, *against* could mean *before*, as in *The Beggar's Opera*: “’Tis now high time to look about me for a decent Execution against next Sessions.”

ALCORAN—The Koran. See also *Mussulman* and *Mahomet*.

ALLOW—Admit, as in *Joseph Andrews*: “His Face and Person were such as the Generality allowed handsome.”

AN’—An obsolete word for *if*.

ANSWER—To *suit*, to *do* (in the sense of “that’ll do”). See Fielding’s *Tom Jones*: “I applied a fomentation . . . which highly answered the intention”—in other words, it did what it was supposed to do.

APARTMENT—Not a rented dwelling, but a room.

ART—Our post-Romantic conceptions of art and artists have wrenched the word from its eighteenth-century meaning. It now often suggests the ineffable process of genius. But *art* in the eighteenth century, especially the early part of the century, more often meant something like *craft*. The Latin word *ars* (from which our *art* is derived) was often used to translate the Greek word *technê*, the root of words like *technical* and *technique*. *Art* could also mean *craftiness*, as when Mr. B complains of Pamela, “O the little hypocrite! . . . she has all the arts of her sex.” *Artlessness* became an increasingly flattering compliment as the century progressed and sincerity became more and more valued. Johnson gives some of the many meanings of *art*: “1. The power of doing something not taught by nature and instinct; as, to *walk* is natural, to *dance* is an art. 2. A science; as, the liberal arts. 3. A trade. 4. Artfulness; skill; dexterity. 5. Cunning. 6. Speculation.” See also *Nature*.

ARTIFICIAL—*Artificial* has always been opposed to *natural* (q.v.), but that hasn’t always been a bad thing. It originally meant something like “brought about by art” (q.v.), or, as Johnson defined it, “Made by art; not natural.” His third definition reveals that the eighteenth century valued artificiality: “Artful; contrived with skill.”

AUTHOR—Not only a writer, but any creator—especially God, who was said to be the *author of our being*.

AWFUL—Not *rotten* but *awe-inspiring*, as in “awful majesty.”

BACKWARD—As an adjective, often *reluctant* or *shy*.

BAGGAGE—An insulting term for a woman, like “hussy.”

BALL—Not only a big party with dancing, but a musket-ball or bullet.

BANNS—Declarations of a couple’s intention to marry. Under the rules of the eighteenth-century Anglican church, the banns had to be read in church three times before a couple could be married.

BARON—See *Nobility*.

BATING—Except for.

BEDLAM—Bethlehem Hospital, London’s insane asylum. Our modern sense of *chaos* or *pandemonium* comes from the asylum. In the eighteenth century, visiting Bedlam was a popular day-trip; fashionable men and women would look at the lunatics in their cages as we might look at animals in a zoo.

BELLY—To *plead one’s belly* means to try to escape execution by claiming one is pregnant. Pregnant convicts were not executed, but usually transported (q.v.).

BENEFIT OF CLERGY—According to medieval law, clergymen were not subject to most penalties under civil or criminal law; they could be tried only in the ecclesiastical courts. This *benefit of clergy* continued (albeit with more and more limitations) into the eighteenth century, and, at various times, was extended to anyone who could demonstrate literacy.

BETIMES—Early.

BETTY—The woman’s name was often used for any maidservant, something like the way “Jeeves” can now stand for any butler. See also *Abigail*.

BIRTHDAY SUIT—Not bare-ass nudity, but a set of fancy clothes worn on the birthday of the monarch.

BIT—Deceived, duped, taken in, tricked.

BLACK—A “black” woman is usually a woman with black hair, not one of African descent. Ditto *brown*.

BLOW—To bloom. Our modern term *full-blown* comes from a flower that has bloomed completely.

BOHEA—A variety of tea, pronounced “bo-*hay*.”

BOWELS—By transference from the internal organs, *bowels* could mean *pity* or *tenderness*. There are no unpleasantly intestinal overtones.

BRAKE—A thicket or heavily overgrown area.

BRAVO—A hired assassin; sometimes used loosely for any thug.

BRIDEWELL—London’s prison for women.

BRILLIANT—As a noun, a diamond.

BROWN—See *Black*.

BUBBLE—As a noun, a dupe; as a verb, to dupe or trick.

CALENTURE—A fever or illness, especially in tropical regions.

CANT—Low or meaningless language, or (as a verb) to use language meaninglessly. Johnson advises Boswell: “Don’t cant in defense of savages,” and “Clear your mind of cant.”

CAR—A chariot.

CAUSE—In legal usage, a *case*.

CELL—Any small room or chamber, not necessarily a prison cell. It was often used to refer to rooms in a monastery, or rooms occupied by hermits. Sometimes it was used metaphorically to refer to the grave.

CHAIR—A sedan chair, used as a means of transportation around London. A seat inside a box, with long rods underneath it. Two *chairmen* would lift the rods and carry the chair.

CHAIRMEN—See *Chair*.

CHAISE—A kind of carriage, though the exact kind changed over time. Throughout most of the century, a *chaise* was a one-horse open-topped carriage for one to three people.

CHARACTER—Reputation, high standing; letter of recommendation from a former employer.

CHARIOT—A fast two-seat horse-drawn coach, popular among the fashionable set. Usually pronounced as two syllables: *charret*.

CHECK—As a verb, to *hold back* or *restrain*.

CHIRURGEON—An old spelling of *surgeon*. Also *chirurgery* for *surgery*.

CHOCOLATE—Hot chocolate (the modern candy bar didn't come along until later). Chocolate of any sort was a recent import to England in the eighteenth century, and became a very fashionable drink. There were not only coffee-houses and tea-houses, but chocolate-houses.

CHURCH-YARD—Still the usual English word for *graveyard* or *cemetery*.

CLENCH—A pun; also spelled *clinch*. See also *Quibble*.

CLOWN—A rustic or bumpkin, not a circus performer.

COACH AND SIX— . . . horses.

COMMISSION—In the eighteenth century, military officers received their commission by buying it.

COMPASSIONATE—As a verb, to show compassion, to sympathize.

CONCEIT—A notion or idea, sometimes a witty or paradoxical one. Related to *conception*.

CONDESCENDING—*Condescending* had none of the negative implications it has today. Aristocrats who showed a proper degree of courtesy to their social inferiors were said to be *condescending*.

CONVENT—*Convent* could mean not only a *nunnery*, but a *monastery* as well.

CONVERSATION—Any social interaction. *Criminal conversation* was adultery.

CORDIAL—A drink of hard liquor, often taken for what was supposed to be medicinal purposes.

CORN—As is still the case in Britain, *corn* meant any grain, including wheat and barley.

CORRESPONDENCE—Not only an interchange of letters, but any sort of relationship.

COUNT—See *Nobility*.

CRIME—See *Belly*, *Benefit of Clergy*, *Mint*, *Transportation*.

CROWN—See *Money*.

CUP—A *cupping-glass* was a vessel used to draw blood; to *cup* a patient, therefore, meant to bleed him or her, a very common medical procedure.

D—The usual abbreviation for *pence*, as in 4d, from Latin *denarius*. See *Money*.

DART—A spear or javelin; sometimes an arrow. The modern sense, referring to the little pointed doohickeys thrown at dartboards in bars, arose only in the twentieth century.

DEMONSTRATE—To prove logically. Think of the abbreviation Q.E.D. at the end of a logical or mathematical proof. It stands for “quod est demonstrandum,” “which was to be proved.”

DESERT—Any deserted or uninhabited place—a wilderness, not necessarily a place filled with sand and oases. Robinson Crusoe’s *desert island*, for instance, was filled with lush vegetation.

DEVOIRS—Responsibilities or duties (from the French). Also *civilities*.

DEVOTED—Doomed.

DIGEST—To arrange methodically. As a noun, something arranged methodically, as in *Tristram Shandy*’s “thorough-stitch’d digest of noses.”

DIRECTION—Address, as in the address of a house or building. House numbers were uncommon; country houses usually had names (as is still the practice with many country houses in Britain), while buildings in the city were often identified in what seem to us strangely roundabout ways: Sarah Fielding’s *David Simple*, for instance, was “Printed for A. MILLAR, opposite *Katherine-street*, in the *Strand*.”

DISCOVER—*Uncover or reveal*.

DISGUSTING—Distasteful, but without the visceral revulsion we hear in the modern word. When Johnson dismisses the pastoral aspects of Milton’s *Lycidas* as “easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting,” he doesn’t mean the poem makes him want to vomit, merely that it’s unpleasant.

DISTEMPER—An illness or disease.

DISTICH—A poetic couplet. Greek *stikhos* is a line of verse; the *di-* means two.

DISTRACTED—Insane, raving.

DIVERT—Entertain or amuse.

DIVINE—As a noun, a priest or minister.

DOME—Any sort of dwelling, not necessarily one with a round roof.

DOUBT—Fear, believe; almost the opposite of the modern sense. When, in *The School for Scandal*, Sir Peter says of his young wife, “I doubt I love her,” he means that he *thinks* he loves her.

DRAUGHT—The usual British spelling for *draft*, often used for a *drink*. See Pope’s *Essay on Criticism*: “A little *Learning* is a dang’rous Thing;/Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian Spring*:/ There *shallow Draughts* intoxicate the Brain,/And drinking *largely* sobers us again.”

DROPS—Diamond earrings.

DUKE—See *Nobility*.

DURST—Dare.

EARL—See *Nobility*.

EAT—In the present tense, pronounced the same way as today, and with the same meaning. But *eat* could also be the past tense, meaning *ate*, and pronounced *et*.

EJACULATION—Anything forcibly expelled, especially oaths or exclamations. Usually with no sexual connotations at all (although a few authors do play with the ambiguity).

ELSE—Often used on its own to mean *or else*, or *otherwise*.

EMPIRIC(K)—A quack doctor.

ENCUMBRANCE—A mortgage or lien, or some condition on the use of property or money.

ENGINE—Any sort of machine, device, or contrivance.

ENTHUSIASM—Fanaticism, especially in religious matters. Johnson famously defines it as “a vain belief of private revelation.” Today it means something like “energy to get a job done,” but it almost never had that positive connotation in the eighteenth century, especially the early part. After a century of religious wars, Britons were eager to get away from “private revelation.”

EQUIPAGE—A carriage and its attendant footmen, often used in reference to grand or ostentatious carriages.

EVENT—Often used for *outcome*.

FABLE—A common term in literary criticism for *plot*.

FAME—Reputation.

FAMILY—In large households, the *family* often included the domestic servants.

FANCY—The word is derived from *fantasy*. As a noun, it often meant something like *imagination*: Addison writes in *Spectator* 411, “The Pleasures of the Imagination or Fancy (which I shall use promiscuously)” —in other words, he feels free to use them interchangeably. It could also mean *something imagined* (including delusions), or a *caprice*. As a verb, it meant *to imagine*. Sometimes spelled *phansy*.

FEE—*Fee* could be a verb, meaning *pay for*.

FLAMBEAU—A torch. See Dryden’s *Alexander’s Feast*: “The King seiz’d a Flambeau, with Zeal to destroy.”

FLORIN—See *Money*.

FOND—Foolish, naive, innocent.

FRAME—The OED’s sixth sense is important in the period: “Mental or emotional disposition or state. a. Natural or habitual disposition, temper, turn of thought, etc. b. Temporary posture of mind, state of feeling, mood, condition of temper.”

GAOL—Still a common British spelling of *jail*. Also spelled *goal*.

GARNISH—Fees a prisoner paid a jailer to gain better treatment. See the scene in Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera*, where Macheath gets less burdensome chains placed on him when he offers Lockit more money.

GARRET—An attic. Garrets were traditionally associated with poor, struggling writers, who could afford nothing better. Johnson complains, in the first edition of *London*, about the pains awaiting the new author: “Toil, envy, want, the garret, and the jail.” (In the second edition, after he’d been snubbed by Chesterfield, he rewrote it: “Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail.”)

GENIUS—In Latin, a *genius* was a tutelary spirit which attended a person after birth. This sense of a *spirit* has always been with it. In the eighteenth century, the word could be applied to: (1) The defining characteristic or quality of a person. (2) The defining characteristic or quality of a nation or an age: when Johnson in his *Observations on Macbeth* refers to “the genius of his [Shakespeare’s] age,” he doesn’t mean Shakespeare himself; he means the nature of the society in which Shakespeare lived. (3) The defining characteristic of quality of a custom, law, language, or other institution. (4) A person’s capacities, abilities, or qualities of mind. Only later in the eighteenth century did the modern sense—an exceptional power of mind, or the person with that power of mind—arise. Johnson’s *Dictionary* points to some of the many senses circulating in 1755: “1. The protecting or ruling power of men, places, or things. 2 A man endowed with superiour faculties. 3. Mental power or faculties. 4. Disposition of nature by which any one is qualified for some peculiar employment. 5. Nature; disposition.”

GENEVA—Gin. The word and its shortened form come not from the Swiss city, but from *genever*, Dutch for *juniper*, the plant which provided the flavor for the original Dutch variety—though British gin rarely used juniper berries. Gin was bad medicine: it showed up right around 1700, and became a favorite drink of the poor. Quality control was bad enough to kill many people—think of crack cocaine or PCP. A famous pair of Hogarth prints contrasts the squalid and diseased *Gin Lane* with the healthy and British *Beer Street*.

GLASS—A mirror (or looking-glass).

GOAL—See *Gaol*.

GOTHIC(K)—A vague term for anything old but not from classical antiquity—the Middle Ages or Renaissance especially. It originally carried negative overtones, suggesting barbarism, but in the last third of the century the primitivism it suggested came into vogue, as Gothic fiction and Gothic architecture became all the rage.

GREAT—Rich and powerful. Especially in the 1720s and '30s, it was associated with the controversial Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, who was often referred to as “the Great Man.”

GROSS—Large, coarse. Not with the modern sense of *disgusting*.

GUINEA—A coin worth twenty-one shillings, or just slightly more than a pound. See *Money*.

GUST—Taste, whether literal or metaphorical. Compare Spanish *gusta* or French *goût* (the circumflex means an *s* has been omitted).

HALF-PAY—Military officers received half their usual salary when they were not on active duty.

HAND—Often means *handwriting*.

HARDLY—Sometimes means *barely*, as today, but often means *with difficulty*.

HAUTBOY—An oboe.

HISTORY—Used for any narrative, including fictional ones.

HOLLAND—A kind of fine linen cloth often used for sheets and underclothes, named for its place of manufacture.

HOMBRE—A favorite card game. Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* includes the most famous *hombre* game in literature.

HUMOUR—A loaded word. *Humour* sometimes had the meaning we accord it, something close to *comedy*. More often, though, it meant a predisposition or characteristic. It could also mean *mood* or *caprice*, as when Prior talks about his lover “putting peevish Humours on” (“An Ode”). And the old Galenic medical sense was still around—bodily and mental health depended on the balance of the four *humors*, blood, phlegm, choler, and black bile. See *Melancholy*.

IAMBIC(K)—A metrical foot, consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. In ancient Greece, the iambic was used for satire; *iambick* is therefore sometimes used to represent satirical writing in the eighteenth century, as in Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe*: “Thy Genius [q.v.] calls thee not to purchassee fame/In keen Iambicks, but mild Anagram.” In other words: your strength isn’t writing satire, but putting together word games.

IDEA—Especially in the early part of the century, an *idea* was an *image*, not just any sort of conception. Locke’s influential definition: “Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea.”

IDEAL—Could mean *imaginary*.

IDIOT—*Idiot* didn’t always have the same insulting tones it has today. An idiot was someone with impaired mental ability (Johnson’s definition is “A fool; a natural; a changeling; one without the powers of reason”). The word could be used in a value-neutral sort of way: when Swift willed money “for building and maintaining an hospital for idiots and lunatics,” he wasn’t being insulting.

IMPERTINENT—Not *irrelevant* but *rude*, especially to one’s social betters.

INCUMBENT—Weighty, serious.

INDIFFERENT—A *person* could be *indifferent*, just as today, meaning he or she has no preference. But in the eighteenth century, it could be applied to a *thing* (meaning *moderate*, *neutral*, or *merely adequate*), or to a *situation* (meaning *unimportant*). Johnson wrote to Cave in 1743, “I would have it understood as wholly indifferent to me”—we’d now say *he* was indifferent to *it*, not the other way around.

INTELLIGENCE—Not only *intellectual ability*, but also *information*.

INTERCOURSE—Any sort of interpersonal dealings. There are no hints of sexuality; the first occurrence of the more prurient usage the OED records is from 1798, which refers to “an illicit intercourse between the sexes.” Only in the late twentieth century did the phrase “sexual intercourse” come to be the most familiar sense.

INTERVIEW—Any sort of meeting. There are no suggestions of the sort of meeting job-applicants undergo.

JADE—An abusive term applied to women; something like *bitch*.

JAKES—A privy or latrine.

JILT—A harlot, whore, or kept mistress; or, as Johnson defines it, “A woman who gives her lover hopes, and deceives him.”

JOINTURE—A legal term with many meanings, of which the most important are (1) a dowry, and (2) “The holding of property to the joint use of a husband and wife for life or in tail, as a provision for the latter, in the event of her widowhood. Hence, by extension, a sole estate limited to the wife” (OED).

KENNEL—A gutter or sewer on the street. Related to the word *channel*.

L—A common abbreviation for *pounds* (money, not weight), from Latin *libra*. See *Money*.

LANDSKIP—Old spelling of *landscape*. For most of the eighteenth century, landscape was not considered an especially dignified genre of painting; history painting and portraiture were more respected.

LANTHORN—A lantern.

LETTERS—*Letters* can have all its modern meanings (individual characters in an alphabet, epistles from one person to another), but can also mean *learning*. To *have letters* is to be educated.

LEVEE—A bedside reception. The nobility would be entertained as they woke up by the attendance of the lesser nobility at their bedside. Often those nobles would then scurry off to the house of the next person up the chain to attend *his* levee, and so on up to the king.

LICENSE—Freedom from restraint; liberty. Often used pejoratively, suggesting libertinism and immorality.

LIMN—To paint.

LINE—The equator.

LINK—A torch.

LIQUOR—Any liquid, not necessarily alcoholic.

LISP—The word means more or less the same thing today as it did in the eighteenth century, but then young children were said to lisp. Compare Pope's famous line: "I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came" (*Epistle to Arbuthnot*). See also *Numbers*.

LIST—As a verb, *list* could mean *enlist*, i.e., to join up with a military organization.

LIVERY—The clothes worn by servants, usually identifying the household to which they belong.

LYING-IN—A pregnant woman would *lie in* until the birth of her child.

MACARONI—Not pasta, but a fop or dandy.

MAGAZINE—A storehouse, especially for weapons. The newfangled periodical publications that were storehouses of miscellaneous articles came to be called *magazines* in the eighteenth century.

MAHOMET—The standard eighteenth-century spelling of *Mohammed*. Pronounced with the accents on the first syllable: *Ma-ho-met*. See also *Alcoran* and *Mussulman*.

MAKE LOVE—To flirt or court, not to have sex. See also *Sex*.

MALL—A very fashionable area of London; a walk-way in St. James’s Park. Pronounced to rhyme with *pal*, not *Paul*.

MANIFEST—As a verb, to show forth, demonstrate, make clear.

MARGENT—The bank of a river. Sometimes spelled *margin*. See Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”: “Full many a sprightly Race/Disporting on thy Margent green.”

MARQUIS—See *Nobility*.

MASK—Often a person who wears a mask, as at a masquerade ball.

MEAT—*Meat* sometimes has the modern meaning of *flesh*, but often meant simply any food.

MECHANIC(K)—As a noun, a *tradesman* or *workman*; as an adjective, *related to manual labor*.

MELANCHOLY—Now used loosely for “feeling blue,” but more intense than that in the eighteenth century. *Melancholy* was an insanity, an imbalance of the four humors (an excess of black bile), which led to sullenness and violent outbursts. See *Humour*.

MERCER—A cloth merchant.

MIEN—Face, countenance, appearance. Pronounced *mean*.

MINT—St. George’s parish in Southwark, a squalid area in London. In the Middle Ages, the “Liberty of the Mint” provided sanctuary for debtors who lived within the district; into the eighteenth century, the area was home to debtors and criminals hoping to avoid imprisonment.

MITTIMUS—A legal document instructing a jailer to detail a prisoner.

MOBILE VULGUS—Mob. Our word *mob* is just a shortened version of the Latin phrase. Swift resented the clipping, and preferred the longer form.

MONEY—It can be hard to keep the value of money straight. Modern British currency is simple—one hundred pence make a pound—but until 1971, it was a complicated mess. Four *farthings* made a *penny*; twelve *pence* (the plural of *penny*) made a *shilling*; twenty shillings made a *pound*. (That means there were 240 pence in a pound.) So far so good, but now it gets complicated, because the actual coins in circulation didn’t correspond with the theoretical units of money. A *guinea* was a coin worth twenty-one shillings, or one pound one shilling (sort of like having a bill worth \$1.05); into the twentieth century, gentlemen were traditionally paid in guineas. A *florin* was a two-shilling coin, and a *crown* was five shillings, or a quarter of a pound; there were also *half-crown* coins, worth two shillings and sixpence (written 2/6, pronounced “two-and-six”). There were also coins for twopence (pronounced and sometimes spelled *tuppence*), threepence

(pronounced and sometimes spelled *thruppence*), and sixpence. The *groat* had gone out of circulation in the seventeenth century; it was worth four pence. (European coins also circulated in England—louis d'or, livres, pistoles—but keeping them straight is more trouble than it's worth.) The relationship in value between eighteenth-century and modern money is a very difficult question, because prices didn't bear the same relationships to one another as they do today. Early in the century, a day-laborer (like a modern migrant farmer, maybe, and the bottom of the economic ladder) would earn a shilling a day for six days a week; that works out to just over fifteen pounds a year. At the same time, Pope's translation of the *Iliad* came out at six guineas, which would be almost forty percent of the annual wage of a day-laborer. The middle class made it through the eighteenth century on a few hundred pounds a year; the amounts of course rose over the course of the century as inflation raised prices. The wealthy could have income in the tens of thousands of pounds. See *Plum*.

MRS.—An honorific applied to most women of a certain age, regardless of their marital status.

MURTHUR—An old spelling of *murder*.

MUSSULMAN—A Moslem. See also *Alcoran* and *Mahomet*.

NABOB—A Briton who made a lot of money in India.

NAKED—Not necessarily *entirely* naked, just indecently dressed. The *British Magazine*, for instance, includes this passage: "The streets were . . . filled with naked people, some with shirts and shifts on only, and numbers without either." See also *Shift* and *Shirt*.

NATURAL—Derived from *nature* (q.v.) and the opposite of *artificial* (q.v.), but also much more. Johnson's definitions are useful: "1. Produced or effected by nature. 2. Illegitimate [as in "a natural child"]. 3. Bestowed by nature. 4. Not forced; not farfetched; dictated by nature. 5. Consonant to natural notions. 6. Tender; affectionate by nature. 7. Unaffected; according to truth and reality. 8. Opposed to violent; as, a *natural* death." It could also be a noun: "1. An idiot; one whom nature debars from understanding; a fool. 2. Native; original inhabitant. 3. Gift of nature; nature; quality."

NATURE—A tricky one. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, *nature* had no hints of the great outdoors. Johnson's *Dictionary* explains some of the many senses: "1. An imaginary being supposed to preside over the material and animal world. 2. The native state or properties of any thing, by which it is discriminated from others. 3. The constitution of an animated body. 4. Disposition of mind; temper. 5. The regular course of things. 6. The compass of natural existence. 7. Natural affection, or reverence; native sensations. 8. The state or operation of the material world. 9. Sort; species. 10. Sentiments or images adapted to nature, or conformable to truth and reality. 11. Physics; the science which teaches the qualities of things."

NICE—Fastidious, scrupulous, meticulous, careful, nit-picky. Johnson's definitions: "1. Accurate in judgment to minute exactness; superfluously exact. It is often used to express a culpable delicacy.

2. Delicate; scrupulously and minutely cautious. 3. Fastidious; squeamish. 4. Easily injured; delicate. 5. Formed with minute exactness. 6. Requiring scrupulous exactness. 7. Refined.”

NOBILITY—The ranks of the nobility can be difficult to sort out. At the top of the ladder was, of course, the king or queen. Below the monarch come *dukes*; below them come *marquises* (the singular is traditionally pronounced *markwiss*, not *markee*), then *earls*, then *viscounts*, then *barons* at the bottom of the hierarchy. Some European countries have *counts*, who correspond to the British earls.

NUMBERS—Poetic meter. When Pope says, “I lisp’d in numbers, for the numbers came” (*Epistle to Arbuthnot*), he means that as an infant, he spoke (see *Lisp*) in poetically measured speech, because rhythm came naturally to him. Sometimes used generally for poetry itself, as when Prior writes, “My Lyre I tune, my Voice I raise;/But with my Numbers mix my Sighs” (“An Ode”).

OATEN PIPE—In poetry, an *oaten pipe* (or *reed*) is a shepherd’s flute made from a reed. That shepherds played such flutes is a literary convention stretching back to antiquity, and associated with the pastoral mode.

OCCASIONAL—Not *from time to time*, but *on a special occasion*. An *occasional poem*, for instance, isn’t something that’s a poem at one time and something else at another. It’s a poem composed for a special occasion, such as the king’s birthday.

OR—*Or* can mean *either*, as in Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel*: “Believe me, Royal Youth, thy Fruit must be,/Or gather’d Ripe, or rot upon the Tree.”

ORDINARY—As a noun, an *ordinary* was the chaplain at a prison.

ORIGINAL—A word with a complicated (and fascinating) history. It once meant “Of or pertaining to the origin, beginning, or earliest stage of something.” Only in the eighteenth century—especially with Robert Young’s book, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759)—did it take on its more familiar modern meaning, “Proceeding immediately from its source, or having its source in itself; not arising from or depending on any other thing of the kind; underived, independent.”

OWN—Acknowledge, admit to.

PAINT—Sometimes *paint* meant the same thing as today, but it often meant what we call *make-up* or *cosmetics*. A woman who paints probably doesn’t own an easel.

PARISH—The most local organizational unit of the English church. When a child is said to be “on the parish” or “charged to the parish,” he or she is poor and on the eighteenth-century equivalent of welfare: parishes were responsible for supporting the poor born within their territory.

- PARTS—Abilities, graces, fine points. A “man of parts” is someone talented and capable. When Fielding writes, in *Joseph Andrews*, of “the young Gentlemen of the Bar” who “show their parts,” he’s describing not kinky exhibitionists but lawyers eager to show off their skills.
- PATCH—An artificial birthmark or beauty mark applied to the face, often to cover up blemishes. They were most common among women, but at various times men too wore them.
- PATHETIC(K)—Evoking or arousing the emotions, especially the tender ones. Modern informal usage tends to confine *pathetic* to losers, but when Shaftesbury praises “the most delightful, the most engaging and pathetick” poetry (*Sensus Communis*), he’s not insulting it.
- PATRIOT—*Patriot* could have the same meaning it has today, but in the 1730s it also had a more specialized meaning: those who belonged to the Whig party but opposed its leader, Robert Walpole.
- PECULIAR—*Peculiar* often means *particular*, with no hint of *weird* or *unusual*.
- PENCIL—A *pencil* is almost always a *paintbrush* (the modern graphite-filled stick wasn’t invented until the nineteenth century). The pencil is often compared contrasted with the pen; the point isn’t to compare two kinds of writing tools, but to compare writing with painting. It’s usually an allusion to Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*, “as in painting, so in poetry.”
- PENNY—Four farthings, or one twelfth of a shilling. See *Money*.
- PERIOD—Generally, a conclusion or end; with reference to prose style, a clause, usually one balanced with others. To *put a period* to something means to stop it.
- PHAETON—A four-wheeled carriage drawn by two horses, open to the air.
- PHILOSOPHY—*Philosophy* could have the meaning we give it today—the study of logic, ethics, metaphysics, and so on—but often in the eighteenth century meant roughly what we mean by *science*. But see also *Science* for some warnings about using that term.
- PHYSIC(K)—Medicine or medical care.
- PLACE—A job or position.
- PLAIN-WORK—Basic sewing.
- PLATE—Plates, saucers, cups, and utensils, originally of gold or silver, but later used more broadly.
- PLUM—A fortune of £100,000, or a person who has such a fortune. The word was used like the modern word *millionaire*. See *money*.
- POESY—An obsolete word for *poetry*.

PORTION—A legal term with many meanings, including (1) “The part or share of an estate given or passing by law to an heir, or to be distributed to him in the settlement of the estate”; and (2) “Dowry; a marriage portion” (*OED*). It can also mean *destiny* or *lot in life*.

POUND—Twenty shillings. See *Money*.

PRECIPITATE—Hurry, hasten, rush.

PRETEND—To profess or claim. It didn’t have the modern suggestions of make-believe.

PREVENT—Here are some relevant selections from the *OED* on this tricky word, which has changed its sense radically since the eighteenth century: “1. To act before, in anticipation of, or in preparation for (a future event, or a point of time, esp. the time fixed for the act); to act as if the event or time had already come. Obs[olete]. b. To meet beforehand or anticipate (an objection, question, command, desire, want, etc.). arch[aic]. 2. To act before or more quickly than (another person or agent); to anticipate in action. Now rare and arch. 3. To come, arrive, or appear before, to precede; to outrun, outstrip. Now rare and arch. 5. To forestall, balk, or baffle by previous or precautionary measures. Obs. 6. To cut off beforehand, debar, preclude (a person or other agent) from, deprive of a purpose, expectation, etc. Now rare. 7. To stop, keep, or hinder (a person or other agent) from doing something.” Note that sense 7, now the most familiar, was the newcomer in the eighteenth century; the *OED* records its first use in 1663.

PRINCE—Sometimes the son of a king or queen, but often used for any sort of royalty. Even the king could be called a prince.

PROJECTOR—One who engages in projects or schemes. These could be scientific, political, economic, and so on.

PROPER—In addition to its modern sense, *proper* could mean *one’s own* (from the Latin *propria*).

PROPRIETY—*Propriety* sometimes means *property* or *right of possession*.

PROVE—*Try, test, or make a trial of*. See also *Try*.

PUFF—To praise too much, or to allow praise to swell one’s head, as in *Pamela*: “Don’t let people’s telling you, you are pretty, puff you up.” Writers often “puffed” one another’s works.

PUNK—A prostitute.

QUALITY—The nobility, or the condition of being noble, as when *Pamela* wonders “at the absurdity of persons even of the first quality, who value themselves upon their *ancestors* merits, rather than *their own*.”

QUEAN—A wench or prostitute.

QUIBBLE—A pun. See also *Clench*.

QUIET—As a noun, peace of mind. Johnson’s definition is thorough: “Rest; repose; tranquillity; freedom from disturbance; peace; security.”

QUIT—Leave, exit.

QUIRE—Alternative spelling of *choir*.

RAIL—To ridicule harshly: Johnson’s definition is “To use insolent and reproachful language; to speak to, or to mention in opprobrious terms.”

RALLY—Ridicule, make fun of. Johnson’s definition is “To treat with slight contempt; to treat with satirical merriment.”

RAPE—To carry off or kidnap, especially a woman—often, but not necessarily, for the purpose of forced sex.

RECEIPT—Recipe, as when Pope gives a facetious “Receipt to Make an Epic Poem” in *Peri Bathous*.

RELIQUE—A spelling of *relic*, meaning something left over. Bishop Percy named his collection of old ballads *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*; Dryden refers to Shadwell’s poems becoming “Martyrs of pies, and reliques of the bum”—that is, spare paper used to line pie-tins in a kitchen and to wipe bottoms in a privy.

RENCOUNTER—A meeting (or, as a verb, to meet). Sometimes it’s a meeting between military forces, sometimes it’s people in a duel. But it could also be a private meeting of lovers. Also spelled *rencontre*.

REPAIR—To go or to travel. Pope ridicules “tuneful Fools” in his *Essay on Criticism*, “Who haunt *Parnassus* but to please their Ear,/Not mend their Minds; as some to *Church* repair,/Not for the *Doctrine*, but the *Musick* there.”

RETIRE—Not what one does at the age of sixty-five, but either leaving a room or withdrawing from the affairs of the world. People who chose to escape the city to live in the country were said to be *retired*.

RIDOTTO—A fashionable mode of entertainment in London, with music and dancing. The first ridotto was held in 1722 at the Opera House in Haymarket.

ROMANCE—A fictional narrative. Although modern critics are careful to distinguish the *romance* from the *novel*, eighteenth-century usage didn’t conform to our own notion of the two genres, so be careful.

ROTTEN BOROUGH—Eighteenth-century elections were notoriously corrupt. Some tiny hamlets with two or three inhabitants could elect their own members of Parliament, while some large cities like Sheffield had no representatives at all. The tiny boroughs with disproportionate voting power (“rotten boroughs”) were favorite targets for crooked rich people, who could pay off the handful of voters and buy themselves a seat in Parliament.

ROUT—As a noun, it means either a crowd or assembly, or a great deal of noise.

RUN—*Run* is both the present and the past tense, the way we use *ran*.

SALUTE—To greet, often with a kiss—a friendly, not a passionate, kiss.

SATYR—Sometimes the mythological goat-man, sometimes an alternative spelling of *satire*. Dryden’s *Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* includes a long discussion of the relationship between the two, which came up often in discussions of satire.

SCIENCE—*Science* was often used to mean learning or knowledge of any sort, not just the “natural sciences” and “social sciences” now covered by the term. In fact our modern idea of science—with its suggestion of lab-coats and test-tubes—would have been alien to eighteenth-century thinkers. The various branches of learning weren’t divided the same way as they are today, so there’s no one eighteenth-century word corresponding exactly to what we’d call science. See also *Philosophy*.

SCRUPLE—Qualm that something may not be right. Johnson’s definition: “Doubt; difficulty of determination; perplexity: generally about minute things.” *Scruple* could also be a verb, which Johnson defines, “To doubt; to hesitate.”

SENSIBLE—Related to perception; having sympathy; feeling. Very different from our modern sense of being reasonable or rational. Can also mean *aware*. Johnson’s definitions show the many usages: “1. Having the power of perceiving by the senses. 2. Perceptible by the senses. 3. Perceived by the mind. 4. Perceiving by either mind or senses; having perception by the mind or senses. 5. Having moral perception; having the quality of being affected by moral good or ill. 6. Having quick intellectual feeling; being easily or strongly affected. 7. Convinced; persuaded. A low use. 8. In low conversation it has sometimes the sense of reasonable; judicious; wise.”

SEQUEL—Whatever comes next, not necessarily a follow-up book.

SESSIONS—Legal sessions in which cases were decided.

SETTLEMENT—The OED defines it: “Establishment of a person in life, in marriage, in an office or employment.” Often an inheritance.

SEX—Not the act of copulation (the first recorded use of *sex* to mean *coitus* is from 1929); rather, women generally—the *fair sex*. When, in *The Beggar’s Opera*, Macheath cries, “I love the sex,” he means he loves women. (Of course, it’s a safe bet that he enjoys the sex, too.)

SHELL—In poetry, a *lyre* (because they were once made from tortoise shells). See Collins’s “The Passions”: “When Music, Heavenly Maid, was young,/While yet in early *Greece* she sung,/The passions oft to hear her Shell,/Throng’d around her magic Cell.”

SHEW—An old spelling of *show*.

SHIFT—An undergarment.

SHILLING—Twelve pence, or one twentieth of a pound. See *Money*.

SHIRT—Johnson defines *shirt* as “The under linen garments of a man.”

SIGNIFY—Often used for *mean* or *amount to*, as in *Pamela*: “What signify all the riches in the world, with a bad conscience?” If something “doesn’t signify,” it often means it doesn’t matter.

SINGULAR—Unusual, unprecedented, aberrant, eccentric, exceptional.

SIZE—Short for *Assizes*, a session of the legal courts.

SNACKS—*To go snacks* is to share something or divide it equally.

SPARK—A dandy; a showy, flashy man.

SPECIOUS—Johnson defines *specious* as “1. Showy; pleasing to the view; 2. Plausible; superficially, not solidly right; striking at first view.” Its eighteenth-century denotation is much the same as today—“plausible but wrong”—but whereas modern usage puts the emphasis on the *wrong* part, eighteenth-century usage emphasized the *plausible* part. When we call something specious, we automatically condemn it; eighteenth-century writers would say something was specious, *but* it was wrong. Johnson, for instance, is quoted by Boswell: “Such are the specious, but false arguments for a proposition which always will find numerous advocates.”

SPONGING HOUSE—A house kept by a bailiff or justice of the peace to detain debtors before their removal to debtor’s prison. Also spelled *spunging house*.

STATION—Social class, rank, or lot in life. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* says, “mine was the middle State, or what might be called the upper Station of *Low Life*.”

STILL—Often has the meaning *always*.

STUFF—A kind of light woolen fabric. Also often used dismissively, as when *Amphitryon* complains in Dryden’s play, “What horrible Lyes hast thou told me! such Improbabilities, such Stuff, such Nonsense!”

SUFFER—Besides its modern meaning, *suffer* could mean *allow* or *permit*, with no hint of pain.

SWAIN—A rustic person, especially a young man.

SWAY—Power or influence.

TAPER—A small candle.

TEASE—Annoy, vex, torture; it's usually more intense than the modern word. Also spelled *teize* or *teise*.

TELL—Not only *say* or *relate*, but also *count* or *enumerate*.

TOILET—A dressing table, where a woman applied make-up, or the act of dressing at such a table. There's no hint of the modern plumbing fixture, which hadn't yet been invented.

TOKEN—Any small sign or indication.

TRAFFIC(K)—Commerce, trade.

TRANSPORTATION—Forcible exile for committing a crime. Long-term imprisonment was rare; jails were used to hold prisoners until trial, after which they were either acquitted or punished by fine, execution, branding, the stocks, or transportation. America was a favorite destination early in the century (Moll Flanders, for instance, is sent to Virginia); later Australia became England's favorite dumping ground for its criminals. (For the modern sense of *transportation*, see *Car*, *Chair*, *Chaise*, *Chariot*, *Equipage*, and *Phaeton*.)

TREPAN—To beguile, cheat, or entrap.

TRY—*Try* can mean *test*, or *make a trial of*. See also *Prove*.

TUBE—Sometimes a *tobacco pipe*.

TURK—It sometimes meant natives of Turkey, but it could often be used to refer to anyone from the East, especially any Muslim.

TURKEY MERCHANT—Not a seller of large flightless birds, but a trader with contact with the Turks. Cloth was the most common item traded.

UNCOUTH—Johnson defines it as “Odd; strange; unusual.”

USE—To treat, as in *Pamela*: “Mrs Jervis uses me as if I were her own daughter.”

VICIOUS—Given to vice, or related to vice—in other words, *immoral*, *profligate*. The modern sense, often applied to animals or people who behave fiercely, also dates from the eighteenth century, but was less common than the more generic sense of *immoral*.

VIRTUOSO—A connoisseur or expert in antiquities and natural curiosities, or what we'd today call a scientist.

VISCOUNT—See *Nobility*.

VIZARD—A mask.

VULGAR—Common, but not necessarily disgusting.

WANT—*Want* means not only *desire*, but *lack*, both as a noun and a verb. When Mandeville says that the bees in *The Grumbling Hive* “wanted Dice,” he means that they lacked them; “lost the opportunity for want of money” means “because of a lack of.”

WEEDS—Clothes, especially those worn by women in mourning.

WELKIN—A poetic term for the sky.

WHERRY—A small rowboat.

WHISPER—The verb often took a direct object without a preposition for the person whispered to, as in Sheridan's stage direction, “Re-enter Servant and whispers Joseph Surface.” Modern usage would have “whispers *to* Joseph Surface.”

WIT—One of the most loaded words of the eighteenth century. It means something like “mental faculties” in general, but it also has a more restricted sense—imagination, fancy, quick-wittedness. It can also mean a person who has wit—someone with a fine sense of humor (especially one with a satirical edge), an intellectual, or any writer. Pope's definition is famous and intriguing, though not especially helpful: “*True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,/What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest.*” Johnson's definitions are more precise; with their examples, they stretch to several pages, but here are the definitions from his *Dictionary*: “1. The powers of the mind; the mental faculties; the intellects. 2. Imagination; quickness of fancy. 3. Sentiments produced by quickness of fancy. 4. A man of fancy. 5. A man of genius. 6. Sense; judgment. 7. In the plural. Sound mind; intellect not crazed. 8. Contrivance; stratagem; power of expedients.”

WITHDRAW—To take back or to leave.

WITHOUT—Often means *outside of*—the opposite of *within*.

WONDERFUL—Amazing, unusual, noteworthy, but not necessarily good.

WORSTED—A kind of fabric made from wool yarn.

ZOUNDS—An oath or swear-word, contracted from *God's wounds*. It had about the same degree of offensiveness as the modern *damn*.