

even if it is in another language, is a mistake. Dobson deserves credit as translator, and additional credit for the poem he created based on the work of Ronsard. Many books today use the English translation, crediting Dobson, and obliterating Ronsard.

Traditional tales

While in “Outdated scholarship,” above, we dealt with changes to a quotation from a known author, we also see the repetition of unsupportable stories about the authorship of quotations, perhaps once accepted and passed down but now known to be simplifications or out-and-out mistakes. This can be seen in the following examples, listed in many, many quotation dictionaries.

A prime example of repeating unchecked the claims of others is the attribution of the phrase “l’esprit de l’escalier” (staircase wit, or afterwit), or variations thereon, to Denis Diderot in his *Paradoxe sur le comédien* ([1830] 1902) (written between 1773 and 1778, first published in 1830). ’Tis not there, nor is it anywhere else in his work, despite claims by many of the standard quotation compilers. Fred Shapiro (*YBQ* at 204, *NYBQ* at 215), *Bartlett’s* (*BFQ1968* at 437a, *BFQ2002* at 331-26, *BFQ2014* at 313-15) and others persist in this, but the closest I can find is the following, from “Paradox sur le comédien” (1875a, 383), with *Paradoxe sur le comédien* ([1830] 1902, 40) differing by the loss of the comma after sensible:

Cette apostrophe me déconcerte et me réduit au silence, parce que l’homme sensible, comme moi, tout entier à ce qu’on lui objecte, perd la tête et ne se retrouve qu’au bas de l’escalier.

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(This apostrophe put me out, and reduced me to silence, because the man of sensibility, like me, is wrapped up in the objection to his argument, loses his head, and does not find his answer until he is leaving the house.)

– Denis Diderot in “Paradox sur le comédien” (1875a, 383) with a translation by Walter Herries Pollock (1850–1926) (1883, 41)

Pollock reasonably translates “au bas de l’escalier,” calqued as “at the bottom of the stair,” as “leaving the house,” because the parlor floor of a better house, the étage noble, is above the ground floor. This also may suggest that the association of the phrase “l’esprit de l’escalier” with Diderot did not occur to Pollock at that time, although it was clearly in use as a set phrase.

More importantly, it was in common use before *Paradoxe sur le comédien* is said to have been published.

I do not know who took the stairs that Diderot describes and paired them with esprit. The earliest example I can find is in the third volume of *Briefe eines Verstorbenen* (1831) by Prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich

von Pückler-Muskau (1785–1871),¹⁷⁹ which largely takes the form of letters from the author to his correspondents describing his travels. (A calque of the title is *Letters from the Departed*, although the clumsier *Letters from the Dead* was used as the title of a more recent translation.) The book was translated by Sarah Austin (1793–1867) with the first two volumes coming out in 1831 as *Tour in England, Ireland, and France, in the Years 1828 & 1829*. The translation of the third and fourth volumes, from which this is taken, appeared in 1832 as *Tour in Germany, Holland and England, in the Years 1826, 1827, & 1828* (1832). Together they were marketed as *Tour of a German Prince*. This appears in letter XI dated January 19th, 1827, at page 312 of volume 3 in German, page 290 in English.

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(As it is, we Germans have nothing left in society, but that sort of talent which the French call 'l'esprit des escaliers';—that, namely, which suggests to a man as he is going down stairs, the clever things he might have said in the 'salon'.)

It appears that the French phrase was in use in Germany by the late 1820s. It appears as well (always in French) in some English periodicals from the 1830s on. The earliest French-language publication I can find is a translation into French of Pückler-Muskau's travelogue (1833, 296) with a translation credited to Jean Cohen (Anne-Jean-Philippe-Louis Cohen de Vinkenhoef 1781–1848).

It may be that Diderot associated the time to descend the stairs with slow wit, but that does not mean that this phrasing is his. Yet quotation dictionaries repeat this now-traditional but mistaken tale. Perhaps it comes from something else that Diderot wrote, in which case that should be cited. Or perhaps it should be relegated to a dictionary of phrases and idioms until a more proper citation can be fixed.

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Emma, c'est moi.

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– Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880), said to be his response when asked who Emma (Madame) Bovary, the title character of his debut novel, is

The character is thought to be modeled on Delphine Delamare, although Flaubert was saying that a character in a novel can be as much

the author as anyone else. Or, was he merely deflecting a too-often asked question about the character? Some sources give the statement as “Madame Bovary, c’est moi!” see, for example, *BFQ2002* at 527-11, *YBQ* at 275a and *NYBQ* at 287, which cite only the same source, *Flaubert*, a 1909 book by René Descharnes. They both misspell that book’s author’s name in the same way. Coincidence?¹⁸⁰ *BFQ2014* at 494-3 has that version as well, with a cite to another secondary source, the 1939 book by the Flaubert scholar Francis Steegmuller titled *Flaubert and Madame Bovary* in which we are dealing with hearsay at best. (*BFQ1968* does not have the line.) The shorter version given above is quoted in many places; for one, try Jacques Barzun’s *From Dawn to Decadence* (2000).¹⁸¹

Of course, there may well be reason to doubt whether Flaubert said this in any form. See, for example, the blog post “Madame Bovary, c’est qui?” by Pierre Assouline in *Le Monde* (2009), where he reviews Pierre-Marc de Biasi’s *Gustave Flaubert: Une manière spéciale de vivre* (2009), which presents this argument, and the online article “« Madame Bovary, c’est moi », formule apocryphe” by Yvan Leclerc (2014), which discusses the Descharnes reference and presents evidence that, as its title suggest, the quote is apocryphal.

It is a good story and many folks clearly wish it were so. But a quotation dictionary cannot give just a secondary source without explanation. Finding the same unlocatable secondary source, unsupported, in different quotation dictionaries raises additional questions about editors borrowing from other publications and about standards of accuracy for popular but otherwise unverifiable quotations. Until it can be documented, it is a semiquotation at best.

Secondary sources

Many quotation dictionaries provide as an attribution, that is, as proof of the accuracy of a claim of authorship and a reliable, checkable reference, a citation to a secondary source. This is inescapable for ancient works. It is inexcusable for contemporary works.

A fanatic is one who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.

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- Winston Churchill, according to *CDQ* at 316b; they assure us it is so because they believe he was so quoted in *The New York Times* of July 5, 1954

There appears to be no evidence for this citation produced by anyone over the years, but Columbia University is willing to stake its reputation on a supposed newspaper account. The official digital archive of the paper has no searchable record of such a statement on that date. There is a review in *The New York Times Book Review* by Herbert