

ALPHOMES

SUSAN THORPE

Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, England

Crossword aficionados, in order to solve anagrams, can arrange the letters of the problem word in strict alphabetical order and then consult references such as an anagram dictionary in which the alphabetically-ordered sets of letters are themselves arranged in alphabetical order. Each entry lists one or more words that can be formed from the particular ingenuity of its title. *Eht Cdoorrsw Aaagmnr Acidiinorty* (The Crossword Anagram Dictionary) compiled by R.J. Edwards, Mayflower Books, 1978. Currently, the anagram section of Peter Newby's *Pears Advanced Word-Puzzler's Dictionary* (Pelham Books, 1987) is the most comprehensive dictionary of this kind for words ranging in length from 6 to 10 letters, to which it is restricted. To take an example from the PAW-PD, the six letters of the alphabetically-ordered letter set EFINST produce the four mutual anagrams FEINTS, FESTIN (obsolete form of the noun/verb festoon), FINEST and INFEST. In *Word Ways*, such sets of alphabetically-ordered letters have been referred to variously as letter sets, letter patterns, letter breakdowns, letter groups, alphabetically-reduced forms, alphabetical anagrams, etc. Ted Clarke calls them alphwords but, as Ross Eckler points out in the May 1995 issue of Ted's *Wordsworth* magazine, this rather suggests a particular type of word and Ross speculates on using alphorm or alform. In the same issue of *Wordsworth*, Dr J.H. Marshall, Senior Editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries, suggests the possibility of alphanagram but, at the same time, doesn't rule out phrases such as basal anagram or sorted anagram. For my part, I would like to propose the term alphome (derived from Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) for these alphabetically-ordered letter sets. So the definition of an alphome could be ALPHOME: noun a set of alphabetically-ordered letters of which at least one arrangement is a word.

A mere glance at certain alphomes is enough to set the logological senses tingling and three in particular are dramatic. AAAAAALMRSTT with 6 As, and CEEIIIINNZZZZZZ with 6 Zs, transpose to TARAMASALATA (Chambers) and ZENZIZENZIZENIC (OED), an obsolete mathematical term for the square of a square of a square. EEEIILNNOOPSSSSSSSS, unique in having 9 of the letter S, transposes to the 20-letter POSSESSIONLESSNESSES.

Other striking alphomes are those composed exclusively of the first, or last, three letters of the alphabet. Thus we find the alphome ABC, of the mutual (and reverse) transport anagrams CAB and BAC (a type of ferry boat). AABC has the mutual anagrams CABA (the Somaliland equivalent of 0.453 liters) and BACA (Bible), AABCC is BACCA (a berry and also a form of tobacco), AAABC is revealed as the anagrams ABACA (the Manila hemp) and CAABA (variant of KAABA, a religious shrine in Mecca), whilst AAABCC derives from BACABA (any palm of the genus *Oenocarpus*). At the other end

of the alphabet, XYZZZ is a disguised ZYZZYX (a hymenopteran), but we certainly can't better XYZ, a reversed ZYX, the name of a flea!

Equally eye-catching are those alphomes which have three of each of their letters: DDDEEE is DEEDED, EEEGGG is GEGGEE (the victim of a hoax), EEEFFF is FEFTEE (an early form of feoffee, a trustee invested with a freehold estate in land), EEESSS is both ESSEES (Essenes, members of an ancient Jewish sect) and SEESSES (variant of seises, takes possession of), EEEHHSSS (Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary) is SHEESHEHS (pl of sheesheh, a kind of tobacco pipe), EEESSSTTT (OED) is SESTETTES (plural of sestette, a variant spelling of sextet) and LLOOOPPP (English Dialect Dictionary) is POPPOLOLL, a kind of fruit drink found in Yorkshire.

Also initiating a double take are the alphomes of those words composed entirely of alphabetically-consecutive letters (see *Word Ways Query* February 1993 and *Word Ways Colloquy and Kickshaws* May 1993): DEF reverses to make the word FED, ABCDE is BACED, DEFGHI is FEIGH'D and RSTUV is STRUV.

Some alphomes, like the ACT of a CAT, are simultaneously words in their own right -- alphomic words in fact. Contenders for the most prestigious alphomic and reverse alphomic words must surely be those which span the alphabet from A to Z and Z to A, respectively. ARZ (obsolete variant for art) and ADZ (an ax-like cutting tool), however, hardly set us ABUZZ with enthusiasm, an emotion to be reserved, perhaps, for the plethora of words beginning with Z and ending with A. Amongst these we suitably find ZUBA, a buzzing (backward flying?) hymenopteran, along with ZOICA, ZUMA, ZUNIGA and ZURA (arachnids), ZIA, ZOOEA and ZUPHEA (crustaceans), ZUA, ZEBA and ZIBA (molluscs), ZOLEA (an orthopteran), ZULIA and ZICCA (bugs), ZUMBA (a fly), ZIA, ZOMIA, ZOLA and ZOLCA (lepidoptera), ZOMBA and ZUNIA (beetles), and, with 7 letters, the longest such word, ZYXOMMA, at first sight a relative of the flea ZYX but in reality a dragonfly. Non-animal offerings include ZONA (a girdle), ZONDA (a hot wind of the Argentinian pampas), ZUCCA (a gourd), ZUDDA (a large leather water bag), ZUPPA (soup), ZURLA (an Oriental oboe-type instrument), ZYGA (benches for rowers), ZOA (symbolic figures in William Blake's poems), ZEA (a grass genus with only one species, maize) and the Biblical ZIA, ZIBA, ZIHA and ZOBA.

A search for long alphomic words reveals ADDEEMS, ADELOPS, ALLOQUY, BEEFILY, BEGORRY, BELLOOT (OED), BILLOWY and EGILOPS, all with 7 letters. There exist, however, three mutual 8-letter anagrams whose alphome is, by good fortune, an alphomic word in its own right. The mutual anagrams are SPOILAGE, SPOLIAGE and PELASGOI (plural noun for the Pelasgians). The American Heritage Dictionary defines Pelasgian as 'one of a people living in the region of the Aegean Sea before the coming of the Greeks, Gk pelasgoi, native name of unknown origin possibly reshaped by folk etymology as if to mean sea people, from pelagos, sea'. Their common alphome is AEGILOPS which takes the crown as the longest-known alphomic word. Already familiar to *Word Ways* readers, AEGILOPS is at once the name of a species of oak tree, a type of eye ulcer and the weeds found in a cornfield. A coined 9-letter phrase, CHILL LOSS (in

contrast to the better-known coinage HEAT LOSS), has been suggested by Ted Clarke as being that which happens when a fridge door is left open (Word Ways Kickshaws, February 1994). TROLLIED, with 8 letters, is seemingly the longest acceptable reverse alphomic word. There are several 7-letter examples: SNIFFED, SPIFFED, SPONGED, SPOOFED, SPOOKED, SPOOLED, SPOONED, TROLLED, TSONECA, VROOMED (OED), WOOLLED, WRONGED and ZYXOMMA. However, the 9-letter SPOON-FEED is relentlessly hyphenated in all the dictionaries I have consulted. Can anyone find an unhyphenated SPOONFEED?

Another little interesting amusement lies in treating the two alphomic superlatives AEGILOPS and TROLLIED as acronyms, whence we discover that Alphomed Entries Grouped In Letter Order Produce Sets & The Reversed Ordered Letter List Is Easily Documented!

Some words, when spelt backwards, form other good words, and so it is that certain alphomic words, read backwards, form good reverse alphomic words. The longest such pairs have 5 letters: ELOPS to SPOLE, SOMMA to AMMOS (Web 3), NOOPS to SPOON, MOOPS to SPOOM, DEEPS to SPEED and LOOPS to SPOOL. Such alphomic reversal pairs, just like non-alphomic reversal pairs, are useful when it comes to constructing palindromic phrases.

In his PAW-PD (see earlier), an author friend of mine has a policy of not defining the obvious meanings of words. Hence we discover that EFF is an obsolete form of EFT, a newt. In a rare moment of delicacy and tact, he suggested that EFFING could therefore be defined as 'hunting for newts' so that common speech, normally dispensing with the G, conveniently creates for us the colloquial alphomic word EFFIN'. OOOOPS!

OOOOPS? A slip of the pen? Not at all. Rather an OED variant spelling of OOPS, but, more to the point, a special alphomic word. With the exception of NOOPS, NOOST and NOOSY, it appears that all alphomic words with 5 or more letters begin with a letter from the first half of the alphabet. In beginning with the letter O, the 6-letter OOOOPS seems to be unique. Looking at reverse alphomic words, OOOOPS finds its counterpart in JIGGED, no other 6-letter reverse alphomic word beginning with an earlier letter of the alphabet.

A strange question, perhaps, but what makes an alphomic word? Obviously the fewer the number of different letters in a word, the greater must be its chance of being alphomic. This is aided by the occurrence of double letter-pairs such as those in FOO and OOF. The preponderance of double letter-pairs in these words is striking. In addition to common pairs, such as those in FILLS, BERRY, SPOOK and TREED, less common pairs are to be found in CHIVVY, DIVVY, CIVVY, DIKKOP, BEKKO, DEKKO, BHIKKU, ABUZZ and BRUZZ. A few have 2 pairs: ABBOTT, ABBESS, ACCESS, ADDEEMS, BELLOOT (OED), POLLEE (Web 3), POMMEE, TOFFEE and WOOLLED. The absence of a double letter-pair in the longest alphomic word, AEGILOPS, rates it a rare word indeed, and it is also unusual in being one of only a handful of these words to begin with two vowels.

As might be expected, many of the alphomic words with 5 or more

letters are adjectives ending in Y, whilst a high proportion of similar length reverse alphomic words are verbs ending in ED. There exists at least one pair of antonymic alphomic words, the verbal EMPTY and FILL. Numerically, only one's FORTY FIRST birthday is of interest to alphome devotees. Given names (especially those for girls) are more obliging, and those with 4 or more letters (some diminutives) include ABBEY, ABEL, ADDY, AMOS, ANNOT, ANSTY, ALLY, BELL, BENNY, BERT, BESS(Y), BETTY, BILL(Y), CISSY, DIXY, DOTTY, ELLY, GILL, GLORY, HORST, ISSY, LOTTY, MORT(Y)...and EDDA, LIDA, OLGA, POLL, RONA, SONIA, VIDA, YVONNE and ZONA. (The names are taken from Peter Newby's *Pears Word-Puzzler's Dictionary*, Pelham Books, 1983.)

On a personal note, my favorite alphomic and reverse alphomic words include DIMPSY, DITTY, FLOOSY (Web 3), CHINTZ, CHOPPY, BEGORRY, EGGHOT, BIJOUX, GIPSY, GHOST, GOOSY and SPOOFED, TONGA, TSONECA, WUNGEE, YTTTRIC, YUNCA, ZONKED (OED), VROOMED (OED), YUCCA, YUPPIE (OED), MECCA, VOLGA, and WOOFED. And a taste of alphomic verse:

Wrong Spoon

First effort.
Spoon poked.
Toffee sponge?
Solid yolked!

Sponge flops.
Dotty abhors.
Choux rolled.
Dirty floors!

Abbey Amor

Bells tolled,
Abbot spoke.
Wooded Abbess.
Abbey woke!