A CRITIQUE OF A CRITIQUE

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In her article "Anagrams: Ars Magna?" in the May 1974 Word Ways, Judith Tarr Isquit described the results of an experiment in which 20 anagrams and antigrams, ten composed by Jezebel Q. Xixx and ten composed by various members of the National Puzzlers' League, were rated by a panel of 25 people regarding their appositeness and grammatical correctness. In a critique following this article, Ms. Xixx argued that the panel was demonstrably incompetent, on the grounds that they rated an excellent antigram (of hers) much lower than a relatively inferior anagram (of hers) much lower than a relatively inferior anagram (of hers) much lower than a relative

Let us examine in detail Ms. Xixx's arguments used to establish the excellence of INFERNOS / non-fires and the defects in PRIMATE / trim ape. She claims that an inferno is a fire, and that the opposite of a fire is a non-fire. The Oxford English Dictionary informs us that the word inferno comes from the Italian word of the same spelling, and in turn from the late Latin infernus, meaning "hell". The word is familiar because of Dante's epic poem, The Divine Comedy, in which are described the nine ever-narrowing circles of Hell (the Inferno). In these circles, a variety of tortures are inflicted upon the souls of the damned, fire being only one of many alternatives available to Lucifer; in fact, the ninth circle, at the center of the earth where Lucifer himself is located, is surrounded by a fourfold ring of ice. The association of the word inferno with fire is of relatively recent vintage; neither the Oxford English Dictionary nor Webster's Second Edition notes this association, and in Webster's Third the association of inferno with conflagration (which, in turn, is defined as a fire) is relegated to the third and final definition. In short, it would have been far more appropriate to anagram INFERNOS into a concept involving the lower regions (or perhaps a general place of torment) rather than a fire.

The step from fire to non-fire is equally dubious. Surely, an anagram of unquestioned excellence ought to use words that are listed in dictionaries. Non-fire is not, and I challenge Ms. Xixx to find a genuine literary usage of this word. Until this is accomplished, it must be regarded as a nonce-word, a hapax legomena.

Turning now to PRIMATE / trim ape, Ms. Xixx first criticizes it on the grounds that the two sides should be plural instead of singular (or, if singular, should be prefaced by a). I see no need for both terms to be plural to make the anagram grammatical. Can Jezebel cite any anagrammatic authority for this? In A Key to Puzzledom (Duane Powell Press, Dowagiac, Michigan, 1906), a classic in its
field, John L. Hervey discusses at some length what makes a good anagram, but fails to mention this requirement; in fact, he cites approvingly such anagrams as ENDARMEMT / tender name. Nor is it necessary to prefix the indefinite article; it is just as complete a thought to say "PRIMATE suggests TRIM APE" as it is to say "A PRIMATE suggests A TRIM APE".

Ms. Xixx's next criticism focuses on the relationship between primates and trimness. Without citing her sources, she states that trim most usually means "slender", and slenderness is hardly characteristic of the gorilla. However, neither Webster's Second nor Third gives any connotation of slenderness -- rather, the word means "neat and compact, well-ordered, of proper proportions". Why cannot this be applied to a normal, healthy ape? Interestingly, the obsolete meaning of trim is "firm, stout, strong" -- if anything, the opposite of slender.

Finally, Jezebel points out that the concept primate is more inclusive than the concept ape -- all apes are primates, but not all primates are apes. This criticism is more valid than the previous two; however, to be consistent, Jezebel should apply the same standard to her own anagrams. Not all STREET SHOES are hose testers; some, in fact, may wear out before a sturdy pair of hose will. Not all SEXUAL INTERCOURSE is relaxing -- has Jezebel ever considered rape? Must all ARGUMENTS anger? Surely not, judging from the dictionary definitions of "arguments". The point is that if exact equivalence between anagram and base is strictly enforced, very few good anagrams will ever appear -- either from Jezebel or anyone else.

PRONUNCIATION UNKNOWN

In the February 1971 issue of Word Ways, Darryl Francis pointed out that Webster's Third Edition says of the word BALGE, in the color name BALGE YELLOW, "pronunciation unknown". In contrast, consider the case of the word BERSERK, the pronunciation of which is so well-known to the Merriam-Webster editors that they have shown twenty different pronunciations for it. If one is confronted by twenty different pronunciations of a word, it is inconceivable that they do not include the one which would represent one's unassisted wild guess. Accordingly, the editors of Webster's could just as well have said of BERSERK, "pronunciation unknown".