

THAT'S IN A NAME

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Traditionally a favorite linguistic recreation, anagramming becomes especially diverting when applied to personal names. The typical result is a phrase which in some respect describes the person associated with the name. In Howard Bergerson's familiar work Palindromes and Anagrams, there are eight anagrams on the name William Ewart Gladstone, each giving someone's perception of that man.

In the May 1984 issue of Word Ways, Mike Morton and A. Ross Eckler present over thirty times as many anagrams on the name Ronald Wilson Reagan. The latter were the product of a computer program which selected from a stored vocabulary those combinations of words which permuted the letters in the President's name. Ordering particular combinations into meaningful phrases required human intervention. Many of the resulting arrangements seem to have little relevance to Reagan. Readers' inputs in the August issue show that a number of highly relevant combinations had not been found by this procedure. However, considering that the program generated hundreds of thousands of combinations to be examined and rearranged, the results are impressive indeed.

Now comes word in the October 1984 issue of Scientific American, reported by A. K. Dewdney in the "Computer Recreations" column, of related work by other software and hardware experts. Of particular interest is a set of heuristic techniques to facilitate anagram production, the work of James A. Woods of NASA Ames Research Center. They are described in an unpublished paper by Woods entitled "On Computing Anagrams". Their principal use, admits Woods, is to scramble people's names - "a burgeoning cottage industry, somewhat akin to horoscope reading".

Presumably this means that there are certain formal analogies between astrological character delineation on the one hand, and the practice of onomancy on the other. The latter pursuit is at least partially implemented by determining name anagrams which describe character traits or biographical events. Whether the occurrence of such anagrams is purely coincidental, or whether their existence acts as a subliminal influence on the name-bearer to realize the potential specified in the anagram, are questions not discussed here. However, in the case of creative writers, it can be persuasively argued that the presence of such fortuitous combinations would almost surely be perceived, if not pursued.

Woods concludes with a prophecy of his own - that "as with
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chess playing and 'steel drivin'', the days of the unaided John Henry are numbered. Make way for the 'steam' anagramatist!" Perhaps because time is running out, or because my own name is so close in sound and spelling to that of John Henry, I cannot resist the urge to present a set of anagrams which collectively "explain" the life of an outstanding writer of recent times. The name of Gertrude Stein, who wrote a remarkable manual entitled How to Write, among many other books, was extraordinarily rich in accurately descriptive permutations, as will be seen. The demonstration to follow is the product of inspiration, perspiration, and permutation - but not so much as one computation!

We note first that the earliest interest of Gertrude Stein as a university student was medicine. This period in her life corresponds to such anagrams as UNGIRD ERE TEST, or TIRED? GET NURSE or GET TRIED NURSE. Soon, however, she abandoned this curriculum, perhaps because the gravity of medical responsibility carried such heavy weight. This is suggested by the grim URGENT: REST DIE and the even grimmer INTERRED GUEST.

In quest of an alternative, she chose to become a writer, but not an ordinary one. Her great creativity led her quickly to a rejection of traditional styles: RUNES GET TIRED. The solution? RESTRING ETUDE.

Her experiments were not all crowned with success: I ERRED; E.G., STUNT. It was not long before her innovations aroused protest: TRUE DIN GREETTS. However, she was able to cope with confidence: GREETTS TRUE DIN.

The experiments continued, sometimes in a cheerful tone: RIDENT GESTURE. There were other times, when, even in France, a more sombre note was struck: DU GENRE TRISTE.

How to Write, published in 1931, is a title possessing significant anagrams of its own, including rot with woe, we throw riot, and two--i, her--two. With the publication of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, just two years later, the "i, her" duality would coalesce.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are anagrams which relate to this thematic ramification. A solitary life may have induced TEN TIRED URGES. In any case, her enduring companionship with Alice B. Toklas is effectively summarized through DESIRE, TURN, GET. Their Parisian friends accepted the association with tolerance and would greet them pleasantly throughout the city: STREET GRIN DUE.

The greatest triumph of her life may have been the homage paid by GIs after World War II, who saluted her as the queen of modern letters: REIGNED TRUEST. Her many kudos and accolades notwithstanding, the average reader was to remain skeptical, obtusely regarding her artistry as nothing but the ramblings of a REGISTERED NUT.