

RIPLEY UNMASKED

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In the November 1978 *Word Ways*, Darryl Francis reviewed a limited-circulation book by Alfred Lubran entitled *Unitotolinearsyllabification*. Among other words, this work cited the following specimen:

orniscopytheobibliopsychocrystarroscioaerogenethliometeoroaustrohieroanthropoichthyoppyrosiderochpnomyoalectryoophiobotanopegohydrorhabdocrithoaleuroalphitohalomolybdoclerobeloaxinocosciodactyliogeolithopessopsephocatoptrotephraoneirochiroonychodactyloarithstichooxogeloscogastrogyrocero-bletonooenoscapulinianiac

The word describes someone deluded into practicing an ungodly assortment of divination forms relating to birds, oracles, the Bible, ghosts, crystal gazing, shadows, air appearances, birth stars, meteors, winds, mysterious manifestations, entrails of humans and fishes, fire, red-hot irons, altar smoke, mice, grain picking by roosters, snakes, herbs, fountains, water, wands, dough, metal, barley, salt, lead, dice, arrows, hatchet balance, sieves, ring suspension, random dots, precious stones, pebbles, pebble heaps, mirrors, ash writing, dreams, palmistry, nail rays, finger rings, numbers, book passages, name letterings, laughing manners, ventriloquism, circle walking, wax, susceptibility to hidden springs, wine, and shoulder blades.

This word was apparently foisted on an unsuspecting world in the late 1920s or 1930 by Robert Ripley in his widely-read "Believe It Or Not" newspaper column. In any event, the word was included in a Ripley collection published in book form in 1931, and again in a double such collection published in 1934: *Ripley's Believe It Or Not: Two Volumes In One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934, p. 194). The word purports to be one used by monastic authors of the Middle Ages writing on the subject of human superstition, but I am convinced that it was actually concocted by someone on the Ripley staff who made a complete mess of the job:

- * the ending -MANIAC, itself an unjustifiable replacement for the correct ending -MANCER, is misprinted -NANIAC
- * PYTHO-, an illegitimate borrowing from PYTHONISM, is misprinted PYTHEO-
- * CRYSTALLO- is doubly misprinted as CRYSTARRO-
- * CAPNO- is misprinted CHPNO-
- * ORNISCO- is an illegitimate borrowing from ORNISCOPY, replacing the correct form ORNITHO- derived from ORNITHOMANCY
- * GELOSCO- is an illegitimate borrowing from GELOSCOPY, itself an inferior form of the proper term GELOTOSCOPY

- * DACTYLO- is an erroneous form of DACTYLIO-, unacceptable even if it had been correct because the element DACTYLIO- appears earlier in the word
- * a precise count shows that the claimed 310-letter word is actually 311 letters long

Had Ripley really put his mind to it, he could have created a word of 612 letters describing this mixture of divinations. I conclude this from an examination of Paul Hellweg's article on divination terms in the May 1982 issue of **Word Ways**, using the longest variant of each divination form spelled in two or more different ways in his list.

For the record, I exhibit the correct form of Ripley's word, with slashes placed between the various divinations in order to make it easier to read:

ornitho/pytho/biblio/psycho/crystallo/scio/aero/genethlio/meteoro/-
 austro/hiero/anthropo/ichthyo/pyro/sidero/capno/myo/alectryo/-
 ophio/botano/pego/hydro/rhabdo/critho/aleuro/alphito/halo/-
 molybdo/clero/belo/axino/coscino/dactylio/geo/litho/pesso/psepho/-
 catoptro/tephra/oneiro/chiro/onycho/dactylio/arith/sticho/oxo/-
 geloto/gastro/gyro/cero/bletono/oen/scapuli/mancer

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