

# WORDPLAY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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Modern recreational linguistics, as codified by Dmitri Borgmann in Language on Vacation (Scribner's, 1965), primarily views words as collections of letters to be manipulated in various ways, and secondarily as combinations of sounds or carriers of meaning. As in other branches of scholarly inquiry, this narrow focus has enabled today's logologists to see relationships more clearly, to ask new questions, and in general to elucidate the subject to an extent their predecessors could not even comprehend. Yet with such advances come myopia - one sees the individual trees, but no longer the forest. It is extremely instructive to look at the field of recreational linguistics through the eyes of two practitioners of a century ago, back when the emphasis was on collecting literary curiosa of all sorts rather than following up with new investigations. Thanks to Gale Research Company, two of the greatest works in this field are once again in print: Charles C. Bombaugh's Gleanings for the Curious from the Harvest-Fields of Literature (Hartford, 1875), available for \$54, and William S. Walsh's Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities (Philadelphia, 1892), available for \$70. The former should not be confused with the Dover paperback reprint, which contains less than half the chapters of the original.

One is struck by the variety of subjects included in these books. Bombaugh is like a present-day trivia encyclopedia, though confined to literary material; Walsh is alphabetically arranged and resembles a modern dictionary devoted to colorful phrases and colloquialisms such as the one by Partridge. Both books, however, do not hesitate to incorporate extended essays on various topics. The 19th-century forerunner of present-day core logology is covered by Walsh in fascinating accounts of Anagrams, Palindromes, Lipograms, Alphabetic Diversions (pangrams and alphabetical acrostics), and Eccentricities of Spelling (inconsistencies of sight and sound). Oddly, he includes nothing on Word Squares although the subject was by then well-known. There is far more material in its 1100 pages, much of it devoted to no-longer-fashionable types of wordplay: Bouts-Rimes (a parlor game in which one is challenged to write a poem incorporating a set of rhymed words), Equivoque (poems whose right and left halves have opposed meanings), Cryptograms, Refractory Rhyme (find rhymes for words like orange or silver), Chronograms (Roman-numeral dates formed from letters in words or phrases), Echo Verse, Acrostics, and the like. Even further afield, Walsh explores such curiosa as newspaper agony columns, gravestone epitaphs, Irish bulls, coincidences, typographical blunders, and hoaxes.

Bombaugh has drawn upon much of the same material, and one can see the same examples repeated there. Yet there is enough difference to make the book well worth acquiring. If anything, his definition of a literary curiosity is even broader than Walsh's, for he includes such Ripleyesque items as noted human longevity, the question of whether a person feels anything after decapitation, and using a cat's eye to tell the time of day! His book ends with a chapter which is rather somber to the modern taste: life and death, with such lagnaippes as the last words of various notables, plus stories of bodies preserved long after entombment.

Like Addison nearly two centuries earlier, Walsh has a somewhat jaundiced view of recreational linguistics. Under Alphabetic Diversions he writes:

An alphabet, one would say, is too sacred a thing to be treated other than reverently. Yet there have always been triflers, even in this Holy of Holies. Some miscreants have taken the utmost imaginable pains to avoid a particular letter, and have composed poems, essays and treatises without once raising the unmeaning taboo. Others have made inordinate use of some letter and insisted that it should form the initial of every word. The first call their Procrustean method lipogrammatizing; the latter, alliteration...Others, again, have found still other methods of conjuring with the alphabet,-- a cunning sleight of hand that may be made to work miracles at the beck of the true thaumaturgist.

Further:

Some ingenious trifler has discovered that there is one verse in the Bible which contains all the letters of the alphabet...Prof. De Morgan, who in his lucid moments was a great mathematician, used to find an insane pleasure in relieving his severer studies by composing ingenious puzzles [of this type]...Since that time many other people have tried their hands at the same kind of trifling.

He is hardly less severe when discussing the Anagram:

Although the anagram has fallen on evil days, and is now relegated to the children's column...it once boasted a high estate and taxed the reverence of the wise, the learned, and the devout. The Hebrews held there was something divine in this species of word-torture...after centuries of endeavor so few really good anagrams have been rolled down to us. One may assert that all the really superb anagrams now extant might be contained in a pill-box.

Bombaugh's opinion of wordplay was hardly more elevated; he terms pangrams a "literary folly", calls the acrostic "fit only for trivial subjects", and characterizes the anagram as a "frivolous and now almost obsolete intellectual exercise". Is it any wonder that it took so long for present-day logology to develop?