

MYSTERIOUS ACROSTICS

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Most of us know what a word square is -- or, at least, think we do. Those of us who do not know, consult Webster's Third New International Dictionary in order to find out.

He who consults the Third Edition makes a surprising discovery. The term WORD SQUARE seems to be a superfluous one. It is defined by the dictionary merely as a synonym for the proper term, the word ACROSTIC. More specifically, the dictionary user is referred to definition number three of the word ACROSTIC.

What that third definition tells us is that an acrostic is a series of words of equal length, the number of words being the same as the number of letters in each word, so arranged that it is the same when read horizontally or vertically. Lest anyone have the slightest doubt about what this definition is supposed to mean, the definition is illustrated with a well-known word square, repeated at the right.

H	E	A	R	T
E	M	B	E	R
A	B	U	S	E
R	E	S	I	N
T	R	E	N	D

I discovered this definition of the word ACROSTIC shortly after acquiring my copy of the Third Edition in 1961. I was utterly dumbfounded. In my personal view, acrostics were acrostics, word squares were word squares, and never the two were destined to meet.

For quite some time -- actually, for more than twelve years -- I thought about this curious state of affairs. Never once in my extensive encounters with the literature of recreational linguistics had I seen a word square called an acrostic -- or vice versa, for that matter. After the ripest sort of consideration, I finally decided to write to the editors of the Third Edition, asking them for a few citations in support of the dictionary definition of the word ACROSTIC. Having dashed off my inquiry, I sat back and awaited an enlightening reply.

That reply arrived today. It follows in full:

We have your letter of March 7 in which you ask for corroboration of sense 3 of acrostic in Webster's Third New International Dictionary. We are sorry to say that we cannot furnish you with such proof because, evidently, none exists. This sense of acrostic and its accompanying illustration were approved by our outside specialist in grammar and linguistics apparently without support-

ive evidence. As this is a practice that is totally inconsistent with our lexicographic philosophy, we are grateful to have the matter brought to our attention. We thank you for writing.

This is, of course, only the latest in a long series of errors in the unabridged Webster dictionaries to be mentioned in the pages of Word Ways. However, it is the first one that invades the domain of logology. Consequently, it might be worthwhile to make a systematic check of all logological terms in the Third Edition, to find out whether there are other errors as well. Any volunteers?

SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS

Despite its rather high price of \$12.50, Josefa Heifetz's new book Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary (University Books, Secaucus, N.J., 1974) is a logological feast of 6000 "unusual, obscure and preposterous" words and terms culled over a ten-year period from a wide variety of dictionaries and other sources (including logastellus and peditastellus, coined by John McClellan in the August 1970 issue of Word Ways). No doubt readers will bemoan the absence of their own favorite oddities (I missed ucalegon, a neighbor whose house is on fire), but far more of interest is included than excluded.

This is a dictionary for browsing rather than scholarly research; nevertheless, references directing the reader to further information about each entry would have been helpful. Her definitions are refreshingly brief and pointed: hircismus (stinky armpits), snarleyyow (dog), karimata (a two-headed Japanese arrow that whistles while it works), and savssat (animals crowded around a hole in the Arctic ice). (Sometimes, as for serendipity and topiary, they are so brief as to be misleading.) Proofreading is generally good, but typos such as Tetragrammation and liwi (for iiwi) were noted.