We are not used to the idea that anagrams might have anything to teach us. For most of us, they are games we outgrow, and famous writers, from Ben Jonson to Samuel Johnson, and from John Dryden to T. S. Eliot, have dismissed their deployment in literature as trivial, empty, and even perverse—a twisted art, as Dryden described it in his satirical poem *MacFecknoe*, devoted to “torturing one poor word ten thousand ways.” But Christopher Ricks has recently reminded us that Shakespeare’s age was the veritable “heyday of the anagram,” suggesting that the art of verbal recombination can be studied as “a true assistance to art” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In my illustrated lecture, I want to go further and suggest that anagrams deserve a central place in a larger history, one with broader textual, cultural, and intellectual dimensions.

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