THE RESILIENCE OF THE LAMBS

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Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go;
He followed her to school one day, that was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play to see a lamb in school.

A century and three quarters after "Mary Had A Little Lamb" was published, residents of Sterling, Massachusetts and Newport, New Hampshire are still arguing over the ownership of this famous little ditty about the faithful lamb and unwelcoming schoolteacher. According to Sterling, the Mary of the poem was a girl named Mary Sawyer, born there in 1806. One day in 1815 her devoted lamb followed her to school and up the classroom aisle when she was asked to recite a lesson. The teacher, alas, turned the lamb out. The incident so amused and inspired a boy named John Roulstone, who happened to be visiting the class that day, that he took pencil to paper and dashed off the first three stanzas (two given above). The Sterling Historical Society contains a copy of an 1879 letter by Mary Sawyer in which she described the incident and confirmed Roulstone's authorship.

According to Newport, every word of the poem was written by Sarah Josepha Hale. Easily Newport's most distinguished citizen, she was editor of Godey's Lady Book from 1837 to 1877, as well as the author of 20 books and hundreds of poems. "Mary Had A Little Lamb" was published in 1830 under her name in a collection called Poems For Our Children. Hale said she wrote it, in a signed statement that appeared in the Boston Transcript in 1889, written by her son on her behalf before she died.

The poem has been written under various literary constraints, beginning in the August 1969 Word Ways with five lipograms, in turn omitting the letters A, E, T, H and S. But one can do far better; here is Mary with only half the alphabet (E, T, A, I, N, S, C, L, D, M, R, H and P) used.

Maria had a little sheep, as pale as rime its hair,
And all the places Maria came the sheep did tail her there.
In Maria's class it came at last (a sheep can't enter there);
It made the children clap their hands—a sheep in class, that's rare.

During the next three decades, Mary and her lamb have been linguistically tortured in countless ways in the pages of Word Ways. This article for the first time brings them together.

One-Syllable. Two-Syllable, Three-Syllable Words: Dave Morice, WW Nov 1998

Young May had a wee small lamb; its fleece was white as snow,
And to each place that young May went, the lamb was sure to go.
It trailed her to her school one day; that broke some sort of rule.
It made the kids all laugh and play to see a lamb in school.
Mary purchased tiny lambkin, snowlike fleeces covered.  
Every pathway Mary traveled, lambkin surely hovered.  
Lambkin followed Mary schoolward, countered legal ruling  
Making playful children chuckle, seeing lambkin's schooling.  

Marilyn's ownership! Minuscule lambkin maximized fleeciness snowily.  
Certainly everywhere Marilyn visited lambkin visited showily.  
Yesterday lambkin, following Marilyn scholarly, misbehaved lawlessly.  
Schoolfellows empathized laughingly, playfully, scholarly lambkin flawlessly.

Alliteration: Jim Puder, WW Feb 1998

Astral Aries' avatar, alabaster "Allie",  
Ann adopted; allies are Ann and Ann's argali.  
Ann, an able autodidact, academic angst avoids;  
And arch Allie's Argus-eyed act awes astonished anthropoids.

Monovocalic: Jim Puder, WW Feb 1998

Martha had a banal lamb, a drab, bland vacant argal  
That baas at straw and laps a dram as Martha chars as bar gal.  
Pal Martha has a class, alas, that chaffs at lambs and llamas.  
Martha pans that gang as "crass" and calls lamb "cat's pajamas".

Pangram (all letters): WW Feb 1989

Mary had a little lamb with fleece extremely white;  
Instead of grazing all alone the lamb kept her in sight.  
It followed her to school one day which was against the rule;  
The children thought it quite a joke to view a lamb in school.

Heterogram (no repeated letters in a word): unpublished

Mary had a tiny lamb (its coat was white as snow),  
And to each site its owner went the lamb was sure to go.  
He trailed his owner lyceumward. "No livestock" rules debar.  
It made the children laugh and play—watch lamb in seminar!

Initial Letter Acrostic: Richard Lederer, WW May 1997

Mary had a little lamb,  
A ram with fleece like snow.  
Reacting to where Mary went,  
Young sheep was sure to go.  
Lamb followed her to school one day  
A flouting of the rule,  
Making children laugh and play.  
Beholding lamb in school.

Automynorcagram (initial letters of words respell beginning of poem): WW Feb 1989

Mary acquired ram yesterday, a coat quite unblemished.  
It romps each day, running alongside Mary.  
Yes, each schoolteacher expels rams daintily accompanying youths.  
Although children often amused, teacher quite unimpressed...
Each word shares a letter with its predecessor: WW Feb 1989

Mary had a baby lamb, as pale as frost her fur;
Whenever Mary ventured forth, that lamb accompanied her.
She went along to school one time (this was against the rule);
The children laughed and clapped their hands—lamb should stay out of school.

Each word has no letters in common with its predecessor: WW Feb 1989

Mary owned a tiny ewe; its fleece was much like snow.
But everywhere big Mary went, small ewe did surely go.
It came to class one day in May despite a rule "No ewe!"
Alas, the class did jump with glee to have young lamb on view.

In each line, last letter of each word is first letter of next: Richard Lederer WW Aug 1998

Maria acquired diminutive ewe
Of fleece emitting glow.
Whatever realm Maria accessed,
The ewe'd, delighting, go.

So ovine entered damsel's school
Trespassing 'gainst their rule;
Children nickered, dawdled, danced—
So ovine exits school.

No repeated word: Dave Morice, WW Nov 2006

Mary had a little lamb; its fleece looked white as snow.
Now everywhere that young girl walked, her pet would surely go.
He followed child in class one day; this went against some rule.
It made the children laugh and play to see an ewe in school.

Line-by-Line Palindrome: Peter Newby and Dave Morice, WW Nov 1990

Mary bred a Derby ram,
Won some gem o' snow.
Went one romp more, not new—
O gods, Mary, rams do go!

Walks a ton, not ask law;
'Loof drag gal, laggard fool.
Mar damn mad ram
Loots Mary, ram, stool.

End-to-end Palindrome: Dave Morice, WW Nov 1988

Mary, baboon? To go to room? Gnu? Star? No, 'tis all lamb.
O, bit on stool, eh, Mary? Won sore heel? Sit! One rule, so:
Mall, la, sit on rat. Sung—"Moo rot! O, got no, O, baby ram!"

Last two lines transposition of first two lines: James Rambo, WW Feb 1989

A girl once kept a tiny sheep, widely famed for whiteness;
This pet would dog her very step, no certain sign of brightness.
'Twas viewed, the pest, one day in class by impish children there;
Kids laugh to see pets, goofing off, weren't trying—open, err!
Eva caged a wee, wee ewe, fat tresses wet as grass.
As Eva raced afar, ewe raced as far! Ewe was as crass.
Ewe started after Eva's feet, faced ewe at fact cave.
Tads tagged, tads teased, tads raved at ewe, tads saw sweet treats ewe gave.

Words formed of chemical element symbols: WW Feb 2000

ONe TiNY AgNUS SHe NoW OWNS (SNOW-WHITe IS HEr CoAt),
WHieN HEr LaDy IS NeArBY, AgNUS STaYS, J NoTe.
In ClAsS ONe MoRn SHe TaKEs HEr PLaCe; TeAcHEr CrIEs "SHoO! RUN!!"
HeAr THoSe LaSSiEs ScReAm "HoW CuTe!" ThIS AgNUS—PURe FUN!

Word lengths replicate pi digits: unpublished

See a lamb (a snowy explosion of fleece)
Trail her owner anyplace (marvelous loyalty!)
Following her in, the friendly lamb capers at school
(Damn the law!). Children all go bananas (universal mirth).

Anguish Languish: Dave Morice, WW Nov 1988

Marry, addle id, all am. Id's fleas wash wide ass? No.
End, if reward add merry want, doll, lamp wash your tug, ob!
Heave! Owl owed air, two's cool, won't hay? Dot, wash again, stir. Who'll?
Id maid, thatch hill drain law fanned. Flay! Deuce! Sea, all ham—in's cool.

Four-Letter Words: Dave Morice, WW Nov 2006

Mary kept some tiny lamb with wool hued just like snow.
Each spot that this girl, Mary, went, that lamb went also (slow).
Once lamb went past home room with girl; that bent some rule last year.
This made kids loud, glad, made them play; they eyed lamb very near.

Four-Letter and Shorter Words: Jeff Grant, WW May 2004

Mary had a tiny lamb; its coat was pure as snow,
And any spot that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.
It came up to her desk one day, and did not heed the rule.
It made the kids all hoot and play, to see a lamb so cool.

Three-Letter and Shorter Words: Jeff Grant, WW May 2004

Amy had an ewe so wee, it was an icy hue,
And any way our Amy led, the ewe it did go, too.
It ran in to her den one day (an act not in the law).
Oh, the fun for boy and gal! The ewe so wee all saw.
Haiku: WW Aug 2003

Lamb's with Mary always.
They enter school, against rule.
Students laugh and romp.

Rhopalic: Dave Morice, WW May 2000

O, to own lamb, Mary's little whitest creature,
Violating legalities, schoolmates interrupting
Schoolteacher entertainingly, disrespectfully,
Incontrovertibly counterproductive.
Semiprofessionally historicogeographic,
Supernaturalized anticonstitutionalist.
Hyperconscientious anthropomorphologically,
Pathologicopsychological, philosophicopsychological.

Double Rhyme: Dave Morice, WW Nov 2006

Mary, very bad, had tiny whiny lamb, damn!
Full wool, quite white, snowy showy view, too.
All tall places, spaces Mary'd tarried at, that
Damn lamb raced, chased through, too.
See? He followed, wallowed near here. Cruel school
Had bad rule: "You'll stow slow lamb, ma'am,
But what wild child laughed, daft at that?
They'd played. "See free lamb scram!"

The Lamb's Viewpoint: Dave Morice, WW Nov 2006

Lambie had a little girl, her hair was white as snow,
And everywhere that Lambie went, the girl was sure to go.
She followed him to graze one day; that was a real disaster.
It made the lambs all baa and bleat to see a girl in pasture.

Dave Morice parodies Mary in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet (May 2000 Word Ways):

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Or say that Mary had a little lamb?
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And yet its fleece was white as snow, dear ram.
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines
And scorches everywhere that Mary went,
And every fair from fair sometimes declines
By chance: the lamb was sure to go repent.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Unless it followed her to school one day,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade
Although that was against the rule last May.
So long! The children laugh and play and tarry
So long to see a lamb in school with Mary.
Inspired by this, Mike Keith anagrammed Shakespeare’s Sonnet 143 to tell Mary’s story (Aug 200 Word Ways):

Lo, as a careful huswife runs to catch,
One of her feathered creatures broke away,
Sets down her babe and makes all swift dispatch
In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;
Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent,
To follow that which flies before her face,
Not prizing her poor infant’s discontent—
So run’st thou after that which flies from thee,
Whilst I thy babe chase thee afar behind,
But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me
And play the mother’s part, kiss me, be kind.
So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will
If thou turn back and my loud crying still.

The gal named Mary shuffles through the house—
But view her as she strokes her frisky lamb,
Whose brow is whiter than a snowy mouse,
Fleece chalky as French cliffs of epigram.
Each place she’d bathe, attain or hie without
(To parish church or at the stuffy crypt)
The lamb’s instinct did follow her about
(So close around that twice she nearly tripped).
Back to her class that zany lamb would fly
And cause a hubbub (then they fetched it in);
It whacked the inkwell, overturn’d the pie,
Though this was chief and total public sin.
“Anoint this lofty one,” the brats then cried,
“For now it’s certain: school is rather fried!”

If Clement Moore had written Mary Had a Little Lamb, Dave Morice imagines that it might sound something like this (Nov 2000 Word Ways):

‘Twas the day before Christmas, when all through the school,
Not a creature was stirring or breaking a rule.
The teacher was warning the children in fear:
“Don’t you dare bring your pets to the schoolhouse this year!”
But Mary was absent that day from her class
And wasn’t aware of the rule, poor lass.
She had a small lambkin whose fleece was snow white,
And he followed her always by day or by night.
Now Mary and Lamb nestled snug in their beds,
While visions of snowflakes just danced in their heads
And Lamb in its fleeces, and Mary in covers
Had just settled down where the snow never hovers,
When out in the pasture there rose such a storm.
She sprang from her bed, though it wasn’t too warm.
Away to the window she flew in great fright,
Tore open the curtains and turned on the light.
Her Lamb jumped outside on the new-fallen slush
Where its snowy white fleece was all colored like mush.
More rapid than snow, the slush fell down with ease,
And Mary was worried the poor Lamb might freeze.
“Now, Lambie! Now, Fleecy! Now, Snowy! Now, Hush!
Come into the house so you won’t turn to mush!”
But the Lamb only bleated and stood in the light,
And Mary went back to her bed for the night.
But then when she walked to her school the next day,
The Lamb trotted after her, wanting to play.
It entered the building, went through the front door
And pranced down the hallway and tried to ignore
The loud ringing bell that meant class would begin.
The children all laughed till the teacher walked in.
The teacher, on seeing the animal, yelled
“That filthy lamb’s lunchmeat, and Mary’s expelled!”

Richard Lederer provides the last word on Mary and her lamb: “To err is human, but to write
logological verse is simply ovine.”