The limerick packs laughs anatomical
Into space that is quite economical.
But the good ones I've seen
So seldom are clean
And the clean ones so seldom are comical.
Vyvyan Holland

It has been claimed that the limerick is the only fixed poetry form indigenous to the English language. This may or may not be true. In his book *The Limerick* (Bell Publishing Co., New York, 1964), a collection of very blue limericks, G. Legman traces the origin of the verse form back to the very beginnings of Anglo-Saxon literature. Most of his illustrations are rather forced.

A fanciful theory of their origin: During the fifteenth century, there were Irish mercenaries in almost every army in Europe. They would compose verses in limerick form about each other; after each verse, all would join in the chorus "When we get back to Limerick Town, 'twill be a glorious morning!"

The limerick's start is obscure,
Especially forms that are pure.
But this wins all bets:
The older it gets,
It is bluer and bluer and bluer.

Elizabeth Foster was born in Boston in 1665 to William and Anne Foster. At the age of 26, she married one Isaac Goose (or Vertigoose), a widower with several children. Elizabeth and Isaac had a daughter who later married Thomas Fleet, a Boston printer. In later life, Elizabeth Goose lived with them. Grandmother Goose loved to sing to her grandchildren verses she had learned as a child. Her voice left something to be desired and so irritated Fleet that he published a broadside of her verses to deride and discourage her. Its unexpected success both surprised and delighted him. So, in 1719, he published the book *Songs for the Nursery, or Mother Goose's Melodies for Children*. In addition to some primitive forms like *Hickory Dickory Dock*, it contained at least one perfect limerick:

There was an old soldier of Bister
Went walking one day with his sister
When a cow at one poke

The first
was a small
published by J.
The first collection of limericks (although they were not called that) was a small book *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women*, published by J. Harris of London in the 1820s. One selection:

There was an old woman of Leeds
Who spent all her life in good deeds;
She worked for the poor
Till her fingers were sore
This pious old woman of Leeds.

In 1846, in his *Book of Nonsense*, Edward Lear gave the verses their name and their lightheartedness which has persisted to this day -- even among those who are wholly ignorant of poetry.

Although at the limericks of Lear
We may feel a temptation to sneer
We should never forget
That we owe him a debt
For his work as the first pioneer.

Langford Reed

Lear's limericks depended upon their plot for their effect. The final line was always a repetition of the first or second line. This need not be a defect. Consider these two:

There was a young person named Tate
Who went out to dine at 8.8
But I'd hate to relate
What that person named Tate
And his tête-à-tête ate at 8.8.
Carolyn Wells

There was an old man from Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket
But his daughter Nan
Met a traveling man
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

These might be considered a transition between Lear's style and the modern limerick which depends upon the last line being the punch line.

There was a young lady of Lynn
Who was so exceedingly thin
That when she essayed
To drink lemonade
She slipped through the straw and fell in.

By definition, a limerick is a nonsense poem of five anapestic lines, of which lines 1, 2, and 5 are of three feet and rhyme, and lines 3 and 4
are of two feet and rhyme. The classic limerick has the form:

$$
da \ DA \ da \ DA \ da \ DA \\
da \ DA \ da \ DA \ da \ DA \\
da \ DA \ da \ DA \ da \\
da \ DA \ da \ DA \ da \\
da \ DA \ da \ DA \ da \ DA.
$$

However, unaccented syllables can be added to the beginning and/or end of lines 1 and 2. Unaccented syllables can be added and/or deleted from the beginning of lines 3, 4, and 5. This results in a most flexible metrical format.

Innumerable newspaper competitions have been held; hundreds of thousands of "missing last lines" have been supplied by contestants. It has been estimated that at least a million limericks -- good, mediocre, and indecent -- are in existence today.

It was only natural that people would begin to play around with the rhyme form, the scan, and anything else they could think of. The results are called limergimmicks. For example, there are limericks that rhyme without scanning:

There was a young man of Japan
Whose limericks never would scan
When someone asked why
He replied with a sigh
It's because I always try to get as many words into the last line as I possibly can.

And there are limericks that scan without rhyming:

There was an old man of St. Bees
Who was stung on the arm by a wasp
When asked, "Does it hurt?"
He replied, "'No it doesn't --
I'm so glad that it wasn't a hornet,"
W. S. Gilbert

Some neither rhyme nor scan:

Another young poet in China
Had a feeling for rhythm much finer.
His limericks tend
To come to an end
Quite suddenly.

Authors frequently play around with the basic form:

That things were not worse was a mercy
You read the bottom line first
Since he wrote all reversed
He did every job arsy-versy
A very odd poet was Percy J.A. Lindon
You really can't call it a limerick
I guess it is more of a gimerick
'Cause this poem of mine
Stops at the fourth line

An Anglican curate in want of a second-hand portable font, would exchange for the same a portrait (in frame) of the bishop-elect of Vermont

And others tamper with typography:

There was a young lady of Diss,
Who said "Now I think skating bliss!"
This no more will she state
For a wheel of her skate
Made her fizzle into the tale.

Two hunters were tracking a deer
On a trail that was not quite clear
When one of them said
With a shake of his head
"There's a sharp drop-off right about here!"

Tongue twisters are always popular:

A tutor who tooted the flute
Tried to teach two young tooters to toot.
Said the two to the tutor,
"Is it harder to toot or
To tutor two tooters to toot?"

Carolyn Wells

Closely related to these are limericks in which the same sound is repeatedly echoed. The first of these appeared in the February 1970 Kickshaws, and the second in November 1971.

A merchant who traded in cocoa
Much admired that strange style called rococo.
You'll be happy to learn
That the name of his firm
Is to be The Rococo Cocoa Co.

Leigh Mercer

When the 'Rose & Crown' signboard fell down,
George, the landlord, remarked with a frown
"On the one to replace it
We'll have much more space b'tween Rose and & and & and Crown."

Leigh Mercer
We come across some strange rhymes:

A beautiful lady named Psyche
Is loved by a fellow named Yche
One thing about Ych
The lady can't lych
Is his beard, which is dreadfully spyche.

McKnight, an irascible Col.,
Had a temper simply infol.
He often would try
To slaughter a fly
With a tightly-rolled paper or jol.

Puzzles are popular:

An amorous M. A.
Says that Cupid, the C. D.,
Doesn't cast for his health
But is rolling in wealth —
He's the John Jaco-B A.

M. A. is Master of Arts; hence C. D. must be caster of darts, and the last line is Jacob Astor of hearts.

The most completely gimmicked limerick is this one by Leigh Mercer:

\[
\frac{12 + 144 + 20 + 3\sqrt{4}}{7} + 5(11) = 9^2 + 9
\]

which translates to

A dozen, a gross, and a score
Plus three times the square root of four
Divided by seven
Plus five times eleven
Is nine squared and not a bit more.

Why not try your hand and be a Happy Limericker?