THE CASE OF THE CLEAN LIMERICK

JOHN McCLELLAN
Woodstock, New York

It will come as somewhat of a surprise to some people that such a thing as a clean limerick exists -- the Rabelaisian voice of naughtiness drowns out the weaker voice of its cleaner brother and almost completely dominates the field. The purpose of this short paper is to point out that clean limericks not only do exist but that they can be quite good; and to suggest means by which they can be recast with certain bawdy overtones, without sacrificing their purity, and thereby appeal more to man's natural rambunctiousness. This popularization process we may call 'pseudo-pornographizing'. It is not our purpose here to launch into a history of this particular verse-form (which has been treated adequately elsewhere) but rather to present the case for the pristine limerick -- that persecuted minority member of the family.

For our purposes we divide the limerick field into three main categories, and give examples of most of them. That one division may imperceptibly slide -- usually downward -- into the next is to be expected. We find 'grays' along with the 'blacks' and 'whites'.

Our first category is made up of those small, unassuming poems in limerick form which by no stretch of the imagination can be considered as contributing to the delinquency of a minor; they may be quoted in mixed gatherings, like social teas and church-suppers to which the children's teacher is invited, along with the local pastor. The verse elicits polite laughter and, "Oh, how clever" before the subject is changed; in modern parlance they are 'G-rated' and many people really enjoy them very much. We give a few examples:

Our Mabel has saved up her dimes
To purchase a Table of Primes.
We never thought Mabel
Would need a prime table --
Perhaps it's a sign of the times.

An industrious, if careless, young monk
Filled his cell with all manner of junk,
'Til the Prior made him take
All the mess to the lake
Where the Brethren dumped it, kerplunk!

As we slip from grace -- slightly -- from the above category to IA, we find certain words, or 'ideas', showing up, and we must be somewhat more careful now, may be their neighbors or their neighborhood in mirth, or maybe...

In a subsequent category and we would quote, ther...
more careful of the company in which we use them. The laughter, now, may be rather short-lived, and members of the group may eye their neighbors surreptitiously to make sure they should join in the mirth, or not. In this category we list:

A young man who loved a computer
Was known as a rather poor suitor --
He neither kissed girls or missed 'em,
For the binary system
And his precious computer seemed cuter.

A girl had a fleeting romance
With a Tinker she met at a dance:
Despite his endeavors
She left him for Evers,
Who was then superseded by Chance.

In a subdivision of the above, 1Aa, perhaps, we give:

A dowager held a levée
While she sat on an antique bidet,
And gave a critique
or
the Book of the Week,
Which elicited well-bred ales.
A female math student at Trinity
Delighted to talk of Infinity
With a Cambridge professor
Who cared rather less for
That subject than for her virginity.

In category 2 the deterioration detectable above increases slightly, and we would rate the examples -- following our cinema's lead again -- as PG. Gentlemen might exchange these witty brevities over their brandies after supper, when their ladies have retired to the withdrawing-room (perhaps to indulge in piquancies of their own). It is in this category that we first notice the appreciative leer. As examples we cite:

A girl on her Easter vacation
Loved a Red-Cap in Grand Central Station,
And left him her grip
In lieu of a tip --
It happened quite near 'Information'.

While working in Soil Conservation,
Tom had an illicit relation
With a poor Amerind,
Highly-sexed and dark-skinned,
Who loved him without reservation.

Category 3, of course, comprises the naughty limericks -- the ones we enjoy hearing or reading, and sometimes remember long enough to quote, thereby giving vicarious pleasure to others. No polite, muted
laughter in this category! Here, the decibels increase in direct proportion to the naughtiness; here, the enthusiastic explosions of mirth, the authentic 'knee-slapppers'!! To continue our parallel with the movies, these are the 'X-rated', and it is quite unnecessary to give any examples: we all have our favorites, concerning such topics as the old sea-captains of lugger, the girl-friends of Rumanian nobility, the band at the Waldorf-Astoria, a medical oddity named Boris, and a hundred-and-one others.

We hasten to return to the thesis mentioned briefly above. Yes, it seems a shame that some of the clever limericks of category 1 go by the board — just noted in passing — and it is suggested that with a little work (of a mildly scurrilous nature) and some patience, one may breathe life into these 'step-children' of the poetaster, and resurrect them from their undeserved shade. Let us take the following as an example of a limerick which might benefit by the denigratory process of pseudo-pornographizing:

There once was a copper of Montreuil
With only one tooth and one eye —
But that eyeball unique
Was full of mistique —
(The tooth he had lost in jai alai.)

Tame, yes, and not very exciting; clever? Well... Let us see what translation into, say, French, can accomplish:

Il y avait un gendarme de Montreuil
Qui n'avait qu'une dent et qu'un oeil —
Mais cet oeil solitaire
Fut plein de mystère,
Cette dent, d'importance et d'orgueil.

It immediately takes on an air, does it not? We Anglo-Saxons are so used to thinking of Paris as the City of Lights and Love that a mere line of French immediately conjures up Rue Pigalle and the Folies Bergère! We forget our own splendid contributions to international naughtiness!

Can we extend our prurient experiments further? Indeed we can. By the judicious use of asterisks we may suggest the most shameful intimations, and intimate the most shameful suggestions:

Il y avait un gendarme de Montreuil
Qui n'avait qu'une *** et qu'un ***
Mai s cet *** solitaire
Fut plein de mystère,
Cette *** d'importance et d'orgueil.

It may not be possible, or feasible, to proceed any further with this 'naughtiness by inference', unless it be to transcribe this final form on some wall, as graffiti... and we leave the interested reader to fend for himself. It may be possible that he is quite content with his present stock of limericks and will not wish to disturb the status quo; or, he may not care... he may have an idea silly, and he may be quite
may not care for French and will choose Russian for his translation; or, he may have a low tolerance for this verse-form and think the whole idea silly, and want nothing more to do with it. And in this, of course, he may be quite right.

**SAY IT MY WAY**

Willard Espy's latest book, published by Doubleday in 1980 for $11.95, is a treatise on correct pronunciation and usage in spoken English. Not your usual treatise, though — it is enlivened by 197 of the author's short verses illustrating grammatical points, such as

| Each other | Brothers two combat each other;  
| One another | Brothers three fight one another  
| Figure | It's hard upon the brothers' mother.

Don't eat like a pig! — you're ruining your figure.  
If you grow any bigger you will have no figure.

(As the latter illustrates, the rhyming is often reminiscent of Ogden Nash.) I know of no more entertaining way to tour this dryasdust subject. The pity is, most readers of the book need Espy's advice about as much as Sunday churchgoers need their preacher's sermon — those who really need help will never crack this book. Or, they have been dead for 150 years, such as the writers of the US Constitution, who exhort us to "form a more perfect Union" (isn't perfect perfect?).

**A PRESIDENTIAL PALINDROME**

In the May 1977 Kickshaws, Dmitri Borgmann suggested that the Republicans ought to use the palindrome RETRACT IT, CARTER every time the President made a statement. The New York Times recently characterized Carter and his administration as people who "have made clumsy reversal on major issues a trademark of their regime", the disavowal of the United States UN vote against Israeli West Bank settlements being the most blatant example. Professor Scher of New York University suggests in a March 9 letter to the Times that this shilly-shallying be embodied in the palindrome TO LAST, CARTER RETRACTS A LOT.