

MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMPOON

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In the August 1969 issue of *Word Ways*, Ross Eckler introduced the idea of mutating "Mary Had a Little Lamb" by writing five versions of the poem in lipogrammatic form, in which only one of the five vowels was not used throughout each text. Seventeen years later, in the August 1986 issue, Paul Hellweg presented five more versions, this time in univocalic form, in which only one of the five vowels was used throughout each text. Although this isn't the August 2003 issue, I'm continuing the tradition by adding five more poems to the flock.

First, the original verse by Sarah Josepha Hale:

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.

Next, a brief refresher course on the mutations: the first two lines of Eckler's E-less version, and the first two lines of Hellweg's E-ful version:

Mary had a tiny lamb,
Its wool was pallid as snow...
Meg kept the week sheep,
The sheep's fleece resembled sleet...

And now, five new versions, each with its own *modus operandi*. The compositional methods progress from easy to difficult. The poems have their own meanings, sometimes far different from the original--for instance, the third poem seems surprisingly bawdy. The first three retain the original punctuation, but the last two were re-punctuated to add a little spice. The explanations of the ways they were written follow the final poem.

1. MARY HAD AN ALPHABETICAL LAMB

A had lamb little Mary,
As fleece its snow was white,
And everywhere Mary that went
Go lamb sure the to was;

Day followed he her one school to,
 Against rule that the was;
 And children it laugh made play the
 A in lamb school see to.

2. MARY HAD A SHEARED LAMB

Mar ad lit lam,
 It flee as whit a now,
 An every hat mar wen
 He lam as O O;
 Follow he O O on ay,
 Hat as again he;
 I mad he child a an lay
 O lam l O.

3. MARY HAD A SHIFTY LAMB

Mary haggie the litoral lambskin,
 Itself fleet wash white-collar but snowbank,
 As exceedingly thee Mary wept
 A lambskin wash surefire toward gobble;
 Her foment hers toward schoolboy onerous daybed,
 Thee wash as a ruler;
 Itself magnetize a childbearing launch as plead
 Toward seed the lambskin inside schoolboy.

4. MARY HAD A PUNNING LAMB

Marry, addle id, all am.
 Id's fleas wash wide ass? No.
 End, if reward add merry want,
 Doll, lamp wash your tug, oh!
 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--inn's cool.

5. MARY HAD A PALINDROMIC LAMB

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:
 No nose lure. No, 'tis Lee, hero,
 Snowy ram. He loots not I, Bob.
 Mall, la, sit on rat. Sung--
 "Moo rot! O, got no, O, baby ram!"

List of the composing methods:

1. The poem is a rearranged version of the original; the words appear in alphabetical order in each line.
2. The poem is a shortened version using the longest MWPD word found in each original word; if none was found, the word was dropped.
3. The poem is a shifted version of the original, composed by replacing every word with the alphabetically next MWPD word

classified as the same part of speech. (Exceptions: MARY was kept, and THE was replaced by A.)

4. The poem is a complete pun on the original without using any of the original words.
5. The poem is a letter-order palindrome written in the spirit of the original work.

If only Sarah Josepha Hale knew what sort of monster she was creating when she wrote about her lamb, she'd bleat.

Editor's Note: Many years ago, James Rambo of Palo Alto, California supplied the editor with another letter-order palindrome on "Mary Had a Little Lamb":

Tots un-gag nil too fast.

l go, gala,
Cover a slip-up--
A merino, yet!

On it now steps

As, Mary,
Baby rams as pets wont.
(I note yon ire.)

Ma, pupils are vocal, agog!
It's a footling agnus, tot.

THE WORLD'S FASTEST SCRABBLE PROGRAM

In the May 1988 issue of the Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery (Vol. 31, No. 5), Andrew W. Appel and Guy J. Jacobson describe a superfast program they wrote in 1983 to play Scrabble against a human opponent (or, presumably, another computer). Using various efficient data structures, they succeeded in programming a VAX 11-780 to take no more than a second or two to consider all possible legal moves with a vocabulary of 94,240 words. (In contrast, the commercially-available Scrabble game player Monty has a vocabulary of 44,000 words and takes about 2 minutes per move.) The program does not incorporate any strategy, such as preserving tile combinations in the rack that are likely to lead to high scores in later moves, or avoiding leaving the board open for the opponent to make a high-scoring move; all it does is select the highest-scoring word available to it on the move under consideration. The program easily beat one of the authors, and in a test match in which the program played against itself for 10 games, it had an average final score of 377 per player.

It would be interesting to test this against expert Scrabble players, to see whether or not its superior word-finding ability can compensate for its strategic myopia. The program consists of about 1500 lines of code in the C programming language, and has been ported to a Sun workstation and an Apple Macintosh.