MARY HAD A LETTER LAMB

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Perhaps the most famous of all children's poems is the eight lines of verse composed by Sarah Josepha Hale and published in 1830 in *Poems for Our Children*:

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.

Over the years, writers for Word Ways and other journals and books have been attracted to Mary and her lamb. One can only wonder if Sarah Josepha would hail the things that have happened to her letter lamb when verbivores have attacked it.

In each version, the writer uses a specific form of letter recreation to rewrite Sarah Josepha's creation. The trick is to stay within the rules of the letter pattern while preserving the spirit of the original. Of course, the content changes in the process.

We'll start with an acrostic in which the first letters of the first stanza spell MARY and the first letters of the second, LAMB:

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.

Not very difficult, that variation. But now, as we start our *Lambie Redux* retrospective, please read our lipograms. In the August 1969 Word Ways, editor A. Ross Eckler presented "Mary Had a Lipogram" in which he demonstrated that it is possible to rewrite literary works lipogrammatically. Eckler omitted a common letter -- E, A, T, S, H and then a large cluster -- and still preserved both rhyme and meter.

Here is his lipogrammatic version with E, the most frequently used letter in the alphabet, banished:

> Mary had a tiny lamb,
>   Its wool was pallid as snow,
> And any spot that Mary did walk
>   This lamb would always go.
> This lamb did follow Mary to school,
>   Although against a law,
> How girls and boys did laugh and play.
>   That lamb in class all saw.

To show the possibilities of alphabetic compression, Eckler exiled B, F, G, J, K, O, Q, U, V, W, X, Y and Z -- half the letters of the alphabet:

> 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!

Just as the foregoing lipograms bar specified letters, the univocalic excludes all vowels but one. In the August 1986 Word Ways Paul Hellweg took on Mary and her letter lamb, employing only a single vowel in each version. In the following stanzas, Hellweg flies through the air with the greatest of E's:

> Meg kept the wee sheep,
>   The sheep's fleece resembled sleet,
> Then whenever Meg went
>   The sheep went there next.
> He went where she heeded her texts,
>   The precedent he neglected;
> The pre-teens felt deep cheer
>   When the sheep entered there.

In *Anguish Languish* (Prentice Hall, 1956), Howard L. Chace invented a method of double-sound punnery to narrate furry tells (fairy tales) and noisier rams (nursery rhymes). In his loopy language, Chace replaces the words in the original versions with words that are similar but never quite the same in sound. Here the first stanza is Chace's, the second mine. Oriole ratty? Den less gat stuttered!

> Marry hatter ladle limb.
>   Itch fleas worse widest snore.
> An ever-wear debt Marry win
>   Door limb worse shorter gore.
> High fallow dear tusk cool wand aye.

> Thought wars aghast door role.
> Id meade door chilling lift and plea
> Tush eel a limb ads cool.

In the February 1989 Word Ways, James Rambo wrote a version in which the two stanzas are anagrams of each other:

> A girl once kept a tiny sheep,
> Widely famed for whiteness;
> This pet would dog her every 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!

In the November 1990 Word Ways, Peter Newby made up the first line of a palindromic version, and Dave Morice completed the challenge for the first verse. I have cobbled the second stanza. Typically, a palindromic parody takes us into some bizarre pastures:

> Mary bred a Derby ram,
> Won some gem o' snow.
> Went one romp more, now 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.

I close by trying to gag you with a spoonerism. Here's my spooneristic version of Mary and her lamb:

> Larry lad a middle ham.
> Flits niece was sight as woe.
> And every there what wary meant,
> The gam was lure to show.
> He hollowed fur to school done way,
> Watch whiz arainst the ghoul.
> Skit plaid the ildren chaff and may
> Sue lee a scam at tool.

Thank you for allowing me to pull your eyes over the wool. To err is human, but to write logological verse is simply ovine!