

MARY'S WAYWARD LETTER-LAMBS

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In his article "Mary Had a Letter Lamb" in the May 1997 Word Ways, Richard Lederer assembled a number of logological variations, as composed by several authors, on Sarah Josepha Hale's familiar "Mary had a little lamb..." poem. Perceiving that there still seemed to be a few unfilled niches left in the letter-lamb canon, I felt inspired to try my own hand at the form. I soon found, however, that it wasn't so easy to make the variations I was attempting work while also adhering to the story line of the original poem. I could usually get Mary (or her surrogate) and some sort of sheep together on the first line, but after that my verses were apt to stray off on often-radical plot tangents of their own. It seems doubtful, therefore, that these black sheep can be regarded as being true letter-lambs; nevertheless, they may provide some amusement.

The first one is a rhyming univocalic (a verse which uses only one vowel) in which, among other liberties taken with the original, Mary the young shepherdess has been transmogrified into Martha the barmaid. (An argal or argali is a species of wild sheep native to Asia.)

Pastoral in A

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."

Next is a would-be letter-lamb in which each line is a palindrome, and in which alternate lines rhyme. The first stanza came easily, albeit at the cost of corrupting what had been an innocent nursery rhyme into what appears to be raffish detective fiction. Given the additional constraint of having to carry a particular plot, however, the second stanza got to be a bit more labored.

Who Killed Ram Omar?

Mary's sassy ram
Elapses, pale.
Malign, or wrong? I lam--
Liar tots to trail?

No, pupils, I peep! Obese Bo Peep I slip up on...
 "Red!" Rae hisses. "Bo did obsess--I heard 'er:
 'No pusillanimity--not I, tony Tim! In all, I sup on
Red rum!...O, to mar a ram! O, to murder...'"

Hmmm. Sounds incriminating for Bo (whose own sheep, it will be recalled, was mysteriously "lost" and never heard from again), but there may be other, exonerating verses to this poem that I've overlooked.

The claim to fame of this next number, naturally, needs no noting.

Mary Had Alliterative Lambs

Astral Aries' avatar,
 Alabaster "Aly,"
 Ann adopted; allies are
 Ann and Ann's argali.
 Ann, an able autodidact,
 Academic angst avoids,
 And arch Aly's Argus-eyed act
 Awes astonished anthropoids.

Bethel bought Bob's baby barwal
 (Being baffled by bazaars),
 Buying "Babe" before Bob's bar brawl
 Brought Bob back behind brig bars.
 Beth brings Babe by busy bookstores,
 Browsing briefly, barely biding.
 (Baby barwals badly brook bores,
 Bleating blackly!)...Beth's backsliding.

Cora copped Cassandra's cosset,
 Causing Cassie carking care;
 Cassie combed cruel Cora's closet,
 Calling, "Come, cade Camembert!"
 Contemplating creamy chamois,
 Cora, clumsy, cut Cam's cords;
 Consequently casting Cammy
 Coursing, carefree, Cassie-wards!

Conceivably, there might be as many as 23 more verses to this opus, but let us not graze overlong in one field. In any case, it's clear that these refractory alliteration lambs are never going to make any serious effort to conform to the script of the original poem--at least, not for this shepherd. (A barwal, by the bye, is a domestic sheep of north India kept "for fighting purposes," according to Webster's Second.)

The salient characteristic of this last pseudo-letter-lamb is that each of its two stanzas is a single word-unit palindrome. I was able to get it to rhyme, but couldn't do much with line length or meter, and as a result it scans poorly as verse. Not only that, but it's more than a little removed in mood and message, I fear, from Sarah Hale's gentle original.

Wolf Bane

Mary follows sheep, raising hair that, clipped, "wool" is.

School? A bane--"Dire," her wolf in sheep's clothing, less scary!

(More scary: less clothing, sheep's in wolf!) Her dire bane a school is...

Wool clipped, that hair-raising "sheep" follows Mary.

Dip "sheep" Dire conveys Mary to school one day;

From play to fear, now, kids do flip!

Mary's flip: do kids now fear to play?

(From Day One, school, to Mary, conveys dire sheep-dip...)

You can see why I called them black sheep.

MAD AMADEUS SUED A MADAM

Move over, Jon Agee! Look to your laurels, William Irvine! Allan Miller weighs in with a new illustrated palindrome book, published by David Godine in 1997 for \$10.01 (ISBN 1-56792-077-2). Here you will learn that MUSTAFA'S TENT NETS A FAT SUM, and that IN OZ, NO RONZONI can be found. And if SUNUNU'S TONSIL IS NOT SUNUNU'S, then whom does it really belong to? Many palindromes are illustrated with droll drawings by Lee Lorenz, which rescue even unpromising phrases from oblivion. Enjoy!