VERSE, CURSED: DOUBLE DACTYLIC SACRILEGE

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As all card-carrying recreational linguists know, the double dactyl is a serious light verse form comprising two quatrains, with each line—except the final, rhyming lines of the quatrains—consisting of two dactylic feet, and in which the first line must be a nonsense reduplication; the second line a proper name; and the penultimate or antepenultimate line one double dactylic word. (For complete rules, origins, scholarship and numerous cerebral examples, see Jiggery Pokery by the form's inventors, Anthony Hecht and John Hollander, Atheneum, 1983.)

From the book, here is an elegant example by Hollander:

Higgledy-piggledy,
Benjamin Harrison,
Twenty-third President,
Was, and, as such,

Served between Cleveland's, and
Save for this trivial
Idiosyncracy,
Didn't do much.

Constructing a double dactyl was an occasional challenge in the long-running, but now defunct, Competition in New York magazine. Several of my own efforts appeared in that venue, including the following specimen, published in the April 20, 1981 issue.

Oh, just in case you've forgotten: Tertullian, born in Carthage c. 160 A.D., was a pagan who enthusiastically converted to Christianity, becoming a priest, theologian and prolific writer whose works are still read. Asked how he could accept the resurrection of Christ, he apocryphally replied: "Credo quia absurdum" (I believe it because it is absurd). Admirers continue to insist that this is a misquotation, but for our purposes such controversy is irrelevant.

Higgelus-piggelus,
Father Tertullian
Said, "It's impossible.
Thus, it is true."

To this day, bureaucrats
Characteristically
Follow such reasoning.
What else is new?
That submission, with its irreverent allusion to Christian doctrine, garnered a mere Honorable Mention. Coincidentally, in the same Competition, a Mr. Alex Vaughn captured First Prize for his entry, which has a similarly profane theme:

Higgledy-piggledy,
Jesus of Nazareth
(Parables, miracles,
All of that jazz)

Came to us courtesy
Parthenogenesis.
Medical annals say
No one else has.

A month later, in the May 18 issue, the magazine's letters column contained the following rant:

"I fail to see anything funny about the name Jesus of Nazareth, and I think that anyone who does is either ignorant or an imbecile.... I consider the drivel and its publication and its being awarded a prize an intentional insult to my own religious beliefs, or at the very least an expression of unbearably bad taste."

Hmm, I thought, how did my own semi-heretical swipe escape his fury? The above tirade was signed: "The Reverend Richard A. Chichester."

What a setup! The temptation was impossible to resist. I composed this reply:

Blasphemy-phlasphemy,
Richard A. Chichester.
Temper thy anger, O
Man of the cloth.

"Turn other cheek," He said,
Epigrammatically.
Would He then bless you for
Waxing so wroth?

Although the Competition's moderator loved the rebuttal, the magazine's editors—perhaps anxious to extricate themselves from a thorny situation (the irascible clergyman's letter bore the obsequious headline "No Offense Intended")—declined to publish the verse. It appears in print here for the first time.

Finally, as a matter of honesty and full disclosure, I should note that the witty riposte was a collaborative effort between me and my then soon-to-be former erstwhile quondam ex-wife. Wherever she is today, she can't accuse me of appropriating all the credit.