

DR. STEPHENS' STAR-CROSSED STANZAS

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David L. Stephens, a doctor in Charlotte, North Carolina, contributed three articles consisting of original palindromes to *Word Ways* in the mid- to late 1970's. Later, he incorporated some of this material into a single mega-palindrome 55 pages in length entitled *Satire: Veritas*, which, according to a *Word Ways* ad, was tentatively planned to be published as a *Word Ways* monograph in September of 1980. Besides the fact that he liked to compose palindromes, one can infer from Stephens' writings that he was conversant with French and Latin, had been in the navy and enjoyed folk music and the novels of Evelyn Waugh.

Stephens' *Word Ways* articles include "Able Was I Ere I saw Elba" in the February 1975 issue, "A Tart Reply to Napoleon" in the May 1977 issue, and "Ignis, Sing I: A Neroic Ode" in the February 1978 issue. Letter-unit palindromes, often quite long and often liberally salted with French and Latin terms, constitute the bulk of these articles. But although these palindromes have their points of interest, it is with his pair of word-unit palindromic poems in his third article ("Ignis, Sing I" in the February 1978 *Word Ways*) and their misadventures that this report is concerned. These palindromes are of particular interest to me because they are both examples of rhymed, end-to-end-palindromic (RETEP) verse, which I have long collected.

Word-unit palindromes, being less tightly constrained than the letter-unit variety, offer a palindromist considerably greater latitude for expression, and it is really only in his word-unit palindromic poems that Stephens' true poetical gifts become apparent. The first, and perhaps better, of his two poems, in keeping with its theme of the flames of desire at first dwindling, then spontaneously reigniting, is entitled "Sing, Ignis," and employs an ABBACCDD rhyme scheme:

Returning exquisite desire,
Burning, then ashes and smoke,
Glowing ember or flaming oak —
Unknowing, unknown secret fire!
Fire, secret, unknown, unknowing,
Oak flaming or ember glowing,
Smoke and ashes, then burning
Desire, exquisite, returning.

(Note that palindromic poetry, like other kinds of poetry, greatly benefits from that relaxation of normal grammatical and syntactical standards that is known as "poetic license.")

Stephens remarks in his article that this poem was inspired by a German folk song, which was recorded in different translations by Burl Ives and Richard Dyer-Bennet. Would any folk-music-knowledgeable reader happen to know to what song(s) he is referring?

Stephens' second poem exhibits a slightly different rhyme scheme, ABBACDCD, and is entitled "Hannibal, Missouri"; it envisages, perhaps, Mark Twain in later years recalling his boyhood:

Glimmering, gone — springtime stream
Lapping — road winding down
The shimmering hill. Hometown
Napping — sweet, solemn dream!
Dream, solemn, sweet — napping
Hometown. Hill shimmering —
The down-winding road — lapping
Stream — springtime — gone, glimmering!

In a 2010 *Word Ways* census of published RETEP verse, I found that there existed a total of 14 published word-unit RETEP poems, of which Stephens' pair were only the fifth and sixth to appear. And while relative artistic merit is of course a subjective judgment, it could reasonably be argued that "Sing, Ignis" is the best-realized word-unit RETEP poem ever composed.

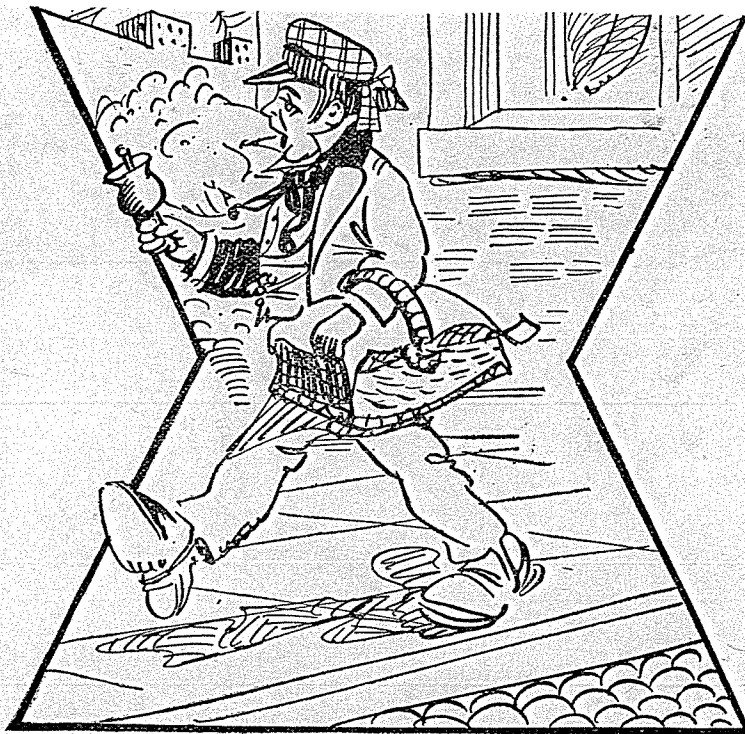
It was after their publication in *Word Ways* that the story of Stephens' two poems took a turn for the bizarre. Apparently, Stephens wrote to Willard Espy, of whose popular book, *An Almanac of Words at Play* (Potter, 1975), he would have been aware, offering the poems for future publication. As a rule, Espy was not a great fan of palindromes, but the novelty of word-unit palindromic poems, as well as the particular charms of these two, evidently swayed him, and he included them in his 1980 Potter book, *Another Almanac of Words at Play*, on pages 108 and 109.

Alas, the error imp struck. "Sing, Ignis's" title was omitted. Whereas Stephens' anecdote was that "Sing, Ignis" had been inspired by a German folk song which had been recorded in different translations by Ives and Dyer-Bennet, Espy's commentary had the poem itself being recorded in different translations (?) by the folksingers. "Dyer-Bennet" was misspelled. In "Hannibal, Missouri" the word "the" was moved from the beginning of the seventh line to the end of the sixth line, thereby wrecking Stephens' carefully worked-out rhyme scheme for the poem. But these were just minor glitches compared to the error imp's coup de grace. Somehow, Espy had gained the misimpression that the "authors" of the two poems were unknown, and his publisher seems never to have checked with Stephens to verify this. Which means that Stephens may never even have been informed that the poems had been accepted for publication. If so, he must have been startled, to say the least, the first time he perused a copy of *Another Almanac of Words at Play* and discovered therein his two prized poems, each attributed to "Author unknown." Ouch.

As it turns out, fate was not yet done with David Stephens. In 1996, Algonquin brought out Michael Donner's "palindrome encyclopedia," *I Love Me, Vol I*, as a trade paperback. Donner had mined Espy's books, among others, for material for his "encyclopedia," and so of course came across "Sing, Ignis" (minus its title) among them; liking it, he tabbed it for his own book, where it resides on page 301. Thanks largely, perhaps, to the word "encyclopedia" in its subtitle, Donner's book was widely purchased by public and scholastic libraries, where it was often installed in the reference collection. Owing to the book's long-lived ubiquity in libraries, probably at least twenty times as many people have by now encountered "Sing, Ignis" in *I Love Me, Vol. I* as ever

met with it in Espy's book, and true to form, they have also all read that it was composed by an "author unknown" (albeit, this time, "according to Espy").

As exasperating as it is that this same error of attribution was permitted to occur a second time, sixteen years later, it is no fault of Donner's, who had no way to check on Espy's information. For that matter, without having seen Stephens' letter to Espy, one cannot say for sure that the original misunderstanding was Espy's fault, either—Stephens' letter might have been unclear or misleading as regards his poems' authorship. In any case, the more important question now is how Stephens' name is to be reconnected to his poems in the public's perception, given that the only two places in which wordplay anthologists of the future are apt to come across either of these poems are in books that agree that they are of unknown authorship?



Hot cross buns! Hot cross buns!
One a penny, two a penny,
Hot cross buns!
If your daughters don't like 'em
Give 'em to your sons!
One a penny, two a penny,
Hot cross buns!

Find a prospective customer.