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## **British Literature Survey To The 1780s (In Limericks) by Victor Scherb**

I first remember reading limericks in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and being fascinated by their musicality and compression. Although I was only about fourteen at the time and had had little exposure to poetry, these odd short poems articulated many features of Vonnegut's complex, humane, and beautiful novel. His limericks looped back on themselves with a subversive wit, pushing at the boundaries of language and experience, and they had a plainspoken quality that touched the nascent Billy Pilgrim in me.

Nevertheless, it was only last year that I started writing limericks, partly because I was reaching the point in my career that teaching and writing about literature wasn't as much fun as it had been at first, and partly because I was trying to encourage my fellow faculty to engage in a kind of creative play. It happened that in Spring 2004 my course immediately preceded that of one of my colleague's, and we both happened to be teaching the sophomore British Literature survey. As my colleague also specializes in medieval literature, at the end of my class, instead of completely erasing the board as I usually did, I wrote a limerick on Peter Abelard. My colleague said that he'd had to explain to his class, but the limerick made for an interesting jumping off point for class discussion, so I quickly followed it with another limerick on St. Francis, and from then on I started trying to key them (not always successfully) to much of the material we covered in the survey.

Some students liked my limericks, some were puzzled by them, and it's possible some may even have been offended, but if so, no one brought it to my attention at the time. My colleague took them with considerable good humor, although he never started writing any of his own in reply to mine, which was what I had kind hoped would occur. Nevertheless, it was a liberating experience, for it was the first time I had written creatively in many, many years. For me, the good thing about the limerick form is that it sets the bar pretty low, and a bad pun is almost as good as a deep insight. For new poets or non-

poets like myself, they come pretty easily, and the traditions of the form allow us to indulge our deeply twisted love of a torturing some poor, defenseless word. Perhaps more importantly, limericks also provided a chance for me to reconnect to the joy and creativity that lie at the heart of aesthetic experience, something that I think we forget at our peril.

### **British Literature Survey to the 1780s (in limericks)**

*Prelude: Saints and scholastic philosophers I have known*

There once was a man from Assisi  
Whose portrait hangs in the Uffizi,  
He once went outside  
With nothing to hide,  
To show people nothing was easy.

There once was a girl who predated Aquinas,  
Who thought the preacher of Paris was finest.  
She had great doubt,  
When her uncle found out,  
That he'd turn Peter's plus to a minus.

*The Old Main Drag: Brit. Lit. Survey (mostly in limericks)*

Once Grendel, a night stalker, to kill Danes was dispositive,  
For the doom of their thanes, shield bearers, he was causative  
Beowulf made him bleed,  
That last of Cain's seed,  
So that Hrothgar--Healfdane's son--cried out, "he's A-(p)positive!"

As many a scope in mead hall played ragas  
Lost weary wanderers lived out their own sagas  
Ecgtheow's heir had no brother,  
But Grendel alone was another,  
The wondrous hero, the wretched recluse—both anhagas.

There once were scops who spoke before pennings,

Before our few words and short, reproducing like lemmings.  
For them, an ocean became  
A whale-road of fame.  
Harp strings were brushed,  
The listeners hushed;  
They prepared for the shock  
As the word-hoard unlocked:  
Their bards' treasures, sound-visions--those were good kennings.

There once was a steed—no cheval Chevrolet,  
He throve on fresh grass—ate no etouffee.  
Of his name minstrels had heard,  
Though they often demurred,  
For few found a rhyme word for Gringolet.

There once was a shield that had got,  
A sign that was drawn like a knot.  
A five-pointed star,  
Helped its knight only so far,  
For his Solomon's seal was a naught.

There once was a young man called Gawain,  
Who did play a game for his name.  
He said no to a lover,  
Yet still had to discover,  
The green sash of his shame was his fame.

When once asked by a priest without rancor,  
Why for a hermit's hold she did hanker?  
Julian replied,  
From the cell's dark inside,  
That Love was the light for this anchor.

A young man at court once did fawn it,  
For Anne's head he bought many a bonnet.  
All Thomas could sigh,  
As he watched her die,  
Was the poetical cry, "Oh, Henry! He's sawn it!"

There once was a young poet with worry,  
Who wanted to write verse in a hurry,  
Petrarch opened the door,  
But in rhymes English was poor,  
So our Earl added two more—that's our Surrey.

Penelope once had a fella  
Who loved her more than Trav did Old Yella',  
Astro's face turned to lead  
When to Rich she was wed,  
That's how hard Phil fell for his "Stella!"

There once was a knight called Redcrosse,  
Who from his mind and his lady got lost,  
Arthur him found,  
Una's house made him sound,  
So that he could show that dragon who's boss.

There was a young man who could write by the yard,  
Cursed by school boys, he was a poet ill-starred,  
They know his sonnets by score,  
Total one fifty-four.  
It's hard to be scarred as The Bard.

There once was a young poet named Donne,  
Who could remake the world in a pun,  
Ann More found him quizzical,  
But she knew she'd met a physical  
Soul mate, who'd turn his losses into one won..

There once was a young poet named George,  
His verse into The Temple he forged.  
To speak through his art,  
God's grace in man's heart,  
To tell man that when God reigned it poured.

There once was a young man named John,

Who felt truth shouldn't be Parliament's pawn,  
By the title appeared,  
His own name revered,  
A clarion call to all writers and speakers in song.

There once was a prince who put on quite a show,  
'Til a ship's captain chained and said to him: "Row!"  
The Black Mars refused,  
Rather life he would lose,  
Than shame his name, so said he, "Oar? Oh! No go!"

There once was a young writer from Eire,  
Who wrote in the guise of a Brit who did care.  
In the land England had beaten,  
He foresaw lots of Erse eatin',  
All to show readers that Brits didn't play fair.

**About The Author**

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