

The Lost Limericks
of
Edgar Allan Poe

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BROM BONES BOOKS

Introduction

I should have been more suspicious.

As I glimpsed him enter the tavern, the man's large hat and heavy coat should have caught my notice. While a wide-brimmed hat might provide welcome shade from the sun during an Oklahoma summer, even a light coat is hardly necessary in that state during that season. Perhaps, though, he was from a climate even warmer.

Of course, his taking the bar stool adjacent to mine—when there were others at a safer distance away—stirred that pinch of wariness that is often evoked by uninvited company.

And then there was his name: Bertram Lucius Zachery Bubb. (He spelled the last name without my having asked.) Now, I can hardly blame the *man* for the pretensions or eccentricities of *those who named him*. At least, that's what I told myself before I returned the courtesy and shook his hand.

It was odd, too, that he moved quickly from small talk to asking, "Know anything about literature? American literature?"

I told him that, indeed, I did and that, in fact, American literature was my specialty both while earning a doctorate degree and as a low-ranking professor in the university where I taught.

"But do you know anything about American

authors from the 1800s?" he asked next.

"Again, that's my focus," I replied, unsure if this was just a remarkable coincidence or if Bertram Lucius Zachery Bubb had done his homework on me.

Both of those feelings lessened with his next inquiry.

"Know anything about Edgar Allan Poe?"

"Just the basics," I said with a shrug. "I've always preferred Nathaniel Hawthorne to Poe."

It was then that he retrieved a wooden box, about the size of a jewelry chest, from the bar stool on his other side. He carefully placed the box on top of the bar, cocked his head toward it, and then slid it an inch or two closer to me. He nodded.

I discovered that inside this wooden box was an old, handwritten manuscript. The paper was curling at the corners and yellowed with age. Rather than touch the pages, I turned the box to see what was on them. When I began to make out what was there, I went ahead and gingerly lifted some of the pages.

"Delicately," the man hissed.

It was poetry. Short poems. Five lines a piece. A rhyme scheme of a-a-b-b-a, the "b" lines shorter than the others. A mostly amphibrachic meter (e.g., there *once* was a *man* from Nantucket).

"Are *all* of them limericks?" I ventured.

"100 limericks," said the man. "Exactly 100." He looked around the bar a moment before adding in a hushed voice, "But not just limericks, my friend. These are the *lost* limericks — of Edgar Allan Poe."

I probably snorted.

My companion was not deterred. "I have no

conclusive proof that they were written by Poe. If they were, he must have written them as a way to pass the time, maybe as he sat sipping an ale down at the pub." Mr. Bubb spread and waved his hands to imply that Poe's pub might have been much like the tavern in which we were seated. "Or maybe limericks simply served as his warm-up exercise before tackling more important writing."

I peered back into the box. "Maybe. What are they about?"

"Oh, some are variations on his poetry and fiction. Some are about his writing process and being a literary critic—and about what other critics thought of him. Others are about his life in general, and quite a few of them seem random. Those last ones feel like ideas that he was considering but never developed. Ideas that came to a dead end."

I was intrigued, and I might have revealed this by raising my eyebrows or by rubbing my chin.

"But *I'm* not a professor of American literature," he said quickly. "*I'm* not someone who could benefit from this discovery, if they were written by Poe."

It seems that my companion *had* done his homework on me.

I pulled the box a bit closer to myself, giving its contents a second look. "Are you suggesting these are *available*?" I inquired.

"Assuredly so. And to answer your next question, the price is the equivalent of three years of your salary."

I remember definitely snorting at this point.

He explained, "I have no idea what their worth is, but I want leave them with someone truly

invested in seeing that they're properly examined. And properly edited and footnoted, assuming there's a book here."

Again: I should have been more suspicious.

But when one is a low-ranking professor at an Oklahoma university, three years' salary isn't much to pay if I could verify that Poe himself had penned these limericks. Very likely, such a discovery would be the high point of my academic career as well as a ticket out of the Sooner State.

"Unfortunately, you must decide this tonight," he stipulated. "You're not the first on my list of potential buyers, and I have several names after yours. I have to fly off to Kansas next."

I need hardly explain what I decided after another couple of beers. You're holding the results in your hands. Sadly, sometime between my acquiring that manuscript and your opening this book, I have learned that determining the true authorship of the limericks is impossible, as I will delineate next.

The Case in Favor

As I say, I have concluded that there can be no final ruling on whether or not the limericks you are about to read were truly written by Edgar Allan Poe. There are arguments on either side, and I will give the crux of them both.

On the supporting side, we must answer two questions: *could* Poe have written limericks, and if so, *would* Poe have written limericks? Although the term "limerick" emerged sometime after Poe's death in 1849, the basic form existed for centuries

before his birth. Some critics cite Iago's pub song in Shakespeare's *Othello* (2.3.72-76) as being an early example of what would become called a limerick. The five-line ditty has an a-a-b-b-a rhyme scheme and comes close to that amphibrachic rhythm we associate with limericks.

Furthermore, while many people see Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense*—published in 1846, three years before Poe's death—as a founding work in popularizing limericks, an earlier work might be more germane. In 1820, *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women, Illustrated by as Many Engravings: Exhibiting their Principal Eccentricities and Amusements* was published in England. The short book is comprised of sixteen limericks, each with a full-page illustration, and it would have made a perfect gift for a child—especially one facing a long sailing trip from England back to the United States. 1820 was the very same year when ten-year-old Eddy Poe made such a journey with his foster parents, the Allans.

As to the first question, then, Poe *could* have known about limericks, though he wouldn't have called them that. But *would* such a serious poet have bothered to write any?

Of course, reading a man's spirit is difficult. The popular image of Poe as a gloomy, haunted soul more at home in a catacomb than at a street festival might disincline one to think that he would dabble in "nonsense verse," even if it were to pass the time or to ready himself for more lofty work. In other words, when looking at any of the daguerreotypes of the author, one might struggle to envision that face with a smirk on his lips or a twinkle in his eye.

But evidence confirms that, along with his somber side, Poe had a well-developed sense of humor. For example, Miles George recalls the budding author when he attended the University of Virginia: "He was very excitable & restless, at times wayward, melancholic & morose, but again—in his better moods frolicsome, full of fun & a most attractive & agreeable companion."¹ As with any complex human being, the character is in the contrasts, not the consistency.

The writing itself confirms this, too. While Poe's brooding poetry and tales of horror are far better remembered by many readers today, Poe also wrote several works of humor and parody. "Bon-Bon," "The Duc de L'Omelette," "The Devil in the Belfry," "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," and other pieces reveal the author's comedic side. He could even write jokes, such as this one from a column he wrote called "Marginalia" that appeared in different magazines from 1844 to 1849: "I have great faith in fools:—self-confidence my friends will call it."²

¹ Letter to E.V. Valentine, dated May 18, 1880, and quoted in Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Cooper Square, 1969), p. 108.

² *Southern Literary Messenger* 15.6 (June, 1849), p. 837. For a discussion of "Poe's ostensibly humorous efforts," see Frances Winwar's *The Haunted Palace: A Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 202. Agreeing that the author's essence was one of contrasts, Winwar concludes that between his dark humor and his brilliant horror "crouched the unfathomable enigma of Poe's personality."

True enough, his humor was rarely if ever bawdy, the tone now typically associated with limericks. However, bawdiness is not found in the 1820 and 1846 books noted above. Neither is it found in the limericks I acquired from Mr. Bubb.

Certainly, a smirk and a twinkle also underlie Poe's series of literary hoaxes. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," "Von Kempelen and His Discovery," and of course, what has come to be titled "The Great Balloon Hoax" are all examples of Poe waggishly passing off his imaginative fiction as factual reporting.

If none of this substantiates that Poe *would* have written limericks, it at least reinforces the point that he had a playful, if not mischievous, side that would be required for him to have done so. In addition, he almost certainly would have chuckled if a batch of limericks falsely attributed to him had been purchased at a tidy sum.

The Case Against

I didn't need to pay an additional tidy sum for an expert in handwriting to discern that the limericks sold to me by Mr. Bubb were *not* written in Poe's hand. This becomes obvious even when comparing the manuscript to examples of his signature online. However, penmanship is hardly proof of authorship.

For instance, the limericks might have been transcribed. I can picture someone close to Poe collecting them over a course of years and copying them from scraps of paper the poet had tossed aside. Another possible scenario is that Poe—

during those famous five undocumented days preceding his death—had feverously dictated these pieces, perhaps as a final nose-thumbing to the literary world that had seldom shown him enough respect.

Another formidable problem is the sprinkling of historical anachronisms found in the limericks. The one titled “To Life Drawing” includes the word *snorkel*, a term typically traced to the 1940s, when it passed from German to English. In “Above the Fray,” we see what appears to be an allusion to lyrics made popular by the Beatles. At first glance, these twentieth-century references (and any others I have missed) invalidate the claim that the nineteenth-century poet is the author.

We must remember, though, that Poe was proficient at neologism. Such terms as *bugaboo*, *normality*, *pants*, *promiscuity*, *sentience*, and *tintinnabulation* are among the most recognizable words that lexicographers trace back to Poe—but no further. With this in mind, could it be that he actually beat the Germans or the Beatles in the usage of these words and phrases rather than the other way around? In other words, was Poe truly *ahead of his time*?

I fear that I appear to be a drowning man grasping at rationalizations in response to the evidence that Poe did *not* write the 100 limericks you are about to read. Even that number—exactly 100—subtly implies an author working *after* Poe’s era. There were only 16 limericks in *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women*, and Lear needed *two* volumes to fit the 72 found in the first edition of *A Book of Nonsense*. But 100 suggests an author

writing enough material to comfortably fill a book in a later period.

One might even imagine a low-ranking literature professor in Oklahoma spending his evenings at a bar, sipping beers and scribbling limericks. But I'm no poet, and remember that I've always preferred Hawthorne to Poe.

Thus, the mystery of who might have written these works, if not Poe himself, remains unsolved. All I can say is this. On that evening in the tavern, when I agreed to purchase the curious contents of that wooden box, I felt the first stab of regret when the seller reached beneath his heavy coat to extract a contract ensuring that I would make timely payments. Before passing the contract to me, he signed his name: *Bertram Lucius Zackery Bubb*. As I scanned that signature, my mind's eye registered it in abbreviated form:

B.L.Z. Bubb

There is a certain devilish ring to it, no?

If, indeed, the manuscript were all part of some kind of a literary hoax—one that Poe himself might have relished—then assuredly, I am that hoax's most humiliated victim.

Tim Prasil