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129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Virtuous Versifying:

A Composition About Rhymes

BY ERIC L. BALL

[Editor's Note: This is the second of three parts in Eric Ball's essay trilogy, *Homemade Music: A Family Tree*. The first part, "Gouging Tradition: Musings on Fingernail Fiddle Making," appeared in *Voices* Vol. 43 (1–2), Spring–Summer 2017.]

*I've lived in many places
In the north the east the west
And now I'm in Fort Edward
And I like this place the best.*
—from "My Life," by Irene P.

As I rummage through the cardboard box in which I store the scrapbooks, Bibles, old photographs, research notes on the family tree, and various odds and ends left behind by my paternal grandmother, I look for the composition notebook with her poems. I am preparing a talk about poetry in ordinary, everyday life for a local book fair, and I wonder if I might do so by using Grandma's poems as my point of departure.

The versifier in me, though, wishes I was composing rhyming couplets instead. Lately I've been writing lots of rhyming couplets and setting them to music.

My rhymes are similar in structure to the rhyming couplet in Crete, known as the *mantinada*, that I practiced and studied many years ago: There is a pair of rhyming, fifteen-syllable lines in iambic meter. Since the fifteenth syllable is weak (unstressed), the rhyme is considered *feminine* and must cover the last two syllables of the line. For example:¹

*He loves you or he loves you not? The question
drives you crazy,
But all you need to do is ask the petals of a daisy.*

Actually, the lines don't have to rhyme—assonance is also acceptable:

*I never should've played with you, attraction's
game of rummy,
We didn't make a perfect match and now I'm
out of money!*

Also, certain departures from iambic meter are allowed and desirable:

*After its metamorphosis a butterfly must wonder
What it will be when it wakes up the next time
from a slumber.*

Such rhymes in Greek always consist of fifteen-syllable lines, but my English-language rhymes may be comprised of a pair of either fifteen- or fourteen-syllable lines. Fourteen-syllable lines—lacking what would have been the unstressed fifteenth syllable—have so-called *masculine* rhyme:

*The jack-o-lanterns' eyes light up at night on
Halloween,
But not until the ghosts come out and children
start to scream.*

So, in fact, my rhymes are basically just what students of English literature call *fourteeners*.

Note also that each line divides into two parts, the first of which has eight syllables. That means if the four half-lines are written as a four-line stanza instead of as a rhyming couplet, then we're more or less talking about the same thing as *ballad meter*.



The author's grandmother circa 1972.
Courtesy of the author.

Whenever I look for something in one of these boxes, I invariably spend time looking at everything else in it, too. As I look through a scrapbook filled with local newspaper clippings from the late 1950s and early 1960s—before my time—I am taken by how often my grandmother's picture was in the newspaper as either a Home Demonstration Unit executive committee member or chair, or as a 4-H leader. Here she is posing with a "hat display," and there she is with an "uncooked goodies" exhibit at a Christmas Open House, opening an oven at a food training session and presiding over an antique exhibit.

One reason I agreed to do the book fair talk was because, like Grandma, I believe there is potential for positive social change through public engagement, even if I may not share her faith in the certainty of progress.

In another scrapbook, I find a local newspaper clipping with poems by local third-graders, and featuring my grandmother's only published poems. Grandma must have been especially talented, prolific, or at least enthusiastic, compared to the rest of her class, because three of the five poems in the clipping are hers.

At last, I find the notebook I've been looking for. Grandma was in the eighth grade when she copied into it all the poems she'd written up until then, starting with those from the third grade. Interspersed are several autobiographical essays. There are also two lists: "Teachers I have had" and "My Eighth Grade Friends."

I remember how when I was a kid staying overnight at my grandparents' house (where my aunt also lived); we sometimes ended up looking at old photos, my great grandfather's tool chest, or this notebook of poems. My grandparents and aunt would then retell old family stories for my benefit. When it came to the poems, my aunt always made a big deal about one poem in particular, called "George Washington," owing to this stanza:

*His parents had gone away one day,
They left George all alone,
He chopped down his father's best cherry tree,
But told when his father came home.*
....

I suppose my aunt thought it especially noteworthy because my grandmother was never one to say anything naughty about anyone, never mind about the father of our country—even in the service of promoting honesty.

On the whole, Grandma's childhood poems describe an innocent experience of ordinary, everyday life in small-town America of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Several poems concern holidays ("Valentines Day," "Mother's Day," "Saint Patrick's Day," and "May Day"). Some treat nature and the seasons.

There's one on "The Last Day of School," and another on "The Close of School." Some are intentionally humorous, such as one personifying "Gym" as "Jim":

...
*We girls are wild about the boy,
We love to visit him,
And when we do, we're full of joy,
He's full of pep and vim.*

Other poems are more pondering, such as "Why?":

*Why does the Summer come at all?
Why can't the Winter stay?
Oh, why have Spring and then the Fall?
And Winter go away?*
...
*There are so many things to ask
Of things before the eye.
I'm sure they are all honest facts
But "Why?" I ask, just "Why?"*

Family members frequently appear as subjects in Grandma's writing. There's a poem about her little sister and another about the family, "Playing Cards":

*Each evening early, after lunch,
The family feeling funny,
Get together all at once,
To play a game of "rummy."*

*Now Ronald's going pretty good,
He's sure he's going to win,
But Dad says his head is thick as wood,
And gets ahead of him.*

*And then in old "Casina,"
I get the little and big,
And then comes all the aces,
Why I feel like dancing a jig.*

*Now ma thinks this is funny,
As funny as can be,
She says she'll win the next game,
But Dad gets more than she.*

*And then there's "fish" and "Steal the Pack,"
And we play that "Kerboo,"
You think you've caught the other folks,
But the forfeits up to you.*

*And now mom brings some lemonade,
And cookies fudge or cake,
While dad studies every card in the pack,
To see what he can make.*

*He wins and I say I won't play,
I'm sure that he does cheat,
But he just laughs and says, "Trene,
If you knew how to play you'd beat."*

*Before we know, it's ten o'clock,
While Ron counts spades to seven,
We stop our game, all tired out,
And retire at half past eleven.*

Domestic family life also figures in the few surviving poems that she wrote as an adult. An untitled poem that dates from the 1950s is about my father as her young son:

*I'm the mother of a Fireman,
Each morning after dawn,
And as I cook his breakfast,
My how we carry on.*

*The fire-truck stays in the kitchen,
To be near at his beck and call,
While I walk out around it—
With cereal, eggs, and all.*

*Soon after breakfast my Cowboy comes,
With holsters boots, of course,
We fight off the bad men in the town,
Then away he goes on his horse.*

*At lunch I'm the mother of a Farmer,
With his tractor for his seat,
He's so far behind with all his chores,
That he scarcely takes time to eat.*

*During the course of the afternoon,
The Doctor gets a bang,
I patch up the bruises just in time
To pick up Superman.*

*Who fell because he tried to fly,
Off the piano stool,
In time to protect his sister,
Who got off the bus from school.*

*And Daddy gets home from his work,
Just in time to find,
My son the Circus Owner,
And the Pilot of a B-29.*

*I'm the mother of a few more folks,
Before the day is done,
But soon we're in the bed room,
Me and my little one.*

*And as I tuck him in his crib,
He bugs me, oh, so tight,
I'M THE MOTHER OF A DARLING BOY
And everything is just right.*

The poem "May 16, 1970—Saturday"—
could have been titled, "Empty Nest":

*I went upstairs to-nite—
Thought I would close
the windows from the cold—
But pausing on the stairs
Gave pause to think that I
was growing old.*

*I walked into her room—
And slowly looked around—
At barren walls—
no bed, no drowsy—
sleepy girl—
Just empty boxes, empty chairs
was all*

*I slipped across the
hall where he has slept
Since we moved in and
he was one year old—
An empty bed and
shelves all neatly stacked—
I shut the window to
keep out the cold—
Not long ago—I used to
walk these stairs—
Each evening without fail
at close of day—
And go into each room
and tuck them in—
And pause a while before
I slipped away.*

*And kneel and kiss each
drowsy sleepy head—
And say a "thank you" prayer
Cause they were mine—
And, I didn't realize it then—
How quickly goes the
passage of the time.*

*She's married now and
lives a house away—
my only girl, —has left
her room for good,
And he has gone to college
and away—
Returned to marry as I knew
he would.*

*I soon will be a grandma
it is true
And have another baby
to adore
But just to-nite, I'm
lonesome—*

*And go into each room
and tuck them in —
And pause awhile before
I slipped away.*

*And kneel and kiss each
drowsy sleepy head —
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*I soon will be a grandma
it is true
And have another baby
to adore
But just to nite, I'm
lonesome —*

From "May 16, 1970—Saturday," the poem that could have been titled "Empty Nest," as written by the author's grandmother. Courtesy of the author.

*And I'm blue
Cause I don't climb the
stairs much any more.*

She wrote another about me and for me:

Pumpkin Pirate

*My 8 year old grandson is clever
More clever than most kids you see
Why, even his teacher admits it
So therefore it can't be just me*

*So for Halloween Day he was chosen
To come up with a great work of art
He decided to create a pirate
Which I think was exceedingly smart*

*So a pumpkin as big as a mountain
Was treated with trimmings galore*

*And I'm blue
Cause I don't climb the
stairs much any more.*

*No other pumpkin, I'm certain
Had been so well treated before*

*He sat with one eye at the party
And scanned the third graders that day
And when it was over my grandson
Just carried him gently away*

*And then to his Grandma he brought him
With a conquering glint in his eye
And said he thought maybe thanksgiving
We could all have a nice pumpkin pie*

*So we carved up the pirate in pieces
It was soon going to come to an end
When we finally sat down to eat it
We all felt we were losing a friend.*

Grandma also wrote songs, and the lyrics of one song survive. "Mother Goose's

Nursery Rhyme” struck me as “pop-jazzy,” when she played it on piano and sang it for me when I was little:

*I don't want to reach the heights of glory
I don't want to be a queen, that's true
I only want to live a fairy story,
If I can live that simple life with you—
my dear*

*We'll play we're Jack & Jill
And tumble down the hill
As long as we're together we will never mind
With two hearts to inspire
We'll be sure to climb much higher
Like in Mother Goose's Nursery Rhyme
...*

It seems she wrote the song mostly for the pleasure of domestic music-making. Grandma and her musical siblings would gather around the piano and make music, and she would also play piano for her young kids and their cousins to sing along. I guess you could say that my family was “late” in arriving at the so-called parlor song tradition of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Some of Grandma’s poems espoused particular virtues; many celebrated domesticity as a virtue. I guess what always impressed me most was simply that she was writing poetry in the first place, as part of ordinary, domestic, everyday family life.

It had long seemed to me that poetry was something that mostly happened a world away, out there, somewhere else, and especially *up* there among people more educated and sophisticated about their creativity than me and my family. Poetry, a jazzy pop song—indeed *culture*, be it commercial or the kind of thing we learned about in school—those were things we might consume or even fool around with, but never seriously consider being an actual part of.

Grandma’s example—right there, alive, in front of me—made the act of writing verse seem a bit more “real” and “here” and less distant. All the more so to the extent that Grandma’s poems figured into admiring family conversations. Without the encouragement of her poetry, I might never have started trying to write. I only wrote some 10 or 20 poems in high school, and about that

many more during my college undergraduate years, but I spent a lot of time and gave a lot of care to each one. A few ended up in the inevitable student literary journals, but still I knew I was mostly just a “primitive,” operating on intuition—largely unschooled in creative writing and not particularly well read.

After my first year in college, I saw *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989). I was so moved by the film that I went back to see it four more times that summer. The film takes place at an elite prep boarding school in what appears to be the late 1950s. A group of students have hitherto experienced poetry as something of a lifeless artifact to be analyzed and measured. Robin Williams played a newly hired teacher with Romantic sensibilities, who dedicated himself to getting the students to *feel* poetry, so that it might come alive for them. The students reconvene a secret club dedicated to reading poetry together at night, off campus in an old cave—against the rules. Although the teacher is fired, the film ends with many students standing up for him (literally, on top of their desks), defying their headmaster.

The film dramatized a dichotomy between authentic engagement with poetry versus poetry’s having been co-opted and exploited by repressive and oppressive institutions, which help maintain and manage the status quo. The students standing up to their headmaster symbolizes the future. The prep school reminded me (in a much more extreme way, to be sure) of some of my own experiences of poetry, music, and culture as something owned, defined, and controlled by powerful elites somewhere else. The film dramatized both a tension I experienced intensely within myself, as well as the possibility of a kind of eventual liberation.



Between my grandmother’s example and *Dead Poets Society*, I had all the encouragement I needed to write verse. Later, while living in Crete, where I interacted frequently with prolific *mantinada* composers and other devotees of the genre, my interest in writing poetry developed into a passionate devotion to the composition of rhyming couplets in Greek. What began as dabbling turned into a serious

pursuit, and soon, I was actively participating in impromptu rhyming sessions.

Yet, *mantinada* composing wasn’t exactly considered writing poetry. In fact, Greek national culture relegated the genre to the category of *folklore*. That’s because many rural people unconnected to modern urban literary establishments composed them, and categorizing things this way served the project of modern nation building and consolidation. It enabled the intelligentsia to view the “folk” as bearers of a diachronic national soul extending back to ancient Greek and Minoan times, and as people whose “raw” cultural practices could be drawn on and improved upon by the nation’s artists and authors. Interestingly, though, this official move may also have helped reinforce among many Cretans the importance of the *mantinada*’s belonging to *all* Cretans, and of continuing the practice in peaceful co-existence alongside—instead of under—poetry proper.

This brings me back to Grandma’s poems—specifically, to her third-grade poems published in a local newspaper. The newspaper introduced the poems, explaining that the students wrote them after having been read poems by Lucy Larcom and James Whitcomb Riley, and learning a little something about their authors’ lives.

An online search told me that Larcom published a famous account of her New England childhood in the antebellum period, *A New England Girlhood*, and is known for having been a model for progressive change for women. Riley was known for a book called *Rhymes of Childhood*, and played an important role in developing a Midwestern regional literature in the face of the already established literature of the American East. My grandmother’s teacher apparently knew well what she was doing!

Yet, in light of my study of the *mantinada*, I couldn’t help but notice something else. As usual, what poetry “is”—never mind the criteria for evaluating what counts as “good” poetry—seems to be taken for granted, or rather taken to be whatever has been defined and negotiated somewhere else, typically in distant urban centers of power—literally distant in terms of geography, but also

figuratively distant in terms of the particular interests or sensibilities of, say, an outlying region's small town's inhabitants.

So, as wonderful as I think it is that a local school and newspaper celebrated and encouraged the versifying creativity of local children, I simultaneously consider it an example of how, for better or worse, a large public bureaucracy (the school system) teaches people in a particular place to write poetry by emulating what is considered poetry by an official establishment somewhere else. The school not only teaches how to write verse, but how to write the kind of verse that has been officially sanctioned as poetry by a powerful literary institution involving publishers, critics, and educators run by certain national and international elites who, also interested in maintaining their elite status, may not act in a wholly "disinterested" manner.

Locals may be required to pay school taxes and attend classes that promote certain practices of poetry, even if it goes against the interests of the very community being required to do so. Those same locals may work as employees in support of an economic system that allows certain owners—just *because* they are owners—to exert significant influence over which practices of poetry that locals are encouraged to participate in, or are even exposed to in the first place. Some kinds of "censorship," it turns out, are rather subtle.

All this makes me wonder about the possibility of versifying practices that locals themselves have more of a voice in shaping—and not necessarily merely by creating a regional version or offshoot of official poetry. I don't know if there was something like a folk poetry tradition in this area when my grandmother was growing up, but surely there were local or regional folk songs with lyrics.

Another reason I grew passionate about the Cretan *mantinada* was that it involved people versifying in their ordinary, everyday lives—not unlike Grandma, though with more intense sociality. I used to join in the efforts of Cretans I knew who, bemoaning the ostensible gradual loss of the frequent social gatherings of yesteryear, sought to revive or keep up such practices in their own homes, almost as a kind of middle-class (and

frequently Dionysian) parlor music. Insofar as the *mantinada* was considered the purview of "the people," I didn't worry much about my being a "primitive." Even as a non-native speaker, I found I could revel in versifying in the company of others in daily life. A society of *living* poets, as it were, where *we*—not the establishment—got to define what the poetry was.

There was also something else to ask "of things before the eye"—a "cherry tree" in my unconscious, as it were, that took a while for me to own up to: it seems I had experienced domestic and ordinary, everyday life poetry in the United States as signifying *femininity*. My only real, live example of doing poetry was my *grandmother*; all the male poets I knew of were the famous ones, far away and "up" there. So, the stigma was double: I was anxious about being a primitive and about not being seen as masculine enough. I might have believed in gender equality, but that doesn't mean I could ignore—or even that I could recognize that perhaps I should *try* to ignore—certain gender norms.

Men and women both passionately composed *mantinades* in Crete, but it was mostly men I'd happened to witness doing so. And I can't imagine anyone considering these men—physically strong, well-acquainted with the labor of farming, head-of-household types—effeminate.

It was only years after my first viewings of *Dead Poets Society* that I considered the significance of the fact that the students were *boys* at an *all-male* prep school. I felt so moved by what I took to be the film's central message of liberation that I'd failed to see how it could also be interpreted as the story of boys who found the wherewithal to overthrow their headmaster, an immediate authority figure and official representative of poetry's real owners. In other words, how the film was a stereotypical story of boys becoming men—men who will eventually become the fathers who will keep winning at cards because they have time to study "every card in the pack" while their wives are bringing "some lemonade, and cookies fudge or cake."



vir- Latin, *man*.

As it turns out, my attachment to the *virtues* of versifying in ordinary, everyday life in Crete wasn't only about being part of a vibrant local community filled with rhyming-couplet *virtuosity*, but also a matter of *virility*.

Does this mean that, in the interest of gender equality, I should give up my current pursuit of rhyming couplets?

Not quite. I'm still inspired by the Cretan *mantinada*'s widespread, "locally owned," ordinary everydayness, even as I remain cognizant that a locally owned "poetry," practiced in ordinary, everyday life, is always at risk of being co-opted by *local* elites (and by local *male* elites), who may be seeking to wield their power and authority to maintain unjust hierarchies in the local status quo. As with their national and transnational counterparts, local institutions, too, can be scrutinized for how they justly or unjustly exercise power and authority. Even merely invoking the local as a point of pride can turn ugly—into a kind of regional ethnocentrism or snobbery that is dismissive of the national, the commercial, or almost anything authoritative at all, simply on the grounds that it isn't "authentically" local.

So, neither local ownership nor informal, ordinary, everyday practice per se are exactly the answer. The ideal, it seems to me, would be not to have any authority at any scale *unjustly* silencing, marginalizing, or repressing people's desires to versify. Any and every group or network of people should be as free as any other to join together—informally or formally, in ordinary, everyday life, or through institutions of any size—to cultivate or organize any poetry practice they want, however they want.

In the meantime, some of us ("Doctors") will operate on, or from within, the most powerful institutions of poetry and music in ways that help make them a little less unjust. To the extent that even subtle, indirect censorship is being perpetrated by such institutions, we can try to alleviate it—we can try to make sure that the authority of cultural institutions derives as much as possible from *all* who are part of them.

*It may climb the highest mountain
To the snow-capped peak "surprise"
Or roll across the beated plains
And rise,—and fall,—and rise.*

*And then each player tries his best
To go to all the bases
Sometimes he stumbles as he runs
Sometimes with Death, he races.*

*With uplift head and muddled mind
His heart is all afire
He tries to run to that "home plate"
The "Plate of His Desire."*

*Now we might stumble as we run
On some sharp-pointed stone
But remember all are in the game,
And we are not alone!*

A portion of "Everybody's Baseball Game," as written by the author's grandmother. Courtesy of the author.

Some of us ("Cowboys") will saddle up with a less powerful institution of poetry—such as a regional poetry like the *mantinada*—doing our part to keep it strong enough to "fight off" oppressive encroachment by any literary institutions that may be unfairly privileged, while also helping to make its own practices less unjust. Instead of surrendering every ounce of power and authority over poetry to the education system, big publishing, and Nobel Prize committees, we might try directing or deflecting some of that power and authority in support of Home Demonstration Units (as it were), local open-mic nights with poetry readings, and online poetry networks.

Some of us ("Farmers") will cultivate ordinary, less formal spaces for versifying. Families will gather in parlors to sing songs like Grandma's "Mother Goose's Nursery Rhyme," and friends will improvise rhymes over wine and food. Boys will form societies that come together at night in old caves to recite the words of dead poets. Everyone will post poems in cyberspace, and others will respond to them.

Some of us ("Firemen") will give up altogether on many of these institutions—having determined that they are a lost cause doing more harm than good—and we'll try to extinguish them.

Some others of us (in the "Circus") will want to give up on institutions doing more harm than good but will surrender to keeping the show going anyway so we can pay our bills.

Others of us ("Pilots") may give up on those institutions altogether and fly away—try to chart brand new courses and create alternatives that free ourselves from the most glaring forms of unjust power and authority. In so doing, some of us may "take off" from old forms and practices, as we try inventing new ones.

Some of these alternatives will catch on and grow—as Grandma wrote in "Springtime":

*Upon a lofty hilltop
The snow is melting fast
It's thawing to a puddle
Oh! It's a brook at last!*

*And now, far down the mountain
There flows a babbling stream
And as it goes it glistens
So crystal like and clean.*

Sometimes, alternatives that catch on may appear less innocent upon further inspection, and others that start out innocently enough may need to be abandoned after they become attached to or co-opted by egregiously repressive and oppressive institutions. Still others that catch on may contribute to the historical emergence of the very kinds of spaces, practices, networks, and institutions that support a more truly democratic future, and not only for versifying.

So many cowboys, farmers, firemen, circus workers, pilots, and more. We shouldn't expect that they should ever entirely agree on strategy, not even when it comes to poetry and verse. As I have written in another rhyming couplet:

*Now when it comes to politics, there's many
different kinds:
Alliance-building, power moves, and changing
people's minds.*

And so, virtue's "game" continues. Here's some more of Grandma's verse, one last time:

Everybody's Baseball Game

*There's a baseball game that's coming,
It's important as can be,
With a whole field full of players,
And including you and me.*

*There's room for everyone at bat,
And there will go each man,
He'll carefully take the "Bat of Life,"
And accomplish what he can.*

*With half the team against him,
And the other half his friends,
He will bat the "Ball of His Fate,"
And determine where it ends.*

*It may go into the field of "Success,"
It may go into the valley of "Sorrow,"
Or it may skip the joys in life,
And crumble away to-morrow.*

*It may climb the highest mountain,
To the snow-capped peak "Surprise,"
Or roll across the beated plains,
And rise—and fall—and rise.*

*And then each player tries his best,
To go to all the bases,
Sometimes he stumbles as he runs,
Sometimes with Death, he races.*

*With uplift head and muddled mind,
His heart is all afire,
He tries to run to that "home plate,"
The "Plate of His Desire."*

*Now we might stumble as we run,
On some sharp-pointed stone,
But remember all are in the game,
And we are not alone!*

*And like all other games we play,
We've got to brave it through,
And be good sports until the end—
The best of luck to you!!* ▼

Note:

¹Rhyming couplets appearing in this essay ©

Eric L. Ball.

Eric L. Ball is Professor in the Arts and Humanities Division of Empire State College. His writings about music in the Glens Falls–Lake George–Saratoga region frequently appear in *The Glens Falls Chronicle*.

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