Some Problems of Rhymed Couplets

by Betsy Hanson

Oh, those gaudy red and yellow November leaves!

The windstorm the previous evening had deposited a wet mass of them on the sidewalk in front of the church. As Dulcie Mainwaring hurried to the poetry workshop, she slipped and landed on that anatomical part known colloquially as the "derrière."

Surprised and embarrassed but not injured, she stood up and looked around, as one does, to see if anyone had witnessed her pratfall.

A tall man, his leonine head of blond hair glowing in a shaft of autumnal sunshine, called out.

"I say, are you all right? Why, if it isn't—er—"

Dulcie felt her face flame with a blush as she waved feebly at Aylwin Forbes.

"*Dulcie Mainwaring*." She spoke loudly and slowly, as if to a foreigner—surely he had not forgotten her name? "And I'm fine."

"Of course! Dulcie! Fancy running into you! Although as my mother would say, 'There is no such thing as a coincidence.'"

Dulcie hoped that he winked because of a bit of debris blown into his eye.

"Excuse me, I'm late for a poetry workshop." Dulcie started up the walk to the church entrance.

"Another coincidence! Virgil Blankenship's workshop, is it? A former English colleague. He asked me to join the group."

And so Dulcie found herself seated at a table in the meeting hall behind the sanctuary with a handful of other poetry lovers, Aylwin taking the seat beside her. Oh, the unwelcome frisson of sitting next to Aylwin! Only months ago this man had asked her to help him with his work and then had shifted to a tepid style of seduction.

Good on me for turning him down, Dulcie reminded herself, since it seemed I was to be his consolation prize after Laurel's rejection.

But still, that frisson...

To distract herself, she focused on Dr. Virgil Blankenship, a stout bald fellow in a black turtleneck sweater.

"Today we will review the poetic forms used in English," he explained. "At the end of this session, I will randomly assign a form to each of you, along with a prompt word. Next Saturday you will read your work aloud. You may grumble at being *told* what sort of poem to write, but it is well known that parameters are a stimulus to creativity."

He then asked each of them to share why they had chosen the class; the two spotty undergrad lads mumbled about wanting to improve their marks in English, a beatnik-type fellow with dark curls resting on the collar of his leather jacket said the world needed to be described as it really is, and a pensioner with celery peeping from her string bag said she wanted to write poems for her grandchildren.

"I want to put my English degree to creative use," Dulcie said. "And submit some poems to magazines."

She was surprised to hear herself boldly declare this ambition, particularly with Aylwin sitting there beside her. Well, he needs to know that there is more to me than indexing! she thought.

Aylwin said Blankenship had invited him with the hope of adding professional expertise.

"And as for parameters, I agree with Dr. Blankenship. Edmund Lydden, the subject of my own research, used the sonnet form to brilliant effect."

And yet weren't many of those sonnets *unfinished*? Dulcie was tempted to add. Somewhat like my feelings for you, unfortunately. Why, oh why, do I have to feel this buzz of attraction for a person who "has not been what I deserve," as a glossy woman's magazine would suggest?

Dr. Blankenship started with pantoums and moved on to the sestina, villanelle, ballad, and haiku. Before the class ended at 3 p.m., he distributed the poetic forms and themes.

"Free verse is mine," Aylwin said as he followed Dulcie out of the church. "Theme of 'beasts.'"

"Pity you didn't get the sonnet, your speciality," Dulcie said with what she hoped was a slightly sarcastic tone. "Mine is rhymed couplets, about 'life'."

"Doubt you can get a rhymed poem published," he said. "Free verse, that's the thing. But to quote my mother again, 'Someone has to be chosen, so why can't it be you?'"

Surely you are not suggesting that *I* could be *your* chosen one? Dulcie thought.

"And might I interest you in a drink? We could discuss the wonders of the pantoum and villanelle?"

But Dulcie was in no mood for more unwanted frisson so said she was ready for an early night. She watched for slippery leaves as she hurried to her bus stop.

In the newly darkened evening, streetlamps lit up gusts of leaves and pedestrians turned up their coat collars.

I shall compose a poem about November, Dulcie thought, which is certainly a part of life. And what better month to inspire deep poetry? The fecund harvests, over; the daylight crimped into a mere eight hours or less; wet winds flicking the

last leaves off the trees; and those leaves clumping on the pavement, causing those in a hurry to fall on their "derrières..."

And not to forget the poor people in their shabby coats, shaking tin cups on street corners, their hands and cheeks chapped from the cold...

Sitting by the fire with a wedge of Stilton and the heel of a wholemeal loaf, Dulcie wrote possible November rhymes in a notebook. "Leaves" and "grieves," "chill" and "pill," "dark" and "lark," "loss" and "moss?" "Beggar," "poverty," "hopelessness"—did any words rhyme with these sad images?

Well, not to worry. She had a whole week to draft and refine a poem. She could get a good start on Sunday.

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But on Sunday other tasks beckoned: a thorough scrubbing of the bathtub, tidying the pantry, wiping down the kitchen walls, sorting through a stack of old Christmas cards and making a list of addressees. By evening she was ready to start writing but found that a new BBC radio drama demanded her attention.

And so it went for the rest of the week. A new indexing project kept her busy, as did the usual shopping, cooking, and cleaning. And one did need to rest in the evening! Not to mention that working with other people's words all day leached the energy for using *her* words for poetry.

On Friday morning she spoke sternly to herself about "buckling down" and writing as soon as she arrived home. If only she had been given free verse! It would be easy to string words together in that poem-y way, stacking up disparate descriptions. In truth such poems left her feeling stupid for not quite understanding the meaning, but surely it was easier to do a poem that didn't rhyme.

At eight o'clock, as Dulcie sat with a still mostly empty notebook page in front of her, there was a knock on the door.

"Hello, dear, I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, but I wanted to give you these." Dulcie's neighbor, Mrs. Beltane, wafting a floral scent even in her quilted dressing gown, handed over a bulging paper bag. "Pippin windfalls from a friend's garden. One hates to see them go to waste. All those little ones in Asia, you know."

"Oh, well, I suppose." It took Dulcie a moment to understand that Mrs. Beltane was referring to the proverbial starving children in China, though it wasn't clear what foraged windfalls could do to help them.

"I know you'll put them to good use. Bottled up for winter, or maybe even some apple brandy?" Mrs. Beltane chuckled. "If I may say, you don't seem quite the brandy type, my dear. But what do I know?"

When she had thanked Mrs. Beltane and said good night, Dulcie dumped the apples on the kitchen table. They exuded an overly fruity odor; many were rotten, best to be sorted right away.

Oh, dash rhymed couplets! She wasn't going to finish a poem by the next afternoon, that was clear! So she wouldn't show up. No one would care, not even Aylwin. And why should she care if he did? Silly of her to spend good money on such a workshop.

And does anyone ever really want to hear amateur poetry, if it comes to that?

She threw out the rotten apples and peeled and sliced the good ones. With some leftover pastry dough, sugar, and cinnamon she put together two apple pies.

It was almost midnight when the tarts were finished baking. Dulcie set them on a rack to cool and went to bed, relieved to have made a decision to skip the workshop but also vaguely unsettled. She had always been a person to finish what she started.

When she woke the next morning, still dark at seven, a string of rhymed couplets bounced in her head. Oh, never mind, I'm not going to the workshop today, she told herself. But she made a cup of tea and started writing.

So what if this isn't a poem full of heavy thoughts about the meaning of life? she thought. I like it. It's mine. And, surprised but pleased by a sudden flash of confidence, she decided she *would* read it at the workshop and wouldn't care what anyone thought of it. Not even Aylwin.

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Dulcie hoped she would read first, to get it over with, but Dr. Blankenship ordered the readings by the participants' surnames. "Mainwaring" was last, right after "Forbes," the others' names clustered around the early part of the alphabet.

Aylwin, accustomed to speaking in front of groups, recited his poem in a voice too loud for the small room:

Form, Free Verse. Theme, Beasts

The lion, prowling, silent, shrewd,
Loping through the jungle, the silent shrewd jungle
With its cloaking vines, the weltering birds
The lion, keen on his prey, his paws padding the sodden floor
And he springs! The wildebeest clambers, writhes
The lioness hears the victor's roar
Welcomes him, the lion king, the hunter king.

He bowed, smiling, as the beatnik lad started a round of applause.

The pensioner raised her hand.

"That nature program on the BBC showed the female lions doing the hunting? And it wasn't any jungle? More like a big meadow, brown and dried up, it was."

Exactly what I was thinking, Dulcie thought, remembering what she had learned as a child from an encyclopedia about animals.

Aylwin smiled stiffly. “Those of us who have made poetry our life study understand artistic license.”

Blankenship turned to Dulcie. “And now, for our final recitation.”

Dulcie’s voice trembled as she began, but after the first stanza her voice was stronger, and she stood up straighter:

Form: Rhymed Couplet. Theme: Life

When November’s chill crisps up the skies
It’s time to bake some windfall pies

I sort through the fallen and forgotten
Throw away all the bruised and rotten

Examine the rest, to determine
Which fruit’s flesh might have a worm in

Carve them to an even slice
Bake with pastry, sugar and spice

Next the pies must cool and settle—
This is the step that tests my mettle

(Recommended it is not
To eat a pie when steamy hot)

Ready, November’s windfall pies!
Autumn apples in new disguise.

Dulcie sat down.

Silence.

She folded the poem and stashed it in her bag.

“I liked that one, I did,” said the pensioner, starting to applaud. “Says something like it is, not words that don’t make sense together, and all that.”

The rest of the class joined the applause but stopped when Blankenship invited the class to adjourn to the tea cart at the back of the room.

Aylwin made no comment about Dulcie’s poem and led the others to the urn.

I should have skipped the class after all! Dulcie scolded herself. Why did I think a pie could be the subject of a poem?

Close to tears, she pulled on her coat and headed for the door.

“Miss Mainwaring!”

Was that Aylwin?

No, Blankenship.

“Your charming poem!” he said. “Referencing the Biblical apple while noting the inevitable fading away of all life.”

“It was about making a pie with the pippins from Mrs. Beltane,” Dulcie said. Blankenship didn’t seem to hear her.

“I would like permission to publish your poem in the literary journal that I edit.”

Just then Aylwin walked up, munching a ginger biscuit.

“You’re welcome to mine as well, Virge,” he said. “I’ll give you first crack before I submit elsewhere.”

“Indeed.” Blankenship handed Dulcie the address of the journal.

Dulcie nearly danced from the church. Her poem, published! Just like that!

Aylwin called after her, “A drink to celebrate our success?”

Our success? Ha! *Mine!*

Frisson gone, confidence gained, she called back, “Not tonight, sorry!” and escaped to her bus stop.

At home she settled with a piece of windfall tart and a cup of Assam, then stood up and read her rhymed couplets in a strong, happy voice.

What will it lead to, writing poems? she wondered. Is a poem more worthy than a pie? Maybe, maybe not. But on this November night, “dark without a lark,” *I* have *both*.