

## THE LIMERICKS OF ALGERNON SWINBURNE

Bob Turvey

Algernon Charles Swinburne occupies an interesting place in the history of limericks, though his limericks are rarely discussed in studies of his poetry, and no collection of his limericks exists. Several anthologists cite him as being responsible for some of the best-known Rabelaisian limericks, but there is no documentation for attributing these bawdy examples to Swinburne. His friends and relatives have recorded a handful of limericks that are nursery clean, and there are references to limericks describing the foibles of people he knew or knew of. This essay summarizes what is currently known about the limericks he wrote.

Swinburne's cousin, Mary Disney Leith, records his interest as a child in the genre:

We were both devoted to the game of bouts rimés, and used to set each other pages and pages of bouts, always of a comic nature, and then he used to read them aloud when completed, in the evening. We were also fond of what are now called "Limericks," and he had a way of finding the most ridiculous and expressive rhymes to names of all sorts. (Leith 21)

In an early anthology of limericks, Langford Reed quotes a letter Bernard Shaw had sent him, which suggests that Swinburne wrote ribald limericks:

Writes Mr. Bernard Shaw: – "There are several personal Limericks by D.G. Rossetti, and some by Swinburne, which became known in their generation, but like the large number of geographical Limericks which preceded them they are mostly unfit for publication." (Reed 13-14).

Reed then quotes Coulson Kernahan to show that some Swinburne limericks were descriptions of his contemporaries:

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