Like an interior design collaboration between Michel Houellebecq and Martha Stewart, putting together a medieval verse form and queer theory is not only magnificent and original, it breathes the rarefied air that hipsters are trying to reach in vain when they turn, after vinyl, to cassette tapes. A.W. Strouse’s short commentary on the first chapter of Judith Butler’s monumental volume *Gender Trouble* is not only original and fully unexpected, it’s sublime.

By short commentary, I mean quite technically the learned medieval form used by Latinate and Islamicate cultures who inherited it from Hellenized Romans and Jews in late-antiquity Alexandria, or from Greek schoolmasters in Byzantium. In medieval reading practice, three types of commentary are common. The middle commentary is what we would call today a translation or modernization. The long commentary
explicates all the difficulties and nuances of the text, line by line. It is similar to the modern companion, or the full set of footnotes. It is especially common for legal or the most popular literary texts, such as Ovid’s *Heroides*. In the age of print, it was often set in the three margins around the original text, which was printed in the center. It is usually twice or three times longer, often many more, and it dwarfs the original text on the page, while still preserving the hierarchy of values. The page distribution, with the original text in the center and in larger print, makes it look like a precious jewel in a properly humble setting. The short commentary, naturally, is the summary of the text. The present, succulently original volume, is a short commentary in verse. Verse form was not unusual for medieval commentaries of all three types. The reader will feel like they’ve stepped into a time machine, taking the most beloved queer theorist with them, to disembark in Paris or Oxford or Venice, circa 1290, to have a drink with Roger Bacon or Dante, or maybe Marco Polo.

Why put one of the most famous and still one of the most urgently relevant critical theory texts of the 1990s into a form not used since Petrarch studied at Bologna? A form later reserved for teaching reluctant children manners, as in:

The Goops they talk while eating,
And loud and fast they chew;
And that is why I’m glad that I
Am not a Goop—are you?
For a very good reason, indeed. Not only is this verse version of Butler’s immortal, slender volume good fun, it will also help the students digest and remember the turns of Butler’s argument. As we all know, Butler writes like a congenial, more elastic friend of Derrida: very down to earth, but nearly impossible to recall at length if you are reading her for the first time. Unless you are a mathematical genius or the kid who, during Spring Break, sits in a café at the University of Chicago discussing neo-communist thought while the rest of your age group has sex on the beach, the level of abstraction may not appeal to you. In terms of cultural references, it’s hard to thrill to discussions of Monique Wittig if you’ve never before read any Wittig, and are later unlikely to do so. As a result, for most mortals, the experience of reading *Gender Trouble* is like alpine skiing: great on paper, difficult in practice.

The thesis of *Gender Trouble*—like all brilliant statements, including $E = mc^2$—is something that, nowadays, even a Catholic small-town twelfth grader knows; that is, gender is performative and its apparently unshakeable stability is not stable, natural, nor original, but it derives its illusion of permanence mostly from sustained repetition. It’s a self-stylization with a history. So far, so pedagogically unproblematic. But, as anyone who has ever assigned university or college students *Gender Trouble* to read knows, that assignment works just as great (not) as assigning Lacan’s *Seminars*. Take a whole semester to read three of the shorter essays, and it will be the most memorable class that these $1\frac{1}{2}$
students ever took. Assign the whole volume to a large class for this week’s discussion, and be prepared to do all the unpacking yourself—unless there is a conservative straight male in the classroom, who will gladly mainsplain it. Later, the vegan student with long hair and felt slippers will confess when they tried to read it out loud, the squirrel outside their window fell asleep with a nut still in her mouth. It’s hard to be thrilled by discussions of 1968 lesbians when they are the same age as your grandmother.

This rhymed version solves the problem. It draws a clever cartoon map of the text that is memorable and manageable, navigable and fun. It’s a commentary that helps us remember every turn of Butler’s thought, and also a work of art that one fondly remembers reading. It’s a subversive, secret adventure. If kitsch is art remis au goût du jour, remade to suit today’s taste, this marvelous poem remakes 1990s feminist philosophy au goût de Dante, to the taste of Heloïse and Hrabanus Maurus and Jean de Meun. It’s not just great art, it’s high camp: a loving assassination. It’s a marvelous, maximalist tour de force that plays with a famously minimalist author. Foucault once said that his generation, so cocky about having revolutionized and reimagined the world, had not invented a single new sexual pleasure. I think it doesn’t matter that we haven’t, if we are the first to read such a sparkling thing as this poem.

—Anna M. Kłosowska
Gender Trouble Couplets, Volume 1