

DER STRUNKENWHITENLIEDER LIBRETTO

libretto by Scott Guy
set to the music of Liza Lehmann

1. The Schmittses's House
2. The Apostrophe
3. The Death of Western Civilization As We Know It
4. Being Right, Yes, But Alone
5. Strunk and White
6. The Witch's Malice
7. Redaction
8. Apostrophic Threnody

1. The Schmittses's House

JOE types an email and reads aloud.

JOE: So, I'm visiting the Schmittses, whom I've known for twenty years. We were friends until tonight but now that's gone. Their son, who's eight or nine, says "To who should I serve coffee to?" And I politely say "Whom. You mean 'to whom' and not 'to who.' When the interrogative pronoun's used immediately after the preposition 'to,' then 'whom,' in fact, is the only proper form. Thought you'd want to know." But then his mother says, "Stop! Stop correcting him! You'll make him feel bad." Then I say, "He will feel even worse if you don't teach him. Teach your boy the reasons why." She grows all red-faced, then her son, he starts to cry.

Okay, look, maybe I'm a pompous ass, but I know when I am right and if we let our grammar go, then what goes next? So then I say to her "Let me teach him when to say 'to whom'. Or would you rather he's ignorant like you and like your spouse?" She says, "Stop. It's time that you left us, I and my spouse."

So that is why I'm not welcomed in the Schmitts's house. In the Schmittseses house. Schmitts zizzes house. Schmittseseszizz. S-C-H-M-I-T-T-S. One Schmitts. Plural: two Schmittses. Possessive plural: two Schmittses-apostrophe-S. That looks so stupid. God, no wonder people think I'm pompous. What junk I write! Can't put that in an email. But it's right. Plurals of proper names ending S form their possessives in the same way as ordinary plurals. The Joneses' house. The Schmittses's house. Wait. (*re-types*)

"...time that you left us, I and my spouse. So that is why I'm not welcomed in the House of Schmitts." Put it in the Outbox. And log on to SEND it....

JOE logs on, but there is a tremendous crash of lightning, and suddenly appearing in the room as if from thin air, is an imposing female figure, dressed in flowing diaphanous robes.

2. The Apostrophe

APOSTROPHE:

*Stay thy hand! I beg of thee!
Harken me. Stay thy hand!
Before you send that mail,
O hark my friend!
Pray don't hit send else it will be my end.
Forfend! And do not hit send!
Do not hit send.*

JOE: All right. You....Okay, who are you?

APOSTROPHE:

*Apostrophe.
I am Apostrophe.
The punctuation mark of plural nouns, omission, and of possession.
But I'm the last of me. The last one.
I'm the last, the last apostrophe.*

3. The Death of Western Civilization As We Know It

APOSTROPHE:

*Oh! Oh! Years of misuse hath made of me
A most endangered species.
No one knows my name
Much less my theses.
No one but you. You! You!
You know the truth.
You know it's S-C-H-M-I-T-T-S-E-S apostrophe S.
And you're the only one left alive who knows.
If you don't pass the knowledge on, we both are lost.
If ignorance is once allowed to dominate,
It's a sanguinary line we have crossed.
Thus must we cling to knowledge given unto us.
Noblesse oblige. Our knowledge comes at a cost.
If those of us who still possess the truth
Fail to teach others it,
We'll bring on the death of Western Civilization
As we know it.
It falls to you to save us now.
If you fail us, then we are lost.*

4. Being Right, Yes, But Alone

JOE: I'm not going to send my friend an email that says "Schmittses's." I'm not going to send it with the apostrophe, sorry. It'd be like I'm flinging the rules of grammar in his face and insulting him for not knowing them. I learned better tonight at the Schmittses -- at the House of Schmitts.

*I'm sorry, but in all conscientiousness
He would accuse me of rude pretentiousness.
And he'd be right!
I've learned a lesson of my contentiousness tonight.
I've learned that though I may be superior,
Most people hate learning they're inferior.
They blame the messenger for his truthful message.
So more and more I am feeling wearier, if right.
Aghhhhh! I cannot stand knowing something's written wrong,
So I'll correct the apostrophe. Correct it!
How I love being right! Being right, yes!
But alone. Being right, yes, but alone.
No. Sorry.*

(types)

"House of Schmitts."

*I just won't ever correct the junk I write.
Friends are more valuable than Strunk and White.
I've lost one friend.
I'd much prefer being wrong and shrunken quite
Than right.*

5. Strunk and White

APOSTROPHE:

*Strunk and White!
Strunk and White!
You blaspheme their names!
Grammatical deities among men.
Linguistic theologians! Heroes of punctuation everywhere!
The gods of the semi colon:
Strunk and White.
Forgotten ye about them,
Mankind's ignorant without them.
Lost, ungrammatical, ye sunken sight.
I dare you to quote them!
Cite them! Any passage anywhere!
Prove to me thou still cite Strunk and White
If you dare!*

6. The Witch's Malice

JOE: I don't need to take your dare. I can quote them.

APOSTROPHE: The reason thou won't correct thine email is that thou art afraid! Afraid thou know'st not thine Strunk and White after all.

JOE: I know my Strunk and White!

APOSTROPHE: Then prove it.

JOE: I know my Fowler.

APOSTROPHE: Prove it!

JOE: I know my Warriner, sorry that's Warriner's.

APOSTROPHE: I believe thee not! Recite the Rules of Apostrophe!

JOE: The Rules of Apostrophe?!

APOSTROPHE: Methinks thou can'st, thou can'st!

JOE: Very well. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding apostrophe S. Follow the rule whatever the final consonant.

APOSTROPHE: Oh!

JOE: Thus write: Charles's friend.

APOSTROPHE: Charles's friend.

JOE: Thus write:

JOE and APOSTROPHE:

Burns's poems.

The witch's malice!

The witch's malice! The witch's malice!

Charles's friend. Burns's poems. The witch's malice!

Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names ending in E S and I S,

The possessive Jesus and such forms as

For conscience' sake

For righteousness' sake.

But such forms as Moses's law,

Isis' temple are commonly replaced by

*The law of Moses,
The temple of Isis.
Thus write:
The pronominal possessives
Hers, its, theirs, yours and ours
Have no apostrophe.
Indefinite pronouns, however,
Use the apostrophe to show possession.
One's rights.
Somebody else's umbrella.
A common error is to write it's for its or vice versa.
The first is a contraction, meaning "it is."
The second is a possessive.
It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas.
It's a wiser man who studies his apostrophes.
Yes, true that it's a wise dog if it scratches its fleas
But it's a wiser man who studies these apostrophes!*

JOE: And...SEND!

APOSTROPHE: Send? With the corrected apostrophe.

JOE: No. Without it.

(Apostrophe reels.)

7. Redaction

APOSTROPHE:

*O foolish mortal, what hath thou done to me?
You did not heed what warning I gave unto thee.
I weaken. Ah!
O why did you ignore what I had thus begun to plea?
O would that thou had chosen but a different way.
Thus do I say would we could return to yesterday!*

*When fades the language that built our world, then fade we all.
Upon our pillars of knowledge do we rise and fall.
If you, the last who knows wrong from right,
If you have ceased the fight, fade thee now farewell
For I no more remain.
And although after me you will look,
You will look in vain.*

*Grammarians and punctuationists of yore,
How desperately sought they clarity and exactitude for thee.
Now, how they mourn this night.*

*O such a glorious world they gave!
Such etymology! Morphology!
English semantics! Onomasiology!
Is there a soul left alive who's heard of onomasiology?
Our days are o'er! This way will pass no more.*

*When fades the language that built our world, then fade we all.
Upon the pillars of knowledge do we rise and fall.
If you, the last who know wrong from right,
If you have ceased the fight, fade thee now farewell,
For I no more remain.
Although after me you will look after me,
You will look in vain.
In vain.*

JOE: No. I'll correct it. Look, I'm correcting it and hitting SEND. There. Come back.

(But fadeth she from existence.)

JOE: Oh, no. Oh...no.

8. Apostrophic Threnody

JOE:

*Such power have we thrust in our own hands
But rare's the one who ever understands.
O, that we would dare to wield that pow'r,
But we're afraid we're the only voice in a desperate crusade.
And we have lost the hope to carry on.
But if we cease, then it will be all gone.
The witch's malice! Pronominal possessives!
Hers, theirs, ours,
It's a wise dog that scratches its own fleas!
We dare no longer speak the truth
In the Schmittses's House!
Such power have we thrust in our hands but we're afraid.*