

What Ava Knows

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We who have achieved the exalted status of grandparenthood know, without a doubt, that each of our grandchildren possesses a level of wisdom and insight that the world has never before seen in a child of such a tender age, and that none has ever been cuter. On a visit less than two years ago, our remarkable granddaughter, then going on three, informed us that her name was “AvaRachaelMackdotcom” with a perfectly straight face, her own enthusiastic twinkle, and a frightening level of sophistication.

Ava loves to sing. The extent of her recitations would make Homer jealous. Shortly after reaching her second birthday, Ava offered to sing for her Mimi and her GranTed (that’s me!). She began with her own version of “Mary Had a Little Lamb” in mid-morning. Time passed and Ava, spinning out an epic, was still reciting verses, some of them brand new to my ear, singing with the animation and sincerity only a two year old can muster.

After applauding vigorously, I began to ponder the experience. How did Ava acquire these verses? How did nursery rhymes like this originate? (Probably a spontaneous burst of poesy from a genius grandchild, right?) When were they written? Why do they persist? Can these rhymes, of which there are many hundreds (884 in The Annotated Mother Goose) be placed in real historical contexts? Did they have concealed meanings beneath the surface? We must consort with historians, always a dangerous pursuit, as well as folklorists/linguists, and self-appointed moralizers to ask if we can, *or should*, make sense of this nonsense. And when we leave the subject, what will be our degree of certainty? We need to know what Ava, and all our children, know.

Well, what are nursery rhymes? They are short rhyming verses with content, at least in this present time, directed to children. The use of nonsense words is not uncommon, as long as they carry the rhyme forward. These rhymes are largely of English origin and many are centuries old. Nursery rhymes survive, of course because parents agree to recite or read them to their children. The oral tradition is paramount here, as we usually recite or sing these rhymes to our children before we read them. (Can you hear your delighted

child or grandchild look up at you after your best declamation and, wide-eyed, say, “Again!?”) Remember that children are very conservative creatures in maintaining the integrity of what they have heard before. How many of us have been corrected by a child or grandchild if we didn’t tell the story the tenth time *exactly* the way it came out on our first try. So adults have to like them. But perhaps we also enjoy them because of our childhood associations with them, when we remember the warmth or fun of the nursery or the parent from whom we heard them. Sometimes parent or nurse employs these rhymes because “in the pleasantness (or desperation) of the moment it is the first thing which comes to her mind.” Some of what became nursery rhymes were simply the only verses the involved adult knew in attempting to engage, placate or sooth a small child. A few nursery rhyme mavens believe, although with slim evidence, as we shall see, that once upon a time these rhymes expressed religious or political views which were protectively concealed by substituting words that altered the meaning. Many were just plain nonsense, rhyming silliness. How to make the distinction, if one exists, becomes a paramount thrust of the literary and social historian of nursery rhymes.

There are a group of rhymes of considerable age that the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (ODNR) classifies as “Infant Amusements,” in which verses emerged as an accompaniment to some action. For example, Petronius the Arbiter, author of the Satyricon about 50 C.E., noted a small boy in a counting game saying “Bucca, bucca, quot sunt hic?” i.e., “how many (fingers) are here?” Doesn’t this sound remarkably close to the twentieth century English child demanding, “Buck she, Buck she, buck, How many fingers do I hold up?” The American transmutation, New York style, is actually documented as: “Buck, buck, you lousy muck, How many fists have I got up?” You just can’t make these things up!

We do find simple lullabies from Roman times, even one by the great Roman lyric poet Horace (65-8 B.C.E.), but these have not entered the nursery rhyme canon. The germ of the riddle “Two legs sat upon three legs” (involving a three legged stool, a leg of mutton, and a hungry peasant) is found in the writing of the Venerable Bede (672-735 C.E). A French version of “Thirty days hath September” comes to us out of the thirteenth century. However, it is almost impossible to find the roots of our nursery rhymes in the

first millennium C.E., or even the early second millennium, in part because printing was not invented in the West until 1440.

An analysis of the age of nursery rhymes has determined, based on extensive bibliographic research, that about 7% were documented as written in the sixteenth century or earlier, while the internal evidence in the rhymes and other relevant factors suggest that this number may actually exceed 25%. Thus more than a quarter of all the rhymes that have come down to us probably existed when Shakespeare was just a mini-bard. Nearly 50%, and probably as many as 85% of the total, are over 200 years old. Clearly the *Merrie England* of the Tudors (1485-1603) and the Stuarts (1603-1714) provided the richest soil for our nursery rhymes to sprout.

However we must not ignore twentieth century rhymes, e.g. the wonderful poems of A.A. Milne, in *When We were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We are Six* (1927). The first rhyme I remember, a favorite of my mother, was:

They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace.
Christopher Robin went down with Alice.
Alice is marrying one of the guard.
'A soldier's life is terrible hard,'
Says Alice."

What is the context for the earliest of these rhymes? There is reasonably good evidence that in early modern European civilization, children were usually viewed as little adults, grown-ups in miniature, expected to display the conduct of an adult as quickly as possible. In 1960 French historian Philippe Aries, made a strong case that until the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, traditional Europeans did not have a distinct concept of childhood as a separate stage of life and tended to relegate children to the margins of family activity. Aries' view was biased toward the evidence left by the upper classes (e.g., diaries, children's portraits as little adults), but the arguments are persuasive. While aspects of this bleak-traditionalist point of view of childhood have been vigorously disputed, especially as to the level of affection children experienced in these eras, society did become more child oriented beginning in the mid-seventeenth century. Before this time, children were seen as born into Original Sin, with salvation only possible through making the little ones God (and Hell)-fearing citizens as quickly as

possible, since the childhood mortality rate was tragically high. The evidence that children of the eighteenth century and earlier were often witness to strong language, bawdy jokes and drinking songs, and experienced strong drink, is not as impressive as some moralizing texts would claim. However, there is the evidence of a small book by Thomas Durfey (1653-1720), Pills to Purge Melancholy (1719-1720), which was said to be one of the first to be used in the nursery. Durfey's text contains ten gloriously bawdy ditties, including such titillating titles such as "Come Jug, My Honey, Let's to Bed", "Would Ye Have a Virgin of Fifteen Years," and "Blowzabella, My Bouncing Doxie." The general belief of scholars in the area is "that it can be safely stated that the overwhelming majority of nursery rhymes was not in the first place composed for children. In fact most are the survivals of an adult code for joviality, which, in their original wording were, by present, standards, strikingly unsuitable for those of tender years." It is very likely that these rhymes contain fragments of ballads and folk songs, memories of street cries, old stage productions and mummers' plays, riddles, proverbs, prayers, barrack room refrains of rude jest (as we have seen with Blowzabella and her friends), political squibs, and declarations of romantic fervor. Can one also find, as ODNR authors Iona and Peter Opie suggest, the legacy of war; satire of religious and royal personages and activities; remnants of ancient culture and ritual; even the last echoes of "long-forgotten evil?"

Childhood only began to be seen as a separate state worthy of society's devoted attention in the time of Locke and Rousseau. John Locke (1632-1704) suggested that the child was a *tabula rasa* (blank slate), although one with natural tendencies toward aggression, power over others and bodily pleasure (apparently one-upping Dr. Freud). All of these tendencies had to be overcome by education. Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) added a more passionate commitment to the individuality of the child, urging greater attention to schooling, and also criticizing the dogma of Original Sin.

It is, in my view, therefore no coincidence that firm documentation for the use of entertaining rhymes written *explicitly* for children is not found until 1744 when Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book, the earliest extant collection of credible nursery rhymes, was published. A lone copy of Volume Two is all that remains, carefully preserved in the

British Museum. The Famous Tommy Thumb's Little Storybook followed, some time between 1754 and 1768. The first known American edition of nursery rhymes, now in the Boston Public Library, was printed in 1771.

The search for origins of nursery rhymes looks fairly uncomplicated if we accept, without evidence, the association of the rhyme with a convenient historical figure with a similar name. Let's look at such a nursery rhyme presenting real problems for the literary historian.

Mary, Mary quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells,
And pretty maids all in a row.

Well, which Mary are we talking about? Is the Mary in question the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, usually depicted in Renaissance painting as living in an enclosed garden, a *hortus conclusus*, and in whose chapel one hears those "silver bells"? What about "Bloody" Mary Tudor? Doesn't Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, get a vote? Or even a prostitute of some repute found in nursery rhymes, "Mary Carey, Quite Contrary?" We simply cannot distinguish among the four Marys. Or perhaps the name Mary was used just because the author liked the rhyme with "contrary." Our documentation doesn't help, since the first recorded lines of this rhyme appear in Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book (1744), while Mary Tudor died in 1558, and Mary Stuart really lost her head in 1587. In this area one learns quickly to beware of glib, facile associations with no supporting documentation, and to respect the strength of the ancient oral tradition.

For "London Bridge" we have considerable documentation. London Bridge, which did "fall down" rather impressively when destroyed in the eleventh century by King Olaf of Norway, was built up with stone by Peter of Colechurch in an effort lasting through the reigns of three monarchs, Henry II, Richard Lion Heart and John. Finally completed in the thirteenth century, it fell down intermittently, at least in part, and was rebuilt over many centuries. Furthermore, a "London Bridge" game was known to Meister Altswert, an Alsatian poet of the late fourteenth century. There is a dark tradition surrounding the Bridge, that it would not stand unless a child was buried alive in the foundation to "watch" over it, a custom documented in earlier medieval times, and the ODNR authors

feel it significant that the poem abruptly stops, or is censored, after the last two verses which set a *watchman* for the Bridge. They continue, “It is one of the few, perhaps the only one, in which there is justification for suggesting that it preserves the memory of a dark and terrible rite of past times; and the literary history of the song does not frustrate the idea of its antiquity.” We do not find the poem about “London Bridge” in print, however, until 1725. Perhaps there was no need to print such rhymes passed on orally down the generations with such consistency. Or maybe that’s when the rhyme was really written! Again, there is insufficient proof for the skeptic.

Investigations of the origins of nursery rhymes have been led by several identifiable groups, which include the antiquarians, the folklorists/linguists, and the wildly imaginative, sometimes silly pseudo-scholars, for whom data is not very important, the Monte Python group of nursery rhyme students.

Charles Henry Bellenden Ker published, in 1832, a small volume entitled An Essay on the Archaeology of Popular Phrases and Nursery Rhymes, and, ten years later, in 1842, James Orchard Halliwell assembled 300 familiar verses for children in the fourth of the Percy Society’s (a short lived London literary club, 1840-1852) thirty volume series titled Early English Poetry, Ballads, and Popular Literature of the Middle Ages. Thus began one strain of English literary antiquarianism, a nineteenth century passion for searching out the origins of literary themes, including nursery rhymes, employing a level of scholarship which ranged from the uncritically historical to the comically hysterical. Eventually linguists, sociologists and folklorists, as well as a group of wildly imaginative writers who chose not to be burdened by facts, were caught up in this search for nursery rhyme origins.

The antiquarian school of nursery rhyme collectors, personified by John Orchard Halliwell, was not really interested in the rhymes *per se*. Nursery rhymes were for this group merely a manifestation of a rich literary heritage waiting to be gathered, annotated, and printed, just as if these activities were real historical scholarship. The record of London Bridge’s architectural misfortunes is historical fact, so we are willing to accept that the verses about the Bridge are quite old. Antiquarianism thrives on relics or remnants of a past age still found in modern society. For them nursery rhymes, in their beguiling antiquity, preserve the flavor of a bygone age. The antiquarians’ work was

sometimes accompanied by remarks on source materials, philological notes, and occasional historical references, but Halliwell was honest and self-critical enough to state that, “like most other branches of popular literature... their history is wrapped up in great obscurity.” Yet, despite the skepticism with which Halliwell and his antiquarian colleagues approached his subject, he did fall prey to the need to give his readers a degree of certainty which he could not substantiate.

For example, Halliwell provides a history of the following old rhyme, without a reference: “What is the rhyme for porringer? The king he had a daughter fair, And he gave the Prince of Orange her”. Halliwell tells his reader that this rhyme was written on the occasion of the marriage of Mary Stuart, eldest daughter of Charles I, to the young Prince of Orange in 1641, but how does he know? Virtually the identical situation occurred, in fact, in 1677 when Mary, daughter of James II, married the future William III, also a Prince of Orange. By not making any attempt at this distinction, Halliwell shows himself an uncritical collector rather than an historian.

Another very old association has been suggested for “Baa, baa, black sheep”, wherein that selfless, wooly ungulate indicates that his (or her) shearing has been divided in *tres partes* which will be shared, “one for the master” (the king or his vassal), “one for the dame” (probably Mother Church), with only a third going to the oppressed little guy “who lives down the lane” and who, clippers in hand, has been chasing that blasted black sheep all over the countryside for days. There really was a division of bags of wool, in order to pay the export tax imposed in 1275, since wool was crucial to the growing English economy. (Symbolically the Lord Chancellor still sits on a woosack in the House of Lords.) So we again have a suggestion or rationale for the rhyme, an historical memory, over and above this little story.

Other scholars of the later part of the nineteenth century were not content with merely collecting older versions of nursery rhymes. They wanted to know the history, meaning, and source of each, rather than simply revering a rhyme because it was old. Almost without exception this was attempted through the new approach of comparative folklore. In order to penetrate beneath the pleasant surface of the rhymes and detect vestiges of ancient myth and ritual which might lurk there, extensive research and comparative analysis was necessary. Folklore studies have roots both in anthropology and in history.

The folklorists were aware of societal evolution, the fact that custom and myth change dynamically with time, leaving only a vestigial residue for succeeding ages.

One approach of the folklorists to the origins of nursery rhymes was to look for correspondences of tales and rhymes from different countries. Some folklorists believed that if two rhymes in geographically widely separated regions had similar elements, it followed that both were derived from an older source. This popular concept was strongly influenced by vigorous philological debates which intensified in the nineteenth century as similarities of different languages were traced back, in both Europe and Central Asia, to common roots. With evidence for a common ancestral language, a similar history for tales and poems was postulated as well. No thought was given to other, quite logical possibilities besides the vertical transmission and evolution of the original ancient themes, such as parallel independent development (with overtones of Jungian synchronicity), extensive and rapid borrowing, or cultural diffusion to explain similarities of language and culture between societies.

Meanwhile the folklorist/linguist group had been hard at work on

Jack and Jill went up the hill,
To fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down
and broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.

The rhyming of “water” and “after” (in the seventeenth century pronounced “wahter” and “ahter” also dates this poem to no later than the first half of that century. However it could be much older, as we shall see, and this pronunciation could merely have given it this form in the century of its widest circulation. Most early quotations coupling Jack and Jill, by the way, such as Shakespeare’s “Jack shall have Jill; Nought shall go ill” (Midsummer Night’s Dream, Act 3, scene 2), or the old folksong:

I won’t be my father’s Jack,
I won’t be my mother’s Jill,
I will be the fiddler’s wife,
And have music when I will.

employed these names in the common seventeenth century usage simply meaning “lad” and “lass,”

There are hints of issues below the surface of “Jack and Jill.” One does not usually go *up* a hill for water. Is not something unusual being depicted? But what? In the thirteenth century Icelandic literary work called Prose Edda, a boy named Hjuki (Jack?) and a girl, Bil (or Jill), were drawing water from a well into a bucket suspended from a pole, which they bore on their shoulders. Mani, the personification of the moon, stole them from their parents, and the two children, and the pail of water they bore between them, were placed in the heavens where they can be seen when the moon is full, with a little imagination. One analyst suggested that the fall of Jack, and subsequently of Jill, simply represented a folkloric explanation of the waning of the moon. Carried away with this correspondence, the Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould added that since the name Hjuki derives from a verb meaning to pile together and Bil from one meaning to break up or dissolve, Hjuki and Bil, a.k.a. Jack and Jill, represent the waxing and waning of the moon, and the water they bear signifies that the rainfall depends on the phases of the moon. This analysis is a good example of the remarkable, and sometimes treacherous, distances over which the linguistic approach to folkloric analysis can carry us. While we cannot glibly dismiss this approach, assuming that the linguist really knows the language, it does seem a bit fanciful, though often repeated..

However, linguistic analysis to derive conclusions of historical conjunction can be badly misused if the scholar is a terrible linguist, as was the aforementioned Charles Henry Bellenden Ker, a famous wit and botanist (1764-1842). He believed that many modern words were merely verbal relics of the original phrases and rhymes which have been greatly distorted in the process of linguistic evolution, thus losing their literal sense in the process. His technique for his studies was at least original. Ker connected English to Anglo-Saxon, and this to Low Saxon, which he related to Dutch. Well, they are all in the same family of languages, right? However his next, and illogical, jump was to connect an earlier stage of English to modern Dutch. Now almost anything became possible. It was his conviction, and that of some others in the 1830's, that sound was much more important than spelling in the transmission and evolution of language. Modern scholars have agreed with this approach in some cases. However Ker translated

English nursery rhymes into homophonic Dutch phrases, i.e. the words sound alike, since he felt Dutch was really slowly evolving Low Saxon! He then retranslated them, again using homophones, into modern English. For example, “It is raining cats and dogs” astonishingly and homophonically became “*Et reyn’s ketse aen d’oogs*”. With the Dutch word *ketse* correctly translated as “drives” and *d’oogs* as “the eyes”, the phrase was reshaped into “The rain is violent and drives to the eyes,” a more reasonable concept, I suppose, than trying to visualize domesticated mammals falling from the skies.

Ker carried this bizarre scholarship to new, paranoid heights when he decided that nonsense rhymes currently familiar to children were once diatribes against a cruel and oppressive Roman Catholic Church and had become a sort of Anglo-Saxon code protesting against its alleged oppression. Thus Ker postulated that suffering and extortion emanating from Rome were actually written into “Little Jack Horner” and “Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son” and were altered by English priests in an effort to render meaningless what he supposed had been Anglo-Saxon polemics against the Church. However no one can find any preexisting polemic anywhere, raising just a few suspicions about Mr. Ker’s grasp on reality. Ker’s work has been called, “probably the most extraordinary example of misdirected labor in the history of English letters.” Nevertheless, his research represented one of the first attempts to explain away the apparent nonsense of nursery rhymes, and he did rely on linguistic studies for his methodology. It didn’t help that his scholarship was incompetent and his understanding of the Dutch language was almost nonexistent! It’s a good thing we never see scholarship like that any more!

There is a fascinating and probably more legitimate, application of linguistic scholarship which suggests the antiquity of one of the earliest types of rhymes we employed as kids, generically called counting-out rhymes. Remember “Eeny, meeny, miney, mo, Catch a tiger by the toe....” Incidentally, the tiger was originally a chicken or a tinker to be caught by the toe.

The first line is found, virtually identically sung, in Cornwall, early nineteenth century New York and even in Germany, where it begins “Ene, tene, mone, mei.” Sixteenth century Celtic dialects counting out “one, two three” still sound close to the modern English, e.g. the Cornish “ouyn, dow, tray”, or Breton, “unan, daou, tri.” There are, however, found in the English North Country and East Anglia some other sets of

counting words, reaching up to the number twenty and documented as used by shepherds to count their flock and fishermen for reckoning their catch. Here we do find “ina, mina,” standing for “one, two”, although followed by the words “tethera, methera...” which, inconveniently, do not give us antecedents for miney and mo. Although the rhyme was first found in print only in 1883, the Lakeland Dialect Society’s web site and Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas opine, in their book The Hiram Key, that this counting out rhyme must go back to the time when the Celts retreated before the invading Romans (55 B.C.E and 43 C.E.) and/or Angles and Saxons (fifth-sixth centuries C.E.), proudly retaining their customs and language, especially in isolated grazing country in which conquering armies seemed to have had little interest. Similarly the Westmoreland words for “eight, nine, ten” are “hevera, devera, dick”, which sound to some like the counting-out rhyme,

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock.

Why not acknowledge the possibility of the antiquity of this rhyme as well, for teaching counting, or perhaps even how to tell time. After all, the mouse must run *up* the clock to pass the numerals eight, nine, and ten (“hevera, devera, dick”), but must run down again to get to the number one. Humor me here!

Linguistic analysis helps with another familiar rhyme, the lullaby. “Hush-a-bye baby, on the tree top,” which is probably no older than the sixteenth century, perhaps the seventeenth. “Rockaby” was not recorded as a word until 1805, although the word “bye”, as in “Bye, baby bunting,” means sleep and dates from the fifteenth century. The “lulla” in “lullaby” has been found in a fourteenth century manuscript. There have been some strange attempts to give this rhyme historical significance, with multiple, wildly imaginative suggestions which just seem to cancel each other out, e.g. that the “baby, in the tree tops” represents the Egyptian god Horus as a child; that this is a French nurse’s threat; that we see a depiction of American Indian child care; or that it is really a lampoon of James II and his son, The Old Pretender.

So linguistic analysis suggests that, in some cases, rhymes probably relate to older speech patterns. And it is not an unreasonable assumption that the printed word may often not be the earliest version of a rhyme, as oral tradition appears to dominate the passage of nursery rhymes. Of course, this problem continues to make ironclad documentation very difficult.

Another children's verse and game was one which, as a student of the history of medicine, I was certain that I knew all about:

Ring-a-ring o' rosies,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.

This had to be a remnant of the effects of the London plague of 1665-6, or perhaps of the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century. I had learned of the Carnevale mask of the Medico Della Peste, or Plague Doctor, while wandering through Venice at that colorful season when everyone is masked for days before Lent. A sixteenth century French physician, Charles de Lorme, had initiated the use of this mask which had a long, bizarre hollow beak in which to place posies of flowers to absorb the vapors causing the plague. A ring-like necrotic, "rosy" rash is seen with the worst cases, and in pneumonic plague there is coughing and sneezing, and, indeed, "all fall down." So I wore my Plague Doctor's mask in Venice proudly, knowledgably, certain of the association with the nursery rhyme. Alas, the facts got in my way! Of twelve versions of this rhyme so far collected, only one is similar to the version I recited. Some even go on to tell us, "The wedding bells are ringing," generally not alluding to a lethal occurrence! If the rhyme refers to the London plague, why was it unknown to the antiquarian Halliwell as late as 1842? In fact, "Ring-a-ring o'rosies" doesn't appear in print until 1881, in Kate Greenaway's Mother Goose. And I thought I was so smart!

After the antiquarians and the folklorist/linguist came the fanciful speculations of a new breed of writers who chose to ignore all standards of historical investigation and who really ought to inhabit my proposed Monte Python sketch. They looked to the history of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and their perception of unchanging human nature for inspiration, but facts seemed less important than inspired imagination. In "Rain, rain,

go away” was seen a chant of pre-Christian nature worship. “Ride a cock horse” had to refer to Lady Godiva, so Banbury town was banished from print in favor of Coventry.

Anything for Lady G!

Little Jack Horner
 Sat in a corner
 Eating a Christmas pie;
 He put in his thumb,
 And pulled out a plum,
 And said, What a good boy am I!

According to Percy Green’s totally speculative A History of Nursery Rhymes, Jack was involved in a sort of “sit-in”, protesting the Puritanical aversion to Christmas festivities, and preceding Ebenezer Scrooge by a century or more. However, there actually was a man named Horner, steward to Richard Whiting, the last abbot of Glastonbury, in the sixteenth century, well before Puritanism appeared late in that century. The abbot was said to have sent his steward, Horner, to Henry VIII with a Christmas pie containing bribes in the form of title deeds to twelve manors, one of which, the manor of Mells, a real plum of a property. This the crafty Horner extracted with his thumb, according to the rhyme. Hidden messages may have been sometimes transported in this way in the sixteenth century. While the Horner family vigorously objects to the historicity of this story, they are still ensconced happily at Mells where they have been since Henry’s Dissolution of the Church (1536-1541). However, they complain that the abbot’s steward was named Charles Horner and that there never was a Jack, or John, Horner.

Nevertheless there are documents in Somerset mentioning a John Horner, and, as we have noted, any man might, at that time and even now, be referred to as Jack, especially if he was believed to be a knave. The family huffishly points out that Horner *bought, not stole*, his property. But it’s a great story, first published, alas, in the nineteenth century, but still possibly composed earlier. Invoking the oral tradition to extend the origin of a rhyme back through the centuries becomes analogous to using a time machine in this pseudo-discipline!

Perhaps the queen of dangerous (and inaccurate) quasi-historicism was Katherine Thomas, who authored The Real Personages of Mother Goose, wherein she freely

associated historical personages and events with any rhyme she thought fit. Thus poor Richard III, scrambling for his horse, any horse, became Humpty-Dumpty, and George I became “Georgie Porgy.” And why did she select George I when she had three other royal Georges to choose from? No one knows. Another author, Lady Maxse, gives the identity of Georgie-Porgy as “George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham.” Popular tradition insists that he is Charles II. An 1841 satire of all these strange and silly identifications (by an author in The Kentish Coronal) revealed “Georgy” as really, and humorously, a celebrated character in the reign of Charlemagne! Writers like Ms. Thomas were undeterred, and she proceeded to associate a nursery rhyme with every English monarch, believing that such a rhyme must have been attached to the king during his lifetime. She invented her evidence, traveling to many libraries in the United States and England, somehow finding whatever she was searching to prove. She recognized the need for documentary proof, placed 305 references in her book, but paid little attention to the accuracy or relevancy of these. For example, the jingle, “I love sixpence, pretty little sixpence...” was, in her view, a popular jibe at Henry VIII. Why? Well, she thought he was a miser, and that seemed to be enough evidence. In “Sing a Song of Six Pence,” she saw the monastic lands as “pockets full of rye,” as did Ker before her. Why? The monasteries possessed fields where grain was grown after all. This was not exactly a unique attribute!

A profoundly pious, and distressingly zealous, author named Edna Sollars believed that “A large number of these familiar jingles were Catholic in origin, and wielded tremendous political power during the various reigns of early England.” Her premise was, as it has been for many, that there was once an intelligible origin for these rhymes which has fallen into obscurity. For her, nursery rhymes documented Catholic achievement and perseverance, not oppression and censorship, as did some of the earlier authors cited above. Thus in “Patty Cake,” the cake marked with a “T” was, to Edna Sollars, really the Host bearing the crucifix. But it’s a “T,” Edna! On such undocumented claims were many subsequent publications based, for everyone in this room knows that *if you can cite a reference for your statement, it must be true!*

The antiquarians, the folklorists and the overly imaginative Monte Python crew were concerned with, and guessing at, the background of nursery rhymes: ecclesiastical and

monarchical oppression; vestiges of myth and ritual; a parade of British monarchs. But where was the evaluation of the worth and content of the rhymes themselves? In the twentieth century, *such a civilized time*, there appeared reactions to the naked cruelty and barbarity of nursery rhymes, which, some noticed, actually contained really violent material! Why do we expose our children and grandchildren to the maiming of three sight-challenged rodents; Jack's skull fracture; assault and battery by the King of Hearts on the Knave of the same suit; and so much more gore? In fact, according to one Geoffrey Handley-Taylor of Manchester, who analyzed some 200 nursery rhymes, about half "personify all that is glorious and ideal for the child. The other half harbor 'unsavory elements'." How unsavory? Well, about 20% of these describe murder, including a variety of ingenious techniques including choking, cannibalism, decapitation, bisecting, squeezing, shriveling, starving, boiling, hanging and drowning. Assault and battery are committed in just over half of the "unsavory" rhymes, involving maiming, torturing, severing, and lashing. Almost one in ten of these deals with child abandonment. *Shockingly* even marriage is torture--- alluded to as a form of death! What *were* they thinking? "Expressions of fear, weeping, moans of anguish, biting, pain and evidence of supreme selfishness may be found in almost every other page." notes Hundley-Taylor. Yet this apparent morass of evil has come down to us over sixteen to twenty generations or more. Are we guilty of raising crypto-sadists?

The earliest attacks on nursery rhymes came in the late seventeenth century in Puritanical tracts deploring their amorality, rather than the violence they contained, and then issuing stern commands for the indoctrination and upbringing of children. Some such criticism of nursery rhymes continued until about the middle of the nineteenth century, since many literary critics believed that the coarse tastes of preceding centuries had brought forth a literature of "wrong, duplicity and violence." We find nineteenth century rhymes more child oriented, especially after Lewis Carroll's (1832-1898) delightful. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) appeared, with its wondrous nonsense verse, memorably:

Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch.

Jabberwock, Bandersnatch and friends distressed some of the self-appointed guardians of children's literature while providing only hilarity in the nursery. Other nineteenth century nursery rhymes which have stayed with us include "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" (1806);

There was a little girl,
and she had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead
When she was good, she was very, very good,
But when she was bad, she was horrid,"

possibly by Longfellow before 1870; and, of course, AvaRaechelMackdotcom's "Mary Had a Little Lamb" by Mrs. Sarah Josepha Hale (1778-1879) of Boston, written in 1830 about an incident she called, well, at least "partly true." Mrs. Hale's lasting association with technological advancement, you will recall, occurred when the first recorded words Thomas Edison (1847-1931) spoke into his brand new phonograph in 1877 were "Mary had a little lamb." Talk about oral transmission of nursery rhymes!

Even in the twentieth century we find authors requiring the revision of these rhymes. Professor Allan Abbott of Columbia wrote in The Times (London) that such revisions must "agree with the purpose and activities of modern education since the rhymes must be held responsible for filling minds of children with erroneous notions about both natural phenomena and social relations." A Manchester textile manufacturer, Geoffrey Hall, published a reformed edition of the rhymes in 1949, declaring that his own childhood was shadowed by the cruelty of the traditional rhymes. He admitted, "I don't like children very much, you know. I really hate the nasty little brutes. But I've got to live with them when they grow up." So his revisions were really in self defense!

Criticizing this revisionism, this reach for political correctness, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1907-1990) noted that one should not alter the ability of nursery rhymes to symbolically resolve thorny issues, provide a form of childhood catharsis and a mechanism for allowing children to deal with violence and anger imaginatively. Others see them as sublimation for the wildness of youth. Really?

Nursery rhymes are somewhat mutable, and there are slightly different versions, but the alteration of a few words has never threatened the survival of the memorable, playful little stories they have told us for many generations. The very antiquity of the rhymes shows that society has found value and enjoyment in them. They possess a permanence, a link between generations when so much change rushes about us and rushes us about. In the words of one student of children's literature, "The direct simplicity, the dramatic imagination, the vivid fancy, and the free and spontaneous humor of the 'Mother Goose Rhymes and Jingles' will probably never be exceeded by any body of modern verse, and will doubtless, while our language lasts, remain 'the light literature of the infant scholar.'"

The prevalent attitude toward nursery rhymes sees questions of immorality and reform as ludicrous. Nursery rhymes are not to be destroyed by rewriting. It is quite possible that some nursery rhymes, orally transmitted over the centuries, contain hints of an older society, a "once upon a time." But, most importantly, our nursery rhymes are to be enjoyed for their humor and nonsense, their colorful imagery, delightful euphony, and sheer fun.

And that is what Ava knows!

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