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The Nursery Rhymes of Mother Goose: A World without Glasses

by Perry Nodelman

Of all the great works of children's literature, the oddest is the body of poetry surrounding the name of Mother Goose. It is amorphous. It is various. Above all, it is absurd.

The canon of Mother Goose is so amorphous that trying to pin it down might be something like doing a bibliography of the complete works of Anonymous. In Iona and Peter Opie's *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes,* there are 550 different rhymes (not including variants); in William and Ceil Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose* there are 884. The reason for this uncertainty about how much Mother Goose wrote is obvious—there is not now and there never was a Mother Goose, at least not one who wrote poetry.

That has not prevented scholars from trying to invent one. Their candidates have ranged from Charlemagne's Mother Bertha (who went by the nickname "La Reine Pedauque," or Queen Goosefoot, and who has become confused with another Queen Bertha, blood relative and wife of Robert II of France, who is said to have given birth to a goose-headed child) to one Elizabeth Foster Goose (or maybe Vergoose or Vertigoose) of Boston, Massachusetts, who may or may not have recited rhymes to her grandchildren in a manner that suggested the cackling of geese. Somehow, somewhere in history, the idea of literature for the young became connected with the name Goose; it seems to have already been an old idea when Perrault subtitled his collection of fairy tales "CONTES DE MA MERE LOYE"—stories of Mother Goose—in 1697. But where or how the connection was first made nobody knows.

What we do know is what goes under the name of Mother Goose—a body of verse that has become separated from its original contexts, and therefore, its original authors. In some instances, we either know or can guess some of those authors: we know that "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" first appeared in Jane and

Ann Taylor's *Rhymes for the Nursery* in 1806, and that Sarah Catharine Martin had something to do with *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog* published in 1805; if she didn't make it up, at least her version of it was what first made it popular. And we know that no less a literary figure than the great Samuel Johnson was responsible, not just for compiling the dictionary and providing James Boswell with an object of worship, but for

> If a man who turnips cries,
> Cries not when his father dies,
> It is proof that he would rather
> Have a turnip than his father. (Opie 284)

That the sententious Dr. Johnson improvised this as an example of bad writing may say less about the quality of the verse ascribed to Mother Goose than it does about Johnson's taste; a similar lack of appreciation backfired on Samuel Griswold Goodrich, better known as "Peter Parley," when the rhyme he made up in the eighteen-forties as a parody of the irrationality of Mother Goose rhymes also entered the canon:

> Higglety, pigglety, pop!
> The dog has eaten the mop;
> The pig's in a hurry,
> The cat's in a flurry,
> Higglety, pigglety, pop! (207)

The Opies suggest that many of the rhymes ascribed to Mother Goose may have been written by professionals: "we believe that if all the authors were known, many more of these 'unconsiderd trifles' would be found to be of distinguished birth, a birth commensurate with their long and influential lives" (3).

But scholars have not often been able to identify authors, for a simple but important reason. Whoever wrote these verses in the first place, and whatever the occasions of their having been written, they are the kinds of words that get stuck in human minds, so that people can pull them out on those occasions when they need to say or sing something that sounds pleasant or just plain interesting. Whatever their sources, then, people who found these verses easy to remember remembered them, and passed them on to others by word of mouth; and so, the poems became part of an oral tradition that cares much less for authorship than it does for memorability.

As a result, we can't figure out exactly what Mother Goose wrote; and because memory tends to be eclectic in its tastes, we can't any more easily determine the characteristics of her work. This body of verse includes everything from gentle prayers like

"Now I lay me down to sleep" to counting out rhymes like "Eena meena mina mo," from parts of old ballads like "Lavender's blue, diddle diddle" to tongue twisters like "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. "Obviously, this variety of rhymes had a variety of difference sources, mostly in forms of jollity of the sort that people used to enjoy in their free time, in the days before soap operas and singles bars. Some rhymes were intended as riddles or jokes, some were parts of mummer's plays, some were drinking songs or just pleasant songs to sing at parties; and some were words that allowed reluctant performers to get out of singing at parties:

> There was an old crow
> Sat upon a clod;
> That's the end of my song.
> That's odd. (138)

"Oh where oh where has my little dog gone?" was originally a comic ballad, "Der Deitcher's Dog," published by Septimus Winner in 1864; luckly, its transition to the oral transition divested it of its tasteless mock-German accent and its cheap jokes about "very goot beer" and sausage made "mit dog" and "mit horse."

Some of the rhymes had less playful origins. Some, like "Hot cross buns" and

> Young lambs to sell! Young lambs to sell!
> I never would cry young lambs to sell
> If I'd as much money as I could tell,
> I never would cry young lambs to sell (264)

were once street cries; and the stern advice to

> Come when you're called,
> Do as you're bid,
> Shut the door after you,
> Never be chid (136)

seems to have been directed at servants before it was inherited by children.

Not surprisingly, this grab-bag of various types of verse ranges widely in tone and effect. There is somewhat imbecilic absurdity of

> Goosey, goosey gander
> Whither shall I wander?
> Upstairs and downstairs
> And in my lady's chamber. (191)

But there is also the mysterious beauty of

Gray goose and gander,
Waft your wings together,
And carry the good king's daughter
Over the one-strand river. (190)

There is the smarmily gentle

I love little pussy,
Her coat is warm,
and if I don't hurt her
She'll do me no harm. (356)

But there is also the bloodyminded nastiness of the boy who drowns another pussy in a well, the farmer's wife who amputates the tails of defenseless handicapped mice, and numerous other tales of sometimes breathtakingly brutal violence:

When I went up sandy-hill,
I met a sandy-boy;
I cut his throat, I sucked his blood,
And left his skin a-hanging-o. (377)

(Somehow, it doesn't help to know that this is a riddle, and that the sandy-boy is merely an orange.) There is the wistful sadness of

The north wind doth blow
And we shall have snow
And what will poor robin do then?
Poor thing. (426)

But then there is the raucous vulgarity of another verse about a robin, as it appeared in the first known collection of nursery rhymes, *Tom Thumb's Pretty Song Book*, in 1744:

Little Robin Redbreast
Sat upon a rail
Niddle noddle went his head
and Poop went his hole.

In modern versions designed more for the adult sense of decorum than the juvenile sense of humor, the last line is "Wiggle waggle went his tail." But even when the vulgar bits have been expurgated, a free spirited breeziness survives everywhere in Mother Goose, in references to "dirty sluts" (297) and "Greedy-guts" (390) and to a disrespectfully described "gaping wide-mouthed waddling frog" (181).

But more often than not, the most widely known verses of Mother Goose are merely absurd—absolutely and unreservedly absurd. What are we to make of poems that express no surprise or alarm about weird events like cows that jump over the moon or

people that jump over candles, or weird characters like groups of tradesmen who climb into small containers intended for bathing and husbands who incarcerate their wives in large vegetables? What are we to make of a logic which assumes that a refusal to submit oneself to the divine will is grounds for having one's lower extremities grabbed by a large domesticated fowl and being tossed down the stairs, or that the thought of having one's cradle blown out of a tree by the wind should comfort an infant and assist somnolence? (Nor does "Rockabye Baby" express an attitude unusual in Mother Goose; there is also

Baby, baby, naughty baby,
Hush, you squalling thing, I say.
Peace this moment, peace, or maybe
Bonaparte will pass this way

And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you,
And he'll beat you all to pap,
and he'll eat you, eat you, eat you,
Every morsel, snap, snap, snap. (59)

Pleasant dreams?)

Furthermore, what are we to make of poems that do the opposite, and instead of taking oddities for granted, imply that there is great significance in quite obviously insignificant events, such as a child falling asleep half-shod, or another child pulling a plum out of a plum pie, or a couple who

walked on their feet
And 'twas thought what they eat
Helped, with drinking, to keep them alive! (171)

Given their history, of course, these verses may once have made sense. Before the vagaries of memory distorted them, they may have been associated with events that explained them, or had further verses that eventually offered rational explanations for some of the bizarre behavior they describe. But once these verses have been divorced from those contexts, there is no question about it: they are unquestionably loony.

That lunacy interests, and bothers, a lot of adults. Here are words that we have in our heads, words as familiar to us as our own names and telephone numbers, words we seem to have always known, for we probably can't remember when we first heard them; but if we stop to think about it, these ever-so-familiar words make no sense at all. A lamb going to school? A garden with pretty maids growing in it? A blackbird that bites off noses? How could something so familiar—something we all know and take for granted—be so strange? So irrational? So just plain loony?

That strangeness bothers some people so much that they invent all sorts of theoretically rational explanations for it—ways of accounting for the lunacy by denying it. Sure, they say, Mother Goose rhymes *sound* strange—but they actually have hidden meanings, and once you know what those meanings are, then they aren't strange at all anymore. About once a year or so, I get a phone call, usually late in the evening, from someone who asks, in a slightly slurred voice over a background of tinkling glasses and loud music, for the guy who knows all about children's literature. When I admit to being that guy, the slurred voice says, "You don't know who I am, but we're having an argument here and somebody said you could settle it. Isn't that there rhyme 'Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie' all about one of them kings of England back in the olden days, and, like, he had all these mistresses and he killed them all, like Henry the Eighth?" When I say that, no, it isn't, that in fact old versions don't even have the name George in them (the Opies report that the first printed version, in Halliwell's *The Nursery Rhymes of England* of 1844, is about "Rowley Powley") and that in any case these rhymes rarely have that kind of secret allegorical meaning, the slurred voice gets a little angry, and says, "But I heard it from a guy who says he read it in a magazine somewhere—so it must be true. I thought you professors were supposed to know everything."

In asking about the hidden meaning of nursery rhymes, my callers are partaking in another significant aspect of oral culture, the transmission of pseudo-scholarship by rumor and word of mouth. Some of the demystifying explanations of nursery rhymes they ask me about have a long history of their own, going back at least as far as 1708, when William King included speculations about who the original King Cole might have been in his *Useful Transactions in Philosophy* (Opie 134). In 1834, John Bellenden Ker published *An Essay on the Archeology of Popular English Phrases and Nursery Rhymes;* almost a hundred years later in 1930, Katherine Elwes Thomas' published *The Real Personages of Mother Goose,* which, the Opies say, expressed "a cheerful determination to prove that the nursery characters were real persons regardless of what the sources quoted say" (29). This book formed the basis of an MGM documentary which probably put these silly theories into popular circulation, where, as my phone calls reveal, they still survive.

One of the main delights of the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* is the Opies' levelheaded discussions of these theories, which are often more absurd than the rhymes themselves—and just as entertaining. The Opies say, "Much ingenuity has been exercised to show that certain nursery rhymes have had greater significance than is now apparent.... It should be said straightway

that the bulk of these speculations are worthless" (27). Thus, Ker himself invented the early form of Dutch which he claimed that the rhymes were actually Anglicized versions of, so that "Ding Dong Bell" was originally

> Ding d'honig-beld,
> Die kaetst in de weld
> Hwa put heer in?
> Lyt'el Je haen, Je Grjn (Opie 28)

which supposedly meant, "It is the honey-bearing image that brings this revenue, it is this that affords all this wealth. Who is it takes it out? That curse to us all, the sneering bully (the monk)"—an attack on the Catholic Church by early Dutch Protestants, it seems. In 1866, the Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould proposed that Jack and Jill were originally Hjuki and Bil of the Norse Edda; he could only explain how Bil became Jill by suggesting that one of the children ought to have a female name, and he conveniently forgot the much simpler explanation that Jack and Jill have often been used as generic names for boys and girls, as in Shakespeare's "Jack shall have Jill; nought shall go ill" (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.2.461-2). A particularly rich example of the wild extremes to which pseudo-explanation has gone is the Opies' list of sources proposed for "Hey diddle diddle," which begin with James Halliwell taking seriously the practical joke of someone who presented him with a parallel to the verse in supposedly ancient Greek:

> some other of the 'origin' theories that may safely be discounted are (i) that it is connected with Hathor worship [whatever that is]); (ii) that it refers to various constellations (Taurus, Canis Minor, &c.); (iii) that it describes the flight from the rising of the waters in Egypt (little dog, the Dog Star, or 'Sohet'; fiddler, beetle, hence scarab; cow jumping over moon, symbol of sky, &c.); (iv) that it portrays Elizabeth, Lady Katherine Grey, and the Earls of Hertford and Liecester; (v) that it tells of Papist priests urging the laboring class to work harder; (vi) that the expression 'Cat and the fiddle' comes (a) from Katherine of Aragon (Katherine la fidele), (b), from Catherine, wife of Peter the Great, and (c) from Caton, a supposed governor of Calais (Caton le fidele). (203-5)

Alternately, the Opies suggest that "The sanest observation on this rhyme seems to have been made by Sir Henry Reed, 'I prefer to think,' he says, 'that it commemorates the athletic lunacy to which the strange conspiracy of the cat and the fiddle incited the cow.'"

This perfectly logical explanation for one particular rhyme points to an important generalization about all the works of

Mother Goose. Since most of us remember these rhymes without knowing or caring about their original reasons for existence, any satisfactory explanation of their significance will not depend on their origins. Because we know them and treasure them in apparently meaningless forms, we must account for their lack of meaning instead of attempting to find meaning in them.

A good way of doing so may be found in the circumstances in which they have been remembered. The British call these verses nursery rhymes because they have a history of having been often said or sung to young children by people with no books handy. Somewhere in the history of each of the rhymes of Mother Goose there is probably a nanny or a mother trying to calm down a child, and plucking some words out of her brain in order to do so. In these circumstances, the original purpose of the words is quite beside the point; as the Opies say, "the mother or nurse does not employ a jingle because it is a nursery rhyme *per se*, but because in the pleasantness (or desperation) of the moment it is the first thing which comes to her mind" (6). I can recall my own mother singing to my younger brother about how he'd wonder where the yellow went when he brushed his teeth with Pepsodent; if other mothers also sang it, and if their children remember it and later pass it on to *their* children, then someday that verse may turn out to be a nursery rhyme, for people who haven't the vaguest idea about who or what Pepsodent might once have been.

In fact, the *real* explanation for the often absurd nature of nursery rhymes is less often a forgotten historical significance than it is merely the vagueness of memory. Again and again, the Opies report that familiar rhymes are actually parts of simpler versions of older songs—most often their openings or their choruses; and the rest of the song often grounds the apparent nonsense in quite logical circumstances. For instance, Mother Goose tells us merely that

> Elsie Marley is grown so fine,
> She won't get up to feed the swine,
> But lies in bed till eight or nine
> Lazy Elsie Marley. (159)

But a later verse of the original verse of the original song Mother Goose borrowed these lines from provides the reason for this indolence: Elsie can afford to be so lazy because she's become rich on the proceeds of booze, and maybe even prostitution:

> Elsie keeps wine, gin and ale,
> In her house below the dale,
> Where every tradesman up and down,
> Does call to spend his half-a-crown.

The memories of those who brought rhymes to the nursery were not just selective; they were often inaccurate. "Goosey Goosey Gander" is as illogical as it is because the last four lines about throwing an old man down the stairs actually have a separate source:

> They are much the same as the lines which school-children address to the cranefly ("Daddy-long-legs"), sometimes pulling off its legs as they repeat,
> Old father Long-Legs
> Can't say his prayers;
> Take him by the left leg,
> And throw him downstairs. (191)

An even vaguer memory than the one that joined these two separate bits of memorable verse into one strange poem is the one responsible for "Rub a dub dub" as we now know it. This story of three men in a tub is based on

> Hey! rub-a-dub, ho! rub-a-dub, three maids in a tub,
> And who do you think were there?
> The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker
> And all of them gone to the fair. (376)

Replacing "were there" with "they were" makes for a whole different story: the sordid and less memorable truth behind the memorable nonsense is that the three tradesmen weren't taking the bath themselves; it was their minds that were dirty, for they were just spectators of the tub scene, apparently at a side-show involving three, count 'em, three beautiful wenches.

The fact that easy (if sometimes confused) memorability is what made a rhyme part of the nursery canon is an important clue to the significance of Mother Goose rhymes as touchstones for children's literature—especially children's poetry. These rhymes have that insidious insistence that writers of popular songs aspire to—we find them running through our thoughts even when we'd rather forget them altogether. The important question is, why are they so insistent? What makes them so memorable? Knowing that should tell us much about how poetry in general affects and delights us.

The first thing to be said is that the memorability of these rhymes has little or nothing to do with their content; the mere fact that so many of them make so little sense should tell us that. In some cases, in fact, the content is quite literally something we would otherwise find hard to remember, so that the rhymes have the express purpose of assisting memory, of helping us to recall the days of the month in "Thirty days hath September" or the letters of the alphabet in

A was an archer, who shot at a frog,
B was a butcher, and had a great dog. (48)

Rhymes like these allow us to remember otherwise unmemorable information because they use patterns of language, rhymes and rhythms, that place the useful information into predictable slots; all we have to do is remember the frog in the first line, and we're well on the way to remembering the rhyming "dog" in line two, and thus, the butcher who owned him and the letter B that begins the word "butcher." The information survives because it is carried within an easily recognizable and highly repetitive structure. It is accompanied by a great deal of what theorists of information call "redundancy": that part of our communications with each other that we already know, for paradoxically, we cannot communicate anything new without reminding ourselves of a great deal that we know already:

> A written message is never completely unpredictable. If it were it would be nonsense. Indeed, it would be noise. To be understandable, to convey meaning, it must conform to rules of spelling, structure and sense, and these rules, known in advance as information shared between the writer and the reader, reduce uncertainty. They make the message partly predictable, compelling it to carry extra luggage in the form of superfluous symbols. Rules are a form of redundancy....
> (Campbell 68-9)

Because nursery rhymes often don't conform to rules of sense, they might seem to lack this sort of redundancy; but in fact, their obvious patterns of rhyme and rhythm and repetition quickly become redundant, and thus, help us to remember the nonsense they contain. According to Jeremy Campbell, psychologists have discovered that people "are poor at remembering sequences which contain little or no redundancy...most people can sense a distinct change that occurs when unorganized strings of words acquire structure. Some sort of barrier is crossed, with powerful effects on the effectiveness of memory" (218).

Nursery rhymes often have very short lines, so that the rhymes comes frequently and thus, are hard not to notice:

Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick,
Jack jump over
The candlestick. (226-7)

They also tend to have strong, assertive rhythms, as in

American jump, American jump,
One—two—three (55)

and strongly repetitive patterns of language, so that nouns and verbs appear at the same place in series of lines:

He *put* in his thumb,
And *pulled* out a plum,
And *said,* What a good boy am I! (234)

Here the second word in each line is a verb, "put in" is balanced by "pulled out," and "out a" is echoed by "what a." Sometimes, the patterns are all reversals:

As I went over the water,
The water went over me. (220)

There are also often repeated words or phrases, repeated refrains or choruses as in "There was a man lived in the moon, lived in the moon, lived in the moon" (52) or "Curly locks, curly locks" (140) or "Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?" (357) When all of these rhymes and patterns and reversals and repetitions combine in one short verse, the result is hard to forget:

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock. (206)

But redundancy makes, not just for memorability, but also, and more significantly, for enjoyment: as their long history of service in the nursery shows, we recall these rhymes in circumstances in which we wish to give pleasure, to both ourselves and to children. They are a pleasure to hear, and they are a pleasure to say.

That they are a pleasure to hear accounts for the rhymes that the Opies call "infant amusements": words meant to accompany games that adults play with babies, such as "This little piggie went to market," designed as an accompaniment to tickling, or this rhyme meant to be said while hiding an object in one of two closed fists:

Handy dandy, riddledy ro,
Which hand will you have, high or low? (197)

The pleasure is not just the physical activity, but the silly sounds that go with it: the mere fact that the words make no sense focuses attention on their patterns, and it is these satisfying structured patterns that gives listeners pleasure. When my own children were younger, they were particularly fond of our own variation of one such game:

This is the way the lady rides—
Easy, easy;
And this is the way the gentleman rides—
A gallop a trot, a gallop a trot;
And this is the way the farmer rides—
Hobbledy hoy, hobbledy hoy;
And this is the way the maniac rides—
Eeeeee—AW!

The traditional game consists of holding the child's hands and of jumping it up and down ever more quickly on one's knees; at the end of the last verse, which I made up myself, I'd toss the child up into the air—and that toss, accompanied by a high pitched scream, always got more laughs than a toss without a scream, and without a redundant pattern of every quickening nonsense syllables preceding it.

That the rhymes are a pleasure to say is also apparent in games like these; "A gallop a trot" is a wonderful workout for the tongue, and it's hard not to want to say it, and then say it again. And it's easy to understand why children like to choose sides with counting out rhymes that are as much fun and as challenging to say as

Inter, mitzy, titzy, tool,
Ira, dira, dominu,
Oker, poker, dominoker,
Out goes you. (223)

Some of the rhymes are even more obviously intended to be fun to say—among them tongue twisters like "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" or

I need not your needles, they're needless to me,
For kneading of needles is needless, you see.
But did my neat trousers but need to be kneed, I then should have need of your needles indeed. (326)

In all these rhymes, basic characteristics of language—for instance, the fact that words or sounds that are similar to each other create rhythmic patterns—have been exaggerated, so that they become much more obvious than they usually are in speech or in written prose. Having been exaggerated, they become the center of attention: these tongue twisters are less about their apparent subjects than about the pleasure of the patterns formed by the words used to describe those subjects. And to some extent, that is true of just about every rhyme in the Mother Goose canon.

But the qualities of words in themselves can be foregrounded in this way exactly because the meanings of the words in these rhymes is so relatively unimportant. Like conversations in

languages we don't understand, we can hear the music better when we aren't conscious of the significance of the words. Not knowing Italian, I used to think that Puccini's aria "Mi chiamano Mimi" sounded extravagantly romantic—until I read a translation of the libretto for *La Boheme*, and discovered that all it meant was, "People call me Mimi, and I live by myself in a chilly room making artificial flowers."

That part of the effect of Mother Goose rhymes depends on their lack of meaning becomes particularly obvious when we consider the works of poets who try to imitate Mother Goose, like the Canadian poet Dennis Lee. When he writes absurd nonsense, the rhymes and patterns become as significant as they are in the originals, and Lee creates some magnificently persuasive rhymes:

Mississauga rattlesnakes
Eat brown bread.
Mississauga rattlesnakes
Fall down dead.
If you catch a caterpillar
Feed him apple juice;
But if you catch a rattlesnake
Turn him loose! (16)

But when he uses almost the same rhythms for poems that try to convey realistic emotions, they only seem shoddily sentimental, more Eugene Field than Mother Goose:

I've got a Special Person
At my day-care, where I'm in.
Her name is Mrs. something
But we mostly call her Lynn.

Cause Lynn's the one that shows you
How to Squish a paper cup.
And Lynn's the one that smells good
When you make her pick you up.
She smells good when she picks you up. (24)

What is interesting however, is not just that the nonsense of the first example allows sound patterns to become apparent—it is that it is, unlike the second example, satisfyingly mysterious—a strange set of events delightful both because they are strange and because the patterns of their saying make them seem so inevitable, so to be taken for granted.

The same is true of all the important works of Mother Goose. They are memorable not just because they are highly patterned, but also because they are so successfully strange. Their main strangeness is that they use quite sensible language in the service

of quite nonsensical situations, as in the story of a man who lived in the moon.

> And his hat was made of good cream cheese, good cream cheese, good cream cheese,
> And his hat was made of good cream cheese,
> And his name was Aiken Drum.
>
> His breeches were made of haggis bags, haggis bags, haggis bags,
> His breeches were made of haggis bags,
> And his name was Aiken Drum.

This is redundancy without any comprehensible information to convey—the use of the very means which make communication possible to communicate nothing sensible. It becomes interesting and pleasurable exactly because the meaning it conveys is so unrecognizable. Short-sighted people will understand when I say that the work of Mother Goose is something like taking your glasses off and enjoying what you see, or rather, don't see—wrongheadedly using your eyes, your tools of vision, to see unclearly, and enjoying the mysterious and meaningless world you see.

There is, of course, some pleasure in putting your glasses back on again, and realizing that that wonderful reddish cloud with green and yellow bits was just an ordinary phone booth after all. It's something like solving a riddle: that which seemed so peculiar, so absurd, so entirely inexplicable, had a quite commonplace explanation after all. That may explain why so many people try so hard to find explanations for these rhymes: they are so strange that we assume they must be riddles—that they must have quite rational explanations after all, if only we could apply our ingenuity and figure out what they are.

And of course, many of the rhymes are actually riddles—very weird descriptions with very ordinary explanations:

> Four stiff standers
> Four dilly-danders.
> Two lookers, two crookers,
> And a wig-wag. (397)

To a nasty mind like mine that sounds exceeding sexual; but in fact it's just a cow. Or how about

> Little Nancy Etticoat
> With a white petticoat,
> And a red nose;
> She has no feet or hands,

> The longer she stands
> The shorter she grows. (326)

This apparently deformed Elephant Girl is actually just a candle.

But so what? What is most revealing about the riddles of Mother Goose is that their answers are not very memorable. It's the riddling descriptions themselves that capture our attention, so much so that in a few cases we have even forgotten that the verses we take such pleasure in reciting started life as riddles. One example is

> Little Dicky Dilver
> Had a wife of silver; He took a stick and broke her back
> And sold her to the miller;
> The miller wouldn't have her
> So he threw her in the river. (148)

This apparently gruesome tale of horror is part of a longer ballad which makes it clear that Little Dicky Dilver's wife is actually a grain of wheat, whose travels after the miller breaks her back are chronicled in a series of verses. An even more telling example of a riddle now divorced from its answer is one of the most famous of the rhymes: few people who recite the story of "Humpty Dumpty" realize they are giving a riddling description of an egg.

Like most of Mother Goose's riddles, "Humpty Dumpty" really needs no answer. It's the peculiar description, the strange world evoked by language used in an unusual way, that gives it its power. When we do find out the answer of a Mother Goose riddle we've not heard before, we tend to immediately go back and consider the riddle again, and only partially to see how the answer explains what seemed so weird; the other reason we return is to enjoy the pleasure or familiar things turned so strange, so magical—the world of the commonplace made wonderful by magic. Knowing that it's a phone booth, we take our glasses off again to enjoy how it becomes a strange red cloud. Knowing that it is a description of an egg only heightens the mysterious intensity of this extravagantly beautiful description:

> In marble halls as white as milk,
> Lined with a skin as soft as silk,
> Within a fountain crystal-clear,
> A golden apple doth appear.
> No doors there are to this stronghold,
> Yet thieves break in and steal the gold. (196)

And the fact that it represents something so mundane as teeth and gums does nothing to dispel the magically mysterious behavior of

Thirty white horses
Upon a red hill,
Now they tramp,
Now they champ,
Now they stand still. (212)

The irony in the history of attempts to explain away, conventionalize, normalize nursery rhymes is that the absurdity that so disturbs a certain kind of adult mind may be exactly what most delights those children and adults who most enjoy these rhymes. It is an anarchic absurdity, a defiance of convention and normalcy; it's no accident that Mother Goose's version of the old proverb

A man of words and not of deeds
Is like a garden full of weeds (286)

should continue with a series of absurd statements that send up the seriousness of the proverb:

When the weeds begin to grow,
It's like a garden full of snow;
when the snow begins to melt,
It's like a ship without a belt;
When the ship begins to sail,
It's like a bird without a tail.

(I've changed the tense here to fit the first verse, which, not surprisingly, has been discarded in many modern versions.) To explain away this sort of deliberate absurdity is merely to restore the pomposity of the proverb, merely to replace the wonderful image of stamping horses with a picture that could delight only a dental hygienist.

Like the story about the garden or the riddle about the horses, Mother Goose's best work contains nothing much that we aren't familiar with—although its daily acquaintance with cows and candles makes it even more magically foreign for us than it once was for our ancestors. But it combines common words for common objects in such a way that they become strange; due to accidents of history, furthermore, or sometimes due only to our lack of knowledge about their origins, even those rhymes that once did make sense have come to be mysterious. Making the ordinary seem weird is a way of shooting holes in our usual vision of the world—focusing our attention on things we are otherwise so familiar with that we no longer even notice them. Above all, in making the ordinary noticeable and strange, the language of Mother Goose draws attention to its own power, its own mystery. In these ways, in revealing the power of language to make the ordinary wonderful and to be wonderful in and for itself, the

rhymes of Mother Goose offer their young hearers an introduction to the main pleasure of poetry—indeed, of all literature.

The rhymes of Mother Goose have given rise to a vast body of pictures, including many by great children's illustrators from Caldecott and Greenaway and Crane in the last century to Maurice Sendak and Nicola Bayley in more recent years. While many of these illustrators have produced fine books based on Mother Goose, new creations that result from combinations of these old words with new pictures, their work never adequately represents the rhymes themselves. This is not just a question of our being better able to imagine our own pictures without the interference of Caldecott or Sendak; the fact is that *any* specific picture at all, even one we invent for ourselves, is bound to destroy some of the special impossibility, perhaps even unimaginability, of the images evoked by the rhymes themselves.

Consider the thirty white horses: while a picture of a set of dentures would obviously deflate the grand mystery of the image, a picture of thirty horses doesn't serve much better, for looking at a bunch of horses is not the same as having words evoke them for us; and in any case, the illustrator would have to resort to a hill covered with red posies or something equally literalizing. The fact is, the best picture is an impossible one that could be both teeth and horses at the same time—and not as silly as that sounds, but grandly strange. The pictures evoked by most Mother Goose rhymes are equally impossible. Breeches made of haggis bags? Somebody sitting on a tuffet (especially when there is no such word or thing as a "tuffet")? Boys made of frogs and snails and puppy-dog's tails? All are equally unimaginable to the eye but easily understandable to the mind.

But most illustrations for nursery rhymes are anything but impossible; illustrators tend to explain the rhymes away in the same doggedly singleminded way that scholars have tried to allegorize them. Sometimes this makes for good jokes, as when Randolph Caldecott or Maurice Sendak turn simple rhymes like "This is the house that Jack built" or "Hector Protector" into long, complicated narratives in an extended sequence of pictures; the effect of these is something like the relationship between complex riddles and their commonplace answers, except in reverse: the riddling words are relatively simple, the pictures that provide the answers complex. But more often than not, literalizing illustrations merely make the rhymes seem pointlessly commonplace rather than magically absurd. The actual silver bells growing on the plants in both Blanche Fisher Wright's and Nicola Bayley's gardens look manufactured, like chintzy Christmas ornaments; and the athletic lunacy of the cow in "Hey diddle diddle" seems hardly even worth noting when illustrators again and again depict it as an optical

illusion—a matter of a cow in the foreground seeming to jump over a moon low in the sky in the background. Either taking these rhymes literally or attempting to literalize them, as Wallace Tripp does when he makes the fox who "gives warning/It's a cold frosty morning" into a TV weatherman, results in a flattening of their mystery.

Consequently, while children should certainly have access to the many ingeniously humorous stories that good illustrators have made out of Mother Goose, we shouldn't allow the existence of those stories to deprive children of the quite different pleasure of the rhymes on their own—the pleasure of hearing or of saying these enjoyable and evocative words without the interference of accompanying illustrations. For this purpose, any large collection of the rhymes will do; but since the main audience for Mother Goose is likely to be those too young to be able to read the rhymes for themselves, the best collection will be one that offers the most to the adult readers who will actually speak the rhymes.

Like many other editions, the Opies' *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* gives adults access to a lot of fine rhymes to read aloud to their children; unlike most other editions, it has the added virtue of explaining the rhymes in a sensible and useful way—offering answers to the riddles, and easily followed directions for the infant amusements. As an added bonus, the *Dictionary* offers careful scholarship that doggedly traces rhymes back to often fascinating origins, happily debunks silly ideas—and meanwhile, offers a rich ragbag of delightfully useless information about subjects as diverse as American slang and Old Norse deities. Reading the *Dictionary* is like exploring the attic of an old house—there is lots of stuff to rummage through, and most of it is just useless and dusty, and some of it is useless and fascinating, and some of it is not just fascinating but useful indeed. The *Dictionary* is much like the rhymes it contains—it has a lot to offer because it's more than a little crazy.

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The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault: Acute Logic and Gallic Wit

by James Gellert

Writing nearly two and a half centuries after the first publication of the fairy tales of Charles Perrault, the respected author, critic, and fellow countryman of Perrault, Paul Hazard, rhetorically asked:

> At what moment did the thought first occur to someone that children might wish for other reading than school work, for other books than catechisms or grammars? What revolutionary first became aware of the child's existence and dared to sanction it? What perspicacious observer noticed children? What benefactor procured for them the joy, multiplied to infinity, of owning a book at last that was truly theirs?" (6-7)

These questions are obviously critical to the development of children's literature; Hazard answers them by identifying the "moment" as the century of Louis XIV, and the "revolutionary" and "benefactor" as the French Academician, Charles Perrault. With the publication of Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez* in 1697, adds Hazard, "Mother Goose came out of the sheds and barns and strutted about Paris; then and for the first time, French children, and later all the children in the world, had a book after their own heart, a book so lovely and so fresh that they were never willing to give it up" (8).