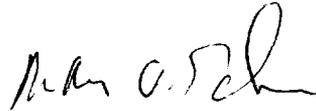


An Examination of Mother Goose:
Making Some Sense out of Nonsense

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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Funny isn't it, how you can't remember what you did last week, but you're able to recall numerous childhood memories that remain vivid despite the years. One of my clearest and fondest memories from my childhood is when I was six years old. At that time my younger sister was just beginning to eat baby food, or I should say she was old enough to start eating baby food. She was not a cooperative child, and trying to get her to swallow, but not spit, was like engaging in combat. My mother tried everything, but what finally worked was the famous jingle about a small boy who terrorizes girls on the playground. This boy was Mother Goose's own Georgie Porgie. We tried many other distracters after this, but my sister refused to eat unless Georgie was sung continuously--it got to be exhausting for those singing, but she loved it. It was her first experience with nursery rhymes, and it was a smashing success.

The episode was hardly my first introduction to the rhymes; I was already expertly tripping them off the tongue. I had a record which told stories about the rhymes, and I listened to it until I could recite them verbatim. Seventeen years later I am as captivated by these compact masterpieces as that five year old girl. The more I learned about the rhymes, their history, and the controversy they sometimes spark, the more intrigued I

became to study them further. And so I have learned more, although I believe I have only scratched the surface. I discovered fascinating theories as to who the revered "Mother Goose" actually was, as well as who some of her players might have been. Most amazingly, I found a heated controversy as to whether the Lady's rhymes are actually suitable for young children, or whether they model deviant behavior and encourage violence.

So just who was Mother Goose? Although theories abound, my personal feeling is that her anonymity is part of both her charm and success. As varied as her rhymes however, are the explanations as to her identity. The more well-known theories are easy to discover, although they often sound as fanciful as the jingles themselves. Upon more intense research, theories can be found which, although lacking in dramatical flair, contain a simple and logical believability. One of the two most common explanations combines two famous women both named Bertha, both from France (Baring-Gould, 16). The first was Queen Bertha, mother of Charlemagne she was known for having an oddly shaped webbed foot which was and is pictured in much French folklore as sitting at a spinning wheel surrounded by children who are listening to her tales. The other Bertha of this theory was married to Robert II of France, and, so the story goes, the result of their incestuous marriage was a child with the head of a goose. Hardly a pleasant visualization, and certainly the name "Mother

Goose" as applied to this Bertha is a more literal term than any adult would conceive of. Originally the stories of these two women were separate, but because of their shared name, the two stories became one over the years.

Having heard from Europeans, it seems only fitting that Americans make their bid to claim that Mother Goose is indeed, like apple pie or baseball, an American institution. Their candidate is Elizabeth Goose (originally Vertigoose) of Boston who lived from 1665-1756. Having had several children (and in turn several more grandchildren), Elizabeth supposedly told the most wonderful stories and rhymes, both from memory and her imagination. In 1719,

her son-in-law supposedly published a book from his printshop which contained many of these rhymes and jingles (Delmar, 12).



Some say he did so to mock her, but {Bleirer, 34}. it is much more pleasant to side with those who believe he did it as a tribute. Either way, this is a flimsy theory at best. No matter that a copy of the 1719 book has ever been found, no matter that any printing of the book has ever been uncovered. Indeed no matter that the first usage of "Mother Goose" as connected with stories for the young was Perrault's 1679 collection of fairy tales. Ignore the fact that Perrault's publication appeared twenty-two years

before Thomas Fleet's elusive book. Even supposing that the Fleet book did indeed exist, using the title of Mother Goose was hardly an idea that began with Elizabeth Goose. Proponents cling fiercely to the theory, however, and make the pilgrimage to "Mother Goose's" headstone. Ironically, this grave holds Isaac Goose's first wife; Elizabeth is buried in an unmarked grave some distance away (Delmar, 13).

Romantic as this version is, few serious scholars of the rhymes support it, and actually a simple and quite believable theory for the name does exist. In The Authentic Mother Goose, Barchilon and Petit suggest that in France the older women of the village were given the job of tending the geese since it required little skill or strength. Because it did require so little, these women were no doubt faced with a dilemma. Either they could sit and stiffen from boredom or find a way to pass the time. Telling stories and singing songs were amusements the women could share not only with each other but with the village children as well. These women earned the title "ma mere"--Mother Goose (Barchilon and Petit, 10). Hardly a glamorous theory, and yet decidedly so, for there is always charm in the thought of the common person contributing to something of lasting importance.

Although I personally sense this last theory is closest to the truth, I must admit that I think it best if we never know. If Mother Goose had been a living,

breathing person whose picture we could show children and make real to them, then I believe she would lose some of her appeal. Now she is a friend whom each child creates in his/her own mind, tailor-made to fill that child's special needs, and what is more real to a child than that which is magic?

Magic or fun had little to do with the rhymes in the beginning, however. Basically, the verses served four purposes for those who used them:

educational, historical, political, and/or social.

The first was educational, as these jingles were sung or chanted for infants and toddlers. Most of these

Most of these rhymes have accompanying movements.

This group is perhaps the one which is still widely known and used by parents and teachers of young children today.

Such toe or finger play rhymes

as "This Little Pig" or "Thumbkin" are popular in nursery, child care,

{Arbuthnot, 125}.

and preschool centers, at least those that I have observed or worked in. Concepts such as parts of the body, letters,



and counting are not mastered after one exposure, and even in Mother Goose's time this was apparent, as many of the rhymes were teaching the same lesson with different words but very similar motions. These rhymes had the wonderful advantage of teaching the children without their being aware of the learning taking place. This group of rhymes is probably one of the smallest, although for someone with young children dozens of them may spring to mind.

Another group was that written to record some important historical event. The most famous of this category, of course, is "London Bridge." Although most people are familiar with the first and ninth verses which tell of the bridges "falling down" and being rebuilt, they may not realize that sixteen additional verses exist. For example, here are the first four verses of the rhyme:

London Bridge is falling down, my Fair Lady.

How shall we build it up again, my Fair Lady?

Build it up with wood and clay, my Fair Lady.

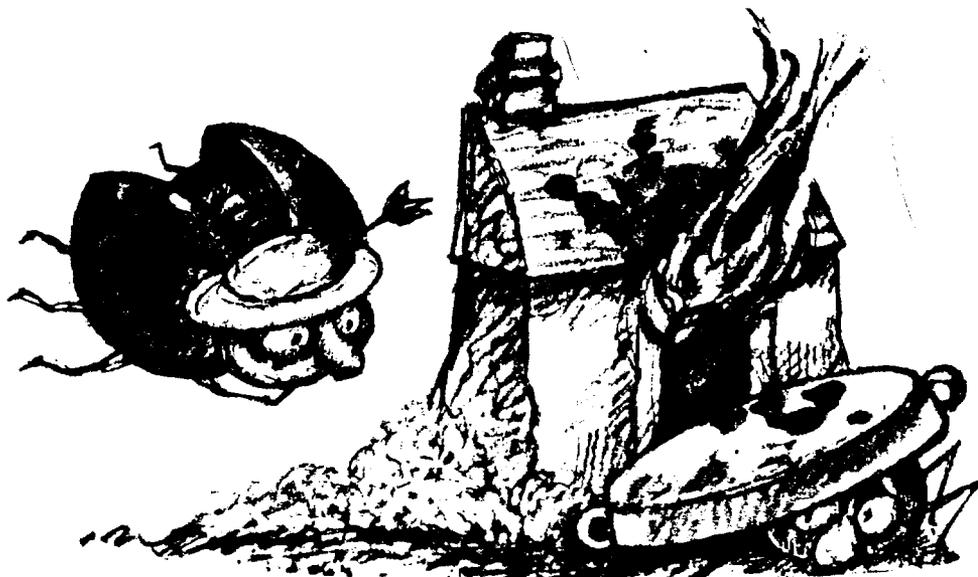
Wood and clay will wash away, my Fair Lady (Spier, 1-9).

The entire rhyme actually tells the story of the bridge's lifespan and its destruction by the great fire of London, for although the fire did not burn the bridge itself, it greatly weakened the arches and supports. While the rhyme is not specific as to which reconstructions of the bridge it describes, documentation does exist of one Margery Bachelier, who in 1437 left her gold wedding band to the bridge through her will (Spier, 35). Perhaps this

inspired the verse "Build it up with silver and gold, my Fair Lady."

Another lesser known rhyme which records a historical event is this one:

Dr. Foster went to Gloucester
In a shower of rain;
He stepped in a puddle
Up to his middle,
And never went there again(Delmar, 124).



{Lobel, 22}.

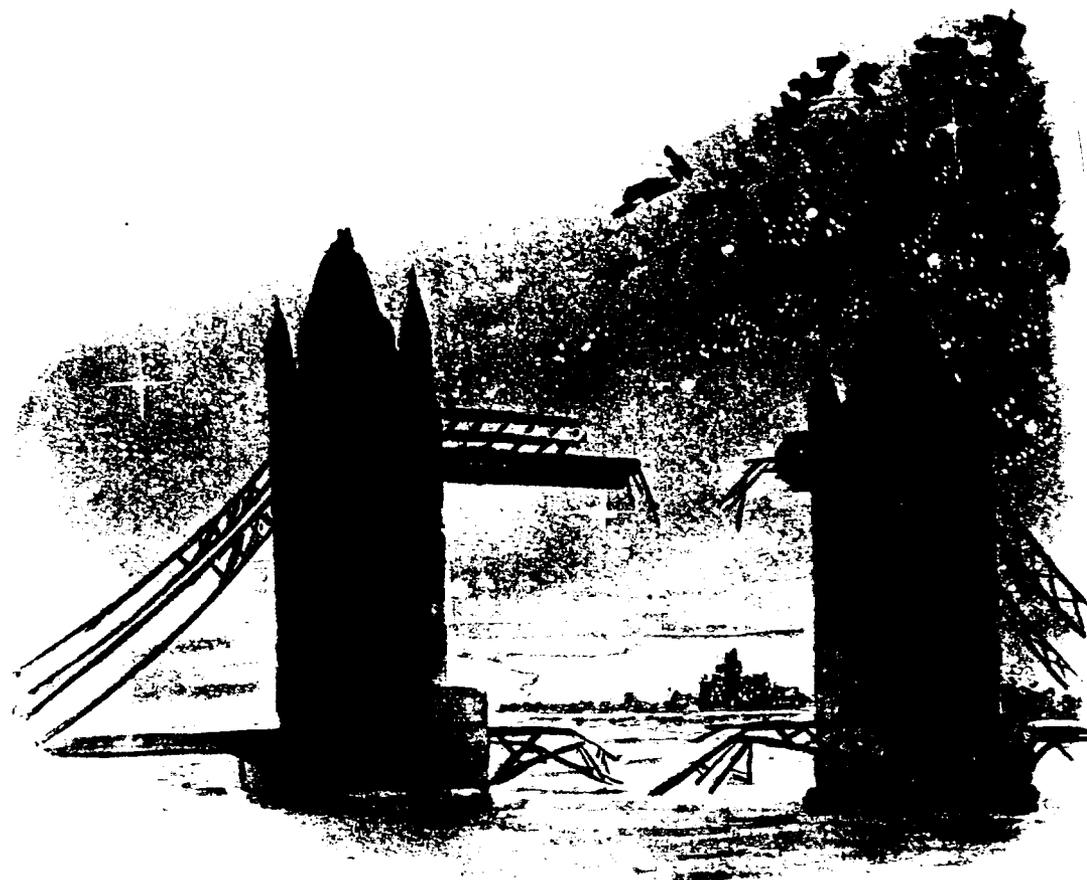
This rhyme is speculated to be about Edward I, whose horse and coach became so deeply mired in mud that the king vowed on the spot he would never step foot in the town again (Delmar, 124).

Although almost every rhyme is said to hide some historical or political allusion, this is highly unlikely. Some authors, however, such as Katherine Elwes Thomas,

interpret all rhymes to fit some historical event or political scandal. Many of the jingles in Thomas's book have explanations which seem simply too fantastic to believe. One such is her interpretation of the famous jingle, "Jack and Jill." She states that the names are terms for priests, two in particular, Bishop Tarbes and Cardinal Wolsey. Poor Cardinal Wolsey is attached to at least a dozen rhymes in her book. This time, however, he is travelling to France (or "up the hill") and Miss Thomas claims that during this trip, the two priests laid groundwork for Henry's VIII's split with the Roman Church, therefore undoing themselves (Thomas, 92). Two problems present themselves when reading her intriguing explanations. First, Thomas seldom gives conclusive documentation but frequently uses that from which she could draw conclusions. Secondly, she fails to offer any additional theories that exist about the rhymes. "Jack and Jill," for instance, was said to be based on a Scandinavian myth of two children captured by the moon while trying to steal a bucket of dew (Eckenstein, 20). Not only does Miss Thomas ignore such theories, but she presents her own as if they are clearly documented fact.

Some rhymes were written as political statements, however, as that was the only safe form of negative expression in the days of kingly rule. To avoid losing their heads, political critics of the time would write catchy jingles full of symbolism which the common people

would pick up and circulate through the land. The most famous in this category is the well known rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle," a rhyme about Queen Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth was often called the cat and is said to be the cat of many nursery rhymes. It is also said that she loved to dance to fiddle music, and did so often. The dog in the rhyme is speculated to be Elizabeth's on-again off-again lover Robert Dudley, whom she once referred to as



{Mother Goose's Nursery Rhymes, 37}.

"her little lap dog" (Delmar, 131). The "dish" and the "spoon" were involved in making sure the Queen's food arrived free from poison. The story goes that when the

Queen discovered that her dish and spoon had been secretly married, she was so enraged that she locked them in the Tower of London where they spent the rest of their lives and had two children.

While several other famous politically based rhymes exist, such as "Ride a Cock Horse" or "Mistress Mary," they are not as abundant as some would have us believe. Many of the rhymes do, however, show something perhaps more fascinating and important than either historical or political influences. Robert Darnton believes that the rhymes exhibit a social record of their times. Such rhymes as "The Old Woman in a Shoe," "Pease Porridge," or "Old Mother Hubbard" demonstrate actual living conditions of common people. Also, rather than being a specific tale of a single person's life, these rhymes were written to reflect the general harshness and struggle that most men, women, and children lived every day (Darnton, 40). Because parents of the 1600s and 1700s did not believe in coddling their children, they did not hide the horrors of society from them. Children in this time period grew up with poverty and violence from the moment they were born. Mother Goose's catchy jingles no doubt gave them an outlet for dealing with the hunger, abuse, and hard labor which they faced daily. During this time, children spent many hours playing the games that went along with these rhymes and indeed, parents knew them as well as their children.

Not every one has embraced the nursery rhyme though.

Almost from their beginning, opponents have criticized their use with children. These opponents give two basic reasons why the rhymes are unsuitable for children: lack of moral codes and encouragement of violence. The Quakers were one of the first groups to object to Mother Goose. They felt that many acts described in the jingles were sacrilegious, but admitting their power to catch on they tried to doctor the rhymes (Baring-Gould, 19). One rhyme that underwent the transformation was "Hey Diddle Diddle"; the lines were not totally changed, but the rhyme was slaughtered. "Hey Diddle Diddle . . . was redone by some sober 'parson' as follows: the dog does not laugh, but barks; the cow does not jump over the moon but under the moon, that is, below, in the meadow. . ."(Bodger, 405). Obviously the attempts of the Quakers to tame the Lady's rhymes failed. But they are not the only ones who felt that the rhymes exhibited a negative influence. In 1925, Mrs. Winifred Sackville Stoner, Jr., tried her own hand at writing what she considered to be sound educational nursery literature (Baring-Gould, 19). What she turned out, unfortunately, were poor imitations such as:

Every perfect person owns

Just two hundred and six bones(Baring-Gould, 19).

Probably the most famous tirade against nursery rhymes came in 1952 when Geoffrey Handely-Taylor published a work on nursery literature reform. This work contains a forty-three line detailed breakdown of the violent and unethical

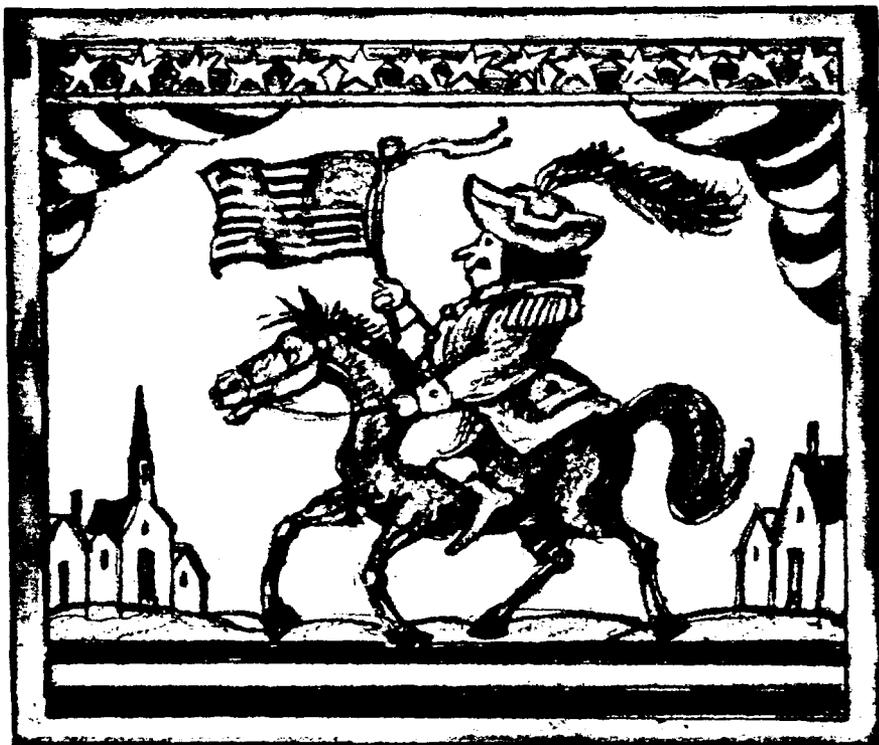
acts taken from what Taylor claims to be an "average collection." The list includes some acts which I cannot find an example of, for instance body snatching or devouring of human flesh, and lists acts which although not violent, can be considered immoral, such as racial discrimination and cursing. Not only did I fail to locate rhymes to support all of Handley-Taylor's list, but the literature which I studied gave no indication of his having listed these rhymes in his own work.

My research turned up surprisingly little from the opponents side. Taylor's publication in 1952 is the last major critical work that I discovered. Literature from the mid-to-late 1960s is much more positive, with the 1970s and 1980s being relatively quiet, but positive as well.

As fiercely as those above cry out against the rhymes, proponents of Mother Goose clamor just as strongly for their continuance. The advocates see many benefits of using Mother Goose as both a formal and an informal learning tool. One reason that many educators support the rhymes goes back to Darnton's view of their social origins. Children from the inner city share much with the children of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both had little time to spend worrying about such luxuries as playing or learning; their goal was in surviving. These children of the city live in a hard world, and placing them in a middle class learning situation is like placing an American child in a Japanese classroom. When these urban

children are presented with material that is the middle class ideal, they simply cannot relate to it. Further, presenting this type of material to such children fails to help them deal with their problems; quite the contrary, it frustrates them and may actually cause them to react outwardly in a negative manner. Mother Goose is different, however; she is not pretentious, nor does she cater exclusively to the well-to-do. When children read her lines they can work off their anger through them without actually having to go out and do something negative.

All children (all people for that matter) use some kind of escape mechanism when they need to let off steam. Some people turn to athletics, some to hobbies or work, others to reading. Take the rhyme, "The Old Woman Who Lived In a Shoe," for example; the child can use this rhyme to pretend to be the mother and can play out the role



of being in control of a situation rather than a helpless child. This eliminates

{Lobel, 53}.

the child's need to go do something destructive to let out this same energy.

Bruno Bettelheim feels that teaching children how to deal with anger and violence has been neglected by adults (Bettelheim, 188). Children are presented with reading material which is blatantly devoid of aggression and then punished for even minor acts of violence with no thought given to the violence in the punishment itself (Bettelheim, 189). Children use play to try out many roles and often imitate what they see at home. Parents who give out violent punishments at home should not be shocked to find their children engaging in violent play. Indeed, by using nursery rhymes, children have the perfect cathartic vehicle which is no more destructive than the imitative play of the home. ". . . escape values are necessary for coping with the hard realities of life. We might hypothesize that disadvantaged children, of all children, stand most in need of the magic of the fairy tale in their literary fare"(Seaberg, 509). So for the disadvantaged child, Mother Goose is a sort of celebration of life, all that is good, bad, and glorious.

But other benefits of the Lady's literature exist for all children. The major benefit children can gain from Mother Goose is in the area of language/reading development. Beginning with the educational rhymes that are done with the infant and toddler, these rhymes expose children to the flow and rhythm of the language. The

actions that accompany the rhymes and the proximity necessary encourage interaction, whether it is a smile and a coo from an infant or a toddler's hesitant voice joining in the song. Educators have long known of the teaching power of the jingles, although the use of the rhymes has not always been implemented to their potential. For instance, in 1916 a series of basal readers published by Ginn used a nursery rhyme as an introduction to the lesson (Delmar, 267). The rhyme was first to be memorized by the children and then the lesson was to be read. Unfortunately, the lessons themselves used the



(Baring-Gould, 245).

Mother Goose characters to present a "Dick and Jane" reading format. The rhyme itself had little relevance to the actual reading lesson, and the text of the reader continued on for page after page engaging the characters in what Mother Goose herself must have considered appalling conversations.

But before children are ready to attack the actual printed word, they must first develop the appropriate skills. One vital skill is that of discrimination, both auditory and visual. Children can learn these skills through slight differences in voice, expression, or objects. In a house that is noisy and cluttered, learning

to discriminate can become difficult, if not impossible(Bodger, 404). By using Mother Goose rhymes, children can learn to discriminate by alliteration, rhythm, rhyme, and refrain, while having so much fun in doing so that learning ceases to become a chore and is instead a pleasure.

Probably the most important thing a child needs when learning to read is a repertoire of oral skills. One approach to teaching reading is the Language Experience Approach. This school's philosophy is that if the child can say it, then it can be written, and if written can then be read. This approach takes some experience and has the child dictate a story related to that experience. What better motivator than these magical rhymes. Perhaps a pumpkin could be hollowed out and made into a house for Peter's wife, or several shoes could be compared to decide which would make the best home for the old woman and her children. From these simple activities, it is truly amazing what detailed and imaginative stories that children will create. And because the stories have been told by the children themselves, after reading along with the teacher a few times, the children can then read them on their own. Some would say this is memorization and not true reading, but others feel LEA is a valid technique which gives a child practice with real reading situations. While seeing a group of letters and knowing that the word is "cat" can be attributed to memorization, seeing that

word and comprehending what a cat is, is reading, if we accept the definition of reading as being gaining meaning from print. Reading and writing experiences with nursery rhymes are unlimited because of their utter silliness.

If for no other reason, then, Mother Goose's rhymes are valuable because of their creative possibilities. Joan Bodger quotes Walter de la Mare: "These are the rhymes . . . that free the fancy, charm tongue and ear, delight the inward eye" (Bodger, 404). Creative thinking and problem solving are easily fostered with nursery literature. We can set children thinking of ways for Little Bo Peep to find her sheep. Should she organize a search party, Put an add in the paper? We can dig up some of the nursery riddles for the children to solve. Children of today know immediately who Humpty Dumpty is, but before the rhyme was illustrated, it was meant to be a riddle to which the answer was that Humpty was an egg. Another example of a riddle rhyme is the following:

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(Delmar, 45).

The answer to this rhyme is a candle.

If children are a bit older, they can incorporate the rhymes into more formal types of writing. Letter writing,

for example, is a very successful use of the fictitious inhabitants of Mother Goose land. A good way to begin such an adventure is to read "The Jolly Postman" by Janet and Allan Ahlberg. This delightful little book follows the postman on his rounds and finds him delivering mail to fairy tale characters. Various types of mail are received - a postcard, a business letter, an advertising flyer, and a formal invitation, for example. Children would enjoy patterning a letter to a favorite nursery character in which they could allude to the content of the rhymes as well as follow the correct format of the letter. Another way to use nursery literature for writing is to have the children turn a rhyme into a news story. They must take care to include all important information who, what, when, where, why, and how. I have seen examples of such "nursery news" compiled into a newsletter format which can carry the experience into determining headlines, arranging the articles on the page, including pictures, and naming publication.

It seems apparent, then, that the rhymes can be used not



*Georgie Peorgie, pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry;
When the girls begin to play,
Georgie Peorgie runs away.*

{Baring-Gould, 170}.

only as a learning tool, but to build a positive attitude toward learning and school.

Finally, only the question of moral corruption remains. If the question is, "Were the rhymes written with the intention of teaching 'bad' morals?" then for me, the answer surely must be no. Morals are very much in the subjective domain; what is acceptable to one person is taboo to another. While critics like Geoffrey Handley -Taylor argue that the jingles encourage the wrong sort of behavior, others feel differently about the rhymes. According to Barchilon and Petit, "The rhymes are not to be analyzed in terms of logic common sense or moral value. The grossest mistake is to believe that their nonsensicality and often sadistic content can be 'corrupting' (Barchilon and Petit, 35).

Adults have a funny way of trying to guess how children think and to determine what is appropriate for them. The problem in doing so is that they use adult standards, so that an adult decides that the rhymes are unsuitable because of what the adult sees in the rhyme, not what children see. One thing adults might consider is that children do not think as they do. A child has a very egocentric view of the world and a fairly brave outlook on life. A child is often not frightened of things which adults are, especially in the world of literature, perhaps because of the child's need for concrete experiences. Children often have difficulty visualizing

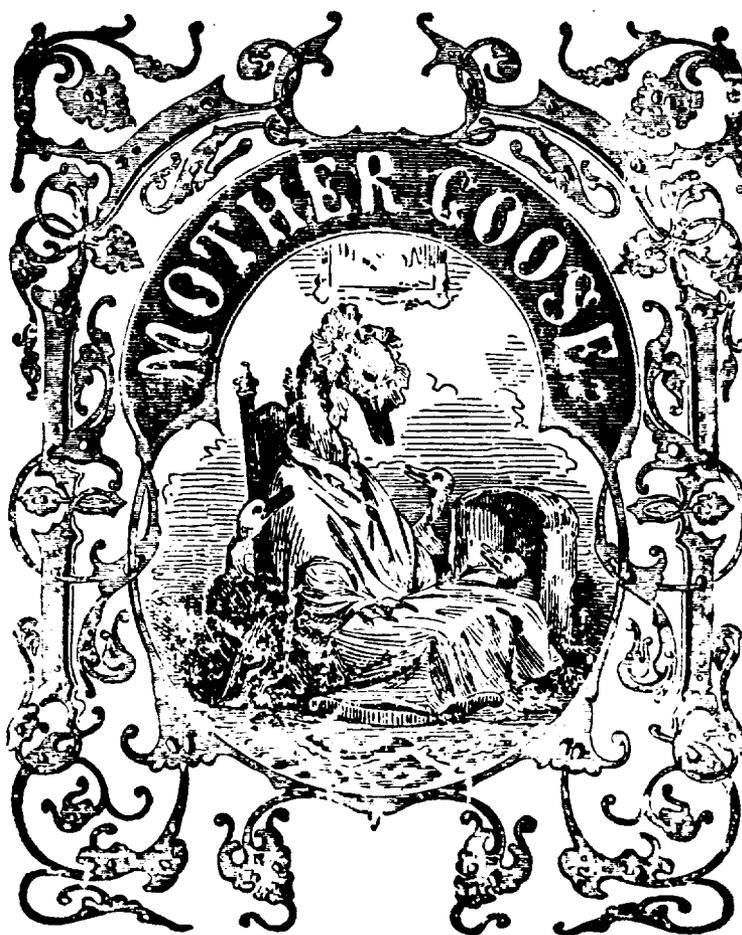
abstract situations; because nursery rhymes are either read by the child or sung to children, they could be visualizing the rhymes any number of ways, and none may be the way an adult interprets them. Also, to young children, such concepts as death are elusive. They have a hard time grasping the permanence of death; children think in terms of Wiley Coyote, who is crushed or flattened time and again but always comes back good as new. Such events do not seem scary if they are seen as only a temporary state of being. Additionally, adults have some strange need to analyze everything and then attach some symbolic meaning. Children take the world at face value; they accept the rhymes for what they are -- entertaining and fun.

For the moment, the debate over the appropriateness of nursery rhymes seems to be dormant. No doubt it will surface again in time, as most issues do, and as with most issues, will likely remain unsolved. It is, I think, important to remember that nursery rhymes have survived from the sixteenth century (and possibly before) to the present. They survived in



{Bleiler, 5}.

great part because they were picked up by children and handed down from parents to children, or passed from child to child and cherished by children everywhere. And chances are, right at this moment, some child, somewhere, is sharing a song or verse with Mother Goose.



(Bleiler, 98).

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