HISTORICAL MEANING IN MOTHER GOOSE: NURSERY RHYMES ILLUSTRATIVE OF ENGLISH SOCIETY BEFORE THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

By William J. Baker

Those few historians who have turned their attention to the Mother Goose nursery rhymes have concerned themselves primarily with two problems. First, they have considered the origins of Mother Goose as a literary form, and have discovered that in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries several Europeans codified an oral tradition which had existed for some time. Charles Perrault's *Les Contes de la Mère l'Oye*, published in Paris in 1697, was translated into English in 1729; and these French and English versions had their counterparts not only in "Fru Gode" or "Fru Gosen" of German folklore, but also in similar rhymes in Scandinavia, Moravia, Italy, and Iceland.[1] Although the rhymes originated in specifically national terms, they are international in theme and type.

A second concern of English-speaking historians has been the unique historical origins of the rhymes—the political events or actual characters in England who initially inspired those old ballads, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, bawdy tavern songs, street cries, counting-out exercises, political squibs, and lullabies which have come to be known as nursery rhymes. According to various speculations, Good King Cole was an ancient British King of Colchester; Doctor Foster who went to Gloucester was Edward I; Tommy Tucker, Old Mother Hubbard, and Little Boy Blue were all references to Cardinal Wolsey; Bo-Peep and Little Miss Muffet were Mary Queen of Scots; the cats in "Hey Diddle Diddle" and "I love little Pussey" were Queen Elizabeth I; Jack Sprat was Charles I, Simple Simon was James II, and Wee Willie Winkle was William III; and the old woman who lived in the shoe with her numerous children was Queen Caroline, the wife of George II. Apparently the stream of such speculations is endless.

This sort of speculation reached its apogee in the work of Katherine Elwes Thomas, who insisted in 1930 that she had established "beyond controversy that the nursery rhymes, largely of

Jacobite origin, are political diatribes, religious philippics, and popular street songs, embodying comedies, tragedies, and love episodes of many great historical personages, lavishly interspersed with English and Scotch folk-lore flung out with dramatic abandon."[2] More recent research suggests, however, that those theories concerning specific historical origins of the rhymes amount to little more than "nebulous guesses."[3] As Iona and Peter Opie, the editors of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, have argued, the theories are so numerous and contradictory that they cancel each other out.[4] The fine lady upon the white horse, for example, has been identified by different investigators as Lady Godiva, Elizabeth I, and Celia Fiennes, the daughter of an officer in Oliver Cromwell's army; and Georgie Porgie has been associated at one time with George I, at another with George Villiers (Duke of Buckingham), and even with Charles I. Undoubtedly many of the nursery rhymes originated with reference to real people, famous and otherwise. But even if we could decide their origins with certainty, they would tell us little about those people.

A more profitable approach to Mother Goose, for the purposes of the historian, is to look to the rhymes for a reconstruction of the life styles, the concerns, the assumptions of English people before the coming of industrialism. Most of the rhymes existed, written or unwritten, before 1750.[5] They are filled with kings and queens, gentlemen and ladies; but also with farmers, shepherds, millers, bakers, blacksmiths, butchers, tinkers, candlestick-makers, tailors, and cobblers. "Occasionally," in the words of May Hill Arbuthnot, "the name of a real person does appear, as Robin Hood or Jack Horner, but history is to be found chiefly in such English place names as Exeter, Gloucester, London Bridge, or in the street cries, old customs, songs, lullabies, games and the like. These reflect the times and places in which these old jingles developed."[6] The rhymes do, indeed, stand as a window through which we can observe that world which is now long past.

Yet some historians ignore the nursery rhymes as a historical source, on the basis that they tell us nothing that we do not already know about pre-industrial England. Admittedly the rhymes do not shed any light on the politics or diplomacy of that age, nor do they contain any details which one can feed into a computer for an analytical quantification of public opinion, much less of economic structure. They are evidence of a different type, useful for the purposes of artistic craftsmanship, not factual analysis. They convey an immediacy, a freshness, a concrete, imaginative picture of those commonplace scenes, activities, and attitudes which people then took for granted, but from which we moderns are far removed.

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The world of Mother Goose is a simple, rural world. While Maid Mary went a-milking, her suitor went not to an office or factory, but "a-hoeing and mowing each morn." Willy Boy too went "to the meadow to see them a-mowing," and "to help them to make the hay." One less energetic little boy "went into a barn, and lay down on some hay," only to have an owl come out, fly about, and frighten him away. One and all were familiar with the animals and

birds which dominate the nursery rhymes: horses, cows, sheep, pigs, dogs, cats, kittens, foxes, ducks, geese, hens, blackbirds, owls, and robins.

Mice and rats, ever-present in the farmhouse or cottage, barns and fields, are especially prominent in the nursery rhymes. A mouse ran up the clock, until the clock struck one; and the three blind mice ran after the farmer's wife, who cut off their tails with her carving knife. It was said of Jerry Hall that he was so small, "a rat could eat him, hat and all." As rats transmitted the old bubonic plague, they were dangerous as well as bothersome. Their eternal enemies, cats, are also plentiful in Mother Goose. The crooked man who walked the crooked mile "bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse." The six little mice who sat down to spin refused to allow Pussey into their midst. "Shall I come in and cut off your threads?" she offered. "No, no, Mistress Pussey," they replied, "you'd bit off our heads." Wise mice, and funny; and significantly omnipresent in the world of Mother Goose.

The harsh treatment accorded those blind mice's tails at the hands of the chopper is only one example cited by some modern critics who see the nursery rhymes as being too sadistic for today's children.[7] But the question of modern nurseries aside, the rhymes are, in fact, authentic representations of a pre-industrial society which was characterized not only by rustic simplicity but also by crudeness and violence. In Mother Goose, robins are often killed, little Johnny Green cruelly drops the pussy in the well, people are beaten and maimed, and blackbirds snap off the nose of the maid in the garden hanging out the clothes. Moreover, the world of the nursery rhymes is as earthy as it is violent. One old rhyme scarcely finds its way into modern editions:

Piss a bed,
Piss a bed,
Barley Butt,
Your Bum is so heavy
You can't get up.

During the Tudor and Stuart eras, three-quarters of all Englismen lived in the countryside, mostly in small villages of 200-300 people. With their villages opening onto the open fields, they lived close to nature. Each spring, long before Wordsworthian romanticism, daffodils were imaginatively welcomed: "Daffy-down-dilly is come to town, with a yellow petticoat, and a green gown." One's livelihood was in nature's hands. Not only were the crops dependent on the proper amount of sun and rain, but even the making of bread depended on the wind-powered mill:

Blow, wind, blow! and go, mill, go!
That the miller may grind his corn:
That the baker may take it,
And into bread make it,
And bring us a loaf in the morn.

For several centuries prior to industrialism, the export of wool was a prime English occupation. "Old woman, old woman, shall we go a-shearing?" asked the would-be lover. Alas, Little Bo-Peep once lost her sheep; and worse still,

Little Boy Blue was found fast asleep under the haystack while his sheep were loose in the meadow and the cows in the barley or wheat field. Apparently the local leaders in the enclosure movement had not yet erected their fences. Certainly the cloth made from that wool was not yet being turned over to the process of mass-production in factories. In one of the rhymes, Little Tommy Tacket sits upon his cracket, near the "half a yard of cloth [which] will make him coat and jacket."

Village life given to sheep-tending or agricultural labor was a self-contained, somewhat isolated existence in those days before *The Times* was delivered to the doorstep or the B.B.C. brought the news to most living rooms. In the older nursery rhymes there are few references to the world outside England. No mention is made of America, Africa, or Asia. Only Spain and France figure in the original English versions of Mother Goose. There is one plaintive plea for the "rain, rain" to go to Spain; and there is a ditty about a visit from the King of Spain's daughter, "all for the sake of my little nut tree." A rousing verse depicts a king of France who went up the hill with forty thousand men, then came down the hill and "n'er went up again." As Spain and France were two of the three continental powers (the Dutch being the third) with which England was in conflict during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, two old family rhymes are of no little significance: at one time "there was a navy went to Spain," and at another time there were "eleven ships sailing o'er the main, some bound for France and some for Spain."

Given the provincial nature of rural life, Bobby Shafto, "gone to sea, silver buckles at his knee," was something of a romantic hero who had broken the tyranny of place. Although most villagers were doubtlessly satisfied with their life, unaware of the larger world, occasional lines from Mother Goose indicate a certain restlessness:

> Oh that I were where I would be,
> Then would I be where I am not;
> But where I am there I must be,
> And where I would be I can not.

"Far from home across the sea, to foreign parts I go," begins one of the rhymes. And there is more than meets the eye in a stanza concerning Tom the piper's son, who "learnt to play when he was young, and all the tune that he could play, was 'Over the hills and far away'!"

Though settled and provincial, life was not static for English villagers. Itinerants were regularly to be seen passing through one's village. "Old chairs to mend! Old chairs to mend!" "Old clothes to sell! Old clothes to sell!" cried the wayfarer. Peripatetic tinkers went from village to village in search of work. "Old Knives-and-Scissors," a traveling knife and scissors grinder, figures prominently in one of the rhymes. And there were beggars constantly on the move, "some in rags, and some in jags, and one in a velvet gown," whose arrival was announced by barking dogs.

Villagers themselves went to weekly or monthly markets, often several villages away; and they went to annual fairs. References to both markets and

fairs fill the nursery rhymes. "To market, to market, to buy a fat pig." Some little pigs went to market, while other little pigs stayed home. But one woman who "went to market for her eggs to sell," once fell asleep beside the king's highway, and a mischievous pedlar cut her petticoats "up to her knees, which made the little woman to shiver and sneeze." Sad too was the case of Simple Simon, who "met a pieman, going to the fair" but had not a penny to pay for a taste of the pieman's ware. Jaunts to the fairs at Banbury, Scarborough, Derby and St. Ives are immortalized in Mother Goose.

So is the importance of London, whose phenomenal growth in size and importance during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries[8] is reflected in the nursery rhymes. While occasional references are made to the old towns of Norwich, Bristol, Gloucester, Newcastle, Dover and the like,[9] only to London does the man go to buy himself a wife, to bring her home in a wheelbarrow. To London, of course, the pussey cat went to see the Queen. Certainly it was none other than London Bridge that was falling down. At Charing Cross sat the black man upon his black horse; and at Picadilly the coachman met a pretty girl, and took her by the hand. London dominates the nursery rhymes as thoroughly as it dominated the political, economic, and social life of the kingdom.

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Yet Mother Goose illustrates not only how and where people lived, worked, and moved about. The rhymes also reveal social attitudes. On the subject of courtship and marriage, for example, Mother Goose conveys a realistic, unromantic perspective. The man who wooed the little maid received the word that he "must say a little more, and produce a little ore" before the maid would "make a little print in your bed, bed, bed." A certain John was urged to sell his fiddle to buy his wife a gown, but he vowed that "for ne'er a wife in town" would he part with his fiddle. Marriage in Mother Goose is hardly the type where the partners live "happily ever after" according to the fairy tale formula. Peter the pumpkin eater could keep his wife at home only by nonsensically putting her into a pumpkin shell, where he kept her very well. One nursery rhyme marriage was particularly disastrous. Married on Sunday, the wife "began to scold on Monday" and became worse, until she died on Friday. "Glad was I on Saturday night," as the husband put it, "to bury my wife on Sunday." In a male-dominated world, society inevitably blamed the woman as the source of marital strife. Mother Goose tacitly supported that prejudice.

Mother Goose also assumed an attitude of social deference. The manner in which most Englishmen understood their relation to their "betters" stands at the heart of many of the rhymes. Stationed above the world of peasants, laborers, and craftsmen were *gentlemen* to whom the herd of English humanity deferred. There were masters to be obeyed. "Master I have, and I am his man," one of the rhymes begins on a note scarcely removed from medieval feudalism.

Gentlemen did not work with their hands. They were to be served; their physical needs were to be provided with peasant toil. Even the animals in Mother Goose assume a deferential posture. "Baa, baa, black sheep." For whom were his three bags of wool reserved? The first was for his master, the second for his

dame, and only the last for "the little boy who lives down the lane." "Hickety, pickety, my black hen." She lays eggs, of course, for gentlemen. "Six little mice sat down to spin . . . , weaving coats *for gentlemen*." Not to be out-done by the animals, Little Blue Betty sold ale to all comers, but reserved her *good* ale for gentlemen.

The idea of a stratified society was an unquestioned assumption, supported regularly by local parsons whose sermons emphasized the divinely-ordained, unalterable "station" into which each individual was born. One old Mother Goose riddle, underscoring the larger structure of authority, made much sense to farm laborers:

> What God never sees;
> What the king seldom sees;
> What we see every day.

The answer: an equal. Aristocrats even rode their horses differently from common folk, according to one rhyme sung while a child was being pumped up and down on his father's foot:

> This is the way the ladies ride,
> Nimble, nimble, nimble, nimble;
> This is the way the gentlemen ride,
> A gallop a trot, a gallop a trot;
> This is the way the farmers ride,
> Jiggety jog, jiggety jog.

Most of the nursery rhymes were not originally composed for children.[10] Adults instinctively put their own class assumptions into their ballads, riddles, proverbs, and other popular oral expressions; and when those pieces became domesticated, they merely reinforced, for children, the idea of a stratified society. If it can be argued that the Christian religion tended to keep adults in their "appointed place" and even to make them satisfied with their station in life, then a similar analysis can be rendered concerning Mother Goose's role in offering for children an escape into fantasy. No less than the later Cinderella fairy tales, nursery rhymes allowed even the children of poor farm laborers to "play at queen and king as down the garden walks we go." "Lavender blue and rosemary green," in the words of a more familiar rhyme, "when I am king, you shall be queen." Here was the ultimate unrealistic exercise of the imagination, as much in the realm of make-believe as the cow jumping over the moon. Inadvertently the nursery rhymes became a part of the ritual of social control, one of the many subtle forms of mythology geared to the maintenance of order and stability in pre-industrial England.

They were also used for the inculcation of social morality concerning misdemeanors such as lying and stealing. In "Lyer Lyer Licksplit" who turned about the candlestick, the question is asked: "What's good for lyers?" And the answer is equally direct: "Brimstone and fire." Thieves especially came to a bad end, according to Mother Goose. The Knave of Hearts stole the tarts "and took them clean away." But he was caught, beat "full sore," and made to vow "he'd steal no more." When Charley stole the barly from the baker's shop, "the baker came out and gave him a clout, which made poor Charley hop." Tom the piper's son fared little better. After stealing and eating the sweetmeat pig, "Tom was beat, and Tom went howling down the street." The humorous but violent fate of Taffy the Welshman constituted a morality drama of the first order. As punishment for having stolen a marrow bone, a leg of lamb, and a piece of meat, Taffy was "beat about his head," his socks were filled with clay, and his coat and trousers were hung "to roast before the fire."

In the frontispiece of a song book designed "for all little Masters and Misses," published about 1788, the point was made that "Every pretty moral Tale, should o'er the infant mind prevail."[11] Portions of Mother Goose are on the order of such "pretty moral tales." Although the nursery rhymes were doubtlessly told primarily for the entertainment of children, they in fact served the didactic purpose of confirming social values as well as reinforcing social attitudes.

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In considering the use of Mother Goose for social history, three conclusions are in order. First, the content of the nursery rhymes reminds us that *no* material is outside the purview of the historian's craft. Folklore has as much to say on the past as do government documents, manuscript letters, or philosophical treatises. Indeed, when handled with care the nursery rhymes suggest more about the way people actually lived and thought than do all the official publications at our disposal.

The rhymes furthermore serve as a corrective on the old tendency to regard history in terms of politics, diplomacy, and wars. Most historical accounts of Tudor and Stuart England are studded with kings and their ministers; and with parliamentary and military maneuverings. While there is little need to quibble with the primacy of this solid core of important men, institutions, and events, surely a well-balanced history must also look to "the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker." One might well ask, for example, what mercantilism, or "the divine right of kings," or the battle of Blenheim, had to do with a certain poor old woman and her kind:

> There was an old woman
> And nothing she had,
> And so this old woman
> Was said to be mad.
> She'd nothing to eat,
> She'd nothing to wear,
> She'd nothing to lose,
> She'd nothing to fear,
> She'd nothing to ask,
> And nothing to give,
> And when she did die,
> She'd nothing to leave.

Finally, Mother Goose reveals how vastly different the past was from the present. If one of the values in the study of history is to discover not only how people in earlier days were so like us, but also how different from us they were,

then the nursery rhymes perform an essential service. The world of Mother Goose is foreign territory to us moderns whose lives are largely urban, automated and media-oriented. Conspiculously absent from the rhymes are radios, television, phonographs, and telephones; and even newspapers and magazines. The rhymes portray no factories and no machines—and certainly no automobiles, trains, or planes. Even their shops are not retail stores as we know them. It is not merely a world that we have lost;[12] it is a world that most of us—personally—have never known. Through Mother Goose we can understand that distant and foreign world a bit better.

NOTES

[1]Iona and Peter Opie, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 8-11; William S. Baring-Gould and Ceil Baring-Gould, eds., *The Annotated Mother Goose* (New York, 1962), p. 17

[2]Katherine Elwes Thomas, *The Real Personages of Mother Goose* (Boston, 1930), p. 17.

[3]May Hill Arbuthnot, ed., *The Real Mother Goose* (Chicago, 1966), p. 3.

[4]Opies, *Oxford Dictionary of Mother Goose*, p. 27.

[5]Ibid., pp. 6-8; Baring-Goulds, *Annotated Mother Goose*, pp. 15-16.

[6]Arbuthnot, *Real Mother Goose*, p. 3.

[7]See Baring-Goulds, *Annotated Mother Goose*, pp. 19-21.

[8]G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London, 1946), pp. 142, 206, 287.

[9]Significantly absent from the older rhymes are any references to Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, and Leeds—small, unimportant towns before the Industrial Revolution.

[10]Opies, *Oxford Dictionary of Mother Goose*, p. 3.

[11]Baring-Goulds, *Annotated Mother Goose*, p. 100.

[12]Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (Chicago, 1965).

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