

MOTHER GOOSE



A Frog He Would A-Wooing Go



A frog he would a-woeing go,
Sing heigh ho! says Rowley,
Whether his mother would let him or no.
With a rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,
Heigh ho! says Anthony Rowley.

Humpty Dumpty



Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Children for many generations have listened to their parents read or recite poems and jingles that we know as Mother Goose rhymes or nursery rhymes. Hardly a child grows up without learning by heart “*Hey Diddle, Diddle*,” “*Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake*,” or “*Jack and Jill*.” Even before they really understand what the words mean, children are amused by “*This Little Pig Went to Market*” or lulled to sleep by “*Rock-a-bye, Baby*.” Why are the jingles sometimes called Mother Goose rhymes?

Was Mother Goose a Real Person?

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The name Mother Goose first appeared on the frontispiece of Charles Perrault’s collection of fairy tales (*Contes de ma Mère l’Oye*) in 1697, but it is possible that the name had been known for a long time. In French villages older women were probably given the task of keeping the geese. Since these women were also the village storytellers, they might have been called *ma mère l’Oye*. Some believe the original Mother Goose was the mother of the French emperor Charlemagne (742-814). This woman, who was called Goose-Footed Bertha, was famous for the tales she told her children.

In Boston’s Old Granary Burying Ground a tombstone marks a grave that is said to be Mother Goose’s. A woman named Mistress Goose (Vergoose or Vertigoose) lived in Boston, Massachusetts, toward the end of the 17th century. She was the mother-in-law of Thomas Fleet, a Boston printer. Fleet is reported to have published in 1719 a book called *Songs for the Nursery*; or *Mother Goose’s Melodies for Children*. It was a collection of the rhymes his mother-in-law sang to her grandchildren. No copy of the Fleet volume has ever been discovered, however, so scholars do not accept the story as true.



John Newbery of London prepared a collection of nursery rhymes before he died in 1767. It was published in 1781 under the title of *Mother Goose’s Melody: or, Sonnets for the Cradle*. In 1785 Isaiah Thomas of Massachusetts published a reprint of the Newbery edition for American children. These

two books contain the first written versions, but we know that many of the rhymes are really much older.

Most nursery rhymes were never intended for the nursery. During the 16th century in England adults sang ballads, madrigals, and rounds. Mothers sang the songs to their infants, and so the songs were brought into the nursery. The people of Elizabethan England also liked to tell riddles. Many of these riddles became part of the literature of the nursery. Other rhymes referred to political events and were recited or sung in taverns and marketplaces. Children hearing them would seize upon a catchy refrain or appealing phrase and make the musical rhymes their own.

Probably the only nursery rhymes meant especially for children are the rhymes that mothers sang to their children at bedtime, the rhymes that taught the children how to count or say the alphabet, and the rhymes that accompanied the games mothers and children played together.

Children in every country have nursery rhymes. The jingles often reflect the history or customs of the people. English rhymes refer repeatedly to London, Wales, Queen Anne, King George, and many other places and people familiar to English children. American nursery-rhyme collections include the well-known “*Yankee Doodle*,” which appeared during the American Revolution, and “*Mary Had a Little Lamb*,” supposedly based on a true incident.



All over the world children delight in hearing and reciting nursery rhymes. Each year new editions of nursery rhymes are published. There are several reasons for their great popularity. First, the subjects of the rhymes are extremely varied. Bad boys, crooked men, old women, birds, dogs, cats, frogs, kings, and queens all appear in nursery rhymes. Many rhymes tell a good story, full of action and fun. The wildly exaggerated humor appeals to children. The rhymes also have a definite rhythm that children love. Sometimes a refrain is repeated. Sometimes combinations of sounds make lovely poetry. There are funny rhymes and sad rhymes, silly rhymes and beautiful rhymes. In short, there is a jingle for every taste and mood. ♣

Jack Sprat



Jack Sprat
Could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no lean;
Betwix them both,
They cleared the plate,
And licked the platter clean.

This Little Piggy



This little piggy went to market,
This little piggy stayed home,
This little piggy had roast beef,
This little piggy had none,
And this little piggy cried,
Wee, wee, wee, all the way home.

Jack and Jill



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.