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The Generative Power of Nursery Rhymes

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Generative Power of Nursery Rhymes

Ronald Reichertz (bio)

The history of nursery rhyme reformation and re-formation reveals the great staying power and creative vitality of the form. There are several ways to develop such a history of the rhymes and to consider how they

inspire or interact with other forms of children's literature. For example, Lucy Rollin's treatment of the rhymes within a cultural and psychological context suggests a social history of the rhymes along the line of Jack Zipes's work on folk tale (Rollin 136). Such a history would elaborate on the link between the subversive tendency in the rhymes and their overriding preoccupation with what Zipes calls "maternity," a quality associated ". . . with 'pleasure, wishes, and desire' over and above 'moral instruction and guidance'" (Rollin 150). I take an alternate route, one that examines some representative reformations (attempts to remove imperfections through revision) and re-formatations (alternative formations or substitutions) during historical periods dominated by specific assumptions about what constitutes appropriate children's literature. These reformations and re-formatations include simple revisions of words and phrases, substitutions, parodies, and entirely new creations, as well as reassessments of the form based on classifications and other critical strategies.

Since its self-conscious beginnings as religious didacticism in the seventeenth century, children's literature has been categorized as predominantly moral didactic, informational didactic, or imaginative, with some key periods during which it was left uncategorized through lack of any coherent adult interest. During such periods of neglect in the otherwise didactic eighteenth century, a century that opened dominated by religious didacticism and closed dominated by moral didacticism, collections of nursery rhymes appeared; their reformation is most frequently associated with a sure sense of what constitutes appropriate children's literature.¹ A brief look at a fairly recent attempt to reform nursery rhymes illustrates this point.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s Geoffrey Hall, a wealthy Manchester merchant, and Geoffrey Handley-Taylor led a campaign against violence in nursery rhymes on two fronts: Hall rewrote traditional rhymes, publishing his verses in several editions of *New Rhymes for Old* (1949+), and Handley-Taylor compiled and annotated *A Selected Bibliography of Literature Relating to Nursery Rhyme Reform* (1952). Both of these works were

published by True Aim, a publishing house created by Hall to make available revised material meant to safeguard children from the painful and corrupting influence of violence. The fact that this attempt at reform took place at a time when imaginative literature had long since won a central place as appropriate literature for children is probably related to the violence associated with the Second World War. There was a good deal of attention given to violence and sexuality in children's reading on both sides of the Atlantic immediately following the war, including a congressional investigation of comic books and Frederic Wertham's publication of *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) in the United States.

Hall's efforts also received considerable attention from various publications in England, Ireland, and Australia. After returning to read the originals, reviewers generally agreed that many of the traditional rhymes were indeed violent in contrast to Hall's versions:

Hush-a-bye Baby
On the tree top,
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock.
When the bough bends,
The cradle won't fall;
Then will swing baby,
Cradle and all.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Soon picked up Humpty Dumpty again.

Three kind mice, three kind mice,
See how they run, see how they run;
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
She cut off some cheese with a carving knife;
Did you ever see such a thing in your life

As three kind mice!

Although none of these reformed versions have survived in collections, the reviewer for the *Weekly Overseas Mail* applauded Hall for "eradicating the undesirable elements . . . without sacrificing any of the qualities of simple rhythm and wording." Further, the reviewer added, the Hall versions allow for a development of "a truer sense of humour without a suggestion of cruelty and depravity . . ." (n.pag.).

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The Generative Power of Nursery Rhymes

By Ronald Reichertz

The history of nursery rhyme reformation and re-formation reveals the great staying power and creative vitality of the form. There are several ways to develop such a history of the rhymes and to consider how they inspire or interact with other forms of children's literature. For example, Lucy Rollin's treatment of the rhymes within a cultural and psychological context suggests a social history of the rhymes along the line of Jack Zipes's work on folk tale (Rollin 136). Such a history would elaborate on the link between the subversive tendency in the rhymes and their overriding preoccupation with what Zipes calls "materiality," a quality associated "... with 'pleasure, wishes, and desire' over and above 'moral instruction and guidance'" (Rollin 130). I take an alternate route, one that examines some representative reformations (attempts to remove imperfections through revision) and re-formations (alternative formations or substitutions) during historical periods dominated by specific assumptions about what constitutes appropriate children's literature. These reformations and re-formations include simple revisions of words and phrases, substitutions, parodies, and entirely new creations, as well as reassessments of the form based on classifications and other critical strategies.

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Handley-Taylor complements Hall's reformations in what he claims is "the first published bibliography relating to nursery rhyme reform" (introductory note).² In the 1979 revision of the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, Iona and Peter Opie included Hall, and by extension Handley-Taylor as the latest contributors in a series of attempts to reform the rhymes "because of their nonsense, or the sadistic tendencies some of the rhymes are alleged to arouse in children" (2). Handley-Taylor's statistical analysis of 200 traditional rhymes cleared some 100 for children while enumerating 201 "unsavoury elements" in the remaining 100 rhymes. His combined catalog of ways of dying and varieties of physical violence appears in its entirety in William and Coll Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose* (20-21). Hall's attempt to revise the violent rhymes evenuated in the publication of over three hundred "new rhymes from old," rhymes of dubious quality that proved to be short-lived.

Hall's True Aims publication of Handley-Taylor's bibliography as well as his own revisions of rhymes were simply one more reaction to what have been considered undesirable features of the rhymes. The Opies trace such rhyme reformation back to the publication of George Wither's religious didactic "Rocking Hymn" and the accompanying rationale in *Harlequin or Britons Second Remembrancer* in 1641 (*The Oxford Book of Children's Verse* 28 and 387). Wither's combination of lullaby and hymn



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