

CHILDREN'S ORAL POETRY: IDENTITY AND OBSCENITY¹

C.W. SULLIVAN III

I offered this paper for publication not so much for any original insights present but as it may be (or may not be!) an example of how to take children's folklore scholarship into other venues—in this case, children's literature, at a conference where this was the only children's folklore paper.

Introduction

We were all children once, and according to children's folklorist Jay Mechling, that might pose a problem for collectors of children's folklore. In an essay entitled "Children's Folklore," in Elliott Oring's collection, *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, Mechling begins his argument by saying, "The white, male folklorist recognizes that he will never really know what it means to be a black woman, but we all think we know what it means to be a child" (1986, 91). But our knowledge of what it means to be a child is filtered through a lens that is thick with the years that have passed since we were children, years during which we have forgotten or glossed over much, years during which selective memory has compressed some experiences and expanded others, years during which we have developed our own "presumptions and emotional responses" to the very subject that we think we are treating objectively (91).

In fact, some adults, when confronted with certain materials collected by children's folklorists, deny the reality of those materials or, worse, accuse folklorists of unethical behavior. I, as editor of *Children's Folklore Review*, was accused of providing children with obscene materials when I published a series of articles by sociologist Gary Alan Fine on pre-adolescent male slang. My accuser, a local high school principal, neither recognized that the publication was for adults, not children, nor remembered that children of that age, especially perhaps boys, were capable of such language. Thanks to an understanding department chair and dean who defended me and the journal, I suffered no professional ill effects from the situation and *CFR* has continued on as a successful and, I hope, a well-respected journal of children's folklore research.

Other scholars have not been so fortunate. An Australian collector photographing girls' playground games took a picture of girls flipping up their dresses and showing their undergarments as such an action was described in the rhyme they were chanting:

Flintstones, Flintstones, yabba, yabba, doo!
(repeat)
Fred does the bow,
Wilma does the curtsy,
Pebbles shows her Knickers,
And we all go "Wow!"

His dissemination of these photographs caused him to be arrested and suspended from his university position for distributing child pornography. The case dragged on for six months or so until it came before an understanding magistrate who threw it out of court (*Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter* 1994, 1). Neither of these cases is about the children, but both illustrate adults' misperceptions about childhood, adults' projections of their own attitudes onto what they see happening on the baseball field or the playground.

These projections arise for at least two reasons. On one hand, as Mechling recounts, our imagination is still dominated by "[e]nlightenment and romantic era portraits of the child," by our "American commonsense understanding of childhood...[as] a period of separation, protection, preparation, and innocence," and by the "various schools of child psychology" that are all "bound by cultural assumptions and biases" (93). On the other hand, it seems to me that the American (if not western) process of "growing up" encourages us to leave childhood behind. How often are children told "Act your age," "Don't be a baby," and "You're too old for that"? Children are told, with regard to rivalry with younger siblings, "You should know better; you're older." Some growing up, "Act like a lady" and "Big boys don't cry," is gender coded. This attitude is nothing new, as an often-quoted, ancient passage indicates: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11).

The solution, Mechling argues, is for the folklorist to "approach the child's folk group assuming very little" (93). One of the definitions of a folk group is that it operates on a very "high context" level; that is, things happen in the group that outsiders would not understand without explanation. This is especially true of folk speech; within a folk group there are words and phrases that members of the group will share with each other and understand that outsiders would need explained—if, in fact, members of the group were willing to share such words and phrases with outsiders. Mechling continues his argument by suggesting a solution: "the folklorist [should take] an approach that views children's folk cultures as if they were fully complex, developed, and autonomous. This 'as if' assumption means that we approach children's folk cultures just as we would any unfamiliar culture" (93).

To rephrase Mechling, then, one might say, "The adult folklorist recognizes that he or she no longer really knows what it means to be a child and approaches the collection of children's folklore as one would approach the collecting of folklore from any group of which he or she is not a member." What I would like to present here, then, is a look at children's oral poetry as the creation of a culture significantly different from the adult culture around it and examine the ways in which the members of this culture use poetic forms to create, first, an identity separate from the adult culture and, second, especially through the medium of obscenity, an identity in opposition to the adult culture.

Identity

Much of what I wish to say about identity in general has been said before, but I hope to be able to add something to the discussion. In *American Children's Folklore*, Simon Bronner asserts that the division between adult authority and the children under adult control is reflected in children's folklore in general: "For children, we must remember, do not simply ape the mores of adults. They want to declare their own identity, and lore is their protected expression of cultural connection to one another" (1988, 29).² Bronner continues, "Besides rebelling against adult norms, children's folklore reflects children's concerns about their rapid growth, the appropriate responses to adult society, and traditional roles and values in a nation being modernized" (31). Oral poetry, whether handed down traditionally to deal with recurring situations or created and circulated in response to contemporary cultural stimuli, forms a very large part of younger children's folklore.

Children use traditional rhymes in what Iona and Peter Opie, in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, call "oral legislation" (1959, 121-153); that is, they use rhymes in the way older children and adults use books of rules. Counting-out rhymes, for example, such as "Eenie, meenie, miney, moe" or "One potato, two potato," are considered unbiased ways of selecting the first "IT" in a game, the sacrificial person who has to be "IT" without having been caught.³ Game or play rhymes are not always legislation, but they do structure children's activities; examples include game rhyme "The Farmer in the Dell," hand-clapping rhyme "I'm a pretty little Dutch girl," ball-bouncing rhyme "My name is Alice," and the largest category of all, jump-rope rhymes "Cinderella Dressed in Yellow," "Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around," and "Policeman, Policeman do your duty." Such rhymes have been circulated by children for generations as they organized their own play, without direct adult supervision, long before they were whisked off to such regulated activities as adult-organized football or baseball leagues, Boy Scouts, or Girl Guides.

In addition to regulating their own games, children have a series of rhymes that attempt to enforce conformity. Children have their own ideas, independent of (but to some extent derived from) the adult culture that surrounds them, and they have rhymes which make fun of or insult transgressors within the group. Overweight children hear "Fatty, fatty, two-by-four," a child hastily dressed might hear, "I see London, I see France / I see [name]'s underpants," informers to authorities hear, "Tattletale, tattletale, / Hanging on the bull's tale," liars hear "Liar, liar, pants on fire," and, of course, immature or sensitive children hear, "Cry, baby cry, stick your finger in your eye." There are many more such rhymes, and the point is that they are circulated by children, not taught by adults, and address what the child's folk group considers proper or, more to the point, improper behavior.

On a slightly more complex level, and more obviously influenced by the adult community, perhaps especially by the family, are rhymes that insult people outside the child's immediate peer and age group. The Opies, collecting in the 1950s, included the following rhymes in a chapter entitled "Partisanship." Some rhymes have historical origins:

The Irishmen ran down the hill,
 The Englishmen ran after,
 And many a Pat got a bullet in his back
 At the Battle of Boy'an Water. (1959, 343).

Other kinds of partisanship can be directly religious. Protestants may say, "Catholic, Catholic, ring the bell, / When you die you'll go to hell" and be answered by the Catholics, "Protestant, Protestant, quack, quack, quack, / Go to the Devil and never come back" (344). Still other rhymes can be political, this one based on an Oscar Meyer bologna commercial jingle:

My peanut has a first name
 It's J-I-M-M-Y
 My peanut has a second name
 It's C-A-R-T-R [sic]
 Oh, I hate to see him every day
 And if you ask me why I'll say
 'Cause Jimmy Carter has a way
 Of messing up the U-S-A (Sullivan 1980, 9).

What are serious matters to adults—war, religion, and politics—become fodder for children creating parodies of that adult seriousness.

There are also national and ethnic attitudes in some children's rhymes. When I was young, we caught "a Nigger by the toe," although later and more sensitive versions of "Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Moe" change "Nigger" to "tiger." In *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children*, Herbert and Mary Knapp, collecting collecting and publishing some twenty years after the Opies,⁴ include, in addition to political rhymes, what I would call derisive rhymes about African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Jews, and "Polacks"⁵ (1976, 190-206). One that the Knapps collected covers several bases:

Franklin said to Eleanor,
 "Eleanor, how are you?"
 Eleanor said to Franklin,
 "I've got some advice for you.
 Roses are red, violets are blue,
 You kiss the niggers,
 I'll kiss the Jews,
 And we'll stay in the White House
 As long as we choose." (1976, 201).

Rather than reinforcing internal conformity, these rhymes solidify the folk group's identity in opposition to what anthropologists and sociologists, as well as folklorists, would call "The Other"; i.e., those people who are obviously and demonstrably not "Us."

Another way in which children assert their own identity is through parody. This seems to me a more subtle kind of partisanship or derision in which children take what is presented to them by the adult culture and parody it; that is, they take something serious and change it to make it humorous. Bronner suggests that "Children are fond of parodying the standard and familiar, especially when in the process of doing so they can establish that they have a world of their own making" (1988, 77). Nothing is out of bounds as far as children are concerned. They will parody religious materials from evening-meal grace, "Good bread, good meat, / Good God, let's eat" to evening prayers, "Now I lay me down to sleep, / A bag of peanuts at my feet," to Christmas carols, "Joy to the world, the school burned down." School is a particular target; "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" becomes "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school" and in a parody of "On Top of Old Smokey," we hear "I shot my poor teacher / With a forty-four gun." Commerical jingles, too, are prime targets: "MacDonald's is your kind of place, / They throw french fries in your face," "Pepsi Cola hits the spot, / Smells like vinegar, tastes like snot," or "Sani-Flush, Sani-Flush, / Cleans your teeth without a brush." And there are many more parodies of this sort.

While most parodies serve to establish children's identity as separate from the adult world, some parodies indicate different levels within children's folk culture.⁶ By parodying the theme song from the television show, *Barney and Friends*, older children can indicate that they have outgrown a program directed at the very young viewer. In "'I Hate You, You Hate Me': Children's Responses to Barney the Dinosaur," Elizabeth Tucker, while also acknowledging timely references to topics like the AIDS epidemic, asserts this very point. The original theme song, which begins "I love you, you love me," becomes in parody versions:

I hate you, you hate me.
Let's go out and kill Barney
And a shot rang out and
Barney hit the floor
No more purple dinosaur (1999, 28).

And as Judy McKinty points out, there are similar songs about the Teletubbies set to the Barney tune:

I hate Po, Po hates me,
We're not a happy family,
With a dagger in his back and a bullet in his head,
Uh-oh Laa Laa, Dipsy's dead (2000, 49).

The older child's execution of Barney or one of the Teletubbies signals his or her rejection of that earlier stage of life and is part of the putting behind of childish things I spoke of earlier.

By far, the most popular area of parody is the nursery rhyme. Nursery rhymes are among the earliest rhymes to which children are exposed, the earliest rhymes they learn themselves, and the earliest rhymes they parody. Moreover, the

parodies show both the separation from the adult world and the development of the child within his or her folk group. The earliest of these, that is, those said by the youngest children, are usually innocent.

Mary had a little lamb,
It was a greedy glutton,
She fed it on ice cream all day,
And now it's frozen mutton (Opie 1959, 90).

And one of my favorites:

Mary had a little lamb,
Her father shot it dead,
Now Mary takes her lamb to school,
Between two hunks of bread.

But as children get a bit older, the parodies become somewhat more daring:

Mary had a little lamb
She tied it to a heater
Every time it turned around
It burned its little peter. (Bronner 1988, 80).

And then more sexually suggestive and linguistically complex:

Mary had a little lamb,
And, boy, was the doctor surprised.

And:

Mary had a little lamb,
She also had a bear;
I've often seen her little lamb,
But I've never seen her bear [bare].

What is true of the "Mary had a little lamb" parodies is also true of other nursery rhymes. Parodies tell what Jack burned when he jumped over the candle stick, what Jack and Jill were really doing up on that hill, what happened to Mother Hubbard when she went to get her dog a bone from the cupboard, how having so many children affected the Old Woman who lived in the shoe, and what Jack Horner was eating in the corner—just to name some of the most popular.

Obscenity⁷

This obviously brings us to the R-rated section of the performance. Children's rude or off-color or obscene humor (let's just settle on "obscene" as the cover term)

has been a problem for folklorists for some time. On one hand, as Iona Opie has testified (see note #4), publishers would not accept such materials in the 1950s. By the time of the Knapps' *One Potato, Two Potato* in 1976, things had changed, and materials that could not have been published in the 1950s could be published. When Simon Bronner published *American Children's Folklore*, in 1988, it seems as of anything was allowed. However, the Opies said, "Genuinely erotic verse...is unusual" (1959, 95), and the Knapps echoed that sentiment, "Little erotic verse shows up in grade school" (1976, 85); however, as the Knapps admitted on the very next page (86), it wasn't easy, and was sometimes impossible, for adults to convince children to tell them such materials—and for obvious reasons.

As the Knapps suggest and Bronner's examples reinforce, such erotic materials become plentiful among junior high school age children. As with the "Mary had a little lamb" parodies, children's obscene humor is developmental within the folk group; that is, as the children get older, their obscene verse changes. The first subject of such verse is feces. One of the first insults a child learns is to call someone else a "doo doo head," and there is an attendant verse, "Nanny, Nanny boo boo / Stick your head in doo doo." The very first obscene verse I learned from an older boy in the neighborhood was:

1944
 The monkey climbed the door
 The door split
 The monkey shit
 1944

Why this made me laugh heartily, I now have no idea. A rhyme reported by the Knapps may illustrate its age with a reference to a chain-pull toilet, "Push the button, pull the chain, / Out comes a little black choo-choo train" (1976, 62). Bronner includes

The night was dark
 The sky was blue
 Down the alley
 A shit wagon flew
 A bump was hit
 A scream was heard
 A man was killed
 By a flying turd

and remarks that "These rhymes comment on children's growing understanding of taboos on certain images and words" (1988, 81). They are also opportunities for children to engage in what Mechling might call "obscene play" or "forbidden play" (1986, 94), a kind of play which is their own and in which they engage in direct opposition to the attitudes of the adult folk group. And feces is just the beginning.

In addition to feces, there is a general interest in all eliminatory and excretory functions. A rhyme in which the reciter points to the general areas of chest, crotch, and buttocks creates interesting food metaphors:

Milkly Milky,
Lemonade,
Around the corner,
Hot dogs made.

As the title of Donna Lanclos' article "Bare Bums and Wee Chimneys," indicates, there is a great deal of children's lore—rhymes, jokes, sayings, and songs—about those two areas of the body. In addition, underwear, which covers those body parts, is another topic of more than passing interest to children, and in addition to the "I see London, I see France" admonitory rhyme, there are others; and most of the rhymes in this category involve someone's having lost his or her underwear. One such rhyme begins:

Tarzan, Tarzan, through the air
Tarzan lost his underwear
Tarzan say, "Me don't care—
Jane make me another pair" (Bronner 1988, 78).

In that rhyme and its many variations, Jane, Boy, and Cheetah are also naked. These rhymes about body parts and underwear, as well as the jokes and songs and sayings about them, allow children to engage in some forbidden language play, and because adults would find at least some of that language play objectionable, the children have, once again, delineated and taken possession of something that is not only their own but in opposition to adult norms.

From a focus on body parts and their excretory and eliminatory functions, it is probably not a huge step to focus on body parts and their reproductive functions. The information children have about sex and reproduction is often incomplete, hazy, and/or erroneous; but as soon as they are aware that babies come from women's bodies, their lore begins to reflect this. The Knapps report the following recitation by a ten-year-old boy: "Now I lay her on the bed, / I pray to God I'll use my head" (1976, 172), both a parody of "Now I lay me down to sleep" as well as a rather vague rhyme about sexual activity. More familiar, but no less vague, is a parody of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean":

My Bonnie lies over the ocean
My Bonnie lies over the sea,
My daddy lies over my mommy,
And that's how they got little me. (Knapp 1976, 185).

About a variation of the song, Bronner reports the person from whom the song was collected learned it in second or third grade; he comments, "Within the apparent innocence of this ditty, the singer is declaring her astute awareness

of sexual knowledge supposedly kept hidden from children" (1988, 218, n.22). Children's questions about where babies come from show that they are, indeed, interested in the subject, and the rhymes, songs, jokes, and sayings indicate not only a sort of innocent knowledge, but also a willingness to know and share whatever information they have.

While it may be obvious that children know what they are talking about in the immediately previous examples of innocent sexual rhymes, it may be that they are saying more than they know in others. According to Roger Abrahams (1969, 31-32), the single most popular jump-rope rhyme is:

Cinderella
Dressed in yellow
Went upstairs
To kiss a fellow
Made a mistake
And kissed a snake
How many doctors
Did it take?
1, 2, 3, 4, 5...(Bronner 1988, 70).

In a variant reported by the Knapps, Cinderella "Came downstairs with a bellyache" between "Kissed a snake" and "How many doctors did it take?" (1976, 125). Mechling argues:

One way to account for the popularity of this rhyme is to see in it a disguised discussion of sex and pregnancy. The rhyme begins innocently enough with a fairytale character, probably known to children through the Disney film and storybooks. But the Cinderella story itself is about the sexual awakening of a young woman. In the jump-rope rhyme, the young woman goes upstairs to kiss her boyfriend, but she kisses a "snake" instead, and one way to interpret the meaning of "kissing a snake" is in sexual symbolic terms. In the child's vague understanding of reproduction and the difference between the womb and the stomach, sexual contact could result in a "stomach ache"—that is, pregnancy (1986, 101).

The "bellyache" figures in numerous hand-clapping, jump-rope, and other game rhymes; and it is important to note that these are girls' game rhymes, making the sexual interpretation even more convincing.⁸

Conclusions

Where does one draw the line? I do not mean with children; this is their material, and forbidding it to them would be as successful as King Canute's fabled attempt to halt the incoming tide. I do not mean in this presentation, although I will admit a certain trepidation in presenting increasingly obscene materials (as well as some

I have already presented) to such an august gathering as this. No, I mean where do we draw the line between children's and adolescents' folklore?

Folklorists often talk about age-group folklore (Brunvand 1998, 54-56), and that almost works here, ending childhood at 12 and beginning adolescence at 13, but some children learn things sooner and others later. Perhaps it might be better to look at intent. I mentioned earlier the Opies' and the Knapps' comments that little erotic verse exists at the grade-school level. It does exist at the junior-high and high-school levels, where it is recited or told perhaps expressly for its erotic value (the basic knowledge of sex and sexuality being fairly well understood by the tellers at that age).

In other words, the intent of the adolescent teller is different from the intent of the child teller. The adolescent teller intends to be erotic; the child teller, generally, does not. On the first level, "Identity," the child tellers are creating and passing on verses that are their own, outside of and sometimes in opposition to what they hear from and see in the adult community; and it is difficult to tell just how important it is for those who are essentially powerless to have something of their own, something that they can control. On the second level, "Obscenity," the child tellers are also asserting their independence from the adult culture, especially with the verses about bodily functions and the like; but they are also beginning to show an awareness of, in their own language, direct and metaphorical, that most secret of all adult knowledge, the knowledge of sexuality. But the child's intent, whatever else it is, is not to be erotic.

We will read our children poems from *A Child's Garden of Verses*, *When We Were Very Young*, and *Now We are Six*, and our children will love those books and poems, but when they are on their own, on the playground or in the woods, it is more likely that they will be reciting some of the materials, or variations thereof, mentioned above. And this is as it should be; they are entitled to their own poetry and to their identity as children as they express it in that poetry.

NOTES

1. A shorter version of this article was originally presented at the "Poetry and Childhood Conference and Exhibition" sponsored by Cambridge University and the British Library, London, 20-21 April 2009, and will be published in a volume of selected papers from the conference.

2. By "protected," I assume that Bronner means that children protect their lore from adults, not that someone else is protecting the children.

3. Examples, unless otherwise noted, are from my own experiences or collections.

4. The publication date is important. Iona Opie has since said to me in private conversation that Oxford University Press would not publish some of the ruder materials that she and Peter collected.

5. Polack jokes, of course, are not really about Polish people but are actually an iteration of the Numbskull jokes that have circulated about various groups with ethnic and religious labels suitable to the time.

6. See Donna M. Lanclos' "Bare Bums and Wee Chimneys" for an extended discussion of defining lines between children and adults.

7. I am omitting the larger category of what Simon Bronner (1988, 81-82) calls gross rhymes, as violence and other subjects of gross rhymes are not generally considered "rude" or "obscene."

8. Prior to the twentieth century, boys may have participated in what are now considered girls' games. For a discussion of gender and hopscotch, see Derek Van Rheen, "Boys Who Play Hopscotch: The Historical Divide of a Gendered Space" 1998.

WORKS CITED

- Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*. 1994. 26 (August): 1-2.
- Abrahams, Roger, ed. 1969. *Jump Rope Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bronner, Simon J. 1988. *American Children's Folklore*. Little Rock: August House.
- Brunvand, Jan H. 1998. *The Study of American Folklore*. 4th ed. New York: Norton.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1979-1981. Pre-Adolescent Male Slang, I-VII. *Children's Folklore Newsletter* II.1, II.2, III.1, III.3, IV.1, IV.2, and IV.3 (Fall -Winter).
- Knapp, Herbert, and Mary Knapp. 1976. *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children*. New York: Norton.
- Lanclos, Donna M. 2000. Bare Bums and Wee Chimneys: Rudeness and Defining the Line Between Child and Adult. *Children's Folklore Review* 22.2 (Spring): 7-48.
- McKinty, Judy. 2000. E-Contributions. *Children's Folklore Review* 22.2: 49.
- Mechling, Jay. 1986. Children's Folklore.. In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, ed. Elliott Oring. Logan: Utah State University Press, 91-120.
- Opie, Peter, and Iona Opie. 1959. *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Sullivan, C.W. III. 1980. Peanuts and Baloney. *Center for Southern Folklore* 3.1 (Winter): 9.
- Tucker, Elizabeth. 1999. "I Hate You, You Hate Me": Children's Responses to Barney the Dinosaur. *Children's Folklore Review* 22.1 (Fall): 25-33.
- Van Rheen, Derek. 1998. Boys Who Play Hopscotch: The Historical Divide of a Gendered Space. *Children's Folklore Review* 21.1 (Fall): 5-34.