Nursery Rhymes

Snapshots of past events, or messages for life?

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'Jack and Jill went up the hill, to fetch a pail of water'. A complex rhyme, the origin of which is unknown, but it is thought that it may originate in Norse mythology, and related to a narrative in Prose Edda, an Old Norse work of literature written in Iceland during the mid-13th century. The rhyme is found today in modern folk lore in Scandinavia and Northern Germany, and possibly rooted in Pagan mythology. The English version was published in 1765, and the suggested explanation is that Jack and Jill are actually Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette, who were convicted of treason during the French Revolution, otherwise known as the Reign of Terror, and beheaded. Jack, or Louis XVI, lost his 'crown' (= his throne and his head). And Jill, or Marie Antoinette's head soon came tumbling after. This explanation, it seems to me, is unlikely because the rhyme is undoubtedly old, and the French Revolution is relatively recent. More explanations exist, but all, including the Norse mythology, are speculative.

'There was an old woman [with many children] who lived in a shoe'. A folk tale, mythical or critical of the crown? The rhyme was first published in 1797, but probably older than the print, with lines in the printed version suggesting a Shakespearean origin. It is thought that there is a folk lore connection between shoes and fertility, manifested in the modern day by throwing a shoe after the bride as she leaves the church, or tying shoes to the honeymoon car. Debates about the meaning of the rhyme have centred on matching the old woman with historical figures who had large families, but these explanations are largely inconclusive.

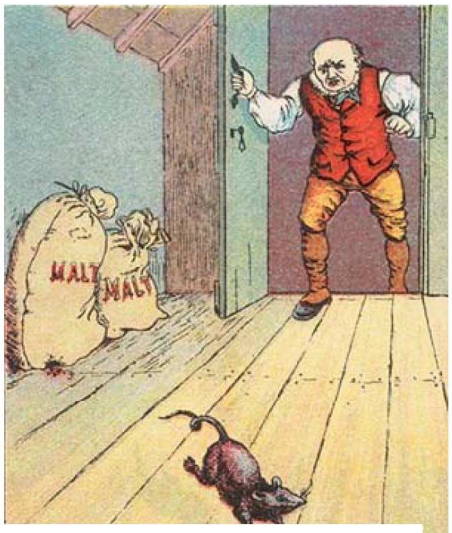
A political explanation is more likely. King George II of England was nicknamed 'the old woman'; his wife, Queen Caroline, co-incidentally, had eight children. It was widely believed Queen Caroline was the power behind the throne. The 'numerous children' were the Members of Parliament that George was unable to control ('didn't know what to do'), and the phrase 'gave them some broth without any bread' refers to George's parsimony and attempts to restore the finances of the country.

Lastly, the 'house that Jack built', a much longer rhyme not based on religion, politics or greed, but a cumulative tale that does not tell the story of Jack's house, or even of Jack who built the house, or not even really about a house. It was first published in 1755, but its origins may be earlier than that, possibly during the 16th century. You know how it goes:

'This is the house that Jack built.
This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built
This is the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
This is the cat
That killed the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built'....and so on.

The rhyme shows how the 'house' is associated with people and events, and all are interlinked in communities. It is a clever piece, with each line deeply nested in the previous stanza, such that one line cannot be untangled in the absence of the others. I have had a wonderful time wandering through Norse literature and Pagan oral tradition, not to mention surfing the internet. There are hundreds and hundreds of nursery rhymes in all societies and in many languages, often modified locally to fit the people and circumstances. Bet you can think of a few not mentioned here that range even further over just politics and religion.

The rhymes were frequently created at a time when to caricature royalty or politicians was punishable by death. Nursery rhymes became a potent way to send thinly veiled messages in the guise of children's entertainment. But even more importantly, in largely illiterate societies, the rhythm of the rhymes, and the catchy sing-alongs helped people to remember events and pass them on to the next generation, the oral tradition as it was. We don't hear nursery rhymes and chants anymore; no 'oranges and lemons' or 'Georgie Porgie', although the latter, depending on whose interpretation you and parental guidance. But whatever else they may be, nursery rhymes are a triumph of the power of oral history.



This is the rat that ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built.
Source: ComicBookReligion.com

And the children merrily singing them to this day remain oblivious to the meanings contained within. Or more likely not singing them, unless they have a 'nursery rhyme app' on their smart phone. *Sic transit gloria**.■

* Thus passes the glory of the world