ISSUES

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A Common Nomenclature for Traditional Rhymes

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THERE presently exist a number of names for the traditional oral rhymes most commonly referred to as "nursery rhymes" and "Mother Goose rhymes." In the present paper I would like to briefly review the history of these nomenclatures, then propose a common nomenclature applicable to rhymes in every language.

Let us begin with the term "Mother Goose rhymes." The name "Mother Goose" does not appear to have originated in England. Most authorities now agree that this grandmotherly figure had her origins in seventeenth-century France (BRIDWATER and KURTZ 1963; NORGAARD 1987; POTTER 1950; BRACY 1965, 1978; SMITH 1986, 5).[1] In 1697 a retired French civil servant, Charles Perrault (1628–1703), published a compilation of popular folktales entitled *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* [Stories or tales of times past, with morals] (POTTER 1950, 751). The main title of the book was soon eclipsed, however, by the apparent subtitle on its frontispiece: *Contes de la mère l'oye* [Tales of Mother Goose]. Some scholars claim that Mother Goose was a sort of mythical fairy bird-mother popular among the French royalty and peasantry much before Perrault published his book (POTTER 1950, 751).[2]

Perrault's book was translated into English by Robert Samber under the title *Histories or Tales of Past Times, Told by Mother Goose* and published in 1729 by J. Pote and R. Montago in London (DARTON, 1982, 88, 353). Its frontispiece bore a picture similar to that found in Perrault's volume, with the subtitle "Mother Goose Tales." The book soon found a wide readership among the English, who, like the French, knew it best by its subtitle (NORGAARD 1987, 552). Its popularity inspired publisher John Newbury (1713–1767) to issue in 1760 a compilation of English rhymes under the title *Mother Goose's Melody, or, Sonnets for the Cradle* (POTTER 1950, 752).[3] This link between traditional rhymes and the name of Mother Goose lasted in England for a number of decades.

It was about twenty-five years after Newbury published his book that Mother Goose finally reached the shores of America (POTTER 1950,

752). In 1785 Isaiah Thomas of Worcester published Samber's book under the same title for New World Publisher. The popularity of Mother Goose in America soon surpassed that in England, contributing to an association of this figure with traditional rhymes that has continued in the United States until the present day.[4]

Meanwhile in England Mother Goose was being dispossessed of the rhymes once told under her name, the term "Mother Goose tales" being gradually replaced by the newer "nursery rhymes" (NORGAARD 1987). Researchers have yet to determine when this expression first appeared. The word "nursery" has been used in England only since the sixteenth century (ONIONS 1959, 618),[5] as has "rhyme," for which there are no recorded instances in the present spelling before 1550 (SKEAT 1988, 519).[6] Thus the term "nursery rhyme" cannot have been used before the late sixteenth century.[7]

The first recorded association of traditional rhymes with the word "nursery" is from 1784, when Joseph Ritson titled a compilation of rhymes *Gammer Gurton's Garland or the Nursery Parnassus* (OPIE 1953, 399; OPIE and OPIE 1989, vi).[8] At this time, however, the influence of Mother Goose was still so predominant that it left chance for the new concept to take root. By the early years of the nineteenth century, however, this influence was beginning to wane. *Songs for the Nursery,* by Benjamin Tabart, came out in 1806 (DARTON 1982, 358), followed in the same year by Ann and Jane Taylor's *Rhymes for the Nursery* (DARTON 1982, 182).

The first use of the term "nursery rhymes" appears to be in the title of a sixteen-page booklet, *Nursery Rhymes from the Royal Collection,* published in 1820 by J. G. Rusher of Banbury (TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM 1963, 793–96). This was followed by numerous other appearances during the next two decades. In 1842 the Percy Society published James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipp's *The Nursery Rhymes of England, Collected Primarily from Oral Tradition* (DORSON 1968, 67), a work so popular — five editions by 1853 — that it made "nursery rhyme" the standard term for all subsequent British publishers and compilers. The publication of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* nearly a century later (1951) can be viewed as yet another expression of the move in this direction.

Thus the nomenclatures for this literary genre were pretty much settled in the two major English-speaking lands by the second half of the nineteenth century. Both sides tended to apply their respective choices across the board, with Americans categorizing all rhymes as "Mother Goose rhymes" and the British classifying as "nursery rhymes"

even those verses that had originally been part of the Mother Goose collection (NATIONAL UNION CATALOGUE 1975, 610–43).

There has, however, been a thin stream of synthesis between the two expressions. Many books bear titles to the effect of "Mother Goose's Nursery Rhymes" or "Nursery and Mother Goose Rhymes"; *Mother Goose or Old Nursery Rhymes*, first published in 1881 (MAHONY 1970, 79), is one of the oldest examples. Twentieth-century followers of this precedent are not common, but neither are they rare.

"Mother Goose" and "nursery rhyme" are not, however, the only two labels for traditional rhymes. Another stream of nomenclature can be traced to Robert Chambers, a Scot who in 1826 compiled *The Popular Rhymes of Scotland, with Illustrations, Collected from Tradition* (DORSON 1968, 123–24). In the fourth expanded edition of this book in 1842 Chambers partially changed the title, but retained the expression "popular rhymes." This nomenclature influenced many nineteenth-century English rhyme compilers — even Halliwell, who pioneered use of the term "nursery rhyme," opted for Chambers' term when in 1849 he issued his next compilation of rhymes, *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales* (DORSON 1968, 68).

In 1858 Michael Aislabie added another nomenclature when he named his compilation *Folklore; or a Collection of Local Rhymes, Proverbs, Sayings, Prophecies, Slogans, etc.* The expression "folk rhyme" first appeared in the 1889 volume of *Chambers Journal* (SIMPSON and WEINER 1989, 1,142), and was followed in 1892 by G. F. Northhall's collection *English Folk Rhymes* (BREWSTER 1976, 212). Although this expression was utilized by Thomas W. Talley when he issued his 1922 compilation *Negro Folk Rhymes* (BREWSTER 1976, 213), and by Opies in his 1959 *Lore and Languages of Schoolchildren* (OPIES and OPIES 1959, 333), it has failed to acquire any kind of widespread popularity.

Adding to the number of nomenclatures are several that have been developed in the course of the scholarly discussions on rhymes. Robert Chambers suggested "ratt rimes" (DORSON 1968, 129). DORSON favors the expression "traditional rhymes," even when introducing books that use the term "nursery rhymes" (1968, 67); he has also coined the term "inherited rhymes" (1968, 68). The *Encyclopedia Americana* employs three nomenclatures: "traditional nursery rhymes" in the 1965 edition, and "children's rhymes" and "traditional English rhymes" in the 1987 edition.

Before we move on we should note that there have been attempts to bypass this problem of nomenclature. Some authors did so by using vague, general terms, an approach that may be traced back to the earliest-

known collection of rhymes, *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*, edited by Nurse Lovechild (DARTON 1982, 101) and published in London by Mary Cooper in 1744 (OPIE 1967, 149). Others went in the other direction, naming their compilations in highly specific terms, as with H. C. Bolton's *Counting-out Rhymes of Children* in 1885.

Readers may have noticed that the works mentioned so far were all published subsequent to the late seventeenth century, raising the question of whether rhymes existed before that time. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, 78.3% of all English rhymes came into existence before the eighteenth century, and 31.9% were popular even before the seventeenth century. What, then, was the nomenclature used in those days? According to the *Encyclopedia Americana*, "Before the 18th century, nursery rhymes had been referred to by English-speaking peoples as 'songs', 'ditties', or, in pre-14th century nomenclature, 'lullynges' and 'cradle songs'" (NORGAARD 1987, 552). *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* cites as an example the title of John de Trevia's 1398 work *Nouryces use Lullynges and Other Cradyl Songs to Pleyse the Wyttes of the Chylde.*

As a preliminary to our effort to find a common nomenclature for rhymes, let us summarize the main usages to date.

	-1300	1300–1700	1700–1800	1800–1900	1900
England	Lullynge, cradle song	Song, ditty	*Mother Goose's melody*, nursery parnassus	Nursery songs, *nursery rhymes*, *popular rhymes*, local rhymes, folk rhymes	*Nursery rhymes*, children's rhymes, traditional rhymes
America			*Mother Goose's melody*	*Mother Goose's melody*	*Mother Goose's melody*, *Mother Goose's rhymes*, folk rhymes

(nomenclatures in italics represent major trends)

The pre-seventeenth-century terms have little to contribute to our search for a modern nomenclature, and should be dropped. I also propose that we eliminate the ornate or allegoric names, such as "nursery parnassus" and those that use the name "Mother Goose." Next I suggest that we exclude expressions that tend to link rhymes with songs or melodies.

This leaves us with the following terms: nursery rhymes, traditional rhymes, popular rhymes, children's rhymes, and folk rhymes. Of these we might drop those that are too specific to cover the whole range of rhymes. Let us first consider the case of "nursery rhymes" and

"children's rhymes." These terms reflect the common tendency to regard rhymes as verses for children. But as is pointed out by all authorities in this field, the overwhelming majority of rhymes — with the exception of game rhymes and alphabet rhymes — were not composed for children; most were originally part of such adult forms as folk songs, ballads, barroom airs, jokes, etc. (OPIE and OPIE 1989, 3; P. M. O. 1970, 791; NORGAARD 1987, 552; BRACY 1978, 591). Anthropological research supports these views. For example, a century ago Carrington Bolton concluded that counting-out rhymes are "a survival of the practice of the sorcerer" (MACDOWELL 1982, 319), although eighteenth-century compilers had presented them merely as children's verse.

Next let us consider "local rhymes." Rhymes, like all oral literature, were indeed collected from certain specific localities. Yet if we study collections from various areas we quickly see that most rhymes are national — and sometimes multinational — in character. Thus parallels of "Brow bender, eye peeper, nose dropper, mouth eater, chin chopper" and "Humpty Dumpty" are found widely across Europe (P. M. O. 1970, 790), and an African-American rhyme has been traced back to Zambezia (TRACEY 1965, 365–72). It is thus evident that local rhymes are simply variants of more widely spread forms.

Of the three remaining terms, I propose that "folk rhyme" is the most suitable for use as a common nomenclature. My reasons are as follows:

1) "folk rhyme" is the only nomenclature wide enough to encompass all examples of the genre;
2) it implies the ties that rhymes have with folklore as a whole;
3) it is consistent with the names of other genres in folklore, such as "folktale" and "folk song".
4) it draws a border between oral and composed rhymes.

Is it reasonable to ask for a change in the established nomenclature? Perhaps not, but precedents do nevertheless exist. In an article in the 10 October 1846 issue of *The Athenaeum* William John Thoms suggested that the then-popular term "popular antiquities" be replaced with the "good Saxon compound *folklore*"; within a year "folklore" was widely accepted and "popular antiquities" had gone out of use. Similarly, such old and well-established terms as "fairy tale" and *märchen* were replaced by "folktale" when scholarship on the subject developed during the twentieth century. It is my hope that the term "folk rhyme" will achieve similar wide usage in the scholarly literature, and that in other languages a term of similar significance will be adopted.

NOTES

1. Some scholars have connected her with the eighth-century Frankish queen Goosfoot (POTTER 1950, 752).

2. Mother Goose tales were mentioned by Jean Loret in his 1650 poem *La Muze Historique*; he called them tales that were fabulous and false (BRACY 1965, 512).

3. The date of this book is not settled. Some scholars argue for 1765, others for a later year. The book was entered on His Majesty's Stationer's Register on 28 December 1780 (BRACY 1965, 593). Some scholars attribute this collection not to Newbury but to Oliver Goldsmith (MEIGS 1969, 62)

4. There is a competing explanation about Mother Goose's history in America. Some say she was a real American lady named Elizabeth Goose who lived in Boston (POTTER 1950, 751; SMITH 1986, 5), and that in 1719 she published a book of rhymes. No evidence of such a book has been found in one hundred years of searching.

5. Shakespeare used this word in *King Lear*.

6. This is a Latin word that came to English through the French *rime*.

7. According to a report in the *Boston Transcript* of 1860, there was a book in London before 1633 named *Rhymes for the Nursery or Lulla-Byes for Children*. The existence of such a book has never been proven, however.

8. "Parnassus" is a Middle English word that was used for poetry collections since about 1600 (ONIONS 1959, 1,435)

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