

The Earliest Political Cartoons – Nursery Rhymes

At one time, it was quite dangerous to criticize the government. An offended king or queen would have your head removed from your shoulders. There was no freedom of speech, so those who did have complaints often hid them in happy little rhymes. The adults would make up silly little stories, using common people and common daily things, but those people and things stood for the nonsense that was going on at court. It was the only safe way to poke fun at the nobles. Those rhymes still exist today, but for the most part, we've forgotten their beginnings. Let's look at a few.

*Georgie Porgie pudding and pie
Kissed the girls and made them cry.
When the boys came out to play
Georgie Porgie ran away.*

Georgie Porgie is believed to be about George Villiers, an English duke who lived in the early 1600s. He was quite attractive and had very few morals, so he was always getting into romantic trouble. The common people loved to make fun of the nobles who couldn't remember to whom they were married. We still do that today, don't we?

*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.*

Humpty wasn't an egg as is usually pictured, but a cannon used in an English civil war in 1648. The cannon was perched on a wall, but the wall crumbled under fire and the greatly feared weapon broke. The "king's men," or the people loyal to the crown, lost that battle due to the loss of the cannon called Humpty Dumpty.

*Little Jack Horner sat in a corner
eating his Christmas pie.
He stuck in his thumb and pulled out
a plum and said, "What a good boy am I."*

In the 1530s, King Henry VIII, who had left the Roman Catholic Church, started breaking up the great monasteries of England and taking their land and riches. One monastery tried to bribe the king by sending him paperwork that gave him the titles to 12 large castles and pieces of land. The paperwork was hidden inside a pie. That was normal at the time because thieves were everywhere on the roads. The messenger was named Richard Whiting, not Jack Horner, but it is believed he stole the title to the best piece of land. The monastery was eventually destroyed, but that one piece of land was never retrieved, and Richard Whiting was never caught. He was a "good boy."

*Mary, Mary quite contrary
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockleshells
And pretty maids in a row.*

This one refers to Bloody Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII. She wanted to return England to the Roman Catholic Church and she had anyone who disagreed tortured or killed. The garden in the rhyme is really a graveyard. Silver bell was a nickname for a thumbscrew. Cockleshells were also an instrument of torture; but they were connected a bit lower than the thumb. A guillotine was commonly known as "the maid."

DIRECTIONS

Following are elements necessary for a good, old-fashioned nursery rhyme:

- It talks about a bit of history
- It turns major players into common folk
- The evilness or stupidity of subject's actions are hidden but still understandable in a story that doesn't seem as awful as what is really happening
- It possesses a happy rhythm and rhyme that makes the story easy to remember
- It includes a fun children's picture that helps hide the true meaning

