

# The STORY of MOTHER GOOSE

by Robin Wilson



Most of the tales included in any Mother Goose collection--and there are many such collections now--originated in the distant past as folk stories told to children. If there were an actual mother goose, she might well have been an 8th Century noblewoman named Bertrada II of Laon who, in 740, married Pepin the Short, King of the Franks, and in 742 bore his son Charles, immortalized as Charlemagne, the de facto founder of the Holy Roman Empire. Bertrada, who was a patroness of children and provided her over-achieving son his only education, was known as Bertha Greatfoot or Queen Goosefoot.

Whatever Bertrada's role, by the mid-17th Century a mythical Mother Goose was widely acknowledged by French peasants and nobility alike as a fairy birdmother who told charming tales to children. Some of these stories were set down in print as early as 1637 in Giambattista Basile's Italian collection of stories entitled *The Pentamerone*; others can be traced to another Italian, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, whose 73 folktales collected in *Facetious Nights* were a source for plays by both Shakespeare and Molière.

The first collection of stories to bear the name "Mother Goose" was produced by Charles Perrault in 1697. His book of ten fairy tales was entitled *Tales from the Past with Morals*, and under the frontispiece picture of an old woman telling stories to children and a cat appeared a subtitle for the book: "Tales from My Mother Goose."

Perrault's book was translated into English in about 1729 as *Mother Goose's Fairy Tales*, but the stories did not attract much of an audience until 1760, when John Newbery, a friend and publisher effectively established a brand new branch of the book trade by published *Mother Goose's Melody*.

A quarter of a century later, in 1787--the year the U.S. Constitution was signed in Philadelphia--Isaiah Thomas published the first American edition, entitled *Mother Goose's Melody: or Sonnets for the Cradle*, which included such favorites as Little Tommy Tucker and Jack and Jill, along with half a hundred others. Later editors have greatly expanded Thomas' modest collection, but the old tales and rhymes from European antiquity continue amidst collections of as many as 700 rhymes, stories, and riddles.

From misty origins among medieval family storytellers to Italian and French anthologists and onto English translations, Mother Goose arrived on our shores just as we achieved nationhood, and she is now very much a part of the American tradition.