

A Visit from *St. Nicholas*: The Poetics of Peer Culture, 1872-1900

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In 1872, the publishers of *Scribner's* asked Mary Mapes Dodge—who was already famous as a children's poet and as the author of *Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates*—to edit a new juvenile periodical, *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Dodge responded with an article for *Scribner's*, published anonymously under the title "Children's Magazines," that served as both a manifesto and a brilliant piece of advance publicity for the venture. The essay begins with an image of frenetic public promotion:

Sometimes I feel like rushing through the world with two placards—one held aloft in my right hand, BEWARE OF CHILDREN'S MAGAZINES! the other flourished in my left, CHILD'S MAGAZINE WANTED! A good magazine for little ones was never so much needed, and such harm is done by nearly all that are published.¹

Most children's magazines, she claims, are aimed at parents; they are full of "sermonizing," the "wearisome spinning out of facts," and the "rattling of the dry bones of history." In short, they are educational and moralistic, and this is not just dull but harmful; a child's magazine should be a "pleasure-ground," where children can live "a brand-new, free life of their own for a little while, accepting acquaintances as they choose and turning their backs without ceremony on what does not concern them."²

The notion that children had specific, consuming desires *that ought to be satisfied* was a new idea in 1873, when *St. Nicholas* was officially launched, but it was crucial to the expansion of the juvenile market; by the turn of the century, a Marshall Field ad could assert that “Little people’s interests, their desires, their preferences, and rights to merchandise are as strong and definite as those of any adult portion of the community.”³ *St. Nicholas* hit the right note, becoming what the cultural historian R. Gordon Kelly has called “the best-remembered and best-loved American children’s magazine.”⁴ The magazine shaped and responded to “little people’s interests” through serialized prose pieces, elegant illustrations, and hundreds of light “rhymes and jingles.”

But what, exactly, were children’s interests? Despite Dodge’s anti-didactic rhetoric, the fiction she chose tends to be “character-building,” dovetailing children’s interests with those of their parents. Kelly argues that these plots champion tradition over commercial novelty, sincerity over artifice, and parental authority over youthful impetuosity: “The apparent changes taking place with such rapidity in American society during the 1870s and 1880s did not imply the obsolescence of the parental definition of things. Their world remained subjectively plausible within the formulas of children’s fiction.”⁵ But if the magazine’s fiction presented a strictly policed and plotted pleasure ground, its verse selections were far less predictable. Their literary quality could be slapdash, their humor broad, and their messages—about tradition, commercialism, and parental authority—decidedly mixed.

Indeed, it is the very incidental quality of these rhymes that makes them worth examining, since their marginality enabled them to register the more unsettling social ramifications of the expanding juvenile marketplace. Unlike *St. Nicholas*’s prose pieces, which were often written by big names (like Alcott) for big money, the magazine’s light verses could afford to take chances, to push boundaries, and—as I will show—to reimagine the lyric as a plotless pleasure ground where children could meet and play.

These light verses, written by Dodge herself, Laura Richards, Palmer Cox, and other “minor” poets, are not overtly groundbreaking; most rely on tried-and-true formulas from nursery rhymes and folklore, as in this anonymous verse that appeared in the December 1876 issue of *St. Nicholas*:

My uncle Jehosephat had a pig,
A pig of high degree;
And it always wore a brown scratch wig,
Most beautiful for to see.⁶

But if the *St. Nicholas* poets relied on established traditions, they used them only to reinvent them: Mother Goose became freshly topical, folkloric fantasies of animation and transformation worked as advertising ploys, and local legends turned into national fads. *St. Nicholas* was a very early player in the expanding

postbellum field of children's popular culture, and, as I will argue, its rhymes and jingles helped children to identify with popular cultural materials, and with one another, as members of an historically-specific peer group, or generation.

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS

St. Nicholas was able to gain instant visibility, partly through its affiliation with *Scribner's* but also through its cleverly-chosen name. By 1873, the interpenetration of tradition and commerce had resulted in the emergence of St. Nicholas, or Santa Claus, as a rallying-point for nineteenth-century children. In Clement Moore's seminal 1823 poem, St. Nicholas is divorced from his earlier role as a religious disciplinarian: he carries no switch or lump of coal; instead, he looks "like a peddler just opening his pack," preparing to instigate the secularization and commercialization of Christmas.⁷ By the late 1860s, when the illustrator Thomas Nast transformed him from a folkloric and slightly sinister elf into a benevolent patrician, St. Nicholas was the chief symbolic underwriter of children's material culture.⁸ Although he was sometimes called "Father Christmas," St. Nicholas was not precisely a father-figure: external to the family, he was part of an emerging mass cultural public sphere, generating a "public" composed of middle-class children that he supposedly visited in an uncannily inclusive journey through the sky each Christmas.⁹

By calling the new magazine *St. Nicholas*, Dodge was able to use the common currency of Santa Claus to draw an explicit analogy. In her opening letter to child readers of the magazine's first issue, she points out that both St. Nicholas and *St. Nicholas* are "fair and square," visiting children regularly and bringing not disciplinary measures but material treasures. Reinforced by children's pre-existing, extrafamilial relationship to the iconic figure of St. Nicholas, Dodge was also able to address her readers as a cohesive public, making them visible to themselves: "DEAR GIRL AND BOY—No, there are more! Here they come! Near by, far off, everywhere, we can see them—coming by dozens, hundreds, thousands, troops upon troops, and all pressing closer and closer."¹⁰ The presumably solitary act of reading a new periodical was thus transformed into a spatialized event (like a visit from St. Nicholas), "taking place" at a specific moment, in November of 1873, and involving a specific cohort of children, who press "closer and closer" as they "troop" to their "brand-new" magazine. *St. Nicholas* was thus spatialized, at the outset, as a place where children might meet—or through which they might imagine—other children: as Dodge clearly realized, a major function of toys, games, books, and magazines was the transposition of peer culture from the face-to-face village or street-corner to the abstract public sphere of a national, or even international, mass culture of the child. And the key to this transposition was not the *eradication* of children's traditions, but rather their *transformation* into salable, stylish (and therefore obsolescent) commodities.

UPDATING MOTHER GOOSE

In the early issues of *St. Nicholas*, “rhymes and jingles,” often accompanied by humorous illustrations, were used as “filler” between more substantial—and generally more instructive—prose selections. Operating, often literally, in the margins of the magazine, poetry continued to draw on the “traditions” that had been put into literary circulation by romanticism, including folklore, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes.

Nursery rhymes remained an especially important subgenre. They have a long history of straddling the line between oral (“folk”) and written (“commercial”) culture; indeed, the first secular children’s publisher, John Newbery, was circulating a collection of “the most celebrated Songs and Lullabies of the good old Nurses,” titled *Mother Goose’s Melody*, as early as 1765.¹¹ This British book depicts an old nurse, spinning by a fireside as she recounts rhymes. The commercial circulation of nursery rhymes, then, was nothing new, although before the Civil War the vast majority of children’s rhymes printed in America (as opposed to Britain) were didactic in the tradition of “John Roger’s Exhortation to His Children.”¹² What was completely new, however, was the irreverent way that *St. Nicholas*’s authors “played” with familiar texts, rewriting and reframing them to do more immediate cultural work.¹³

In the anonymous “Miss Muffet” series, that appeared in successive issues from 1875 to 1876, ethnic children (an Eskimo, an Irish girl) are scared away from their food; for instance, in “Miss Muffet No. IV,”

Little Peeky-Wang-Fu, with her chopsticks so new,
 Sat eating her luncheon of rice,
 When a rat running by,
 On the rice cast his eye,
 And Peeky ran off in a trice.¹⁴

By reframing “Miss Muffet” in terms of ethnicity, the poem takes on the immediacy of “Our Country To-Day.” Mary Mapes Dodge, who published (and probably wrote) “Miss Muffet No. IV” had already had a rousing success with her dialectal sketch, “Mrs. Maloney on the Chinese Question,” which the actress Charlotte Cushman made famous as a comedic performance-piece. Peeky-Wang-Fu, then, is not just a revised Mother Goose character; she is part of a national response to immigration and to foreign workers that ultimately resulted in legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1880.

But “Miss Muffet IV” is not just about exclusion; like much mass cultural ethnic humor, the lessons that it teaches are more ambivalent than that. The poem (like all of the poems in the “Miss Muffet” series) relies on the “common knowledge” of nursery rhymes to install “common knowledge” about other children, implying that children of all national origins can be subjects bound by the laws of the nursery-rhyme genre. It assumes, in other words, that the cultural

materials of childhood—as epitomized by the image of *St. Nicholas* (or *St. Nicholas*) traveling all over the world—are exportable and potentially universal. This is, of course, a fantasy generated from the dominant position of the English-speaking, middle-class American child; indeed, the familiarity of the original “Miss Muffet” underlines the foreignness of “Peeky-Wang-Fu.” Nevertheless, it is a fantasy of inclusion—and a common one in *St. Nicholas*—relying on the crucial notion that *age marks the body even more definitively than nationality*; that every seven-year-old in the world, from “Peeky-Wang-Fu” to “Little Biddy O’Toole,” is a potential “Miss Muffet” and a potential peer.

By the 1880s, as the historian Howard Chudacoff has argued, graded public schools and the field of pediatric medicine were convincing middle-class Americans that intellectual and physiological traits were less a matter of class, character, or ethnicity than of mental and physical *age*. This intensification of age-norms was also, of course, a boon to commercial writer–editors like Dodge, who could tailor their verses to age-graded peer groups while also helping to form and maintain such groups.¹⁵ The notion of a universal peer culture (often based, quite explicitly, on the “universal” desire of children for toys) was reinforced by nonfiction articles on children of other cultures, such as Alice Donlevy’s “East Indian Toys,” which stresses how much East Indian girls love their dolls.¹⁶ Nursery rhymes in *St. Nicholas*, then, function ambivalently: on the one hand their generic familiarity offers a supposed point of age-graded commonality to all children, but, on the other hand, their modified content often addresses the specific consuming desires (i.e. for slapstick ethnic humor) of nineteenth-century middle-class Americans.

But the emergence of age-graded peer culture required more than just topical rhymes; these rhymes had to maintain their traditional ludic position in the daily lives of children. This led to peculiar hybridizations of traditional and commercial children’s culture. In February of 1876, *St. Nicholas* featured a “Mother Goose Pantomime” that showed children how to organize a performance of “The Rats and the Mice,” complete with costumes, props, and stage directions. In this traditional British rhyme, a bachelor is overrun with rats and mice, so he goes to London to fetch a wife. In the *St. Nicholas* version, however, the whole rhyme is to be sung by a “concealed singer,” to the tune of “Zip Coon,” a popular minstrel tune about a comical, blackfaced “larned scholar.”¹⁷ This grafting of minstrelsy onto a nursery rhyme is not surprising; minstrel shows in the nursery were already being performed by a bevy of mechanical toys, such as the miniature steam-engine, recommended in the January 1874 issue of *St. Nicholas*, that featured a “colored gentlemen” on top: “Fire up the engine, and he has to dance, whether he wants to or not.”¹⁸

In an essay on Stephen Crane, Bill Brown has argued that both toys (like the steam-engine dancer) and literary forms (like the fairy tale or the nursery rhyme) could stage versions of a conflict that was already developing in the 1870s, between premodern forms of life (nursery rhymes, country dancing) and modern

mass culture (“pop” music, magazine verses, mechanized toys). The stakes, Brown suggests, pit nationally-identified, ruralist traditions¹⁹ against the worldly, urbane materiality of the consumer marketplace.²⁰ The “Zip Coon” version of “The Rats and the Mice” manages the gap between the premodern and the modern, between tradition and novelty, by hybridizing old and new cultural forms. If children chose to perform this piece, they could stage an apparently independent and localized production of a traditional rhyme that was nonetheless underwritten by the text of a national magazine and by the tune of a popular song.

As Dodge seems to have understood, her “troops” were not willing simply to identify with ahistorical images of childhood; they wanted, not just their “own magazine,” but their “own childhood,” rooted not just in timeless nature and age-old rhymes but also in the popular and material culture of the postbellum American middle classes. When Dodge asserted that children wanted their own magazine, she did not mean that children wanted to produce it themselves, like the March sisters’ “Pickwick Portfolio,” but that they wanted to buy it, or at least to consume it, themselves. This desire for a purchasable generational identity was new, and it was generated in part by the mass-educational and mass-marketing systems that created an obsolescent children’s public sphere, a place where “Miss Muffet,” “Zip Coon,” *St. Nicholas*, and *St. Nicholas* could circulate and interpenetrate.

To call this emerging mass cultural pleasure ground a “public sphere” is to stretch the meaning of the term almost to the breaking point; certainly, this sphere was too heavily commercialized to be a disinterested part of “civil society.” In an essay on “The Public Sphere of Children,” Aleksander Negt and Oskar Kluge have distinguished between what they see as a genuine children’s public sphere, which would be self-organized, self-regulated, and truly autonomous, and the fragmentary, ghettoized “enclaves” of middle-class childhood which, in their view, “faithfully mirror the bourgeois public sphere.”²¹ From a utopian point of view *St. Nicholas* was never and could never be an autonomous children’s space. But to assume, therefore, that it simply “mirror[ed] the bourgeois public sphere” is to assume that later-nineteenth-century America (even the white, middle-class, *St. Nicholas*-reading part of it) comprised one unified, visible culture that *could* be mirrored. Instead, as I have been arguing, children’s culture was a hybrid response to tensions within the culture—tensions that pitted modernity against nostalgic antimodernism, propriety against pleasure, and (increasingly) children against their parents.

PLUCKING MOTHER GOOSE

If *St. Nicholas* did act as a kind of mirror, it enabled children to become visible to themselves as individuals and as a distinct group, linked by both the oral residue of nursery rhymes and the material detritus of contemporary advertising. But children did not allow themselves to be just faithful reflections of the adult world; often, they wrote in to the “Letter Box” to share, with other readers, their

playful responses to emergent mass-cultural forms. For example, one young “Helen M.” wrote in 1889 to explain how she made a paper-muslin book out of advertising cards (including numbers of “darky cards”), with the pictures cut out and repasted to illustrate rhymes like “One, Two, Buckle My Shoe.” Helen concludes:

I named it “Pluckings from Mother Goose, by One of her Goslings,” and I dedicated it to my sister Nan, and her large darky doll, Topsy. . . . I would like to know whether any one else has tried a Mother Goose scrap-book, and with what success

While this little girl has clearly metabolized the casual racism that pervaded the advertising industry in the 1880s, she disregards the commercial function of these “darky” images, transforming them from instrumental sales ploys into idiosyncratic illustrations. Moreover, she takes personal credit and pride in herself as the “author” of this transformation.²²

Helen’s creative work with advertising cards and Mother Goose mimics (without precisely mirroring) the kind of “work” that was beginning to dominate the days of many middle-class women—namely, shopping. As William Leach has pointed out, the new consumer culture (department stores, catalogues) of the Gilded Age gave women a sense of power, as their choices multiplied and as these choices were seen to represent the women themselves: their individual tastes, their resourcefulness, and their public “authority.”²³ But if selecting, cutting, and pasting advertising cards gave children like Helen a sense of personal power, this power was also explicitly social and explicitly public: in her letter, Helen expresses the urge to find other children engaged in the same activity, and to connect with these newfound peers (peers who share a knowledge of both traditional rhymes and contemporary advertising cards) via the spatialized *St. Nicholas* Letter Box. We might recognize, here, a “peer culture” forming not on the village level but on the national level—a culture that depends on the signifying systems of nursery rhyming and of commercial advertising, but that does not always play by the rules of either system.

The peer culture that was developing through *St. Nicholas* had, like women’s department store culture, an ambivalent (if ultimately financially dependent) relationship to patriarchal authority figures and the moral laws that they represented and enforced. Antebellum magazines like the *Youth’s Companion* had been aimed at parents as well as children; since 1823, the magazine had billed itself as “a family paper, devoted to piety, morality, brotherly love—no sectarianism, no controversy.”²⁴ By contrast, the postbellum figure of *St. Nicholas* (as revised by Nast, Dodge, and Wanamaker’s Department Store) is not precisely a “youth’s companion”: he delivers the goods, and then he gets out of the way. Likewise, in *St. Nicholas*, although the prose is full of covert lessons (more

frequently about propriety and sportsmanship than about morals, per se), Dodge as editor also allows for a certain conspiratorial “naughtiness,” especially in the verse selections.

This naughtiness could manifest itself in sly recastings of moralistic verses. Already by the 1880s, Sarah Josepha Hale’s “Mary’s Lamb” was one of the best-known rhymes in English.²⁵ In 1830, when Hale wrote the poem, animal poems in American children’s magazines fell into two categories: either they were allegorical morality tales or they preached kindness to animals. “Mary’s Lamb” falls into the latter category, ending with a teacher’s voice informing “eager children” (in four lines that have dropped from the oral version):

And you each gentle animal
In confidence may bind,
And make it follow at your call,
If you are always kind.²⁶

In 1884, a “Letter Box” contributor—relying on the widespread familiarity of the poem—sent illustrations of three lines from “Mary’s Lamb.” In the first sketch, Mary is dragging a large, reluctant ram by a chain; in the second sketch, meant to illustrate “And so the teacher put him out,” the ram is butting into the teacher, who is airborne, with his spectacles flying off as he sails out the door.

The extraordinary thing is not that a child drew such sketches but that *St. Nicholas* published them, thus parodying not just pedagogical poetry but also the pedagogue himself. As re-imagined in the sketch, “Mary’s Lamb” silences the lecturing voice of the teacher (who is not quoted) and becomes more closely aligned with the children, who cluster as peers in the background watching their teacher being ousted. And this peer clustering does not rely just on the immediate solidarity produced when a teacher is charged by a lamb, or when a funny drawing is surreptitiously passed around a schoolroom. Through its appearance in *St. Nicholas*, the joke generates a larger public, composed of schoolchildren from New York to California,²⁷ who dream the same anarchical dream of undermining school authorities. If the public schools were designed (like much *St. Nicholas* fiction) to produce ideal citizens, then images like that of the rampaging lamb put pressure on this ideal, signaling an emerging tension: on the one hand, the “free market” depended on authoritative institutions like the school and the family to support it, but, on the other hand, the products of that market—like *St. Nicholas*—catered to children’s desire to lead “a brand-new, free life of their own for a little while,”²⁸ beyond the reach of all disciplinary measures.

INVASION OF THE BROWNIES

The first children’s poetry to inspire a major consumer craze, and to generate national advertising campaigns, was Palmer Cox’s “Brownies” series. The Brownies made their debut in *St. Nicholas* in 1883, and, as the *New York Times*



Figure 1: Palmer Cox. “The Brownies on Roller Skates.” From *The Brownies: Their Book*. NY: Century Company, 1887, 93. First published in *St. Nicholas*, 13:7 (May 1886), 545.

put it in Cox’s obituary, “It is doubtful whether any fashion in children’s literature has ever swept the country so completely as Palmer Cox’s Brownies took possession of American childhood in the early eighties.”²⁹ Cox’s Brownies, whose escapades were related in illustrated couplets, spawned a vast commercial enterprise, with spin-off dolls, rubber stamps, card games, wall paper, spoons, candy molds, Christmas ornaments, and even a Noah’s Ark with pairs of Brownies taking the place of animals.

The Brownies, a group of “cunning,” little men loosely based on the Scottish folklore³⁰ that Cox had heard as a child in Canada, sneak out at night to play and make mischief. But mysteriously, by morning, they manage to put everything

back in its place, so that adults never realize (though children suspect) that Brownies have been afoot:

When people lock their doors at night,
 And double-lock them left and right,
 And think through patents, new and old,
 To leave the burglars in the cold,
 The cunning Brownies smile to see
 The springing bolt and turning key;
 For well they know if fancy leads
 Their band to venture daring deeds,
 The miser's gold, the merchant's ware
 To them is open as the air.³¹

Despite their origins as Scottish folklore, the Brownies' tastes are up-to-date; their favorite places to invade are stores, where they "borrow" newfangled gadgets including bicycles, ice-skates, roller-skates, baseball equipment, and hot-air balloons. The Brownies' attraction to "merchants' wares" is not really surprising, since by the 1880s merchants were beginning to peddle the promise of magical transformation through material goods. The Brownies embody this promise, gaining instant power over commodities while evading (as advertisements themselves tend to evade) the specter of money changing hands. At any rate, the Brownies' power is not purchasing power; indeed, like children, they are not even properly *consumers*, since they do not earn or spend money but only avail themselves of a material world produced, marketed, and paid for by others.

And yet, if the Brownies concretize children's marginal relationship to the marketplace, they also paradoxically represent both their desire to participate in this marketplace and their urge to be independent of it. Cox's poems and drawings press the new mass culture of the child to its logical conclusion, envisioning a world populated exclusively by peers: among the Brownies there are no families, no compulsory schools, no moral trajectories, and no demands beyond the demands of pleasure. As the Brownies "took possession of childhood in the early eighties," they not only modeled age-graded relationships but also offered peers a mass-cultural marker: children swept up by the Brownies craze were marked as members of an historically-specific peer group, or what we might call a *generation*.

The sociologist Karl Mannheim has defined a *generation* as "a particular kind of identity of social location, embracing related 'age-groups' embedded in a historical-social process."³² Before the Civil War, if "generations" formed at all (and the modern conception seems to date from later eighteenth-century romanticism),³³ they formed not in childhood but in the transition to adulthood, as the result of large-scale cataclysms like war or revolution. The experience of childhood was by and large a subset of family experience: if children were affected by large-scale conflicts (as Little Eva was, for instance) this knitted them

closer to adults as they shouldered adult concerns. But the cataclysmic cultural changes of the Gilded Age (mass manufacturing, the playground movement, child-study, public schools) pushed middle-class children into each others' actual and imagined company, drawing energy and interest from outside the family circle and giving children what Mannheim calls a "distinct social location" that marked them not just by class but by age.

This location was not always an actual place; often, it might be described as a kind of "Toy-land" produced by the popular culture of the postbellum era. Significantly, this "land" was not a natural, rural, or timeless zone; the Brownies inserted children—albeit by proxy—into historical-social processes; in one adventure, for instance, they attend the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Modernity and novelty were key; in one of its first issues, *St. Nicholas* assured readers that they could rely on the magazine "to always be on the lookout for new games and playthings," so that children might know of "the latest inventions from Toy-land."³⁴ If Toy-land was a place—even a pretend place, a phantom public sphere—it also functioned as a social location where children might encounter each other, not as part of the family circle, but as independent entities like the Brownies.

The children of the eighties could thus use their knowledge of mass culture to revise and adjust older rhymes, reflecting the tastes of their specific milieu, as some children in Carrington, Dakota Territories, did in 1886 as part of a (strikingly secular) Christmas entertainment. A nine-year-old, Theodora C., described the scene to *St. Nicholas*:

We called it "An Evening with Mother Goose and the Brownies." Yes—we had all the cute little boys in Carrington dress up like Brownies. They did mischief very nicely, all quietly in their stocking feet. While Mother Goose was singing her melodies, they came and stole away her goose, and they pelted Mother Hubbard with paper balls. . . . they tripped up Jack and Jill, upset Blue-Beard, stole Jack Horner's plum, overturned the bachelor's wheelbarrow, little wife and all, let the spider down from the tree onto little Miss Muffet, and tied Bo Peep's sheep-tails to a tree, and woke her up with their baas. . . .³⁵

Theodora's Brownies are much more aggressive than Cox's Brownies, taking the basic principles of "mischief" and pushing them (albeit in a performative context) to violent extremes. Uncontained by the magical re-ordering that makes the Brownies invisible and unthreatening, "Mother Goose and the Brownies" ends in unplanned chaos, as the "maiden all forlorn" (from "The House That Jack Built") throws a cat across the stage, causing the house to collapse on several Brownies.

The America that the Brownies (and the children of Carrington) confronted—a world created by the merchants, inventors, and entrepreneurs that

Alan Trachtenberg identifies as agents of incorporation—could be overwhelming in scale.³⁶ As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, such a world threatens the survival of individual agency: “Increasingly constrained, and yet less and less concerned with these vast frameworks, the individual . . . can henceforth only try to outwit them, to pull tricks on them, to rediscover . . . the ‘art’ of the hunters and rural folk of earlier days.”³⁷ De Certeau’s image is fancifully romantic, but it does articulate a romantic “antimodern” impulse that was already surfacing, as Jackson Lears has argued, in late-nineteenth-century America.³⁸ Children, whose agency was “increasingly constrained” by the “vast frameworks” of the Gilded Age, found in Cox’s fragmentary “folk” images a way to recall an independent, self-contained world—a world where “play” was an unincorporated (undisciplined, unproductive, or perhaps even violent) activity.

If we take the Brownies seriously, however, a certain pathos emerges. With their tiny, fat bodies, they are halfway between children and toys; if they appropriate material objects for their own pleasure, they are also objects themselves, easily appropriated for the pleasure of others. As immediate ancestors of the Kewpie doll, the Brownies as illustrated by Cox are among the first children’s drawings that twentieth-century observers might recognize as “cute.”³⁹ Like children, the Brownies have the power to tactically subvert the system (by stealing a bicycle, for instance) but not to change it: by morning, everything is always back where it was, and little people remain marginal, their very “cuteness” a sign of their potential objectification by adults. From this perspective, it is not surprising that the most successful Brownies tie-in product was America’s first inexpensive portable camera, Eastman Kodak’s *Brownie*: finally, children could be captured on film by their parents.

The technology of the portable camera resonates strongly with the surveillance technologies of “child-study.” In the last decades of the nineteenth century, social scientists, educators, and parents began to document the minutiae of children’s leisure activities; the anthropologist Fanny Bergen, for instance, published popular essays in the *Atlantic* on children’s uses of wild plants.⁴⁰ Child-rearing practices were becoming less punishing (the ideas of both infant depravity and infant perfection seem to have been on the wane) but more hyperarticulated, as elaborated, for example, in the 1897 *Proceedings* of the First Annual Conference of the National Congress of Mothers.⁴¹ The rising interest in sensitive and productive discipline sparked a new interest in the concept of play; on the grassroots level, this resulted in the organization of sand-lots, recreation centers, municipal theaters, pageants, and other forms of supervised recreation.

On the one hand, the rhymes and jingles in *St. Nicholas*, especially those such as “The Rats and the Mice” that came with performance instructions, might seem like part of the same tendency to organize play on behalf of children. On the other hand, *St. Nicholas* (despite the persistent personifications of the magazine as “dear old St. Nicholas”) was of course not a teacher or a parent but an object: a beautiful red and gold package full of spatialized “departments” like “The Letter Box” and “The Treasure-Chest of Literature.” This object arrived every month,

as the *Literary World* put it in a laudatory review of *St. Nicholas*, “with the brilliancy and beauty of new coins of gold dropping from the mint, and with something of the regularity and precision of their appearance.”⁴² Although Dodge became famous as the “conductor” (she refused to be merely an editor) of *St. Nicholas*, the rhymes she chose never developed what we might call a consistent “controlling interest” in children’s play. Unlike child-study experts, she was not finally concerned with making play socially or developmentally productive; rather, she was concerned with making play profitable in a literal sense, which meant catering to children’s desires. This does not mean that children’s desires were given free reign; the “rebellions” staged by, say, Cox’s Brownies were contained by verse forms and impossible contexts; they disturbed without destroying the social order. Indeed, the *St. Nicholas* rhymes, for all their archaic and carnivalesque qualities, are perhaps mostly “about” learning to be middle-class and to take pleasure (but not excessive pleasure) in commodities, in “new coins dropping from the mint.”⁴³

But to market pleasure and play nevertheless involved challenging (without entirely dismantling) the older sentimental version of “childhood” as a family affair determined by the family’s social position and ethnicity. The “social locations” of middle-class children’s play expanded to include both real and imagined age-mates, who might together escape surveillance on bicycles, on roller-skates, or through their “very own magazine.” Transgressive behaviors were tolerated or even encouraged in *St. Nicholas* as the values of the marketplace clashed with the values of home and family life. Sometimes these transgressions took partial cover under folk and nursery-rhyme conventions (as in “My Uncle Jehosephat” or the Brownies) but sometimes they were quite unapologetically realistic and contemporary, as in an extraordinary 1874 Dodge poem that begins: “One rainy morning/Just for a lark/I jumped and stamped/On my new Noah’s Ark.”⁴⁴

If children didn’t really have their “own” magazine or their own truly autonomous public sphere, incidental poetry nonetheless helped them to make time and space for themselves. *St. Nicholas* offered its rhymes and jingles to children as objects that could be played with; it gave them the chance to pursue their own agendas and to meet their own needs—especially their need (itself a product of later-nineteenth-century middle-class culture) to escape their parents.⁴⁵ If children, like Brownies, could seldom be truly subversive, they could nonetheless tactically resist incorporation into the institutions that—even by the 1880s and certainly by 1900—had begun to define and contain childhood.⁴⁶ Rhymes and jingles gave children a lyrical time and place where they could “jump and stamp” *just for a lark*—and in a culture increasingly obsessed with productivity, progress, and development (including “child development”) this social location must have been precious indeed.

And yet, as I have shown, the notion of the lyric as a plotless pleasure ground cannot remain untroubled by history. The early issues of *St. Nicholas* are

transitional texts, mediating between residual and emergent historical forms of childhood. By the turn-of-the-century, middle-class children would be firmly entrenched as economic consumers rather than producers—and middle-class social workers would be working to bring poor children out of the labor force as well. But before 1900, in the 1870s and 1880s, the rhymes and jingles in *St. Nicholas* laid the groundwork for new, middle-class assumptions about the value of children and childhood. These assumptions—that children ought to play, that play can unite children, and that children might form a peer group or generation—sold magazines. But, as young readers' published responses to the magazine's materials suggest, such assumptions also had wider-ranging effects: they linked play to fashion, they fostered what would come to be known (years later) as the generation "gap," and they created, in Dodge's words, "troops upon troops" of "little people," whose "interests" could be addressed, but whose playful practices could not always be predicted—or controlled.

NOTES

1. [Mary Mapes Dodge], "Children's Magazines," *Scribner's* 6:3 (July, 1873), 352.
2. *Ibid.*, 353.
3. Quoted in William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993), 87.
4. R. Gordon Kelly, *Mother Was a Lady: Self and Society in Selected American Children's Periodicals, 1865-1890* (Westport, Conn., 1974), 23. Fred Erisman makes a similar point—about how Dodge's choices reflected parents' interest in the middle-class status quo—about the magazine's nonfiction. See Erisman, "The Utopia of *St. Nicholas*: The Present as Prologue," *Children's Literature* 5 (1976): 66-73.
5. *Ibid.*, 37.
6. "My Uncle Jehosephat," *St. Nicholas* 3:3 (January, 1876), 200. Most unsigned rhymes in the early issues of *St. Nicholas* were written by Mary Mapes Dodge; she also published under pseudonyms, most frequently "Joel Stacey."
7. In the January 1875 issue of *St. Nicholas*, part of Moore's poem was reprinted in facsimile; the accompanying commentary notes that "No matter who writes poetry for the holidays, nor how new or popular the author of such poems may be, nearly everybody reads or repeated 'Twas the night before Christmas' when the holidays come round; and it is printed and published in all sorts of forms and styles, so that the new poems must stand aside when it is the season for this dear old friend" (161).
8. See William Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift-Giving* (New York, 1993).
9. To function as an age-graded peer group is to be susceptible to "peer pressure." As Etta K. of Kansas City wrote to *St. Nicholas*, "I was wanting you before Christmas because all of the girls at school say you are so interesting. I never had a hope of getting you. But what do you think! On Christmas, to my great surprise, among my presents was *St. Nicholas*!" *St. Nicholas* 3:8 (June, 1886), 634. The magazine was available in bound yearly volumes for the gift market, as well as by monthly subscription.
10. Mary Mapes Dodge, welcoming letter, *St. Nicholas* 1:1 (November, 1873), 2.
11. John Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Believe* (New York, 1996), 23.
12. This poem was included in the *New England Primer* that was still being used as late as the 1840s; Emily Dickinson learned to read from it.
13. In my discussion of Mother Goose rhymes, I call such rhymes "traditional," meaning that they were often transmitted orally and that their contents were not topical in the nineteenth-century American context. Of course, many of these rhymes were originally topical political satires, written for adults; the fact that their original meanings and authors are not commonly cited simply reinforces the notion that Mother Goose rhymes have crossed the line into oral culture.
14. *St. Nicholas* 2:12 (October, 1875), 751.
15. See Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton, 1989). Chudacoff does not address the role (and the motivations) of the mass culture industry in age-grading, but his demographic work is especially useful, showing how

a decrease in family size, together with a narrowing in the age gap between husbands and wives, contributed to a more age-conscious, polarized family structure by the turn of the century—parents on the one hand and close-knit, like-minded siblings on the other. See esp. pp. 92-98.

16. Alice Donlevy, "East Indian Toys," *St. Nicholas* 2:1 (November, 1874), 52.

17. For a discussion of "Zip Coon" as popular music, and as an antecedent to jazz, see Eric Lott's critique of Theodore Adorno's "Perennial Fashion—Jazz" in Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993), 171-177.

18. "New Toys and Games for the Children," *St. Nicholas* 1:3 (January, 1874), 171.

19. And here we might recall that Newell's direct intellectual forbearers were Herder and the Grimms; the whole discipline of folklore, in America as in Germany, was steeped in the language and assumptions of romantic nationalism, even though (as Newell admits) many of the "games and songs of American children" were British imports.

20. Bill Brown, "American Childhood and Stephen Crane's Toys," *American Literary History* 7:3 (1995), 443-476. Brown sees this conflict recapitulated in toys like the steam-engine dancer, who embodies both traditions of the rural South and the modernity of the mass-produced object. Brown also genders the emerging mass cultural sphere as female, and traditional childhood as the ruralist, male-centered province of the "boys' book."

21. Aleksander Negt and Oskar Kluge, "The Public Sphere of Children" in *Public Sphere and Experience*, trans. Peter Labanyi et al. (Minneapolis, 1993), 283-288. I do not mean to suggest that Negt and Kluge generally assume culture to be unified; one of their main points is that it is not. Nevertheless, like many adults confronted with childhood, they seem to make sweeping assumptions about children based on the notions that 1) children are "naturally" more free from cultural constraints than adults; and 2) capitalist society does not value children because they are not productive workers. This latter assumption is at least debatable by anyone who studies later-nineteenth-century America, where children were almost obsessively valued.

22. Helen's impulse to make a book might also signal a nostalgic desire for the more fully autonomous work of making a magazine from scratch, as the March sisters do in *Little Women*, or as the Brontë siblings so famously did in the early part of the century.

23. Leach, *Land of Desire*, 148. See also Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York, 1985). Bowlby frames this phenomenon in Freudian terms: "Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic mirror into a shop window, the glass which reflects an idealized image of the woman (or man) who stands before it, in the form of a model of what she could buy or become. Through the glass, the woman sees what she wants and what she wants to be." 32.

24. This description appeared on the back of *Youth's Companion*, 16 April 1827; this "family paper," it should be said, continued to be popular after the Civil War, appealing largely to a poorer and less sophisticated readership (especially in the West) that could not afford to indulge the demographic split between children's and adults' reading materials; in tone, it was more akin to, say, the *Saturday Evening Post*, than to strictly juvenile periodicals.

25. The first four lines of the poem were the first electronically recorded human speech, as recited from memory by Thomas Edison in 1877.

26. Sarah Josepha Hale, "Mary's Lamb," in *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse in America*, ed. Donald Hall (New York, 1985), 20.

27. One characteristic of the "Letter Box" is that it printed letters from a variety of locales in each issue; the "Mary's Lamb" sketch was flanked by letters from London, New York, Hartford, California, and Harper's Ferry.

28. Dodge, "Children's Magazines," 353.

29. "Palmer Cox" (obituary), *New York Times*, 25 July 1924.

30. The "Brownie" is a term from lowland Scotland, according to the Celticist antiquarian Henry Jenner; he speculates that "Brownie, Duine Sith, and Peght, which is 'Pict,' are only in their origin, ways of expressing the little dark-skinned aboriginal folk who were supposed to inhabit the barrows, cromlechs, and *allées couvertes*, and whose cunning, their only effective weapon against the mere strength of the Aryan invader, earned them a reputation for magical powers." Henry Jenner, Introduction to "In Cornwall," in W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911; rep., New York, 1990), 163.

31. Palmer Cox, "The Brownies on Bicycles," *St. Nicholas* 13:1 (November, 1885), 70.

32. Quoted in Anthony Esler, *Generations in History* (Williamsburg, Va., 1982), 45.

33. Raymond Williams notes that pre-romantic uses of "generation" refer to lineages, not to age-graded groups; see Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976), 140-142.

34. "New Toys and Games for the Children," *St. Nicholas* (January, 1874), 170-171.

35. *St. Nicholas* 13:7 (May, 1886), 554.

36. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of American Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982), 3-4.

37. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), xxiv.

38. See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1981). Antimodernism, according to Lears, often involved fantasies of returning to more "primitive" forms of life, such as those of rural folk, medieval artisans, and children.

39. On the influence of Palmer Cox's Brownies on Rose O'Neill's Kewpies, see *Woman's Home Companion* (January, 1914), 3-4.

40. Selections from Bergen's "Pandeian Pastimes" and "Nibblings and Browsings," which first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896 and 1893 respectively, are reprinted in Simon Bronner, ed., *Folklife Studies from the Gilded Age: Object, Rite, and Custom in Victorian America* (Ann Arbor, 1987), 120-133.

41. For a discussion of this conference, of child-study and child-rearing practices, and of the professionalization of child care, see Bernard Wisly, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia, 1968).

42. *Literary World*, 12 December 1896, 454.

43. This was also one major function of the American advertising industry, as Jackson Lears has argued in *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (New York, 1994).

44. Mary Mapes Dodge, *Rhymes and Jingles* (New York, 1874). This collection contained work culled from *St. Nicholas* as well as original verses; it was released in conjunction with the bound Christmas volume of *St. Nicholas* in 1874.

45. I do not mean to imply that children in earlier eras did not need to escape their parents; I mean that in later-nineteenth-century America, temporary imaginative escapes from family life became acceptable themes in children's literature, as they had long been in folklore, and this reflected a new sense of the middle-class family as both more oppressive (less child labor, less real financial independence for children, longer childhood) and more open to challenges and questioning via mass culture.

46. As Dodge comments in "Children's Magazines," "Most children of the present civilization attend school. Their little heads are strained and taxed with the day's lessons. They do not want to be bothered nor amused nor taught nor petted." 353.