

The Importance of Children's Folklore

Brian Sutton-Smith

The importance of children's folklore is, primarily, the excitement it brings children. This wisdom appears strange only because adults spend so much time trying to cure children of their childhood. If adults thought of children as being more like themselves, they would say of children's play, "Of course, they enjoy the same as we enjoy."

When adults gather in a club or theater or on a playing field, they enjoy the amusement or excitement of those places. Yet they find it hard to allow children the same sort of fun.

We know that children get in much amusement and horse play when we are not around, yet we prefer not to think of that as relevant to how *we relate to them*. We think our job is to reform children, not indulge them. Our job is not to find how they are like us; it is to find how they are different from us and how we can, by our own industry and good faith, save them for maturity.

Much of the thriving industry of child psychology shows how children are saved from their primitive state by *socialization*. This is why most explanations of children's folklore are couched in terms of its socializing value. But if we are to talk about children's folklore, we must talk first about its importance to children themselves, and only then discuss the importance of children's folklore in a child's socialization.

Play: The Child's View

Unfortunately, no one is perfectly clear about what children get from play. There are certain specula-

tions, however, that over the years have accrued some apparent merit. *First*, there is the idea that in play, fateful events in a child's life which are elsewhere passively experienced are here actively controlled. The importance of play to children, by this reasoning, is that it puts them in the drivers' seats; it keeps up their courage, their sense of their own ability to succeed. *Second*, because they can control the scenario in play, they can modulate its ups and downs, its rises and falls of excitement; its anticipations, tensions, and climaxes; its drama of life. *Third*, from these it follows that through such playful manipulations of experience interpretations can be placed on life. Whether the problem is powerlessness, or hostility or affection (the most usual ones), in play they can be "writ large" in a theater that one's peers can mutually enjoy. By thus reversing usual circumstances in which they are controlled by events, the children thus understand and gain flexible control of events themselves. Seen in this light, much of their play business is nonsense or inversion of reality, and only in that way is the uncontrollable controlled. As Soviet children's author Korny Chukovsky (1882-1969) said: "They only know sense who also nonsense know."

A little reflection here shows that there is nothing here that adults do not enjoy. They also laugh and cry at their fates as pictured in films, theater, books, and sports. For a few moments heroes reverse the conditions of fate; they give us excitement and climax; and they state with some caricature the alternative meanings of existence. Seen from this point of view the importance of children's play and folklore is no different from that of adults. To be sure, their problems

are fewer and are those of little people — mainly powerlessness. Adult problems are multiple and those of big people — mortality. The importance of children's folklore is the same as the importance of adult folklore. It can make life bearable. It can make life meaningful. It can sometimes transcend it in a variety of euphoric and esthetic manifestations as in games, dance, song, and story.

Play: The Adult View

The prevailing scholarly view is that what children learn from each other is the control of aggression and sex, vital life processes they cannot learn from adults. Children learn about asymmetrical power from adults: about how to look after and be looked after. From peers, though, they have to work out how to survive personally and sexually in a less protective world. Much of what children are doing and learning in folklore is *negotiating* to get the excitements that they seek. All are concerned with the dramas of power, but it takes a great deal of conflict and argument to set the stage on which the dramas can be enacted. A hint of the complexities that are involved is contained in Christine Von Glascoe's wonderful account of the work of playing the game "Redlight." She says:

"When disputes arise between director and other players, the game of 'Redlight' stops. A second game, which concerns dispute settlement, is substituted in its place. This interior game I refer to as 'Redlight II.' The substantive nature of these disputes addresses the question of whether or not the director observed some player to move during the no-go condition. A surprising order of philosophical inquiry emerges in the course

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of such debates. Arguments are grounded in terms of player-members doctrines about intentional acts, unconscious acts, accidental acts, goal directedness of acts and fate-determined acts. A summary of directors' acts is expressed in the following paradigm: I saw you move, and your move was intentional and goal oriented, therefore you must return to the start line. A summary of the player's response would be: I didn't move, and if I did it wasn't goal directed, and if it was goal directed and intentional, you didn't see me." (from a paper read at the annual meeting of the Association for Anthropological Study of Play, Notre Dame University, April 1978).

By this account, the girls in "Red-light" are learning how to be lawyers or philosophers.

According to another interpretation of the educative function of play, boys who play team games are learning how to be politicians: learning how to find a place for everyone, no matter how apparently useless he is, so that the game can keep going. If the useless baseball player is far enough in the outfield he may perhaps be hit by the ball and stop it by accident. It is said that boy's groups are large and relatively easy to get into, but this still doesn't do members much good, because merit and skill alone get them to pitcher or first up. Girls' groups are smaller and harder to get into, but members are treated well once they are in. This latter is apparently a model of a family or of lovers rather than of a political group.

Some even argue that actual play itself is not really very important; it is only through the arguments

to which play leads that children really learn anything. On these grounds, children's folklore is the context for educative dispute. But then this is probably the conclusion you reach when you simply deny that children are playing for the same kinds of reasons you do. It is a bit like arguing that the role of sex in marriage is to benefit the development of mutual understanding, which is to mistake an incidental consequence of sex for its motive force. Play is like sex, and folklore is like play. They have their own reasons. They are the excitements of our existence. Their consequences are multiple, and we should not mistake the industry of unfathoming them for the meaning of the acts themselves.

Suggested Reading

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Humpty-Dumpty Jumping Jack. Circa 1880. Rochester, New York. Made by A. V. Sprague's Novelty Works.

Page Seven:
Skeleton Hand Puppet. Circa 1880. Made by Lano Family, location unknown.