

Hi, this is Ross from Learning without Borders and today we're going to learn about nursery rhymes.

In the last podcast we looked at *Ring-a-roses*, the popular children's rhyme that is actually about the Black Death that ravaged Europe in medieval times. Today we will look at two more seemingly innocent rhymes that have darker, hidden meanings. They also both happen to be about the same person: Mary I of England.

Mary was the eldest daughter of King Henry VIII, the guy who married six different women, cutting off two of their heads. Seeing as her father was such an enthusiastic head chopper, it should come as no surprise that Mary enjoyed a bit of killing herself. So much, in fact, that even today she is remembered as "Bloody Mary". Mary was a Catholic at a time when Catholics and Protestants in Europe didn't exactly get along. As a result, she made it her personal mission to eliminate Protestantism from her kingdom by killing as many as possible. This brings us to our first rhyme...

*Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary* is a particularly innocent sounding rhyme that most people don't even realise is about a real person. It goes like this: "Mary, Mary, quite contrary/How does your garden grow?/With silver bells and cockle shells/And pretty maids all in a row". So as we know, the Mary in this rhyme is Queen Mary and "contrary" is another way of saying the things she does don't make sense. Now on to the most confusing part; what kind of garden is made of bells and shells instead of grass and flowers? As it turns out, silver bells and cockle shells were actually types of torture device used to make Protestants confess to their crimes, whilst the garden in question is actually Mary's kingdom – England. Finally we come to the pretty maids all in a row. What could be sinister about pretty girls standing in a line? One theory is that it refers to Lady Jane Grey, the woman who was famously Queen of England for nine days before being executed by Mary.

The second rhyme is a particularly famous one that sounds dark even on the surface: *Three Blind Mice*. You might have heard it, it goes: "Three blind mice, three blind mice/See how they run, see how they run/They all ran after the farmer's wife/Who cut off their tails with a carving knife/Did you ever see such a thing in your life/As three blind mice". You can't help feeling sorry for the mice really, after all, not only do they start out the rhyme being blind, but to make matters worse they then have their tails cut off by a furious woman. Actually, the so-called "mice" are three Protestant priests who tried to stop Mary being queen. They were naturally unsuccessful and so were punished by Mary, whose favourite way of punishing people was tying them to a stick and burning them alive. So instead of cutting off their tails, she turned them into mousey shish kebabs. They weren't blinded however, so it is believed that the blindness refers to their Protestant religion instead of following the "true" religion of Catholicism.

I hope this has been eye opening for you. Check out my other podcasts if you want to hear some more dark origins behind famous nursery rhymes.