



Classics in Short No.110 Varying tunes for the Pied Piper of Hamelin

Piper of Hamelin

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

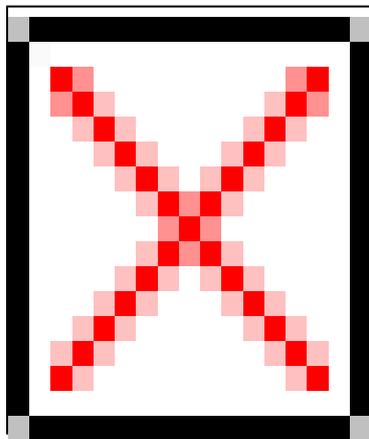
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Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Robert Browning's poem examined.



Pity about those last lines, Mr Browning,

but then you've always been a bit of a lad where the verbals are concerned and, although you had the chance to find something better, you didn't and they stayed this way:?

So, Willy, let me and you be wipers

Of scores out with all men ? especially pipers,

And whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice

If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise!

I don't think we need the accents on those o's for the line works all right anyway; it's just the frightful attempt at a rhyme at the end ? especially after the three hundred and two dazzlers that came before.

But then,

you'd never done much in the way of writing for children and perhaps you'd never have done this if young Willy Macready hadn't been in need of cheering up. Nor did you have much in the way of models to follow in 1842. There were some nice poems for children by Mr and Mrs Howitt and I believe you were very fond of those Taylor sisters, but nobody had put in a virtuoso performance like this versified tale of yours about the ridding of the rats (and then the children) from the town of Hamelin. You apparently picked it up as a genuine legend recorded some centuries before, and I think your papa was trying to write it up before you did, but yours is the only telling that caught on.

For quite a while

your piper was anthology fodder or a text to read round the classroom (which would be something of a challenge). Its climb to popularity came less through your bardic afflatus than through the persuasive engraver and printer, Edmund Evans, who got his protégée, Miss Kate Greenaway, to make a picture book out of it. He sought your permission in 1885, didn't he? forty-three years after you first published the verses. You claimed to be honoured by the suggestion, but much tuition of the artist was undertaken by that Mr Ruskin and you had to wait till 1888 before getting a nice presentation copy with a pretty illustrated inscription by Miss G herself.

Did you like it, I wonder?

(Did you get any royalties?) It had the Greenaway decorative attractions and the Evans colour-printing skills? but only rarely did she get energy into her drawing, and she never worked out, did she, which side of the piper's pied costume should be coloured red or yellow. More interestingly, we also encounter here the first adaptation of your verses by another hand. This was necessary for, in 1889, the book came out in a French edition. Heaven knows how your irregular rhyming and your conversational enjambements could be replicated in another language, so Messrs Hachette got a M Girardin to do a very suitable prose version. What's more, it solved the problem of dealing with those last two lines:

Que leur flûte nous ait délivré des souris ou des rats, si nous leur avons promis

quelque chose tenons notre promesse.

Thus Aunt Kate

took you through the portal to the dubious paradise of Picture-land. This did not prevent plain text versions arriving in the schoolbooks and anthologies of old, but once your poem had come out of copyright it became open season for the adaptors and maulers to get to work. In 1842 the picture book, as it was to become, was not much more than a cheap paper-covered thing of no great account, but by the end of the century it had become a notable genre and an artist-led, rather than an author-led, production. Thus your three hundred and three verses became subject to cutting (the report to Rat-land by the sole-surviving rat was particularly vulnerable) or else your quaint accents were abandoned altogether and the story adapted merely as a vehicle for illustrative exercises.

As it happens,

the events you described generated an almost ineluctable sequence of subjects for those illustrators so that a comparison of interpretations is facilitated. For me those truest to your intentions are, for the poem itself, the finely articulated drawings of Walter Hodges with a great piper (1971), and a prose retelling by Barbara Ireson with near child-like illustrations by Gerald Rose and a heartbreaking final tailpiece (1961). But within the last few years, two eminent people whom we tend to refer to these days as 'Celebrities' have committed serious reinterpretations of your text of which I fancy you would not greatly approve. In the one, a certain misanthropic Russell Brand has distorted it into a modish socialist tract with frantic illustrations by a Mr Chris Riddell. In the other, a Mr Michael Morpurgo, former Children's Laureate (an honour we established in 1999), has tender-heartedly altered the history; in a tedious text with none of your Browning bounce, he allows a negotiation to take place which brings the children back out of the mountain where they were trepanned. I fancy, dear sir, that you will be glad to find that your own work is nowhere acknowledged in either volume, but you would surely be charmed by the hat that Emma Chichester Clark has given the piper in Mr Morpurgo's ramblings.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0712357289, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin by Michael Morpurgo and Emma Chichester Clark, 978-1406345193, Walker Books, £7.99

Trickster Tales: The Pied Piper of Hamelin by Russell Brand and Chris Riddell, 978-1782114567, Canongate Books,

£14.99

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