

## Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall...

Humpty Dumpty is a character in an English nursery rhyme, and one of the best known in the English-speaking world. He is typically portrayed as an anthropomorphic egg. The first recorded versions of the rhyme date from late eighteenth-century England and the tune from 1870 in James William Elliott's *National Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Songs*. Its origins are obscure, and several theories have been advanced to suggest original meanings.

Humpty Dumpty was popularized in the United States on Broadway by actor George L. Fox in the pantomime musical *Humpty Dumpty*. The show ran from 1868 to 1869, for a total of 483 performances, becoming the longest-running Broadway show until it was passed in 1881. As a character and literary allusion, Humpty Dumpty has appeared or been referred to in many works of literature and popular culture, particularly English author Lewis Carroll's 1871 book *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which he was described as an egg. The rhyme is listed in the Roud Folk Song Index as No. 13026.

The earliest known version was published in Samuel Arnold's *Juvenile Amusements* in 1797 with the lyrics:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
Four-score Men and Four-score more,  
Could not make Humpty Dumpty where he was before.*

The rhyme does not explicitly state that the subject is an egg, possibly because it may have been originally posed as a riddle. There are also various theories of

an original "Humpty Dumpty". One, advanced by Katherine Elwes Thomas in 1930 and adopted by Robert Ripley, posits that Humpty Dumpty is King Richard III of England, depicted as humpbacked in Tudor histories and particularly in Shakespeare's play, and who was defeated at Bosworth Field in 1485.

*Punch* in 1842 suggested jocularly that the rhyme was a metaphor for the downfall of Cardinal Wolsey; just as Wolsey was not buried in his intended tomb, so Humpty Dumpty was not buried in his shell.

Professor David Daube suggested in *The Oxford Magazine* of 16 February 1956 that Humpty Dumpty was a "tortoise" siege engine, an armored frame, used unsuccessfully to approach the walls of the Parliamentary-held city of Gloucester in 1643 during the Siege of Gloucester in the English Civil War.

From 1996, the website of the Colchester tourist board attributed the origin of the rhyme to a cannon, colloquially called Humpty Dumpty, recorded as used from the church of St Mary-at-the-Wall by the Royalist defenders in the siege of 1648. A shot from a Parliamentary cannon succeeded in damaging the wall beneath Humpty Dumpty, which caused the cannon to tumble to the ground. The Royalists (or Cavaliers) attempted to raise Humpty Dumpty on to another part of the wall, but the cannon was so heavy that "All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again".

Humpty Dumpty has become a highly popular nursery rhyme character. American actor George L. Fox (1825–77) helped to popularize the character in nineteenth-century stage productions of pantomime versions, music, and rhyme. The character is also a common literary allusion, particularly to refer to a person in an insecure position, something that would be difficult to reconstruct once broken.

