

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem Old Mother Hubbard

### The Poet

This nursery rhyme first appeared in 1805 as *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*. It was printed by John Harris, a successful printer/publisher of the time. The book was illustrated with engravings showing the various stages of the story.

It was written by Sarah Catherine Martin (1768-1826), who probably based it on earlier material. Unfortunately almost nothing is known of the author.





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There are conflicting claims about the original 'Old Mother Hubbard'. One story is that she was a housekeeper at a grand house where Martin stayed in 1804. However, there were also Mother Hubbards (a type of 'Mother Goose' figure) in popular stories and verse going back as far as the late 1500s. It has been argued that the first verse, which has a completely different metric pattern, is in fact traditional, and that Martin added the other eleven.



What does the first verse mean? No one knows. There is a theory that, as with other famous rhymes, the verse encodes references to real people and events. This hypothesis has 'Old Mother Hubbard' as Cardinal Wolsey, who angered King Henry VIII by refusing to arrange the King's divorce from Queen Katherine of Aragon. Henry wanted to divorce Katherine in order to marry Anne Boleyn. In this interpretation, Henry is the dog. Wolsey (Old Mother Hubbard) goes to the cupboard (the Church) for a bone (the divorce) – but there was none (ie no divorce). It must be pointed out however that this is only a theory. The rhyme as we know it makes a completely coherent 'story' out of an old lady called Mother Hubbard, and her perplexing adventures with her little dog.



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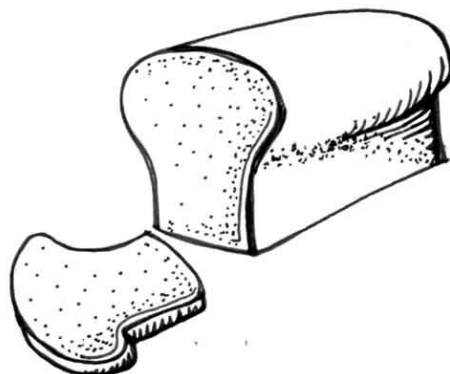
### The Poem

Essentially, the poem is a series of comic inventions – every time the old lady goes out to get something for the dog, on her return he is doing something surprising – smoking, dancing, playing the flute, riding a goat, reading the paper, spinning (wool) and so on. The joke is in the fact that the dog acts like a person – to the old lady’s obvious surprise.

The series of silly incidents ends only when the ‘dame’ acknowledges the dog’s amazing powers with a curtsey. The dog, predictably, bows. ‘Your servant’ was a polite form of address, a shortened form of ‘Your obedient servant, sir or ma’am’ equivalent to ‘I’m at your disposal’. The dog says ‘Bow-wow’, as a dog should. Perhaps this puts the dog back in his place. But the poem doesn’t want to be over-analysed. It is nonsense verse. There is no moral.

The poem has a regular rhyme scheme. The first verse has a ‘one off’ scheme of **a/a/b/c/c/b**, and the other verses a standard pattern of **a/b/c/b**.

Why is this poem so popular? Because has long since become a standard of childhood. It is almost always illustrated. It is a ‘funny dog’ story, in the form of an entertaining rhyme.



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## Reading the Poem Old Mother Hubbard Reading Poetry to Your Class



The appeal of poetry is through its rhythm, sound and imagery. Many children do not have sufficient experience with these features to effectively read verse that is new to them. Therefore their first experience with a new poem whether it is nonsense verse or a classic narrative should be by hearing it read skilfully. Only after they have **heard** it can they be expected to **read** it. For that reason it is vital that the teacher knows each poem well enough to bring it alive and so arouse and maintain children's interest.

### Hints for Reading This Verse Aloud

This is a simple rhyme and needs to be read with expression. Failure to do this will result in a delivery that resembles "**dah-dadda, dah-dadda, da-dah**". SO.....

- Vary your voice by changing the **pace**, the **volume** and the **pitch**.
- Use **pause** were appropriate for suspense and so add to the humour.
- Use facial expression to show surprise, shock, amusement.

