

You or I or Nobody Knows

by David Spalding

Dan, Dan, The Dirty Old Man

On one of the rare evenings when I get to watch television, I sat down to watch the Stratford version of "Taming of the Shrew." It was played with startling originality by including the play within a play structure usually omitted, and so I looked it up next day. I also looked for a half caught line of Katharina's that had intrigued me.

"...doubt not her care should be,
To comb your noodle with a three-legged
stool,
And paint your face...." (Act I, Scene 1)

Shakespearean scholars have doubtless discussed this - as every other line - endlessly. I wonder how many remembered their childhood, and realized the allusion. The echo is, of course, of the little children's rhyme "Dan, Dan the dirty old man," in which in some versions the old man combs his hair with a three legged chair. Perhaps Shakespeare was making a subtle blow at his contemporary scribbler Samuel Daniel (1569-1619)?

Dan is a widely known children's rhyme, yet does not appear in print very often. My wife Andy and I both learned versions as children in England. Mine (Sheffield) went -

Dan, Dan, the dirty old man,
Washed his face in a frying pan,
Combed his hair with a three-legged chair,
And scratched his belly with his big toe
nail

Andrea's version from Manchester is, as usual, different.

Dan, Dan, the dirty old man,
Washed his face in a frying pan,
Combed his hair with a donkey's tail,
And scratched his belly with his big toe nail

A cursory survey of my library produces few printed versions. The invaluable Opies, of course, have one, quoting the first two lines in the section on traditional nicknames (Lore and

Language of School Children, p. 179). However, it does not appear in the **Annotated Mother Goose**, suggesting no early printing in England or the U.S. Possibly its slightly disreputable connotations discouraged this, though I believe the more vulgar significance of "Dirty Old Man" in England is relatively recent.

In Canadian collections, it does not appear in either of Edith Fowke's major children's books and the only printed version I have located is in Sharon, Lois and Bram's collection of children's songs **Elephant Jam** (p. 11). Here, Dan opens the usual way, there

Combed his hair with the leg of a chair,
Dan, Dan, the dirty old man.

No source is given here, but the excellent notes to the record **Smorgasbord**, where it appears, indicate it only as British. They add the touching note that "it makes reference to the lack of bathrooms in the older working class houses, causing poor old Dan to wash and comb in the kitchen instead." (Ah well, if we gave them baths, they'd only use them to keep the coal in, wouldn't they. Old British Joke.)

Is there then a Canadian version? Andrea recalls when teaching a group of senior citizens in the Stony Plain Multicultural Centre some years ago, in a restored "settler's cabin", having great difficulty in gaining the interest of one elderly man until she caught him with his eye on the huge frying pan, muttering the verse, and finished it with him. His version was:

Dan, Dan, the dirty old man,
Washed his face in a frying pan,
Combed his hair with a rusty nail,
And scratched his belly with his big toe nail.

Apart from the fact that he had a Canadian accent (so the song was not obviously a recent British import), no other information about this source is known. What new marvels will be collected now tape recorders are really portable?

American versions I have come across (but cannot at the moment find in print) usually end:

Combed his hair with a wagon wheel,
And died with a toothache in his heel.

Drawing on this tenuous body of evidence, it is possible to draw a progression from exaggeration to nonsense. In the presumed earlier version mentioned by that pioneer folksong collector, W. Shakespeare and learned by me

in childhood, the three legged chair motive is present, and it is theoretically possible to conceive of combing one's hair with such an implement. One leg of a chair becomes less suitable.

The donkey's tail and wagon wheel element, however represent complete nonsense, and the original joke is replaced by a new one. By reversing this progression, it is possible to reconstruct a hypothetical Elizabethan ur-text, which I here offer for the benefit of scholars.

Daniel, Daniel, ye dirtye olde manne,
Washed hyse visage in ye fryngge pan,
Combed hyse noddle with ye three-legged
stoole,
And scratched hyse bellye with hyse greate
toe nayle.

Perhaps young Will heard something like that, and remembered it when seeking for vituperation for Katharina - he was going to need plenty, after all. Did he learn it from girls skipping? We will discuss that thread in another article.

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