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An Examination of the Tale
The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse
in the USM de Grummond Children's Literature Collection
By Tiffany Markulike

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Introduction

Fables with animal characters have been around since the earliest known records of oral tale-telling. These fables told a tale with a message, the well-known phrase "the moral of the story." The ability to translate characteristics between humans and animals seems to come naturally. Both children and adults can follow along and draw the same conclusions about the story's simple message. According to Rudd (2006), "these fables require us to move with ease between the human and the non-human worlds...it is a two-way process as we transpose motives and reactions from the human world into the animal, and create contexts in which animal reactions and observed behavior can be represented and moralized in human terms" (p. 39).

One such animal fable is *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*. It is the familiar tale of two mice, one living in the country and one living in the city, who visit each other and decide relatively quickly that the unfamiliar surroundings are not ideal. In the end, each would prefer to be back in their original environment and in their own home. Beginning with Aesop, this tale has been told countless times and with many different authors and variations. The moral, however, is essentially the same. An example of that morality lesson is "Far better to lead a simple life than dine on riches and live in fear" (Scarry & Scarry, 1961).

Another example is "What good is fine food if you can't enjoy it? It is much better to eat plain food in peace" (Wallner, 1970). A third example is "For what good is elegance without ease, or plenty with an aching heart?" (Galdone, 1971). Perhaps in its simplest form, the message is, "There's no place like home" (Brett, 1994). According to Blount (1974), stories of mice "outnumber any other kind of animal" (p.152) The reason for that, she goes on to say, is

"perhaps it is easier to imagine them members of their own hidden social systems and to think that when out of sight they might be a part of a miniature mirror world" (p. 152). Indeed, it is this miniature world that people love to return to again and again to willingly suspend their disbelief that mice cannot travel from city to country and talk, reminisce, laugh, and sit down to dinner together. Even now, we love to learn from these mice and be reminded that the things people seek beyond their regular routines and experiences are not always as exciting as they may seem.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the different versions of the classic folk tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* contained within the de Grummond Collection, including scholarly analysis, authorship, and changes over time in the details of the story.

Research Questions

- R1. What is the historical origin of the tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*?
- R2. How many versions of the story are in the de Grummond Collection?
- R3. What is the earliest version of the story in the de Grummond Collection?
- R4. What are the publishing dates of the different versions in the Collection, and who authored them?
- R5. What are some of the key variations in these different versions of the tale?

Importance of the Study

This study is significant in that it examines one of the most well-known children's morality folk tales and analyzes the presence of the various publications of that story located in the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection. It includes the extent of the collection in terms of how many versions are available and the collection's characteristics to

determine the oldest version with the earliest publication date and the newest version with the most recent publication date. Furthermore, it analyzes some distinct differences within the versions available within the de Grummond Collection.

Definitions:

Authorship: The creator or writer of a book, document, article, or work of art. (source: www.merriam-webster.com)

Origin: The point or place where something begins, arises, or is derived. (source: dictionary.com)

de Grummond Collection: Located at the University of Southern Mississippi and founded in 1966 by Dr. Lena Y. de Grummond, the Collection holds the original manuscripts and illustrations of more than 1,300 authors and illustrators as well as 180,000 published books dating from 1530 to the present (deGrummond.org, 2019).

Literature Review

Aesop, who lived from 620 BC to 560 BC, is credited with the story about two mice, one from the country and one from the city. His story taught people to be content with what they have and not long for that which is possessed by others. With their varying nuances and details, all other versions must pay homage to Aesop for the idea. The earliest referenced written version of the story *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* is in the "Book of Satires, Book II, Satire VI" by Horace (65BC-8 BC). The Latin book *Fables* by Gualterus Anglicus, known as Walter the Englishman, whose version of the tale is "possibly dated 1175" (Rudd, 2006, p. 41) is another early known version and likely a primary source used by Henryson in *Moral Fables*. Arguably one of the most well-known early retellings of the story, Henryson's version in *Moral Fables*, written between 1450-1480, included "The Uplandis Mouse and the Burges Mouse," published near or prior to 1508, in which he attributed the story to "Esop" (Aesop). According to FRO, "The numerous early editions of the poems, which once enjoyed a great and deserved reputation in Scotland, have almost entirely disappeared. As told by Henryson, though embroidered with his own peculiar humor, the story is substantially the same as that given by Horace and Phaedrus" (FRO, p. 234).

Another author of the same journal, *Notes & Queries*, later corrected this statement saying, "FRO is inaccurate. The fable of the "Town Mouse and the Country Mouse" is in Horace, but it is not in Phaedrus" (Yardley, 1889, p. 272). The moral of the story as written by Henryson in his book *Moral Fables* is:

Of Eirthly joy it beiris maist degrie,
Blyithnes in hart, with small possessioner
(*Notes and Queries*, Volume S7-VIII, p. 234).

Unlike previously published versions of the story, Henryson expands on the moral by adding a relationship between the mice; he makes them sisters. It is also Henryson who gives much more detail to their personalities and context to their surroundings than prior versions. At that time, the mice may have been referred to in the feminine form in a French version of the fable, *Isopets*, thus giving Henryson the idea of sisters (Rudd, 2006). Regardless of whether the idea of the mice being sisters is original to Henryson or not, his unique telling of the tale is most certainly original. According to Rudd, the choice to refer to the mice as "sisters deir" is more than just conducive to the rhyme scheme; it also suggests "a hint of discord, or at the least, rivalry, between these sisters" (p. 42). As the story continues, the reader becomes aware that "this is not the simple tale of one mouse who happens to live in the town visiting another who lives in the country, but of an older sister who has made good in the big city, while her younger sibling remains in the family home, keeping the old ways" (p. 42). With this, Henryson adds an element of irony that resonates with the reader as more "sibling rivalry and gloating than simple affection" (p. 42).

There is also a satirical version of the story attributed to Charles Montague (Earl of Halifax) and Matthew Prior, jointly. This version, "The Hind and the Panther Transvers'd to the Story of the Country-Mouse and the City Mouse," was published in 1716 in *The Poetical Works of Charles Montague, the Late Earl of Halifax* (Borrajó, 1889, p. 174), but did not appear in any of Prior's compiled works until 1727 (Prideaux, 1889, p. 398), which suggests that Montague may have had a stronger hand in the jointly-written venture. This satire, followed by some other satirical versions of the story, was not considered geared

toward children and would not likely be in a collection of children's literature. There are other early French publications of the story, particularly La Fontaine's *Fables* published in the 1730s. Additional children's versions of the story were written by well-known authors such as Beatrix Potter's version published in 1918, *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*. Other famous children's authors who have written versions of the story include Richard Scarry, Paul Galdone, Helen Ward, Ethel Hayes, and Jan Brett.

Methodology

The methodology for this research on the tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* is a historical narrative and collection analysis. The research contained within the study includes the utilization of books, articles acquired through scholarly database searches, scholarly journal articles, websites, and information gathered directly from the de Grummond Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi. The number of versions of *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* at the de Grummond collection was acquired by searching the *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLDC)* and limiting the search to only those versions of the story currently housed in the de Grummond Collection.

Results

R1. What is the historical origin of the tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*?

The story of *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*, originated sometime before 560 BC and is attributed to Aesop in Ancient Greece. The story has been passed down orally for hundreds of generations and published by numerous authors, with slight variations and differences over time. One famous version is that of Robert Henryson in his book *Moral Fables*, which was "probably written in the last quarter of the fifteenth century" (Rudd, 2006, p. 40). Other versions have been published by celebrated children's authors such as Beatrix Potter, Paul Galdone, and Jan Brett. The timeless classical story endures and continues to be enjoyed by both the young and old.

R2. How many versions of the story are in the de Grummond Collection?

The database search conducted on the *Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD)* within the de Grummond Collection returned 25 results when searching under the keywords "country mouse." Of these 25 results, only 17 can be considered versions of the classic folk tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*. The other books included mice as characters, but the plots were not variations of the original story. Table 1 displays the current children's published versions of *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*, in the de Grummond Collection.

Table 1. Town Mouse, Country Mouse Books in de Grummond Collection

Title	Author	Publisher	Copyright
Town Mouse, Country Mouse	Jan Brett	Puffin Books	1994
Town Mouse, Country Mouse	Aldren Auld Watson	Holt, Rinehart and Winston	1966
The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse: An Aesop Fable	Helen Ward	Templar Books	2011
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Helen Craig	Candlewick Press	1995
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Paul Galdone	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	1971
The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse: An Aesop Fable	Bernadette Watts	Toll Communications Llc.	1979
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Lorinda Bryan Cauley	Piccadilly Press Ltd.	1984
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Ethel Hayes	The Saafeld Publishing Company	1942
The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse	Beatrix Potter	Warne; 100th Edition	2002
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Ethel Hayes (Illustrator)	Saafeld Publishing	1942
The Mouse with the Daisy Hat	Ruth Hurlimann	D. White	1971
Three Cat and Mouse Tales	Marilyn Helmer	Kids Can Press	2004
Bernelly & Harriet: The Country Mouse and the City Mouse	Elizabeth Dahlie	Little, Brown	2002
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Alan Benjamin	Western Publishing	1987
The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse	Patricia and Richard Scarry	Little Golden Book	1961
City Mouse - Country Mouse and two more mouse tales from Aesop	John Wallner	Scholastic	1970
Town Mouse House: How we Live One Hundred Years Ago	Nigel Brooks	Walker Children's	2000

R3. What is the earliest version of the story in the de Grummond Collection?

The earliest version of the tale *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* in the de Grummond collection, is *The Town Mouse and The Country Mouse* by Ethel Hayes, published in 1942 (Figure 5). The Beatrix Potter version is the oldest version in the de Grummond collection in terms of the original copyright (1918). However, the one in the de Grummond collection is the newer version copyrighted in 2002.

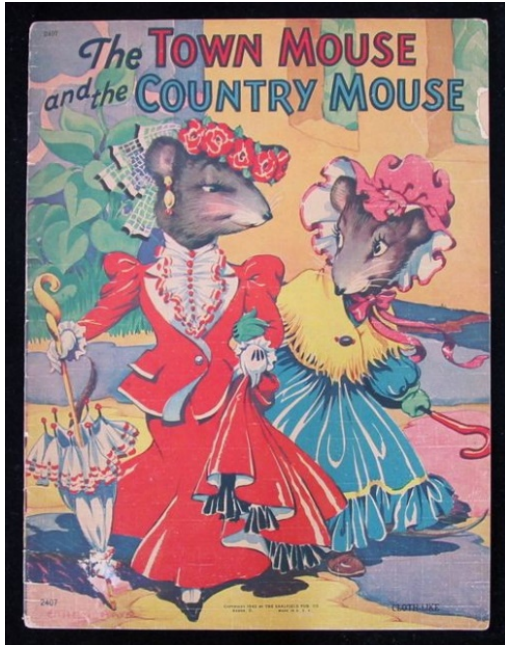


Figure 1. *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* by Ethel Hayes, 1942
(Kent State University Special Collections)

R4. What are the publishing dates of the different versions in the collection, and who authored them?

In Table 2, the different versions of the story *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* from the de Grummond collection are listed in ascending order by publication date. The authors are listed in the second column, next to the year of their publication date:

Table 2. *Town Mouse, Country Mouse* Books in de Grummond Collection by Publication Year

Publishing Year	Author
1942	Ethel Hayes
1942	Ethel Hayes (Illustrator)
1961	Patricia & Richard Scarry
1966	Aldren Auld Watson
1970	John Wallner
1971	Paul Galdone
1971	Ruth Hurlimann
1979	Bernadette Watts
1984	Lorinda Bryan Cauley
1987	Alan Benjamin
1994	Jan Brett
1995	Helen Craig
2000	Nigel Brooks
2002	Beatrix Potter
2002	Elizabeth Dahlie
2004	Marilyn Helmer
2011	Helen Ward

R5. What are some of the key variations in the tale?

The various versions of the *Town Mouse, Country Mouse*, are often a result of the time period in which they were published, the authors' cultural and stylistic differences, and poetic license by the different authors. According to Blount (1974), "No other small creatures are as appealing and versatile, from Aesop onwards, and as new versions of Aesop have always been popular – the Town and Country Mouse story is the tale most often repeated – the mice will lend themselves to any fashion and copy the humans of any era, from Robert Henryson's Scotland of the fifteenth century to the late Victorian England of "Miss Browne" (p. 153). Henryson's version chose to portray the mice as sisters, while that of Anglicus mentions two mice in his version, but they were not portrayed as sisters. On the contrary, "he makes no mention of a relationship of any kind between them, and his opening lines offer no reason why the mice encounter each other at all.

In this, Walter (Anglicus) is in keeping with the fable genre, which dispenses with the need for any context for its tales, being perfectly content with the kind of 'once there was' opening that precludes further question" (Rudd, 2006, p .41) While neither the Henryson nor Anglicus versions appear in the de Grummond collection, the variations of the tales within the collection usually involve differences in the relationship between the mice as well.

In Galdone's version, for example, the mice are both male and are "old friends" with the city mouse being a servant of "his majesty's court" (Galdone, 1971). In Hayes's version from 1942, the mice are female, but rather than being sisters like Henryson's version, they are cousins. The town mouse decides to visit her "country cousin," so the story goes. In the Little Golden Book classic by Scarry and Scarry (1961), the mice are female, yet they are good friends in this version. The story begins in this version with "Annie mouse lived quietly in the country. One day, her friend from the city came to visit her."

In the version by Ward (2011), there are two main differences. The mice in this version are both male mice, and as in the Hayes 1942 version, they are cousins. The most noticeable difference in Ward's version is that the mice are illustrated to look like actual mice. They appear as a mouse might appear in reality, with no clothing as most other versions portray them. In most versions, they live in small houses, drive a small car, and cook in a tiny kitchen. Ward's version alone has them living as actual mice would live, out in nature and crawling along the ground in the grass and the fields. It is truly unique in this way.

Another version that has unique features is the one by Brett (1994). The illustrations are very elaborate and contain many details that would be missed if a reader does not carefully look at them. As is Brett's custom, each image contains a 'clue' as to what will

happen on the following page. For example, when you see an owl on the side of the page swooping in from a distance, the reader can be confident that the owl will be making an appearance on the next page. Another feature unique to Brett's version is that there are four mice because she created two married mice couples. One couple lives happily in the country, while the other couple is accustomed to city living. The couples have no prior relationship and have never even met. The husband mouse from the city takes his wife to the country for a getaway, and the country mice overhear them talking about how lovely it is, and they are considering staying. The country mouse husband suggests they trade houses as they have always been interested in going to town. The couples swap places, and they both soon find that they are not happy in their new habitat. As with other versions, they both end up running back to their original homes. Interestingly, the two antagonists (a country owl and a well-dressed city cat) run into each other while pursuing the mice and suggest trading places in the end. That surprise adds an unexpected twist at the end of this version. The Scholastic version by Wallner (1970) has two male mice, and as in numerous other versions, the mice are cousins. Beatrix Potter's book, *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* (1918, 2002), has a unique difference compared to the previous versions. The story begins by explaining that Johnny the town-mouse was born in a cupboard, while another mouse, Timmy Willy, was born in a garden and was a "little country mouse." Quite by accident, Willie-Tillie takes a nap in a hamper that had been loaded with vegetables to go to town. He "crept in through a hole in the wicker-work and after eating some peas - Timmy Willie fell fast asleep" (Potter, 1918, p. 8). The two mice's meeting occurs after the hamper full of vegetables is loaded onto a cart for the city and happens to be delivered where Johnny, the town-mouse, lives. The story goes on from there with many unique details and beautiful illustrations.



Figure 2. *Johnny Town Mouse* by Beatrix Potter (1918)
(<https://americanliterature.com/author/beatrix-potter/short-story/the-tale-of-johnny-town-mouse>)

One other consistent difference from version to version of the story is the town mouse's reaction to the meal provided by the country mouse at the beginning of the story. In some cases, it is rejected by the town mouse. "The City Mouse turned up his nose at the country food. And he invited his cousin to have dinner with him in the city" (Wallner, 1970, p. 9). In other cases, the city mouse partakes of the meal offered by the country mouse but criticizes it in some way. "Really, my good friend, I am amazed that you can keep up your spirits in such a dismal place and with such rustic fare to eat" (Galdone, 1971, p.6). In other versions, the town mouse eats with the country mouse and does not criticize but rather points out the better options in town. "In the City, we dine on rich, exotic foods in sumptuous surroundings" (Ward, 2011, p. 10).

One version of the tale in which two mice are not the same gender, but rather one female and one male, *City Mouse, Country Mouse* (Rudy, 2017), is not in the de Grummond collection. In a unique twist ending, when the girl mouse returns to the country because she cannot tolerate city life any longer, both mice miss each other as time passes and cannot enjoy life

so much without the other as "they were the best of friends." As a result, they both travel back to see the other and meet halfway in the middle. They stop to eat at a small-town café (which has some of the country and some of the city) and decide it is a perfect balance. In conclusion, they build houses next to each other and settle happily in the town.

Conclusion

"One place suits one person, another place suits another person. For my part, I prefer to live in the country, like Timmy Willie" (Potter, 1918, *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*).

The classic tale the *Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* has been a favorite of both children and adults for generations. The University of Southern Mississippi de Grummond Children's Literature Collection houses seventeen different versions of the tale by sixteen different authors. The earliest version in de Grummond, by Ethel Hayes, has a copyright date of 1942. Beatrix Potter's original version of *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* was written in 1918, but it is a later version (2002) in the collection. At the time of the study, the most recent version of the tale in the collection is by Helen Ward from 2011.

It is clear that the story of the two mice, one from the town and one from the country, has stood the test of time and will continue to do so. Newer versions of the tale continue to be published, like that of Maggie Rudy in 2017, so more versions may likely appear in the de Grummond collection as time goes on. Different authors make small changes to keep the story uniquely their work while keeping the main theme and the story's central message. It is perhaps these differences that keep the story always fresh and never going out of style.

In the words of Seth Lerer (2008), "Among all the transitory things in the world, knowledge survives. But note how all of those things that beset knowledge are themselves the creatures of the fables: thieves, mice, maggots, water, and fire all live in the menagerie of the Aesopica, confined to their fictions, allowed to speak to those who can unearth their bones" (p. 56). This study has shown this to be the case in the tale of the *Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*. Authors and readers continue to tell the story, read the story, and write the story in new

and unique ways. For further information on the de Grummond Collection, the story of *Town Mouse*, *Country Mouse*, or other folk tales, see degrummond.org, *Aesop: Five Centuries of Illustrated Fables* by John McKendry (1964), or refer to the sources noted in the bibliography.

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