

"I HATE YOU, YOU HATE ME": CHILDREN'S RESPONSES  
TO BARNEY THE DINOSAUR  
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Since the spring of 1992, public television has given American viewers regular glimpses of a large purple dinosaur named Barney who teaches preschoolers how to brush their teeth, recognize colors, and make new friends. Although Barney seems at first glance to be thoroughly bland and harmless, he has become the focal point of a raging controversy between lovers and haters of his TV persona. Schoolchildren have given Barney a violent death in song parodies and mock-beatings; adolescents and adults have created their own song parodies, written humorous articles, and spread rumors about Barney's evil intentions on the Internet. While there is a strong thematic unity between children's and adults' attacks on Barney, I will not try to cover the whole range of expressive behavior here. Children's Barney songs and mock-beatings constitute an important body of folklore in themselves, reflecting a larger cultural phenomenon in which fear of coercion, rebellion against authority, and anger toward blandness are dominant issues.

A background check on Barney reveals that he first came to television in 1988 as star of the small-scale "Backyard Show" in Texas. Cheryl Leach, a former teacher and the mother of an active two-year-old, wanted to create a character who would capture young children's attention. With help from a friend and capital from her father-in-law, who owned a video studio, Leach began a campaign to boost awareness of Barney in nursery schools and daycare centers. The breakthrough came when four-year-old Leora Rifkin found a Barney tape in a Connecticut video store and watched it, as her father said, "over and over and over" (Lawson; Fitzpatrick). Since Leora's father was Executive Vice-President for Connecticut Public Television, he was able to launch Barney on PBS in April of 1992. The show got off to a slow start and PBS threatened to cancel it, but a write-in campaign from parents and children kept the show on the air. Within a year, Barney had become a household word. News anchorman Peter Jennings called him "a rage," and others started to use the words "cult" and "mania" (Fitzpatrick). *Barney and Friends* surpassed *Sesame Street* as the highest rated PBS series for children, and the na-

tional PBS preschool audience rose by 30%. Barney-lovers made up 45% of the pledges in Connecticut Public Television's first fundraiser since the beginning of the craze. And Barney merchandise, including dolls, slippers, bedsheets, and clothes, rose into the hundreds of millions in sales (Forest).

Statements of support by psychologists, parents, and children have shown that the rapid escalation of Barney's popularity hasn't just come from artificial publicity; many people truly do love and appreciate Barney. Dorothy Singer, co-director of Yale's Family Television Research and Consultation Center, says, "Barney represents the type of person a lot of people wish they had in their lives—someone who is always loving and approving and really nice whenever he or she is around you" ("Secret"). Singer's explanation gains credibility from tributes like this one from three-year-old Laura Carroll: "I like Barney, he's so nice. I want to give him a great big hug" (Fitzpatrick).

Some of the most dramatic statements about Barney come from parents of preschoolers and children in the first and second grades. One young mother told me that her eighteen-month-old daughter, while ill with chickenpox, wanted to do nothing but watch Barney tapes. With wide eyes fixated on the antics of her purple friend, the little girl had just one word to say: "More!" Another mother said that her seven-year-old son, after seeing a TV commercial for a local Barney performance, turned to her with disturbingly vacant eyes and asked in a singsong voice, "Can we go? Can we get front-row seats?" This apparent mesmerization of young children has troubled their parents. Terms related to drug use and abuse have arisen in critiques of the Barney show. "My daughter's addicted to him!" was the claim of one reporter (Ferguson). Another writer referred to Barney as the "drug of choice" for a legion of preschoolers (Forest). Despite these disturbing, semi-humorous references to drug-induced conformity, many parents have been happy to see their children becoming happy and quiet—one writer used the term "immobilized"—when Barney's show is on ("Pacifier").

The age at which young Barney-lovers become Barney-haters seems to vary. In most cases, the shift seems to occur around the second grade. After getting through the first year of elementary school, children start looking for ways to establish their status in the school's hierarchy. No longer the youngest, they look for ways

to assert their superiority to new recruits. Making fun of Barney, beloved icon of the preschool set, serves the purpose of establishing superiority very effectively.

Parodies of Barney songs began to emerge when the show achieved national recognition. These parodies peaked in the fall of 1993; at that time, children on playgrounds across the United States delighted in sharing Barney songs they had heard, and some children also enjoyed inventing new versions. My data sample of Barney songs comes from children in New York, Pennsylvania, and California; all of these songs were collected in 1993 and 1994. The songs spread with lightning speed and also faded relatively quickly, as is common with topical song parodies (Opie; Knapp). My collection of children's Barney songs falls into three subtypes: simple parodies of the main theme song, parodies of the same song that accentuate HIV, and two-line parodies of another Barney song. While other experiments with poking fun at Barney in song have occurred, these three subtypes appear to be the most common.

The first kind of Barney song involves a simple inversion of the Barney show's theme song, which goes like this:

I love you, you love me,  
We're a happy family.  
With a great big hug  
And a kiss from me to you,  
Won't you say you love me too?

Sung to the tune of the song "This Old Man" (well established in schoolrooms and on playgrounds since the 1950s), this theme song introduces each "Barney" broadcast. In 1993, an eight-year-old boy gave me this version:

I love you, you love me,  
Let's hang Barney from a tree.  
With a shotgun, boom,  
Barney's on the floor.  
No more purple dinosaur.

Variations of this song spread rapidly through the United States, with Barney experiencing various deaths—all through violence and aggression. The variety of invitations to kill Barney showed plenty

of creativity: "Let's throw Barney in the sea!" "Let's go out and shoot Bar-nee!" Usually the songs ended in gunshots, with Barney dead, bleeding, and gone forever.

One version of this subtype (taught to a three-year-old by her older sister) found its way to print in *The New York Times* in April of 1993 ("Regarding Barney"). The text is as follows:

I hate you, you hate me,  
 Let's go out and kill Barney  
 And a shot rang out and  
 Barney hit the floor  
 No more purple dinosaur.

The author of the opinion piece in which this Barney song appears expresses concern about the focus on violence: "The goal—getting rid of Barney—was admirable. The solution seemed, even in jest, excessive. Almost as though, schooled by the usual TV fare, the kids had to supply the missing element: a gun" ("Regarding Barney"). Both the publication of this text and the commentary on its meaning had a significant impact on readers of *The New York Times*. Reciting the song and worrying about what it signified, parents and other concerned adults found it to be evidence of decaying social values and lack of impulse control. While some adults enjoyed the song, sharing the exuberant rebelliousness of its composers, others decried it as a sign of increasingly violent behavior.

Children, however, tend to have quite different explanations of their own parodies. When I asked several kids why they liked to sing Barney songs, they gave me short answers: "Because they're fun!" "Because I hate Barney!" "Because I like to make songs like this up!" The last of those three responses reminds us how joyful the process of parody composition can be for a child. Inversion of an annoying song written *for* children puts the creative power right back where the children want it: under their own control. Writing about parody, Iona and Peter Opie made an observation that fits the Barney backlash beautifully "It is as if children know instinctively that anything wholly solemn, without a smile behind it, is only half alive" (87). The bland, carefully affectionate didacticism of the large purple dinosaur becomes a target

for obliteration in the Barney song parodies, with children wielding the weapons of mass disapproval.

Whether the destruction of Barney within a song text shows a disturbing trend toward violent solutions deserves careful consideration. Instances of aggression in schoolyards have become more common in this decade, with the result that recess has sometimes been removed from school schedules (Beresin). Parents have questioned whether violence on television begets violence in real life, and the likelihood of some children imitating aggressive role models seems high. On the other hand, rhymes about shooting and killing have been prevalent in children's folklore for many years. The Opies include a "Mary Had a Little Lamb" parody in their collection that features a gun-toting father: "Mary had a little lamb, / Her father shot it dead,/ And now it goes to school with her/ Between two chunks of bread" (90). Closer to the Barney song pattern are the numerous songs about murder and mayhem in schools, including the version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" that I learned in the 1950s: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school. / We have tortured every teacher, we have broken every rule." A version of "Oh, Little Enemy" (a parody of "Oh, Jolly Playmate") that I collected in 1976 ends with the words "I'll poke your eyes out, I'll make you bleed to death. / And we'll be enemies forevermore, more, more-more-more-more!" Perhaps limited familiarity with children's folklore makes adults worry more about the Barney songs. When violent behavior seems to be increasing, song texts can be viewed as bad influences and harbingers of worse things to come.

Less violent than the first kind of Barney song is the "HIV" subtype, sung to the tune of the same theme song:

I hate you, you hate me,  
Barney died from HIV  
We called the doctor  
And this is what he said:  
"Sorry, kids, Barney's dead."

In this song text, nobody kills Barney; the children seem to be sad witnesses to his demise from "HIV" (or AIDS). The last lines of the song remind the listener of jump rope rhymes in which a doc-

tor is summoned (Abrahams). Since AIDS is such a pervasive and frightening plague, it is no wonder that it has found its way into Barney song parodies. In the above text, Barney seems to be the victim of a sudden, mysteriously fatal disease. The song reflects both children's and adults' perplexity in the face of such a swift-moving, incomprehensible killer.

It is also possible that the "HIV" songs about Barney make him a target for homophobic feelings. Just as TV viewers have speculated about whether Bert and Ernie of "Sesame Street" are gay, they have wondered whether Barney's bright purple color signifies homosexuality. The most recent subject for such debate has been Tinky-Winky of the popular children's show *Teletubbies*. Participants in an Internet chat group have recently asked whether the purple color of both Barney and Tinky-Winky confirms that they are homosexuals (alt.tv.teletubbies). People who view Barney as homosexual may regard his death from "HIV" as a reasonable consequence. While contemporary awareness of AIDS has moved beyond the stereotype of "the gay man's disease," there is still a linkage between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in popular humor. Jokes about AIDS were classified as "homosexual" humor in Blanche Knott's *Truly Tasteless Jokes IV* (1984). However, this seems to be a preoccupation that primarily arises from the folklore of adults rather than the folklore of children. The children whom I interviewed did not seem especially worried about "HIV" or interested in Barney's sexuality. To them, the obliteration of Barney was the main point; "HIV" was just one more opponent to bring Barney down.

In contrast to the "HIV" texts, the third kind of Barney song is a simple couplet. Its tune is that of "Yankee Doodle," and its focus is not on death but on mental incapacity. The words are as follows:

Barney is a dino 'saur with lots of imagination.  
Just one thing he has a problem with, it's retardation.

This brief, succinct parody of the first two lines of a popular Barney song fits the pattern of children's taunts and jeers that has been well documented since the publication of Iona and Peter Opie's *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Anyone who has spent time

on the playground of an American public school knows how frequently many children use the term "retard." This politically incorrect epithet does not always criticize a person's intelligence; sometimes it derides social ineptitude, slowness, or dullness. Children have found Barney to epitomize all of these undesirable characteristics. When asked why they hate Barney, children have told me: "Because he's stupid." "Because I can't stand him." "Because he's such a lovable JERK." Adults have drawn similar conclusions in witty statements such as this one from a *New Yorker* columnist: "Barney is a six-foot-tall magenta dinosaur. . . who when he rocks back and forth giggling compulsively in a tone of unequalled feeble-mindedness—'ohh-ohh-oh'—jiggles his lumpish body like an overripe eggplant" ("Pacifier"). Both adults and children have made it clear that Barney is not very smart and deserves all the taunts he gets. As the butt of jeers in the schoolyard and on the pages of high-profile magazines, he has received an impressive amount of well-publicized hostility.

Another part of the Barney phenomenon has taken the form of ritualized physical attacks on Barney merchandise. I have watched children grabbing Barney dolls, pommelling them, and jumping up and down upon them. One of my students watched a seven-year-old girl in Toys R Us beat up a four-foot-tall stuffed Barney, then revive it with CPR. A nine-year-old boy, at his first sight of a Barney tub toy, asked eagerly, "Oh boy, can I take it in the tub and drown it? Can I rip its head off with a knife?" Newspaper reports and urban legends have told of Barney being mobbed in a shopping mall, poked and prodded by hostile youngsters. And on college campuses, fraternities have beaten up effigies of Barney in fund-raisers and party games.

Why have both children and adults so enthusiastically beaten up Barney? Their attacks are only mock-violent, as Barney dolls feel no pain. However, playful violence can indicate problematic hostility. Barney provides not just a target for specific scorn, but also an outlet for strongly aggressive feelings. While children are not generally allowed to hit their parents or teachers, sometimes they have permission to beat a grinning purple doll representing a bland, sanctimonious authority figure. Beating up Barney has given some children the chance to let off steam, but it has also lent legitimacy to the idea of attacking those that one does not like or

respect: an approach frequently found in cartoons and on TV shows watched by the young. It appears that children are acting out quick and violent solutions within a framework of humorous response, often receiving applause from both adults and other children.

Since I started writing this article, the massacre of schoolchildren in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999, has caused many people to look closely at evidence of violent and aggressive behavior among American schoolchildren. Both Barney song parodies and ritualized attacks on Barney dolls certainly involve aggression, with an emphasis on mock-beating and killing. Do these verbal and physical attacks on Barney signify healthy rebellion against authority figures, as so many other song parodies have done in the past? Or do they represent a dangerous preoccupation with violence that will yield destructive consequences? The answer to both questions may be "yes." In any case, children's folklore provides an excellent index of what young people are really thinking and feeling. Barney songs and mock-beatings have delighted many people; they may prove to have educational value as well.

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