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## The History of a Little Girls' Game

“Clapsies” was the name my girlfriends and I knew for the rhyming, rhythmic, and often repetitive verses you sing while clapping someone else’s hands in a matching pattern. We were fifth-graders then, fifteen years ago. One or two younger boys would sometimes look on with fascination and longing while we played, but self-respecting boys past the age of eight stayed on the other side of the schoolyard blacktop. Only girls did clapsies. We did them every day that year, whenever we could, from the fall to the following spring.

In September, we exchanged our knowledge of clapsies learned elsewhere, from older girls or in camp. Later, the leading clapsie players made up variations on the movements of the standards, and we would practice a variation we liked over and over to make sure that it did not get mixed up and turn into something else. A really good one was impossible to forget forever, though; it was bound to be reinvented. The movements of a good clapsie made so much sense that learning them was more like remembering. Our clapsie movements were logical and deliberate, yet full of energy as, palm on palm, we went faster and faster, slapping harder and harder.

When adults mention this little girls’ game, they call it “pattycake”—as in “. . . baker’s man, bake me a cake as fast as you can.” But pattycake is to clapsies as baby talk is to jive. It is not a game adults think about seriously. I myself hadn’t thought of it for more than a decade when one August, entirely by chance, I played clapsies again. My friend Jamie and I were hiking the Appalachian Trail in Maine at the time; the trail was muddy and the undergrowth thick and green. One of the nice things about the Appalachian Trail is the fact that the volunteers who maintain it have built shelters or lean-tos where hikers can sleep. In the logbooks kept there, hikers

write notes to travelers in both directions. Clapsies, I was to think later, are also a kind of public, random, but very American literature.

Jamie, who had gone ahead of me some time before, was asleep on a sunny rock when I met two girls in a lean-to clearing. They looked about nine years old. With them was a woman, seemingly in her fifties. We said hello, the way hikers do. Then, just as it crossed my mind to wonder what circumstances had brought this particular white woman to accompany two little black kids, she told me that they were “Fresh Air Fund girls.” She had a “camp” nearby—I figured she meant a summer place—and liked to entertain poor urban kids there for two weeks at a time. The girls stood a little bit away both from Jamie, asleep on the rock, and from us.

While their hostess and I were being friendly, they were doing clapsies. “They didn’t know each other at the beginning of the trip,” she explained, “but then they started playing pattycake and got along fine. The girls always do that.” From the corner of my eye I could see that some of the clapsies they were doing were completely new to me. Clapsies change.

One of the girls was milky-coffee colored, overweight, and still puffing from the hike. Her hands were stiller than the other girl’s and slower, like a jazz bass line catching up to a leading flute. She was from Brooklyn. The other girl had an amazingly long-limbed brittle skinniness that, on her small scale, made her seem a model for the stately woman she will someday be. She was very dark and from the Bronx. I asked them to teach me a clapsie they had been doing. It was called “ABC” and it looked harder than it was. The skinny girl, whom I’ll call Vanessa, taught it to me in only three tries. By then Vanessa and I had awakened Jamie with our laughing, and she was ready to join me in a clapsie we both knew from the seventies.

“ABC” has a sequence where Vanessa and I clasped hands, like business people shaking hands, except that we also clasped the other set of hands under the first clasp, then the first set of hands under the second clasp. Then we let go and slapped our own thighs and then snapped our fingers. It reminded me of a waterfall, including the splash at the bottom where an imaginary cascade hit our thighs.

The song begins with the melody and lyrics of the Jackson Five hit, as far as “123”:

ABC  
 Easy as  
 123  
 Ooh, aaah  
 I wanna piece of pie  
 pie too sweet  
 I wanna piece of meat  
 meat too rough  
 I wanna ride the bus  
 bus too full  
 I wanna ride a bull  
 bull too black  
 I wan’ my money back  
 money too green  
 I wanna jellybean  
 jellybean not cooked  
 I wanna read a book  
 book not read  
 I wan’ some lemonade  
 lemonade too sour  
 I wanna climb a tower  
 tower too high  
 I wanna say good-bye  
 Good-bye. . . .

[This is when you tickle the other person’s stomach and usually everybody laughs.]

Too soon it was time to leave the girls and their hostess so we could hike up the hill before sundown. I wondered then if white girls or girls whose own parents could afford to send them to Maine knew the clapsies these two girls knew. Did the girls in my hometown, for instance, know “ABC”? I decided to find out.

My hometown, Teaneck, New Jersey, is a middle class community of some 40,000 people who live only seven miles from the “GW Bridge” to New York. There is a book about Teaneck, *Triumph in a White Suburb*, that describes how it came to

be the first town to integrate voluntarily, in 1965. Teaneck is a good place to collect clapsies, since (as we shall see) the game has been a way of sharing between blacks and whites from its beginnings.

On an early October morning I arrived at Lowell School carrying a large cassette recorder, just in time for the recess after lunch. "I want to see if anyone is still doing the clapsies I did as a kid," I told one of the lunch aides, a middle-aged black woman. "They're still doing some of the clapsies I did!" she exclaimed, as if flattered by a compliment they paid her.

Out in the schoolyard, the girls at Lowell put on a show for me, and each other. They sang together in a big circle around whatever pair was demonstrating a clapsie. A few authoritative girls decided which pair would go next, and one girl made sure everybody knew which clapsies I had and hadn't taped, so the next pair could be sure to demonstrate a new one. All I had to do was agree to the choice and push my cassette recorder on and off.

It turned out that Teaneck girls do know "ABC," the very funky clapsie the Fresh Air Fund girls taught me. Two black fourth-graders evidently had taught it to the other girls at Lowell. And the girls at Whittier School, on the other side of town, knew it, too.

Advanced clapsie players develop varieties done in foursomes and in big circles instead of one-on-one. These were the clapsies the girls at Whittier demonstrated for me. Sometimes two pairs interweaved the original hand movements, and sometimes a player in a foursome might clap hands with more than one other girl in a more complicated interweaving. Only a few girls could do this smoothly. Anxious to find a foursome that could perform one particularly difficult clapsie for me successfully, two of the bossier girls asked another girl not to play. She agreed immediately, looking much less hurt than I would have expected. She didn't look hurt for long, either. After the clapsie had been done, she was invited into the next round by the same pair that had ejected her. Cooperation is basic to clapsies.

The players might also stand in a big circle singing, each with her right palm resting on top of the palm of her neighbor; as they sang, each in turn flipped her free right arm

over to slap the back of the hand resting on hers. When the song ended, the last person who was slapped left the circle. The players repeated the song until only two were left.

I don't remember doing circle claps like this one as a child, but Jamie, who grew up in one of the wealthier parts of Chicago, does. She described to me a clapsie that I later found recorded by Bess Hawes, a researcher in the field of black folk culture: "I have seen Los Angeles children playing this circle clap, though to different rhymes . . . clapping their neighbors' hands with right hand clapping up and left hand down; clapping their own hands together; clapping their neighbors' hands *left* hand up and *right* hand down; clapping their own hands, etc. Children can do this with enormous speed as early as the age of six. Interestingly, A.M. Jones describes just such clapping play in a child's game from West Africa." (In Chicago, Jamie tells me, she did this pattern matched with a song that began "A sailor went to sea, sea, sea.")

The connection between West Africa, on the one hand, and Chicago and Teaneck, on the other, can be traced. In fact, the more I learned about clapsies, the more I learned about what it means to live in a racially mixed culture, to be female, and, above all, to be a child.

The lyrics and clapping of clapsies have two near historical sources, white and black. Children's games are said to be piecemeal relics of abandoned bits of adult culture. Clapsies are no exception to the rule. Like other traditional children's games, they echo adult customs of previous centuries. Yet it is one of the mysteries of children's spontaneous games that they mysteriously persist over time and over large areas quite independently of adults.

Girls across the continent learn clapsies, counting out rhymes ("eeny, meeny, miney, moe"), and jump rope and ball-bouncing songs at certain ages—and television, radio, books, teachers, and parents usually have nothing to do with it. In the United States the game has been a kind of sponge, absorbing trickles of culture from regions as far away as the British Isles and Africa, and from times as remote as the eighteenth century. In this respect, clapsies resemble the rest

of American culture, so that in almost every American girl, there's something that likes a clapsie. You could say that clapsies are a whole library of oral and manual girllore.

The lyrics date to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and American girls' singing games, which were much more varied and numerous than those of today. "Ring around a rosey," originally called "Ring a Ring of Roses," is perhaps the simplest and most familiar. (There used to be an idea, later proved false, that this ring game had been inspired by the plague.) Now confined to pre-schoolers, "Ring around a rosy" is a good example of how traditional girls' games came to be played by ever-younger children. Victorian girls as old as fourteen played such games, singing of marriage, death, and burial, or of women's chores (as in the contemporary pre-schoolers' game "Mulberry bush": "This is the way we wash our clothes, wash our clothes . . .") As they sang, they did pantomimes, clapped, skipped, or danced in rings or lines like those of American and English country dances. The games themselves were played in previous centuries by adults. The clapping was the straightforward sort where you clap only your own hands.

The best record of these games is Lady Alice Bertha Gomme's 1894 two-volume collection of *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Gleaned from her adult correspondents' memories of both rural and urban Victorian childhoods, Lady Alice's games probably date from the middle of that century, and no doubt her accounts were tidied up considerably by memory and the demands of respectability. Nearly all of these games have quietly disappeared, as have those described by her American counterpart, the anthropologist and folklorist William Wells Newell. However, the branches of the broad family tree of clapsies can easily be traced through a few modern examples that preserve ancestral words or clapping patterns.

One such is "Miss Mary Mack," about a girl dressed in black, with silver buttons down her back, who asked her mother for fifteen cents to see an elephant "jump over the fence." Gomme records a game called "Alligoshee," in which mid-nineteenth-century girls of Middleton, Hersham, Surrey, and Shepscombe sang of various people dressed in black with

silver buttons down their backs. Another part of “Miss Mary Mack” appears in folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith’s history of children’s games in New Zealand. It records that New Zealand children are said to have sung the following verse as early as 1901: “Pounds, shillings, and pence, the monkey jumped the fence / He went so high, he reached the sky / Pounds, shillings, and pence.” As for the elephant, the earliest evidence of it that I uncovered appears in a clapsie one black woman remembers from Georgia after the turn of the century. Hers is also the first evidence I found of similar words tied to clapping.

Today, the lyrics of clapsies are approximately half-British and half-American, with ancestors that can be traced throughout the British Empire and the United States. There are relatives in Continental Europe, as well. It follows from this history that if the roots of clapsie lyrics are farflung, the lyrics themselves are quite as far from fixed. “ABC” is a modern contribution to a song that was conceived long ago: it is an example of folklore-in-the-making.

The clapping patterns and music of contemporary hand-clapping have always been black in style, with African roots. Girls play clapsies in strictly white towns, as well as in integrated towns like Teaneck—yet blacks do have a special cultural claim as inventors.

Steven Spielberg gave us several extended soft-focus renderings of hand-clapping near the beginning of his movie *The Color Purple*, based on the Alice Walker novel set in 1909 among poor black women in the rural South. The movie obscured the complexity and variety of clapsies; Celie and Nelly’s patty cake was much too simple for girls their age. Black girls actually know many more, and more complicated, singing games than other American girls do. In the 1920s, when the traditional games began to die out among the white majority, black girls continued to adapt the old games to a specifically black tradition of clapping and communal showing-off sessions.

The Anglo-American games and lyrics had married Afro-American rhythms some three centuries earlier. When the traditional games first crossed the ocean, slaves—both children and adults—encountered them on plantations. Soon



they had been mixed into the elaborate social clapping play that then bloomed among the American inheritors of African polyrhythmic drumming.

Applause, clapping to folk music, or clapping to chants at political demonstrations are related in spirit to this black clapping tradition; all distill the powerful effect of actions performed in unison or in a kind of rhythmic harmony. Well into the 1900s, Southern blacks of all ages, male and female, still knew a variety of off-beat, total-body, community-making yet improvisational slapping games that are now seen mostly in rudimentary forms and mostly among kids. "Gimme five" springs from this tradition. So does the complicated solo body-slapping routine called "Hambone," or handjiving, which is what little black boys are doing when they drum on tables and slap their own thighs and stomachs.

Once accompanied by a song of the same name, "Hambone" was a man's act. As Bess Hawes wrote in 1972, most young black men still know one or another version of the routine. It has had a mini-revival since then after appearing on two recent McDonald's commercials.

"Hand Warmin', Hand Clappin'" inspired so many calls to the company asking for directions on how to do the routine that McDonald's printed up an advisory flyer. "Hand Warmin's Back" appeared in fall 1986 complete with handjiving performances by a baby, white professional types of both sexes, an elderly white couple, a black couple, and a young black man who spins in his wheelchair before slapping the hand of his white friend. They all clap their hands, slap their stomachs and thighs, slap other people's hands, or otherwise raise a heartwarming ruckus while eating their french fries.

At least some of the original versions of games like "Hambone" would have been entirely lost to memory and recorded history had they not been recalled by Bessie Jones of St. Simon's Island, Georgia, and compiled by Bess Hawes in *Step It Down*. As an octogenarian in the 1970s Jones evidently was able to demonstrate a book's worth of the singing games (words, music, and clapping) from her youth in the rural black community of Dawson, Georgia. It was Bessie Jones who described the clapsie with Miss Mary Mack's elephant. The name she gave was "Green Sally Up."

Bessie and her friends learned “Green Sally Up” from their parents. Indeed, this was the first step in a long development process that culminated in adult solo clapping performances. Its clapping pattern is the basic patty cake: clap right hands; then your own hands together once; clap left hands; then your own hands together once; and right hands again:

Green Sally up  
 Green Sally down  
 Green Sally bake her possum brown  
 asked my mama for 15 cents  
 to see that elephant jump the fence  
 he jumped so high  
 he touched the sky  
 he never got back  
 until the Fourth of July  
 you see that house, on that hill  
 that’s where me and my baby live.  
 oh the rabbit in the hash come a-stepping in the dash  
 with his long-tailed coat and his beaver on.

It makes sense that Bessie Jones’s instructional clapsie contained part of both the words and clapping pattern of “Miss Mary Mack,” the first, the simplest, and, probably, the most widely known clapsie I did as a child. “Miss Mary Mack” merely varies the patty cake with a cross on the chest. As with all clapsies, each of the movements is timed to a syllable or beat:

Miss Mary [cross hands on chest; slap thighs; and clap your own hands together once]

Mack, Mack, Mack [the patty cake: clap right hands; then your own hands together once; clap left hands; then your own hands together once; and right hands again]

all dressed in [repeat hand sequence from beginning]

black, black, black

with silver

buttons, buttons, buttons [you have to say “buttons” fast as if the word were one syllable]

all down her  
back, back, back.  
She asked her  
mother, mother, mother [fast]  
for 15  
cents, cents, cents  
to see the  
elephant, elephant, elephant [very fast]  
jump over the ["over" is one beat]  
fence, fence, fence.  
It jumped so  
high, high, high  
it reached the  
sky, sky, sky  
and it never came ["and it" is one beat, and so is "never"]  
back, back, back  
'til the Fourth  
of July, July, July ["of July" is one beat, and so are the  
next two "Julys"]

But the contributions made by previous generations to the clapsies of the present are not always this easy to recognize, for the games played by twentieth-century kids sound up-to-date despite deep roots. The topics and themes of clapsie lyrics are seldom anachronistic when they are clear: pubescent sex, for instance, has replaced marriage as a major topic. A new attitude towards death, too, has replaced the nineteenth-century one. Once accepted as a universal fate, death is now universally resistible in clapsies—with medical help, of course.

It would indeed be a throwback for children in the 1980s to sing the lyrics of, say, the traditional singing game called "Waterflower," with its opening announcement of mortality. Nonetheless, traces of these lyrics can be detected in several current clapsies, and they are worth describing in full. Reported in a 1944 collection of *Play Songs of the Deep South* (and probably dating back some years earlier), "Waterflower" seems to be about many things simultaneously: the dependency of women on men; the threat of death inherent in all rites of passage, which represent progress toward a certain end;

lovesickness; and love as an escape from death. The story is simply that a girl recovers from deadly lovesickness by marrying the boy. In the Deep South both boys and girls played “Waterflower.” First they skipped around one girl who stood in the center as they sang:

Waterflower, waterflower  
 Growing up so tall  
 All the young ladies must surely, surely die

Then they stood still and pointed at her, singing,

All except Miss 'Lindy Watkins  
 [actually, the center girl's real full name would be used]  
 She is everywhere  
 The white folks say, the white folks say,  
 Turn your back and tell your beau's name

Miss 'Lindy Watkins turned her back and hung her head, picking it up only to point to a boy, her “Johnny.” Another boy, the “Doctor,” then entered the ring and gravely examined 'Lindy's tongue and pulse. Her encirclers stood and clapped their hands on the first and third beats as they sang,

Doctor, Doctor, can you tell  
 What will make poor 'Lindy well?  
 She is sick and 'bout to die  
 That will make poor Johnny [real boy's name] cry!  
 Marry, marry, marry quick  
 'Lindy you are just lovesick . . .

They continued clapping as the Doctor fetched Johnny and returned to his place in the circle, Johnny courted 'Lindy, and 'Lindy and Johnny joined hands and danced.

Such funereal Victorian singing games have disappeared in our age, when it is no longer common for a child to see a sibling die or touch a dead body. But children's verses still frequently touch on sickness and mortality; and emergency house visits are a running theme of clapsies. “Waterflower”

may be a direct historical link from an Anglo-American game to the clapsie “Uno dos cietas.” There, excesses with a boyfriend lead to a potentially deadly bellyache (pregnancy?) that is conquered by demonstrating competence with numbers (competence to be an adult, on one’s own?). However, in “Uno dos cietas,” unlike “Waterflower,” the boy is not the cure; in fact, he is not even present for the cure:

Uno dos cietas  
 East west  
 I met my boyfriend at the candy store  
 He brought me ice cream  
 He brought me cake  
 He brought me home with a bellyache  
 Mama, Mama I feel sick  
 call the doctor  
 quick, quick, quick  
 Doctor, doctor  
 will I die?  
 Count to five  
 and you’ll be alive  
 1,2,3,4,5  
 I’m alive!

The modern elements in clapsies are usually self-evident. Clapsies today are female chauvinist, witty, cynical, rude, and wise by turns. “S.O.S.,” a current favorite at Lowell, is an example of typical boy baiting, explaining that “Boys go to Jupiter, to get more stupider / Girls go to Mars, to get more candy bars.” If lyrics cannot be dated conclusively by the attitudes expressed, modern references, such as this indirect one to Mars candy bars, will give it away. A number of clapsies, like “ABC,” include lyrics from songs or commercials. One clapsie launches a story by listing soft drinks. Another, “Big Mac Filet of Fish,” turns a commercial jingle on its head, concluding: “You deserve a break today / so get up and throw your food away / at McDonald’s / the dish ran away with the spoon.” McDonald’s picked up the teasing tone in its own jingle for the “Hand Warmin’” commercials, which proclaim

that “It doesn’t mean a lot if you don’t get it *hot!*” The “it” refers to solo handjive, but as I heard this I kept thinking that the jingle was about a cold hamburger.

“Rocking Robin” takes off from a 1950s American hit. The obscenities were added by the kids:

swing swing, swing  
to the arithmetic, Hey, hey!  
rocking in the treetop  
all day long  
huffin’ and a’puffin’  
and a’singing my song  
all the little birdies  
on Jaybird street  
love to hear the robin go  
tweet, tweet, tweet

(chorus, with the same melody as the original)  
rocking robin  
tweet, tweet, elite  
rocking robin  
tweet, tweet, elite

Mama’s in the kitchen cooking rice  
Papa’s in the alley (or Papa’s in the poolroom)  
shooting dice  
Mama’s in jail sitting on the pail  
Papa’s downstairs selling fruit cocktail  
(chorus)

Batman stepped on Robin’s toe  
Robin said “Don’t do it no more!”  
Batman said “I’m the FBI”  
Robin said “That’s a doggone lie.”  
(chorus)

Went downtown to get a stick of butter  
then fell down sitting in the gutter  
went downtown to get a piece of glass

shoved it up his ass and  
 ooh, ah, I never saw a mother-fucker  
 run so fast  
 all the little birdies  
 had a real good time tonight  
 there goes King Kong  
 playing ping pong with his rubber ding dong

Several of the clapsies are surprisingly worldly. One such is “The Spades Go,” which has nothing in common but the first three words with the clapsie I knew by that name. I have yet to find a child who knows my version. Mine expressed a sentimental view of love; the new one decidedly does not, although (as you will see) it answers the lovelorn question of mine: “What is the me-ee-ee-ening of all this sah-ah-ah-awr-row over the hills of love?” But you’ll have to accept “just because I kiss you, doesn’t mean I love you” as an answer. In my version,

The spades go  
 tulips together  
 twilight forever  
 bring back my love to me  
 my heart goes  
 thump badee ump bump  
 thump badee ump bump  
 over the thought of thee  
 What is the  
 me-ee-ee-ening . . .

In the new version,

The spades go  
 down, down baby  
 down by the rollercoaster  
 sweet sweet baby  
 never gonna let you go  
 just because I kiss you

doesn't mean I love you  
 caught you with your boyfriend  
 late last night  
 hugging and a'kissing  
 and a'holding you tight  
 How do we know that?  
 peeking through the keyhole  
 naughty naughty  
 didn't wash the dishes  
 lazy lazy  
 jumped out the window  
 crazy crazy  
 ooh la la walla walla walla  
 ooh la la walla walla walla  
 I love you

The danger of applying literary analysis to clapsies is that one may read sense into what children happily accept as nonsensical. I actually know of three clapsies that begin, "the spades go." Could the phrase once have referred to the slang meaning of "spades," blacks? If so, the kids are now completely unconscious of it. Often, too, they do not understand the curse words or sexual references of clapsies—which is not to say that they therefore do not know that they are being rude. Some do; some don't. This depends on age: Remember that clapsies are child's play.

"Green Sally Up" and clapsies in general are a characteristically childish instance of the black art of clapping. First, the rhythms of clapsies are very simple. Second, little girls' consciousness of a communal purpose is relatively vague. Clapping in clapsies is more like drumming than applause since it is nearly free of any purpose other than making sound (much as the lyrics often are). Unlike adult clapping, it is not primarily intended to convey approval of a performer or attract attention or create a sense of community. This is one reason no one doubts that clapsies are now the product and possession of the young, although children imitate the adult uses of clapping, as well.

Another reason is that the lyrics of clapsies are also not primarily intended to communicate messages. Children have



their own ways of understanding language. For one thing, they are more prone than adults to continue associating words heard together by chance. When they are asked to free-associate in psychological tests with a given word, say “green,” they may well respond, “red,” or “blue,” in adult fashion, but they also tend to come up with such words as “grass,” “light,” or, if the child happens to own a green truck, “truck.” Children delight in word association much as some grown-up poets do: They aren’t the least bit disconcerted by near-nonsensical or nonsensical results.

The appeal of clapsie lyrics may therefore lie more in the way the words are organized than in their meaning. It is the nature of clapsies, and jump-rope or ball-bouncing songs, to include (1) fixed lists (“ABC,” “123”); (2) couplets; (3) series of phrases with similar grammatical structures; (4) potentially endless lists of ideas or objects; and (5) repetitions of a word or words at the beginning of linked phrases, at the end of phrases, or at the beginnings *and* ends of phrases, which often lead to a climax. You’ll find examples of all of these kinds of rhetoric in “ABC,” and you can find 1, 4, and 5 in the sentence above this one.

Such verbal patterning is traditional in folklore, in working songs like “John Henry” as well as in children’s verses. Clapsie rhetoric has more in common with adult rhetoric than one would think at first hearing. If clapsie lyrics are distinguished mainly by their lack of overt sense, it is also true that the lyrics of some adult music—from the polyphony of the sixteenth century to twentieth-century rock—conspicuously fail to communicate, either by being inaudible, patently rhetorical, repetitive, or simply stupid. Of course, that adults sometimes do what children do does not make children any less childish.

To note the childishness of clapsies is not to say that they do not help prepare girls of various ages for adulthood, or that a boys’ game would do the job better. I add this because when it comes to playing, childishness and girlishness are often confused.

Psychological and historical research comparing the games of the sexes do suggest that there is a “feminine” way of playing. Boys were traditionally the active, aggressive sex. In the days when they were playing the early, violent, and now ex-

tinct versions of modern sports like rugby, girls' games were relatively static and inactive. They were charming because they were orderly and mannered, like "Waterflower"; indeed, they could be viewed by adults as symbolic demonstrations that conflict can be controlled, and it was as such that they were deemed psychologically satisfying to girls. Nowadays, boys are still more likely to play outdoor team sports, and boys play them at younger ages. Girls tend to play in small spaces or indoors, and to play one-on-one. Their games emphasize the skill and verbal cleverness of individuals, not speed or strategy or team spirit.

There is a long-standing discussion among feminists about how to equip our daughters for the hazards and opportunities of adulthood. Some argue that habits carried over from traditional girls' games put women at a disadvantage in the later games of life—especially those of large organizations. Girls' games, it is charged, are too orderly, too focused on skill rather than ingenuity or energy, and above all too individualistic. In *Games Mother Never Taught You* (New York: Rawson Associates, 1977), Betty Lehan Harragan states the charge in especially extreme terms, but her points are not unrepresentative of the debate. She writes, "For traditional girls' games [such as jacks and jump rope] there are no umpires or officials, no opposing teams of critical judges, no advantages to be gained from collaboration). . . . Girls' games are children's games which are outgrown early in childhood and never resumed because they have no intrinsic educational value; they teach nothing. . . . The objective of girls' games is never to beat anybody or perform under competitive stress, but merely to improve an agility in a vacuum."

How strange to confuse the absence of teams and concerned adults, or formal competition and its trappings, with a . . . "vacuum." Has she forgotten the girls themselves? The word would suggest that traditional girls' games might as well be played alone. This is certainly not true of clapsies, which by nature can't be played alone. Girls who play jacks and jump rope and clapsies together become a community. While the making of a community is not the self-evident purpose of clapsies, as with adult clapping at demonstrations, the community exists. Its purpose is to support (or criticize) the

achievement of individuals within conspicuously predetermined and therefore rather demanding parameters. The clapsie set-up represents some kinds of real-life competition much more closely than does a confrontation of teams.

Clapsies do fit the stereotype of girls' games. They are verbal; cooperative, without the complex organization of teams or opposing "sides"; free of strategy, elaborate rules, arguments about rules, and numerical outcomes. In short they may be girlish, but this does not mean that they are easy or uncompetitive. The game requires individuals to perfect their coordination, concentration, and ability to perform in a partnership, usually before an audience. The competition is implicit. Clapsie-style competition is like competition in the arts.

In any event, girls are changing their games of their own free will, so arguments based on projections from the girlhoods of today's women seem less and less relevant. One of the general rules of this century has been the tendency for girls to abandon their own games in favor of pastimes once peculiar to boys. In such circumstances, it is hard to see why girls need encouragement to play as boys do. The idea is a mere prejudice that ignores childish and girlish virtues.

Meanwhile clapsies, like many traditional girls' games before them, may eventually disappear among white girls. "There's no question that the game is fading," Brian Sutton-Smith told me from his office in Philadelphia, where he is Professor of Human Development and Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. In an essay called "Sixty Years of Historical Change in the Game Preferences of American Children," as well as in other writings on the subject, Dr. Sutton-Smith explains that formal singing games began to fade among whites during the 1920s. After World War II, these games all but disappeared as girls turned to jump rope and ball-bouncing instead. The girls became increasingly active, perhaps simply because sneakers, loose clothing, and adult encouragement permitted them to be. Clapsies probably picked up after the War, too, Dr. Sutton-Smith suggested to me. Yet in his recent study of games played in the Philadelphia area clapsies were hardly mentioned in reports of play among white girls. Blacks are another story, of course.

My own observations bear out the suspicion that clapsies

are now declining among whites. A boys' game is on the road to extinction when, at some point in its evolution, it begins to be played mainly, and then only, by girls. By contrast, a girls' game comes to be played by younger and younger girls before dying out, the fate of the original "Ring a Ring of Roses." In Teaneck, clapsies are no longer, as they were in the seventies, most popular in the fifth grade; they've slipped down to the first few months of the fourth. That's when the new fourth-graders teach each other the clapsies they learned over the summer, while the fifth-graders move on to singing Madonna songs in chorus.