

BY CHLOE KUKA

# Work & Play.

## The Finger Plays of Edith Goodyear Alger

### STUDENT ESSAY

*Golden Age of Children's Literature Course*

The desire to make learning fun clearly motivates Edith Goodyear Alger's two poetry pieces, "Finger Play" and "Monday."

A masterful blend of poetry and visual art produced in collaboration with illustrator Albertine Randall Wheelan and published in *St. Nicholas Magazine* in 1895, these poems are as edifying as they are entertaining. The lines of simple poetry show children that the chore of washing clothes can be framed as a game, while the lively illustrations of gestures for children to perform while they read, termed finger plays, cultivate imagination by encouraging children to see the "little space 'twixt fingers & thumbs" as a penny or a cookie.

In both her work and her writings, Goodyear dedicated herself to the education of the younger generations. Beginning in 1893, she served as a training supervisor at the Observation and Training school. Her concern with facilitating child development is reflected in the highly integrated design of image, text, and physical interaction in her works as well as the ways in which these elements interact to foster the mental, moral, physical, and imaginative development of children. Moreover, the innovative execution of "Finger Play" and "Monday" positions them as forerunners of later children's

media containing image-texts and elements of physical interaction. The close interplay between the illustrations and the text as well as the use of panels for the finger plays places them in the realm of comic history.

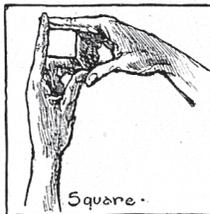
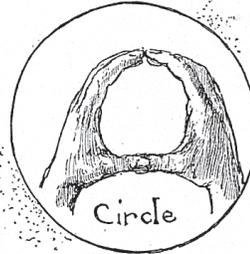
Yet as much as these two works anticipate the future, they also reflect American children's literature from the first half of the 19th-century. Books children read were notoriously didactic, concerned more with improving than entertaining the child. By the second half of the 1800s, authors such as Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll began bucking this rigid norm, creating space for imagination and playfulness in their books and, as a result, the broader sphere of children's literature.



# Finger Play

By Edith Goodyear.

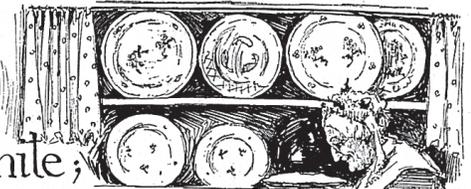
The little space 'twixt fingers & thumbs  
Is round as a circle you see!



While in there, a tiny square  
Shows corners four to me.



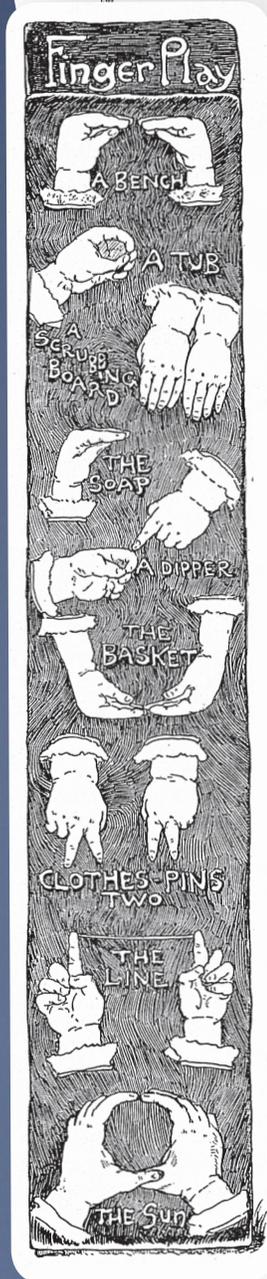
Circles are like the daisies white;  
Like pennies, candies and plates,  
Like Grandma's cookies & pumpkin pies;  
And best of all, the pretty blue  
In Baby's laughing eyes.



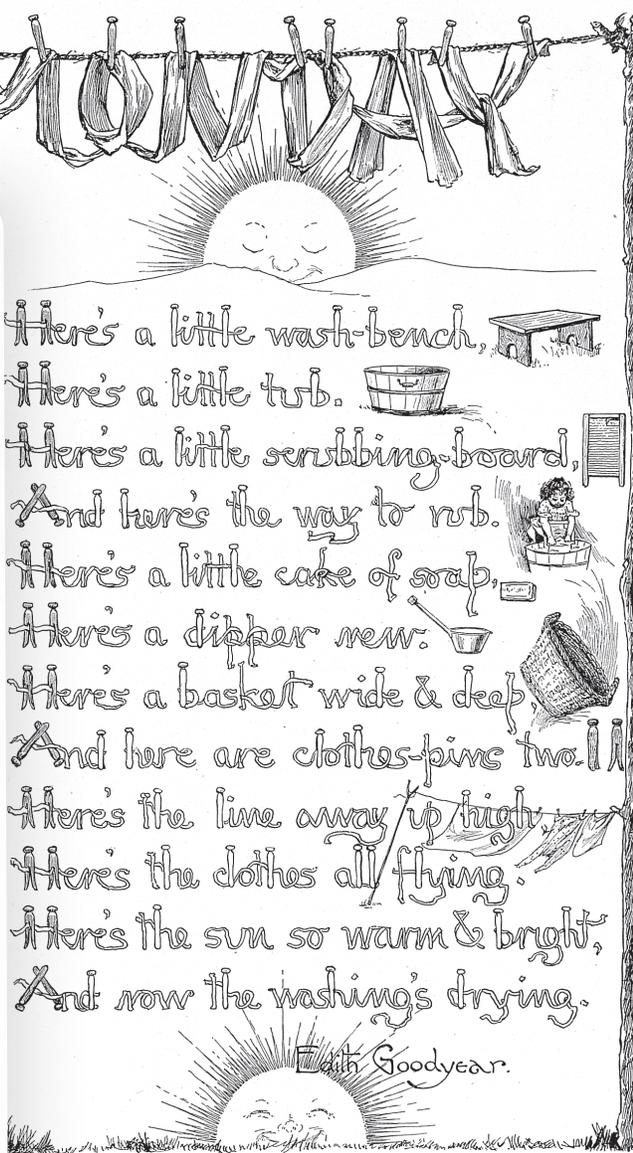
The square makes me think of the rug where he sits  
On the nursery floor at play;

Of the lawn where he rolls  
in the sunshine bright,  
And the dainty spread  
that covers his bed  
When he's fast asleep at night.





"Finger Play"  
and "Monday,"  
St. Nicholas Magazine.  
Edith Goodyear Alger  
(1895)



imaginations as much as their fingers, and they should not just passively look at the images, but inhabit them. In "Monday," the text and illustrations are not merely lines on a page, but a setting for children to immerse themselves in. A child should smell the fresh dampness of clean clothes, feel the warmth of the sun, hear the whoosh of the wind tousling the clothes on the line.

In just two pages, Goodyear accomplishes her goal of expanding the child mind through an entanglement of artistic media and a healthy dose of fun. The influences of Friedrich Froebel, Mary Mapes Dodge, and the overriding zeitgeist of American children's literature result in two works that are both quintessentially Golden Age and ahead of their time. "Finger Play" and "Monday" pave the way for modern interactive image-texts designed for children, such as board books and touch-and-feel books. Just like Goodyear's pieces, these books encourage young children to form a physical connection to the text itself, seeing beyond the literal by perceiving textured surfaces as objects or creatures that are real yet completely imaginary. Over one hundred years later, Goodyear's conviction that learning "is best performed in the spirit of genuine play" continues to be reflected in children's literature. ☀

While "Finger Play" and "Monday" were influenced by these conflicting cultural patterns, they were also shaped by the ethos of the publication in which they appeared: *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Mary Mapes Dodge, the editor of the magazine, played a central role in the propagation of certain ideologies for children's literature. In particular, she was opposed to overly didactic literature. If *St. Nicholas Magazine* were a garden, traces of any moral messages were to be masked by the perfume of flowery language and overshadowed by the brilliance of lurid adventures. Like toads and snakes, morals were an unavoidable, unglamorous part of the child's literary landscape, tolerable only when concealed from the reader's immediate detection.

Children who engage in these finger plays exercise their