The fairy tale rhyme known widely as “Jack and Jill” has been the subject of much debate since Duncan’s ground breaking 1985 monograph *Jack and Jill: Who Knew?* His thesis that Jack is a symbol of the playfulness of childhood in the emerging middle class in pre-modern England (Duncan 1066) has been challenged on numerous fronts. Raz suggests instead that Jill should be the focus of interpretation as a “proto-feminist icon of equal pay for equal work” (589). Murray, by contrast, argues that “Jack and Jill” should be read as a lament prompted by the scarcity of water during the catastrophic droughts of the 13th century (cited in Raz 496). While each of these authors makes important observations, a more nuanced reading of “Jack and Jill” must take into account both the setting (i.e., the hill) and the absence of parental figures in the narrative. As will become clear, this rhyme expresses the futility of family life in the context of the plagues that ravaged Europe in the 14th century.

The origin of “Jack and Jill” in the 14th century is widely acknowledged. The opening lines, when read carefully, convey the rhyme’s precise social origin: “Jack and Jill went up the hill//To fetch a pail of water.” Clearly the protagonists are children. “Jack” is a diminutive for the more common “Jackson,” and “Jill,” only attested here, appears to be a shortened form of the Germanic “Hilda” (Sprache 69). Water is certainly a common symbol of life and freedom (Duncan 32), but it was also the primary treatment for the plague at that time (Bube 128). Another pertinent fact for interpreting these lines is that the hill, the quintessential topographical feature of modern day England, was even more prevalent prior to the Industrial Revolution (Deere 99). The full meaning of the lines now becomes clear: Children commonly found themselves responsible for nursing their sick parents during the years of the plague.
The rhyme continues, “Jack fell down and broke his crown//And Jill came tumbling after.” Raz sees this turn of events as a reversal of a traditional interpretation of the Garden of Eden story.

The word choice is significant: Jack “fell” down. In contrast to ancient theologians, who tended to place blame for the so-called “fall of mankind” on Eve, this bold author asserts that it was Jack, the male, who fell. The woman, Jill, does not fall, but “tumbles,” that is engages in a playful act of defiance. (Raz 126-27)

This assertion would be more convincing if “Jack and Jill” were set in a garden rather than on a hill. The key word “fall” is probably better understood as an expression of failure. “Tumbling” is not a reference to a child’s game as Raz claims (101). “To tumble” only took on this meaning in the 17th century; previously it only meant “to fall repeatedly, to come to harm” (Sprache 101). The poem thus ends with both Jill and Jack (“he broke his crown”) suffering physical harm as a result of trying to care for plague victims. Thus the final two lines of the rhyme speak not only to the failure of water to cure the plague—a fact borne out of historical studies that demonstrate that water cured only 20% of plague cases prior to the invention of plastic buckets (Sterile 145)—but also to the common spread of infection from victim to caregiver (156). “Jack and Jill” is neither an exploration of childhood nor an early feminist manifesto. It is a poignant reflection on the futility of the health of families in plague ridden England. In light of this new interpretation of “Jack and Jill” one must wonder about its implications for understanding Jack’s later sparse existence as revealed by the equally famous “Jack Sprat.”