

# ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional  
Drama Research Group.  
Vol. 4 no. 5 1984



## TOWARD ESTABLISHING THE STUDY OF FOLK DRAMA AS A SCIENCE:

A Critique of Sandra Billington's article 'The New Burlesque - An Undress Rehearsal' (Roomer 3:4, 1983), with comments on recent criticisms of traditional drama research.

CRAIG FEES

The failure of scholarly standards evident in Sandra Billington's article is not her fault alone, but the failure of the entire field of what has come to be called "Folk Drama Studies". When the term "Folk Drama" was coined in about 1891 (1), it was in the attempt to establish a science of a broad range of phenomena gathered together for the first time under the one conceptual umbrella. Almost as soon as it announced the breadth of the phenomena it intended to study, however, the aspiring science focussed itself on one particular manifestation: the St. George, or Mummers', play (2). The term "Folk Drama" was still an open one when E.K. Chambers published his study of "Folk Drama" in The Medieval Stage (1903), including a wide range of mimetic games and activities. But he closed the term down in 1933 with the unfortunate publication of The English Folk Play (3).

The initial call for a science of Folk Drama was never successfully answered, partly because it was incompletely posed, and the "discipline" of Folk Drama Studies degenerated into mere theorizing around a set pattern, collecting illustrations of this pattern, wearing the trappings of scholarship, but lacking the fundamental sense of self-criticism and evidence that are the essence of scientific thinking. In terms of discovering anything real or illuminating about the world, therefore, Folk Drama Studies soon faltered. It became trivial in relation to the genuine anthropological sciences, which have questioned themselves into several revolutions of theory and method in this century.

The term "Folk Drama" is less than a hundred years old. But the weight of this failure of the field to develop into a science - and particularly the failure to recover from the losses of the First World War (4) - became so heavy that in order to achieve anything genuine and alive many of us have felt the need to step outside the Old Tradition altogether, and begin again with the original thought of building a science.

To step outside the Tradition is not the same as to side-step it, which has been the general impulse of those dissatisfied with the Tradition in this century, stepping aside in the hope that it would crash down of its own accord and leave the field free and clear. It is this attempt to sidestep rather than step outside the Burden of assumptions and assertions of the Old Folk Drama that leads Sam Richards and the author of 'Nelson's Column' to complain of the limits of what appears to be contemporary Folk Drama research, and to point out that beyond the St. George play there is a wide field of dramatic behaviours which qualify as folk drama, which deserve to be studied (5). Because they have sidestepped the Old Tradition, instead of stepping outside to take a good look at it, they are not aware of the necessity of what the TDRG are doing, nor are they aware that their points are the same which the founders of Folk Drama Studies were

gesturing towards at the end of the 19th century, but which were lost in the 20th. It is characteristic of the Old Folk Drama Tradition that it obscures its origins, and it is a character of side-stepping that it does little more than react to what the Old Tradition hands over. Only by stepping completely outside the Old Tradition and engaging it directly, making it answer direct questions about itself, about its origins and prejudices and meanings - taking it as a subject of study - can we genuinely free ourselves of its somnolent certainties and ascertain the value of the truths it undoubtedly contains.

The major contributions in recent English Folk Drama Studies have been in the nature of side-steppings. Margaret Dean-Smith's insights came close to establishing a genuine enquiry (6). An attempt to achieve a science of Folk Drama Studies grounded in data led to the compilation of English Ritual Drama (7) - but again, this didn't initiate the breakthrough into science because its basic assumption is never questioned: the belief that what is at the heart of, and characteristic of Folk Drama, is ritual - "Hero/Combat" ritual (8). Consequently, ERD remains in the nature of an extended illustration to this basic assertion. The Traditional Drama Research Group is in an equally perilous position. The same dissatisfaction with "Folk Drama", the same sense of the obscuring of phenomena by the Old Tradition, led to the substitution of the term "Folk" by "Traditional". But this was a stop-gap term. It did not arise from a fundamentally new insight into the nature of the material, it was brought in to escape the suffocation of the Old Tradition, to hold it at bay until a new discipline, rooted in genuinely new insights, could take shape, and throw up a more permanent and illuminating term to substitute completely for "Folk Drama". The impulse of the TDRG is towards stepping outside of Folk Drama, but it still hovers dangerously close to a mere side-stepping.

The difficulty, of course, is that in side-stepping "Folk Drama" - rather than stepping out of it - the characteristics of "Folk Drama" continue to reassert themselves in each "new" study without this being apparent. For example, when Sam Richards asserts that children's games are "folk drama" he apparently takes it for granted that his task is finished, he doesn't see the necessity of providing an argument to support the assertion he makes. But why should children's games be considered Folk Drama? In the Old Folk Drama it was equally sufficient to assert and illustrate; assertion stood for argument, and illustration stood for proof. That's why it never became a science. That's why it became moribund. That's why it has produced critics, who criticize but do not analyse, who do not come to the only conference in England devoted to Traditional Drama Studies, or if they do come, don't make their ideas and experiences heard.

Only by a fundamental examination of the field of Folk Drama Studies as such - as a tradition - can we guarantee ourselves of freeing ourselves from its failures and false assumptions.(9). This examination must be rigorous, and it is the current lack of any such critical examination that points out to us that we are still not a discipline; we are poised to become one and are preparing to become one, but we have yet to achieve the breakthrough. Consequently it is truthful to say that there are as yet no "specialists in folk drama", although there are those of us who take a special interest in folk drama. There are no specialists, as yet, because there is as yet no discipline of Folk (or Traditional) Drama.

The aspiration is there, however, and this brings us to the TDRG and to the criticism that is rightfully made by Sam Richards and others - if not adequately supported - that the range of what is covered in its work is limited almost entirely to the St. George play in its various manifestations. But how can this emphasis on the St. George play be helped if what we are trying to do is re-establish a science through the bulk of the failures of the Old, rather than stepping aside from it and hoping it will blow itself away? The Old Folk Drama Studies occupied itself almost entirely with the St. George play, and with a limited number of examples trotted out again and again to illustrate its assertions. For the Old Folk Drama Studies, its assertions are primary. Consequently, three generations, of thirty years each, have passed since Ordish published his plea for a study of Folk Drama. The wealth of material recorded by James Madison Carpenter in 1932/33 (10) indicates how much living material there has been available in those three generations. This material, and the human lives and memory it represents, the Folk Drama 'Scholars' allowed to pass almost completely into extinction without question because it was irrelevant to the assertions they were making. Part of the immense task of the TDRG at the moment is to recover as much as possible of

what there is, both living and in print, in order to supplant illustration with evidence, and make the formulation of sound arguments possible. That is, the TDRG is taking on the Old Scholarship in one of the ways that it must be taken on if it is to be genuinely supplanted by a scientific study - and in all conscience, as scientifically minded people, this is a task that must be completed. The reality then is that time and money make it impossible to do the fundamental research into the broader realm of 'Folk Drama' that critics like Sam Richards rightly call for. Such work is being done, in its way (11), but it is up to those who see the necessity of it to commit themselves to it by putting their insights and observations into papers and presenting them either to the Traditional Drama Conference or to outlets of discussion such as Roomer. That is, it is up to all of us to come forward in the task of actually, and finally, creating a science of Folk Drama Study, whatever name it finally achieves.

Especially in these early days we will be confronted by our own ignorance of the most basic things - sources, theories, facts - and by the immensity of the task and its horizons. But if we maintain ourselves critically, and question both our sources and the sources of our thinking, we will at least know that the vastness of the vistas are real, and we will be freed from the pseudo-vistas of the Old Study, which offered a kind of comfort for some, but fail continually to stand up to scrutiny.

## Part II

It was with a shock that I came across Sandra Billington's article in Roomer (12), and it was only by placing it in the context of the Old Tradition drawn above that I could see how it came to be printed. The article attempts to explain an illustration and article taken by Paul Smith from The Graphic of 25th December 1891, and published by him with a query as to its significance in Roomer 2:3 (1982). The illustration shows a stage, upon which there are a lady St. George, a male fitted with a large and yawning dragon's head, a lady in chains, and various persons described in the accompanying article as appropriate to the rehearsal of a play. Miss Billington's basic premise, justifying the existence of her article, arises from the characters of St. George and the Dragon on the stage. She writes:

"The question is what is St. George doing on the professional boards of an unnamed London theatre?" (13).

If this were not merely an assertion posed as a question, one could easily provide an answer:

- a) St. George being the patron saint of England, his story well known,
- b) who figures prominently in popular spectacle from Henry V's time on (at least) as Miss Billington tells us almost immediately, and
- c) the 19th century London theatre being a voracious consumer of plots and storylines,

it is difficult to see why the mere presence of St. George and the Dragon on a professional stage, named or un-named, should raise this particular question. It would be peculiar and significant if they did not appear on the London stage (14).

Her basic assertion is not really a question, however, and instead of leading her toward research into the 19th century London stage or the role of St. George and the Dragon in popular spectacle, it leads her directly to a second assertion:

"...The 1891 illustration shows folk and 'legitimate' theatre in yet another phase of exchange" (15).

The foundation for this second assertion is the presumed coincidence, in both the illustration and the Folk Play, of the characters of St. George and the Dragon. Both having the characters of St. George and the Dragon, there is a prima facie case for an exchange - a case which only needs illustration, and not proof.

In our new discipline of Folk Drama Studies, which aspires to be a science, we can assert the following principle:

The coincidence of the characters of St. George and the Dragon in two or more media, one of which is Folk Drama, is not sufficient evidence for any mutual influence or exchange.

Why not?

- a) In the first instance, the character of the Dragon is uncharacteristic of the Folk Play; it is an anomaly (16). When it appears it itself must be explained. It is not a basis for asserting the influence of the Folk Play on other media, as Miss Billington has done.
- b) Prior even to this, however, is the fact that the story of St. George and the Dragon is and has been widely available in popular culture for a long time. The fact that two different media know it does not in itself or by itself let us presume some sort of influential contact between them.
- c) If we are going to argue influential contact by the Folk Play on other media, it must be on the basis of characteristics which are fundamental and overwhelmingly special to the Folk Play. The most significant of these, essential enough to Folk Drama to have given rise to the "Hero/Combat" school of theory, is the sequence of death and resurrection - which is conspicuously missing from the arguments Miss Billington makes (17). She raises the Quack Doctor at one point, but unless he is involved in a death and resurrection, there is nothing significantly special to link him to the Folk Play: like St. George and the Dragon his character is too well known in popular culture to be significant on his own (18). Nothing that has to date been identified as unique or significantly characteristic of the Folk Play appears in the stage plays Miss Billington cites, and there is therefore no basis for arguing any kind of knowledge of the Folk Play or influence by the Folk Play.

Point (a), above, could conceivably be countered by references in the article itself. Miss Billington refers to E.K.Chambers' attempt to show that the common "Slasher" figure in the Folk Play was originally a Dragon figure (19). This argument is irrelevant, because the overwhelming mass of folk plays collected from the 18th century onwards lack the Dragon (20), and in this article we are presumably speaking of the influence of a living folk tradition on a living stage tradition. The argument that Chambers makes in any event does not stand scrutiny, being based on selective evidence and a comparative method approaching wishful thinking (21).

This leads us to a second principle: E.K.Chambers can be cited as an authority only in cases of data and sources of information. The moment there is any hint of speculation or theory in his 'facts' he ceases to be an authority, and what he says must be supported independently.

E.K.Chambers was an excellent burrower, an excavator and accumulator of sources and quotes. As I have shown elsewhere, however, he was not an original thinker; nor did he claim to be (22). He took over, whole, the mainline Literary Theory of his day and accumulated facts as illustrations for it. This Literary Theory of the 18th and 19th centuries was itself based on unexamined theories of man and culture rooted in the Middle Ages (23). It was, therefore, an archetypal Tradition, unexamined in its fundamental assumptions, and acquiring facts rather than being created by them. Chambers, furthermore, was not in himself a self-critical scholar: he did not define terms (you will search The Medieval Stage in vain for a definition of "Drama" or "Theatre"), he argued major points by association in the absence of actual connection, he offered hypothesis as fact without clearly drawing the distinction (24). He was, in short, an unreliable factualizer, and where he departs from demonstrable data he ceases to be reliable.

Miss Billington's basic premise and her primary assertion are therefore faulty and without foundation. Given this, and even if this were not true, the evidence she presents does not support the assertions she makes. It is not, in fact, evidence at all, and certainly not evidence for an exchange between the folk play and the stage play.

There are two blocks of 'evidence'. The first consists of E.K.Chambers' thoughts on the "contribution which the romance and the play has made to folk drama" (25), in Miss Billington's terms. We have already discussed the use of E.K.Chambers as an unsupported authority on matters of theory. More disturbing is that once again this 'evidence', which is not sufficient in itself, is not relevant to the task at hand anyway, since it concerns the effect of literary media on the folk play, while Miss

Billington's article concerns the influence of the folk play on the legitimate stage. Even if Chambers' thesis were a hundred percent correct it would have no bearing on the argument she is making.

The second block of 'evidence' consists of Miss Billington's interpretation of an 1833 playbill for a production of St. George and the Dragon at Drury Lane. The playbill, which she reproduces, does not support the interpretation she makes of it.

"The playbill reveals that the management were aware they were using folk play material" (26)

she writes. The support for this assertion is; a) "The performance included 'A Grand Old English Cavalcade' in which was included "Morris Dancers" " (27); and, (b) "The aesthetic descent into folk entertainment apparently worked: the bill advertised the fact that crowds rushed in immediately the door opened" (28).

This latter point is uncritical and naive, taking a theatre advertisement at face value to tell us what it cannot be relied upon to tell us; the size of an audience and their motivation for attending a play.

The first point relies, not on argument, but on the presumed existence of a popular knowledge of the Mummers' play in 1833, and on its association in the popular mind then, as now, with both the Morris and 'Old England'. It is a mark of the youth of our discipline that this question of how people conceived of the "folk play" at different times has never been put before, and that it is still possible to naturally assume that the categories we take for granted today were in effect a hundred and fifty years ago. In 1833, however, the term 'Folk Lore' had not been coined, and the Mummers' play was known in only a handful of popular sources identifying it as something particularly interesting; e.g. Davies Gilbert (1822), Hone (1827), Gentleman's Magazine (1830), William Sandys (1833). There were several antiquarian references, several in local histories, and a muted reference in Sir Walter Scott's Marmion (29). The awareness of the folk play that we have now did not exist as such then.

Contemporary sources show further that the association of the St. George play with 'Merrie England' had not taken place by 1833. Except, arguably, in Marmion, none of the sources I have cited suggest an association of the St. George play particularly with "Old England". Where an author attempts to trace the roots of the Mummers' play into history, it is generally to Rome or to soldiers returning from the Crusades (30). The possible exception is in Scott's reference, in Marmion, Canto VI:

"England was merry England, when  
Old Christmas brought his sports again" (31)

which is supported in his footnote III by a description of a play acted in Scotland when he was a youth (which bears no relationship to the St. George play), and then adds, almost as an afterthought, "There was also occasionally, I believe, a St. George". The connection here of the St. George play with "Merrie England" is tenuous, and too isolated, to argue a general cultural identification of the St. George play with "merry Old England" to the extent required to inflate the playbill into a knowledge of and widespread market for the St. George folk play.

Nor can we assume that in 1833 the current association of Mummers and Morris was made. If we look, in fact, at the context of the Morris in the playbill, we see that it comes not in the midst of typically 'folk' activities, but as an element in an "Old English" civic procession; a procession which includes the authorities of Coventry, members of the military, morris dancers, tradesmen and so on. Rather than an argument for an awareness of what we now call "folk culture", the use of the Morris in the playbill by the Drury Lane management points towards a knowledge of what was considered then as the foundations of the drama in the Cycle plays. I would suggest from the evidence given that there was a more specific knowledge of Thomas Sharp's A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry, which was published in London in 1825, and in which the elements of the playbill procession all appear, including the Morris (32). The St. George play does not appear in Sharp's book.

It is not entirely surprising to find this uncritical projection into the past of currently held ideas and categories of thought. The denial of time and space as relevant factors is an integral element in the Old Folk Drama Tradition. This denial manifests itself in a number of ways.

Is it credible, for example, that the Drury Lane management put on a play in 1833 because it found it hard to compete with a Royal Amphitheatre production of 1822, as Miss Billington seems to imply? (33). Is it credible to state that a droll, the text of which is not given, noted in London in 1686, was spread by players travelling through Yorkshire circa 1750 (as mentioned by John Jackson in 1793, again without text) to Shropshire from which it was collected and subsequently published by Charlotte Burne in 1883? (34). It can only be credible if evidence and the effect of time on transmission are considered irrelevant.

Time is furthermore used to obscure the necessity of grounding assertions on fact. The story behind The Graphic illustration, Miss Billington tells us, "is fascinating and goes back into the mists of time" (35). But the mists in time are the mists of our own ignorance, not a physical property of Time, and not a stable foundation upon which to rest an argument. Folk Drama Studies has built itself up precisely on the lack of information about the past, not in order to discover more information, but as if that lack of information was irrelevant and in fact supported the assertions made. The connection between the St. George play and ancient pagan ritual, for example, has never been concretely made, the tremendous dislocations of successive invasions and, for example, the Black Plague have never been taken into account in the need to explain how a presumed pagan ritual could have in fact, in situ, continued, transformed, into the present. Such arguments as have been made - e.g. "Oh you wouldn't have women in that, it's more like being in church" (36) throw a contemporary informant into the past, as if a living person spoke with the full authority of a pre-historic document.

Miss Billington's article gives us the opportunity to remark on another feature of the Old Scholarship: Romantic idealism substituted for scholarship. "But it would be nice to think that the audience remembered the real thing", she writes (37). Why? But even more important than that "Why" is the assertion that is so easily put forth in the rush of romantic imagery: what is the "real thing"? What are its characteristics, where does it exist, what authority or argument is there for calling this text real and that not? In point of fact, and largely due to the obscuring of any such questions by the Old Scholarship, we still don't know if the folk play is ever really "real" in the older terms of an autochthonous production of the folk. We don't know what the influences are, to what extent it is a matter of popular chapbooks, or of stage plays and puppet theatres, of antiquaries and local vicars getting up something from 'the old times', of political propaganda or social mimicry. None of this detracts from the significance of the 'folk play', quite the opposite, but it makes nonsense of the concept of the "real thing".

Up to this point, Miss Billington's article stands well within the Tradition of the Old Folk Drama Scholarship, and does so until we reach the vital support apparatus that makes of scholarship more than mere assertions and leaps of faith, that takes it into the realms of scientific accountability. I mean here, specifically, footnoting. The Old Folk Drama Scholarship knew the rules and maintained the standards of footnoting. Footnotes are tools. They give the support for arguments that cannot be fully made or re-made. They give the sources of information, and therefore make the scholar accountable. They make it possible for others to consult a researcher's sources, to join in the conversation, to point out differences of interpretation or additional sources that must be taken into account, of lapses in information. But at least four of Miss Billington's nine footnotes are faulty, and there are major bits of information given in the article which should be footnoted. What are the sources, for example, of the extensive discussion of the history of "St. George"; for the Bartholomew Fair reference; for the 1822 Royal Amphitheatre performance? If, as seems likely, all these boil down to E.K. Chambers and his English Folk Play, it is necessary to tell us so and give us page numbers. On what page does Chambers specify the 1789 Covent Garden performance? There are no page numbers given in footnotes 5 and 7 (which is incomplete anyway), and one of the sources cited, Charlotte Burne's Shropshire Folklore, runs to well over 500 pages. Footnote 4 asks us to hunt through seven pages for a one-line quote. We are asked in footnote 1 to hunt through only three pages for another one-line quote, but this never appears, and a brief reflection tells us we were never likely to find it there.

The quote in question is: "It is clear that folk drama, 'village theatre', and the regular drama and travelling players...[sic] participated in an intense interaction" (38).

This is ascribed to John Jackson, The History of the Scottish Stage, 1793, p.409-411. The subject matter is surprisingly precocious for so early a text, especially in the use of the term "folk drama". The term 'Folklore' wasn't coined until 1846. It is a measure of the infancy of our discipline that we can't say for certain when the term 'Folk drama' was coined, but I think it is quite likely that the first published use of the term was in 1891, when T.F.Ordish published his article by that title in Folklore (39). Prior to that, what we now call the folk play was generally known as the mummings' play, or some variation of the words "Christmas", "play", "mummings", and "drama". The quote that Miss Billington gives, if it does not come from her own notes, almost certainly comes from a 20th century source.

Other equally fundamental criticisms can be made of what amounts to a resurgence of Old Scholarship in an organ devoted to the establishment of a new discipline. This resurgence is interesting and significant in itself, and we need to ask ourselves what it means. But I would like to close by drawing attention to a feature of the article which is a widespread feature of the field in general; it is under-researched.(40).

The reason for Sandra Billington's article is to explain a few references to St. George and the Dragon appearing on the legitimate stage in the 19th century, as if these needed explanation, and could only be explained by reference to the English Folk Play. However, if we turn to a standard reference work on the English stage, Allardyce Nicoll's A History of English Drama 1660 - 1900 (41), we find that it lists not a few, but twenty plays produced or published between 1660 and 1900 with "St. George and the Dragon" in the title, seven with "The Seven Champions of Christendom" (one of which also has "St. George and the Dragon" in it), and one called "The Royal Champion, or St. George for England". The latter was produced in 1728. One of the St. George plays was dated "?1688". All the remainder are dated between 1800 and 1900. All these references are to first productions or publications only, mainly in London or major provincial theatres, and not to revivals or plays performed in tents or other less legitimate theatres, so the actual number of times such plays will have been performed over the century is much greater than the twenty-six titles mentioned.

A brief excursion into the literature available concerning 19th century popular theatre will give a few more examples, and suggest that there is a wealth of material available to anyone who will take the time to explore the material more thoroughly. M.Willson Disher's book, The Greatest Show on Earth (London: G.Bell & Sons, 1937), traces the history of the English equestrian circus. St. George and the Dragon make a number of appearances - "St. George and the Dragon, or the Seven Champions of Christendom" (circa 1818-1820) is mentioned on page 100; an 1822? performance on p.107; a rehearsal is described on p.128. The turn of 1871 into 1872 saw "Lady Godiva; or Harlequin St. George and the Dragon and the Seven Champions" at the Amphitheatre, written and presented by George Sanger (p.257). Sanger's 1884/1885 pantomime was "Old Dame Trot; or Harlequin Godiva and Peeping Tom St. George and the Seven Champions of Christendom, of which he never tired" (p.263). One of his rehearsals for a Lady Godiva pantomime is described on pages 268-9, and his dragon is described on p.270: "It swooped down and dragged St. George from his horse when that principle boy, wielding her sword in the left hand, grasped a bar inside the monster's mouth with her right and was hoisted aloft while the curtain fell on a grand conflict in mid-air". This reference to St. George as a lady takes us to The Graphic illustration again, where he is also played by a lady.

The failure on Miss Billington's part to do basic research brings us back to the first criticism I made of her article: the basic premise is utterly wrong, and since it is not based on the inquisitive spirit it cannot but be wrong.

It is a characteristic of the Old Folk Drama Scholarship that it was only able to support its theorizing by refusing to ask itself questions. It leapt for the easily available answers. It very quickly ceased to strive for the status of a science, and contented itself with daring acrobatics high above the crowd. We who are attempting to create a science therefore have an immense task in front of us. Not only must we develop an understanding of whatever it is that is studied in folk or traditional drama, but we must also come to understand the unique form of entertainment which has bequeathed so much of our material and its preconceptions to us. We are fortunate in that, although the past is dead and unavailable for further comment, we still have with us some of the old performers in the old tradition. We should not refuse to listen to what they say: whichever tradition they belong to, it is imperative that we hear them in their own terms. That is the essence of the new discipline.

## NOTES &amp; REFERENCES

1. Perhaps in T.F.Ordish, 'Folk Drama', Folk Lore 2, 1891, p.314; see my discussion later in this paper (footnote 39).
2. In his first article on 'Folk Drama' (ibid.), Ordish ventured: "All symbolic or concerted action and gesture are exceedingly traditional" (p.316), and "...song and dance, and combined or concerted imitative action of any kind" (p.318); "...in the poetry of the Eddas, in the religious rites of the warlike worship of Odin, in the power of expression as shown by the scalds, and the musical capacity as shown by the Saxon gleemen.." (pp.318-9), "...it is the survivals of those elements in the folk-lore and traditional customs of our country that I venture to call English folk-drama" (p.319). This descriptive definition admits of a wider range of behaviours than Ordish permits himself to discover. In his second article, 'English Folk-Drama II', Folk Lore 4, 1893, he turned almost immediately to the St. George-type play: "It would be taking a very limited view of folk-drama if we were to restrict our attention to what are known as the mumming-plays associated with Christmastide. But they are the most generally known - indeed, I fear that by some they are considered to represent the whole stock of English folk-drama - and I will address myself to this class of folk-play first" (p.150). In this, and his subsequent, unpublished essay, 'English Folk Drama: III', (dated by Margaret Dean-Smith to 1911; see her 'The Life-Cycle Play or Folk Play', Folklore 69, 1958, p.239; contained in the Ordish papers at the Folklore Society, with a copy held at CECTAL - and I would like to thank Paul Smith for my copy) he doesn't move very far from the Mummings' Play.
3. E.K.Chambers, The Medieval Stage, Oxford, 1903. Vol. I is devoted almost entirely to Folk Drama. I think it can be argued that The Medieval Stage is an answer to Ordish's articles on Folk-Drama, which attempted to introduce the Folk into a major role in the history of Drama and thereby subvert the traditional history of Drama to which Chambers subscribed. Vol. I of The Medieval Stage is an extended exercise in eliminating the Folk from dramatic history. The concept of what is contained in 'Folk drama' is very extensive, however, compared to his The English Folk Play, Oxford, 1933.
4. I'm thinking particularly of the death of Reginald Tiddy, whose human and experience-based approach to the mummings' play is evident in the uncomplete, posthumously published The Mummings' Play, Oxford, 1923.
5. Sam Richards, Roomer 3:1 (1983) p.5. 'Nelson's Column', Roomer 3:4 (1983), p.24.
6. Her influential article 'The Life-Cycle or Folk Play' (op. cit.), is subtitled "Some conclusions following the examination of the Ordish papers and other sources". In it she makes some very definite, clear propositions concerning the folk play, but these remain in the nature of assertions. The how and why, for example, of a relationship between the Mummings' play and the Greek plays reported by Wace (A.J.B.Wace, 'North Greek Festivals and the Worship of Dionysos', Annual of the British School at Athens, 1909; 'More Mummung Plays in the Southern Balkans' Annual of the British School at Athens, 1912) are put out of question as something having occurred in real space and real time. The comparisons she makes and the conclusions she draws can be made and drawn because no historical questions are asked of the material, and we remain at the level of theory upon abstracted plot structures. Her "An Un-Romantic View of the Mummings' Play", Theatre Research, Vol. 8:2, 1966, pp.89-99, carries us right into our current concern.
7. E.C.Cawte, Alex Helm, N.Peacock, English Ritual Drama, London, 1967.
8. Ibid., p.13: "We have examined our material as a traditional ceremony rather than a series of literary texts...the basis of the Play is an action around which texts have grown in an effort to rationalise what had become inexplicable with the passage of time. The basic theme of this action is bringing fertility to the places and people visited".



9. The Traditional Drama Conference has hosted a number of papers to this end; e.g. Georgina Smith, 'Excellent Examples: the Influence of Exemplary Texts on Traditional Drama Scholarship', 1978; Peter Harrop 'A Diachronic Approach to Folk Drama Performance', 1978; Paul Smith, 'Traditional Drama, Some Underlying Premises', 1982; and Craig Fees, 'Damn St. George', 1982, and 'Folk Play and Analogues', 1983.
10. Carpenter was an American who came to Britain originally to study folk-song. Folk drama material apparently forced itself upon him, and the amazing amount of material he collected is available for study at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, in London, and at CECTAL, Sheffield University - both on microfilm. This material is in the nature of transcriptions from the original recordings with occasional notes. These originals are in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
11. Paul Smith, for example, is reportedly studying the hand-positions of hand-shadow play.
12. Cited in the subtitle to this paper.
13. Billington, p.21.
14. That they appear with some frequency we see later in this paper.
15. Billington, p.21.
16. In cast lists prepared by Peter Millington from 80 folk-plays of Nottinghamshire and local counties, not one had a dragon character. See P.T.Millington, 'The Problems of analysing Folk-Play Cast Lists using Numerical Methods', Traditional Drama Conference, 1978. This confirms the impression one gets from reading through the literature. Having cited Peter's work it is fair to point out that, as with most of the papers delivered at the Traditional Drama Conferences, it has not been published and is difficult to come by.
17. Even a death and resurrection, however, cannot be taken at face value as evidence of influence. There may be precedents for dramatists within established dramatic literature; Brendan Behan's play, The Hostage, features the death and "resurrection" of a soldier, and the prologue to Dryden's play, The Rival Ladies (1664), contains the following lines:
 

"You now have Habits, Dances, Scenes, and Rhymes;  
High Language often; I, and Sense, sometimes and  
As for a clear Contrivance doubt it not;  
They blow out Candles to give Light to th' Plot  
And for Surprise, two Bloody-minded Men  
Fight till they Dye, then rise and Dance agen..."

Examples could certainly be multiplied if they were looked for.
18. See, for example, C.J.S.Thompson, The Quacks of Old London, London, 1928. For a nearly adequate proof of folk play influence on a literary dramatist, see Janus Cycloped, "Play Selection: Christmas Plays and Mysteries", Amateur Stage 1, Nov. 1926, p.364. The play St. George and the Turkish Knight, by Margaret Macnamara is described:
 

"1 act. 9 to 13m, 1f. Scene is a bare stage with a few screens and forms.  
This is adapted from the old mumming plays. St. George kills the pagan  
who has destroyed his page. The doctor restores both to life".

Unfortunately, by 1926 the 'Mummer's Play' had an established life as a literary entity, and this description is no evidence of knowledge or experience of a living tradition of mumming.
19. Billington, p.22. Chambers' discussion is in The English Folk Play, pp.177-8.
20. It can be asked, however, whether the Dragon was more frequently a figure in the folk play prior to the mid-19th century. For sources with Dragons, see Andrew Brice, The Mobyad, London, 1770, p.90: Mrs. Charles Bagot, Links with the Past, London, 1901, p.189 (quoting a diary entry of 1817 referring to the mid-18th century): Fortescue Hitchins, The History of Cornwall, Helston, 1824, p.718;

William Sandys, Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern, London, 1833, p.174ff; see also p.xvii. This latter text is responsible for a number of the references to Dragons in the plays to the end of the 19th century. As far as I am aware the only text of a St. George-type play with a dragon, definitely collected in the field, is in F.G.Lee, 'Oxfordshire Christmas Miracle Play', Notes & Queries, 5th Series, 2, 1874, p.504. Sir Offley Wakeman, 'Rustic Stage Plays in Shropshire', Shropshire Archaeological Transactions Vol. 7, 1884, pp.385-6, and Charlotte Burne, Shropshire Folklore, London, 1883-6, p.500 (she also reprints Wakeman, pp.495-6) have references to the plays "St. George and the Fiery Dragon" and "St. George and the Dragon", respectively, played in the first half of the century. We would need to know more about these plays before making too much of them - though performed by the folk, these are not necessarily 'folk plays'.

21. Chambers (English Folk Play; p.178) quotes five literary sources dated between 1330-40 and the seventeenth century, each of which describes something as, variously, hard as brass, stone and/or steel, which (in two of the quotes) makes this something impenetrable. Chambers then says: "They are all dragons". He prefaces these with the quote:

"My head is made of iron,  
My body is made of steel,  
My arms and legs of beaten brass,  
No man can make me feel!"

from the Mummers' plays.

This mere juxtaposition of quotes is the extent of his argument and proof. A minimum argument would demand that he show that such descriptions are typical and sufficiently unique to dragons to make it unusual for anything else to be described in these terms. Three hundred years of literature can be selectively fished to prove, one should think, almost anything. The argument is naive.

22. See my Medieval Theater and Indo-European Tradition, M.A.Thesis, Occidental College, Los Angeles, 1981, pp. 1 - 62.  
In Chambers' own words, his aim in The Medieval Stage was "to collect, once for all, as many facts with as precise references as possible" (Vol. I, p.vii). In his obituary of Chambers in the Proceedings of the British Academy 42, 1956, p.279, F.P.Wilson wrote: "...what was wanted was one work which would order and estimate all existing knowledge and theory. His work was one of consolidation, not discovery".
23. For a study of these theories, see Margaret T. Hodgen, Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Philadelphia, 1964; and J.S.Slotkin, Ed., Readings in Early Anthropology, London, 1965.
24. This failure by Chambers to define his terms is noted by O.B.Hardison, Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages, Baltimore, 1965, p.17. An argument by association has already been noted in footnote 21. The introduction to Vol. I of The Medieval Stage tells us that much of the discussion of Folk Drama that follows is speculation, but this is not reflected in the language he actually uses, and does not seem to have been picked up by the majority of those who have used the book.
25. Billington, p.21.
26. Ibid., p.22
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. I shouldn't consider this list exhaustive, but indicative. Davies Gilbert, Ancient Christmas Carols (London, 1822, pp.6-7); William Hone, The Every Day Book (London, 1827, cols. 18-21, 122-6, 1645-8); W.S., The Gentleman's Magazine, June 1830, p.505; William Sandys, op. cit., p.xvii, 174ff; Edward Jones, Musical-Poetical Relics of the Welsh Bards (London, 1794, p.108 fn.3); Fortescue Hitchins, op. cit. p.718; Walter Scott, Marmion, London 1809.

30. Rome: Christopher Clarkson, The History and Antiquities of Richmond in the County of York, Richmond, 1821, pp.290-91; interestingly enough, the Roman-origins theory doesn't form part of the first edition of this work, published in 1814 (pp.297-8). Thomas D.Fosbroke, Encyclopaedia of Antiquities and Elements of Archaeology, Classical and Medieval, London, 1825; see "Mummers etc.", p.595, and "Christmas Sports", p.589.
- Crusades: Hitchins, op. cit., p.718; W.S. op. cit., p.505; Sandys op. cit, p.xvii.
31. Scott, op. cit., p.303.
32. Republished by Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, New Jersey, 1973. For morris dancers see, e.g. p.125.
33. Billington, p.22.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p.21.
36. Chambers, English Folk Play, p.5. To be fair, he goes on to say: "I do not suppose any such subconscious atavism, if it is that, to be usual" (my emphasis). But Chambers often uses this technique of giving a claim spurious weight by highlighting it with a gesture of academic doubt. It isn't really cricket. (In the same work: "These were Christmas plays, such as the 'young men of the city' gave at Bath in 1601-6. These might of course be anything; they might even be the Mummers' Play" (p.187). "Putting it all together, one may perhaps judge that the evidence permits, rather than compels, the conjecture of some give and take between the Mummers' Play and the religious drama, at least in its later stages" (p.170) ).
37. Billington, p.24.
38. Ibid., p.21
39. Ordish, 1891, op. cit.  
If not coined in or about 1891, the term "Folk Drama" does not conspicuously appear in the literature before then, and makes a number of appearances after. Several of Ordish's phrasings make it possible to think that he was venturing a new term, taking a certain amount of credit for it; as when he wrote: "...it is the survivals of those elements...that I venture to call English folk drama" (1891, p.319), or begins his second essay with the phrase "...what I call English Folk-Drama" (1893, p.149). These are not strong statements, and raise the feeling that the term is not an utterly new one. Perhaps someone who has come across an earlier usage will send it as a note to Roemer.
40. There is a tendency in Folk Drama Studies for what I call "first-coup" scholarship, drawing an analogy with American Indian warfare, in which the greatest honour accrued to the first warrior to strike an opponent with his coup-stick. "First coup" scholarship may occasionally be brilliant, but in general it is superficial and counterproductive. It gives the illusion that work has been done, and this delays others from taking the real work on.
41. Allardyce Nicoll, A History of English Drama 1660 - 1900, Vol. VI, A Short Title Alphabetical Catalogue of Plays Produced or Printed in England from 1660 - 1900, Cambridge, 1959.

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Title page from New Mummings Book: The Four Champions of Great Britain...—  
 original in the Archive of The Folklore Society. For further details see —  
 M. J. Preston, M. G. Smith and P. S. Smith, An Interim Checklist of Chapbooks  
Containing Traditional Play Texts (Newcastle: History of the book trade in the  
 North, 1976) p.31.

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ISSN 0262-4095

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