

# ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional  
Drama Research Group.  
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## THE INSTITUTIONAL BASIS OF PERFORMANCE : A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY FOLK PLAYS<sup>1</sup>

Georgina Boyes

Although a considerable amount of scholarly research has been devoted to the examination of historical and memorate folk plays in England, to date, few studies have been made of any aspect of contemporary performances. When such discussion has taken place, moreover, it has generally involved assimilating contemporary performances into an analytical and definitional framework reflecting scholars' preoccupation with origin theory and essential concern with historical forms.

Since the latter part of the 19th century, however, an increasing volume of folkloristic attention has affected the context of many better-known examples of extant traditional drama, whilst more recently, the folk song revival has turned its attention to acting mummers' plays. Contemporary performances of folk plays therefore exist in a variety of forms, reflecting processes which did not operate historically - thus the application of general terms like 'traditional' or 'revival' as a means of classifying all plays, current and memorate, presents considerable difficulties.

In an attempt to reach a clearer understanding of the nature of contemporary performances, this paper will examine the existing method of categorising performances, particularly the way in which accepted definitions of 'traditional' and 'revival' plays relate to current forms. Arising from this, a base for examining contemporary performances will be proposed which derives not from the problematic area of textual source, but from the socio-economic context of the plays.

Contemporary performances of English folk plays are generally seen as divided into two main types; those performed by non-traditional teams, usually associated with the folk music revival, and those performed in or immediately deriving from local oral tradition. Whilst this division is at first-sight fairly clear-cut, the definitions of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' teams are not so precise as to provide realistic categories for analysing the nature of a large number of contemporary performances.

The conventional general definition of a traditional play is that by 'mummers whose performance did not depend on the printed chapbook versions, but who passed on their local variant by word of mouth'. (2) Now that the influence of chapbooks on performed texts is being examined more systematically, however, it seems that very few plays can certainly be said to have been unaffected by print, and thus be 'traditional'. The narrowness of this definition should not be objected to on the grounds that it cuts down the number of plays which researchers can 'properly' study, however, rather it should be re-examined in the light of reality. Print and traditional drama are no more inimical than broadsheets and traditional song. Speeches or music which were an expected part of local tradition were added independently by local performers to chap-

book texts. Similarly, regional traditions of season for performance were followed by chapbook printers in different parts of the country. It also seems likely that the existence of printed texts may actually have stimulated performances in the north of England during the 19th century. (3) A text 'uncontaminated' by print provides, therefore, no guide to plays performed in or resulting from traditional processes or contexts.

The question of whether some of the plays which have been known to be introduced into an area or a tradition which has lapsed and then for a variety of reasons been performed again, raises questions about the nature of 'revived' and 'traditional' performances which are not fully covered by the accepted definition of the term 'revival'. In English Ritual Drama (4), Cawte, Helm and Peacock provide a comprehensive guide to the use of 'revival' as a description of play performances. They suggest that the following meanings have, from time to time, been attributed to it:

- a) A team stops for a period and then starts again, with all or most of the original team.
- b) As with a), but all, or nearly all of the performers are new, taught by an old performer, but still in the same village. This may be
  - i) Spontaneous
  - ii) As a result of outside influence.
- c) As with b) but in a different village. Again this may be subdivided i) and ii) as in b).
- d) Team starts in the original village, the ceremony taught from book or MS, but with no personal connection with the original team.
- e) As with d) but in a different place.
- f) Completely new ceremonies with no traditional basis in the proceedings, eg some May Queens, Rose Queens.

For the purposes of a classification of traditional plays, however, they accept only the spontaneous re-commencement of performances by a former performer or performers in the same or another place as valid 'revival'.

If this definition is adopted, however, a number of difficulties in regard to the broad division of contemporary play performances arise. Many teams of mummers associated with the folk music revival have made a considerable effort to obtain maximum 'authenticity' of performance of traditional plays. This involvement with 'genuine' tradition can include their obtaining a text of a local play from former participants, as well as details of costume, timing and acting style. In such cases it would seem that Cawte et al.'s definition of 'revival' should lead to their inclusion in studies concerned with traditional drama. In practice, however, 'revival' teams such as the Antrobus Soulers and the Handsworth Sword Dancers are regarded as being distinct from, for example, Kiveton Park Folk Club Mummers, although the latter perform a local play collected from the family of a team member.

It is clear, therefore, that realistic categorisation of contemporary performances in England cannot simplistically be based on the issue of an oral or printed source of the text. The view that tradition is invalidated if it is found to have been affected by printed forms is illogical, based on the fortuitous discovery of literary states of some items. The chance survival of a chapbook which is the source or modifier of any particular play is hardly a criterion for determining the play's validity as a performance in context.

All contemporary performances of folk plays are not, however, identical. They arise from different types of social contexts. In The English Mummers and their Plays, (5) Brody comments on the rarity of extant traditional hero-combat play performances, noting that 'only about five or six' teams remained in England. Whilst it is true

that only a handful of the acceptedly traditional groups still appear on a predictable basis, and have a membership or date and time of appearance established enough to allow researchers from outside the community to see their play and interview the performers, not all contemporary performances take this form. In a number of areas, ad hoc groups continue to perform traditional plays in a relatively spontaneous fashion. Because the organisation of these teams is less structured, and thus less predictable, they have remained almost entirely unknown outside the immediate locale of their performance. From observation of several of these types of group, together with research on other 'traditional' and 'revival' teams, I feel that the relationship of their performances to their socio-economic context offers a possibility for categorisation which both adds to an academic appreciation of the nature of contemporary plays and is based in the realities of performance.

A major source of difference between contemporary forms of folk play performances is the relationship of the group of performers to their material reward. Historically folk plays represented a means of obtaining extra income or goods for festival seasons and times of economic hardship, a function which 'kept them alive long after their original purpose [sic] was forgotten'. (6) Material reward is still an important element in contemporary performances and can thus provide a consistent and easily observable means of analysis.

Today, material rewards are allocated in one of three ways:

1. Performers themselves receive no material reward from collection after the performance.
2. Performers receive money to cover expenses associated with performing.
3. All material rewards accrue to performers.

Each of these types of allocation is linked with a different form of social organisation.

The first type of economic allocation is associated with teams with a manifest, structured institutional base, such as the schools which organise the Pace Eggers at Rochdale and in the Midgley (Yorkshire) area. Performers usually receive none of the money they collect - charities or the organising institution itself are the usual beneficiaries. The organising institution is not necessarily formed for the purpose of performing folk plays.

Those institutions which provide the social bases for the second type of performance are usually manifest, in that they are named and frequently overtly structured. They include 'traditional' teams such as Antrobus and the Grenoside Sward Dancers and also groups linked with folk clubs. Some of the money collected after such performances will be returned to the team in the form of expenses (of relatively broad interpretation). The rest will accrue to the organising institution's funds to cover expenses related to the performances (such as publicity posters, material for costumes, etc.), or to strengthen the social cohesion within the group by subsidising a party or bolstering general club funds. In this case, the institution may or may not be formed for the purpose of performing traditional plays on a regular basis.

The third and final category is that of the range of social organisations between the informal, loosely-structured institution and ad hoc, temporary groups. These groups are frequently formed spontaneously or come together for a short time each year for the purpose of performing. Teams such as these perform the Old Horse and Old Tup plays in the Sheffield area and some (though not all) of the Bull Guizing plays around Nottingham.

The use of these socio-economic dimensions as a means of categorising plays has the advantage of being immediately related to the processes modifying all aspects of contemporary performances. Text and action of the play reflect the social and economic bases of the performance in terms of lengthening or shortening of text and type or acceptability of impromptu variation - obviously, a school performance by young children would be of a different type from that put on by adults in a Working Men's Club

Similarly, the attitudinal set of an ad hoc performer whose main interest is the collection of money, is not that of a member of a manifest team, romantically continuing an 'ethnic', local tradition. Composition, attitude and behaviour of audiences are also related to the socio-economic dimensions of the performances - a play put on for charity by a church youth group at a garden party would, for example, be received in a different way and by a different audience than would generally be found for an ad hoc performance in the tap-room of a public house.

Decisions on the 'validity' of revivals and labelling performances 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' are not only fraught with definitional problems, but also frequently involve implicit value judgements. By substituting an overt, quantifiable means of classification, it is hoped that the bias of idiosyncratic judgements will be obviated and the possibilities for examining the realities of contemporary traditions will be increased.

#### NOTES

1. This paper was originally written for presentation at the Folk Drama panel of the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society (1977). The ideas expressed were subsequently incorporated in my paper 'Social Bases of Tradition: The Limitations and Implications of "The Search for Origins"', in A. E. Green and J. D. Widdowson (Eds.) Language, Culture and Tradition (Sheffield: CECTAL Conference Papers No.2, 1981) pp.77-87.
2. Alex Helm The Chapbook Mummings' Play (Ibstock, Leicester: Guizer Press, 1969) p.6.
3. A fuller discussion of these and other points relating to chapbooks and folk plays performance are included in G. Smith Chapbook sources of British Traditional Drama: The Mummings' Play as Popular Culture (Paper presented at the Conference on Popular Drama and Film, University of Kent, 1977) and 'Chapbooks and Traditional Plays: Communication and Performance', Folklore, XCII (1981), 208-18.
4. E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm and N. Peacock English Ritual Drama (London: The Folklore Society, 1967) pp.15-17.
5. Alan Brody The English Mummings and their Plays (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) p.10.
6. Helm, op. cit. p.8.

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#### FIELDWORK IN FOLKLORE

Saturday, 19th November, 1983 (10.00 - 5.30)  
 The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, The University of Sheffield  
 Organised jointly by E.F.D.S.S. and C.E.C.T.A.L.

The purpose of the day is threefold: to provide a forum for fieldworkers, to communicate current projects and progress and to offer basic technical advice on recording with sound and moving pictures. Contributions are invited and anyone wishing to make a presentation should contact Jim Carroll, 7B Carlton Drive, London S.W.15.

The cost of the conference is £5 (exclusive of lunch). Remittances should be made payable to E.F.D.S.S. and sent to Dr. Ian Russell, Bridge House, Unstone, Sheffield. S18 5AF. Programme details will be circulated beforehand. Please enclose s.a.e. if an acknowledgement is required.

## TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1982

### THE FIFTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON ASPECTS OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP IN TRADITIONAL DRAMA STUDIES

Saturday, 16th October, 1982 (10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.)

Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language,  
Endcliffe Exhibition Hall, 605 Ecclesall Road, Sheffield.

#### ABSTRACTS OF PAPERS PRESENTED

##### Damn St. George: Some Neglected Home Truths in the History of British Folk Drama, or Bring out the Dead

CRAIG FEES

The paper presents a set of short studies concerned with the history of Folk Drama and some of the things its historians have swept aside. Reference is made to current research in Snowhill and Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire.

##### The Fool - Folk and Fairground

SANDRA BILLINGTON

I apologise for the wide spread of time which this subject requires to outline the thread of connection between the Medieval Folk Fool and that of the published Mumming texts.

Firstly, the existence of Fools in seasonal customs in England has to be established. Theological disapproval provides oblique proof through its condemnation and illustrations in Psalters show that Fools did enjoy the position of ringleader for games, tricks and plays; particularly at Shrovetide.

Shrovetide is one season when puddings were eaten and by the sixteenth century a large crop of pudding epigrams - frequently satirical though obscure today - had developed. This paper shows how the folk Fool became known as Jack Pudding and that this name superceded that of Fool itself. As is known, in the sixteenth century, the Fool rose briefly to a respectable position as a theatrical entertainer. The evidence shows that he did not disappear at the onset of the Civil War, but still survived, in the Fool's coat, in fairgrounds and with travelling entertainers.

The crucial point I hope to make is one which requires more detail than there may be time for. In the fairgrounds a mutually beneficial relationship between mountebanks and their Jack Puddings grew up. So much so that sometimes the Fool had the leading part and sometimes the doctor, whose main source of income was not through the sale of the medicines or 'pacquets', but through the entertainment value they gave. The one collection of mountebank speeches, printed twice, shows that political and religious satire was a large part of their attraction. I have found one example (19th century) of dialogue between mountebank and Fool, which shows the Fool undermining the doctor's pretensions. This dialogue is similar to the Mumming dialogue between the Doctor and his servant Jack and I hope it may be possible to show that the mountebank and his servant, who was originally a seasonal folk Fool, were reabsorbed into the mumming play.

The Work of the Traditional Drama Research Group

STEVE ROUD

The Traditional Drama Research Group was formed in 1980 as a logical extension of the informal co-operative activity and ad hoc communication between particular individuals active in the field.

Since 1980, with a view to furthering study of the subject by means of co-operative projects and the active dissemination of material and information, meetings have been held in various parts of the county. Many aspects of Traditional Drama research have been discussed and the Group is currently involved in developing a suitable indexing scheme for Traditional Drama material and exploring the possibility of publishing a series of monographs.

The Traditional Drama Research Group's activities can be seen as attempting to aid and stimulate research into the subject by initiating and co-ordinating co-operative schemes and by encouraging communication and the active sharing of information and material between individual workers. We fully understand that most Traditional Drama research is carried out by non-professional individuals working informally in their own area and in their own way. We hope therefore that, by offering a channel for the exchange of ideas and information and by providing back up services of indexing and publishing, we can be of service to the subject and the people involved.

Traditional Drama - Some Underlying Promises

PAUL SMITH

Our understanding of the dramatic forms that can or should be included under the heading of Traditional Drama is somewhat limited - being implicit rather than explicit.

This paper is consequently concerned with our statements as to the nature of Traditional Drama.

The Edwards and Bryning Chapbook

PETER STEVENSON

During the last 200 years, chapbooks containing the texts of traditional plays have been published in several towns and cities in Great Britain. These have included the Alexander plays published in Newcastle and Whitehaven, the Christmas Rhyme books of Belfast, the Peace Egg plays mainly from Lancashire and Yorkshire, and numerous others. In An Interim Checklist of Chapbooks containing Traditional Play Texts (1976), Preston et al. list over 100 chapbooks still in existence and more than thirty printers are known to have published editions. With so many chapbooks having been published, the question has often been raised of the influence they have had on play traditions. The chapbooks are generally supposed to have had most effect in the North of England where many teams of pace eggers appear to use texts similar to those found in the chapbooks.

This paper presents an examination of the effect chapbooks have had in one area, namely Greater Manchester where eight printers are known to have published editions. One of these, The Peace Egg, or St. George: An Easter Play, was first published early this century by the Rochdale printing firm of Edwards and Bryning. The publication of the chapbook coincided with the presence on the streets of Rochdale of an extraordinary number of teams of children performing pace egg plays. Many of these teams used the text in the chapbook, and some teams from local schools are still using it in the 1980s. This provides an excellent opportunity to study the effect that the publication of the chapbook has had on a single tradition.

REVIEW

Peter Millington

THE ORDNANCE SURVEY ATLAS OF GREAT BRITAIN (Ordnance Survey: Feltham, Country Life Books, 1982) ISBN 0-600-35003-3 £12.50

This atlas is a very useful tool for researchers who make constant reference to maps, especially if they are using National Grid reference numbers. The volume includes a complete set of Ordnance Survey 1:250,000 maps of Great Britain, together with an index of all named locations and corresponding four-figure grid references. Nearly every village in the country appears on the maps so, although not as definitive as a set of 1:50,000 maps and a 1-inch gazetteer, this is probably the most cost effective atlas available for Great Britain.

Having said that, I have one major criticism of the atlas. Although generous overlaps are provided between pages, the binding is so tight that it is impossible to see many locations. Ironically this includes the Ordnance Survey's home town - Southampton. Accordingly, I would recommend hesitant buyers to wait until a new edition has been produced which has resolved the problem.

One other minor criticism concerns the index. Like most gazetteers there is only one entry per location. This can make it difficult to find some places, for example Hull is entered under Kingston upon Hull and Retford under East Retford. Additional entries for multiword placenames would be a great improvement.

There are, however, some redeeming features for, in addition to the main atlas and index, there are over twenty extra maps, with accompanying text, illustrating the historical and modern economic geography of the country. These could be very useful in trying to explain the distributions of customs, legends, etc. Two particularly useful maps show the county boundaries before and after Local Government reorganisation in 1974.

# TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1983

The 6<sup>th</sup> annual conference  
on Traditional Drama Studies.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD  
22 OCT 1983

for details:

The Centre for English Cultural Tradition  
and Language • University of Sheffield  
SHEFFIELD S10 2TN.



NOTE TO SUBSCRIBERS

The last issue of *Roomer* (designated Vol.2 No.4/5) was unfortunately wrongly numbered and paginated. With this in mind please alter the volume number to Vol.2 No.5 and the pages to 29 (front cover) to 40. The editors would like to apologise for any confusion caused by this error.

TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1983 - CALL FOR PAPERSThe Sixth Annual Conference on Aspects of Current Scholarship in Traditional Drama

University of Sheffield - Saturday, 22nd October, 1983

In the 1983 conference we wish to expand further the varieties of topics covered. Consequently, we would like individuals interested in presenting papers, chairing discussions or bringing exhibition materials, slides and films to contact the organisers by 1st September, 1983

For further information contact: Paul Smith, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield. S10 2TN (0742-78555 Ext.6296)

CALENDAR CUSTOMS

22nd - 23rd September, 1984 - Cecil Sharp House, London  
Organized jointly by EFDSS and The Folklore Society

The study of calendar customs has recently attracted researchers from a variety of disciplines, including folkloristics, social history and sociology but, as yet, there is little opportunity to share approaches and ideas. This weekend conference aims to remedy the situation by considering such aspects as history and practice, patronage, social organisation, function and transmission.

Contributions are invited. Please contact Mr. Derek Schofield, 10 Addison Close, Wistaston, Crewe. CW2 8BY.

Further details will be available from 1st January, 1984.

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

Steve Roud, 22 Adelaide Road, Andover, Hants. (0264-4397)  
Paul Smith, 2A Westfield Road, Bramley, Rotherham, Yorkshire (0709-548426)



## TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH REGISTER

In the near future we intend to publish in Roomer a second Directory of Traditional Drama Researchers Specialist Interests. It is hoped that the production of such a directory will foster exchange and co-operation amongst individuals working in this field.

We feel that it would be appropriate for you to be included in this directory, and we should be grateful if you could complete the following questionnaire outlining your involvement and interests.

In addition to appearing in the Roomer directory your entry will also be passed on for inclusion in the Folklore Research Register for 1984.

If necessary, please continue your reply on the additional sheet(s).

Name:

Address (home):

Tel:

post code:

Subject(s) of Research. (e.g. broad areas of interest and current projects, geographical areas covered and specific traditions/teams being researched):

Synopsis of Materials Gathered Relating to Traditional Drama Studies:

Research Methods and Source Materials:

Are You Registered for a Post-Graduate Research Degree? If so, give details of title, level of research, department and institution, supervisor and starting date.

Have You Completed a Research Degree? If so, give details of this title, type of degree, department and institution and date that the degree was awarded.

List Relevant Publications in the Area of Traditional Drama Studies

Details of occupation (if relevant to folklore studies) and/or positions held in relevant organisations and societies:

Please return to Paul Smith, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language,  
University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN. Tel: 0742-78555 (Ext. 6296)



# THE FOLKLORE SOCIETY

Founded 1878

c/o University College London  
Gower Street WC1E 6BT  
01 387 5894

## THE FOLKLORE SOCIETY - ANNUAL AWARD OF RESEARCH GRANTS

The Folklore Society has now established a series of annual grants for research in the field of folklore studies to the total maximum value of £500 in any one year. The grants are available for research in all aspects of cultural tradition but particular encouragement will be given to projects concerned with areas of United Kingdom folklore not at present satisfactorily explored.

Applications for the Research Grants are invited from members of The Folklore Society of at least one year's standing, subject to the following conditions:

- a) Applicants are United Kingdom residents aged 18 years or over.
- b) The Society is satisfied that there is no possibility of applicants receiving grants from elsewhere to fund the project.
- c) All projects are designed with a view to publication.

The following research costs will be considered for funding:

Travel expenses

Stationery, films, tapes and other consumables

Postage

Copying documents

Only in exceptional circumstances will grants be made towards equipment.

Applications accompanied by an up-to-date curriculum vitae and detailed research proposals must be made no later than 30th November in any year, on forms provided by the Society. All applications will be considered by the Research Sub-Committee who will then make recommendations to the society's full Committee for final adjudication. The decision of the Society's Committee will be made known no later than the date of the Annual General Meeting.

For full details and application forms, please write to the Research Sub-Committee at the above address.