

ROOMER

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THE QUACK DOCTOR AND THE CHEAP JACK

Steve Roud

In a paper delivered at the 1980 Traditional Drama Conference in Sheffield, Mike Preston and Paul Smith identified the apparently very close connections between two previously published songs (The Infallible Doctor, ca.1686; and The Mountebank, ca.1706) and the mummings play Doctor (1). They also commented on the persistence of the 'Quack Doctor' figure in popular culture and stated that "the substantial interplay among popular culture, folklore and literature is coming gradually to be recognised".

I would like to offer here another, somewhat more tentative example of that interplay by way of extracts from the book Life and Adventures of a Cheap Jack by One of the Fraternity [William Green] (2). Whereas the parallels identified by Preston and Smith existed in the direct verbal sphere, the following pieces, I believe, closely mirror the mumming Doctor's style and verbal technique - for example, the use of hyperbole, nonsensical inversion and, of course, the haranguing tone and grandiose claims. These 'whids', as Green call the jokes and patter of the 'fraternity', bear all the hallmarks of being traditional in themselves, and indeed Green specifically mentions that they freely borrowed material from each other.(3).

Given that itinerant sellers and cheap jacks were relatively common figures throughout Britain at least until the last quarter of the 19th century, it may be that by placing the mumming Doctor's speeches within the context of such a similarly structured, but equally traditional verbal genre, we may get a little closer to understanding what the character of the Doctor in the play actually meant to his audience by identifying at least one of the parallels available to them at the time.

The 'whids' given below are taken more or less at random from the book, and anyone interested in testing my theory is urged to read the whole work and judge for themselves. There are plenty more to choose from.

"Now then, gentlemen, if you will just roll up, bowl up, and wheel about, and coil up this way for a few minutes, I shall not detain you long. I'm your old friend Cheap John, and not one of those common hawking, walking, talking, run-about fellows, such as wild Irishmen, fiddle-legged Scotchmen, long-nosed Jews, Greeks, Turks, Italians, and so forth, that go about and up and down the country calling themselves Cheap Johns - they are mere idle impostors. I am the old original Cheap John of all. My father was a Cheap John my mother was a Cheap John, my brothers and sisters were all Cheap Johns, so if I am not a real Cheap John I must be cross-bred. I say, sold again, to a gentleman with a thousand a year, and a bushel of spick-span new half-crowns every Monday morning" (p.18).

"I can speak all languages, as Dutch, Hebrew, Coptic, Greek, and Latin, Double Dutch and German, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and all the Oriental languages that have been translated by Dr. Adam Clarke. For I took up my degrees - by degrees - at all the principal universities in the kingdom, as Oxford, Cambridge,

Barnwell, Eton and other places. I was educated for a 'crocus' - that, you must understand, is a quack doctor - but the smell of the physic and pills, with the lotions, potions, and motions, didn't agree with me; so they sent me to Sheffield and made a Cheap John of me. Talk about scholarship, I learnt all my geography from a book called 'Reading made Easy', on one fine afternoon before breakfast" (pp.20-21).

"Here I am again, gentlemen! Here I am again, ladies, friends, Romans and fellow countrymen. Here I am again, I say, after travelling through England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, through Russia, Prussia, France, Spain, Portugal, the North and South of America, and the West Indies! I have arrived among you once more, just to open your eyes, enlighten your minds, and fill your boots with wonder, just to show and tell you and let you know the imposition that is practised in my absence in the hardware and ironmongery trade..." (pp.22-23).

"The next lot I have to show you is a well-made pocket-knife - a knife, here, with a point like a needle, an edge like a razor, and polished like a two-guinea looking-glass, round joint, square spring, and cast-steel blade. It would frighten a hog, stick a dog, or bleed a cabbage; stab either horse, dog, hog, or devil; kill a cow or mend a plough; nip through the shine-bone of an ox, or the axletree of a coach-wheel; cut nine to ten pounds of meat off a bare bone. And to go with it I have here a pair of Salisbury jockey-trimming shears - a pair fit for a miner, nailer, tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, housewife, or midwife, a ribbon-spinner or bobbin-tosser. They would go through a sheet of copper a yard square and a foot thick, and never injure the edges of them. These scissor-blades are like two lawyers, or a man and his wife, they won't hurt each other; but will cut everybody and everything that comes between them..." (p.46).

"Now if any of you people can show me the man that struck Buckley! I can tell you that he fell notwithstanding, and not with standing he fell. When last seen he was dressed in a sky-green hat, yellow waistcoat, blue trousers and boots of the gridiron pattern, with a frying-pan round his neck for an eyeglass; his age is about one pound six and eightpence..." (p.54).

"Here, I have half-a-dozen knives and forks; the knives are so sharp that one would cut a hair in nine parts out of every eight, cut a crowbar or a blacksmith's anvil asunder, shave a mouse asleep and never wake it once, or you might use either one of them for a razor for yourselves, if at any time you found your housemaid, parlourmaid, kitchenmaid, top garret or any other maid, had been opening oysters with your only one; you'd find one of these knives go over your face as smooth as a snail goes over a cabbage on a dewy morning..." (p.83).

"I sold the fellow [a gun] for two pounds to a farmer in Leicestershire, and I'll tell you what he did. The first day he took it out he fired one barrel, and killed six crows as he didn't see; he fired the second, and shot nine partridges out of five, and the kick of the gun knocked his back'ards into a ditch, and he fell on a hare and killed that. These guns will shoot round a corner and over a hayrick, and they are used to fatten the paupers that are turned out of the unions for not paying their income-tax. They load the guns with fat bacon and shoot it down their throats..." (pp.120-1).

"Here, the next lot I have is a pair of patent spring braces. These are the sort to buckle your small clothes up tight, make you walk light and be a good figure; the more you draw these up the lighter you'll be, and if you draw them up too tight they will pull you off the ground altogether. I once sold a pair of braces like these to a farmer who weighed twenty-two stone; he walked and moved so light when he wore them that his friends did not know him..." (p.229).

NOTES

1. Michael Preston and Paul Smith, 'Two Quack Doctor Songs and Traditional Drama in England' in Thomas A. Green and Paul Smith, Folk Drama (Forthcoming).
2. Life and Adventures of a Cheap Jack by one of the Fraternity [William Green]. Edited by Charles Hindley (New Edition: London: Chatto and Windus, 1881) (first published 1876).
3. "The 'whids' as the words or set phrases used by Cheap Johns in disposing of their articles are called, are very much alike, as one copies from another" (pp.21-2).

SURVEYS THROUGH NEWSPAPERS

TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP - RESEARCH GUIDE 4

One good way of contacting people who remember folk plays and other customs is to make enquiries through local newspapers and magazines. This can be done by sending a request for information to the letters column, or by writing articles which include a similar request. Most T.D.R.G. members have done this at some time, and this Guide is based on a discussion of experiences held at the T.D.R.G. meeting in February 1982.

PLANNING

Initially, you need to decide which area or town you wish to cover. Check if any body else may also be planning to contact newspapers in the area, in order to avoid a conflict of interests. C.E.C.T.A.L.'s annual register of research in the U.K. & Northern Ireland - "Folklore Research 19..." - will help you find out who these people may be.

Selecting Newspapers & Periodicals

Details of newspapers and magazines, and their publishers' names and addresses can be located using the following sources, which should be available in your local reference library :-

- (a) "Yellow Pages" provide a fairly rudimentary list of local newspapers under the heading "Newspaper & Periodical Publishers". This naturally concentrates more on the publishers and their telephone numbers, than on their journals and addresses.
- (b) "Willing's Press Guide", published annually by Thomas Skinner Directories, gives a detailed alphabetical list of all British Newspapers and Magazines. In addition, there is an index to newspapers arranged by County and Town, and there are other useful listings in the classified index under "Local News & Advertisements" and "Rural Life and Country".
- (c) "Benn's Press Directory : Vol.1 : U.K. Media", also published annually, by Benn Publications, gives a detailed list newspapers arranged under town, with a county index.

Besides local and national newspapers, free advertising newspapers, industrial staff journals, 'County' magazines, Club and Society newsletters, Diocesan and Parish magazines, etc., have also proved useful. Some of these are unlikely to be listed in the sources detailed above, but can often be found in local library magazine racks.

WHAT TO WRITE

If your letter or article is published at all, do not be surprised if the printed version differs from what you wrote. Editors always reserve the right to chop and change. The following points should help you get your item published, with the minimum of editorial changes, whilst also encouraging a large response from readers. (See Example 1)

Headlines

Always give a heading which can be used as a headline. The chances are that the editor will ignore it, but at least it should give the right idea. Keep it short. Most newspaper headlines have only 4 to 6 words.

The headline can make or break the enquiry. Headlines which include common local terminology (e.g. "Do you remember the Guisers?") are likely to get a better response than general ones (e.g. "Centuries old Custom Fading from Memory"). Questions can be particularly effective headlines.

The Text

Content can be crucial. The text should give enough information to be interesting and to stimulate replies, but not so much that informants repeat what you have written rather than what they actually remember.

Briefly describe the custom, and slant the wording of the item to provide a local connection. For instance mention the most usual local time of performance, local places, common local names for the participants, custom, etc. Say why you are doing the survey, what information you want, and what will happen to the replies, especially if you intend to publish them. On the other hand, avoid any speculative interpretations of the custom's function, origins, etc. These can put people off, and you may be planting wrong ideas into people's minds.

The length of the text is important. Too brief, and it may make no impact. Too long, and not only may it fall foul of the editor's blue pencil, but also people may be put off reading it. Letters should ideally be about 200 words. Articles can be longer.

Photographs

Where possible, including a captioned photograph with your piece is a good idea. Editors look favourably on "photo stories", and of course they catch the reader's eye. On the other hand, ensure the text and the captioned photograph are each self-contained, in case only one of them is used.

To ensure good reproduction, photographs should ideally have good light/dark contrast, and should be gloss prints. Some publishers will not return photos, so only send spare prints. Say in your covering letter if you want the photo back, and a stamped & addressed envelope may do the trick.

Reply Addresses

The address you give for replies is another factor which can affect the number of returns you receive. The number of replies tends to decrease the further away your address is from the place of publication. You may have friends or relatives in the distant areas who will let you use their address for correspondence.

People prefer to reply to a private address rather than to an institution or organisation. Also, include your telephone number if you are on the phone. Some people will ring on the spur of the moment rather than write. Some can't write (e.g. because of arthritis).

In any case, some people will write to the editor, and their letters may be published in later issues.

Finally, if you are contributing to several publications at the same time, vary your address so you can tell which journal was read. For instance add or omit; county names, post codes, letters in house numbers, etc. But, don't rely on punctuation differences.

If possible, type the contribution. In the case of articles, you will also need to include a covering letter for the editor.

If you want to submit to several publications then you could send copies of the same item to each. However, an editor may decide not to publish your item if he sees it published first by the competition. Also, informants may hold your request in less esteem if they see it printed identically in several places. It is better to have several versions of your request.

In many areas, the same company owns several newspapers. Branch offices contribute local news, whilst the head office is often responsible for general or feature articles, which are used by all their papers. It is generally advisable to write to all the relevant local offices (even if they are all the same address) rather than just the head office.

Timing

Timing your submission can be important. There is perhaps a greater chance that your item will be published, and a greater chance that it will prompt readers' memories if you send it at the appropriate season. On the other hand, avoid the busiest periods by aiming for publication either a week or two before, or immediately after the main festival.

With daily and weekly publications, submit your item the week before you would like it to appear. With less frequent periodicals, submit at least two months before. In a covering letter, you could perhaps ask for your item to be considered for a particular issue - e.g. a Christmas special.

Was it Published ?

If you do not live locally, you may not be able to tell easily if your letter or article was published. You could ask the editor to send you a copy of the issue, but even if you send money, stamped wrappers, etc., there is no guarantee that you will get one. This is because distribution and editorial departments are often not linked administratively.

If you vary your reply address (see above) you may be able to tell from your replies which publications your item actually appeared in.

TYPICAL RESULTS

Most replies arrive during the fortnight immediately after publication. Later replies may come from people living outside the area, even from emigrants overseas. Don't forget that some people may have written to the editor, so it wise to contact the editor two weeks after publication, and check subsequent issues for published replies.

It is impossible to predict the number of replies you will get, if any. Six or more replies from any one printing is good. Most will not say very much, but may nonetheless provide new snippets of information. Some replies are likely to describe revival sides, and you may also hear from other collectors. You might receive replies relating to outside your own area of interest, in which case you should try to pass copies on to researchers who are interested.

Follow Up

Acknowledge every reply, preferably with a personal letter. The correspondent may know a great deal more. If you write requesting further information and/or for permission to publish, include a stamped & addressed envelope. Some people may not be willing to enter into correspondence.

Ideally informants should be visited and interviewed, but try not call on them unannounced. If this is unavoidable, then call to arrange a convenient date, rather than expect an immediate interview.

It does not hurt to thank the editor for publishing your item. If you include a summary of the replies in your letter, this too may be published. This may prompt further replies, especially if you mention remaining unanswered questions. (See Example 2).

Repeat Surveys

Responses are likely to tail off with too frequent enquiries. A second enquiry twelve months after the first will often catch the people who nearly replied before. However, it is not a bad idea to give the publication a rest for a few years afterwards. Remember other researchers want to make queries too.

EXAMPLES

The following letters were published in "Derbyshire Insight", a newspaper published by Derbyshire County Council, and delivered free to every house in Derbyshire. The first of the letters was published just after Christmas 1983.

No.1 - Example of a Successful Letter

(Derbyshire Insight,
Winter 1984, No.5, pp.6 a)

No.2 - And Its Follow-Up

(Derbyshire Insight
April 1984, No.6, pp.2 b-c)

Christmas custom

I wonder if you might spare me some space in your 'Letterbox' columns in the cause of researching part of Derbyshire's traditional heritage — the old custom of 'guising' or 'mumming' at Christmas.

The Christmas 'guisers' used to visit houses and pubs, in disguise and sometimes with blacked faces, to entertain the people inside, either with some songs and music or with a traditional play (with characters like 'King George' and 'Beelzebub'). In some areas similar customs took place on Plough Monday (nearest to 6th January), All Souls Day (November 1st) or at Easter.

Sadly, most of these customs died out before World War I, although many older people still have memories of the 'guisers' or 'mummers'. During the past three years I have been attempting to record people's recollections of these old Derbyshire customs and I would be grateful to hear from any readers who remember the 'Guisers' or who have been told about them by older relatives or friends. Any memory is of value, however small, as it can indicate that the custom was performed in a particular village, even if few details are remembered.

David Bathe
257 Starkholmes Road
Matlock
Derbyshire

Guising

You may like to know that a number of people were kind enough to reply to my enquiry about 'guising' and 'mumming' in the Winter Insight. I cannot mention everyone, of course, but among those who sent me their interesting and valuable memories of these old customs, was 84-year-old Mrs. Ada Handley who remembers the 'guisers' calling at her father's pub, the Forester's Arms in Borrowwash.

In Bolsover, 63 years ago, Mrs. G. Stocks used to perform a mumming play with her two brothers. They used to earn a 'tidy sum' to brighten their Christmas!

Mr. W. Bennett and Mr. G. Broomhead sent me two splendid versions of the 'Derby Tup' from Chesterfield and Sheffield.

If anyone does remember these old customs or has further memories of guising or mumming elsewhere in Derbyshire, I would be very pleased to hear from them.

My thanks again to those people who have already kindly written to me and to Insight for helping with my research.

DAVID BATHE
257 Starkholmes Road
Matlock.

St. GEORGE & the DRAGON.



WH^Y should we boast of Arthur and his knights,
Knowing how many men performed fights,
Or why should we speak of Sir Lancelot du Lake,
Or Sir Tristan? Drulyon that fought for lady's sake,
Read old stories, and there you will see,
How St. George, St. George, he made the dragon free.

CHORUS.

St. George he was for England;—St. Dennis was for France,
And sing:—“**HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE.**”

To speak of monarchs, it were too long to tell,
Likewise of the Romans, how far they did excel,
Hannibal, a Scipio, in many a fight,
Orlando Tortoso, he was a valiant knight.

Romulus and Remus, were those that Rome did build,
But St. Geo. St. Geo. the dragon he has kill'd.—CHORUS. St. Geo. &c.

Valentine and Orson they came of King Pippin's blood,
Sir Alfred and AleRick, they were brave knights, and good,
The four sons of Ammon that fought for Charlemain,
Sir Hugh de Bourdeaux, and Sir Godfrey de Bulloin,
These were French knights, the Pagans did convert,
But St. George, St. George, pull'd out the dragons heart.—CHORUS.

Jephthah and Gideon they led their men to fight,
The Ammonites and Gideonites they put all to the flight,
Cerculus, his labour was in a vale of brass,
And Sampson slew ten thousand with the jaw-bone of an ass:
And when he was blind he pull'd the temple down,
But St. George, St. George, the dragon did confound.—CHORUS.

Henry the fifth he conquer'd all France,
He quarter'd his arms, his honour to advance,
He raised the walls, and he pull'd the cities down,
And garnish'd his head with a double tripple crown:
He thumped the French, and after home he came,
But St. George, St. George, the dragon he made tame.—CHORUS.

St. David you know loves leeks and toasted cheese,
And Jason was the man that brought home the golden fleece,
St. Patrick you know he was St. George's boy,
Seven years he kept his horse and then stole him away:
For which knavish act a slave he doth remain,
But St. George, St. George, he hath the dragon slain.—CHORUS.

Tamerlain the emperor in an iron cage was crown'd,
With his bloody flag displayed before the town,
Skanderburgh, and Magnanimus, Mahomets bashavs did dread,
Whose victorious bones was borne when he was dead:

William, so fam'd, the Conqueror he was call'd,
But St. George, St. George, the dragon he has maul'd.—CHORUS.

Pendragon and Cadwaladar of British blood do boast,
Tho' John of Gaunt his foes did daunt, St. Geo. did rule the roast,
Haggemmon and Cleomedes and Massedon did feats,
But to be compar'd to our champions they are but merely cheats:

Brave Malta knights in Turkish fights, their brandish'd swords drew,
But St. George, St. George, thrust the dragon through & through,
Ottoman the Tartar, he came of Persia's race,
The great Mogul with his chest full of cloves and mace,

The Grecian youth Bucephalus, did manfully bestride,
But these with the worthy nine, St. George he did deride,
Gustavius Adaulphus, was Sweden's warlike king,
But St. George, St. George, pull'd out the dragon's sting.—CHORUS.

Mark Anthony, I'll warrant ye, play'd feats with Egypt's queen,
Sir Egmore, the valiant knight, the like was never seen,
Grim Gorgan's might was known in fight, old Beves most men frighted,
The Mirme Dons and Presto Johns, why were not these men knighted?

Brave Spinalaw took in Breedshaw, Nosson did it recover,
But St. George, St. George, turn'd the dragon over and over.
Bedean the Amazon, Pœtat overthrew,
As fierce as either Vandal, Goth, Sarisan, or Jew,

The potent Olofernes, as he lay in his bed,
In came wise Judith and stole away his head,
With Jove, the Cyclops, though he shower'd down thunder,
But St. George the dragon kill'd, and was not that a wonder.

J. TURNER, PRINTER, HIGH STREET, COVENTRY.

TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP - GUIDES

Included as part of this issue of Roomer is a copy of the fourth Traditional Drama Research Group Guide: Surveys Through Newspapers devised by Derek Schofield, Peter Millington and Dave Bathe. Although it has been prepared with traditional drama in mind, the guide will also be of relevance to other areas of folklore research.

Guides currently available:

1. Basic Questions to Ask by Peter Millington
2. Biographies by Paul Smith
3. Tracing Photographs by Paul Smith
4. Surveys Through Newspapers by Derek Schofield, Peter Millington and Dave Bathe

Forthcoming guides include:

Bibliographic References by Peter Millington

Copies of these guides are available, on receipt of an A4 s.a.e, from Traditional Drama Research Group, c/o Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN.

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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:

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