

ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional
Drama Research Group.

Vol. 6 no.1 1986



'TRADITIONAL DRAMA STUDIES': A NEW JOURNAL

Paul Smith and J D A Widdowson

Traditional drama has been a major focus of research for British Folklorists since the late nineteenth century, and considerable time and effort have been spent by scholars in the field. The primary focus of much of this research has until recently been to document the occurrence of traditional plays and, following the route of historical determinism, has attempted to explain their existence in terms of origin theory. Similarly, much discussion has concentrated on reconstructing the source of the actions of the plays in religious rituals of prehistory.

Over the past twenty years, however, criticism has been levelled at both the employment of such an abstract, unsubstantiated theory and at the total neglect of any aspect of the performance of plays. This criticism has in turn fostered an expansion of research in traditional drama studies at all levels and pure dissatisfaction with precedent has led to the development of several alternative orientations in the scholarship. These alternative approaches range from the literary and statistical analysis of textual relationships and studies of performance in context, to the development of an indexing scheme and archive for traditional drama materials. In relative terms this growth in scholarship has been well out of proportion to other areas of folklore studies in the United Kingdom, and many new ideas and vital areas of research have begun to be explored.

Unfortunately, little of this valuable research has yet been published. For example, the first annual Traditional Drama Conference was organised back in 1978. This one-day meeting on aspects of current scholarship in the area of traditional drama was sponsored by the Division of Continuing Education and The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield. It was hoped at the time that the papers given at this and subsequent conferences would be published shortly after they were presented. However, lack of financial support meant that this goal could not be realised, and very few of the papers read at the eight conferences held so far have yet been published.

Without doubt, this situation has been detrimental to the subject as a whole by curtailing public debate of relevant issues. Perhaps more importantly, however, it has helped to maintain the outdated perception of traditional drama as a subject which has little to offer folklorists today.

In the spring of 1985, we determined to find a way to break this deadlock and to publish the backlog of conference papers as soon as possible. In addition, we wanted to provide a more public platform for the continuing work in the subject.

Producing the material as a book appeared to be an obvious solution, but again financial support could not be found and such a venture did not appear to be cost-effective. It was finally decided that the solution to the problem was to establish a new journal, Traditional Drama Studies, designed to cater for the needs of all individuals interested in this area of study. It is hoped that the journal will not only quickly make available copies of past conference papers, but also provide a forum for many more unpublished research studies which need to be more widely known if the field is to continue to develop.

The first volume of Traditional Drama Studies, appeared towards the end of 1985 and was published jointly by The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language and the Traditional Drama Research Group. This issue contains five papers - four of which were originally presented at the 1978 Conference, and the fifth comprising a short introductory editorial essay.

Taken together, the papers represent a wide range of new approaches to the subject. The topics covered include an examination of the theoretical premises which shape the study of the genre, examinations of contemporary performances and a critical application of some alternative analytical techniques. As such, these essays demonstrate the range of theory and methodology which is now being used to further our understanding of this aspect of our traditional culture.

In more detail, the papers in this first volume are as follows:

'The Chapbook and the Pace Egg Play in Rochdale', in which P. Stevenson and G. Buckley describe the Pace Egg tradition in a Lancashire industrial town, where chapbooks and other printed texts have been used by almost every known team from the turn of the century to the present day. The discussion centres on the way in which the tradition has altered over the years, and the part that the printed texts have played in this change. An exploration of two distinct traditions follows. Firstly, Pace Egg plays as performed in the streets by children in Rochdale from early in this century up to the Second World War. This includes an examination of the Edwards and Bryning chapbook, and of the fact that very few references to the plays occur before 1900. The second tradition examined is that of the plays as organised by schools and other institutions up to the present day. This section is mainly concerned with the Balderstone School play and the Priestnall and Mitchell text. An analysis of the differences between these two distinct types of tradition shows that it is the institutionalisation of the latter which is the distinguishing factor, and not the use of printed texts. Ultimately, however, despite the fact that there are two types of play and two different printed texts, all of them are of equal importance to the study of traditional drama.

The paper by Georgina Boyes, '"Excellent Examples": The Influence of Exemplar Texts on Traditional Drama Scholarship', surveys the ninety year history of scholarship in the field of traditional drama and reveals that a handful of abnormal texts have had a disproportionate influence on researchers' interpretations of the form and function of traditional plays. Following from this, the paper reassesses the place of these exemplar plays in traditional drama as a whole, and suggests an alternative view of plays - treating each as being of equal importance.

Peter Harrop's paper, 'A Diachronic Approach to Folk Drama Performance', stresses the necessity of a performance orientation in understanding extant traditions of Folk Drama while offering a critique of the 'new folkloristics' exclusivity of perspective. If we accept the need for better documentation of traditions as 'total behavioural events', then a working methodology needs to be constructed. A discussion is presented of one such methodology developed from the author's fieldwork in three centres: Antrobus, Bampton and Ripon, which relates contemporary form and function in terms of the dramatic event while stressing the need for a diachronic perspective.

In his study of 'The Problems of Analysis of Traditional Play Texts: A Taxonomic Approach', Paul Smith considers that one of the major problems with the analysis of traditional play texts is in finding a method of quantifying the similarity of any pair of texts. The paper sets out one possible approach to this problem, using cluster analysis techniques, and illustrates the method adopted by producing a taxonomic classification of sixteen T'Owd Tup play texts - the analysis being concerned with spatio/temporal distribution of traditional plays. The resulting discussion critically examines the application of this method of analysis in terms of testing hypotheses regarding the nature of relationships between the texts.

The second volume of Traditional Drama Studies will be available later in 1986 and will include papers from the 1978 and 1979 conferences.

Future volumes will include a further fourteen papers from past conferences. However, as already indicated, we are also actively seeking for publication articles that are currently coming to fruition, and anyone who wishes to submit material for consideration, or who would like further information, is urged to contact the editors at The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language.

Traditional Drama research is already served by a newsletter, Roomer, which is published by the Traditional Drama Research Group and is designed to cater for the more immediate needs of scholarship by publishing notes and news, queries and shorter pieces. It is hoped that between Traditional Drama Studies and Roomer there will be sufficient opportunity for communication at all levels which such a thriving field of study deserves.

For subscription details, please write to The Publications Secretary, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, Sheffield. S10 2TN. (Tel: 0742 768555, Ext.6296).

FRAGMENTS FROM HASTINGS, SUSSEX [TQ 8109]

[Frederick E. Sawyer, 'Sussex "Tipteerers"' Play', Folk-Lore Journal II (1884) pp.1-8. Most of the article concerns the Steyning play, but pp.1-2 has the following on Hastings:]

"The play [from Steyning] is probably a corruption of "The Seven Champions of Christendom" as is shown by the following note kindly furnished by James Rock, Esq. (fn. Of Tonbridge, but who formerly resided at Hastings):- "Within my recollection a party of mummers used to go about the streets of Hastings performing 'The Seven Champions of Christendom'. Of this play I only remember that one of the performers stepped forward saying, 'I am St. George for England'; another then said, 'I am St. Denis for France', whereupon a terrific combat ensued. Sword-dances were also performed, in which the dancers tripped about between swords laid on the ground. Something of the same kind is, or was lately, practised by boys at Christmas-time in the village of Hollington, near Hastings. The party asked permission to enter the houses, and performed their rude play in the entrance-hall" .

[Collection Stephen Roud/Paul Marsh: extract from tape FC 24, visit to Mrs. Stone, at Solent Mead Old People's Home, Lymington, Hants., 16.10.1977]

"...Christmas, used to go through the public houses wasn't it?"

[Did you ever see them?]

Yes

[Where was that?]

In Hastings - in fact they used to be at the public house [where she lived] - when they came - 'course it was night-time and it used to be three or four of them - one was

dressed as a yokel, you know - a country yokel, and one used to be a sailor - he used to wear the [frock? or smock?] and the white and the straw hat, and there was Father Christmas, and 'course they used to have their [bats??] and their lanterns tied to these, very, of course it was very very old-fashioned

[How long ago was it?]

Oh it's, it's been years since I saw them, it would have been - what - I'm 94 now and I left Hastings when I was about 16, but it was before that....They used to say

Here comes I old Father Christmas
Am I welcome or am I not

I remember that bit - I can't remember a lot more - because they used to get turned out of the pub - Mother used to say "Go on, this isn't the place for you", because it was a rough and tumble lot, proper rough and tumble

[What was the name of the pub?]

Oh - we had it long enough, I ought to remember - 'course in them days Hastings was nothing else but a fishing village - they used to keep open all night, the pubs, the boats going in and out...it was in a little side way, alley-way - and next to it was a coal office, and a big fish market....I know it was the something 'Return'...".

[Extract from a letter to Alex Helm from Mervyn Plunkett, dated 24.5.1959]

"....In 1956 I was informed by Mr. Price of St. John's, Crowborough, that he had often seen the Tip-Teerers in Hastings in his youth. They were all masked with "half-masks" - there were about eight of them and they included a man-woman who rode about on a hobby-horse and "In comes I Johnny Sweep, and what I has I means to keep" was all he remembered of the text. Johnny Sweep had a broom and cleared the space with it (presumably before the action)".

[Stephen Roud/Paul Marsh Collection]

"Information from Paul Humber of Romsey (one of the Winchester Morris Men), 8.1.1979. A woman neighbour of Paul's states that her father, uncles (and brothers?) were all members of the Hastings Mummers, their surname being Booth. There were usually five or six of the family in it".

MECHANICAL DRAMA

[From Charles Manby Smith, Curiosities of London Life (London: W. & F.G.Cash, 1853), part of an extensive description of 'Music Grinders of the Metropolis'. The piece had previously been published anonymously in Chambers's Edinburgh Journal Vol.17 (1851), pp.196-201, under the same title].

"The handcart-organists are a race of a very different and more enterprising character, and of much more lofty and varied pretensions. They generally travel in firms of two, three, or even four partners, drawing the cart by turns. Their equipage consists of an organ of very complicated construction, containing, besides a deal of very marvellous machinery within its entrails, a collection of bells, drums, triangles, gongs, and cymbals, in addition to the usual quantity of pipes and metal-reeds that go to make up the travelling organ. The music they play is of a species which it is not very easy to describe, as it is not once in a hundred times that a stranger can detect the melody through the clash and clangor of the gross amount of brass, steel, and bell-metal put in vibration by the machinery. This, however, is of very little consequence, as it is not the music in particular which forms the principal attraction; if it serve to pull a crowd together, that is sufficient for their purpose; and it is for this reason, we imagine, that the effect of the whole is contrived to resemble, as it very closely does, the hum and jangle of Greenwich Fair when heard of an Easter Monday from the summit of Observatory Hill. No, the main attraction is essentially dramatic. In front of the great chest of heterogeneous sounds there is a stage about five or six feet in width,

four in height, and perhaps eighteen inches or two feet in depth. Upon this are a variety of figures, about fourteen inches long, gorgeously arrayed in crimson, purple, emerald-green, blue, and orange draperies, and loaded with gold and tinsel, and sparkling stones and spangles, all doubled in splendour by the reflection of a mirror in the background. The figures, set in motion by the same machinery which grinds the incomprehensible overture, perform a drama equally incomprehensible. At the left-hand corner is Daniel in the lion's den, the lion opening his mouth in six-eighth time, and an angel with outspread wings, but securely trans-fixed through the loins by a revolving brass pivot, shutting it again to the same lively movement.

To the right of Daniel is the Grand Turk, seated in his divan, and brandishing a dagger over a prostrate slave, who only ventures to rise when the dagger is withdrawn. Next to him is Nebuchadnezzar on all fours, eating painted grass, with a huge gold crown on his head, which he bobs for a bite every other bar. In the right-hand corner is a sort of cavern; the abode of some supernatural and mysterious being of the fiend or vampire school, who gives an occasional fitful start, and turns an ominous-looking green-glass eye out upon the spectators. All these are in the background.

In the front of the stage stands Napoleon, wearing a long sword and a cocked hat, and the conventional grey smalls - his hand of course stuck in his breast. At his right are Tippoo Saib and his sons, and at his left, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. After a score or so of bars, the measure of the music suddenly alters - Daniel's guardian angel flies off - the prophet and the lion lie down to sleep together - the Grand Turk sinks into the arms of the death-doomed slave - Nebuchadnezzar falls prostrate on the ground, and the fiend in the gloomy cavern whips suddenly round and glares with his green eye, as if watching for a spring upon the from row of actors, who have now taken up their cue and commenced their performance.

Napoleon, Tippoo Saib, and Queen Victoria dance a three-handed reel, to the admiration of Prince Albert and a group of lords and ladies in waiting, who nod their heads approvingly - when br'r'r! crack! at a tremendous crash of gongs and grumbling of bass-notes, the fiend in the corner rushes forth from his lair with a portentous howl. Away, neck or nothing, flies Napoleon, and Tippoo scampers after him, followed by the terrified attendants; but lo! at the precise nick of time, Queen Victoria draws a long sword from beneath her stays, while up jumps the devouring beast from the den of the prophet, and like a true British lion - as he doubtless was all the while - flies at the throat of the fiend, straight as an arrow to its mark. Then follows a roar of applause from the discriminating spectators, amidst which the curtain falls, and, with an extra flourish of music, the collection of copper coin commences.

This is always a favourite spectacle with the multitude, who never bother themselves about such trifles as anachronisms and unities; and the only difficulty the managers have to overcome in order to insure a remunerative exhibition is, that of finding a quiet locality, which shall yet be sufficiently frequented to insure them an audience. There are equipages of this description of very various pretensions and perfection, but they all combine the allurements of music and the drama in a greater or less degree".

PUBLICATIONS NEWS

John C. Coldewey, "Plays and 'Play' in Early English Drama", Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama XXVIII (1985) 181-188.

Aurelio M. Espinosa, "Traditional Spanish Religious Folk Drama in New Mexico" and "Spanish Secular Folk Drama in New Mexico", in J. Manuel Espinosa (ed.) - Aurelio M. Espinosa, The Folklore of Spain in The American Southwest: Traditional Spanish Folk Literature in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) pp.201-213, 214-228, 266-269.

Ronald L. Grimes, Beginnings in Ritual Studies (Landam: University Press of America, 1982).

TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1986A ONE DAY INFORMAL SEMINAR ON ASPECTS OF CURRENT TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH

Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield
SATURDAY, 6th DECEMBER, 1986

Since the first Traditional Drama Conference back in 1978 we have always wished to increase the amount of informal discussion on this vibrant area of folklore research. To this end, it has been decided that the 1986 meeting will be formatted as a seminar with more discussion sessions and a minimum of formal papers.

Similarly, we wish to expand further the varieties of topics covered and, consequently, we would like individuals interested in presenting papers or discussion sessions to submit a title and short abstract no later than 30th September 1986.

The 1986 meeting will be held in the Centre's main buildings at 5 Palmerston Road, Sheffield 10 - not at the venue used previously. Because of the seminar format, places will be limited - if you wish to attend please request a booking form as soon as possible.

For further information regarding the seminar contact:

Paul Smith, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language,
The University of Sheffield, Sheffield. S10 2TN (Tel: 0742-768555, Ext.6296)

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

ISSN 0262-4095

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, 18 Amberley Grove, Addiscombe, Surrey. CR0 6ND (01-654-6233)
Paul Smith, Laburnum House, Main Street, West Stockwith, Doncaster. DN10 4HB (0427-890042)

The views expressed by the contributors to Roomer are not necessarily those of the editors or of the Traditional Drama Research Group. © 1986 The Authors