

# ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional  
Drama Research Group.  
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NORFOLK CHRONICLE - Top 29.10.1904, others 29.12.1894.

## CHRISTMAS EVE IN DEVONSHIRE.

WITH AN ILLUSTRATION BY STOCKDALE.

CHRISTMAS is a season when the heart of man is evidently enlarged by sympathies of hospitality towards his fellow-creatures, in providing good cheer for himself and those whom Fortune has less favoured. Nowhere is this more substantially realised than amongst the farmers of Devon, who also preserve forms and ceremonies which the march of intellect has swept from other places. Ourselves wishing to see some of the sports in which our forefathers revelled, stepped over on Christmas Eve to Farmer B.'s. Passing the village, we were surprised at the silence prevailing; but an old woman cleared the mystery, by saying, "All the folk be up at the farm;" and, approaching this, the loud laugh and cheering light streaming through the chequered glass—making more dark the dull cold night without—told of a warm reception within. Entering the kitchen, amidst steam reeking from huge rounds of beef, joints of pork, heaps of turnips and potatoes, with puddings of monster rotundity, we discovered the burly host dealing out with unsparing hand to gladden the hearts of his lusty labourers. And truly, each seemed possessed of an appetite equal to the occasion—and, we trust, with powers of digestion such as we dyspeptics know of but by hearsay. Cider also flowed abundantly; and we felt that this meal to the man who receives but 6s. or 7s. a week as wages, must have proved a feast on which he could dwell with a satisfying delight. We could not but consider that the scene before us disproved the landlords' assertion so frequently made, and responded to by the gallant yeomen, "that the farmers are in a starving condition;" nor could we see that our host's provisions enjoyed protection, for all seemed to make free-trade with them.

"Bring in the fagot!"

"Behold him here!"

Fagots, like most other things, are by many in these parts termed of the masculine distinction.

"Clear the way!"

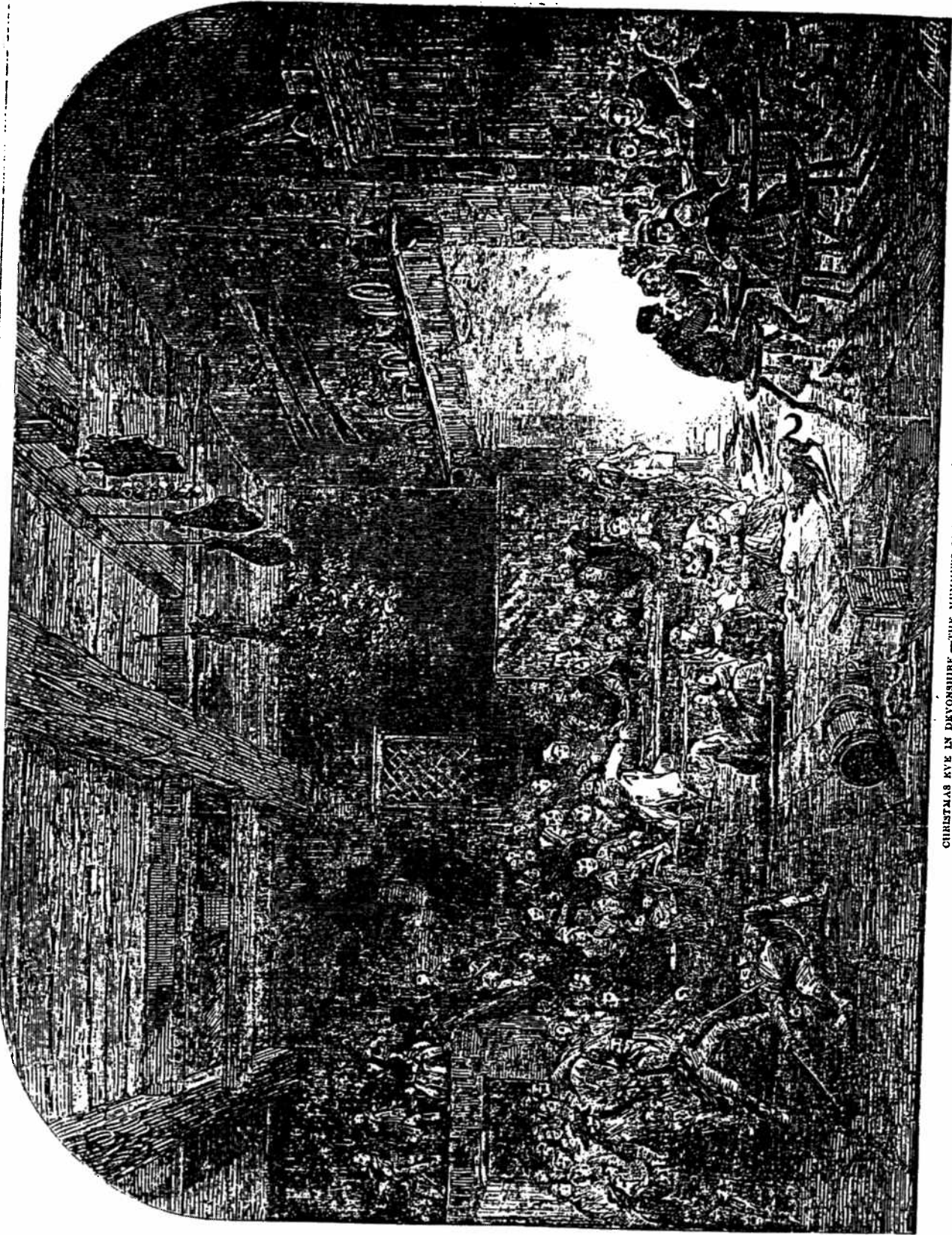
Now the ash-mass of 3 cwt. is raised on the dogs of the hearth, and in a few minutes the blaze from the scissing, crackling sticks,

heightened the ruddy hue of the rustic guests. Song succeeded song and when one presented more stupidity than another, shouts of laughter and bravos applauded to the skies. Now and then a fine voice broke upon the ear, leading us to regret that it was possessed by those whose souls had never been attuned to harmony. Many of their tunes were of the old English ballad class, and charmed us, not only as beings of the past, but having beauty in melody. Our hostess singing the song of "Barbara Allen," awakened the memory to emotions of the past; for we had listened to this song on a similar festivity, now thirty years ago. Then rapid, rolling flood—O Time! where hast thou borne those lips that sang, those ears that listened, those hearts that warmed with ours, leaving us alone to live again the associate scene?

Hark! what shout is that on which confusion seizes all—men, women, and children, rushing pell-mell, scrambling to the highest bench—"The mummings are coming, hurrah! The mummings are coming, hurrah!" And then entered six or seven youths fantastically bedecked with ribbons, and gay, antiquated garments, ransacked from the bureaux of the grand-dames; here and there, a new bright silken bow, worn as a favour from their own dear Marys. Space being cleared, the play representing the unconquerable of Old England partially attracted the attention of the noisy audience. A warrior, lip corked *à la moustache*, personating the ambitious Napoleon, is brought to encounter St. George, who, after a fierce encounter, lays the vaunting Gallic dead upon the earth, the walls echoing the boisterous applause that greets his downfall. However, by the interposition of old Father Christmas, he is restored, to partake again of the season's blessings.

Near this point our Sketch is taken. At the right are seated those whose hunger craves relief, which the farmer's wife is labouring to accord. Facing are they who, with their senses quickened by the juice of apple, shout at the valiant heroes. Inclining against the chimney, behold the farmer watching to supply the wants of any of his friends. Beneath are placed a group of children, whose minds are wondering at so strange a sight. The old sheep-dog, from custom, appears a complacent observer; whilst the younger one barks at the quaint intruders. Above the door the fiddlers three add discord to the din; and from confusion worse confounded we gladly made a retreat.

S.



CHRISTMAS EVE IN DEVONSHIRE.—THE MUMMERS COMING IN.—(SEE PAGE 498.)

## CORRESPONDENCE

From Dr. E.C.Cawte, 51 Station Road, Ibstock, Leicester LE6 1JL.

A few notes arise from Roamer 5:5 (1985):

### KENT PLAYS

Reference to the Play Index in the Helm Collection would show that the R.C.Adams collection was not communicated to Alex Helm, but to me. To save any fruitless search the letters are now at QNS149-56 and 160-4. The Snodland information, from his father-in-law, is at 149 and 151.

### BEMBRIDGE, ISLE OF WIGHT

R.C.Adams was listed on his own, because he went out of his way to obtain information, on my insistence. This was an exception to the general rule which Alex Helm insisted on because he did the typing, that such 'probably to be lost' collections should be listed as HelC and so on. (See ERD p.20). Therefore there is no indication in the publication, though once again it is in the Play Index, that the CawC text from Bembridge was also from Frank O'B. Adams. He was unrelated to, and unacquainted with, R.C.Adams. Mr. Frank O'B. Adams wrote to me twice in 1964; the Roud text agrees with mine, almost word for word, except that I have King George for Saint George, and Johnny Jack's two pieces of text are reversed. There is more text, though not complete. He also described the dress, listed the songs sung with the play, and said that the text was learned from a gardener named Butler, then aged about 50, who probably came from Bembridge. (Cawte collection QNS 157-9).

### STUART PIGGOTT COLLECTION

Chambers acknowledges the collections of Stuart Piggott and Douglas Kennedy, with others, in The English Folk Play (p.3). I have heard it suggested that Douglas Kennedy wrote, or wrote part of, this book, though I believe he has denied it. If anyone can contact him he might know about the E.K.Chambers collection. Chambers died in 1954 so there should be younger people who also know about his work and life.

In the same line, can anyone locate the Eden collection of texts? Some are printed in Folk-Lore LIX (1948) pp.16-34, but there are some ambiguities as to sources which are not cleared by the Eden correspondence in the Ordish papers. My enquiries were unsuccessful.

From Craig Fees, New Barns School, Church Lane, Toddington, Glos. GL54 5DH.

Carl Willetts, in Roamer 5:5 (1985) says of a recent revival script of the Milton Regis play:

"This copy may be of use as a performing version but contains too many alterations including some mis-readings to be considered for serious study".

I take his point that it may not be helpful in studying the text and the earlier tradition that the revival text is based on. But it does offer us a beautiful opportunity for some serious research.

We know that doctoring and improving a text can be a characteristic feature of a living tradition (cf. C.Fees, 'Return to Snowhill', Traditional Drama Conference 1984); even an extreme variation in texts is therefore not an indication of a break in the mumming tradition. It would be good to establish if there is any connection of family or friendship between the 'revival' mummers and the earlier mummers.

If there isn't, and if there is not, therefore, licence within the community for changing the received text, it is still worth serious study to find out why these particular changes were made and by whom - from the source's mouth. Most of the texts we have from the 19th century are, or may well have been, 'improved' in some way, and if we can establish through recent revivals what the rules are for this changing (a la Discourse Theory), then it may be possible to reconstruct something like the texts we are missing. This requires taking the revivalists very seriously indeed, which is something we shy away from because they are in so many ways familiar to us, and perhaps reflect sides of ourselves that we have steered away from. If we're going to understand mumming, we're going to have to take these modern changes seriously, and penetrate through the familiarity to whatever abstract and universal laws may be operating. That is, we will have to accept that our culture can tell us something about culture at the turn of the century, and the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, unless we have stepped entirely outside the functions and processes of human history, a close and serious analysis of what revivalists have done with older traditions, and within the context of their own culture (or within our own culture), ought to tell us a great deal about every period of human culture change. For example, it might tell us something about the Celtic revival of the late Roman period, after a long period of Roman domination. Which brings us to the Romano-Celtic theatres of northern France and southern Britain, about which more some other time. But do they indicate a pre- or post-Roman folk-tradition of theatre in Western Europe? It's that kind of question that a serious study of revival texts and sides may help us to answer.

## PUBLICATIONS NEWS

Roly Brown, 'Mummers in West Berkshire 1897-1927: Work in Progress - Three 'New' Locations', Downs Miscellany 3:2 (Dec. 1985), pp.2-12.

Dave Bathe, 'The Cold Ash Mummer's Play', Downs Miscellany 3:2 (Dec. 1985), pp.13-17.

Roy Porter, 'Before the Fringe: Quack Medicine in Georgian England', History Today (Nov.1986), pp.16-22.

Tony Wales, A Sussex Garland (Newbury, Countryside Books, 1986 - previously published by Godfrey Cave, 1979). Includes text of Fittleworth, Sussex, play collected from George Attrill; pp.104-108.

Jean La Fontaine, Initiation: Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge Across the World (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985).

Peter Davison, Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England (London: Macmillan, 1982).

Regina Bendix, Progress and Nostalgia: Silvesterklausen in Urnasch, Switzerland (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1985. Folklore & Mythology Series Vol.33).

["Twice a year, the male inhabitants of the small village of Urnasch in eastern Switzerland disguise themselves in various costumes. Thus decorated and supporting harnesses with heavy bells, they walk in groups from house to house, and at each house where they are received, they sing three wordless yodels. The custom is called 'Silvesterklausen'... They perform on New Year's Eve and on January 13..."].

## REVIEW

Ancient and Mediaeval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook by Ronald W. Vince (Westwood, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 1984).

Reviewed by CRAIG FEES [A shorter version of this review appeared in Lore and Language 4:2 (1985) pp.126-7].

Traditional Drama Studies has made a break from Folk Drama Studies but is not yet aware of the implications of this break for Theatre History.

Folk Drama Studies is not exactly at the vital heart of Theatre History. Folk Drama itself, on the other hand, is. In Theatre History, 'folk drama' is a blanket category for everything that lies between ritual and written drama. It makes Theatre History possible: 'folk drama' is the no-man's zone between the different eras of Western Drama. Eliminate 'folk drama' and minstrels will tumble into actors, Old Europeans will anticipate the Greeks, Hroswitha will escape from the restraints of her nunnery, Byzantine secular theatre will slop over into the West before the first fruits of quem quaeritis appear. 'Folk drama' has been a necessary and reliable guard at the gate of the Historical Order, and it is because of this that Theatre History has been able to develop into splendidly specialised concentrations on eras and geographical territories. There is a vested interest in letting sleeping dogs lie, and despite the obvious impoverishment of Folk Drama Studies as a discipline, Theatre Historians have been willing to turn a more or less blind eye, and are still unaware that it has collapsed of its own absurdity into the arms of a generation of researchers who owe no allegiance to Theatre History, and, in fact, discovered traditional drama for themselves in pubs and folk clubs. With the unheralded collapse of Folk Drama Studies, Traditional Drama has initiated the collapse of Theatre History as the past two centuries have known it - although neither Traditional Drama students nor Theatre historians seem to be aware of it yet.

Enter Vince's Ancient and Medieval Theatre. If we go via the index directly to the discussion on 'folk drama', we discover immediately (as we will see below), that Folk Drama is a sub-discipline of Theatre History. The debate within the sphere of Roomer over the terms 'folk drama' and 'traditional drama' is therefore resolved: the term first published by T.F.Ordish in Folklore and subsequently hi-jacked by E.K.Chambers in The Mediaeval Stage belongs to Theatre History, not to contemporary Folk Studies. We can relinquish it with a good conscience.

The only works cited in Ancient and Mediaeval Theatre which relate to 'folk drama' are Alan Brody's The English Mummers and Their Plays (curiously mis-subtitled "Traces of Ancient History"), E.K.Chambers' The Mediaeval Stage, his The English Folk Play, and works by other Theatre historians. Vince uses this platform to speak of "the corrupt and sorry condition of the texts of the folk drama...most of them dating from the 18th century - or, more rarely, in continued local performances" [p.27], showing that he is unaware of Cawte, Helm and Peacock's English Ritual Drama, a book which would have corrected the latter part of his statement; nor of work establishing the conceptual and historical fallacy of the notion of the 'Ur text/corrupted text'; nor of Dean-Smith's gentle description of Chambers' The English Folk Play: "a strange, confused work, and one which its author seemed not to realise was long out of date before it was written". As far as Vince is a representative of Theatre Historians, Theatre History is out of touch both with the performance of traditional drama, and recent research about it.

What Theatre History knows about Folk Drama comes out of its own, submerged tradition, and therefore encounters no contradiction: 'Folk Drama' exists merely to provide an easy formula in which to hide Theatre History's ignorance and lack of insight into the 'early stages' of the Drama.

The significance for students of Traditional Drama is immediately clear: the term and concept of 'folk drama' were created within Theatre History, and it is not up to us to either justify the term or abandon it. On the other hand, our field comes loaded with the package of meanings, assumptions and significations that 'folk drama' entails,

and it is in the best interest of Traditional Drama Studies to unravel that package. One direct route is through the study of Theatre History as a tradition of research and writing. Ancient and Mediaeval Theatre says that it is "a modest step towards understanding theatre historiography, the process of writing theatre history", and we might expect to be able to turn to it for some immediate insights. Unfortunately we can't. In the preface, Vince states:

"For students of the theatre, the decision to include the classical theatres and the medieval theatre within the same volume needs no justification: On these theatres depend the subsequent theatres of Western culture. Each is viewed as having had a separate birth, and the great national theatres of the Renaissance are normally seen as the products of a fusion of classical and medieval theatre traditions".

What Vince says is quite true - it is a succinct summation of two centuries of received wisdom, and therefore "needs no justification". But in genuine historiographical analysis, nothing can be above analysis, nothing can be above question, every idea and theory must be made to account for itself, and that must be especially true for that which is justified on the basis of being the way that things are "normally" seen - in other words on the basis of tradition.

We can fairly rapidly zero-in on the origins of this particular tradition. Mediaeval authors certainly did not see themselves as being stuck between two cultural eras: it wasn't particularly clear that the Roman 'era' had come to an end. The concept of the death of Culture in the fall of Rome, a hiatus called the Dark Ages, and a subsequent Rebirth came later, as did the concept of the death and rebirth of Theatre. Indeed, the isolation of 'Theatre' from stage shows and popular entertainments - a conceptual precondition for the theory - took place in the 18th century, and was marked by the rise in the use of the classical vocabulary of 'drama' and 'theatre' in place of the vernacular 'plays', 'play-house' and 'stage' in Theatre histories and diatribes.

The origin of the tradition can probably be located more closely: in 1744 Robert Dodsley put forward the general three-crises formula of Theatre History - Birth in Greece, from ritual: Death, at the fall of Rome; Rebirth in the Middle Ages. Francois Hedelin had already expressed it in 1684, but he localised the Renaissance of Theatre to the French Church. Thomas Percy took over the three-crises theory when he published Reliques of English Poetry in 1765, but by eliminating minstrels and popular entertainers from the history of Theatre - in 'An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England', which Vince doesn't cite, rather than the companion 'An Essay on the Origin of the English Stage', which Vince does cite - Percy effectively cut the tentative connection between Rome and Mediaeval Europe which other writers had discovered or assumed to exist in troubadours, mimes, meistersingers. With this, the theory of Theatre History which "needs no justification" is in essential structure complete.

We can see that for any 18th century educated person with common sense, the evidence for the three-crises theory was ready to hand. Classical authors gave evidence that Greek Theatre was Born out of ritual; its Death was obvious, from the ruins of Roman theatres and amphitheatres, interpreted in the light of the proscriptions against Theatre laid down by the early Church and the Church's victory over Imperial Rome (a cultural possibility re-enacted as recently as the Commonwealth); no thinking person aware of Shakespeare could deny the Rebirth - only the manner and timing of the re-birth. Underlying the common-sense self-evidence of the schema, however, is a complex of cultural assumptions which would certainly not be accepted today, but without which the theory can not stand.

As we would expect, for example, the underlying historical concept is Biblical: Time has a specific and determinable starting-point, originating from nothing through an act of God; the era of the First Creation culminated and died in the Flood (a devastation bridged only by Noah and his Ark); Rebirth through the creatures in the Ark. The pattern repeats in the life of Christ: Birth through an act of God; Death, and a period of darkness; Rebirth - a rebirth in which the world turned out of the Old Law, and entered into the realm of the New Law.

In this concept of Time, History emerges out of divine acts and is structured into the crises of Birth, Death and Rebirth, in which the Rebirth is a rebirth into a better world.

18th century Theatre writers endowed this structure with their own particular assumptions: theirs was the better world, characterised by Progress. The characteristics of Progress were Civilisation; Literacy; Philosophy (Scientific Knowledge); Technology. Peoples who were not urbanised, literate, and who were scientifically or technologically un-developed stood right outside the schema of Culture and Civilisation. They were as children in cultural terms, a category into which African natives and American Indians, pre-classical Greeks, 4th century barbarians and contemporary agricultural workers all fell. Through the historically necessary processes of birth, death and rebirth, their progress out of childhood into cultural adulthood was inevitable, and just as inevitably the relics and memories of their cultural childhoods would be lost. From this arose the perceived need to collect such relics as remained, and the concomitant cry that custom was in decay. In these terms, change was Progress - growth was ultimately always in an upward direction, with advances passing down the cultural ladder to cultural inferiors - never up.

Quite obviously then, 'Folk Drama' pertained to the childhood of the Drama. Irrelevant to the future, it was a relic of the past, in the act of passing away.

Given the structure of History, it was obvious that Theatre could only originate - out of a void - by a divine act, expressed theatrically as religious ritual. Thus in Greece, and again in the Middle Ages, theatre was said to have sprung from ritual. The mumming play easily fell into place either as a remnant of mediaeval religious drama (which was itself in the 'infancy' of Dramatic forms) or as a relic of pagan ritual.

Progress, however, was a matter of cities, writing, philosophy/scientific knowledge, and technology. By definition, therefore, prior to the literate Greeks there was no theatre; the magnificent Greek Theatre developed from the primitive technology of a country cart; literary genius united with Athenian philosophy to create the classical Greek Drama.

The Romans were less intellectually refined than the Greeks (E.K.Chambers would have said they were too democratic), but they were technologically more adept and therefore developed the Theatre machine to new heights. However, these theatres were devoted to the wrong gods - and the old world of Roman Theatre was submerged in the historically inevitable victory of the True Church (or, in later secularised terms, in the barbarian flood). The Ark of the Church bore the seeds of Culture across the night of the Flood, and it was in the heart of Christian ritual that Theatre sprang up again. Through literary and technological progress it outgrew the churches, just as the early Greek drama had; like the Greek drama, it took to the moveable cart as a stage; and kept experimenting until at last it arrived simultaneously at Shakespeare and the concept of a fixed stage housed within its own buildings and devoted entirely to the purpose. With this marriage of Literacy, Philosophy and Technology, the modern era achieved a Theatre comparable to that of the classical age. Then a brief re-enactment of the Fall of Rome - the short dark age of the Commonwealth - over which the Restoration reached, and in a new era, with a better grasp of classical learning, corrected the imperfections even of Shakespeare's plays. It is the men writing out of this era who established the three-crises theory of theatre, and as a historically conditioned theory - thoroughly enrapt of one short period of Theatre, and perhaps overconditioned by the shock of the Commonwealth - it is a theory which requires a thorough re-examination - as does the tradition which sustains it.

On the face of it, the Traditional Drama student is an unlikely candidate to shake up the edifice of Theatre History: a lot of time is spent in pubs and less likely places talking to old people, especially, about something they do or have done; and a lot of time is spent in the pursuit of trivial details in newspaper libraries and record office archives. Precisely because of the nature of our research, however, we have become aware of the gulf that separates events and the records of them, and we are beginning to learn something about the complicated relationship between records and the events they record. At the very least, we have learned that the absence of a record does not mean a thing did not happen, and we have begun to develop ways to tease out information from a variety of records which may not



on the face of it pertain to traditional drama at all. We are beginning to find ways, that is, of approaching unattested sub-historical phenomena - mummers plays, for example, in a town with a weekly newspaper, a vicar who writes local history, and resident members of the Folklore Society - and make the apparent silence speak.

If, by studying historical and living performance traditions we can establish 'rules' of continuity and change and relations between records and observed and unattested phenomena, we will have far more than a critique of their tradition to offer to Theatre Historians. We will have developed tools with which they can approach the limited archaeological and literary remains of every period of Theatre History - "every period", because Theatre by its nature is for the most part ephemeral.

The field of Folk Drama, if it can still be considered a field, is incapable of contributing to an understanding of sub-historic theatrical conditions because it is committed - by the tradition of Theatre History - to the concept that these are not Theatre at all, that when they exist in the present they exist irrationally and drained of content - they are remnants of an evolution that has long since taken place. Traditional Drama concerns the sub-historic theatrical tradition: a tradition that exists contemporaneously with the existence of written records, but does not make written records on its own behalf. As a field-based study, Traditional Drama can not help but respect its living sources of information and the cultures to which they belong - it has to take them seriously, it cannot begin with the assumption of their inferiority, their immaturity, their innate corruption. Consequently, Traditional Drama is capable of genuinely learning about them. It is capable of doing what Folk Drama cannot do: envisualising intelligent, whole and vitally functioning performative traditions outside the boundaries of theatre buildings, prompt books, and critical studies.

For Traditional Drama students, therefore, the history of Theatre is wide open. Where the records cease and Theatre History traditionally reads the death of an era, Traditional Drama is capable of reading further, consulting material culture, the world before and the world after, the works of the recorded culture, indeed anything which speaks of human being. Some day, once field-work has been integrated with theory, the Traditional Drama student will be equipped with a performative model of culture which will enable us to read the probability of theatrical forms and activity into a silent record. This is distant, still, but is coming.

For Folk Drama and Theatre History this century marks, in any event, the end of an era. Theatre as a living phenomenon has over-run its traditional bounds so consistently over the past eighty years and yet remained 'Theatre' that Theatre History is put to a crisis: either it must give itself up to a thorough revitalisation, or it must containerise modern Theatre. The evidence of Vince's Ancient and Mediaeval Theatre is that Theatre History is trying to change with the times without doing either - engaging in a kind of criticism that doesn't criticise, doing a historiography with preconditions.

Traditional Drama is creating a study of theatrical forms that is not tied to Theatre History. This is, in fact, one of the major movements of contemporary Folk Studies - the unification of various strands under the conceptual rubric of 'performance'. It is a difficult study, because it moves in the shadow of two hundred years of Theatre History, and because many of the sources of Theatre history are contained in the tradition of Theatre History. This calls for source criticism, for an understanding of the tradition in which the information we use and need is carried. In Traditional Drama we are carrying out this task anyway, to come to an understanding of the 18th/19th century mummers play. But any tool that comes to hand to help us must be welcome.

Ancient and Mediaeval Theatre is one such tool. It is thoroughly in the Theatre History tradition. As a historiographical bibliography it lays out the tradition of Theatre History schematically, both as the theory and as the major works which have built and supported the theory. It is therefore useful as an overall introduction to Theatre History, and to the study of Theatre History as a tradition: both exemplar, and exemplifier, of a Great Tradition. The flaws which it has, can be attributed to that Tradition.

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BERKSHIRE PLAYS

Malcolm Bee, Roly Brown and Steve Roud are working on a checklist of mummers plays from Berkshire (pre-1974 boundaries), for publication by the TDRG.

If anyone has any previously unpublished Berkshire material, or knows of obscure references which might have escaped their attention, please contact them through ROOMER.

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

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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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