

TRADITIONAL DRAMA STUDIES



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EXCELLENT EXAMPLES

THE INFLUENCE OF EXEMPLAR TEXTS ON TRADITIONAL DRAMA SCHOLARSHIP

GEORGINA BOYES

"...as one reads further and further into the enormous number of plays that have been collected since the seventeenth century from villages throughout England, Ireland and Scotland, he discovers that no matter how many variations are rung on the same theme, the basic action remains constant. Still further, as the variations multiply, so the mummers' play comes to define itself and its own unique identity more and more clearly. Every new version we come upon simply forces us back to the core of the play."¹

The methodology underlying Alan Brody's description of research on traditional plays is admirable. A balanced examination of all available data is the obvious starting-point for any valid analysis, whatever its subject. In suggesting that this process has taken place in traditional drama scholarship, however, Brody idealises somewhat. A survey of the ninety-odd year history of scholarship in the field reveals that a handful of abnormal texts have had a disproportionate influence on researchers' interpretation of the form and function of traditional plays. This paper attempts to reassess the relationship of these exemplar plays to the range of collected traditional drama and suggests an alternative view of plays, treating each as being of equal importance.

The three plays which are consistently cited as 'important', yielding 'fascinating insights into the structure of the ceremony as a whole', and resembling 'the original type most closely' are the texts associated with Papa Stour, Ampleforth and Revesby.² In order to examine the nature of the influence of these plays on researchers' interpretations of traditional drama, a brief survey of scholarship in this genre must be undertaken. The importance of the exemplar texts derives from premises in folkloristic theory, and researchers' views of these plays have to a great extent been coloured by factors explicit and implicit in these premises.

The theory which has dominated English folkloristics since the latter part of the nineteenth century is that of cultural evolution. This thesis, developed by anthropologists such as E. B. Tylor and the founders of the Folklore Society, ultimately derives from Darwin's theory of biological evolution. It proposes that cultures evolve in relatively fixed sequence through stages of savagery and barbarism to civilisation. Residual expressive culture from the early stages of this progression was held to 'survive' into the civilised era in the form of traditional songs, games, narratives and customs. Because this broad tripartite progressive form of cultural development was believed to be universal, it was accepted that beliefs underlying 'primitive' custom could provide

information about the original motivation for 'surviving' English ceremonies. Thus, the functions of religious practices of the cult of Dionysus in ancient Greece and rural calendar customs in early twentieth century Thrace are amongst those cited as analogous to the concepts in which English performances like that at Revesby in 1779 had their origin.

The limitations of this emphasis on origin and form are numerous. Any tradition is a phenomenon produced by the repetition or persistence of a structured activity over time. Thus, by definition, the single or multiple event(s) comprising its origin cannot, of themselves, constitute 'a tradition'. Origin theory suggests a possible initial religious rationale for the performance and maintenance of customs. It does not, however, attempt to explain, on the basis of empirical data, their persistence after the loss of the animistic or numinous impulse for their performance. Further, the comparative method encourages a static approach to the form of custom, whilst simultaneously overlooking its social context. Simplistically relating the Rumanian Kalusari play, the mummers' plays of the Balkans, the Komos and the Buophonia to traditional plays collected over two centuries in different parts of Britain on the basis of perceived formal similarities, ignores both the transitional nature of culture and its social diversity.

To compound the difficulties associated with this concept, the folkloristic implementation of evolutionary theory has also developed in a peculiarly reversed form. Whilst evolution is biologically a process of progressive development, in folkloristics the survival theory which grew from it treated progression as degeneration.¹

It is still widely held amongst English folklore scholars that traditions can only deteriorate over time. Reginald Tiddy, whose play collection and lecture notes represent one of the earlier attempts at extended analysis of British traditional drama, well exemplifies this thesis:

"Serious drama, unlike the dance and song is an art for which the English folk has no special facility, and in order to tolerate the current survivals of the Mummers' Play, which is now merely a perfunctory piece of fooling that precedes the collection of money, we must conceive of it as the product of a number of exceedingly simple communities, as the treasurehouse where generations of the folk have stored the meagre gifts of their imagination... Whatever may have been its past, it now possesses hardly any of the qualities that we look for in a drama... Yet the Mummers' Play, degenerate and underdeveloped though it may be, bears distinct traces of a ritual origin..."⁴

The somewhat patronising tone and devolutionary attitude of this discussion are a persistently recurring theme in later writings. E. K. Chambers, for instance, expanding on the general form of traditional plays in England, commented:

"An archetype in any strict sense, is unattainable. There have been too many cross-currents for that. No doubt there was a

common original, but it has been much corrupted. The order of incidents has been dislocated, and speeches have been transferred from character to character. The result is often incoherent. There is also, of course, much verbal degradation."⁵

Under devolutionary theory, therefore, change over time was seen as resulting in fragmentation by performance - a sort of behavioural zersingen. Cawte, Helm and Peacock, for example, in their discussion of the origins of traditional plays comment:

"It seems entirely reasonable not only to regard our British plays as the remnants of a magical fertility ceremony, but also to think that they once resembled the Balkan performances even more closely than they do now."⁶ [my emphasis]

The consequences of the folkloristic view that the passage of time inevitably produced forms of tradition which were more "corrupt", "confused" or "degenerate" was a preoccupation with ur-forms, archetypes and attempts to reconstruct the "original pure state" of performances. Thus customs taking place in 'primitive' societies such as those described by R. M. Dawkins⁷ and Alan Wace⁸ in remote areas of Greece were held to be more accurate representations of 'early forms' of traditional plays than those collected in 'more advanced' and thus corrupted England. Hence, Margaret Dean-Smith could suggest without qualification:

"No one at all interested in the Play, its seasonal occurrence, its purpose as perceptible in forms more extended and complete than those known in Britain should omit to read the accounts of the fieldwork carried out ... in North Greece between 1900 and 1912."⁹

If this was the conceptual framework within which traditional plays were studied, what was the influence of the exemplar plays on their interpretation? Probably the best known English 'folk play' is that which was performed at Revesby, Lincolnshire on the 20th October 1779. This celebrated text has a number of curious features. It was performed outside the generally accepted season for traditional plays,¹⁰ it appears to have been a unique performance, presented on only one occasion, and further, is far more complex than the generality of 'wooling' plays collected in Lincolnshire.

Most researchers have commented on the unusual form of the text, Alex Helm in particular being especially sceptical about its acceptability as a 'traditional' play.¹¹ In general, however, whilst noting its 'divergence' from the norm, scholars have gone on to base conclusions about the 'original' form of traditional plays on the Revesby text. E. K. Chambers suggested:

"...beneath the accretions of dance pattern, chivalric romance, histrionic and folk-lore borrowings, and sentimental wording, is a primitive nucleus in which skin-clad worshippers, accompanied by a traditional Woman, capered about the slain figure of a man who had been King of the feast. Originally they were all Fools together, but various grotesque types have emerged ... In this respect the Revesby play with its multiplicity of Fools, may resemble the original type most closely."¹²

The Frazerian emphasis of this account is typical of Chambers and contemporaries such as Sharp, Tiddy and Baskervill. This group also provided much of the evidence on literary elements in the texts of both Revesby and its 'cognate' exemplar, Ampleforth. Baskervill, for instance, noted a parallel between Revesby and the medieval Enterlude of Youth, and rather less convincingly suggested that the group and wooing scenes were reminiscent of the Introduction to Ane Satyre of thrie Estaitis.¹³

In spite of this literary activity, however, it was the anthropological and 'survivals' aspect of scholarship which predominated in the study of the Revesby text and gave rise to its dominance as an exemplar until the late 1960s. A play, close to the Frazerian archetype, which even contained the line "we have cut down our father like ye evening sun", could not be too highly valued by 'survivals' orientated scholars. Further, the charm of a text which linked 'the Mummers' Plays, the Plough Plays, the Sword Dances of the North, and even, in its heading the Morris Dancers'¹⁴ was inestimable to those devolutionists who were otherwise surrounded by unsatisfyingly 'fragmented' and degenerate single traditions.

The Ampleforth play, published by Cecil Sharp in 1913, is usually discussed in association with Revesby. Like the Lincolnshire play it contains portions of literary works - notably from Congreve's 'Love for Love'. It is also reckoned to represent an archtypical form - in minor details:

"In the Ampleforth play the chief characters are King, Queen and Clown, and it is very likely that the early names were such as these."¹⁵

in cultural evolutionary congeners:

"I particularly call your attention to the verses after the Killing
"I'm sure it's none of I that did this awful crime"
Exactly so did the actors in the Greek Buophonía run away from the place of the ritual Ox-murder, laying the blame on the axe which had done the deed."¹⁶

and in major import:

"Another important testimony to the origin of the plays is to be found in the occasional indications of the idea that the victim is the son of the conqueror. This idea is not clearly expressed in any of the plays we have. But in the Ampleforth play the King is the Clown's son, and in the sword dance which forms part of the play ... the part of foreman is danced by the King. The man whom they pretend to kill is merely a spectator, but when he is lying dead the Clown speaks of him as his son. Here there is evidently a certain confusion, but it is easily explained. We may conclude that originally the King was killed ... Strict proof is not obtainable, but it seems sufficiently clear that sometimes the hero's antagonist was conceived of as the hero's own son, and this, if it be the case, is an undeniable relic of old ritual."¹⁷

The text which has generated all this rather circuitous theorising was not, in fact, collected directly by Cecil Sharp. There are at least three versions

of the Ampleforth play originating from Sharp's fieldtrip to north-eastern England in March and April of 1913. His main informant, George Wright, initially gave Sharp a version omitting, amongst other speeches, some of the exchanges between the King and the Clown in the Third Part and all speeches after the dance, including the "Buophonía" section. This latter part of the play was, in this version, described in the single sentence:

"If the Clown or another killed, then ordinary mummers play with doctor etc."¹⁸

The text of the play printed in The Sword Dances of Northern England¹⁹ was based on a second version, a 'full set of words' written out by Mrs. Bell, George Wright's daughter, and sent to Sharp on the 3rd April - the week after his visit to Darlington. As Chambers, Cawte and Brody have pointed out,²⁰ Sharp's published text differed in a number of respects from the transcription of Mrs. Bell's text contained in his manuscripts.²¹ In general, the variant readings appear to be bowdlerisations, but there are also alterations of tense, introductions of rhyming words and 'sense' corrections.²²

Of greater interest for the purposes of this paper, however, is the first version of the Ampleforth play Sharp collected. This outline of the action and fragment of text was given to Sharp by George Fox, a 68 year old former dancer. According to Sharp's notes,²³ Mr. Fox, his father and grandfather had all been in the Ampleforth team and when he had left the village to move to Linton, near Newton-on-Ouse, forty years before, Mr. Fox had carried the tradition with him, teaching the Newton men the dance. Performances at Linton continued for twenty years.

Mr. Fox's description of the form of the play as reported by Sharp is very simple:

"When the dancers were in a row about to begin the clown made a speech and called on the men. At the conclusion he called out 'Come on my six little boys and dance.'"

The clown came into the ring for the High Lock, and the Lock was placed about his neck. The team danced round him holding the swords, and the Clown 'fell down and feigned death. All called out A Doctor, a ten pound doctor. Whereat a doctor impersonated by one of the spare men came in and the usual Mummers' scene was enacted, the Clown reviving and jumping up once more.'

It is possible that the greater simplicity of Mr. Fox's description of the Ampleforth play and dance results from a faulty memory. In view of his long connection with the performance, personally and through his family, and his role as a teacher/transmitter, however, this explanation lacks total conviction. Mr. Fox's version is 'full' in that it contains the major incidents which might be expected in a sword play. Further, as a performance with socio-economic aims, this version has much to recommend it - combining fulfilment of the audiences' expectations with a brevity which would permit multiple performances.

As a traditional version of a sword play, therefore, the first collected form of Ampleforth is both acceptable and 'typical'.

This is not, however, to suggest that Mr. Wright's version is a literary fabrication. Although his connection with the play does not seem to have been as lengthy as Mr. Fox's, he had taken the part of the Clown as a young man. The repetitions and oikotypal material forming part of the 'full' text of the Ampleforth play must, however, give rise to some disquiet - especially if the history of its collection reported in The Nation is true:

"Mr. Sharp took down all he could, though the words were often difficult or incomprehensible, and promised him [Mr. Wright] ten shillings if he could remember some more, and his granddaughter ten shillings if she would write it out. The immensity of the reward roused natural suspicion, but Mr. Sharp reassured them by letter, and about a month later received an illiterate manuscript (about 500 lines), which he compared with what he had taken down himself and so produced the published version..."²⁴

However, even if the promise of a pound assisted imagination as well as memory in the production of the text, other evidence suggests that there may in fact have been two forms of tradition at Ampleforth.

Frank W. Dowson, in a letter held in the Ordish Collection, suggested that the sword play was introduced into the Malton district 'about a century ago' (i.e. in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century) by John Robinson.²⁵ Dowson believed that Robinson taught the play to the men of Goathland and surrounding areas, and certainly the existence of a manuscript of the Goathland play was reported to Sharp. The general style of literary material in the Ampleforth 'full' text supports Dowson's suggested dating of the play's introduction. Without further evidence, however, Robinson's role as instigator of the tradition or possible source of the text must be regarded as hypothetical.

The relationship between the full text and that indicated by Mr. Fox's description is difficult to assess. It may be that the simpler tradition is a development of the earlier literary form - Mr. Wright was seven years older than Mr. Fox. It is also possible that the two versions have separate sources and that some interaction occurred as a result of their performance in a single location. Until further textual material from Mr. Fox's version becomes available, it will be impossible to come to any firm conclusion. From its form and style, however, the full Ampleforth text should be regarded as a late eighteenth century conflation of literary and traditional material produced by a relatively sophisticated hand. This text was perhaps superimposed on or provided a source for other less complex traditional forms.

Essentially, this is not a new conclusion. All commentators on the Ampleforth play as published have noted its hybrid form. Sharp himself declared:

"...the Ampleforth play is obviously not a pure folk-product. It needs but a cursory glance at the text to see that it has been subjected to many influences, and that many hands have been at work upon it."²⁶

In spite of this longstanding knowledge of its compilation form, however, the Ampleforth play, like Revesby, has consistently been cited as an example of the performance from which, despite their greater internal consistency, all other examples of traditional drama have 'degenerated'.

Papa Stour, the final exemplar play, has been less studied than either of the foregoing texts. On a visit to Shetland in 1814, Sir Walter Scott was told of a sword dance in which the performers represented the Seven Champions of Christendom. On enquiring for more information about the play, Scott was eventually sent a text based on a copy of 'an old mss' which had been transcribed by the antiquarian, William Henderson in 1788. Scott printed this text in the notes to the second edition of his novel, The Pirate²⁷ and this publication formed the basis of the 1921-22 revival of the custom.

The language of the Papa Stour play is Classical literary, and unlike the other exemplar texts has no element of local usage to place it in context. Thus although the play is known as 'Papa Stour' and is the only Scottish (let alone Shetland) sword play which has ever been recorded, judged from its text, it might have been associated with any area of Britain at any time during the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

Although colourless and self-consciously poetic, it is from its text that the significance of Papa Stour as an exemplar lies. The Hero Combat play was frequently proposed as taking its text from a puppet play version of John Kirke's 1638 drama, Seven Champions of Christendom. Unfortunately for proponents of this theory, however, the majority of traditional plays make disappointingly little reference to the overall content of this presumed archetypal text.²⁸ In Papa Stour, however, the traditional calling-on song of the Sword Dance occurs in satisfying combination with the Seven Champions, thus making it suitable for 'proving' the hypothesis.

It emerges from this brief survey of the form and influence of the three major exemplar texts of traditional drama scholarship that their significance must be judged in theoretical rather than empirical terms. The exemplar plays are atypical hybrids which have very little in common with the generality of text or form of traditional plays. As subjects for a study of the interaction between traditional and literary styles, the exemplar plays offer much that would be of interest. To suggest that they provide widely applicable models of the 'pure' form of traditional drama is however only acceptable within the simplistic conceptual framework of devolutionary theory.

The pre-eminence of the exemplar plays derives from their embodying major tenets of devolutionary theory. The limitations of this concept and the theories of cultural development on which it was based have led to its abandonment in all fields of study but folkloristics, where it lingers with a tenacity which perhaps makes it more worthy of examination as a 'survival' from an earlier stage of culture than the majority of play texts.

Folklore exists in variation. Once devolutionary theory is set aside, each variant form of a tradition emerges as equally significant and no one example of a genre can be treated as intrinsically superior to any other. A half-formed view of this approach to the study of traditional plays paradoxically appears to underlie Alan Brody's discussion of the Ampleforth play:

"A close study of the Ampleforth Play in terms of its literary accretions and analogies with the more traditional plays yields some fascinating insights to the structure of the ceremony as a whole. Those elements which appear to have literary sources are the wooing fragments of Parts One and Two and the first Calling-on Song of Part Three. If we extract these elements, we find a sequence which contains nothing less than all the actions we have already seen in our studies of the play sections of Greatham and the 'Old Version' or Earsdon...

The Ampleforth Play can be seen in the direct flow of the traditional ceremony once this separation is made."²⁹

The function of this exemplar play, Brody seems to indicate, is to show - once separated from its literary accretions - the form of non-exemplar traditional plays. It is a relatively small, but highly important step from this position to a study of all traditional plays without exception.

NOTES

1. Alan Brody, The English Mummers' and their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 3.
2. A case might also be made for including the plays collected and Bellerby and possibly Greatham in any study of exemplar texts. However, the influence of these versions has only developed latterly with the introduction of Life-Cycle theory, and even then the plays have generally been discussed in conjunction with Ampleforth and Revesby.
3. For a more comprehensive discussion of this paradox in folkloristics in general, see Alan Dundes, 'The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory', Analytic Essays in Folklore (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 2-27.
4. R. J. E. Tiddy, The Mummers' Play (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 70.
5. Sir Edmund Chambers, The English Folk Play (Oxford: University Press, 1933), p. 10.
6. E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm and N. Peacock, English Ritual Drama: A Geographical Index (London: The Folk-Lore Society, 1967), p. 24. See also pp. 25-27 (passim) for further examples. The only writer who seems to have seen

traditional plays in non-devolutionary terms was T. Fairman Ordish, who in his article "Folk-Drama", (Folk-Lore, II (1891), 334) simply stated: "Those of my hearers who have seen these traditional plays performed, cannot fail to have remarked the unalterable adherence to custom and tradition by the actors; not a step is allowed to be changed, not a gesture. A folk-play as performed by one generation is an exact reproduction of the play as performed in the previous generation. Very often the performers themselves are oblivious of the meaning of their gestures and words; old words are used, which are quite obsolete in the dialect of the district; actions are rendered with a studious adherence to tradition, but sometimes a little removed from the exact part of the dialogue to which they belong, and when that happens the solemnity of the actors appears a little grotesque."

7. R. M. Dawkins, "The Modern Carnival in Thrace and Cult of Dionysos", Journal of Hellenic Studies, XXVI (1906), 191-206.
8. A. J. B. Wace, "North Greek Festivals and the Worship of Dionysus", The Annual of the British School of Athens, XVI (1909-10), 232-253; and "Mumming Plays in the Southern Balkans", The Annual of the British School of Athens, XIX (1912-13), 248-65.
9. Margaret Dean-Smith, "The Life-Cycle Play or Folk Play: Some Conclusions Following the Examination of the Ordish Papers and Other Sources", Folklore, LXIX (1958), 241. Under devolutionary theory it is inevitable that no suggestion that the Greek plays may represent a conglomerate tradition is ever put forward.
10. Perhaps to mark the wedding visit of Sir Joseph Banks, the owner of Revesby Abbey, on Rent Day. See Michael J. Preston, "The Revesby Sword Play", Journal of American Folklore, LXXXV (1972), 51-57 and The Revesby Sword Play: an Eighteenth-Century Folk Play Adaptation (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975); and M. J. Preston, M. G. Smith and P. S. Smith, (eds), Morrice Dancers at Revesby (Sheffield: Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1975); for further details of the play's performance and editorship.
11. See, for example, "In Comes I, St. George", Folklore, (1965), 124-25.
12. Chambers, p. 225.
13. Charles Read Baskerville, "Mummers' Wooing Plays in England", Modern Philology, XXI (1924), 231-33.
14. Chambers, pp. 120-21.
15. Tiddy, p. 75.
16. Violet Alford, "The Mummers Play", Proceedings of the Scottish Anthropological Society, IV (1949), 33.
17. Tiddy, p. 74.
18. Sharp Mss. Vol. D3, p. 66.
19. Cecil J. Sharp, The Sword Dances of Northern England (3 vols; London: Novello & Co. Ltd., 1913), III, pp. 50-76.
20. See Brody, pp. 84-86 for an outline of these comments.
21. Sharp Mss. Vol. D3, pp. 73-101.
22. Mrs. Bell apparently rendered "eunuchs" (a rarely used term in conversation) as "units", for example. This is struck out and replaced by Sharp without comment (see Mss. Vol. D3, p. 80, line 19). The "sense" behind other changes seems less obvious - Mss. Vol. D3, p. 87, line 5 reads "But I fear he will fight me [indecipherable word struck out] enoo (presently)", Sword Dances of Northern England, III, p. 60, line 9, however gives "But I fear he will fight me, I vow."

23. Sharp Mss. Vol. D3, pp. 20-24.
24. Anon., "The Oldest Play", The Nation, (8 January, 1921), 504. It will be noted, however, that certain details in this account, such as Mrs. Bell's relationship to Mr. Wright, do not accord with Sharp's account.
25. Ordish Coll., Vol. 2, p.110.
26. Sharp, III, p. 17. See also, Tiddy, pp. 82-83; Alford, p. 32; and Chambers, p. 149 for further examples of such comments.
27. The difference between the published form and the description in Scott's diary have been noted by Brody, pp. 156-61 (passim). Further details of variations amongst the printings of the text have also been noted by Ivor Allsop, "The Sword Dance of Papa Stour - Shetland", Folk Music Journal, III (1978), 324-42.
28. It should, however, be noted that no text for this important archetype exists. See Dean-Smith, p. 249 and fn.
29. Brody, p. 93.