

## TRADITIONAL DRAMA STUDIES



VOLUME 3

1994

### **DAMN ST. GEORGE! SOME NEGLECTED HOME TRUTHS IN THE HISTORY OF BRITISH FOLK DRAMA, OR BRING OUT THE DEAD \***

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The concerns addressed in this paper arise from ongoing fieldwork in a specific area of England, involving a specific drama tradition.<sup>(1)</sup> The tradition is a Christmas mumming, carried on by men who take their play to houses and pubs. The area around Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire, in the North Cotswolds, is mainly agricultural, with a recent influx of outsiders taking residence in the village and assuming a great share of control over the life of the village. It is a living tradition I am studying, continuous (except for the 1939-45 war) since at least 1920. It is probably a tradition which existed before the 1914-18 war.

The paper centres on one major conviction: that Folk Drama scholarship has arisen from a group of minds whose knowledge of the folk's tradition was secondary, based not on participation nor on an understanding of the performer's tradition, but rather on observation of the performed-for tradition. A class barrier existed between the scholars and the performers, and the scholarship examined not the tradition of the performers, but a tradition that had developed among the educated members of big-house families. "Folk Drama scholarship" has been in fact something more removed from the folk than the term implies, and is more realistically the scholarship of the big-house library: the "big-house" being shorthand for a certain cultural tradition, which is itself a legitimate object for study. Difficulties arise because this tradition is imputed to the "peasantry".

The "big-house" concept of folk theatre arose from the change in attitude toward the theatre in the eighteenth century (as described in my master's thesis).<sup>(2)</sup> It was crystallized in its developed form in the books of E.K. Chambers.<sup>(3)</sup> The theoretical basis was Greek classical history of theatre: the concept that theatre grew by gradual invention from religious ritual. Eighteenth century culture developed this concept with its own ideas, e.g., the innate superiority of Western, rational culture; the primacy of text and the inferiority of illiteracy; the inferiority of the society and culture of labourers and the poor.

origins of these lines Troupidge traced to a 1710 "improved" edition of Shakespeare, last performed on the London stage in 1817. Between 1817 and 1932 the text presumably remained in oral transmission. This, and parallels in Indian literary theatre, Elizabethan literary theatre, and nineteenth century English tent and booth theatres,(6) indicates that the oral transmission of literature cannot in itself be taken as a defining feature of "folk" or "traditional" drama, and is certainly no argument for a distinct species of phenomena.

The literature that assumes an English species "folk drama" is mainly built around the St. George-type play. Chambers' English Folk Play, and Cawte, Helm and Peacock's English Ritual Drama, for example, are based almost exclusively on it.(7) The Old Tup and Wooing plays are and can be included to an extent because both types of play fit into one of the standard "folk drama" categories, for example as remnants of primitive ritual. But this approach to the drama raises an interesting paradox: it is not the folk and not even the specific folk play which defines whether or not a thing is "folk drama". Its "folkness" is determined by its ability to fit into a predetermined category of ritual origins. When folk produce a piece which fits, then it is a legitimate "folk play". When the folk produce a piece which does not fit, it is not a legitimate "folk play". Neither the folk nor their products define "folk play".

When we take the folk to be the determinant in what constitutes folk culture, a somewhat different picture of "folk drama" emerges. In the first instance the bits of legitimate stage plays incorporated into the odd folk play indicate that whoever was producing the particular play thought of it in terms of the legitimate stage.(8) Well he might. Eighteenth and nineteenth century folk were living in a theatrical age. Professional actors, going up and down the professional ladder, performed at local fairs under conditions that can make the folk play look refined.(9) Theatre professionals lived and retired among people. John Clare, the peasant poet, used the stage as a meaningful metaphor.(10) Consequently, we cannot claim that the folk were isolated from the stage, or the traditions of the contemporary stage, when creating their own productions.

In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries scholars fled theatres and took to libraries and books. Their vocabulary reflects the change: vernacular "plays" and "players" were supplanted by the Greek-based "drama" and the Latin-based "actors". "The theatre" took the place of "the stage", and "stages" became "theatres". At the same time scholars lost the sense of immediate connection with the "people", leading to their "discovery" and to the creation of the term "folklore". In this cultural distinction, literary drama lost connection with village drama. In the extreme, it was denied that folk could understand or produce a "drama", that at best their productions were sub- or quasi-theatrical. From this point of view, it was easy to see folk drama as a completely separate species from legitimate drama, and the folk as somehow divorced from the traditions and direct influence of the stage. Although we are now breaking away from this conception of the field — signified by the use of "traditional" rather than "folk" in the title of the conference at which this paper was originally delivered (4) — we are considering much the same material with many of the same conceptions. A fundamental change has occurred in what it is considered significant to study in the drama, with a development in methods. But the premise of a separate species of drama is still strong, and the mainstay of study is still the St. George/Hero-Combat type play, based on the theory of ritual origins. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss some of these conceptions.

In my experience, the term "traditional drama" is laudological. I have trained in the theatre, both university and professional. I have acted and directed, and developed technical stagecraft skills. Very little of my practical theatrical vocabulary is book-learned, and that which is is a relearning of what has been taught orally and through experience. In my experience, theatre is quintessentially "traditional". A story recounted by Sir St. Vincent Troupidge in Theatre Notebook(5) may serve to illustrate how much even of the "literary" aspect of theatre is and has been a matter of oral transmission. In rehearsal for a 1932 London production of Julius Caesar, a professional actor quoted a speech with a set of lines that are not in Shakespeare's text. The actor had memorized the role around the turn of the century while touring with his father's Shakespearian company. The ultimate

the vulgar (after leave obtained) entered in disguise, and before the gentry, who were properly seated, personated characters and carried on miserable dialogues on Scripture subjects; when their memory could go no further, they filled up the rest of the entertainment with more puerile representations, the combats of puppets, the final victory of the hero of the drama, and death of his antagonist...." (17)

Robert Hunt in his *Romance of the West of England* (1865) speaks of *Duffy and the Devil*, a play also described by William Bottrell in 1873 in *Traditions and Heartside Stories of West Cornwall*. The former saw "one of the company doing the part of Chorus, and filling up by rude descriptions — often in rhyme — the parts which the players could not represent," (18) while Bottrell says (of this Rumpelstiltskin-style play):

Great part of the dialogue appears to have been

improvised, as the actors' fancy dictated. Yet there were some portions in rude verse, which would seem to have been handed down with little variation. Mistical gesticulation expressed much of the story; and when there was unwonted delay in change of scene, or any hitch in acting, in came the hobby-horse and its licensed rider, to keep the mirth from flagging. This saucy jester being privileged to say whatever he pleased, kept the audience in good humour by filling up such intervals with burlesque speeches on any matters which had taken place during the past year, that furnished fit subjects for ridicule.

A hall, farmhouse kitchen, barn, or other out-house, served for a theatre, a winnowing-sheet, suspended from key-beams or rafters, made a drop-curtain. Father Christmas, as chorus, described the scene, and told the company what characters the actors represented, unless they introduced themselves, as was frequently the case, like St. George, saying, "Here come I, a champion bold," etc. He also narrated such parts as could not be acted conveniently....

Furthermore, the dramatic repertoire of the folk has been much

wider than we have been led to believe. The mechanicals' play in *Midsommer's Night Dream* should alert us to this, but the unavoidable evidence comes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A. Watkin-Jones discusses quite a number of eighteenth century Welsh folk-written/produced plays in the *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*. (11) He quotes one English traveller to the effect: "The play that was acted was *King Lear*, but so mutilated and murdered, that I was told it had scarce any other resemblance to the play written by Shakespeare, than the name. It was not unentertaining to see three brawny ploughmen act the characters of Lear's daughters...." (12) And among other things quotes an advertisement running: "Wanted, the names of seven young men in the parish of Bangor willing to play an Interlude next summer; I will be the Fool myself." (13) Among the authors of these interludes he includes Thomas Edwards, or Twm o'r Nant, "him whom his countrymen delight to call 'the Welsh Shakespeare'", according to George Borrow in *Wild Wales*. (14)

Twm o'r Nant was born into a poor family, and earned his living (among other things) as a carter and turnpike-keeper, but also made a considerable amount of money in his lifetime as an interlude writer. According to George Borrow, referring to Twm's autobiography, in Twm's adolescence "It was the custom for young lads to go about playing what were called interludes, namely, dramatic pieces on religious or moral subjects, written by rustic poets. Shortly after Tom had attained the age of twelve he went about with certain lads of Nantglyn playing these pieces, generally acting the part of a girl, because, as he says, he had the best voice." (15) Before he was fourteen, an interlude of his was sold to the lads of Llandymrog, who played it in the summer. Among his interludes were "A vision of the Course of the World," "The Three Associates of Man, namely the World, Nature, and Conscience," and "The King, the Justice, the Bishop and the Husbandman." (16)

William Borlase, in his *Natural History of Cornwall* (1758) describes "a custom I have often seen in the west of Cornwall during Christmas season, when at the family-feasts of gentlemen, the Christmas Plays were admitted, and some of the most learned among

two wagons outside some building, usually in connection with a public house, and was so arranged that the players as they made their exits passed into a sort of Green Room within the building itself, where they were regaled with cakes and ale whilst awaiting their next call" (24) — and was, traditionally enough, all their pay for performing. According to Wakeman, "The plays best known in this district were 'Prince Mucidorus', 'The Rigs of the Times', 'St. George and the Fiery Dragon', 'Valentine and Orson'" (25) and 'Dr. Forster or Faustus'. "Further, "In all of them the Fool or Jester seems to have been a very important character; in the local phraseology he is reported to have "played all manner of megrims", and to have been "Going on with his manoeuvres all the time". The dress of this important personage included bells at the knees, and a paper mask below a cap of hare skin, with the ears up." (26)

He says that Prince Mucidorus

... seems to have been the favourite piece of them all, one old man having played in it no less than 14 times. The plot, as told me by an old blacksmith who as a boy of fourteen took the heroine's part at Chirbury and Priest Weston, was very simple. The heroine (name forgotten) being lost in a wood is attacked by a bear (represented by a man named Whetral dressed in a shaggy skin), and rescued by Prince Mucidorus, who after a terrific contest slays the bear with his sword. At this point of the story the witness came to a stop, and it was only after some pressing that he shyly admitted that the Prince thereupon fell in love with, and eventually married, the heroine, according to the orthodox method in fiction. (27)

None of the (non-Hero/Combat) plays discussed above have been included in discussions of folk drama, and yet all were written and/or performed by folk, and include numerous non-textual features familiar in the more generally recognized "folk drama". Furthermore, there are a number of other performances which their observers call plays, done by the folk and not needing elaboration here, apparently simple and crude, but not of the St. George/Hero-Combat type

Our simple actors got up their dresses in as old-fashioned and smart a style as they were able to contrive them, by begging or borrowing cast-off finery from the gentry round... The entertainment concludes with a dance, to music made by Father Christmas on a crowd. (19)

Hunt reports another *gesse* dance from Cornwall, involving a giant, Blunderbuss, and Tom. Blunderbuss was always a big-bellied fellow — his smoke-trook being well-stuffed with straw. He fought with a tree, and the other giant with the wheel and axle. The giant is destroyed, as in the story, by falling on the axle. The Tinker, of whom we have yet to tell, with his unfailing coat of darkness, comes in and beats Tom, until Jane comes out with the broom and beats the tinker; then — as in nearly all these rude plays, — St. George and the Turkish Knight come in; but they have no part in the real story of the drama. (20)

There is a tantalizing reference to what sounds like a Morality Play in the Journal of Mary Frampton, Dorset, 1830: "no mummers were allowed to perform their ancient drama of the wonderful recovery of a man killed in battle by a little bottle of elixir drawn from the pocket of the doctor of the piece, or to personify the 'sense' from the ancient Mysteries, with their Latin names 'Tactus' 'Visus' etc." (21) (my emphasis).

Sir Offley Wakeman's "Rustic Stage Plays in Shropshire", (1884), reprinted in full in Charlotte Burne's Shropshire Folklore in the County Folklore series, (22) gives a whole other set of plays which were performed by "folk". They are remembered by the old men who had done them the way the St. George play is remembered by old mummers today and which, along with features of more legitimate stage-plays, include features typical of more orthodox folk-plays: "...no women were allowed to act," he writes, "the girl's parts being taken, as in Shakespeare's days, by boys; these were to some extent selected with reference to their musical powers, as songs formed no considerable portion of the play..." (23) but the "stage was erected on

even tried an entirely different version of the play one year, and played around with the final song to find one that would be more popular.(36) Mr. Meadows further told me(37) that the play had originally been bought from the village of Blockley for one pound — a concept of the property-value of the play which takes us back to 'Twm o'r Nant in the eighteenth century, and to various comments throughout the nineteenth century that money was the object of the play — that and having a good time.(38) For that is what the mummings themselves say. It was done for money and because it was a heck of a do.

One reason for the popularity of the St. George play, therefore, is the same reason that church fêtes and flower shows are popular — they are proven money-getters; popularity follows the rules of the marketplace. That is one side of the coin. It is an important side because it puts the folk play into the economic arena along with legitimate theatre and charity drives. It also draws our attention to the other side of the equation, pointing toward the consumers of the folk play. Why was it such a proven, sure-fire money maker? Why did the more affluent buy the play, and why the St. George play?

In 1823 the St. George play was already classed by Davies Gilbert with the treats of his childhood Christmas. He printed it, along with carols and such, because "He is anxious also to preserve them on account of the delight they afforded him in his childhood, when the festivities of Christmas Eve were anticipated by many days of preparation, and prolonged through several weeks by repetitions and remembrances."(39) Gomme spoke to a kind of scientifically-minded nostalgia in Nature, in 1897:

Probably not a few readers of Nature have, while staying over Christmas at a country house, been asked into the hall during the evening of Christmas Eve to witness a strange and fantastic rural performance called the mummings' play, and probably, too, they have promptly dismissed the whole thing as an idle and unmeaning piece of country folly...Alike in the dismissal and in the uncaredful noting of the characters, these observers of the country folk would be wrong.

play.(28) And yet the impression given by the bulk of later nineteenth century collecting and theory, when the folk only knew the St. George-type play, and that there was only the single dramatic tradition. Why? To some extent, the great number of St. George-type texts collected may be an artifact of collection. Having once been recognized officially as the folk play, it will have become the play that educated people felt inclined to collect, disregarding rustic imitations of stage plays, disregarding alternative dramatic games. It is also the play to which educated people turned when it came to discussing, encouraging or reviving folk plays, as Janet Ashbee taught folksons to Oxfordshire children who had sung popular songs to her.(29)

Over and above this is the motivation on the part of the mummings for doing the St. George rather than some other play. In an interview(30) with Mr. E. Meadows, 84, oldest resident in the village of Snowhill, Gloucestershire, and the oldest living Snowhill mummer, we discussed the end of the traditional mummung in Snowhill just before the 1939-45 war. The mummings were stopped by a police constable in Broadway, and because they were doing it for themselves they were told to stop it. Had they given their money to charity they could have kept on playing, and could have been going to the present day.

It was done for themselves, to make money. Another of the old Snowhill mummings say that advertisements were taken out in the local press a couple of weeks before Christmas to announce their availability for parties.(31) And in Chipping Campden the great stories that are told have to do with prodigious collections of money or alcohol.(32) The plays, in the area with which I am familiar, were taken out for money.

Mr. Meadows further told me that the Snowhill men had been called the best mummings going.(33) A statement along these lines was made by H.J. Massingham, who meant that in Snowhill the ancient sense of the play had been maintained better than elsewhere, that it had been less corrupted there over time.(34) Mr. Meadows explained that Snowhill's play was better because they were continually working on it to make it better, more entertaining.(35) There is evidence that they

English society, labelled "folk" after its players, but "folk" in name only.

## NOTES

\* This paper was originally presented at the Traditional Drama 1982 conference.

Craig Fees, Christmas Mummery in a North Cotswold Town: With Special Reference to Tourism, Urbanisation and Immigration-Related Social Change. Ph.D. thesis, Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies, University of Leeds, 1988.

Craig Fees, Medieval Theater and Indo-European Context, M.A. thesis, Occidental College, Los Angeles, 1981. The following discussion summarizes part of that thesis.

Especially in The Medieval Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903); and The English Folk-Play (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933). Traditional Drama 1982: The Fifth Annual Conference on Aspects of Current Scholarship in Traditional Drama Studies, (16 October 1982). Sir St. Vincent Troubridge, "Oral Tradition in the Theatre", Theatre Notebook, vol. 5 (1950-51), 87.

For a short discussion see Fees, (1981), pp. 128ff; and relevant bibliographies, e.g. "Indian" pp. 439-40, "Miscellaneous", p. 448. Chambers, op. cit; E.C. Cawle, Alex Helm, N. Peacock, English Ritual Drama, (London: The Folklore Society, 1967). See also Alex Helm, The English Mummers' Play, (London: The Folklore Society, 1981).

Charles Reed Baskerville discusses several (including the Revsby Play) in "Mummers' Working Plays in England", Modern Philology vol. 21 (Feb. 1924), 232ff. See also C.R. Baskerville, "Early Romantic Plays in England", Modern Philology vol. 14 (1916-17), 55; poetic fragment in Y grec, "Jenkyu, Little John, etc.", Notes and Queries 10 Ser, vol. 5 (Feb. 10, 1906), 109; Cecil Sharp, The Sword Dances of Northern England, vol. III, (London: Novello, 1913), p. 17.

B. Iden Payne, Life in a Wooden 'O' (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), gives some reflection of the life of itinerant actors in

The Christmas mummery play is worth attention, and more than mere casual attention...(40)

because it is a surviving artifact of ancient, pre-Christian religion, a selling point popular in the twentieth century.

There is the suggestion from James Orchard Halliwell that the patronage of the mummers' play was an intentional device to maintain a medium of exchange of a different kind between classes: "...most of our ancient customs," he laments, "are only suited to the thinly-populated rural districts, where charity, good-will and friendship may be delicately cultivated under the plea of their observance."(41) And indeed, we can still hear the delighted cry of Lady Echo: "Oh! The proper mummers are come!" fifty years later in the reminiscences of Mr. Meadows.(42)

Broadly, then, educated, nostalgically-inclined customers of the folk play created and maintained for themselves an idealized notion of the meaning and origins of the folk play, which gave a special significance and sense of occasion to the Christmas play. Among the upper and wealthier classes, the tradition of Christmas as the pre-eminent season for entertainment and plays goes back at least to Tudor times.(43) So the "folk" play was part of an old tradition, though not quite that tradition that is usually presented. With their idealizations they preserved themselves as a seasonal market for the mummers' play. They have even been responsible for the creation and recreation of mummery customs, and through active and passive failure to patronize them have contributed to their demise.(44)

What was in the past called folk drama scholarship can be seen in this perspective as an introspective Maypole-dance around the indisputable fact of mummers' visits. Writers have drawn from, and regenerated, the social customs and ideology of a certain class, almost as if in a conspiracy to make for exciting Christmases, and (incidentally) to keep working men employed at a slow time of the year. And it follows that what has been called the study of the English folk play has been a history or study of big house tastes and the dreams of the Victorian middle class. The rite-and-ritual/men's ceremonial scholarship which is still emerging, appears to be the educated examination of the Christmas traditions of the non-labouring classes in

- the nineteenth century, as do a great number of other books about actors and their lives.
10. See, for example, in John Clare, *Selected Poems*, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1965): "The Parish" pp. 141, 142; "Don Juan" p. xvi.
11. A. Watkin-Jones, "The Interludes of Wales in the Eighteenth Century", *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, vol. IV, part II (1928), 103-111. He gives many examples and a lengthy bibliography of other writers.
12. *Ibid.*, 109.
13. *Ibid.*, 108.
14. George Borrow, *Wild Wales* (London: Dent, 1906), p. 338.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
17. William Borlase, *The Natural History of Cornwall*, (Oxford: W. Jackson, 1758), p. 299.
18. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, (London: John Camden Hotten, 1865), p. 273.
19. William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, 2nd. series, (Penzance: Beare and Sons, 1873), pp. 1-2 and p. 26 after the ellipsis.
20. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1896), p. 60.
21. St. Swithin, "Christmas Observances in Dorset in 1830," *Notes and Queries*, 7 Ser., vol. 10, (1890) 486.
22. Sir Offley Wakenan, "Rustic Stage Plays in Shropshire", *Trans. of the Shropshire Archaeological Society*, Vol. VII (1884), 383. These plays are discussed in Baskerville, "Early Romantic Plays in England", op. cit., pp. 111-2.
23. Wakenan, op. cit., 383-4.
24. *Ibid.*, 384.
25. *Ibid.*, 385.
26. *Ibid.*, 385.
27. *Ibid.*, 386.
28. See, for example, Baskerville, "Early Romantic Plays in England", op. cit., 112 ff; Marie Campbell, "Survivals of Old Folk Drama in the Kentucky Mountains", *Journal of the American Folklore Society*, vol. 51 (1938), 20; Mabel Peacock, "Plough Monday Mummings", *Notes and Queries*, 9 Ser., vol 7 (1901), 322-3; Abracadabra, "Children's
- Drama," *Notes and Queries*, 2 Ser., vol. 10 (1860), 318; John Jackson, *The History of the Scottish Stage*, Edinburgh/London: Peter Hill/J. Robinson, 1793), pp. 409-410, 412; Joseph C. Walker, "An Historical Essay on the Irish Stage," *Trans. of the Royal Irish Academy*, II, "Antiquities" (1788), 75-76 fn.; St. Swithin, "Children's Drama", *Notes and Queries*, 2 Ser., vol. 10 (1860), 168; Game, "Journal of the English Folk Song Society, vol. 5 (1915), 233; Davies Gilbert, *Ancient Christmas Carols*, 2nd edn, (London: John Nichols and Son, 1823), p. v; Sean O'Suilleabhain, *Irish Wake Amusements*, (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), pp. 75-99; J.F. and T.M. Flett, "Dramatic Jigs in Scotland," *Folk Lore* vol. 67 (1956), 84-96; and also Mackenzie Walcott, "Hampshire Mummings", *Notes and Queries*, 3 Ser., vol. 1 (1862), 66 where he says: "I regret to find that the 'act' now varies every year, and is furnished from London." Ashbee Journals (King's College Library, Cambridge), 28 Dec. 1901, fol. 390: The children sang "The Owl and the Pussycat". Mrs. Ashbee taught them "Sunnybank" and a wassailing song.
30. Mr. E. Meadows, 14.10.82.
31. Mr. William Smith, 11.6.82.
32. In every talk I have had with Jack Tomes, current leader of the mummings, the subject of great collections of money or alcohol has come up at least once, an experience others have had (see Peter Harrop and Jack Tomes, 4.12.78; Harrop tape 17, Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies Archives, University of Leeds).
33. E. Meadows, 14.10.82.
34. H.J. Massingham, *Shepherd's Country*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1938), pp. 144-5; 149.
35. E. Meadows, 14.10.82.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. See, for example, *AN, "Christmas Festivals," Gentlemen's Magazine*, 94:2 (1824) 588; Mrs. Gutch, *County Folklore V: Lincolnshire*, Folklore Society, (London: David Nutt, 1908), p. 176. Davies Gilbert, op. cit., p. iii.
40. Laurence Gomme, *Natives* (Dec. 23, 1897), 175.
41. James Orchard Halliwell, *Nursery Rhymes and Nursery Tales of England*, 5th edn (London: Frederick Warne, n.d., p. 305.
42. E. Meadows, 14.10.82.

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## CORK REVISITED: A RECONSIDERATION OF SOME EARLY RECORDS OF THE MUMMERS' PLAYS

Tom Pettitt

As time goes by it becomes less and less likely that the problem of the early history of the English mummings' plays will be suddenly resolved by the discovery of some vital record such as the 1389 text of the Chipping Campden Hero Combat Play — "Yn cometh I, seynthe George..." — or the like. The longstanding efforts of the theatre historians to "locate, transcribe, and publish systematically all surviving external evidence of dramatic, ceremonial, and minstrel activity in Great Britain before 1642" (1) have produced nothing of the kind, and nor have the equally thorough if less co-ordinated explorations of social historians into the social perspectives of traditional custom in the early modern period. (2) It is against this background that the familiar accounts long established as the earliest-known records of the mummings' plays merit critical re-examination, but this task should be prefaced by a clear definition of precisely what it is these may be the earliest evidence for: the history of "the mummings' play" is determined largely in advance by this definition.

This essay will therefore seek for early records of what is probably better called the dramatic mummung, in the sense of a seasonal house-visit custom performed by a group of disguised men whose interaction with the households they visit involves the performance of a show including segments with enough by way of mimesis and plot to qualify as drama. (3) "Mummings' play" is a useful enough term in that it distinguishes these traditions both from other house-visit customs (e.g. wassailing) which lack a fully dramatic element (they are mummings' plays), and from other dramatic customs (e.g. lye-wake games) performed under auspices other than the seasonal house-visit (they are mummings' plays). (4) It is potentially misleading, however, in at least two ways. It specifies exclusively the play, whereas most dramatic mummings involve the performance of an extended show comprising a formal Presentation (in speech or song) and a non-dramatic Entertainment (music, song, dance, speeches) as well the dramatic segment (which should consequently be distinguished as the play proper or, coming as it usually does between non-dramatic items,

See Chris R. Hassell, Jr., *Renaissance Drama and the English Church Year*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979). Ninety four percent of court performances in Elizabeth's reign "occur within the Christmas season in its largest possible liturgical sense..." (p. 4). From the reign of Henry VIII to about 1640 "Over 80 percent (450 of 561) [of recorded dramatic performances at court] occur sometime during Christmaside", (pp. 5-6). The Christmas season, for this purpose, comprises six holy days and eleven Sundays — four Sundays before Christmas, and holy days and Sundays to the second of February (Candlemas).

William Sandys, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, (London: Richard Beckley, 1833), p. xv quotes Polydore Virgil as saying "that it was the custom of the English, as early as the reign of Henry the Second (about 1170) to celebrate their Christmas with plays, masques and magnificent spectacles, together with games at dice and dancing"; see also Joseph Walker, op. cit., 79. A marionette operator in Henry Mayhew, *Mayhew's London*, London: Spring Books, n.d.), p. 456, says: "We used to do a great business with evening parties. At Christmas we have had to go three and four times in the same evening to different parties."

Where monetary returns from mummung do not match effort expended, or where money given is devalued through free availability of money generally, it is extremely difficult to get a mummung side together to go out at night, leaving family, friends and the fun of Christmas parties. In talking about the reason people used to go out, and why it is so hard to get people to go out nowadays, I have been told several times, "There just wasn't the money about them." See, for example, my interview with Charlie Blake, 29.12.81.