TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

Over the past years a number of researchers in the British Isles have been informally working together on aspects of Traditional Drama. Recently, as a logical extension of this co-operation, the Traditional Drama Research Group has been formed with the express aim of furthering research in this field of study by encouraging communication and co-operation.

One of the first decisions of the group has been to instigate a series of occasional publications. Several geographical indexes of traditional plays, covering the counties of Berkshire, Hampshire, Nottinghamshire and Wiltshire, have previously been published by members of the group. Updated editions of these are currently being prepared for publication in this series and further lists are being collated to cover other areas of the country and genres of related traditions. It is also intended to commence publication of out-of-print books, articles and original studies. Also in the area of publishing, the Traditional Drama Research Group has kindly taken over the administration and finance of the newsletter Roomer.

In order to handle the enormous backlog of relevant research materials, members of the group have developed a Co-operative Indexing Scheme for Traditional Drama and Related Customs. The aim of this scheme is to update and expand the material listed by E. C. Cawte, A. Helm and N. Peacock in their volume, English Ritual Drama (London, 1967). Since the publication of this seminal volume, due to the increased interest in this area of study, many more references have come to light. Unfortunately the bulk of this material has not yet been made available in a comparable work. As a result, it is now increasingly difficult to discover just what material relating to a tradition has been located. In order to resolve this situation, a series of worksheets have been developed as an aid to indexing relevant sources.

The group has arranged a series of meetings over the past twelve months. These have been held in various parts of the country and a programme is now available for the forthcoming year.

Enquiries regarding the activities and publications of the Group should be directed to: Traditional Drama Research Group, c/o Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield, Sheffield. S10 2TN

DOCUMENTING TRADITIONAL DRAMA - PART I

Over the years several research aids and questionnaires have been produced, often as part of larger research projects, that are directly relevant to the study of Traditional Drama. As many of the ideas and approaches contained in these items could prove useful in future work we hope in this series to present you with a selection of some of the approaches that have been adopted.
For the first of these we are indebted to Dr. David Buchan and Professor Herbert Halpert for permission to reproduce questionnaires that were originally designed
for use in the Department of Folklore, Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland,
Canada.

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for use in the Department of Folklore, Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland,
Canada.

1. We are trying to find how many areas of Newfoundland have had some form of
Christmas disguising and house visiting often called Mummering or Janneying.
Even a brief report that it existed in your community and whether it is still
carried on would be helpful. If you can say something on this point please
do so, even if only briefly.

2. A more detailed description, and particularly complete details of one set of
disguises and one house visit would be more helpful than many generalizations.

3. We would like to get specific details on any of the following:
   a) What do people call those who dress up in various disguises during Christmas
      in your community, or in any others you know? (Name each place) (Some names
      used include fools, mummers, darbies, janneys, johnnys, jenneys, guisers,
      geezers, maskers, dress-ups soldiers, white boys, ribbon fools, etc.). If
      there is more than one name, which did the older people use? When did the
      newer one(s) come in? Please try to find out what brought in the change.

   b) On what day or days during the Christmas season did people dress up? At
      what times of day or night did they visit other houses? About how many houses?
      How many people were in any one group? How did they announce themselves?
      Give examples of typical ways of asking admission, and typical replies. If
      they have any special way of talking, please describe it and give examples
      of what they might say.

   c) Describe their behavior while going between houses? (Noisy? Singing?
      Marching or casual walking? Peaceable or rough? Any fights or chasing?)
      Describe what they carried in their hands (sticks? walking canes? split?
      hobby horse, etc.) and how used?

   d) If admitted how did they behave? (Were they quiet or rowdy? Describe any
      tricks they might play). If they were expected to entertain, what would they
      do? (e.g., dance? sing? recite? tell stories or jokes? play musical instruments?)

   e) Describe how people tried to find out who the disguised visitors were, and
      how the visitors reacted. Were there any differences in the ways men or
      women behaved?

   f) If anyone in your community remembers an old act or play which the visitors
      sometimes performed, we should be very glad to have any details however small.
      Although we only have a few reports of this perhaps you can find someone who
      remembers such details as the fight(s), the collection, or the names and
      costumes of characters. These last vary from place to place but might include
      some of the following: Father Christmas, Roomer, Jack or Jan, George, Patrick,
      Turkish Knight, the Doctor and some Devil figure, a Captain, someone dressed
      in women's clothes, etc. etc.

   g) Give a complete description from top to toe of at least one common disguise
      and one more interesting, odd or amusing. You might add to this other details
      on the kinds of materials used for costumes and how these were made up. Some
      materials used include the following: Old clothes, quilts, sheets, pillows,
      rags, unusual clothes, new clothes, old clothes, underwear, white clothes,
      animal skins, cardboard, birch rind, boots and shoes, headgear, feathers,
      ribbons, paper, uniforms, animal disguises, etc.

   h) In which of the following ways did mummers disguise their faces? Paint? soot?
      paper, cardboard, wood, animal skin, store-bought, etc.). Describe as many
      of these as you can in detail. For the masks, especially, even a rough
      drawing would be helpful.
FACE DISGUISES

In the following questions the word mask is used throughout. When writing your information, please use the word which is known in your community (false face, mummer’s face, etc.).

Please write details rather than give straight yes or no answers. Whenever possible, illustrate with a drawing or a photograph.

These questions suggest some points about which we need information. Please feel free, however, to write about any aspect of face disguising, mummering, or janneying, even though it may not be covered by the questions.

1. On what occasion(s) did or do people dress up or use some kind of face disguise? What is the local term for the disguise? In what community was this, and when (the approximate years it was practised)?

2. If masks are worn what are they made of? Are boxes, wood or bark, bags, cardboard, animal skins, sheep’s tails or other things used. How is the mask made?

   How are the masks decorated (with hair, moss, animal skins, sheep’s tails, etc.)? How are the decorations fixed on the mask?

   ILLUSTRATE with a drawing, an actual photograph or a mask if possible.

3. Do the older people remember masks that were different from those worn today? When were these worn? By whom? Please describe one of these older masks in detail and tell about it owner if you can.

4. Are masks preserved from year to year or are they made up new every time?

5. Describe what use is made of ashes, paint, shoepolish, paper, cloth, nylon stockings, etc., in typical face disguises in your community. What is such disguising called?

6. Do people wear costumes when they disguise their faces? What kind? What would be a typical costume (describe in some detail)?

Drawings and/or photographs would be a help in explaining your answers.

ANY ACTUAL MASKS WHICH CAN BE FOUND IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND MADE AVAILABLE TO THE FOLKLORE ARCHIVE WOULD BE PARTICULARLY APPRECIATED.

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS; ANIMAL AND BIRD

ANIMAL DISGUISES

Have you seen or heard of a horse figure or horse’s head used as part of Christmas activities? Some of the names reported are Hobby Horse, Horsey Hops, Lopchops. Which of these names, if any have you heard? What others do you know? We would be glad to get information on any of the following:

1. Who made the horse-figure?

2. How was it made? (Mention size, details of manufacture such as wood, nails, cloth, fur, paint used, appearance; did it have eyes, nose, mouth, ears, etc. how lifelike was it? Was a real horse’s head ever used? How were the movable jaws constructed and operated? etc.)

3. How was the head carried? How was the carrier disguised or covered? if the horse had wooden legs or feet were they movable. How were they operated?
4. Describe the behavior of the figure and the reactions of those involved.

5. What other animal figures have you heard of which are used during the Christmas season? (We should like to get reports of the Christmas Bull, or figures which include cows' heads, rams' and sheep's heads (sometimes called the Derby Ram) or any other animal figure). Describe the figure and its use fully.

6. Write down what you know of any song, speeches, dialogue or play connected with any of these figures.

7. WREN. Can you give any information about hunting the Wren (or Ran)? When did it take place and for how long? How was the procession organized and who took part. Describe especially how the wren was secured, prepared, decorated and carried; also the house-visits, drinking, what was collected and how the collection was used. Was any use made of disguise or costume? If there was a song please give the words.

8. OTHER CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS. We shall be pleased to have descriptions of any other Christmas plays, games or customs, such as "Shoeing the horse", "selling" a man for being away from home on Christmas Day, etc.

**MUMMERS IN BEDFORDSHIRE**

I have long been suspicious of many of the apparent gaps on the Traditional Drama map. so I recently sent a letter to several local newspapers in Bedfordshire to see if anything turned up. In reply I received the following

"There were certainly Mummers in Bedfordshire at the end of the last century - 1885-1900 - when my father was a youth in Harlington, Beds [TL 0330]. I remember him telling us as children how he with others visited houses and pubs playing the different roles. The one that has stayed in my memory was the one for Christmas when they took the roles of Christmas fare such as Mince Pie, Plum Pudding, Holly, etc. The only rhyme I can remember is 'Come in Mince Pie and do your part and show these ladies and gentlemen your gallant heart.' I suppose they were called in one by one and each said their piece...."

The ease with which this information was gathered, prompts me to suggest that a concerted effort by those active in Traditional Drama research, aimed at neglected parts of the country, might help to fill in a few gaps. Bedfordshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Herefordshire and Shropshire spring to mind as worthy of immediate attention - even Norfolk and Suffolk, long written off as 'Mummer-less' counties might have something to offer after all.

I would be pleased to hear from anyone who has attempted to collect in any of these areas, or from anyone who would like to co-operate in a new 'offensive'.

**ANIMAL DISGUISE IN MONMOUTHSHIRE**

In connection with a forthcoming study of the interactions between traditional customs (including traditional drama) and social unrest, the editor of Folklore has kindly drawn my attention to the following account in Maxwell Fraser's *West of Offa's Dyke: South Wales* (London: Robert Hale, 1958), p.59:

The deplorable living conditions and hours of work resulting from the sudden rise of the iron and coal industry caused widespread misery, and among the many symptoms of unrest were the exploits of the "Scotch Cattle". This organization was formed in South Wales and operated chiefly in Monmouthshire. The "herds" were led by a "bull", dressed in the skins of beasts, and, with blackened faces, would "scotch" anyone who had offended them. These bands first appeared at Nantyglo in February 1832. Shortly
afterwards they were active in the Pontypool valley, and the movement soon spread. The gangs of men worked together so that a transgressor in one area was punished by a "herd" from another locality to prevent identification.

Fraser goes on briefly to note two specific incidents in 1834 in Blackwood; the murder of a woman, and an attack on a shop owned by one Thomas Rees. Interestingly, for anyone (like myself) dubious of using Welsh material in discussion of English traditions, Fraser observes that "comparatively few of the 'Cattle' were were native Welsh, and the leader of the Blackwood herd was a Staffordshire man, who eventually disappeared from the district after the murder of a constable".

Maxwell Fraser does not give a source for this information, but states in her Preface that where no specific source is indicated she had usually used local newspapers of the time. Welsh newspapers of the nineteenth century are not the most readily available primary source at Danish universities, and I take the liberty of Roomer's good offices to enquire if anyone has come across this material before, or indeed if similar theriomorphic manifestations of social unrest have been noted elsewhere in England or Wales.

Tom Pettitt, English Department, Odense University, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark.

M. H. BARLEY'S CLASSIFICATION OF PLOUGH PLAYS  

Maurice Barley's Plough Plays in the East Midlands(1) remains the most important work on East Midlands folk drama. Not only did Barley systematically collect and describe the first large body of plough play material, but he also attempted to determine the local variations on the plays. In his paper however, he did not give a formal summary of the groupings he had identified, rather he noted that localised variations blend one into the other. Here, I will try to give a schematic presentation of his findings.

General Terminology

Firstly, it is necessary to understand Barley's general terminology. He used Chambers' English Folk Play(2) as the starting point of his study, and broadly followed Chambers' usage. Barley's references to 'Mummers plays' and 'Plough plays' refer to types of plays in terms of characters and lines and are used irrespective of times of occurrence. His references to 'Plough Monday plays' usually mean any play performed on Plough Monday, regardless of type.

East Midlands Groupings

In addition to Christmas Mummers' plays, Barley recognised four localised variants, in the East Midlands. These are distinguished by a) the opening lines of the play b) certain special characters and c) the length of the Doctor's diagnosis of the injured disputer. They are named after their respective areas as follows:-

North Lincolnshire Group
Opening lines - Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I come to give you a bold call. As Christmas time's a merry time, I've come to see you all
Special characters - Bessom Betty and Indian King
Doctor's diagnosis - long
Kesteven Group
Opening lines - In comes I Bold Tom,  
               A brave and nimble fellow. 
               I've come to taste your beef and ale,  
               It is so ripe and mellow. 

Special characters - None 
Doctor's diagnosis - long 

Nottinghamshire Group
Opening lines - Here I come, who's never been before,  
               There's four more actors outside the door. 

Special characters - Eezum Squeezen 
Doctor's diagnosis - short 

Western Notts. Intermediate Group
Opening lines - A room, A room, A room to let us in,  
               We are not of the ragged sort, but of the Royal King. 

Special characters - "Mummers' play" assemblage of characters, occasionally  
               with "Plough play" characters. 

Doctor's diagnosis - short 

Group Interrelationships

Again I would stress that the groups blend into each other, and therefore the best  
way of illustrating the relationships between the groups is a Venn diagram (see  
Fig. 1). Figure 2 illustrates the classification more conventionally. 

Fig. 1 - Venn Diagram of East Midlands Folk Plays  
(The double line delimits Plough Monday plays)
Fig. 2 - Barley's Classification of East Midlands Folk Plays

East Midlands Folk Plays

Christmas 'Mummer's Plays
Plough Monday Plays

'Mummers' Plays
(West Notts. Intermediate Group)

Plough Plays

Notts. Group
North Lincs. Group
Kesteven 'Group

References


PUBLICATIONS NEWS

Recent Publications


Thomas A. Green (Editor), 'Folk Drama', Special issue of Journal of American Folklore 94 (Oct. - Dec. 1981)

Contents:

421-32 Introduction
433-55 The Mummers' Play and the Old Wives' Tale
456-85 In Comes I, Brut King: Traditions and Modernity in the Drama of the Jasksdale Bullguisers
486-505 The Camp Mock Ordeal: Theatre as Life
506-26 'Why do they Laugh?': An Interactional Approach to Humor in Traditional Iranian Improvisatory Theater
527-55 Puppet Voices and Interlocutors. Language in Folk Puppetry

Ray Hargreaves, 'We are the Merry Actors', English Dance and Song 43:4 (1981) 2-3.


TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1982 - CALL FOR PAPERS

The Fifth Annual Conference on Aspects of Current Scholarship in Traditional Drama

University of Sheffield - Saturday, 16th October, 1982

In the 1982 Conference we wish to expand further the varieties of topics covered. Consequently we would like individuals interested in presenting papers, chairing discussions or bringing exhibition materials, slides and films to contact the organisers by 1st June, 1982.

For further information regarding the conference contact: Paul Smith, The Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, University of Sheffield. S10 2TN

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

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, 22 Adelaide Road, Andover, Hants (0264-4397)
Paul Smith, 2A Westfield Road, Bramley, Rotherham, Yorkshire (0709-548426)

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ISSN 0262-4095
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