

Introduction

After a period of vigorous research in the 1970s and 1980s, the study of the British folk play flattened in the 1990s. It was a pleasure at this conference to see that, once again, the topic is part of the academic agenda. It was Ron Shuttleworth who said that books on folk drama are a bit like buses, nothing for ages and then three together.¹ And his remarks did not include the first bibliography of the subject.² Similarly, whilst there have been some BA or MA dissertations on the subject of folk drama in recent years, they have tended to come from university drama departments rather than the few folklore departments we have in the United Kingdom.³ The conference got off to a good start, therefore, with the announcement that Peter Millington, one of the conference speakers, had successfully negotiated his *viva* as delegates were assembling and had been awarded his doctorate by the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield, the first to be granted in the field of traditional drama for nearly twenty years.⁴

A second sign of the resurgence of interest in folk drama was that the Sheffield conference was not just a one off, but the first in a series of international conferences. Many of the delegates to the Traditional Drama Group conference went on to Turku in Finland for the Traditional Nordic Masks and Mumming group conference in August. Discussions had already taken place in the committee of the Folklore Society for a weekend conference on masking and guising to be held at the Warburg Institute in May 2003 and during the Sheffield meeting we were told by Criostóir Mac Cárthaigh of the *'Room to Rhyme'* conference planned by Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin, the University of Ulster, and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, to be held in the spring of 2003. Folk drama studies are very much 'alive and well' with strong evidence of international co-operation as the Sheffield conference clearly demonstrated.

Of the sixteen sessions in the conference, all but four were on the play in Great Britain, nevertheless, this still allowed for a wide range of topics and treatment. Both Duncan Broomhead and Derek Schofield chose to talk about one local tradition, the Alderley Mummers and the Uttoxeter Guisers respectively. Duncan could approach his subject matter as an insider having been part of the Alderley play since its revival in December 1988. Derek, on the other hand has been an assiduous observer of the Uttoxeter team since 1979. Both papers were exemplary in their exploration of their respective sides and sought to position them within their communities – the Alderley Mummers originally under the patronage of the Lord of the Manor, Lord Stanley, the Uttoxeter Guisers with a more demotic audience but nevertheless with the patronage of the Bamford family of JCB fame.

Two of the papers were linked in that they both dealt with aspects of sword dance plays. Christopher Cawte, himself a rapper dancer as well as a play scholar dealt with the nineteenth century literature on the sword dance play in County Durham and with the Earsdon play in particular. Paul Smith also dealt with the sword play in literature presenting his current research work on the James Scott correspondence with Walter

Scott, and, in particular, on the Papa Stour text which the author famously used in his novel *The Pirate*.

Tom Pettitt is a scholar with a particular interest in early drama and in aspects of dramatic performance which may link to the background to, and early origins of, the folk play. His paper on the folk interlude dealt with the dramatic and semi-dramatic games associated with Christmas revels, lyke-wakes and harvest homes, etc. which are a significant segment of traditional drama independent of (and with a better-documented history than) the mummers' plays, to whose development they may nonetheless have made some contribution. The independent games also have intriguing relationships with conventional theatre history (e.g. via the interlude, the jig and the droll). While offering sporadic documentation of these theses, the paper was structured as an attempted typology of games in terms of context, content and form. Sandra Billington is another drama scholar with a particular interest in the medieval period. Her paper 'Tormentors in Passion Play' looked at evidence, from France and England between 1390 and 1590, for games of truth-telling, or slander, and for non-domestic charivari played at and around the midsummer solstice; she sought to demonstrate why these might have been allowed, and how they were connected to the scourging of Christ in Mystery and Passion plays.

By way of a contrast, Peter Millington's paper was focused on the later plays which are part of the canon of folk play studies. He pointed out that with few notable exceptions, there has been a marked reluctance to analyse the texts of English folk plays. Partly this has been because key scholars believed the "actions" of the plays to pre-eminent and the texts irrelevant, and partly because of the daunting enormity of the task. Peter's paper sought to break the impasse by reporting major analyses of the large collection of texts that are available online at www.folkplay.info. These have been done with the assistance of graphical methods and computerised techniques such as cluster analysis. There are three main results of Peter's analysis. Firstly, evidence was presented for a single proto-text that was ancestral to all versions. Secondly, Peter posited a new classification for the plays that both confirms and extends the earlier schemes, but under two principal classes rather than three. Lastly, the evolutionary relationships between the various classes were considered, leading to a proposed genealogy of the plays.

Another 'text' based paper was that of Michael Preston, who argued that the history of the study of the traditional drama of Britain seems to be filled with examples of individuals following various and sometimes conflicting scripts, whether that of a concern with determining the origin of the tradition as a whole or of thinking about mumming as plays, in the sense of what is performed at Stratford-upon-Avon. He looked at examples of the three major families of chapbooks which have long been considered a part of the study of traditional drama - the *Christmas Rhyme* book, *Alexander and the King of Egypt*, and *The Peace Egg* - and argued that each contains evidence that is frequently misread (or ignored) concerning their composition, concerning their reflection of contemporary oral traditions, and concerning the various regional traditions that are signified by "traditional drama.". Mike illustrated his paper with an impressive series of overheads which were essential to the structure of his argument and which we have tried to reproduce here as well as we are able.

Alex Helm was a central figure in play research in the 1950s and 1960s, his tragically early death in 1970 was a great loss. I was delighted when I heard that both Christopher Cawte and Norman Peacock, his close colleagues, were to be present at the conference. I was even more delighted when they agreed to lead a loosely structured

session in which they would discuss how the group ‘worked’ and how that work led to the publication of *English Ritual Drama* and the booklets in the Guizer Press series. Following on from the recollections of Norman and Christopher, the discussion was widened to encompass the work which has been done, and that which remains to be done, to make the Helm Collection at University College London more accessible to today’s scholars. Needless to say, none of the presentation was scripted but as we have the recordings of the evening presentation, we are able to present here a full transcript of the discussion through the courtesy of Doc Rowe and Ron Shuttleworth. A second paper on a major collection of folk play texts was presented by Eddie Cass. His subject was James Madison Carpenter, an American who carried out fieldwork in England between 1928 and 1935. During this time he collected what must surely be one of the largest, if not the largest, compilation of British folk performance materials ever assembled in the field. It is now held in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, Washington where access is inhibited because of a lack of an adequate catalogue. The collection includes some 300 folk play texts from England and Scotland. The paper discussed Carpenter and his collecting and enlarged on the work which was being done in a project based at the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield. This is a project which, starting with an on-line catalogue, will, we hope, ultimately result in a full critical edition of the whole collection.

Three of the papers given at the conference discussed mumming or the folk play in a non British context. Terry Gunnell in his intriguingly titled paper, ‘Waking the “Wiggle-Waggle” Monsters’ dealt with the subject of animal figures and cross dressing in the Icelandic Vikivaki games. Terry pointed out that Iceland seems to lack any continuing and deeply rooted tradition of guising or mumming although there are some relatively modern examples. Once or twice a year, one finds the streets of most larger towns inundated with costumed figures, that is to say, on Ash Wednesday, and on what Icelanders call “dimission”, the pre-graduation days when up-and-coming sixth form graduates who are about to take their final exams dress up and “invade” not only their schools but also the neighbourhood. The paper, however, concentrated on a tradition which seems to have died out in the early nineteenth century if not before. There is good reason to believe that this particular tradition, involving so-called “vikivaki dance games”, or “dance-guising” has roots in an earlier guising traditions, but shows an intriguing development out of these into a more “organised” form of public entertainment. Some scholars have also argued that the games represent the beginning of public theatre in Iceland, albeit in a very rudimentary form. George Mifsud-Chircop’s paper on Carnival and New Year’s Eve drama in Malta described and analysed two ritual drama practices in Malta and Gozo. Since mediaeval times, carnival has always been accompanied by parades, masquerades, pageants. In Malta Carnival had been celebrated since at least the 15th century. Later centuries also evince the popularity with the lower classes of a rustic folk drama, known as *Il-Qarçilla*. *Il-Qarinza* was another drama celebrated on New Year’s Eve, still popular in fragmentation within living memory in Malta and Gozo. Here one discovers the grotesque representation of the death of the old year and the beginning of the new one. Both rituals are defined as the oldest know drama on the island, specifically the earliest fragments of Maltese comic theatre. Finally, in this group, John Widdowson dealt with the tradition of mumming (or mummering, as it is known there) in Newfoundland, where it survived for considerably longer than in most parts of the English-speaking world. Whilst for the most part, the tradition manifests itself in house-visiting by members of the community dressed in unusual costumes and participating in the game of guessing identities, in a few places in the province, traditional mummers’ plays also persisted, though these were no longer

actively performed by the early 1960s. When fieldwork began as part of the emerging folklore programme established by Herbert Halpert at the Memorial University of Newfoundland it was relatively easy to collect information on most aspects of mummering, but with the notable exception of the plays, which proved to be very elusive. John's paper, however, dealt with a play which used to be performed in the small community of Change Islands, situated in Notre Dame Bay. John reported on some of his own fieldwork and that of a colleague, Fred Earle, in setting out to recreate the text of the play.

Neill Martin's paper was on the ways in which guisers and mummers ask for and gain entry to the home as a prelude to their performance. It demonstrated that seasonal rites involving ritual entry in form part of a range of complex threshold and boundary customs linked with life cycle traditions, the bardic orders and early law. Examples which Neill chose for analysis were taken mainly from Celtic language cultures and include the *Mari Lywd* and the *rèiteach*, a betrothal ritual from Gaelic Scotland. Neill also offered a structural model as an aid in the interpretation of these often highly complex threshold and boundary rituals. It is regretted that this paper was not available for reprinting here.

Two other papers which we are not able to reproduce, at least in the form in which they were presented, are those by Emily Lyle and Peter Robson. Emily spoke on transformations of "Galoshins" in the twentieth century, transformations which include those in age and gender of performers. There is a trace right at the beginning of the century of the play being performed by young men but it was predominantly performed by boys of school age. There are records, however, of performances by mixed groups of boys and girls and by girls alone and the factors enabling girls to perform were examined. There is something of a diachronic shift from boys only to the inclusion of girls in the custom. There is also a change in season. The play had been performed at either Christmas/New Year or at Hallowe'en, but most of the later records demonstrate a movement to Hallowe'en. At this time of year, the continued guising custom sometimes retained traces of the play after it ceased to be performed. Possible reasons for the demise of the custom were explored, including changing attitudes to the requests for reward. In the course of the breaking-down of the custom, which was almost total by the middle of the century, it is possible to observe forces at work which sustained it for a while at the same time as they altered it. The norm had been boys learning orally from the performances of other boys, but later on fathers taught it to their children either by oral instruction or by writing out the words. There was more parental control and the houses visited became more restricted. The play was also performed on stage under adult supervision and, in these cases, recourse was often made to a published text unconnected with local tradition. An interesting development was the performance of the play as a monologue by an adult, either seasonally or without regard to the season. These performances were based on memories of the play in performance by a group. Unfortunately, as the paper was extensively illustrated by recorded examples, it was not suitable for reproduction here.

Peter Robson's paper on songs in Dorset mummers' plays was also extensively illustrated by recorded examples. From the somewhat fragmentary evidence available on Dorset mummers' plays it seems that it was customary to finish the performance with a song. In some cases the titles or first lines have been recalled, in others there are sound recordings of the plays which have enabled the songs to be identified. Peter's paper surveyed the songs used by Dorset mummers, and sought to establish a rationale for the choice of material, considering why one song ("Husbandman and Servingman")

was by far the most popular choice. In conclusion it considered the value of mummers' plays as indicators of local song repertoire. Peter's paper is represented by the extensive synopsis and song notes which he provided at the time.

Overall, the papers were of a very high standard and delegates were clearly delighted with the event. What was even more encouraging was the follow-on conferences which, whilst each was planned independently of the others, represented a clear expression of the need to meet to discuss current trends in folk play and mumming and masking research. A similar view was expressed at the Turku conference in 2002 and at the Derry conference of 2003. I am sure we all look forward to the further conferences which are under consideration.

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Eddie Cass

Notes

¹ James Parle, *The Mummers of Wexford*. Drinagh, Wexford: JJP Publications, 2001; Eddie Cass, *The Lancashire Pace-Egg Play. A Social History*. London: The Folklore Society, [2001]; Eddie Cass and Steve Roud, *Room, Room, Ladies and Gentlemen... an introduction to the English Mummers' Play*. London: The English Folk Dance and Song Society and The Folklore Society, 2002.

² Eddie Cass, Michael. J. Preston and Paul Smith, *The English Mumming Play. An Introductory Bibliography*, London, Folklore Society, 2000.

³ See, for example, K.A. Harryman, 'Spatial Aspects of the *Furness Pace-Egging Play* with Reference to Medieval Morality Play Traditions', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Manchester, 1998; Elaine Wedge, 'The Great Pace Egg Robbery', unpublished BA dissertation, Bolton College, 1996.

⁴ Peter Millington *The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, May 2002