

# ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional  
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THE DANISH FOLK PLAY OF THE THREE KINGS AND THE STAR

Tom Pettitt

Seasonal revels in Denmark today have no dramatic or semi-dramatic performances to match the traditional drama of England. The nearest approach is the Shrove-Monday house-to-house quête of masked and disguised children who chant a tricks-or-treats begging rhyme at the door and receive a few coins in their collecting tins.

On the island of Agersø, disguised visitors at Epiphany enter neighbouring households, receiving refreshment and endeavouring not to be recognised, in the manner of the Newfoundland mummers. But for earlier periods, particularly the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is evidence of a wider range of customs, some involving semi-dramatic performances. There were, for example, Shrovetide 'Bears' or Christmas 'Goats', taken on a house-to-house quête, probably in the manner of the Old Tup or the Hooden Horse. There are also sporadic references to a Shrovetide or New Year plough-trailing custom, rather like that of the Lincolnshire plough-lads, which also involved a dramatic entertainment.

But undoubtedly the most widespread custom was the visits of the Three Kings and the Star, which took place at Epiphany (in Danish 'The Day of the Three Holy Kings') or its Eve. In Northern Jutland this was often undertaken by a lone old man, or a man and his wife, usually tramps or the poorest of the villagers, who merely entered a house, displayed a star on the end of a pole, and sang an Epiphany carol, whose text was first recorded as a broadside in c.1800. For this they received food, and usually a glass of spirits.

Elsewhere, however, particularly on the eastern cluster of islands (Sjælland, Lolland, Falster), the performance was more complex, involving at least three boys, representing the Three Kings (vaguely oriental costume and paper crowns) carrying a golden star on a pole. This variant of the custom is known also from Sweden, Norway and Germany. On occasion these three were accompanied by others representing Herod and Judas, the latter with a bag to receive donations. Entering a house, the performers offered sung greetings, and then sang an Epiphany carol narrating the visit of the Three Kings to Herod and the stable in Bethlehem - the earliest Danish text of this is a broadside of 1642; its German analogue can be traced back to the early sixteenth century. The performance was highly stylized, the Three Kings marching round in a circle as they sang the carol. But at two points this pattern is broken for dialogue and/or action: when they discuss (among themselves or with Herod) the black face of one of the Kings, and when one or both of the white-faced Kings beats the one with the black face. This latter action is

entirely unmotivated in the carol, and is usually accompanied by a sung dialogue derived from a shrew-taming ballad rather like our Wife wrapt in wether's skin (Child 277). The song over, the boys receive refreshments, and take their leave with good wishes to the household.

The text translated below was recorded by W.C. Ravn in 1868 at Maribo, on the island of Falster, and reprinted in Marius Kristensen's "En Hellig-tre-Kongers-Vise og Hellig-tre-Kongers-Dans i Danmark", pp.66-7 (see Bibliographical Note).

### The Ancient Song of the Three Holy Kings

(Performed by three boys, of whom two are dressed in as ornate oriental costume as possible, while the third represents a Blackamoor who has a black costume with golden decorations).

1. Good evening, good evening, both man and woman,  
husband, you all, your household  
We wish you all a happy new year,  
a son or a daughter in a year from today.
2. In Bethlehem town, where Christ was born,  
the Three Holy Kings are safely arrived;  
from home they travelled with horses and men,  
until they were come to the land of the Jews.

(One of them displays a golden star on the end of a pole)

3. A star showed them the way to the Jews' land  
and to the heavenly Saviour,  
and they found the child so lovely and gracious  
with the ox and the ass in the stable there.
4. They went into the hut with gladness and joy,  
because a child of God was come to bring comfort;  
and down they fell on their knees,  
when they saw the child before their eyes.
5. They gave the child the reddest gold,  
so he would be merciful and kind to them,  
and incense, myrrh, and red gold,  
they offered to that lord so joyously.

(The black one kneels, while the others walk round him,  
singing:)

6. Herod he asked as much as he dared:  
Why is one of you so black?  
-- yes he is, and the others so white  
(the black one:) Yes, I am black, as is well known,  
For I am a King of the Land of the Moors.
7. (the white ones:) Yes, if you are black, then we are white,  
for we come from Christendom.

(They walk round again. The black King is beaten with a stick  
by the one behind him)

Oh sir, don't hit too hard  
When the flesh is gone the bone is bare.

(They stand in a row)

8. We wish you all a peaceful goodnight,  
there hops a jackdaw, there jumps a cat:  
A good peaceful goodnight.

Commentary

- St. 4<sup>3</sup> There is an exclamation-mark in the text after "down", perhaps suggesting the Kings kneel for a moment, although the report is otherwise pretty full in its stage-directions.
- St. 6<sup>1-3</sup> In the absence of a fourth performer in the role of Herod his lines are sung by the two white Kings.
- St. 6<sup>3</sup> Evidently an extra-metrical interjection by one of the performers.
- St. 7<sup>3-4</sup> This is all that remains of the shrew-taming ballad here. Texts from the neighbouring island of Lolland provide a little more:

Jens Jeppesen has come home from Germany,  
 He cuts sticks, some four or five,  
 For his wife must wear them out.  
 Ah no, dear husband, don't hit too hard,  
 When the flesh is gone, the bone is bare.

In a text from Nykøbing, Falster, a translation of which I have published elsewhere, the shrew-taming dominates the action and is devoted over 20 lines of verse (see Bibliographical Note).

Bibliographical note

(A selection of reasonably accessible sources on Danish customs is given below)

- Bregenhøj, Carsten, Helligtrekongersløb på Agersø (Epiphany Mumming on Agersø) : Copenhagen, 1974, with summary in English.
- Celander, Hilding Stjärngossarna. deras Visor och Julspel (The Star-boys: their Songs and Christmas Play) Stockholm, 1950, Standard survey of Three Kings Play in Scandinavia, with English summary.
- Kristensen, Marius 'En Hellig-tre-Kongers-Vise og Hellig-tre-Kongers-Dans i Danmark' (A Three-Holy-Kings-Song and Three-Holy-Kings-Dance in Denmark), Danske Studier (1925), pp.56-77.
- Millington, P.T. 'The Origins of Plough Monday'. Abstract of paper presented to Traditional Drama Conference, Sheffield, October 1979. Appendix B gives translation of plough-trailing play from Als, Denmark.
- Møller, J.S. 'Aarsfester fra Vaar til Høst in Danmark' (Seasonal festivals from Spring to Harvest in Denmark) Aarets Højtider, Ed. M.P.Nisson, Stockholm, 1938, pp.113-142.
- Pettitt, Thomas 'Ritual and Vaudeville: The Dramaturgy of the English Folk Plays', Prepublications of the English Institute of Odense University, No.19 (October 1981). Includes a translation of a Three Kings play from Nykøbing Falster and discussion of its dramaturgy in relation to that of English folk plays.
- Schmidt, August F. 'Helligtrekongersangere i Danmark' (Three Holy Kings Singers in Denmark), Arv 4 (1948) pp.50-126. Comprehensive survey of tradition in Denmark.

Schmidt, Leopold (ed.) Le Théâtre Populaire Européen, Paris, 1965, No.14. Text, with French headnote and translation, of Three Kings Play from Falkenberg, Sweden.

Stumpfl, R. Kultspiele der Germanen als Ursprung des Mittelalterlichen Dramas, Berlin, 1936, ch. V. Discussion (ritualist approach) of Three Kings play in Germany and Scandinavia.

BRITISH INSTITUTE OF RECORDED SOUND JOINS THE BRITISH LIBRARY AS THE NATIONAL SOUND ARCHIVE

'On 1 April 1983 the British Institute of Recorded Sound became a department of the British Library and is now known as the National Sound Archive.

The recognition of sound recordings as a major element of Britain's national archive comes some 35 years after a group of enthusiasts led by Patrick Saul, founder and first Director of the Institute, began to seek public and government support for the establishment of a national sound archive.

The National Sound Archive is situated at 29 Exhibition Road, London SW7. It comprises over 400,000 discs and 20,000 hours of tape recordings of music, drama and literature, language and dialect, speeches and events and wildlife sounds. It is the national centre for the study of recorded sound, providing a free public listening service. Public lectures and recitals are organised and a journal, Recorded Sound is published twice a year.

It is hoped that the new arrangement will further interest the work of the Archive whilst bringing it administrative benefits and the opportunity to share expertise on the preservation and care of archival material.

The Library has pledged full support for the present activities of the Archive and the wide range of events it has planned for 1983, notably a Compact Disc Week, with talks and demonstrations on this technological revolution in the record industry.'

For further information contact Marie Jackson (01-589 6603)

Extract from British Library News (No.84 April 1983)

**MORRIS AND MATACHIN**

*A Study in Comparative Choreography*

By John Forrest

Just how, where, and when did the morris begin?  
How many of us when pressed with this vexed question will trot out the same stale mish-mash of myth and fakelore?

Here for the first time is an attractive and alternative argument that takes a fresh look at the whole issue, and comes up with some breathtaking and convincing conclusions.

Precisely reasoned and closely documented, this study presents the case that Cotswold morris and certain North American Indian dances had a common origin in the sixteenth-century courtly dancing fad known as 'matachin'. John Forrest makes his case plain with the use of a model for comparing dances on a point by point basis. In content and method the work is a signal contribution to dance scholarship. It is written in a lively style that is eminently readable with an important selection of illustrations.

Jointly published by the EFDSS and CECTAL  
(University of Sheffield). £1.50

Due out October 1983

# TRADITIONAL DRAMA 1983

The 6<sup>th</sup> annual conference  
on Traditional Drama Studies.

22 OCT 1983



In 1978 the first conference solely devoted to Traditional Drama was sponsored by the Division of Continuing Education and the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield. The papers and discussion sessions over the past years have suggested a wide range of innovative approaches to this area of study and the 1983 meeting will again follow in this tradition. In addition to the Conference an exhibition of photographs is to be mounted and film sessions are scheduled. If you have any publicity materials you wish to distribute please feel free to bring them along.

## VENUE

Saturday, 22nd October, 1983 (10.00 a.m. to 5.30 p.m.)

Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language,  
Endcliffe Exhibition Hall, 605 Ecclesall Road, Sheffield. (Tel. 0742-681270)

Fee: £3 (including refreshments)

## PROGRAMME

10.00 a.m. - Coffee

10.30 a.m. - Graig Fees - Folk Play and Analogues: Performance and Charity in Chipping Campden

- Roly Brown - Mummers in West Berkshire 1890-1920

- A video presented by Paul Smith - The Midgley Pace Egg Play

1.00 p.m. - Lunch (available in nearby restaurants and pubs)

2.30 p.m. - Peter Robson - Thomas Hardy's 'Play of St. George'

- Annual Report on the Work of the Traditional Drama Research Group

- Frances Clarke - No Show Without Punch

A B S T R A C T SMUMMERS IN WEST BERKSHIRE 1890-1920

Roly Brown

This paper presents a summary of present knowledge: with a definition of geographical and physical boundaries of the area under scrutiny. It also includes a comment on the period (as indicated above); an examination of 'texts' and action; of the people involved; their practice and routine and what happened to the Mummers.

NO SHOW WITHOUT PUNCH

Frances Clarke

A reconsideration of the principal nineteenth century texts of 'Punch and Judy', with an attempt to assess the importance of indigenous English influences on the nineteenth century show; an examination of the degree of continuity between the nineteenth century tradition of performance and the show at the present day.

FOLK PLAY AND ANALOGUES: PERFORMANCE AND CHARITY IN CHIPPING CAMPDEN

Craig Fees

This paper presents an examination of the roots of the Folk Play's tradition in the pub, in the school, in public places, using local sources of information. Furthermore it presents a study of its 'origins', beginning with the question: Why don't we have it in the United States of America?

THOMAS HARDY'S 'PLAY OF ST. GEORGE'

Peter Robson

Thomas Hardy's novel The Return of the Native (1878) includes a description of a mummers' play, together with some dialogue. When the novel was dramatised, in 1920, Hardy supplied a complete text of the play.

Cawte, Helm and Peacock, in English Ritual Drama (1967) suggested that a traditional play from Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester, was the source for the play described in The Return of the Native. However, Preston, in Southern Folklore Quarterly (1977), subjected the complete text to computer analysis and concluded that "Hardy's play is not traditional in any strict sense of the term".

Consideration of Hardy's biographical details and comparison of his text with other Dorset plays suggests that the play's source should be relocated and that Preston's conclusions should be modified. The issues raised may be seen as extending beyond the question of Hardy's reliability as a folklore source to the emphasis placed by researchers upon textual studies to the exclusion of other aspects of traditional drama.

# AN INTERIM CHECKLIST OF CHAPBOOKS CONTAINING TRADITIONAL PLAY TEXTS

M.J.PRESTON, M.G.SMITH, & P.S.SMITH



Since 1970, we have been conducting an analytical study of chapbooks containing traditional play texts. This investigation has continued and expanded the work undertaken by the late Alex Helm, and attempts to produce a schematic classification of the major textual groups and subsequent variations by analysing the texts of known surviving copies of these chapbooks. The eventual purpose of this classification is to evaluate some of the partially formed hypotheses concerning the problem of the influence of these chapbooks on the traditional drama of the British Isles.

The initial phase of this research project dictated that a checklist of all chapbooks containing relevant texts be located. This volume therefore represents the culmination of that first stage of the project and is the most comprehensive guide to this genre of literature ever to be compiled.

Originally published in 1976, for circulation to members of the History of the Book Trade in the North, the checklist provides information on all chapbooks containing traditional play texts that have been traced to date. The chapbooks are grouped under six main headings. The first five sections list chapbooks which bear a closer affinity to each other than to chapbooks in any other group. Such groupings do not imply an analytical classification, but rather a convenient method of listing apparently related items. The sixth section contains a collection of items of a more literary nature than those in the preceding sections. These are either texts produced in a pseudo chapbook form for an antiquarian market or literary texts by known authors, often based on some oral tradition. This section is by no means exhaustive, as it is often difficult to decide with items of this type, whether they warrant inclusion or not. We therefore only included items which were obviously related to such chapbooks or have been cited by others as being relevant.

Under each title, the known editions are arranged alphabetically by printer, with bibliographical data and a listing of all known surviving copies. Xerox copies of all the items are deposited in the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield.

A limited number of copies of this useful reference work are still available and can be obtained from Cultural Tradition Research Press, 2A Westfield Road, Bramley, Rotherham, Yorkshire.

Price: £2.00 (inclusive of postage and packing)

A4, 54pp, Spiral Bound



THE HOBBY-HORSE.

From John Brand, Observations on Popular Antiquities..., With the Additions of Sir Henry Ellis. An Entirely New and Revised Edition with numerous illustrations. (London, Chatto and Windus: 1877), facing page 263.

#### PUBLICATION NEWS

Robert Leach, 'Punch and Judy and Oral Tradition', Folklore 94:1 (1983) pp.75-85.

Roger D. Abrahams, 'Review of Alex Helm, The English Mummers' Play', Folk Music Journal 3 (1982) pp.285-288.

[Peter Kennedy], Two Devonshire Mummers' Plays, (Totnes: Soundpost reprint, Dartington Institute of Traditional Arts) 1971, 8pp. plus one photograph (price 15p). The two plays are from Sidmouth and Dartington. This publication is currently available from The Folk Shop, Cecil Sharp House, London.

#### ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

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Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

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