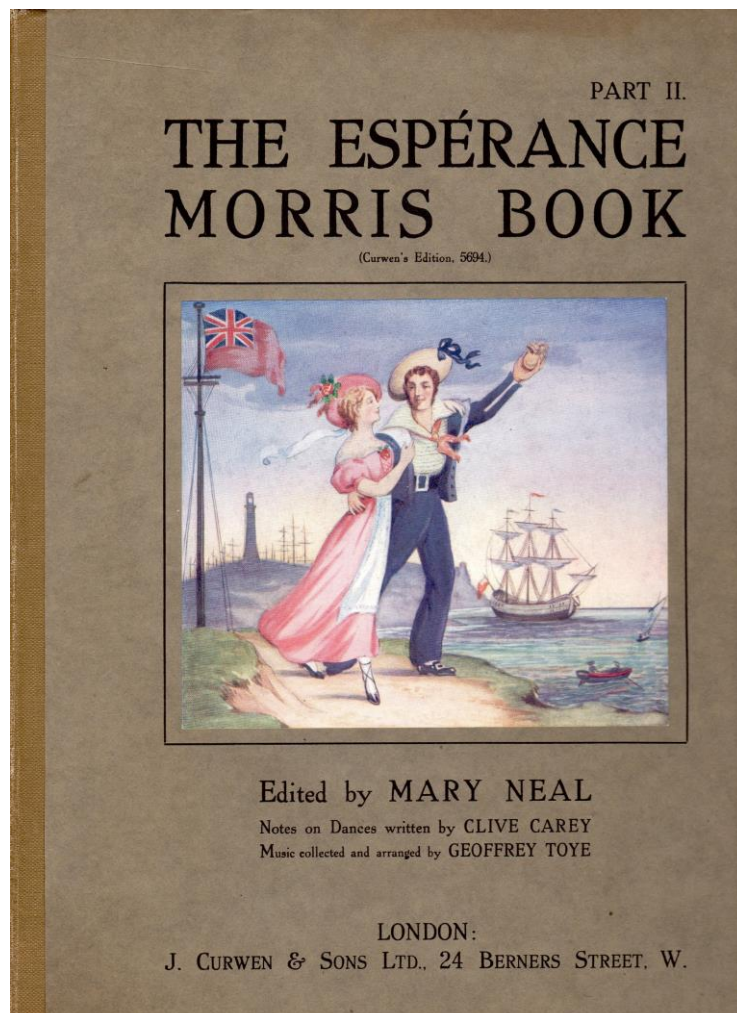


The Morris Dancer

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THE MORRIS DANCER

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Cover picture: Front Cover of The Esperance Morris Book Part 2 by Mary Neal (1911)

At the 2014 Jigs Instructional, the three Editors agreed to remind readers what sort of material would be accepted for each Ring publication. In the case of The Morris Dancer, it is any article, paper or study which expands our knowledge of the Morris in all its forms. It is better that the text is referenced, so that other researchers may follow up if they wish to do so, but non-referenced writing will be considered.

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Editorial

The Golden Bough, Mumming and St George

Julian Whybra's interesting article on Mumming and St George fans a spark into the much-derided works of Sir James George Frazer. Frazer, often criticised for conflating fact, myth and his own fiction into works of anthropology still, however, leaves a trail of influence into modern times since it was first published in 1890. That influence can be traced in the works of Freud, Engels, Robert Graves, TS Elliot and James Joyce among others. Despite the precipitous fall from grace, Frazer's seminal work, *The Golden Bough* has had an indisputable influence on the study of anthropology, sociology, mythology and religion. The issue scholars have with Frazer's work is that serious hypotheses are often presented based on fanciful assumptions and thus, as is often the case, the academic baby goes out with the romantic Victorian bathwater. It has been argued that no other anthropological study has contributed as much to the psychological landscape of our present age. Theodore H Gastor (1959) says of Frazer [he] "enlarged our understanding of the behaviour of societies by laying bare the primitive concepts and traditional folk customs which, as a subliminal element of culture, underlie so many of our institutions". Unfortunately, his methods – often described in terms of 'armchair anthropology' – and often based on the amateur observations of travellers and missionaries have been overrun by much modern scholarship. But this is not to say that it is all "balderdash", as JZ Smith wittily observed, regretting that the word had "nothing to do with the Norse deity". There are elements of *The Golden Bough* which remain relevant and worthy of consideration and Julian's essay puts a fresh set of clothes on his subject: In comes he, welcome or welcome not!

Future Articles

The *Morris Dancer* is only published when sufficient material is available to make it worthwhile. I rely, of course on contributions from those interested in the Morris and the academic community. Sadly, these contributions come to me rarely and in dribs and drabs. I am sure that there are articles out there which would fit these pages very nicely, but because the *Morris Dancer* is published so infrequently, it is forgotten about. The recent weekend held at Cecil Sharp House on Morris Dancing would have brought forward a number of worthy papers, which although rejected by the organisers, could well have been published here. So please, dear reader, write something or send a copy of your pet study, essay or theory to me for consideration.

Mac McCoig

The Oxford University Morris Men 1899 – 1914 (Part Two) by Roy Judge (1970) (continued from MD Vol 5 No. 3 Nov 2014)

The Oxford Society for the Revival of the Folk-Dance published a "Programme for Selection" (Copy in VWL):

"Any of the following dances, with the appropriate action and singing at intervals, are taught by the Lady Teacher. The songs are all in print already, and it is highly desirable to become familiar with these in advance by the use of Mr. Cecil Sharp's and Mr. McIlwaine's published collection, to be had of Mr. Taphouse, 3 Magdalen Street, Oxford, and others."

The local organisers were Charlotte S> Sidgwick of 64 Woodstock Road and Constance M. Leicester of 17 Staverton Road. M.S. (probably Marjorie Sidgwick, Daughter of Charlotte) had a delightfully allusive article in the EFDSS News No. 22 Jan 1930. Presumably referring to Rosina Mallet she writes "The first Oxford Teacher was an East London club girl, looking about fourteen, almost a slum girl, probably a gypsy, a brown-eyed goblin with feet trained by London barrel organs, taking a class of forty middle-aged schoolmistresses with expert calm."

The notes on the "Programme for Selection" say "The Dances are also genuine Folk Music, for the most part they were collected from two peasants in Oxfordshire in whose family they had been handed down from father to son for five generations. These men were brought to London, and taught the members of the Esperance Club to dance with such success, that they are in their turn to-day teaching the dances from one end of England to the other. Everywhere the same interest has been aroused. That there is life and joy in the movement is proved beyond doubt by the daily growing demand for their services. It does not seem too much to hope that the Merrie England of our tradition and of our dream may be before long Merrie England of the present."

So far only two further references to the activities of the society in Oxford have been discovered:

26 June 1909 The Esperance Club gave a concert in the garden of Black Hall by kind permission of Mr. Morrell. Kimber danced Jockey to the Fair and Bacca Pipes. Theo Chaundy's account of Kimber refers to the latter's memory of dancing at Black Hall for Lady Ottoline Morrell: presumably this was the same occasion.

The other reference is indirect, deriving from an article by Mary Neal in the Observer of 5th November 1911, in which she mentions that boys and girls of the Esperance Guild of Morris Dancers had been invited to join a revival Headington side in a display in Oxford "last year".

The Oxford journal for 20th March 1909 refers to a lecture given by Sharp in which Kimber danced. The meeting was full to overflowing.

Meanwhile in London and elsewhere the revival continued apace.

The Morning Post for 14th January 1909 reported on Mary Neal's activities under the heading "Dancing and Social Reform: What London Working Girls are Doing."

"Two bricklayers....willingly allowed their melodies to be harmonised and their dances which were given on the 'High' every Whit Monday, to be taught to the girls.

From Redditch, near Stratford-on-Avon came the idea of using tall hats as part of the costume for the dances, and the Head Master of Eaton was good enough to provide several of these articles of headgear for the purpose."

[On] 4th March 1909 Sharp gave a lecture at the Steinway Hall on the Morris Dance, and Kimber and R. Doddridge performed. This was the occasion on which Kimber broke his concertina. An appeal for a subscription raised £7 and he was later presented by Sharp with a concertina inscribed "From all the audience at the Steinway Hall March 4 1909."

[On] 11th June 1909 Sharp and Kimber performed at a Fete in the Grounds of Chelsea Hospital before King Edward and Queen Alexandra. "When the performance was over their Majesties graciously intimated the pleasure they had received from it." Also appearing at the Fete were "Young ladies from Chelsea Physical Training College". Sharp had been instructing at Chelsea since 1908. It was during the summer of 1909 that the Board of Education agreed to recognise the dances as part of its course of physical exercise.

[On] 27th September 1909 a School of Morris Dancing was established in connection with the Physical Training Department of the S.W. Polytechnic Institute, Chelsea, with Cecil Sharp as the Director. Its purpose was "primarily to conserve the Morris dance in all its traditional purity; and secondly to teach it as accurately as possible to those who desire to become teachers themselves or professed teachers of it."

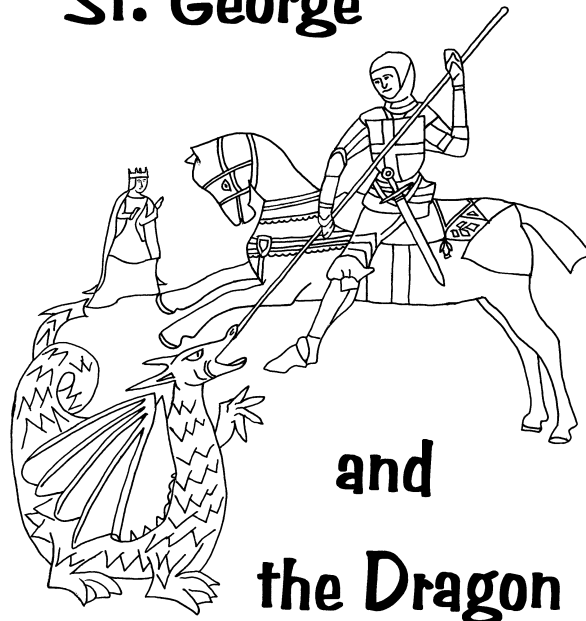
In March 1910 Mary Neal established the Esperance Guild of Morris Dancers in place of the Association for the Revival and Practice of Folk Music. At this point the differences of opinion between Sharp and Neal came clearly into the open.

Sharp wrote to the Morning Post (1 April) to disassociate himself from Esperance activities. "It is however obvious that if our folkdances are to be revived among the lettered classes it is of supreme importance that they should be taught by accredited instructors, and that only those dances should be disseminated which are the survivals of a genuine and unbroken tradition." On 23 April in a further letter, "the new society to be effective should include in its executive the expert as well as the philanthropist."

Maud Karpeles, in Mary Neal's obituary (EDS VIII 6 Jul/Aug 1944) discusses the reason for this breach, seeing it as the "clash of two dominant personalities". On the one hand Mary Neal saw it as "the age-long controversy, the difference between the form and the life, the pedant and those in touch with life itself." On the other, Sharp saw "the danger of enthusiasm that is uninformed. "Philanthropy and art have nothing in common, and to unite them spells disaster." "Mary Neal was essentially a philanthropist. She had a burning desire to bring happiness into the lives of others, and particularly those whose lot had fallen in drab and impoverished surroundings. Cecil Sharp was also a lover of his fellow-men for all his diatribes against philanthropy. His desire was to bring into their lives the forms of artistic expression which were their birthright. What Mary Neal mistook in him for pedantry was his reverence for tradition. Mary Neal believed that to acquire a technique was to take away from the enjoyment of the dances. Cecil Sharp believed that technique and artistry are body and soul, matter and spirit and that nearly all the troubles in the world come from the attempt to divorce the one from the other."

The future in Oxford as elsewhere lay with Sharp, but the work of Mary Neal and the Esperance Morris should by no means be forgotten.

St. George



Julian Whybra

INTRODUCTION

Mummers' Plays are a dramatic form of the Morris and were often accompanied by a Dance. There are numerous traditional Mummers' Plays, each one different and associated with a particular place and time for performance, a particularly representative one of which is St. George and the Dragon. This play was usually performed at Midwinter (the time of the winter solstice) and the traditional 'survivalist' view is that it evolved from and superseded an earlier traditional male, ritual Yuletide Play or festival dating perhaps from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in England in the mid-fifth century. From the arrival of Christianity in the late sixth century these plays were gradually adapted and 'cannibalised' into popular quasi-religious dramas,¹ what E. K. Chambers called, "*the detritus of heathen mythology and heathen worship, enduring with but little external change in the shadow of an hostile creed*".² Thus, say the 'survivalists', heathen folk-plays gave rise to a purely secular drama.³

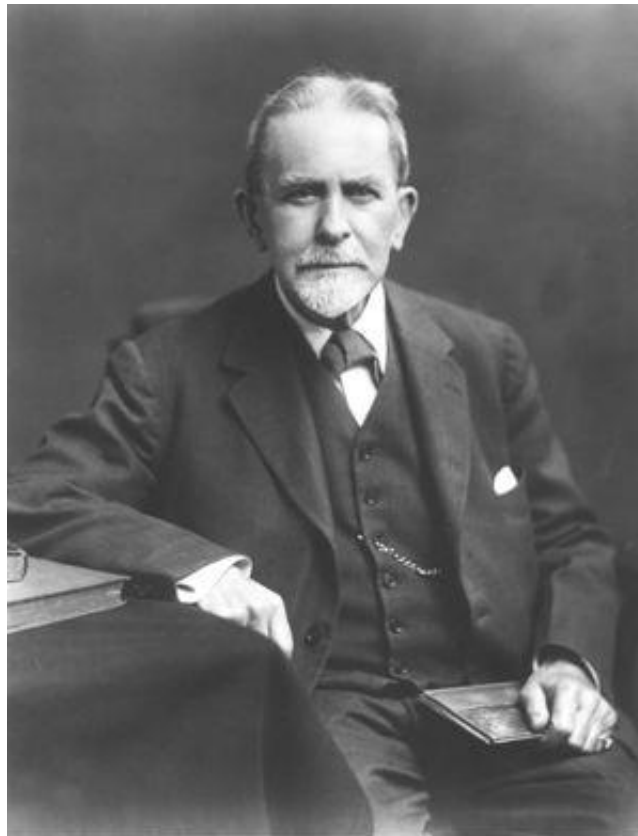
ANTHROPOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The origin of the words 'mumming' and 'mummer' can be traced back to Middle English *mum* ('silent'; still extant as in 'to keep mum') and probably beyond since Early New High German has *mummer* (as does Middle Dutch) 'disguised person', *vermummen* 'to wrap up, disguise or mask one's face', and Old French in 1192 has *momeor* 'masker or jester'.⁴ The word's early association with a disguised performance (*mummers* are known as *guisers* [dis-guisers] in certain parts of the country) or masquerade, can be found in one of John Lydgate's several poems on mummary composed in 1429:

*"Nowe filowepe a lettre...brought by a poursuyaunt in wyse of mommers desguysed to fore þe Mayre of London."*⁵

Although usually broadly comic, mumming has two underlying themes: duality (a belief in the complement or conflict between the benevolent and the malevolent, good and evil, light and darkness, summer or winter) and resurrection (generally stemming from a battle between two or more characters, representing the

duality). Some contemporary British 'revisionist' folklore writers suggest a late mediæval, non-'survivalist' origin for mumming as with Morris dancing (for which there is no evidence)⁶ whereas others and earlier British and European scholars and academics have been influenced by James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and other writers, who viewed these folk dramas as debased versions of a pre-Christian fertility ritual.⁷ There is no written evidence for the 'survivalist' theory either although there is a multitude of persuasive social anthropological, historical, literary and linguistic paradigms from across northern Europe where there are precedents in, and parallels with, secular north European folk-dramatic customs. All these customs date from the early mediæval period and contain



Sir James George Frazer (1854-91), founding father of modern social anthropology

Themes and influences from Germanic⁸ folk traditions of the pre-Christian era e.g. the *Fastnachtsspiele* of Germany & Austria (recorded >1430) and Switzerland (>1353),⁹ the Eddic dramas of Scandinavia (recorded >1270),¹⁰ the *Schembartlauf* of Nuremberg (>1449),¹¹ the *vikivakaleikir* of Iceland,¹² and Danish 'Twelfth Night' folk plays¹³, among others. Passion Plays (recorded >c. 1350)¹⁴ predominantly, but not exclusively, from Bavaria, Franconia, Switzerland, the Tyrol and other Austrian *Länder*, and even (Saxon) Transylvania, although devised for Christian festivals, borrowed heavily from heathen folk-dramas and demonstrate the adaptability of the latter to suit the former. The abundance of similar early examples would certainly appear to undermine 'revisionist' writers' theories. The 'survivalist' view of Mummers' Plays "*as the 'detritus' of primitive ritual reflects folklore's most decisive inheritance from nineteenth-century anthropology, the notion of cultural evolution*".¹⁵

Despite its persistent influence in other fields the prestige of *The Golden Bough* was relatively short-lived among anthropologists and the work became a target for any up-and-coming, next-generation anthropologist in the post-war rush to distance himself from James Frazer and his ilk. Some of his ideas were superseded, undermined or refuted by his detractors¹⁶ and his work was accused of being the result of casual observation rather than scientific fieldwork. E. R. Leach dismissed the "*massive futility*" of the quantity of

Frazer's work when set against the quality of its evidence;¹⁷ Joseph Fontenrose cast doubts on some of the factual evidence;¹⁸ and anthropologist William Bascom queried the proof of several of Frazer's hypotheses.¹⁹ The same refrain was subsequently taken up by folklorists who began to cast aspersions on Mummers' Plays' ritual origins.²⁰

Thomas Pettitt, whilst still critical, took a more balanced view:

"The history of folk drama clearly needs to be re-written, independently of any assumptions about its nature, origins or antiquity...a history established, in other words, using the same kinds of documentation and method deployed in writing the history of any other social or dramatic activity.

*A strictly historical approach, it should be emphasised, is as far from denying the ritual origins of English folk drama as from assuming them. Some traditional customs recorded in medieval or even modern times may well go back to the period of the Anglo-Saxon settlement or beyond, although that in itself does not make them any more 'pagan' than, say, wergild or the alliterative long line: the Angles, Saxons and Jutes were presumably capable of seasonal or occasional merriment for its own sake or for other than cultic purposes. Early literary sources and archaeological remains offer hints nonetheless that they and their Germanic forebears did practice ritual observances, some of which were designed to ensure fertility in crops and herds, and which may lie behind a shadowy cult of kingship which saw an intimate connection between the vigour of the ruler and the prosperity of his people and lands. There is even the intriguing possibility that it is the sacrificial victims of such rituals whose pickled corpses have been recovered from time to time from the peat-bogs of Northern Europe."*²¹

Whilst it is true that Pettitt's interest lay more in the legacy and effect of mumming's history on the development of modern drama than its origins, it is also the case that pre-Christian customs are very much alive and kicking in the twenty-first century: we still make pancakes at the end of 'solmonað', eggs and the hare (bunny) are still prominent during the festival of 'Eostre', and the holly, ivy and log still feature 'ærra geola', and so it goes on – even the names of Easter and Yule are constant reminders of what was...once...of what has been overlain. The same is true in Sweden, Germany, and other northern European lands. To assume the past is a slate wiped clean is ahistorical and to find glimpses of surviving vestiges from pre-recorded history is not only natural but to be expected. It is therefore too easy to be glib and dismissive of early social anthropologists' research and expertise.

More recently there have even been rearguard actions defending some of Frazer's hypotheses, made perhaps, in the realisation, that the anthropological baby might have been thrown out with the politically-correct bathwater.²²

*"...even if proved, the pre-Christian and ritual origins of a custom would reveal little about its nature and function at some later period relevant to the concerns of the social or theatre historian. Customs change over time in form and function, both naturally and in response to external factors...Even ritualist studies of folk drama have insisted that by the later Middle Ages it was merely a seasonal pastime, retaining at most some sense of being done 'for luck,' and 'by the time the [mummers' play] was considered worth reporting,' laments Alex Helm—that is by the eighteenth century—"the observance had decayed to such an extent that it was meaningless." So if the mummers' plays have been something other than ritual throughout their recorded history and during a good deal of their prehistory, then — applying the rigorous logic of C. S. Lewis: by identifying the plays, of which we do know quite a lot, with a pagan cult of which we otherwise know little, we have learnt something about the cult, not about the plays."*²³

Lewis was making the very point made earlier and unwittingly by Helm when he stated that Mummers' Plays were sources which "can throw light on the dark places of pre-history".²⁴

However, the hypothesis that the fledgling Church deliberately sought to counter, absorb and imitate through liturgical drama, an existing pagan ritual was not well advocated and did not win many converts. Unfortunately, among its supporters were post-1933 German academics which did Frazer's hypothesis no

favours. As with almost every other discipline from palaeontology to pedagogy their research was expected to reflect National Socialist ideology: anthropology was no exception. Thus Robert Stumpfl²⁵ and Otto Höfler²⁶ amended Frazer's 'survivalist' hypothesis with the appropriate ideological considerations. Even pre-1933, German anthropologists had begun to expound Frazer's cause in the same vein²⁷ but after the war their work was regarded as tainted, they all became personae non gratae, and *"are in consequence mentioned in post-war German scholarship only with embarrassment"*.²⁸ As a result of the Western world's continuing post-1918 tendency towards the polarisation of opinion and ideas not only has the tainted ideology been jettisoned but so too has much research that was valuable and valid. Certain aspects have however relatively recently begun to be taken seriously again and even held in esteem.²⁹

Likewise, the theory of folk plays' ritual origin has also recently staged a revival largely due to the research of the Records of Early English Drama project which suggests that they were a vital precursor of Elizabethan drama and speculates in terms reminiscent of Stumpfl that their ritual antecedent was a decisive contributing factor from the outset in providing a model for the church's liturgical drama.

*"It is possible, perhaps, that they reinvented the notion that dramatic presentation intensifies the effect of religious belief, or it is possible that they walked round the corner and watched a folk demonstration of this truth. Forms of Christian worship, from the church calendar to elements in the mass itself, being so closely based on pagan forms, it would be almost surprising if those pagan dramatic forms were not adapted to Christian worship. The heart of the men's play being the death and resurrection of the hero, it just might have occurred to a priest that he could similarly dramatise the death and resurrection of Christ."*³⁰

It is time then to re-evaluate the origins of English Mummers' Plays, and St. George and the Dragon in particular, with a view to establishing their antiquity.

HISTORICITY

In common with the St. George Mummers' Plays all the aforementioned early mediæval, north European folk-dramas have in terms of plot a central incident involving the killing and restoring to life of one (or more) of the characters. As each member of the cast appears, he introduces himself with a short speech, usually in rhyming couplets, in which he makes his own personal statement of intent. The principal characters, traditionally male, were a Hero (often the 'King'), his chief opponent ('the 'murdered' Man), the Fool, sometimes a 'Queen' figure (played by a man), and a Shaman or 'quack Doctor' whose main purpose was to restore the killed character to life.



Illustration of the Doctor and his Patient from Hans Sachs' Fastnachtsspiel, *Das Narrenschneiden* (The 'Foolotomy'), 1534.

The term 'mummer' has been used since mediæval times but no play scripts or performance details survive from that era. The earliest recorded play was performed by the "*munners of the court*" at the 1296 Christmas festivities and marriage of King Edward I's daughter.³¹ In 1347, 1348, and 1349 numbers of costumed mummers took part in performances for Edward III. The Guildhall 'Letter-Books' recorded among the 'Regulations made for the ensuing Feast of Christmas' in 1417 that:

*"It was ordered that proclamation shall be made on the morrow that no one shall go at night with a visor or false face. Also, that there shall be no mummyng during this Feast of Our Lord's Nativity"*³²

Moreover, in 1418 a 'Proclamation at Christmas, against Mimming, Plays, Interludes, and Visors; and that a Lantern shall be kept burning before each house' was made and applied to 'the Feast of Christmas' (Christmas fasting lasted from 12th November to 6th January), declaring that:

*"The Mair and Aldermen chargen on þe Kynges byhalf, and þis Cite, þat no manere persone, of what astate, degre, or condicioun þat euere he be, duryng þis holy tyme of Cristemes be so hardy in eny wyse to walk by nyght in eny manere mommyng, pleyes, enterludes, or eny oper disgisynges with eny feynyd berdis, peyntid visers, diffourmyd or colourid visages in eny wyse, up peyne of enprisonement of her bodyes, and macyng fyne aftir þe discrecioun of þe Mair and Aldremen; outake þat hit be leful to eche persone for to be honestly mery as he can, with in his owne hous dwellyng"*³³

There are a number of different mummers' plays; about 220 have survived, though not all are complete.³⁴ There is an account of (but no text from) a Mummers' Play performed in 1685 recorded in a later MS. in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.³⁵ However, the first piece of written text from a Play is a fragment: a speech by St. George, which survives from 1737³⁶ and mentions the Dragon; the first complete text comes from a Play entitled *Alexander and the King of Egypt* and is datable to 1746 x 1769.³⁷ Despite the latter's title the

play's four characters are Alexander, Prince George, the King of Egypt and the Doctor. The most comprehensive play including dances is the "*Morrice Dancers*" play from Revesby, Lincolnshire dated 20th October 1779: a St. George play complete with mechanical (apparently) dragon.³⁸ The late date of these surviving publications is hardly surprising given



St. George: In comes I, St. George, who's from old England sprung! I'll put to the sword all those who spoil our fun! Am I welcome or not?

that texts were performed orally, experienced aurally, and preserved between performances in the mummers' memories without the intervention of a script – a tradition which even in the legitimate theatre continued into the twentieth century.³⁹ It might also be remembered that William Caxton produced his first printed book in English only in 1474. About 70% of the surviving plays include Saint (often metamorphosed into Prince or King or another variant) George.

During the First Crusade (1096-99) St. George was adopted as the patron saint of soldiers after he was said to have appeared to the Crusader army at the Battle of Antioch in 1098. This and other stories made their way back to England and were further circulated by the troubadours. In 1192 the Crusader King Richard I visited St. George's tomb in Lydda while on the Third Crusade (1189-92) and, invoking his name, won a great victory over Saladin's armies at Arsouf and consequently placed himself and his army under St. George's protection. Although the banner of St. Edmund was still carried into battle, by the time of King Edward I (1272-1307) the banner of England's Patron, St. Edmund, had been joined by the banner of St. George. In 1349 the veneration of St. George allowed him to usurp the national patronage, although his title was never Patron but "*specyiel protectour and defendour of this royaume*" (special protector and defender of the realm). During the fourteenth century St. George began to be venerated among the common people as well as by the soldiery. This occurred largely due to the English asserting their identity against the Anglo-Normans after their oppression between 1066 and the fourteenth century: this was the century of Chaucer and Langland and the revival of the English tongue. A legend even developed that St. George had been posted to the Roman Army in Britannia at the end of the third century and he had therefore actually lived in England. The name 'St. George's Channel' was even given to that part of the Irish Sea by which, in the legend, George had sailed to England. Although mere legend, it illustrates the popular acceptance of the Saint. After all, St.

George had become a holy martyr by defying the establishment and that was what the English were doing under the Norman élite, which is why he met with a ready acceptance as Patron. In St. George there is indeed something of the finest part of the English national spirit, the spirit of David that stands up against Goliath, of the little island that stands up against the Continent.

In 1415 at the conclusion of the Hundred Years' War the English fought and beat the French at the Battle of Agincourt. According to legend St. George was said to have appeared above the battlefield to rally the English. The victory did much to cultivate the saint's veneration such that by the fifteenth century it had become truly nationwide: witness the words of 'A Carol of St. George', c. 1470:

*'Enfors we us with all our might
To love Seint George, our Lady['s] knight...
He keped the ma[i]d from dragon's dred,
And fraid all France and put to flight.
At Agincourt - the crowne cle ye red -
The French him see foremost in fight.
In his vertu he wol us lede
Againis the Fend, the f[o]ul wight,
And with his banner us oversprede,
If we him love with all oure might.'*⁴⁰

St. George had become a symbol of English national aspiration - an inspiration for the dauntless and the bold, the courteous and the kind, the noble and the self-sacrificing. After all, the flag of St. George, which was also adopted, is the flag of Jerusalem - the blood-red cross of sacrifice on the white background of nobility and purity; moreover it is also a symbol of victory over death. Even the 'English' rose, also adopted, is in fact the red rose which was brought back by the Crusaders from the Plain of Sharon, on which is situated the town of Lydda where St. George was martyred.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

In terms of the development of the early Mummers' Play, the Hero or King was displaced by St. George at the height of that saint's popularity in the public consciousness in the twelfth century. In transposing the rudiments of the St. George legend to the Play it is logical that the 'Queen' figure was replaced at the same time, or perhaps at a slightly later date,⁴¹ by the Princess whom St. George rescued from the Dragon. In the legend she is named Cleodolinda but in six surviving Play-texts is called 'Sabra'. Pertinently, the name Sabra (Arabic: صَابِرَة, *ṣābira*) is a tenacious, thorny desert plant (in English, the prickly pear, *Opuntia* cactus) with a thick skin that conceals a sweet, soft interior. It is also a female forename. It is possible that this name was also brought back by Crusaders and, being sufficiently foreign-sounding and suitably-anglicised, applied to the Play's character.

Her father, the King of Selene in the legend, alias the Play's King of Egypt, as a worthy initial opponent for St. George, sometimes took on the role of the 'murdered' Man. Sometimes instead, it was 'The Turkish Knight' often named 'Bold Slasher'. Interestingly, the origin of 'Bold Slasher', may come from the same source as 'Sabra'. A small number of Welsh soldiers took part in the First and Second, as many as 3,000 participated in the Third, and considerable numbers in subsequent Crusades.⁴² The Welsh word *Slasiar* (pronounced */ˈslaːsˈar/* almost the same as English 'Slasher'), meaning a 'fine figure of a man' or colloquially a 'handsome chap', may well have been an epithet applied to the Saracens by



Slasher: I'll fight St. George who is my foe and make him yield before I go. Am I welcome or not?

Welsh soldiers. Given the English meaning implying a fierce warrior, it might then have been taken up by English soldiers as a nickname for the enemy. Additionally, the name may have received reinforcement as a result of the massive exodus of Welsh intelligentsia to London⁴³ from the late fifteenth century onwards in expectation of preferment, following the usurpation of the throne by the Welsh Henry Tudor as Henry VII. By the time of Shakespeare's professional working life (1588-1616) playwrights were incorporating a surprising volume of Welsh words and dialogue into plays being performed on the London stage,⁴⁴ evidently a passing nod to the numbers of Welshmen the playwrights knew would be in their audience. Given this combined background it would not be surprising if 'Slasher' had also worked its way on to the street into the populist Mummers' Plays.⁴⁵ Thus the character of 'The Turkish Knight' took on the function of the stereotypical 'bogeyman' and entered the national psyche in England certainly from the time of King Richard I's Third Crusade (1189-1192) if not earlier:⁴⁶ witness the number of inns named 'The Turk's (or Saracen's) Head'. Doubtless 'The Turkish Knight' became a stock character at the same time as, and as the antithesis to, St. George. Later crusades and the ascendancy of the Ottoman Empire reinforced this view.⁴⁷

In some Plays the original Shaman character became the Doctor but in others Father Christmas; sometimes both have evolved in the same play. An Animal element in Mummers' Plays became separated out as a Dragon and/or a Hobby Horse. The Dragon is recorded 16 times in early mumming texts. Perhaps there had once been a primitive play about dragon-slaying which was whitewashed by introducing St. George as the slayer or, as part of the St. George legend, the Dragon was incorporated into the plays at the same time as the arrival of the legend of St. George. The evidence for such exists for there are other types of Mummers' Plays which involve the (ritual) slaying or sacrifice of an animal.⁴⁸ The Fool remained throughout as narrator, explainer, the audience's conscience, confidant and guide to the action.



The Dragon: I'm the great dragon with my fire and smoke. I'll poison your children and make you all choke

Perceptions change with the passage of time and the portrayal of St. George's was no exception: "*In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries...in folk custom and prose romance, St. George was usually represented as a complicated and ambiguous figure. He was no Saint*"⁴⁹ and "[a]fter the seventeenth century the figure of England's patron saint became a cartoon-like super-hero, a distillation of aristocratic values".⁵⁰ Thus, later in the eighteenth century, with three successive English Kings called George, King (or Prince) George was substituted for the 'King' character or St. George. In some Plays the characters of St. George and Sabra metamorphosed into the popular folk heroes Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Likewise the King of Egypt/Bold Slasher the Turkish Knight sometimes became in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a Soldier or a character called the Bold Roamer, found in even more corrupt forms as Ball Roomer, Bulgard (from Bulgar, then synonymous with Turk), Boldgier, Turkey Snipe or The Churlish Knight. A late incidental addition to the cast as performed at Christmas is Little Johnny Jack, an aimless and shambolic figure with rag dolls stitched on to his tattered clothes appearing at the end. His few lines provide the clue for his *raison d'être*:

*In comes I, Little Johnny Jack,
With my wife and my children on my back.
My family's large, and my wife is small,
And I am the father of them all.
Roast beef, plum pudding and mince pie.
Who likes them better than Father Christmas and I?
Nobody!
A jug of Christmas ale, sir, will make our voices ring,
Money in our pockets is a very good thing.
So, ladies and gentlemen, be at your ease,
And give us poor Mummers just what you please.*

A significant feature of Mummers' plays is that traditionally all the players were disguised with (animal) masks or blackened faces, and long strips of coloured cloth or ribbon. This was based on the belief that mummers must be anonymous, their identity utterly submerged in that of the characters depicted, otherwise their 'magic' would not be effective.

THE PLOT THICKENS

The basic plot had evolved as the presentation by the Fool of St. George as an English hero which he proves by vanquishing all comers namely, first, Bold Slasher the Turk (who is revived by the Doctor), secondly, the King of Egypt (the father of Princess Sabra), and lastly, the Dragon (as a reward for which, St. George wins the hand of Sabra in marriage). Traditionally all the actors were male and each one always introduced himself with the words:

In comes I,Am I welcome or not?

In terms of Christianity the story of St. George and the Dragon is allegorical and rich in symbolism. The Dragon represents the devil and the passions (and also the pagan Roman Empire and its Emperors), St. George and the white horse represent the grace of God, the Princess represents the captive soul (and, being virginal, Mary), the King represents the human mind, the City represents mankind, and the Princess's girdle represents moderation and virtue: all stock representations one would expect to find in a liturgical play. Mummers' Plays in general and St. George and the Dragon in particular provided a useful means of reinforcing Christian doctrine in a light-hearted way among the common people outside the Church and so were never discouraged or banned; hence their survival.

The Mummers' Play contains all the characters from the St. George legend – St. George, the King and his daughter, and the Dragon. The St. George and the Dragon Mummers' Play plot differs significantly from the legend of St. George and from Miracle and other religious plays which feature him and his life because the story line and characters stem from a far older pagan tradition which is in keeping with other known Mummers' Plays.

First, in the legend St. George does not marry Sabra, the King of Egypt's daughter. Secondly, the haggling, boastful Doctor who drives a hard bargain does not appear in the legend at all.⁵¹ Thirdly, St. George, in the legend and associated stories and plays, slays the Dragon and in no case is himself killed; in some Mummers' Plays he is killed as often as he conquers. In some plays the combat is a *mêlée* amid general slaughter and in others the Dragon might not even appear at all. The conclusion is that this incident is overlaid on some older story, which evidently did not place any particular emphasis on the death of any particular person(s). Fourthly, all persons who are killed are brought back to life (by the Doctor) which is the one constant and central incident of all the St. George Mummers' Plays. In none of the liturgical or English guild plays does such an incident or even the remotest hint of it occur which might provide a clue as to its origin.

Frazer's (and others')⁵² theory was that the origin of revivification was to be found in social anthropology, folklore, and surviving ancient customs:

*"The general explanation which we have been led to adopt of these and many similar ceremonies is that they are, or were in their origin, magical rites intended to ensure the revival of nature in spring. The means by which they were supposed to effect this end were imitation and sympathy."*⁵³

These four key differences between the St. George Mummers' and Other Plays may be *"in accordance with the folk-feeling of the appropriate ending, or it may come from a form of the story which the churchly legend displaced."*⁵⁴

Man's primary need was food and his attention was centred upon those natural phenomena which appeared to him to control or influence the growth and increase of the plants and animals upon which his very existence depended. He perceived that there was a rhythm to the scheme of nature; that season followed season in an orderly sequence; that growth was succeeded by decay, to be followed, in due course, by a period of renewed life. And thus he came to realise that decay or death was a condition preceding a renewal of vitality; that winter must precede spring, just as night must come before day, and sleep at night before

exercise during the day. Hence the need was felt of actively doing something to promote this scheme, especially at that period of the year (midwinter) when the forces of nature were at their lowest ebb. The resulting rite was based upon the principle of mimetic magic, the concept that like produced like, and the notion that the best means of producing a desired effect, otherwise beyond man's control, was to give the best imitation of it possible. In this particular case, therefore, the magic rite took the form of a mock death followed by a mock resurrection, in imitation of the cyclic death of the Old Year and its rebirth as the New.

Mummers' Plays are thus a form of the Morris with a common origin. The origin and meaning of the dance-cum-playlet was originally quasi-religious or magical in character, the purport of which was to promote the fertility of the soil and of all living things, and to guarantee the cycle of the seasons and the return of the spring. The rite helped nature; nature was in a measure dependent on the rite. Its central act was the ritual mock 'killing' and subsequent restoration to life of a man who, from the character of his dress and other considerations, represented, apparently, the natural world. The rôle of the Doctor was to enable through mimesis this to happen: the dead return to life just as the earth returns to fruitfulness.



Taking a 'bough': Mayflower Morris Men present their Mummers' Play annually on the nearest Saturday to St. George's Day. Little Johnny Jack's outstretched arm and collecting-box can be seen on the extreme left.

SUMMARY

In conclusion it may be said that there exists a variety of early mediæval, secular north European, folk-dramatic customs which lend support to the 'survivalist' hypothesis. Many of these have their origins in pre-Christian folk-plays which may have involved mimetic, ritual observances designed to promote the fertility of the land. Evidence exists that the first Papal mission to these shores specifically instructed its servants not to ban heathen festivals or customs but to incorporate them into Christian practice. The word 'mummer' is first recorded in the twelfth century as is the entry of St. George (and other characters) into public consciousness. 'Mumming' as a dramatic activity is first mentioned in the thirteenth century and with the survival of more hand-written and printed documents it appeared with increasing frequency even among more mundane records. For example, in 1575 "*Geoffrey Cole of Great Burstead*" appeared before the Church court because "*on Twelfthtide last (6th January), being abroad with others a-mumming and being late abroad about midnight, lying upon a bed in Sweting's house. Magdalen Wade was found sitting upon the bed, but no evil committed, as he saith*".⁵⁵ The first account of a Play comes from the seventeenth and the first text

from the eighteenth centuries. The rest, as it is said, is history. As the centuries have passed, events and characters have been absorbed into the performance but the essence of the plot, the action and many of the traditional lines have remained intact.

The feeling of profundity that the Play's magic creates, even now, makes us realise that above and beyond the venal, greedy, shallow, nonsensical, and depressing follies of human existence, there are forces larger than us, things we cannot control, the unchanging ebb and flow of tides and phases of the moon, a universe demanding awe and respect. It puts us in our place, whether we like it or not. A Mummers' Play is the physical equivalent of eternal verities rather than passing fads, and the street is absolutely the right place for it.

Originally an expression of religious belief, the Mummers' Play has passed by various stages into the 'quaint' folk display seen today. It has outlived its original purpose, it has been reduced by Civilisation to take the shape it is today. That it has survived till now is wonderful enough, given its antiquity and its fragility. Yet, even though the words and the plots of the various Plays are often confused and overlaid with additions from subsequent eras, the meaning is still plain: the depiction of the battle between light and darkness and the ultimate triumph of the light. Good overcomes Evil. What better message!

FOOTNOTES

¹ The heathen King Æðelberht of Kent welcomed Pope Gregory I's mission under Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Augustine landed on the Isle of Thanet in Kent in 597 and Æðelberht became the first Anglo-Saxon king to embrace Christianity. It was significant that Æðelberht was also *bretwalda* or overlord of the other English realms, facilitating the introduction of Christianity beyond Kent. As Augustine's mission expanded it came up against the existing heathen religion, its traditions, festivals and holy places. Augustine sought advice from Pope Gregory I as to how he should confront the problem and received the reply:

"Tell Augustine that he should by no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within those temples. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if those temples are well-built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God...Thus, seeing that their places of worship are not destroyed, the people will banish error from their hearts and come to places familiar and dear to them in acknowledgement and worship of the true God...since it has been their custom to slaughter oxen in sacrifice, they should receive some solemnity in exchange. Let them...on the day of the dedication of their churches...celebrate the occasion with religious feasting. They will sacrifice...not any more as an offering to the devil, but for the glory of God...Thus, if they are not deprived of all exterior joys, they will more easily taste the interior ones. For surely it is impossible to efface all at once everything from their strong minds..." (Bede, The Venerable, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ch. 30 'A copy of the Letter which Pope Gregory sent to the Abbot Mellitus, then going to Britain', [usually known as the *Libellus responsionum*, ('little book of answers') dated 22nd June 601, a papal letter responding to Augustine's questions]. Bede solicited help from Noðhelm at Canterbury in forwarding the papal letters).

A policy of pragmatism meant heathen places of worship would be re-used because people were already used to worshipping there; heathen festivals would not be banned but adapted; pagan holy days would accommodate Christian ones; and so on. Thus, wherever barbarians were received into the Church, it was forced to admit acting, even at its very altars. Converts were no doubt indifferent to secular drama but they were evidently obstinately attached to religious drama. As to why the Church allowed these dramatic representations to continue, the answer is that:

"...to the mass of converts of the Teutonic peoples religion was so intimately connected with dramatic representations that the Teutonic priest sought drama in the Christian liturgy and introduced it where he could, in response to an overwhelming demand...The places where religious drama first crops up – England,

North France and Germany - sufficiently indicates its connection with the Teutonic peoples." (Phillpotts, Bertha S., *The Elder Edda and the Ancient Scandinavian Drama*, [Cambridge, 1920], pp. 208).

² Chambers, E. K., *The Mediæval Stage*, (Oxford, 1903, reprinted 1967), vol. 1 (of 2), p. 94.

³ For religious drama in the Anglo-Saxon period see Gayley, Charles Mills, 'An Historical View of the Beginnings of English Comedy' in Gayley, C. M., (ed.), *Representative English Comedies, Specimens of the Pre-Shakespearean Drama*, (Boston, 1900), vol. I, p. xxvii (and xix-xxvi); Phillpotts, *Op. cit.*, p. 209; Waterhouse, Osborn, *Non-Cycle Mystery Plays*, E.E.T.S., (1909), p. 10; Bedingfield, Marvin Bradford, 'Dramatic ritual and preaching in late Anglo-Saxon England', D.Phil. thesis, *University of Oxford*, 1999 and *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England*, (Woodbridge, 2002).

⁴ All etymologies are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Note that for several decades in the late 14th century 'mum' had the additional meaning (in western Europe) of 'a game of dice'.

⁵ MacCracken, Henry Noble (ed.), *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II*, E.E.T.S., no. 192, (London, 1934), p. 695.

⁶ Detailed statistical examination using the sociologist's technique of seriation-graphing of the frequency of the word 'Morris' in the written record by statistician John Forrest (Forrest, John, *The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750*, [Cambridge, 1999]) did not prove that Morris dancing does not have ancient or pagan origins. It demonstrated nothing more than the paucity of the written record in general before the late 1450s. A similar exercise might be done with the words 'snowman' or 'football' with similar result. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first recorded use of those words in English is 1827 and 1409 respectively. It would be ludicrous to deduce on the basis of recorded usage that neither word nor concept existed before those dates: children have made snowmen and played a form of football from time immemorial. Forrest's developmental 'history' did not search for the origins of the Morris; instead, he analysed documented Morris-dance events. Indeed, post-publication he was obliged to ante-date his book's own title by ten years when he discovered an even earlier reference to Morris in an inventory from Caister Castle, Caister-on-Sea, Norfolk dating from 31st October 1448 (Heaney, John and Forrest, John, 'An Antedating for the 'Morris Dance', *Notes and Queries*, [2002], volume 49, pp. 190-193). No doubt the earliest date will continue to be pushed backwards in time. Thus, Forrest's book merely reflected trends in recording and financial support; it did not reflect how, when and where Morris was performed and certainly not why.

⁷ Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, (1st ed. London, 2 vols., 1890; 2nd ed. 3 vols., 1900; 3rd ed., 12 vols., 1916-15; abridgement 1 vol., 1922); Chambers, *Op. cit.*; Phillpotts, *Op. cit.*; Grimm, Jacob, *Deutsche Mythologie*, (1st ed. Göttingen, 1835, 4th ed. Berlin, 3 vols., 1875-78); Tylor, E. B., *Primitive Culture*, (London, 1871); Mannhardt, Wilhelm, *Wald- und Feldkulte*, (1st ed. Berlin, 1875, 2nd ed. 1904); Tiddy, R. J. E., *The Mummers' Play*, (Oxford, 1923); James, E. O., *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*, (London, 1961). Hyman, Stanley Edgar, 'Myth, Ritual and Nonsense', *Kenyon Review*, (1949), vol. 11, pp. 455-475 and 'The Ritual View of Myth and the Mythic', in Sebeok, Thomas (ed.), *Myth: A Symposium*, (Bloomington, 1955, repr. 1968), pp. 89-94; Hunnigher, Bernard, *The Origin of the Theatre*, (The Hague, 1955).

For the St. George and the Dragon Mummers' Play in particular see Beatty, Arthur, 'The St. George, or Mummers, Plays: A Study in the Protology of the Drama', *The Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, (1906), 15, Pt. 2, pp. 273-324; Chambers, E. K., *The English Folk-Play*, (Oxford, 1933); and Liebler, Naomi Conn, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: the ritual foundation of a genre*, (London, 1995), p. 159 et seq.

Where the academics led, the folklorists followed, e.g. Murray, Margaret, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, (Oxford, 1921), *The God of the Witches*, (London, 1931), and *The Divine King in England*, (London, 1954); Kennedy, Douglas, 'Observations on the Sword Dance and Mummers' Play', *J.E.F.D.S.*, (1930), 2nd series, pp.

23-38 and 'Dramatic Elements in the Folk Dance', *J.E.F.D.S.S.*, (1949-51), 6th series, pp. 1-7; Drake-Carnell, F. J., *Old English Customs and Ceremonies*, (London, 1938); Dean-Smith, Margaret, 'The Life-Cycle or Folk Play: Some Conclusions Following an Examination of the Ordish Papers and Other Sources', *Folklore*, (December 1958), vol. 69, no. 4, pp. 237-53 and 'An Unromantic View of the Mummers' Plays', *Theatre Record*, (1966), vol. 8, pp. 89-99; Green, Robert J., 'Some Notes on the St. George Play', *Theatre Survey*, (1968), vol. 9, pp. 21-35; Malin, Stephen B., 'Character Origins in the English Folk Play', Dissertation, *University of Florida*, (1968); Brody, Alan, *The English Mummers and their Plays*, (London, 1969); Pickering, J. V., 'The Medieval Folk Drama', Dissertation, *University of California*, (1971); Kirby, E. K., 'The Origins of the Mummers' Play', *Journal of American Folklore* (1971), vol. 84, no. 333, pp. 275-288, and 'Mummers' Plays and the Calendar', *Journal of American Folklore*, (1973), vol. 86, no. 341, pp. 282-5; Cawte, E. C., 'More of the Mummers' Play', *Journal of American Folklore*, (1972), vol. 85, no. 338, pp. 375-6 and 'Even More About the Mummers' Play', *Journal of American Folklore*, (1974), vol. 87, no. 345, pp. 250-252; Whitlock, Ralph, *In Search of Lost Gods: A Guide to British Folklore*, (London, 1979); Helm, Alex, *The English Mummers' Play*, (Cambridge, 1980).

⁸ To clarify the terminology, Germanic folk tradition refers to the ethno-linguistic Indo-European group of northern European origin (often called Teutonic, Suebian (Swabian), or Gothic in older literature) broadly covering the area where (a) English, Dutch & Flemish, Frisian, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese languages and dialects are or were spoken and where (b) customs, traditions, and mythologies associated with the Germanic group apply.

⁹ Surviving examples from Germany-Austria come from Nuremberg, Lübeck, Cologne, Windsheim, the Tyrol, Glogau and Thorn (now Głogów and Toruń, Poland), among others: see Hartnoll, Phyllis and Found, Peter, 'Fastnachtsspiel' in *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1996) and von Keller, Adelbert, 'Fastnachtspiele aus dem fünfzehnten Jahrhundert', 4 vols., (1853-1858) in *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins Stuttgart*. Swiss examples come from Altdorf, Basel, Bern, Freiburg (Fribourg), Lausanne, Luzern, Winterthur, and Zürich: see Dill, Mats, 'Fastnachtspiele' in Kotte, Andreas, (ed.), *Theaterlexikon der Schweiz*, (Zürich 2005), vol. 1, pp. 561-562. Their connections and parallels with early English folkloric drama are discussed in Pettitt, Thomas, 'English Folk Drama and the Early German Fastnachtspiele', *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 13, (1982), pp. 1-34.

¹⁰ Surviving examples come from Lejre and Salhaugar in Sjælland (Denmark), Uppsala (Sweden), and Skiringssal, the Oplandede district, the Sætersdal valley, the county of Telemark (south Norway), and Iceland: see Phillpotts, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 206-212) and Gunnell, Terry, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, (Woodbridge, 1995), p. 184.

¹¹ More than eighty *Schembartbücher* or 'maskedbeard-books' survive. These are richly-illustrated manuscripts which describe chronologically the Nuremberg *Schembartlauf* from 1449 to 1530. The majority of them are in the *Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg*; thirty-five are located in Nuremberg libraries; thirty are in other German cities' libraries and museums; and a few are abroad: see Sumberg, Samuel L. *The Nuremberg Schembart Carnival*, (New York, 1941), p. 127; Kinser, Samuel, 'Why Is Carnival So Wild?' in Eisenbichler, Konrad, (ed.) *Carnival and the Carnavalesque: The Fool, the Reformer, the Wildman, and Others in Early Modern Theater*, (Amsterdam, 1999), p. 64; Wiseman, Stefanie H., 'The Nuremberg Schembartlauf and the Art of Albrecht Dürer', *The Cerise Press*, (Spring 2010), vol. 1, issue 3, pp. 1-4 (<http://www.cerisepress.com/01/03/the-nuremberg-schembartlauf-and-the-art-of-albrecht-durer/view-all>); Husband, Timothy and Gilmore-House, Gloria, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, (New York, 1980).

¹² Gunnell, *Op. cit.*, p. 144 et seq.

¹³ Denmark has a few surviving folk plays associated with *Helligtrekongers* and *Knutsaften* about the time of Plough Monday from the island of Als and Valsøllille, Sjælland. These have some similarities with English Mummers' Plough Plays. See Olrik, A., 'Træk af hedensk Dyrkelse', *Gads Magasin*, (1926), p. 572; Møller, J. S., *Fester og Høgtideri gamle Dage: Skildringer fra Norvestsjælland med Forsøg paa Tydninger: II Bind: Arets*

Fester, (Holbæk, 1933), p. 140; and Millington, P. T., 'The Origins of Plough Monday', a paper delivered 20th October 1979 at the *Traditional Drama 1979 Conference, University of Sheffield* (updated 1980) and, conflated, at www.petemillington.uk/ploughmonday/Origins.php#notes.

¹⁴ Surviving traditional German Passion Plays include those from Frankfurt am Main (>c.1350), Oberammergau (a composite of four distinct manuscripts dating from at least the 1400s, performed in its present form since 1634), and elsewhere including Alsfeld, Friedberg, Künzelsau, Donaueschingen, Augsburg, Freising, Freiburg im Breisgau, two in Latin from Benediktbeuern (early 13th-century) all in Germany, Luzern and St. Gallen (Switzerland, the latter early 14th-century), Vorderthiersee and Brixlegg (both in the Tyrol), Tressdorf im Mölltal (Carinthia), Vienna (Lower Austria), Sterzing, Bozen and Brixen (South Tyrol now Italy), Eger and Hörtitz (Bohemia, now Cheb and Hořice na Šumavě, Czech Republic), and Laak an der Zaier (now Škofja Loka, Slovenia).

"...[I]n Germany there are resemblances between the Passion Plays and the Fastnachtsspiele, showing that one must have borrowed from the other. The significance... lies in the fact that the Fastnachtsspiele are derived from popular customs" (Tisdell, Frederick M., 'The Mystery Plays', *Journal of English and German Philology*, [1903-05], pp. 323-340). With characters like Master Grobianus, with his coarse and obscene jests, and Mary Magdalene, offering additional opportunities for sexual innuendo, the content, even though lively humour was matched by serious thought, was such that eventually and over time the ecclesiastical authorities forbade the plays' production, e.g. even in 1471 the bishop of Havelberg commanded his clergy to suppress the plays in their parish districts because of the disgraceful and irrelevant farces interspersed through the productions. See Friedman, Saul S., *The Oberammergau Passion Play: a lance against civilisation*, (Carbondale, 1984); Sellar, Alexander Craig, 'The Passion-Play in the Highlands of Bavaria', *Blackwood's Magazine*, (1870), Bd. 107, pp. 381-396; Blackburn, Henry, *Art in the Mountains: the story of the Passion Play*, (London, 1870); [Yates, Joseph Brooks], 'On the holy plays of or mysteries of the middle ages, with an account of a sacred drama which was performed in the year 1840 at Oberammergau in upper Bavaria', *The Christian Teacher*, (1841), vol. 3, no. 12, pp. 150-160; Buckland, Anne Walbank, 'Ober Ammergau and its People in connection with the Passion Play and miracle plays in general: a paper read before the Bath Literary and Philosophical Association, June 12th 1872', (London, 1893); Wackernell, J. E., *Altdeutsche Passionsspiele aus Tirol*, (Graz, 1897). The Benediktbeuern Passion Play is printed in Schmeller, Johann Andreas, *Carmina Burana*, (Stuttgart, 1847) and in Froning, R., *Das Drama des Mittelalters*, (Stuttgart, 1891), vol. 1, p. 284 et seq.

¹⁵ Pettitt, Tom, 'When the Golden Bough Breaks: Folk Drama and the Theatre Historian', *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2005), p. 2.

¹⁶ Prominent among them have been Leach, E. R., 'The Epistemological Background to Malinowski's Empiricism', in Firth R. (ed.), *Man and Culture. An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, (London, 1957), pp. 119-138 and 'Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?', *Daedalus*, (1961), vol. 90, no. 2, pp. 371- 387; Fontenrose, J., *The Ritual Theory of Myth*, (Berkeley, 1966); Bascom, William R., 'The Myth-Ritual Theory', *Journal of American Folklore*, (1957), vol. 70, no. 276, pp. 104-114 and 'Folklore and Anthropology', *Journal of American Folklore*, (1953), vol. 66, no. 262, pp. 283-90 (repr. in Dundes, Alan [ed.], *The Study of Folklore*, [Englewood Cliffs, 1965], pp. 25-33); Lienhardt, Godfrey, *Social Anthropology*, (London, 1964), pp. 33-4; Lévi-Strauss, Claude (trans. C. Jacobsen), *Structural Anthropology*, (Harmondsworth, 1968, repr. 1972), pp. 206-7; and Douglas, Mary, 'Judgements on James Frazer', *Daedalus*, (1978), vol. 107, no. 1, pp. 151-164. Broadly-speaking these authors' writings and opinions reflected the political landscape and mainstream social anthropological thought of the post-war decades in Britain and America. Interestingly many of Frazer's contemporaries and fellow-travellers did not receive similar treatment, Phillpotts, *Op. cit.*, for example, has remained virtually unassailable. However, unfounded criticism continues to this day. For example, Testa, Alessandro, ' "Fertility" and the Carnival 2: Popular Frazerism and the Reconfiguration of Tradition in Europe Today', *Folklore*, (June 2017), vol. 128, pp. 111-132, argues that Frazer posited that all "European cultural traditions...were to be included in the macro-category of springtime festivities in which propitiatory magical rituals were performed for the fertility of the fields". Nowhere in his work did Frazer make such a claim. Testa

then proceeds to knock down this self-constructed ivory tower by debunking two European carnival festivals: *Carneval* from Castelnuovo al Volturno, Italy and *Masopust* from Hlinsko v Čechách in the Czech Republic. The former dates from no earlier than the late nineteenth century, the latter is a long-standing, well-documented, mediæval festival. Both were 'hijacked' in the 1980s and 1990s respectively and provided with a collective, imaginary, new interpretation of the old rite and its function. What Testa calls "*popular Frazerism*" and others have labelled 'cultural bricolage' or 'cultural-heritage-making' has enabled these festivals through "*power confrontations*" and "*political positioning*" to "*acquire Frazerian properties*". In other words, aspects of ritual fertility have been invented and symbolic structures have been created, then attached to them. This cynical manipulation has been laid at Frazer's door. Yet Frazer used neither of these two examples in his research and neither is an example of Germanic folklore (being Roman and Slavic respectively). Both provide a convenient stick with which to beat Frazer despite his being innocent of the 'crime'.

¹⁷ Leach, *Op. cit.*, (1957), p. 121.

¹⁸ Fontenrose, *Op. cit.*, pp. 8-11.

¹⁹ Bascom, *Op. cit.*, (1965) p. 31.

²⁰ Abrahams, Roger D, 'Folk Drama', in Dorson R. M. (ed.), *Folklore and Folk Life: An Introduction*, (Chicago, 1972), pp. 351-62; Boyes, Georgina, 'Social Bases of Tradition: The Limitations of "The Search for Origins"', in Green, A. E. and Widdowson, J. D. A. (eds.), *Language, Culture and Tradition*, (Sheffield, 1981), pp. 77-87, 'Excellent Examples: The Influence of Exemplar Texts on Traditional Drama Scholarship', *Traditional Drama Studies*, (1985), vol. 1, pp. 21-30, 'Cultural Survivals Theory and Traditional Customs. An Examination of the Effects of Privileging on the Form and Perception of Some English Calendar Customs', *Folk Life*, (1988), vol. 26, pp. 5-11; Cawte, E. C., ' "It's an Ancient Custom" - But How Ancient?' in Buckland, Theresa and Wood, Juliette (eds.), *Aspects of British Calendar Customs*, (Sheffield, 1993), pp. 37-56.

²¹ Pettitt, *Op. cit.*, pp. 14-15. For ritual sacrifices found in peat bogs and their implications see Davidson, Hilda Ellis, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Harmondsworth, 1964), ch. 4; Glob, P. V. (trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford), *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, (London, 1969); Chaney, William A., *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*, (Berkeley, 1970).

²² Haugen, Einar, 'The Edda as Ritual: Odin and his Masks', in Glendinning, R. J., and Bessason, H. (eds.), *Edda. A Collection of Essays*, (Winnipeg, 1983), pp. 3-24 defended the suggestion of an ancient Germanic ritual drama preserved within the Elder Edda (Phillpotts, *Op. cit.*); The pre-Christian origins of Scandinavian drama is massively documented and persuasively argued in Gunnell, *Op. cit.*; ritual perspectives have been much to the fore in some European folkloric studies, see Ginzburg, Carlo (trans. John and Anne Tedeschi), *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (London, 1983) and Rey-Flaud, Henri, *Le charivari: les rituels fondamentaux de la sexualité*, (Paris, 1985).

²³ Pettitt, *Op. cit.*, p. 16. He was quoting from Helm, *Op. cit.*, p. 4 and Lewis, C. S., 'The Anthropological Approach', in Davis, Norman and Wrenn, C. L., *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien*, (London, 1962), pp. 219-230.

²⁴ Helm, *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁵ Stumpfl, Robert, *Kultspiele der Germanen als Ursprung des Mittelalterlichen Dramas*, (Berlin, 1936). He suggested that the source of the drama grafted on to the liturgy was not so much a fertility ritual as the initiation-rites of Teutonic warrior-brotherhoods. It was left for the reader to fill in the dots to find parallels with the Hitler Youth movement. See Michael, W. F., 'Das deutsche Drama und Theater vor der Reformation. Ein Forschungsbericht', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, (1957), issue 31, pp. 106-153.

- ²⁶ Höfler, Otto, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*, (Berlin, 1934) and 'Das germanische Kontinuitätsproblem', *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 157, H. 1, (1938), pp. 1-26.
- ²⁷ For example, greatly influential was a lecture by Rudolf Much at the University of Vienna on 14th February 1928 entitled 'Georg Hüsing, die deutschen Hochzeiten' for the *Akademischer Verein der Germanisten*.
- ²⁸ Pettitt, *Op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ²⁹ See Dow, James R. and Lixfeld, Hannjost (eds. and trans.), *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*, (Bloomington, 1994); Diller, Hans-Jürgen (trans. Frances Wessels), *The Middle English Mystery Play*, (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 13-22; McKinnell, John, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*, (Cambridge, 2005).
- ³⁰ Wasson, John, 'The Morality Play: Ancestor of Elizabethan Drama', *Comparative Drama*, (1979), issue 13, pp. 210-21 and 'Karl Young and the Vernacular Drama', *R.O.R.D.*, (1984), issue 27, pp. 151-55 at p. 154.
- ³¹ *British Library*, The Royal Wardrobe Books, 25 Edward I, f.6.b. Princess Elizabeth (of Rhuddlan) Plantagenet (7th August 1282-5th May 1316) married Jan I, Count of Holland at the priory church of Ipswich on Monday, 8th January 1297 (Rymer, Thomas, *Fœdera...*, [1704-13], vol. i [of xvi], p. 850; the 'Collectanea' of John Leland (now *Bodleian Library*, MSS. Top. gen. c.1-3; *British Library*, Add. MS 38132, first published by Hearne, Thomas, *Joannis Lelandi Antiquarii De Rebus Collectaneorum*, [Oxford, 1715], vol. I [of vi], p. 180).
- ³² *British Library*, Guildhall Letter-Books, 5 Henry V, A.D. 1417, Journal 1, folio xli, (in Riley, H. T. [ed.], *Memorials of London and London Life in the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries*, [London, 1868], p. 658).
- ³³ *British Library*, Guildhall Letter-Books, 6 Henry V, A.D. 1418, Journal I, folio ccxxiii, printed in Chambers, R. W. and Daunt, M., *A Book of London English, 1384-1425*, (London, 1931), pp. 96-97 and in Riley, *Op. cit.*, p. 669.
- ³⁴ Millington, Peter, The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays (*University of Sheffield*, Ph.D. thesis, 2002). See his *Historical Database of Folk Play Scripts* available on <http://www.folkplay.info/Texts/77tf26al.htm>
- ³⁵ Smith Clark, W., *The Early Irish Stage*, (Oxford, 1955), pp. 4-5.
- ³⁶ Brice, Andrew, *The Mobyad, or Battle of the Voice*, (London, 1770), p. 90. The reference is in a poem and alludes to its hero's showing more decorum than the "Christmas Mummer" also called "England's Heroe" (i.e. St. George). The editor added the footnote:

"At Christmas are (or at least very lately were) Fellows wont to go about from House to House in Exeter a mumming; one of whom, in a (borrow'd) Holland Shirt, most gorgeously be-ribbon'd, over his Waistcoat, (&. flourishing a Faulchion, yery valiantly entertains the admiring Spectators thus:

Oh ! here comes I Saint George, a Man of Courage bold
And with my Spear, I winn'd three Crowns of Gold.
I slew the Dragon and brought him to the Slaughter;
And by that very means I married Sabra, the beauteous
King of Egypt's Daughter."

- ³⁷ Anonymous, *Alexander and the King of Egypt. A Mock Play*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, [1746 x 1769]). This chapbook was published by John White (died 1769). A chapbook is an early type of printed popular literature. Produced cheaply, they were commonly small, paper-covered booklets, usually printed on a single sheet folded into books of 8, 12, 16 or 24 pages and often illustrated with crude woodcuts, which sometimes bore no relation to the text but were included as popular prints. The same play, as a quarto chapbook dated

1771, appeared in the sale of antiquarian Thomas Brand's library, 13th June 1807 (*Biblioteca Brandiana*, p. 305, lot 7750) and again, as two editions dated 1771 and 1788, in the sale of Thomas Jolley's library, 9th June 1843. The first is entitled, *Alexander and the King of Egypt, a mock play, as it is acted by the mummers every Christmas* and has a MS. note saying, "In the office where the worke is printed there is preserved a collection of hereditary ballads...Among them I find several carrols for the Nativity, St. Stephen's day, &c., with Alexander, a mock play, usually acted by mummers." (*Catalogue of the Second Portion of the Valuable Library of Thomas Jolley*, p. 6, lot 45). Thomas Brand recorded seeing the same chapbook in about 1777 in the office of Thomas Saint, a Newcastle-upon-Tyne printer, "In the Office where this work is printed, there is preserved an hereditary Collection of Ballads...Among these...I find ...Alexander and the King of Egypt, a mock Play, usually acted about this time by Mummers." (*Bodleian Library*, F. Douce Collection, d.44. pp. 1-7; *University of Sheffield Library*, Cat. No. 822.69[A].)

³⁸ The full text (Preston, M. J., & Smith, P., 'A petygree of the Plouboys or modes dancers songs', *University of Sheffield National Centre for English Cultural Tradition*, 1999) is available on-line (see fn. 34, Peter Millington's *Historical Database of Folk Play Scripts*). Although performed at Christmas, the text is a forerunner of the local East Midlands variants usually performed on or about Plough Monday and often known as Plough Plays.

³⁹ See Troubridge, St. Vincent, 'Oral Tradition in the Theatre', *Theatre Notebook*, (Summer 1951), vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, A carol [with music] of St. George, *British Museum*, MS Egerton 3307, folio 63b, (circa 1470), in Davies, R. T., *Mediaeval English Lyrics*, (London, 1963), p.185. A transcription (spelling slightly modernised) follows:

Let's love St. George, Our Lady's knight,
 With all our might.
 He saved the Maiden from the Dragon's wrath,
 and made all France cower and be put to flight.
 At Agincourt (you know the story),
 the French saw him foremost in the fight.
 If we love him with all our will,
 Dutifully he would us lead
 Against enemies and men of evil
 With his banner spread overhead.

⁴¹ St. George was probably first made well-known in England at the end of the seventh century by *The Acts of St. George* by Arculpus and Adamnan which recounted his visits to York, Caerleon and Glastonbury while on service with the Roman army and was translated into Old English. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxons dedicated monasteries and churches to him but he was never a patron saint. Later, at the end of the late tenth century, a *Life of St. George* was written in Old English by Abbot Ælfric (with no mention of a dragon). The dragon/princess symbols were only inserted in later mediæval times into the *Life of St. George* as an edifying allegory. The first appearance of the 'dragon' attached to the St. George legend appeared in the East in the sixth century and may have arisen through the attachment of an earlier legend relating to a local pagan god. At the same time legends surrounding the devout 6th-century Queen Teodolinda of the Lombards became intertwined. The publication of the *Legenda Sanctorum* ('Readings on the Saints'), later known as the *Legenda Aurea* ('The Golden Legend') by Jacobus de Voragine in 1265 popularised the story of St. George and

the Dragon – a story which was particularly well-received in England because of a similar legend in Anglo-Saxon literature involving the hero Beowulf, the dæmonic troll Grendel, and a dragon. Although de Voragine's is the first written record of the princess and the dragon, their appearance in the legend must have been current for several centuries.

⁴² Hurlock, Kathryn, *Wales and the Crusades 1095-1291*, (Cardiff, 2011). A contingent of Welsh mercenaries fought under Herbert II, vicomte de Thouars, in the First Crusade (1096-99); a small party of Welshmen went on the Second (1147-49); the Archbishop of Canterbury toured Wales successfully for six months on a recruitment drive for King Richard's army for the Third (1189-92); a small Welsh contingent was involved in the Fifth (1217-21); and a substantial number took part in both the Seventh (1239-41) and Ninth (1270-72).

⁴³ I am grateful to Dr. M. Paul Bryant-Quinn of the University of Exeter for this information and for the Welsh etymology of 'Slasher'.

⁴⁴ Schwyzer, Prof. Philip, 'The Lady speaks in Welsh: Henry IV, Part 1 as Multi-lingual Drama' in Saenger, Michael (ed.), *Interlinguicity, Internationality, and Shakespeare*, (Montreal, 2014), pp. 46-58. At least eighteen extant plays and masques by William Shakespeare, Anthony Munday, Thomas Dekker, Henry Chettle, William Haughton, Thomas Middleton, Ben Jonson, James Shirley, and others include passages in Welsh in this period.

⁴⁵ The first recorded use of 'slasher' with the meaning 'fighter' is dated 1559 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴⁶ In the First Crusade numbers of Englishmen formed part of Robert of Normandy's army from 1096 and in 1098 the exiled last Anglo-Saxon king, Edgar, arrived at Antioch with another body of English retainers. See Runciman, Steven, *A History of the Crusades*, (Cambridge, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 165, 227-8 & 255; for the Third Crusade see *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 3 et seq.

⁴⁷ Of the eleven Crusades, besides those in the First and Third already mentioned (see fn. 45), Englishmen took part in the Seventh under Richard, Earl of Cornwall and the Ninth under Princes Edward & Edmund of England (*Ibid.*, pp. 218-9 & 335 et seq.). The gradual encroachment of the Ottoman Turks into Europe was eventually halted at the gates of Vienna in 1683.

⁴⁸ There is recorded the survival of a cluster of twelve sacrificial animal Mummers' Plays predominantly from Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and the West Riding of Yorkshire. For example, in one of the Derby Tup Plays, 'The Old Tup' from Braithwell, Yorkshire, a ram is slaughtered and there are no 'hero' or 'shaman' characters. See fn. 34, Peter Millington's *Historical Database of Folk Play Scripts*. I am grateful to David Ashworth for drawing my attention to the existence of these Plays.

⁴⁹ Liebler, *Op. cit.*, p. 159.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ The Doctor character does appear, using almost the exact same words, in the German Alsfeld and Benediktbeuern Passion (and other) Plays suggesting at least 12th- and early 13th-century origins respectively. See von Grein, C. W. M., *Das Alsfelder Passionspiel*, (Kassel, 1874); Mone, F. J., *Altdeutsche Schauspiele*, (Quedlinburg, 1841); Prutz, R. C., *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte des deutschen Theaters*, (Berlin, 1847); Wackernagel, W., *Altdeutsches Lesebuch*, (Basel, 1839); Schmeller, *Op. cit.*; Froning, *Op. cit.*; Beatty, *Op. cit.*, pp. 282-3; Chambers, *The Mediæval Stage*, vol. 1, p. 218.

The earliest secular 'Doctor' figure to appear in European Easter plays, the spice-merchant from whom the three Maries purchase balm on their way to the tomb, has been posited as the first-known likely instance of

a pre-Christian influence or borrowing: he resembles the 'Doctor' of the English Mummers' Plays and the German *Fastnachtsspiele*. See Pascal, R., 'On the Origins of Liturgical Drama in the Middle Ages', *M.L.R.*, (1941), issue 36, pp. 369-87; Hammer, Carl I., 'The Doctor in the Late Medieval "Arztspiel"', *German Life and Letters*, (1970) vol. 24, issue 3, pp. 244-56.

⁵² Frazer, *Op. cit.*, (1913), vol. 2, pp. 190-192; but see also Hirn, Yrjö, *The Origins of Art: a Psychological & Sociological Inquiry*, (London, 1900), p. 283 et seq.; Mannhardt, *Op. cit.*, (1904), passim; Grimm, *Op. cit.*, passim.

⁵³ Frazer, *Op. cit.*, (1913), vol. 1, pp. 110-112.

⁵⁴ Beatty, *Op. Cit.*, p. 282.

⁵⁵ It is impossible to tell from the extract if a constable, watchman or private informer was the witness for the prosecution. Cole was assigned purgation by five people (Court books of the Archdeaconry of Essex [Chelmsford], *Essex Record Office*, Quarter Session Rolls, Q/SR 226/73). Purgation was a legal process whereby an accused person was required to make a sworn declaration of innocence before the judge of an ecclesiastical court. In support of his oath he also had to provide a certain number of compurgators (normally between six and twelve) who had to declare their belief in his good character. Although the system was subject to grave abuse it did not fall into complete disuse until the second half of the eighteenth century (Glossary of Church Courts' Terminology, *Borthwick Institute of Archives, University of York*). Great Burstead Churchwarden's Accounts also record that in 1564 a motley was hired from Chelmsford Parish Church for a performance and in 1565 and 1566 Plays were held in Great Burstead parish churchyard. Great Burstead, Essex was the original parish in which Billericay was a hamlet; now the child has outgrown and swallowed the parent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The photographs of Mayflower Morris Men performing their St. George and the Dragon Mummers' play are © David Harris. The line-drawing in the title is of a mediæval wall-painting (circa 1470) of St. George and the Dragon, Broughton Parish Church, Buckinghamshire and © Julian Whybra. Thanks are due to Dr. M. Paul Bryant-Quinn of the University of Exeter for his expertise in Welsh language and history, to David Whybra of the University of Hildesheim for his assistance with German etymology, and to Mac McCoig, Christopher Saunders and David Ashworth who made suggestions to the text.

Thomas Slye, Kemp's Pipe and Taborer

Julian Whybra

In a recently-published article on Morris taboring the author referred to the pipe and taborer who accompanied William Kemp on his famous Nine Days' Wonder in 1600 as "*unnamed*".¹ This is however not so. Kemp named his musician as Thomas Slye:

*"The first mundaye in Lent, the close morning promising a cleere day, (attended on by Thomas Slye my Taberer, William Bee my seruant, and George Sprat, appointed for my ouerseer, that I should take no other ease but my prescribed order) my selfe, thats I, otherwise called Cauliero Kemp, head-Master of Morrice-dauncers, high Head-borough of heighs, and onely tricker of your Trill lilles, and best bel-shangles betweene Sion and mount Surrey, began frolickely to foote it, from the right Honorable the Lord Mayors of London, towards the right worshipfull (and truely bountifull) Master Mayors of Norwich."*²

Thereafter Thomas Slye was referred to on various occasions throughout the book.

Slye or Sly (at that time there were no fixed rules of spelling) was a common name in Warwickshire in the sixteenth century and, given that Kemp was William Shakespeare's principal comic actor, a link between Thomas Slye and The Bard might reasonably made.

Sly is a very old surname in connexion with dramatic performances in England. John Sly was one of Henry VIII's principal players who was subsequently dismissed by Edward Seymour, the Lord Protector, the Duke of Somerset.³ A family of Slys, described as players, lived in the parish of St. Leonard's, Shoreditch in this same period. Parish Registers name John Sly, Mary Sly, Albone Sly, Robert Sly, Philip Sly and the pipe and taborer Thomas Sly.

From John Sly another of Shakespeare's principal comic actors, William Sly, was probably descended. Shakespeare gave the surname 'Sly' to a drunkard from Warwickshire in *The Taming of the Shrew*.⁴ Though there is no direct evidence that William Sly ever played that particular rôle, the choice of name for the part might well have been influenced by his character. William Sly lived in the parish of St. Saviour's, Southwark close to the Bankside theatres but in 1596 he left Southwark and went to live near his relative Thomas⁵ among the actors in St. Leonard's, Shoreditch and eventually died there on 16th August 1608.

Thomas Sly's connexion with William Kempe makes it likely that he was a musician and player in the employ of the theatre companies on the south bank of the Thames and thus became the obvious choice for William Kemp to take with him on his famous journey. It should be remembered that it was not just Kemp who "*began to foote it*" but also "*good Tom*" Slye who was "*up earlyer then the Lark*", struck "*his huntsup*", "*stroke up merrily*", "*stroke alarum*", and "*tickled it*" all the way from London to Norwich in just nine days.

Kemps nine daies vvonder.
Performed in a daunce from
London to Norwich.
*Containing the pleasure, paines and kinde entertainment
of William Kemp betweene London and that Citty
in his late Morrice.*

Wherein is somewhat set downe worth note; to reprooue
the slaunders spred of him: many things merry,
nothing hurtfull.
Written by himselfe to satisfie his friends.



LONDON
Printed by E.A. for Nicholas Ling, and are to be
solde as his shop at the west doore of Saint
Paules Church. 1600.

The frontispiece from William Kemp's *Nine Daies VVonder* showing Thomas Slye on the left.

¹ Pearson, Tony, 'On Becoming a Morris Taborer', *The Morris Ring Circular*, (Issue 72, Spring / Summer 2016), p. 11.

² Kemp, William, *Kemps Nine Daies VVonder*, (London, 1600), "The first daies iourney, being

the first Munday in cleane Lent"

³ Collier, John Payne, *The History of English Dramatic Poetry to the Time of Shakespeare: and Annals of the Stage to the Restoration and the Stage*, (London, 1831), vol. I, pp. 118 & 139.

⁴ *Induction, Scenes I & II.*

⁵ Collier, John Payne, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare*, (London, 1846), p. 155.

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Book Review by Brian Tasker

The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750 by John Forrest

The History of Morris Dancing 1458-1750 is an academic study of the records of morris dancing in England and as such is not what one might call a “page turner”, but it does amply repay careful study. What follows is not a review of the book, nor is it a comprehensive summary of John Forrest’s findings. It is simply a bringing together of the bits I found of particular interest. I have included page numbers in case anyone wants to follow up my observations in more detail.

Forrest explores possible sources for the dance including ancient Greece (5), the Moors in Spain (8) and entirely English origins either ancient or modern (18), without coming to any conclusion because there is no evidence to support any of them. Cecil Sharp thought that there was a common origin somewhere for morris dances, sword dances and mumming plays and that the further back you went the purer in form they became (9). Those seeking English origins postulated that all the dances were early English pagan rituals: sword dances being an older and more primitive form (21). Joseph Needham took the view that the morris had Saxon origins and the sword came from Scandinavia. He came to this conclusion from an examination of their geographical locations in England (21). Forrest concludes that the dances have no single point of origin, have come together and become known collectively as “morris dances” and that they have evolved continuously over time (27).

It is tempting to see similarities in dances as indicating a common origin but it may be that different people at different times have discovered the same forms of dance and they are totally unrelated.

The book concentrates on what we would call “morris dances” with only passing references to sword dances. It therefore covers the traditions known as “Cotswold”, “Border”, “North West” and “Molly”. and suggests that they are the remnants of a much wider spread of dances which once existed throughout the south and west of England (37-46). In the earliest days the dance may have involved dancing in a circle with high leaping, fighting, mimed action, rhythmic stepping, beating time with implements and the use of dancing bells (74). By the year 1620 a single straight line may have been adopted as shown in the famous painting “The Thames at Richmond” which is used in the book as the cover illustration. The first edition of Playford’s Dancing Master was published in 1651 and by that time longways sets were coming into fashion (296). The modern form of the morris dance clearly evolved alongside country dances because they share so many features: dancing with a partner, heys, gypsies, side by side, back to back and dancing in a ring (294). Dances on the Welsh border became transformed completely into country dance style dances (279). A longways set for six dancers had advantages for the morris dance as there are not too many dancers to share any income and the format gave good choreographic opportunities. Sometimes certain families dominated particular groups in order to control the dance and keep the income for themselves (272) and the music was provided by a musician hired by the day (269). The same musicians played for country dances so the morris dances were developed to use the same tunes (287). Country dance tunes such as Constant Billy, Lumps of Plum Pudding and Bobby and Joan are examples (324).

There are a number of references to women dancing the morris. For example, when William Kemp danced from London to Norwich in 1600 he danced for an hour with a fourteen year old girl in Chelmsford (239) and when the foundation stone of Blenheim Palace was laid in 1705 there were three morris dances: one of young fellows, one of maidens and one of old beldames (330). The account of the Kemp experience suggests energetic individual dancing whereas the Blenheim account suggests much more structured

dancing. The introduction of a country dance style of morris dancing may have encouraged more women to dance (279).

The Betley window is a frequently reproduced image of morris dancers and it can be seen on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (154). The window is dated to around 1621 but the figures are copied from a German engraving of about 1500 (80). The figures in the engraving are similar to some figures made in Germany in 1480 and which are on display in the Munich City Museum (77). The window shows a reversed image of the figures in the engraving but the artist has added bells below the knee. Whether these depictions of morris dancers reflect the style of morris being danced in England at the time is unknown but the additions may indicate that they do (155).

The etching of William Kemp (136) shows that he is not using handkerchiefs. He is wearing a jacket with dagged sleeves which are long pieces of cloth attached at the shoulder which swirled around as he danced. Later, napkins were attached to the arms (239) and eventually held in the hands (137).

It is often said today that morris dancing is not competitive but that was not the case in the past. Different teams competed to get the best and most remunerative bookings. It was important to dance well and also to show dances with superior characteristics. This resulted in the development of new figures and types of step designed to impress the audience and perhaps win bookings which might otherwise have gone to a more local team. By the early eighteenth century prizes could be won at annual festivals. At Epsom in Surrey in 1702 there was "morris dancing, set against set for laced hats" (272). The competition was sometimes fierce. Teams who were geographically close had to develop distinctive styles of dance and this pushed forward the evolution of the dance (273). But to win a competition a dance had to be comparable with other entries in order to be judged a winner. This kept the morris within definable limits and prevented runaway evolution (273 and 358).

So what was the story of the morris in England from the first appearance in 1458 on a silver cup sculpted with a morris dance (47) to the mid eighteenth century when the dances took on the basic form we know today (intro. xvii)? The chronology overlaps (29) but can be summarised as:

Royal 1480-1540 (Mainly London)

Urban 1510-1600 (Processional morris)

Church 1540-1630 (Spreading out from the South East)

Rural 1570-1720

Private House 1690-1750

Royal performances were at their most frequent during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. The morris may have been fairly new to England at the time and formed part of the entertainment at the Royal Court. There were also performances for James IV in Scotland (58). Perhaps the morris was being performed at Royal Courts all over Europe at that time and had not yet been taken up as a popular entertainment for ordinary people.

During most of the sixteenth century the morris featured in parades in some major cities. They were most frequent in London but other cities such as Salisbury and Chester were also involved (92). These processions were part civic amusement and part display of military or political might. Sometimes they could get quite violent (98).

The church raised money for the parish by holding church ales and the morris was one of the entertainments (140). They often provided the coats and bells for the dancers. It was church property and they maintained it and renewed it as necessary. The costume details in church accounts indicate that there

were normally four dancers with six being a minor alternative (161). The dancers were rewarded with food and drink (161).

In about 1571 the church changed its mind about morris dancing (186). The Puritan age had arrived and instead of seeing morris dancing as a source of income it was seen as popish (190) and licentious, in fact a danger to public morals (188) and moves were made to ban it. This is a little surprising as inflation during the Tudor period was high and placed a strain on church finances (213). After the Restoration in 1660 the situation improved but by then morris dancing was in decline (212).

Without the church as a sponsor, morris dancers had to find a new source of finance and collecting from the audience began (263). The problem was that collecting was dangerously close to begging, which was illegal, so the performance had to be skilled enough to appear to warrant a payment as a kind of fee for services (263). The church had provided a location and occasion to dance as well as the costumes and some reward for the performance (259) and if new opportunities to dance could not be found the dance would lapse (259). Secular ales, such as Whitsun ales, continued and rural morris tours began (268). The first rural morris tour recorded took place in Kent in 1589 and involved a team from the Herne area who undertook a perambulation in the neighbourhood of Herne and Canterbury. We know of this tour because they danced in front of the mayor's house in Canterbury without a licence and were called to account as a result (268/270).

The reference to morris dancing in East Kent leads me to go off at a tangent for a moment. The Kentish "Hooden Horse" custom was researched by Percy Maylam and his findings were published in 1909 in his book entitled "The Hooden Horse". He concludes that "In the Hooden Horse custom, we have a survival of the old pageants of Robin Hood, Maid Marian and the Outlaws of the Band, which were afterwards incorporated in the morris dance". He was unaware of the existence of morris dancers at Herne in 1589 and had no direct evidence of morris dancing in the county though he was aware of a reference in a letter written in 1640 by an East Kent vicar complaining that he had been forbidden by his superiors to permit morris dancing on the Lord's day. Although there is no evidence that the Herne dancers had a horse of any description, it is possible that the name "Hooden Horse" derives from Robin Hood and that the Hooden Horse custom is a survival of the Kentish morris dance.

Ever since late Tudor times morris teams had danced at the houses of the country gentry (327). In the first half of the eighteenth century the number of such events increased, especially in the south Midlands, as a result of the wealth created by the enclosure of land and a dramatic increase in the building of country seats for members of parliament (327). These country estates acted as centres of gravity attracting teams to them from all points of the compass (333).

"For another century the treasures of the morris enriched and ennobled their keepers as long as they stayed rooted to their ancestral village homes. Once the traditional performers left the places that gave the dances meaning the game was quickly lost.....Dancers who joined the crowds migrating to cities lost their distinctiveness in the urban multitudes and the dances they left behind died for want of vital bodies.....The merest flicker of the tradition survived into the twentieth century". (350).

Editor's Note: As Brian says, his notes are a personal view of his interest in John Forrest's seminal work on the history of Morris Dancing 1458 – 1750 and in no way is intended to constitute an academic essay. However, I hope his notes will spark sufficient interest in our readers to encourage them to buy the book and dip into it. Contrary to Brian's statement, I did find the book to be a 'page turner', so well is it written. As an academic study, Forrest's book is written in such an easy style so as to be accessible to all with an interest in the background to our tradition. I will always welcome other such essays.