

When the Golden Bough Breaks: Folk Drama and the Theatre Historian

Tom Pettitt, University of Southern Denmark

Collecting traditional tales in Lincolnshire towards the end of the nineteenth century, the folklorist M.C. Balfour had the good fortune to encounter “an old man from Lindsey,” who alongside a rich fund of legends could also offer a historical account of the picturesque local lore and custom they reflected. For in earlier times, his grandfather had told him, people were much concerned about the forces in nature which could affect their well-being, and to control or placate the “bogles”, the vaguely conceived supernatural beings in which these forces were invested, they practised many ritual observances which were hardly in conformity with the doctrines and ceremonies of established religion:

the folk had ideas of their own, and ways of their own, as they'd kept up years and years and hundreds of years, since the time when there weren't no church, leastwise no church of that sort. ... So there were, so to say, two churches; the one with priests and candles, and all that; the other just a lot of old ways, kept up all unbeknown and hidden-like, midst the folk themselves. (Balfour 1891: 259-60)¹

This eloquent little folk-lecture on village culture matches strikingly contemporary thinking among folklorists on the antiquity and origins of folklore in general and folk custom in particular. For it was at precisely this time that Folklore itself emerged from its roots in anthropology and antiquarianism as an independent discipline, devoted to the study of “survivals” from a more primitive phase of social and cultural development, among which folk beliefs and their associated customs could indeed be seen as an archaic alternative “church,” or 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” (Chambers 1967: 1: 94).

The influence of this view on theatre historians (such as Chambers himself) has had decisive implications for the place and the treatment of such customs as display recognizably dramatic features—the folk

¹ I have standardized Balfour's spelling, which attempts to reproduce the dialect pronunciation of the speaker.

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plays—in theatre history, where they are invariably put at the beginning, accompanied by much talk of origins, roots and sources, and rather less of their dramatic characteristics.² The primitive origin of folk custom is an attractive idea, catering to both the romantic antiquarianism and the belief in a resilient, independent village culture, which in varying proportions inspire most academic study of folk tradition: one acknowledges only with reluctance that scholars, unlike Lincolnshire storytellers, are obliged to question the lore handed down by their forebears.

The “survivalist” view of folk plays as the “detritus” of primitive ritual reflects Folklore’s most decisive inheritance from nineteenth-century anthropology, the notion of cultural evolution. According to this the culture of a given society advances through a fixed sequence of savage, barbaric and civilized phases, represented respectively by magical, religious and scientific responses to the external environment in the important business of individual well-being and collective survival. While some societies, to judge from the reports of travellers, missionaries and colonial administrators, had reached only a lower (savage or barbaric) level on this Darwinian ladder, those to which the anthropologists had the good fortune to belong had advanced to the most civilized stage, although residues of earlier phases still persisted here and there among the more backward, ignorant and isolated sections of the community. This was “folklore”—beliefs and practices from the infancy of the tribe conserved by oral tradition and customary observance among the more infantile of its later members.³

The prehistoric cultures of now-civilized societies could therefore be reconstructed by applying a comparative method to evidence from widely separated times and places: the folklore of European villages (in which remnants of primitive culture survived), reports on the indigenous societies of Africa, the Americas and Australasia (in which primitive

² See for example Child 1964; Kinghorn 1968, ch. 3, “Popular and Literary Traditions”; Wickham 1977 (ch. 4, “Drama and Nature” and 1981, ch. 1, “Drama and Festival”); Tydeman 1978 (ch.1, “Ritual Survivals”); Mills 1983; Harris 1992 (ch. 6, “The Village and the Court”).

³ See Gomme 1957: 2. For Frazer’s impact on the emergent discipline of Folklore see Bennett 1994.

culture persisted intact), and the mythologies of ancient civilizations (which recorded the “spoken correlatives” of primitive rites). In a series of ambitious studies by German and British anthropologists, culminating in 1890 with Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, this approach identified and explained a fertility-rite practised by primitive societies to ensure the vitality of the reproductive faculties of crops, herds and men, and hence the survival of the community. At its centre was a figure, variously beast, fool, priest, king, or (when magic evolved into religion) god, on whom the *mana* of fertility especially depended, its continued vigour periodically ensured through the “sympathetic magic” of his sacrifice, followed by revival in a rejuvenated form or replacement by a more potent successor.⁴

In the wake of this anthropological achievement scholars in other disciplines discovered variants, transpositions or remnants of the fertility ritual in a remarkable variety of times, places and forms, ranging from the religion, art and sporting contests of ancient Greece to the rhymes, games and other lore of modern schoolchildren, and in between heroic epics, legends, folk tales and medieval romances, most notably the Grail cycle treated in a celebrated study by Jessie Weston.⁵ Bertha Phillpotts suggested that an ancient Nordic ritual drama was preserved in some of the lays of the *Elder Edda*, and Margaret Murray claimed that what she called the “Dianic” fertility religion persisted in England in the witch cult uncovered in the prosecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ Among literary historians there emerged an “anthropological school,” led by John Speirs, which argued for the significance of the fertility cult in the interpretation of a broad swathe of Middle English literature, including popular songs (some of which were actually performed in the ritual), religious lyrics (in which the Virgin Mary

⁴ See Frazer 1890. Documentation is fullest in the expanded third edition (Frazer 1913), but the work probably had most impact in Frazer’s one-volume abridgement (Frazer 1922), with select but extensive illustrative material. Important earlier works in this tradition include Mannhardt 1875-7, and Tylor 1871.

⁵ E.g. Harrison 1912; Weston 1920. Frazer’s influence is reviewed unsympathetically by Hodgart 1955, enthusiastically by Hyman 1949 and 1968. On the enhancement of Frazer’s impact through his literary style and his addressing contemporary intellectual concerns, see Vickery 1963.

⁶ Phillpotts 1920; Murray 1921; 1931; 1954.

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usurps the place of the cult's spring goddess), alliterative satires, several of Chaucer's minor works, and romances such as *Ywain and Gawain*, *Sir Orfeo*, *King Horn*, and particularly *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, whose anthropological interpretation at Speirs' hands provoked a vigorous controversy.⁷

Ritual status or derivation was similarly claimed for a number of English ballads and folksongs,⁸ but it is of course the dramatic folk customs, persistently and confidently identified by folklorists as the most direct of such survivals of the fertility cult, which are of greatest significance for the theatre historian. This applies particularly to the mummers' plays, which are usually what is meant in most references to "folk drama." It is conceded that they preserve only a degenerate form of the ritual (they "devolve" from it), and that the original purposes are imperfectly appreciated by the participants. But even in the nineteenth century (when most of them were recorded) the mummers' plays retained, it is asserted, a tell-tale affiliation with important transitional seasons of the pastoral or agricultural calendar, an exclusively male priesthood of celebrants, a distinctly animal or arboreal shagginess in the costumes, an untheatrical, ceremonial mode of performance within a significantly circular acting area, and a verbal emphasis on human reproduction which is more than rustic bawdy, matched by a half-formulated sense of some deeper, sacramental meaning to the whole business. In one version of an oft-told anecdote an English mummer, asked by a German professor if women ever performed in the play, echoes the ecclesiastical image of the Lincolnshire storyteller with the exclamation, "Oh you wouldn't have women in that; it's more like being in church"; in another version: "... mumming don't be for the likes of them. There be plenty else for them that be flirty-like, but this here mumming be more like parson's work."⁹ Decisively, in the slaying-and-cure of a character which often features in their plots, the mummers' plays preserve that central act of death-and-revival from the original

⁷ Speirs 1954; 1957. This list should also include medieval drama, which is treated separately below. The debate provoked by Speirs' assertions is reviewed by Howard 1971 and Utley 1967.

⁸ Lloyd 1967 (ch. 2, "The Songs of Ceremony and Occasion"); Nettel 1969 (ch. 1, "Pagan Introduction," and ch. 2, "The Green Man"); Stewart 1977.

⁹ The source in both cases is the folklorist R.R. Marett; see, respectively, Chambers 1969: 5, and Marett 1932-4: 75.

fertility rite.¹⁰ The ritual copulation in which the rejuvenated fertility-figure originally demonstrated his revived powers has been attenuated to a rustic wooing-scene, or survives symbolically in other action: The polygon of interlinked swords flourished aloft in the Sword Dance Plays is clearly “a symbol of the female principle,” and placing it over the head of one of the male characters correspondingly significant of “union.”¹¹

The place and significance conventionally attributed to folk drama in theatre history stem directly from this theory of its origins. Since the mummers' plays recorded in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries retain the fundamental structure of a pre-Christian ritual, something similar must have existed through the intervening centuries, even if “all unbeknown and hidden-like midst of the folk themselves.” The folk plays preserve a proto-dramatic activity antedating the emergence of drama-proper in the Middle Ages, and so belong at the beginning of the story, but as degenerate forms of ritual rather than drama-proper they could have had only indirect significance: a possible influence on theatre history rather than a part of it.

The extent of folk drama's influence has been vigorously debated, assessments of its contribution to the achievements of the Elizabethan stage for example ranging from Janet Spens' enthusiastic “Shakespeare used a folk play habitually as the nucleus of his comedies” to Robert Weimann's dismissive “the Mummers' play left no tangible or direct traces in the Elizabethan theatre.”¹² Oddly enough Sir Edmund

¹⁰ Representative and/or influential ritualist studies of folk drama include Helm 1980; Kennedy 1930 and 1949-51; Dean-Smith 1958 and 1966; Green 1968; Brody 1969. Until recently disagreement has largely been restricted to arguing which variety of the mummers' play most faithfully preserved the primitive rite, or countering occasional maverick suggestions that its origin be sought in some magical or ceremonial practice other than the strictly Frazerian fertility cult. J. V. Pickering (Pickering 1971), in defiance of the ethnic realities, preferred the rites of the Druids, while E. K. Kirby (Kirby 1971 and 1973) suggested shamanism; he was responded to from the orthodox viewpoint by E. C. Cawte (Cawte 1972 and 1974). In a neat combination of two sub-Frazerian theses Stephen B. Malin (Malin 1968) suggested transmission from the fertility ritual via the witch-cult postulated by Margaret Murray.

¹¹ Helm 1980: 26; swallowed whole by Wickham 1977: 138.

¹² Spens 1916: 38; Weimann 1978: 16. Cf. Harbage 1952: 60.

Chambers's authoritative *The Medieval Stage* provided a precedent for both these views, a thirteen-chapter survey of dramatic and sub-dramatic folk customs opening with the explanation that "their substantial contribution to medieval and Renaissance drama and dramatic spectacle is greater than has been fully recognized" but offering along the way the quite contradictory conclusion: "Modern drama arose, by a fairly well defined line of evolution, from a threefold source, the ecclesiastical liturgy, the farce of the mimes, the classical revivals of humanism. *Folk drama contributed but the tiniest rill to the mighty stream.*"¹³

The usual means of demonstrating the influence of the folk plays has been appeal to sequences of action parallel to their typical matter (usually the death-and-revival) in mystery cycles, moralities, interludes and stage-plays, and of such "echoes" there are an impressive number if discerned with the comparative methodology of the evolutionary anthropologists, which exploits correspondences at a very deep and generalized level, with a benign tolerance of surface discrepancies. If indeed there is a significant relationship, as Frazer insists, between the dying-god myths of Baldur, Adonis, Osiris, Tammuz and Christ, and between all these and the summer-versus-winter combat custom of the North American Eskimos and the Little Russian Easter ceremony of "The Death and Resurrection of Kostrobonko," then equally plausible is a connection between the slaying-and-cure of St George in the mummers' plays on the one hand and on the other the loss-and-recovery of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, the fall-and-repentance of the Everyman-figure in the morality plays, not to mention "the general pattern of a threat or disaster followed by redemption and rebirth ... observed in most Renaissance comedies."¹⁴

To one school of thought moreover such parallels were symptomatic not so much of influence as of a more vital, genealogical role for folk drama in theatre history: for if the folk plays "devolved" from an ancient ritual, drama itself may have "evolved" from the same source. The ritual origin of drama was a far from new idea in the late nineteenth century, but it acquired fresh impetus from *The Golden Bough*, most notably in the work of the Cambridge classicists on the origins of Greek tragedy and comedy, the specific rites suggested in this case being the cult of

¹³ Chambers, 1967: 1: 90 and 182 respectively (emphasis added).

¹⁴ See, respectively, Frazer 1922: 317; Wincor 1950; Potter 1975: 12; Wasson 1979: 215.

Dionysus, the local manifestation of Frazer's vegetation-spirit, the *Eniautos Daimon* or year-god.¹⁵ From here the thesis spread to encompass the ritual origins of drama in a much wider context,¹⁶ and the mystery cycles were likewise encompassed in the "anthropological" approach to Middle English literature discussed earlier. Ultimately there emerged an extensive corpus of "myth and ritual" interpretations in which residual ritual patterns or living ritual functions were discerned in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in general and in Shakespeare's tragedies in particular.¹⁷

While this thesis still relegated folk plays to the pre-history of drama, it at least accorded them a decisive role in its study and appreciation. Some critics, admittedly, were content to speak in vague metaphorical terms of "the blood of descent" from ritual in drama, or of drama never forgetting "the rock from which it was hewn," and there were even those for whom a ritual aspect was so fundamental to their concept of drama that it did not matter "two pins" whether the ritual itself ever existed independently at all.¹⁸ But if needed, the folk plays supplied a tangible record of the ritual whose structures and significance drama was claimed to retain, more impressive than the mythical correlatives or distant anthropological parallels to which reference had otherwise to be made. The discovery by British scholars of the living traditions of Greek folk drama supposedly preserving the Dionysian ceremonies bolstered the theory of the ritual origins of Greek comedy and tragedy,¹⁹ and the English mummers' plays could similarly be invoked in documenting the origins of drama-proper or the sacrificial role of the Shakespearean tragic hero.²⁰

That many have nonetheless agreed with E.K. Chambers' alternative view that far from being the well-spring of "the mighty stream" of theatre history, folk drama (or the ritual it preserved) contributed only "the tiniest rill," is due to Darwin's second posthumous intervention into

¹⁵ G. Murray 1977; Cornford 1914.

¹⁶ Gaster 1950; Goodlad 1971; Fergusson 1949; Southern 1962.

¹⁷ See for example Weisinger 1957, and for a tolerant review of the field, Haggood 1962.

¹⁸ See, respectively, Haggood 1962: 118-9 (citing Samuel Selden); Stroup 1977: 141 (citing Gaster); Frye 1973: 109.

¹⁹ Dawkins 1906; Wace 1909-10 and 1912-13; Lawson 1910.

²⁰ Gaster 1961; Beatty 1906; Coote Lake 1931; Rohrberger and Petty 1975.

this field, which generated an alternative evolutionary scenario for the development specifically of English and West European drama in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In this view the single-celled form from which all higher dramatic species evolved was not a pagan fertility rite but the liturgy of the Catholic church. From the elaboration of the *quem quaeritis* trope of the Easter services there emerged a liturgical drama which became steadily more complex and representational, acquired spectacular, secular and even comic elements, was transferred progressively from the church to the churchyard and the streets, passing at the same time from ecclesiastical to guild and civic auspices, and modulating from Latin to the vernacular, eventually blossoming into the mystery cycles of the later Middle Ages. These in turn, via the moralities and interludes, led on to the achievements of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre.²¹

Here were all the makings of a classic scholarly controversy between adherents of liturgical origins, supported perhaps by critics who professed to find Christian sacrificial themes in their Elizabethan tragedies,²² and those in favour of pagan ritual origins, aided by critics who preferred to see Macbeth, Lear and Falstaff as cultic scapegoats. The battle has been a tame affair, however, with the pagans surrendering the high ground at the outset and dwindling into a neglected, reputedly eccentric, minority. Their decisive blunder was to concede the major premise of the opposition, the evolution of virtually all other medieval and Renaissance traditions from liturgical drama, with the inevitable result that the conflict was fought throughout on the specific issue of the genesis of liturgical drama, rather than of one or other of the more secular or spectacular forms which might have been more amenable to the ritualist case.²³ The ultimate anthropological argument that

²¹ This thesis is generally associated with Chambers 1967 (although because of the ambivalence noted above Chambers is also on occasion castigated as a “pagan”), Young 1933, and Craig 1955, although my bald summary does little justice to the complexity of their views or the divergences between them. For a more sophisticated and influential synopsis see Nicoll 1969 (chs. 1 and 2).

²² Hapgood 1962: 114-5.

²³ For reviews of research on the issue see Nichols 1975 and 1976; Flanigan 1975: 81-102. Symptomatically, Flanigan’s more recent review, “Karl Young and the Drama of the Medieval Church” (Flanigan 1984), omits any reference to the theory of ritual origins.

Christianity, with its myth of a dying god and its sacred feast at which his body was dismembered and consumed, is simply another variant of the fertility cult, offered a surrender as much as a victory, and indeed exponents of liturgical origins could argue that since anthropological evidence and the example of Greece seemed to demonstrate that all cults sooner or later generated a drama out of their ritual, something similar was bound to occur in Christianity, and did so in the early Middle Ages.²⁴ Even the most ardent paganist could therefore argue only the more awkward case that when this happened the Church deliberately sought to counter an existing pagan ritual, which liturgical drama could therefore be said to have imitated, or in some way absorbed. The idea has not won many converts, in part as a result of poor advocacy. Its major exponent in Germany, Robert Stumpfl, writing in the 1930s, clouded the issue by the introduction of ideological considerations and by suggesting that the source of the drama grafted on to the liturgy was not so much a fertility ritual as the initiation-rites of those prehistoric antecedents of the Hitler Youth, the Teutonic warrior-brotherhoods. The whole theory, and Stumpfl's work in particular, are in consequence mentioned in post-war German scholarship only with embarrassment.²⁵ Bernard Hunningher's *The Origins of the Theatre* does not suffer from these disadvantages, but confuses the matter another way by suggesting that when the Church sought to match the attractive dramatic rites of the pagans it not only absorbed them but had recourse to outside professional help to accomplish its aims:

In celebrating Christ's resurrection at Easter why should it not meet the pagan or nearly converted half way and appropriate his rites, which celebrated a resurrection too, and, what is more, even represented it? ... How was it possible for missionaries and priests to compete with such acts and performances? Help and rescue could come only from the professional actors and performers—the mimes. (Hunningher 1955: 115)

But the survival of the theatrical tradition represented by the Roman mimes is itself a matter of some controversy,²⁶ and the well-documented distaste of the early church fathers for professional entertainers is far

²⁴ This point is made from otherwise widely differing approaches by Cohen 1928: 1: 5, and Goldstein 1981.

²⁵ Stumpfl 1936. See Michael 1957.

²⁶ Reich 1903; Allen 1909-10 and 1910-11; Nicoll 1931.

from encouraging; so when Hunningher's evidence for their participation in liturgical drama proved inadequate his effort on behalf of the ritual origins theory was decisively undermined (Gamer 1965).

The best case that can be made under these circumstances for the ritual origins of medieval drama is probably the view offered almost at the start of the debate by the folklorist T. F. Ordish: the fertility cult *would* have developed into drama in England along the lines of what happened in Greece, had not Christianity intervened by destroying the ritual's native habitat and evolving a drama of its own. Thus stunted in its development the pagan cult could achieve only the embryonic form of drama which survives imperfectly as the folk plays, and which was available as at least a potential source of occasional borrowings in the essentially self-propelling evolution of liturgical drama and its later derivatives.²⁷ The earliest secular figure to appear in the European Easter plays, the spice-merchant from whom the three Maries purchase balm on their way to the tomb, has been put forward as the first likely instance of this influence, resembling as he does the quack-Doctor of the English mummers' plays and the German *Fastnachtspiele* (Pascal 1941), and later stages of the transition from liturgical to civic and secular drama would offer further opportunities for such interaction. Even Karl Young, the most authoritative exponent of liturgical origins, could envisage such a peripheral role for pagan ritual and folk drama in theatre history,²⁸ it is at least more generous than the suggestions that the death-and-revival mummers' plays are actually folk *imitations* of the Catholic mass, or that much seasonal custom and folk drama is directly inspired by the gospels and epistles read in the liturgy of the feast-day concerned.²⁹

There have been signs nonetheless that like its sacrificial victim the ritual origins theory may be staging a revival in a new and more vigorous form, thanks not least to the surprisingly ample evidence of dramatic activities among the folk of late-medieval English and early-modern villages uncovered by the Records of Early English Drama project. John Wasson, who has contributed substantially to this revelation, suggests that the folk play may have been a more important predecessor of Elizabethan drama

²⁷ Ordish 1891; a similar point is made for Germany by Rudwin 1920: 403.

²⁸ Schelling 1959: 1: 46-9; Young 1933: 1: 12.

²⁹ Dietrich 1979; Moser 1983.

than even the moralities and interludes, and is tempted to speculate in terms startlingly close to those of Stumpfl and Hunningher that folk drama or its ritual antecedent may have made a decisive contribution right at the beginning, in providing a model for the clerical authors of 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 dramatize the death and resurrection of Christ. (Wasson 1979; 1984: 154)

But there is no need to go back this far and confine the debate to folk ritual's contribution to the genesis of liturgical drama, for recent years have also seen the virtual collapse of the alternative and previously orthodox evolutionary scenario which asserted that the liturgical drama was the source of all later forms. The liturgical plays themselves resist chronological alignment into an orderly sequence of progressive elaboration (incidentally removing one of the main objections to Stumpfl's theories);³⁰ extra-liturgical plays have been recorded earlier than the evolutionary time-table can easily tolerate, as have performances by itinerant professionals; the mystery cycles are not necessarily outdoor conglomerations and elaborations of liturgical plays, nor the moralities and interludes organic developments from the mysteries: there are in short substantial discontinuities between each stage of the postulated sequence of development.³¹ The opportunity has consequently arisen to argue the development from late pagan ritual (or early folk drama) not merely of liturgical drama, but also, and more plausibly, of any late-medieval or early-modern dramatic activity—mysteries, miracles,

³⁰ See the review of Stumpfl's *Kultspiele der Germanen* by N.C. Brooks (Brooks 1938).

³¹ Major contributions to the dismantling of the liturgical origins theory include Hardison 1965, particularly Essay 1, "Darwin, Mutations, and the Origin of Medieval Drama"; Axton 1974; Wickham 1958; Kolve 1966, ch. 3. These deal mainly with the earlier medieval period and can be usefully supplemented by Bevington 1975.

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moralties, interludes, comedies, tragedies, histories, pastorals—whose antecedents may now be sought elsewhere than in the immediately preceding phase of the discredited evolutionary sequence.³²

It could be, if unconsciously, that a latter-day neo-ritualist approach to Renaissance drama and literature is taking advantage of this opportunity,³³ but all such endeavour is doomed to confusion if it neglects to acknowledge two inconvenient circumstances with which theatre historians have been slow in coming to terms: the scepticism now shared by most folklorists on the origins in a pagan fertility ritual of folk drama in general and the death-and-revival mummers' plays in particular, and the long-standing refusal of anthropologists to accept that Sir James Frazer's methods and materials prove such a ritual ever existed.

Despite its persistent influence in other fields the prestige of *The Golden Bough* was short-lived among anthropologists. Frazer's ideas on the primitive psychology motivating the sympathetic magic behind the fertility cult were superseded and refuted. There was no unilinear sequence of cultural evolution through which all societies must pass, and both the comparative method and the particular notion of cultural survival it entails were undermined. The evidence cited was often casual observation rather than the product of scientific fieldwork, and the dying-god myths appealed to were not necessarily the spoken correlatives of analogous or antecedent rituals, whose existence and form they therefore did nothing to substantiate. Such shortcomings in the quality of the evidence could not be compensated for by what E. R. Leach dismissed as the "massive futility" of its quantity; indeed on close examination of Frazer's sources Joseph Fontenrose could find no certain instance in the Old World, ancient or modern, of an annual or periodic sacrifice of a "divine king" to promote the fertility of his people and land.³⁴ As the anthropologist William Bascome repeatedly sought to impress on

³² Studies of folk drama influence on early drama (as opposed to the origins of early drama in folk drama) include: Friedenreich 1974; Hewitt 1949; Montgomerie 1979; Pettitt 1980; Ridden 1998; Thorne 1965; Wincor 1950.

³³ Woodbridge and Berry 1992; Woodbridge 1987.

³⁴ Levi-Strauss 1972: 206-7; Lienhardt 1964: 33-4; Leach 1957: 121; Fontenrose 1966: 8-11.

folklorists, the theory of cultural evolution “rested on several hypotheses which its exponents had never succeeded in proving and which, at least in some specific cases, have later been disproved. Since the entire theory stands or falls on these assumptions it has been rejected by anthropologists and most social sciences.”³⁵

All of the subsidiary theses relying on the authority of *The Golden Bough* or its predecessors must therefore stand or fall on their own merits, and few have survived critical scrutiny unscathed. Margaret Murray’s identification of witchcraft with a Dianic fertility cult, despite its continued influence on popular works (and latter-day witches), was refuted (on the basis of her uncritical treatment of the sources) immediately it appeared, and now receives only passing depreciatory remarks in scientific accounts of the subject.³⁶ After a brief period of celebrity Jessie Weston’s views on the cultic origins of the Grail legends were emphatically rejected by Arthurian scholarship, and John Speirs’ “anthropological” approach to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and other Middle English texts has fared little better.³⁷

The implications for drama studies and theatre history are equally radical: critics applying the myth-and-ritual approach to Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama have long since been emphatically urged to re-examine its credentials in the light of the fragility of the anthropological framework within which, consciously or otherwise, most of its results were achieved, and even classical scholars are less certain than they

³⁵ Bascome 1965, the statement quoted from p. 31. Cf. also Bascome 1957. For further accounts of the rejection of Frazer’s assumptions, methods and results see Douglas 1978; Leach 1961; Ackerman 1987. The importance of this development for the study of folklore is discussed by Davidson 1976; Bronner 1984; and in Marian W. Smith’s “The Importance of Folklore Studies to Anthropology [sic: the topic is the reverse]” (Smith 1959).

³⁶ See the reviews of Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches* by George L. Burr in Burr 1921-2 and Burr 1934-5, respectively, and for more recent comments Macfarlane 1970: 10, and Thomas 1971: 514-17. Murray’s detrimental impact on folklore more generally is discussed in Simpson 1994.

³⁷ Loomis 1974, particularly 278-9, and 1963: ix. For a measured assessment of Speirs see Pearsall 1982. The most damaging attacks were those of Lewis 1962, and Robbins 1967.

were, and some are decidedly sceptical, on the emergence of Greek drama in any evolutionary fashion from the rites of Dionysus.³⁸

The most resilient of these derivative theses has been the ritual origin of folk drama itself, despite what Chambers called the “provokingly complete” silence of the early records, and as Alex Helm glumly acknowledges in an authoritative study of the mummers’ plays from a survivalist viewpoint: “One of the saddest features of the study of the ceremonial is the inability of students to find any reference to it before the 1700s.”³⁹ Late-medieval and early-modern England had a vigorous festive culture which, as already noted, is quite well documented, but the documentation does not extend to our mummers’ plays. “We can only assume that there was something before,” Helm goes on, but this assumption is founded precisely on the now questionable theories of evolution and survival, and is further undermined by the growing evidence of how easily cultural traditions can be invented and acquire the aura and reputation of antiquity and authenticity; some apparently hallowed seasonal customs have proved on closer inspection to be of surprisingly recent vintage.⁴⁰ The case for the ritual origins of the mummers’ plays rested primarily on their death-and-revival action, but with the demise of Frazerian anthropology there is no need to focus exclusively on this feature: other aspects of the performance, the clowning for example, may be of as much or more significance for their origins and development.⁴¹

The history of folk drama clearly needs to be re-written, independently of any assumptions about its nature, origins or antiquity, and without recourse to allegedly comparative evidence from supposedly primitive cultures: a history established, in other words, using the same

³⁸ Hardin 1983; Knox, 1979 (Essay 1, “Myth and Attic Tragedy”); Else 1965. For some earlier objections see Pickard-Cambridge 1927—the second (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) edition was revised (by T. B. L. Webster) to conform more to the ritualist view.

³⁹ Chambers 1969: 224; Helm 1980: 7.

⁴⁰ Trevor-Roper 1983; Newall 1974; Judge 1979, particularly 68-77.

⁴¹ This point is made by Abrahams 1970 and in A. E. Green’s review of Brody’s *The English Mummers and their Plays* (Green 1972). The ritual origins of the mummers’ plays are questioned from various perspectives by Abrahams 1972; Boyes 1981, 1985, and 1987-8; Cawte 1993 (a significant convert).

kinds of documentation and method deployed in writing the history of any other social or dramatic activity.⁴²

A strictly historical approach, it should be emphasized, 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.⁴³ And almost alone of the other subsidiary theses inspired or influenced by *The Golden Bough*, Bertha Philpotts’ suggestion of an ancient Germanic ritual drama preserved within the *Elder Edda* still has its serious defenders.⁴⁴

But establishing a continuity of customary observance for the one activity or another between pre-Christian and medieval or even modern times would be both difficult and of limited value. A cautionary example is offered by the sustained series of medieval prohibitions of the “pagan” practice of going about the streets at the kalends of January dressed as a

⁴² For studies of folk drama relying more (or exclusively) on historical evidence rather than postulated ritual origins, see Axton 1992, ch. 4; Baskervill 1920 and 1916-17; Pettitt 1983 for 1982; 1985; 2000.

⁴³ Davidson 1964 (ch. 4, “The Gods of Peace and Plenty”); Chaney 1970; Glob 1969.

⁴⁴ Haugen 1983. The thesis has now culminated in Terry Gunnell’s massively documented and persuasively argued *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*. Ritual perspectives have also loomed large in some continental European studies of folk traditions such as witchcraft beliefs and charivaries: see Ginzburg 1983; Rey-Flaud 1985.

stag or calf, which has been claimed as the direct antecedent of a number of more recent beast-guises, from Falstaff's antlered display in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance and the Dorset "Ooser."⁴⁵ The impressive sequence of prohibitions may be due not so much to the persistence of the custom itself however as to a bureaucratic inertia which persisted in repeating an originally necessary pronouncement in cultures and centuries to which it no longer applied.⁴⁶ In this instance, ironically, one of the earliest references is the lament of a fourth-century Spanish bishop that in preaching against the stag-guise he had succeeded only in introducing it to a community where it was hitherto unknown (Alford 1978: 19).

And 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. The phenomenon has been amply demonstrated in studies of recently or currently living traditions, and is unlikely to have been inoperative in earlier centuries: 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."⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Violet Alford, "The Hobby Horse and Other Animal Masks" (Alford 1968), and in her book with the same title (Alford 1978: 20).

⁴⁶ Arbesmann 1979; Harmening 1979. For a more optimistic assessment of ecclesiastical prohibitions as evidence of contemporary practices see Gurevich 1988.

⁴⁷ Helm 1980: 4. For the notion of the long-term decline of folk drama from ritual to pastime see the opening pages of Baskervill 1920.

⁴⁸ Lewis 1962, speaking of the ritual connections of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This is in fact the point made unwittingly by Helm 1980: 56, in

The ritual origins theory is at worst wrong, at best irrelevant, and in either case has had a severely limiting and distorting effect on the study of the folk plays themselves. It has been the dominant factor in the persistent reluctance of both folklorists and theatre historians to consider dramatic customs as drama, or sometimes even as customs, or to accord a history of development and change, creation and re-creation to either the individual play or the tradition as a whole. Most permanently damaging has been the failure to record fully the living traditions of folk drama persisting in hundreds of English communities up to the outbreak of the Great War, very much in accordance with Chambers' survivalist dictum that "it is, after all, the origin of the play, rather than its latter end, which is of interest to the folklorist" (Chambers 1969: 12). Until the closing decades of the twentieth century folklorists were more concerned to detect the ritual patterns in the play texts assembled by the first major collector, Thomas Fairman Ordish, than to heed his urgent appeal that more local traditions be recorded,⁴⁹ and it has taken the recent re-discovery of the impressive collection of texts and accounts made by the American James Madison Carpenter during a brief period of fieldwork in England in 1932-3 to bring home to a startled profession just how much opportunity was lost at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁰

Such collection as did take place was distorted by its ritualist bias, with little attention given to contextual features irrelevant to the hypothetical original function, so that we now have desperately little information on who the mummers were, the character of the households they selected for their visits, what they were given in reward, and what they did with it. Attention was also focussed on forms displaying satisfactorily ritual action (preferably a death-and-revival) to the neglect both of other varieties of the mummers' shows and of dramatic performances under other customary auspices (Christmas feasts, village festivals, harvest-homes, lyke-wakes, etc.) which were not so endowed.

celebrating the mummers' plays as sources which "can throw light on the dark places of pre-history."

⁴⁹ Ordish 1891; 1893.

⁵⁰ The original collection is held by the Library of Congress, microfilm copies by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, London, and the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, Sheffield. The latter institution has completed a full and detailed catalogue on the collection, now available online at <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter/>. See also Roud and Smith 1998.

An arbitrary selection of other customs was nonetheless encompassed by the ritualist approach, thanks to odd features thought to derive from the primitive rite. The blackened faces of morris dancers for example (actually a sporadic regional practice) must originally have been smeared with the ashes of the festival fire; the lying-down and getting-up of the “Hoss” which parades the streets of Padstow, Cornwall, on May day must be a residual form of the ritual’s death-and-revival.⁵¹

Corresponding distortion has deliberately and explicitly occurred in the study of such plays as were collected, with elements and aspects of performance which resisted accommodation to the ritualist approach dismissed as irrelevant accretions to the ritual core which was the proper concern of the folklorist. “No matter how many words and scenes the ceremony accrues, loses or juxtaposes,” Alan Brody asserts, “it is all no more than the water breaking, shifting and receding around the rock-like centre of the action. It is this centre of action we must deal with if our study is to have any value” (Brody 1969: 10).⁵² This applies equally to the characters, at least their names and identities as opposed to any ritually significant acts they may indulge in or any symbolic (preferably phallic) properties they may carry, and to the dialogue, much of which has a disturbingly unceremonious or inconveniently modern ring: “the Play, and any significance it may have, resides in the action: the text is a local accretion, often both superfluous and irrelevant” (Dean-Smith 1958: 224).⁵³

Repelled by the ahistorical excesses of the survivalist approach, folklorists are now extremely wary of the historical or (as they say) “longitudinal” perspectives of tradition,⁵⁴ but until that history is written

⁵¹ For the morris, see Chambers 1967: 1: 199; for Padstow, Helm 1980, ch. 9 and 110-111.

⁵² The standard bibliography on folk-play research, both during and after the predominance of the ritual origins theory, is Cass, Preston and Smith 2000.

⁵³ See also Cass and Roud 2002.

⁵⁴ For characteristic examples of research which restricts itself emphatically to documented phases of tradition, see Cass 2001; Howkins and Merricks 1991. A useful first step in the unprejudiced study of the mummers’ plays is provided by Steve Tillis in *Rethinking Folk Drama* (Tillis 1991, ch. 7, “Rethinking Folk Drama”). Much British research in the mummers’ plays is now linked to the Traditional Drama Research Group, whose website, at <http://www.folkplay.info/index.htm> is developing into an extremely useful scholarly resource.

no reliable assertions can be made on the role of folk drama in early English theatre history. As yet we simply do not know for how many hours or centuries John Wasson's cleric-playwright would have had to wait on his street-corner before witnessing the "men's play" with its "death and resurrection of the hero" which would inspire him to dramatize the death and resurrection of Christ for the Easter liturgy: so long perhaps that he tired of loitering and dramatized the Visit of the Three Marias to the Tomb instead.⁵⁵

The recent fashion for detecting popular, festive, or "Saturnalian" elements in Elizabethan drama,⁵⁶ or of proposing a carnivalesque status and function for the Elizabethan theatre,⁵⁷ even when not undermined by the ritualist and evolutionary assumptions already discussed, was decisively disadvantaged by this lack of a reliable account of just what there was by way of popular festival, carnival and Saturnalia in Elizabethan England. There was a perceptible reluctance to await (let alone contribute to) the "full-scale anthropology of Elizabethan society" which Robert Hapgood sensibly called for as a prerequisite to discussion of the attitudes and expectations with which audiences attended the playhouses (Hapgood 1962: 114). The example set by C. L. Barber in *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* of prefacing festive interpretation with at least some independent evidence of contemporary festivity was less influential than Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*, which as Carlo Ginzburg rightly complained, prefers the circular procedure of documenting the popular festive traditions allegedly influencing a literary work with citations from the work itself.⁵⁸ The massive historical

⁵⁵ For the present writer's most recent attempt at pinning down the early history of the mummers' plays, see Pettitt 2002 for 2000.

⁵⁶ Originating in this latest phase largely in C. L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Barber 1959), and reinforced by Weimann's *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre*. For theoretical discussion see Evans 1985, and Vickers 1981.

⁵⁷ Montrose 1980; Bristol 1983 and 1985; Kott 1987; Hayes 1992; Thomas 1992; McCanles 1977.

⁵⁸ Barber 1959, chapters 2-3, and see similarly Berry 1984 (on courtship and marriage customs); Bakhtin 1984; Ginzburg, 1982: xvii. François Laroque's *Shakespeare's Festive World. Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (Laroque 1991) marks a welcome return to the empirical tradition, the festive interpretation of Shakespeare's plays prefaced by a massively documented review of Elizabeth festival, but here too there are

studies of Ronald Hutton having now provided a reliable account of English festive traditions, virtually from their origins (to the extent discernible) to their destruction, the time may indeed be ripe for a new start, although students of early English traditional culture and popular drama sometimes accept his authoritative demonstration that the mummers' plays cannot be documented before the eighteenth century only with reluctance.⁵⁹

Writing the history of English folk drama without the benefit of assumptions about its origins faces an immediate and fundamental challenge in the realization that folk drama has hitherto been defined in terms of precisely those same origins. Distinguishing folk drama from early theatre in general indeed proves an insuperable problem, although luckily this adds not merely to the difficulty but also to the significance of trying to reconstruct its history.

Since rejecting survivalism folklorists have been better at characterizing their methods than at identifying the materials to which they are most appropriately applied. This is the case for example with Richard Dorson's response to his own question, "Is Folklore a Discipline?" (Dorson 1973) and while there may have been more truth then than now in his claim that Folklore alone concerned itself with the lives of the common people, defining Folklore as the culture of the poor is of limited value for those earlier periods when the wealthy and educated classes enjoyed the same tales, songs and entertainments, indulged in similar festive licence, and held many of the same beliefs, as the "folk" around them. Even Augustan students of "popular antiquities" were aware that many customs and traditions which "at present ... would have little or no Being, if not observed among the vulgar," had previously "been of National ... Observance" (Bourne 1977: 9).⁶⁰

problematic assumptions about the antiquity of folk traditions, and distracting speculations on pre-Christian myths and rituals.

⁵⁹ Hutton 1991; 1996a; 1996b; Smith 1999: 152-53; Hardin 2002.

⁶⁰ See also Burke 1978: 23-9, and later discussion here.

Uneasy with sociological perspectives, Anglo-American scholarship has more often preferred to speak of folklore in terms of oral tradition,⁶¹ but this distinction is peculiarly inappropriate to drama, where texts are performed orally and experienced aurally, and preserved between performances in the memories of the players. Even this century roles in regular stage-plays have been passed on from one actor to another without the intervention of a script,⁶² and that most folkloristic of oral practices, improvisation-in-performance, has a long if not always glorious tradition in the legitimate theatre (Graves 1922). “Folk” tradition, conversely, is far from incompatible with written or printed texts: many performers of mummers’ plays learnt their parts from commercially printed chapbooks purchased in local shops; others preserved them from year to year in written copies (Moorman 1911: 155).

More promising is the distinction developed by a later generation of anthropologists between a cultural “great tradition” of the educated, based on cities and religious and administrative centres, and a “little tradition” of the remainder which, as Robert Redfield puts it, “works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities” (Redfield 1965: 41-2).⁶³ Initially formulated to handle the heterogeneous culture Redfield encountered in rural Mexico, the model has proved readily and usefully applicable to late-medieval and early-modern Europe, with the great tradition comprising, Peter Burke suggests,

the classical tradition, as it was handed down in schools and universities; the tradition of medieval scholastic philosophy and theology, ... and some intellectual movements which are likely to have affected only the educated minority—the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment.

⁶¹ See Utey 1965 for a critical analysis of 21 standard definitions of Folklore, thirteen of which involve orality, and Finnegan 1977, for the inappropriateness of the oral/written distinction.

⁶² The actor Cyril Luckham, in a talk broadcast on BBC Radio 4, August 7, 1983, “Memories of a Strolling Player,” reported experiencing this practice in a company touring in the North of England between the wars: lacking scripts, established members of the troupe taught new recruits their parts. See also Troubridge 1950-51.

⁶³ For a fuller account and discussion see Bronner 1981.

The little tradition is the residue left when these are subtracted from the culture of the period, and includes

folksongs and folktales; devotional images and decorated marriage chests; mystery plays and farces; broadsides and chapbooks; and above all festivals, like the feasts of the saints and the great seasonal festivals such as Christmas, New Year, Carnival, May and Midsummer. (Burke 1978: 24)

But as Burke establishes in a vital historical adjustment of Redfield's model, the two traditions have not always equated neatly with particular social groups such as the rulers and the ruled. Until some time after the Middle Ages the little tradition was the common, indigenous culture, "vernacular" in more than the linguistic sense, shared, if with differing degrees of splendour and comfort, by all. A small segment of the community possessed of the necessary wealth, leisure and educational qualifications were privileged to participate in the great tradition as well as the little; as Burke puts it, they were culturally "amphibious" (Burke 1978: 24-9). Later however, increasingly significant sections of the social elite withdrew from, opposed, and finally lost contact with, the little tradition, effectively reinforcing social divisions with a deepening cultural stratification as the two cultures became more exclusively associated with the educated rulers and the illiterate ruled.⁶⁴ And with the great tradition established as the sole and exclusive culture of the social and intellectual elite,⁶⁵ the scene is set for their rediscovery, with mixed enthusiasm and astonishment, of the little tradition their ancestors had abandoned, persisting as what the founders of the Folklore Society were later to describe as "curious beliefs, customs and practices" among the "unlearned and backward portion of the community" in the alleys, cottages and workhouses at the rougher end of the town. They called it "Popular Antiquities" and (after 1846) "Folklore," and were not long in

⁶⁴ Burke 1978: 270-281; for the comparatively early onset of this differentiation in England see Wrightson 1982: 13-14; Wrightson and Levine 1979 (ch. 7, "The 'Better Sort' and the Laboring Poor"); Thompson 1974.

⁶⁵ The process was accompanied, or quickly followed, by the emergence of the concept of "culture" (and likewise "art" and "literature") as a body of pursuits and compositions distinct from and superior to the everyday activities and artefacts of economic, social and domestic life (with which the little tradition remained intimately connected). See Williams 1962.

deciding that it “derived from a savage or barbarian state of society” (Gomme 1957: 2).⁶⁶

These are valuable clarifications of both traditions and terminology, but the problem of demarcation nonetheless persists.⁶⁷ The integrity of the Redfield-Burke model is not compromised by the interaction of the great and little traditions and the exchange of material between them; this is acknowledged by Redfield, insisted on by Burke,⁶⁸ and will have been particularly intense before they became exclusively associated with distinct social groups. That is precisely why we may expect the drama of the little tradition—i.e. the antecedents of our folk drama—to have had a greater significance in theatre history prior to 1650: the increasingly elitist status and literary ambitions of the English theatre after the Restoration are themselves a symptom of the “withdrawal” of playwrights, players and patrons from the common culture of the little tradition. But it is correspondingly in this earlier period, in the absence of sociocultural divisions (and ritual origins) that the difficulties of demarcation are most acute, and a pertinent example has already been provided with the inclusion of the mystery plays in Peter Burke’s inventory of the little tradition. This is in accordance with the convention in European and particularly German studies of treating such medieval community drama as a variety of *Volksschauspiel*, but the practice has not gone unchallenged,⁶⁹ and is at odds with the prevailing tendency of Anglo-American scholarship to distinguish between mystery plays and the like as “carefully contrived works of art” (and so part of the great tradition) and folk drama which “may be another matter” (Neuss 1985: x).

The problem can perhaps be resolved by reference to an aspect of Redfield’s model of which Peter Burke made less use, the notion that in

⁶⁶ William J. Thoms’ letter of 22 August 1846 to the Atheneum suggesting the use of the term “Folklore” is reprinted in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Dundes (Thoms 1965). See also Burke 1978 (ch. 1, “The Discovery of the People”).

⁶⁷ Barry Reay discusses what he calls the problem of “overlap” between the two cultures from a social perspective in his Introduction to *Popular Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Reay 1985, particularly 13-23).

⁶⁸ Burke 1978: 58-63, although in speaking of these exchanges as “sinkings” and “risings” Burke contradicts his own adjustment of the model by implying that they occurred between higher and lower social strata.

⁶⁹ For discussion see Schönweise 1976 and Linke 1976.

any one society there is not so much a *division* between two distinct cultures as a *cultural spectrum* extending between purely theoretical “great” and “little” extremes.⁷⁰ Most of what conventionally goes by the names of both literature and folklore, including drama and folk drama, belongs at various points between these poles. Deciding where to draw the line between them or on which side of it to place a particular genre (like the mystery plays), is an arbitrary, inevitably controversial, and ultimately unnecessary exercise. It may be possible in theory to conceive of a “literary” drama written by authors conscious of classical norms, their personal reputation as poets and the aesthetic value of what they were composing, performed before a select and discerning audience with the necessary wealth or connections to gain admittance and the requisite education to appreciate it, and contrarily of a “traditional” drama whose content and form are determined less by the poetic originality of the author than by the tradition of which it was a part, the social auspices in which it functioned and the processes by which it was transmitted and re-created. But in practice any dramatic activity, or indeed any play, is likely to reflect a mixture of these features of content, form and context and so belong, depending on the precise proportions of the mixture, at one or other intermediate point between the “great” (literary) and “little” (traditional) extremes.

Reconstructing the late-medieval and early-modern forms of English folk drama is therefore not a project that can be undertaken as an independent preliminary to assessing their place in theatre history: too many natural connections would be broken, and too many awkward decisions faced, in distributing the material between the parts. And in what “theatre history” is a place to be found? The review of scholarship just offered related the demise not merely of the orthodox “devolutionary” history of folk drama, but also of the received “evolutionary” history of early English theatre as well. The early histories of both folk drama and English theatre require re-writing, and in the absence of convincing demarcations between them the former task is not separate from, but integral to, the latter.

⁷⁰ For discussion see Bronner 1981: 67.

This is not to say, fortunately, that such a massive undertaking cannot be resolved into discrete, coherent units which can be pursued—at least for a time—independently. But these must be identified along lines other than the distinction between folk tradition and the rest, and it may be possible to point to an as yet unrecognized consensus between folklorists and theatre historians on what these may be. The latter, understandably wary of a developmental approach which arranges dramatic types or forms into a neat sequence of progressive elaboration with the Shakespearean theatre as its culmination,⁷¹ increasingly prefer a contextual approach which, in the manner advocated by George Kernodle, operates not so much with a single line of development in the history of early English drama as with several distinct cultural systems—worship, edification, celebration, entertainment, etc.—each of which had or acquired recognizably dramatic features in the course of the medieval centuries or shortly thereafter; a complex of several theatres rather than a unified, unilinear theatre history.⁷²

This is eminently compatible with the performance-orientation and contextual emphasis of the New Folklore, and combining the two suggests that *custom* qualifies as one such activity or theatre: an important segment of early English theatre history comprises dramatic customs or “customary plays” which are an integral part of the observances of seasonal festivals and other traditional celebrations. And since customs, like any other sociocultural activity, could span a good deal of the little tradition—great tradition spectrum, this segment can be claimed to have included not only such antecedents of our recent folk traditions as may have existed but a good deal of the drama conventionally termed “medieval,” such as interludes and mystery cycles, whose performances were closely associated with calendar festivals, wedding celebrations, and the like. For the same reason most of the activities usually separated out for separate treatment as “pageantry,” from court masques to royal entries and Lord Mayors’ shows, are also candidates for inclusion.⁷³

⁷¹ For symptomatic comment see Taylor 1972 and Lancashire 1986.

⁷² Kernodle 1960; an example of a general work applying these principles is Wickham’s *The Medieval Theatre*, and see also Bradbrook 1978.

⁷³ Pageantry also qualifies in a negative fashion through having been subjected to a folk- and ritual-origins approach; see for example Withington 1918 (ch. 1, “Elements of the Pageant”). For exploratory studies of early English

A quest for the medieval and early-modern antecedents of more recent “folk” drama would therefore engage with such “medieval” drama and early pageantry as qualifies as dramatic custom, and would probably do well to acknowledge the existence of several such “customary theatres.” In the first instance, and by the same token, the latter would *not* encompass the Elizabethan popular theatre, which with its almost daily performances throughout the year in purpose-built playhouses by fully professional players and a rapidly changing repertoire of plays belongs firmly in the field of commercial entertainment rather than custom. In terms of the simple Burke-Redfield model the Shakespearean theatre is a characteristic manifestation of a third cultural tradition, a popular culture emerging between the great and little traditions,⁷⁴ or in terms of the adjustment of the model in earlier discussion, the third pole of what becomes a triangular cultural continuum rather than a spectrum between two poles.⁷⁵

But identifying dramatic custom and commercial dramatic entertainment as distinct cultural systems does not rule out significant historical relationships and exchanges of material between them. To a degree at least the Elizabethan theatre may have been a commercialization of one or more of the customary theatres which existed before and continued alongside it. Its incomplete detachment from these customary origins would explain both the undocumented feelings of some drama-theorists on its festive status and carnivalesque function, and the discernibly customary characteristics of its stage, repertoire and dramaturgy. Conversely the modulation back into custom of the more popular segment of the Shakespearian tradition that went underground following the puritan destruction of the theatres in the 17th

performance culture crossing the boundaries between theatre, pageantry and folklore, see my “Customary Drama: Social and Spatial Patterning in Traditional Encounters,” (Pettitt 1995), and “The Morphology of the Parade” (Pettitt 2003 for 2002). For an authoritative review of early English pageantry in the context of theatre history, see Kipling 1997.

⁷⁴ See Burke 1978: 63, on the “chapbook culture.”

⁷⁵ For the notion of the triangular continuum see Theresa Buckland’s study, “Definitions of Folk Dance: Some Speculations” (Buckland 1983), which has significant implications well beyond its immediate topic.

century might explain the disturbing reflections of vaudeville one occasionally glimpses in the mummers' plays. Throughout their parallel existence the theatres of commerce and custom will inevitably have exchanged matters, forms and methods in both directions, directly and via intermediary traditions of village and fairground.⁷⁶ Whatever the significance of a new history of English folk drama in its own right, a new history of early English theatre would manifestly be incomplete without it.⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ See Pettitt 1994 and 2003.

⁷⁷ Recent contributions to such a new synthesis from various perspectives include Clopper 2001; Humphrey 2001; Westfall 1990.

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