

THE OLDEST BRITISH FOLK PLAY

Much has been written about the British folk play traditions during the last two hundred years; many texts have been collected and many of these published.¹ What has been generally overlooked in the study of the folk plays is the importance of "the book of the play," the copy from which performers learned their parts. In reading the hundreds of folk play texts which have been printed, one meets again and again the statement that the recorder has been assured that the text has been handed down from father to son in most ideal fashion, and yet the evidence indicates that this is often not true. I suspect that the performers soon learned that their play would be considered more valuable if it were purely oral, and accordingly told the collector what he really wanted to hear. It is becoming obvious that in the northern parts of England, northern Ireland, and southern Scotland, a very large number of chapbook texts were printed during the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.² One discovers occasionally that a particular band of performers used a printed text.³ And still more often one finds texts recorded which are strikingly like known chapbook versions, and which differ significantly from the other versions recorded in the same area.⁴ Certainly any serious study of the folk plays must not ignore the chapbook texts.⁵

No printed version of the folk plays is known to have circulated in the south and central parts of England.⁶ But we cannot assume that these areas were free from the influence of a written text. Among Percy Manning's papers are two copies of plays as performed at Marston, Oxfordshire; these, though written down by performers in 1832 and 1899, are unmistakably based on a single manuscript.⁷ G. A. Rowell published in 1886 a text "from an old written paper from which the performers evidently had to learn their parts," and this was also from Oxfordshire.⁸ Thus, although there may well have been no chapbooks circulating in central and southern England--in fact, we find occasional record of someone seeking (often in vain, apparently) to obtain the "correct" words⁹--there does seem to have been a tradition of manuscript prompts. Just how extensively manuscripts were used to preserve the local texts we may never know, but this certainly may account, at least in part, for the great similarity of the folk plays of this region.

There has been much speculation about the supposed ritual origin of the various local traditions. In keeping with this emphasis on origins, the elaborate Revesby Sword Play, performed on October 20, 1779, has been commented upon extensively because it is the oldest surviving text.¹⁰ But a fragment from Exeter, Devonshire, dates from approximately 1737, and yet is hardly ever noticed:

Oh! here comes I, St. 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.¹¹

Furthermore, I have demonstrated elsewhere that the play from Revesby, Lincolnshire, is undoubtedly a literary adaptation.¹² A much less impressive text from Islip, Oxfordshire, dated 1780, must, therefore, be given the honor of being considered the oldest recorded complete text.¹³ A St. George play like the above Exeter fragment, it has never been published, but has been mentioned twice.¹⁴ The oldest known chapbook version, however, was published in 1771 in Newcastle.¹⁵

The following text from Islip, Oxfordshire, may have been written simply to preserve the text, but it may have served a different purpose in later years. The Islip text published by P. H. Ditchfield almost one hundred twenty years later,¹⁶ which is undoubtedly based on yet another manuscript preserved among Manning's papers,¹⁷ is nearly identical with all but the "prologue" of Anna

Domino, the later speech of Fat Jack and that of Pedlar Chap, and the songs in the following text. That this text is remotely based on a chapbook is a possibility. Anna Domino's prologue is unlike anything else I have uncovered in the plays, Fat Jack's speech is an obvious parody of the common "wife and family on my back" quatrain, and Pedlar Chap's speech included such dated and atypical lines as "Patches for there Pretty Faces." None of this is, I think, fully demonstrable, but the text remains most important because of its early date. It demonstrates that the texts have changed very little in almost two hundred years.

THE ISLIP MUMMERS' PLAY OF 1780¹⁸

Anna Domino, Carrying a Besom or Broom

What ho! What ho! make room for mummings
and old Anna Domino
I have brought my champions brave
Fighting men, and Pedlar knave
Old Doctor Spinny, sometimes called Quack, (5)
his man Salt Peter, and old Fat Jack.
Old Father Christmas, so old and white,
he has promised to look in tonight.

Act 7 1st¹⁹ Come in my eldest son and show how battles
are lost or won (10)
Here come I the Roayl Duke of Blunderland
With my Broad Sword all in my hand,
Where is the man that dares bid me stand
I'll slay him and cut him as small as Flies,
and send him to the Cookshop to make mincepies, (15);
Mincepies hot or mincepies cold
I'll send him to the Devil before he²⁰ three days old.

Enter Earl or King Percy

I am the man that dares to bid you stand,
altho' you swaggers and swears, that with your courageous hand,
you will slay me and cut me up as small as Flies, (20)
and send me to the Cook shop, to make Mince pies,
Defend yourself for I show no Mercy,
I fight to the death as sure as I am Percy.

Instructions, decide which is to be Dead Man, and
make a good fight,

Herald.

Call the doctor, call old Quack.
Take my donkey to bring him back. (25)

Knock at door.

Come in doctor Quack
I am not a Quack, as you may see
I am Doctor Spinney with a Big M. D.

Doctor enters mounted, Nag restive, kicks the doctor
off. Blame Salt Peter for giving the Nag to²¹ many
Beans.

Doctor, doctor, I have kill'd²² a man.

Salt Peter.

Kill'd a man, kill'd²³ a ²⁴ Monkey. (30)

Herald.

Doctor, doctor, do your part
the King is wounded to the Heart
as you can plainly see.

D.²⁵ S. examines the Dead Man &²⁶ calls Peter to bring
his bag of Tools.

Peter.

I shan't, fetch them yourself.

D. S.

Keep a dog and bark myself fetch them
this minute. (35)

Peter brings bag of Tools.

Doctor sews up the wound, and speaks as follows

I am a Doctor, a Doctor Good
Who's hand²⁷ were never stained with Blood,
I can cure the itch, the Pox, the Palsy, and the Gout,
Pains within and pains without, (40)
If the Devil²⁸ in I can fetch him out.

I have Plaster and Potions Poisons, and Pills,
Some to cure, and some to kill.
I have travelled thro' England, Ireland, France, and Spain,
been to Europe and back again (45)
Hocus, Pocus, Alecampain²⁹
Take one of my Pills, Dead Man, rise and fight again.

Dead man is alive again

Singing heard outside. Song

I am a Button maker by my Trade,
Till I was ruined by a Maid,
Dam such Maids so said I (50)
Fall rall riddle roll ri³⁰ do.

Enters Fat Jack Drunk.

Here come I old Fat Jack,
At fighting I can do my whack,
by Day, or Night, or candlelight,
old Jack will Fight, with all his might (55)
wrong or right, sober or tight.

Jack staggers &³¹ falls, and knock³² Anna Domino
down.

Anna D.³³ groaning, is examined by D. S.

Salt Peter.

Shes³⁴ got the Toothache.

D. S.

The Tooth Ache why she is quite big and will
bring forth a New-Heir-Year, on the 31st of
December at 12 p. m.

(60)

D. S.

Peter fetch³⁵ Pinchers we will have a tooth
out, and make sure, it will make the Bill longer.

Pulls tooth out and give³⁶ a Pill. A. D. right again.
Knock at door.

Here comes I a Pedlar Chap,
On my shoulder I car's³⁷ my Pack,
I have ribbons for the Ladies fair,
ornaments to deck there³⁸ Hair,
Patches for there³⁹ Pretty Faces,
High heeled Boots and fine Laces,
Toys to please both⁴⁰ great, and small,
and I've brought my Fiddle to please you all.

(65)

(70)

All dance the Morris
Enters Father Christmas. Performers all dance round
him, and all sing together.

A virgin unspotted the Prophets foretold,
should bring forth a Saviour which we no⁴¹ behold,
to be our⁴² redemption from Death, Hell, &⁴³ Sin,
Which Adam's transgressions involved us in.
So let us be merry cast Sorrow away
Christ Jesus our Saviour was born on this day

(75)

Finis⁴³

Notes.

1. E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm, and N. Peacock, English Ritual Drama (London: Folklore Society, 1967), pp. 94-132, contains the definitive bibliography. Alan Brody, The English Mummers and their Plays (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), contains a few additional references, as does J. V. Pickering's unpublished 1971 University of California at Davis Ph.D. thesis, "The Medieval English Folk Drama."
2. See Alex Helm, The Chapbook Mummers' Plays (Ibstock, Leicester: The Guizer Press, 1969), pp. 34-39, for a checklist of the copies Helm knew of.
3. See F. W. Moorman, "A Yorkshire Folk Play and its Analogues," in Essays and Studies, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 134-157. Unfortunately Moorman did not supply complete bibliographic information.

4. The text from Eaton House, Penkridge, Staffs., in the Ordish Collection, vol. 2, pp. 119-122, seems clearly based on a chapbook version.
5. Paul and Georgina Smith of Sheffield University and I are attempting to extend Helm's work with the chapbooks. We have discovered more than a dozen to add to Helm's thirty-one and are on the track of others which have been mislaid. Knowledge of additional copies, or even the smallest reference to a chapbook text not included in the bibliography of Cawte et al., would be greatly appreciated.
6. A possible exception is Henry Slight's compilation, Christmas: His Pageant Play or Mystery of "St. George;" as played by the Itinerant Actors & Mummers... (Portsmouth: D. B. Price, n.d.). Slight completed this in 1836, asserting that it was "compiled from and collated with several curious Ancient black-letter editions." No "black-letter" editions are known.
7. Ms. Top. Oxon. d.199, ff. 311^r-314^v.
8. G. A. Rowell, "Notes on Some Old-Fashioned English Customs," Folk-Lore Journal 55 (1886): 98-101.
9. A letter (no year given, but c. 1900) from Edith M. Deverell to Mr. Gomme contains: "Their the local mummers' greatest difficulty is in getting the words complete. The present party have not been taken in one by one as recruits into the old gang, but a gap has occurred, caused no doubt by the general discouragement they met with, and the 'old mummers' look with suspicion on the young ones, and wont tell them the words. They have forgotten part of what they used to hear when they listened to the old mummers. Also they say that every set of mummers has a different set of words. They are very anxious to get the printed or written copy. Would you be kind enough to let them know the Berkshire version? I could copy the words from any book...I don't know whether you will approve of sending out written versions but they are very anxious to have it so I said I would ask you." Ordish Collection, vol. 2, p. 85.
10. T. F. Ordish, "Morris Dance at Revesby," Folk-Lore Journal 7 (1889): 331-356, is the only edition of the play. All other printings are reprints (acknowledged or not), usually with editorial "sense" emendations.
11. Quoted from G. T., "Christmas Pastimes in Exeter Sixty Years Ago," Western Antiquary, 3:9 (1883): 166. Cawte et al. cite the source as Andrew Brice, The Mobyad or Battle of the Voice (Exeter: Brice and Thorn, 1770), p. 90, which they claim was written in 1738. Cf. p. 101. I have been unable to verify this.
12. See my article, "The Revesby Sword Play," Journal of American Folklore 85: 335 (1972): 51-57.
13. In Percy J. Manning's papers in the Bodleian Library, Ms. Top. Oxon. d. 199, ff. 301^r-306^r, is a copy made by E. H. Binney to whom the original ms. was sent. The Ordish Collection, held by the Folklore Society in London, contains Alex Helm's typescript of another copy in vol. 2, pp. 62-64.
14. Cawte et al., p. 56.
15. Alexander and the King of Egypt: A Mock Play as it is acted by the Mummers every Christmas (Newcastle, 1771). The only known copy is in the Dyce Collection (D20.N.1) in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Harold

15. Schofield of the History Department at Colorado Women's College obtained a copy for me.
16. P. H. Ditchfield, Old English Customs (London: Redway, 1896), pp. 316-326; see Brody, p. 46.
17. Ms. Top. Oxon. d.199, ff. 307^r-309^r.
18. The text is an exact reproduction of Ms. Top. Oxon. d.199, ff. 301^r-306^r. I have italicized stage directions and speakers' names. Textual references are given to the Ordish Collection typescript, abbreviated as Ord. The original ms. was sent to Mr. E. H. Binney by an anonymous person who mailed it from Chichester, March 4, 1902. Binney's copy of his letter follows:
 Mr. Binney
 Sir, someone sent me the Oxford Journal this week tis not often I get it, I saw your article on the mummers was pleased with it, (fifty years ago I used to belong to a gang of mummers at Islip) and thought praps the enclosed might interest you. Copy made this afternoon the 4th March 1902.
 Following the letter, Binney copies from the ms.:
 This copy, The Mummers Play, taken from an old M. S. date 1780 The M. S. was the property of the late Thomas Johnson of Islip Oxon & in his hand writing. he was Clerk of the Parish.
19. Ord. reads "Act. 1st." In Binney's copy an illegible word of about three characters is written under "Act."
20. Ord. reads "he's."
21. Ord. reads "too."
22. Ord. reads "killed." Binney's copy is corrected from "killed."
23. Binney's copy is again corrected from "killed."
24. Ord. omits "a."
25. Ord. expands "D." to "Dr." throughout.
26. Ord. reads "and."
27. Ord. reads "hands."
28. Ord. reads "devil's."
29. Ord. reads "Alecumpains."
30. Ord. reads "re."
31. Ord. reads "and."
32. Ord. reads "knocks."
33. Ord. reads "Domino."
34. Ord. reads "she's."
35. In the ms. "my" is cancelled here. A note in the bottom margin reads "So

35. erased in original. E. H. B."
 36. Ord. reads "gives."
 37. Ord. reads "carries."
 38. Ord. reads "their."
 39. Ord. reads "their."
 40. Ord. reads "bothe."
 41. Ord. reads "now." In Binney's copy "/sic/" is written under "no."
 42. Ord. reads "out."
 43. Ord. omits.

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TWO PHRASAL FOLK VERBS: TO POSSUM OFF AND TO CABBAGE ON TO

Verbs with folk etymologies (and especially those derived from the generic plant and animal names) form a sizable lexicon: to skunk, to buffalo, to crawfish, to parrot, to bug, to badger, and so on. The folk verb lexicon grows considerably with the addition of phrasal verbs with a single particle: to weasel out, to tomcat around, to snake out (logs), to louse up, to rat on, to cotton to, to horse around, and so on. The lexicon is further lengthened with the addition of folk verbs compounded with multiple particles: to weasel out of, to worm out of, to cotton up to, and so on.

Both to possum off and to cabbage on to are folk verbs occurring in southern Indiana agrarian dialects. To possum off occurs in the dialect of older members of established farming families in an area near the Wabash River in southwestern Posey County. To cabbage on to occurs in northwestern Floyd County and northeastern Harrison County in the dialect of some established farming families.

To possum off seems a kind of semantic extension of the better known to play possum, which makes use of the inherent attribute of the opossum to feign death when threatened with bodily harm. To play possum makes use of an attributive feature substitution that substitutes sleep for death. The phrasal verb to possum off has the feature feign deleted and assumes the meaning of to go to sleep.

To possum off is rarely used in the first person ("I think I'll go possum off"); rather, it most characteristically occurs in the third person past tense form, frequently in response to a question:

Q: Where's John, Sam?

A: He possumed off a while back.

On occasion, to possum off is expanded to include a second particle, on, and the new phrasal verb assumes the meaning of to go to sleep on:

Q: What happened to John, Sam?

A: He possumed off on me.

To cabbage on to, however, is of an obscure etymology, for there seems to be no real transfer of attributive features from the noun cabbage to the phrasal verb.