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"This is a Mummers' play I wrote" Modern compositions and their implications

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Abstract

It seems that may people feel compelled to rewrite folk plays. Working with a large sample of composed and adapted texts, the apparent personal and cultural motivations of these wannabe folk playwrights are explored. More specifically, this study examines the textual characteristics of the rewritten plays in an attempt to determine what it is that makes the authors think that they have written a mummers' play. These features are then compared with a historical database of "authentic" Quack Doctor plays. It is suggested that similar processes and criteria have existed throughout the history of the plays, and may indeed have been the prime factor in their evolution.

Introduction

Whether on paper or on the Internet, there is plenty of documentary evidence to suggest that the urge to rewrite folk plays is irresistible. Some of these modern plays are simply adaptations of traditional texts, but most are totally new compositions written in the traditional style - *whatever that means*. This last remark encapsulates the subject of this paper. Modern folk play compositions raise a host of questions. Why do people write them, and how? What makes the plays seem authentic? Is it more than having a rhymed script? More than wearing costumes swathed in ribbons and streamers? Just what is it? These are interesting questions in their own right, but the answers may also have implications for folk play history. If the influences and factors that operate today also held sway in the past, then by studying the modern compositions we may gain a valuable insight into how the different traditional play variants emerged and evolved.

Previous Work

The introduction of modern historical personages into the plays has been noted by various authors, including J.H.Ewing (1884), R.J.E.Tiddy (1923) and Alex Helm (1965). These characters are indicative of at least partial rewriting or supplementary composition during the history of the plays. The only previous in-depth study of newly-composed folk plays I can find was conducted by Ian Russell on the Brut King play of Jacksdale, Nottinghamshire in the 1970s (I.Russell, 1981a).

Jacksdale was the home of a traditional hero-combat play, performed at Christmas and featuring the character Bullguys (spellings vary). The actors were known as Bullguisers, possibly a conflation of the character name with the name Guisers commonly used in the region and elsewhere.

In the mid 1970s, a new teenage group of Bullguisers decided to perform the play. Keith Flint, the tradition bearer from the previous generation provided them with the

script, but it did not gel. Instead therefore, he decided to update the play, the result being a brand new script incorporating current celebrities, fashions, jingles and topical events.

Russell interviewed Keith Flint to determine his methods and motivation. Flint said his aim was to update the script to make it funnier and more entertaining. Its topicality is reflected in the cast illustrated in Figure 1. Brut King - one of the protagonists - was based on the boxer Mohammed Ali, who at the time featured in a television advert for Fabergé's *Brut* cologne for men. His opponent - Kung Fluey - was inspired by the then popular kung fu *genre* of films and television programmes. The Referee, of course, mediated the fight. Slack Alice was borrowed from the repertoire of the effeminate comedian Larry Grayson.

Fig.1 - Jacksdale Bullguisers, Nottinghamshire, England, 29th Dec.1977
(from I.Russell, 1981b)
Left to right: Brut King, Opener, Slack Alice, Referee, Kung Fluey

While the characters were new, and indeed most of the script, Flint felt it was important to keep some traditional features. Therefore he retained the classic hero-combat plot where one disputant is felled by the other, and the doctor (in this case played by Slack Alice) revives him. Enter In or Opener still started the play with the traditional verse, and the play ended with a Christmas carol

With the new script in place, the play was performed in the traditional context, with numerous performances taking place over three Christmas seasons, mainly in pubs in and around Jacksdale. They had a good reception, but the actors were made aware of audience expectations for the traditional characters Bullguys and Betsy Bellsybub, who were missing from the play. At the end of three years, the novelty had worn off, both with the actors and the audience, so in the end they reverted to the tried and tested traditional text.

Resources for Modern Plays

The plays used for this study were self-defining. By this I mean that if they said they were mumming plays (or one of the myriad other names used by traditional folk play troupes), they were included. The aim, after all, was discover whatever they meant by this. Most of the plays were drawn from the Links page for Modern Compositions on the Traditional Drama Research Group website - www.folkplay.info. At the time of writing, this listed thirty websites containing modern play scripts, some of which had multiple texts. Also, there were eight websites reporting performances of modern compositions, and nine websites for playwrights with scripts for sale[1]. This collection of links continues to grow.

In addition to these plays, further unsolicited electronic texts were received personally from playwrights and included in the study, as were a few individual hardcopy scripts from various sources. A key factor in selecting this corpus was that the texts were mostly already in electronic form, which meant I was able to load them into a database for analysis and comparison with the database of about 180 traditional texts I had assembled for my PhD research. Many of the websites provided photographs of performances. However, this study concentrates on the scripts and the contexts.

Another body of modern texts is the collection of about 150 "made" scripts assembled by Ron Shuttleworth for the Morris Ring Folk-Play Collection. This was not included in this study, partly because the scripts were not available in electronic form and partly because I wished to keep them in reserve to test my conclusions. Ron, who saw a draft of this paper, tells me that his collection has a similar range of play types, but with more originating from Morris dancing teams.

Types of Modern Play

From an examination of the research corpus, I identified the following types of modern play, largely characterised by why and how they were prepared, and how they were performed:

- Mumming Skits: one-off topical entertainments
- Adapted Mumming Plays: plays reflecting the special interests of clubs and societies
- School and Community Mumming Plays: compositions guided by drama professionals
- Performers' Rewrites: new plays to fulfil new needs
- Compiled Mumming Plays: plays with lines collated from two or more traditional texts
- Other Modern Compositions: experimental writing exercises, and vanity mumming plays

I shall now discuss these types in more detail, in each case giving brief examples and a more detailed case study.

Mumming Skits

Mumming skits form the largest of group of scripts in the study collection. These are plays prepared for a single performance, although often at an annual event such as a Christmas party or ceilidh, or some other recurrent event such as a wedding. The plays acted at these events may always use a mumming play format, or mumming plays may be just one of several styles that are employed. However, whatever the custom, fresh scripts are composed for each occasion.

The motivation is to provide entertainment, and the plays are often satirical, targeting national, organisational or family politics. They therefore portray or allude to topical characters and events, controversies and so on. Most of the text is freshly composed, but a few traditional speeches or formulae are usually included, as are stock characters such as a doctor. In addition, they frequently incorporate jingles, catchphrases, and similar allusions drawn from the mass media, often as parody.

Example Mumming Skits

- Susan Galbraith's May Day Plays (S.Galbraith, 1996, and personal communications)

  Galbraith mainly writes the plays for performance on May Day by the Bassett Street Hounds Border Morris, Syraceuse, New York, USA. At least one of her plays has been performed by pupils of Burlington High School. The plays have information technology themes. For instance, in "The Queen of Winternet", King Barney the Simple is sent into an enchanted state by a virtual reality glove, given to him by the wicked Queen of Winternet. Queen Catherine the Kind calls on various people to bring him back to reality, including the Wizard of Unix - the king's "High Nerd". His entrancement is finally broken by a rapper dance performance.

- Thakeham Mummers' Play (M.Bird, no date)

  This play is a skit on various local personalities and controversies from the village of Thakeham in Sussex, England. The following cast list gives a flavour of the plot: Father Christmas, Parson, Publican, Property Developer, Parish Council, Abingworth Heir, Peace-in-the-Green, Consultant, Chill Penury, and Banker. The Consultant causes the demise of the Abingworth Heir (symbolising the local "aromatic" mushroom farm), which brings the village to hard times. The Banker is brought in to revive the village economy, and is roughly equivalent to the Doctor.

- "Saint George W.: A Mummers Play" (W.L.Brown, 2000)

  This is a skit on the US Presidential Election by William L.Brown. The plot lampoons the disputed election count in Florida, and has the characters Devil Doubt, Father Election, St.George [W.Bush], St.Al [Gore], Turkey Bill [Clinton], and a Doctor.

Case Study - The Cambridge-Somerville Wedding Plays

In the USA, one social group with links to the Cambridge and Somerville area of Massachusetts has taken to performing mummers' skits at wedding receptions whenever one of them gets married. Or, as one of the plays says itself:

"It seems there's a wedding here, and no-one gets away
With getting married hereabouts without a mummers play"

(Cambridge Tradition, 1996)

Many of the participants have studied or taught at the local universities, notably Harvard and MIT. Those that have moved away from the area have taken the new tradition with them, with weddings providing an opportunity for a "gathering of the clan". A large proportion of the participants are highly qualified and are high fliers in their chosen professions. Additionally, many are also members of folk dance groups and choirs.

Usefully, one of the participants - Lenore Cowen has gathered the scripts of ten plays on her website (L.Cowen, no date). In addition to the scripts she also gives an account of how they are organised, and adds her own analysis of what characterises the Cambridge-Somerville tradition.

The plays are prepared by committee under a cloak of secrecy, since in principle they are supposed to be a surprise entertainment for the bride and groom. As people are geographically dispersed, draft scripts and amendments bounce around the group by email. Themes from the lives of the bride and groom are woven into the plays, along with the traditional death and revival and other motifs. The background of the group also features in the plays. Many of the actors are doctors - PhDs if not actual medics - and these are cast accordingly. Indeed there may be several doctors either serially or together, and in one case, the fathers of both the bride and groom, who happened to be medics, were roped into the play at the last minute. Also, there are often groups rather than individual characters - for instance a group of dancers - who speak and act and even die in unison.

Fig.2 - Wedding Mummers' Play for David Cohen and Lori Fassman (from: L.Fassman, 1998)

Fig.2 shows one of these plays being performed. Compared with Lenore Cowen's overview of this tradition, this picture appears to be typical. Because of communication constraints and the short time-scale for preparation, there is little effort to memorise the lines, and as can be seen the actors work directly from scripts. Costumes are usually non-existent or minimal. In this case, one person is wearing a fool's cap. Otherwise, the actors are wearing the tuxedos and dresses appropriate to a wedding.

According to Lenore Cowen the main features of the plays are as follows:

Stock Characters

- Fool - usually also the narrator
- Quackish Doctor
- The Bride and Groom

Plot

- Usually set during courtship and planning of the wedding
- In-jokes about lives, hobbies & relationship of the couple
- References to folk dance
- Death and resurrection - often the bride and/or groom
- Varied endings
  - Blessing for the couple
  - Apology for the play
  - Folk dance
  - Any combination of the three

She also provides lists of motifs, from which the following have been extracted:

Cause of death

Accident	4 plays
Strife	2 plays
Noise	2 plays
Harmony	1 play
Death by Chocolate	1 play

Method of Resurrection

Music	3 plays
Coffee	3 plays
By the Fool	2 plays
By a wedding object	2 plays
Kiss	2 plays

These lists illustrate my own observations that the death is always non-violent - there is no fight - and the revival is usually non-medical, unless one allows the pharmacological effects of strong coffee.

The scripts are written in rhyme - mostly couplets. Almost no lines are taken from traditional mumming plays, but characters do introduce themselves with the traditional formula "In comes I". No other formulaic speeches are used. On the other hand, the following new set of Doctor's lines appears to have become traditional for this group.

[Someone]:	Looks like we need professional help
	Is there a doctor in the house?
	{*Enter Doctor in surgical attire*}
Doctor:	In come I a doctor of sorts Scrubbed up as you can see To be a useful sort of guy/gal Another Ph.D.
	{*Examines patient(s)*}
	Yep they're dead

The above speeches are composite, and typical of lines found in most of the Cambridge-Somerville texts.

The humour here appears to be self-deprecatory. The performers and audience members are mostly experts, consultants and other professionals. These lines seem to acknowledge the common complaint that when experts are brought in to examine a problem, their reports often merely state what was known already, or what could have been determined by anyone with a bit of common sense, and do not contribute towards a solution.

Adapted Mumming Plays

With these plays, the mumming play format or even specific traditional texts are adapted to suit the interests of a club, society or other interest group. These include New Age and Neo-Pagan groups who adapt the plays for their enactments and rituals, and fan clubs who adapt them as "Fan Fiction" - literary works written by fans in the style of their favoured author, television series, or whatever. Although the adapted mumming plays are probably written with performance in mind, they may or may not actually be performed. The purpose may be more about staking a claim to mumming plays for the adaptor's belief system, or building a bridge between the playwright's different personal interests.

The degree of adaptation is highly variable, ranging from completely new scripts to specific traditional texts with little more than names changed to match the interest group's theme. Often changes are also made to emphasise favoured motifs or to remove incongruities. For instance, plays by New Age groups may have a "healer" or a mystical equivalent character, rather than a Doctor, because the title "Doctor" smacks too much established medical practice for their tastes.

Example Adapted Plays

- Mummer's Play for the Eclipse (B.Patterson, 1999)

  To quote from the author's introduction to this text:

  > "The play was performed at the Hurlers stone circles on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, beginning at the moment of first contact between the Sun & Moon on the day of the total eclipse of the Sun August 11th 1999. It is loosely based upon the traditional combat between St. George & the Dragon with one or two obvious twists! It's characters, for the most part are derived from the Grand Cross which may be found on the astrological chart for the moment..."
  >
  > "...All the players were members of Coventry Earth Spirit & the Circle of the Silver Star, who are based near Milton Keynes."
  >
  > "The play is lively & offers plenty of opportunity for interaction with the audience. Although it contains humour it also deals with some very powerful issues & processes. The final verses are a translation of a Gaelic prayer to the sun from Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*..."

  In this play, the Sun is eaten by the dragon - Maureen. St.George offers to rescue the situation by slaying the dragon, but is interrupted by Willy the Wizard who says magic is preferable. In the end Brighde is brought in to act as midwife while the sun is reborn.

  This is self-evidently a Neo-Pagan Celtic adaptation, and laden with symbolism relating to the eclipse of the Sun. There are a few traditional lines, mostly spoken by St.George, but apart from the translated Gaelic prayer, most of the script was freshly composed.

- A Holy Mumming: The Play of St. Blag (S.J.Ross, 1996)

  This play is based on characters from the *Yamara* comic strip. The script is given in several sections as a play within a short story. The author states that this is:

  > "A short story set Where Yamara Has To Live, by S. John Ross. Joe Holy is interrogated by church officials about a Mumming that was staged near his church. A hoot and a holler."

  The script is freshly composed in rhyme, and features characters from the comic strip. The death and resurrection motif is represented by Fea being crushed by a large boulder, and then being raised up by St.Joe administering "healing magic".

- The Zocalo Mummers' Play [fragment] (W.Linden, 2000)

  This fan fiction comes from a discussion list for the *Babylon 5* series. It is simply a traditional text fragment where Father Christmas has been renamed to Father Yearend [2].

- Þrimskviða Mummer's Play (B.Smith, no date)

  This is an enactment of the Old Norse heathen Þrimskviða legend. I am not qualified to comment on the accuracy of the rendition of the legend. The text, however, is probably the most atypical of my modern mumming corpus. It is

written in blank verse rather than rhyme with much use of inverse phraseology and apparently Old Norse names and terms. To this can be added extensive use of the obsolete letters thorn (þ) and eth (ð). The result appears cumbersome and rather difficult to read. This play has been performed, in a woodland setting.

Case Study - The Viadopolis Mummers' Play

This play was adapted by "Simahoyo" for fans of the *Xena, Warrior Princess* television series ("Simahoyo", no date). It is written as a play within a play - intended to be an episode of the series. In this case, the traditional mumming play used as the basis for the script has been kept more or less intact with few new lines added. The adaptation has been achieved simply by substituting proper names in the script with acceptable equivalents from the television series, as follows:

Traditional Cast	**Viadopolis Cast**
Father Christmas	Gabrielle
Saint George	Xena, Warrior Princess
Bold slasher	Julius Cesar *[sic]*
Doctor	Salmonius
Jack Finney	Joxer
Other Names in the Text	
Christmas	Winter Solstice
Old England / English	Greece / Greek
King of Egypt's Daughter	Herodotus' Daughter
Jamaica	Britannia
Pounds	Coppers / Dinars
Beelzebub	Sir Poisongrub

Two types are name substitution are evident. Firstly, the key characters have been replaced with suitable equivalents from the television series. Secondly, changes have been made to avoid anachronisms. Thus, there can be no reference to Christmas, since the series is set in pre-Christian Ancient Greece. Similarly, Jamaica was unknown at that time, so a suitably exotic remote island - Britannia - is named instead. Sir Poisongrub, may not be a substitution, but could have been present in the original text. Certainly E.K.Chambers (1933:65) lists a "Lord Grubb" as one of the alternative names for Beelzebub in his *English Folk-Play*. This could be a clue to identifying the specific traditional text that was used, although I have not yet been able to locate it.

School and Community Mumming

These plays have similarities with adapted mumming plays and skits, in that they may reflect the interests of the school or community, and may feature the topical satire of skits. The difference is that these productions are by amateurs led by professionals, meaning drama teachers, professional actors and similar facilitators. They are usually one-off performances or programmes, possibly associated with a festival or special event. Typically, they are initiated or sponsored by an educational or arts body. The motivation of these bodies is educational, whereas for the teachers and facilitators the projects may also be a livelihood.

The project leaders may provide a ready-made script, perhaps from a menu of wares on offer to potential clients. More likely, the script will be composed by the group under guidance from a project leader, probably in a workshop setting, and perhaps leaving scope for improvisation during the performance. Anything goes, although the script may paraphrase or copy the style of the tradition

School and Community Examples

- "Ringing Down the Shut" Peter Cann (P.Cann, 1997)

  This play was commissioned by Shropshire Local Education Authority and Pentabus Theatre and was first performed by members of Drama Centres, the youth theatre network for Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin at Old St Chad's, Shrewsbury. Steve Johnstone directed the production.

  The mumming play is a play within a play, being scene 2 of 8. The play as a whole is similar to the film *The Wicker Man*, complete with burning effigy. The comic sub-play represents the "Winifest" within the plot. Winifred is beheaded by Caradoc. A mournful Bueno reunites her head with her body and miraculously revives her.

- "Mummers Play" - Thaddeus Jurczynski (T.Jurczynski, 2003)

  Jurczynski put this play together for the Fremont Art Council's Feast of the Winter Solstice in Seattle, Washington, USA. The characters are Fool, St.George, Squire, Dragon and Doctor. This is a fairly traditional cast, and the script indeed includes a few traditional lines. However, the script mostly paraphrases and extends one or more traditional texts. St.George kills the Dragon but then also kills himself by accidentally falling on his sword. The Squire brings on the Doctor to raise St.George. The Doctor's medicines topically include herbal teas and Viagra.

- The Armagh Rhymers (Armagh Rhymers, no date)

  The Armagh Rhymers (Fig.3) are a professional performing group based in Armagh, Northern Ireland. They perform shows throughout Ireland, and run educational workshops for schools at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Ulster American Folk Park, and at the schools themselves. Their main show merges an Irish Mummers' play with traditional music and song, and this also forms the basis of their school workshops.

Fig.3 - The Armagh Rhymers performing at the Verbal Arts Centre, Derry-Londonderry, Northern Ireland, for conference delegates on 11th June 2003. Photographer: Peter Millington

- "George and the Dragon" (Youth Fellowship, 1998)

  The Youth Fellowship is an evangelical Christian arts organisation in Market Drayton, Shropshire, England, working with Christian youth groups. Their plays are intended to promulgate a religious message and perhaps to make converts, although their scripts seem to be directed more at fellow practising Christians than to the general public. This play was performed publicly at the Summer Market in Market Drayton in 1998.

  The Dragon is unsurprisingly the villain, and he threatens "the crowd" - this being a group of cast members rather than the public. Two knights then try to kill the dragon, but fail and are eaten. Incidentally, despite the title, neither of these is named George, nor is anyone else. In the end the Dragon beaten to death by members of "the crowd" with placards that spell J-E-S-U-S. The moral of the story is "Only Jesus saves".

Performers' Rewrites

The Jacksdale Brut King play described under Previous Work is an example of a performers' rewrite. These are plays written by a performing group to supplement or replace their existing play or repertoire. This may apply to both traditional and folk revival groups, although clearly the implications are more significant for traditional groups. Either way, the groups normally retain their existing performance pattern. In the case of traditional teams, this means that they stick to their traditional performing season and itinerary. Similarly, revival teams will keep to their usual venues, for example folk clubs and pubs. The rewritten play may be performed during several seasons or sessions rather than just once.

At Jacksdale, the declared purpose of the rewrite was to bring the play up to date in order to appeal more to modern audiences. Another reason may be to accommodate new needs, for instance to need for a longer play, or to include more actors. The scripts tend mostly to be newly composed, although some traditional characters and speeches are often retained for authenticity or to match audience expectations. They may incorporate material from the popular mass media and include topical allusions. The scripts therefore can have some similarity to mumming skits.

The Meevagh Mummers of Carrigart, Donegal are another example (Críostóir Mac Cáirthaigh, 2002). This play was rewritten to feature key figures from the period of the Second World War - Herr Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, Goebbels, President Roosevelt, Stalin, Gandhi and De Valera. The play was first conceived in 1941 by John M.McGettigan of Glenree and performed for perhaps two seasons. It was later revived in 2000 to raise funds for charity. The two protagonists are Herr Hitler and Churchill, with Hitler losing the fight. It is Doctor Goebbels who is brought on to cure Hitler. The rest of the play is a procession of the remaining world figures whose speeches include comments on various aspects of the war.

Case Study – The Eastwood Guysers' Plays

In 1973 and 1974, the Eastwood Festival Committee of Eastwood, Nottinghamshire took a Guysers play round local pubs in order to raise funds for their local festival. This was a traditional play, based on the version that one of the cast members has performed in his youth in nearby Selson (P.Wragg, 1975). In addition to the traditional characters Opener, Bull-Guy, St. George, Doctor Brown and Belzebub, there were two non-speaking characters - Gypsy and Fairy - whose role was to collect the money. In 1975 however, it was decided to rewrite the play (Eastwood Community Association, 1976). The principal characters, plot and structure were retained, but most parts were paraphrased and/or lengthened. The following graphs and analysis show how the two plays compare.

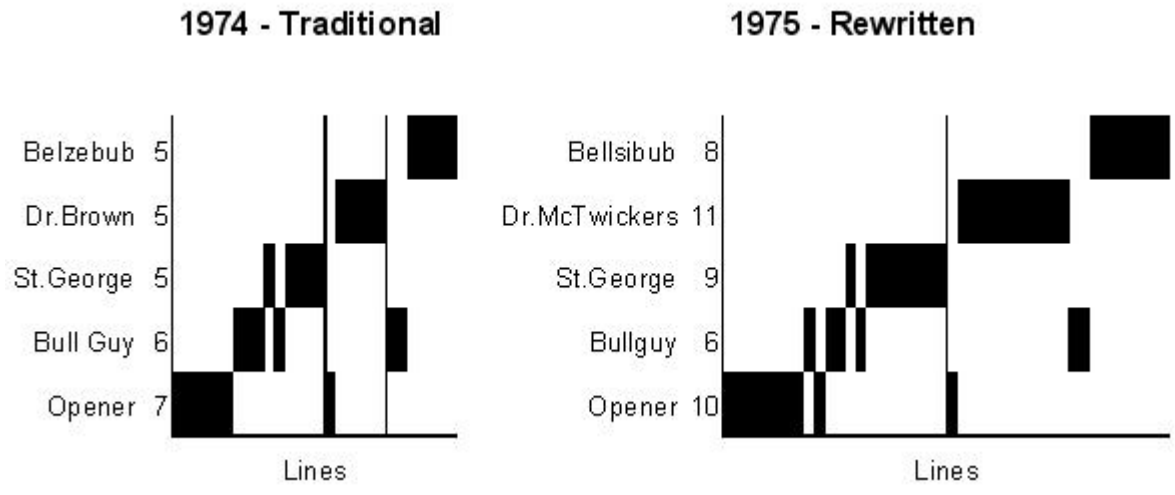

Fig.4 - Eastwood Guysers' Plays: Graphs representing the structures of the texts

The graphs in Fig.4 were prepared using method I first described in *Roomer* in 1980 (P.Millington, 1980). Each graph is basically a grid, where the horizontal axis indicates the lines of the play, thus representing its duration. The vertical axis shows the characters in order of appearance working from the bottom up. Rectangles in the grid are shaded according which character is speaking a given line. Vertical rules

drawn within the grid indicate the positions of stage directions. The numbers next to the character names give the total number of lines spoken by each character.

Both graphs conform to one of the common patterns I have observed for folk plays of whatever subject or language. The main features of this pattern are:

- The majority of lines are spoken by the latest character to enter.
- Where there is true dialogue[3], this tends to be spoken by the two most recent characters.
- There is a tendency for the speeches to form a straight diagonal, indicating the entry of a steady and regular stream of new characters.

The structures of the two Eastwood versions are effectively identical. Bullguy has a brief additional dialogue with the Opener, but otherwise the most obvious difference is that the rewritten version is nearly 60% longer than the traditional version. The character names are also essentially the same, although the doctor has been renamed Dr.McTwickers in order *not* to rhyme with the word "knickers" - a piece of deceptive *risqué* humour:

> In comes I, Dr.McTwickers
> Ah, what have I here, a pair of… tweezers

Compiled Mumming Plays

Compiled Mumming plays are collations of two or more traditional play scripts. This may be done with performance in mind, or the compilation may be a purely intellectual exercise. Consequently such plays may or may not actually be performed. The aim usually appears to be to produce an "improved" script. This might simply involve cherry-picking the best bits from the source texts, or the purpose may be to lengthen the script, for instance to accommodate additional cast members. Alternatively, the motivation may be to reconstruct a "more complete" version. This implies that the compiler regards the source texts as incomplete or fragmentary.

In general, the individual source lines and speeches tend to be kept in their original form, but there may be deliberate omission of what the compiler regards as objectionable material or "modern corruptions". Some newly composed lines are usually added, typically to bridge the inevitable discontinuities that arise from attempting to merge different texts. Some compilers may also introduce new lines to reflect their interests and views.

Compilation Examples

- Henry Slight's *Christmas: his Pageant Play* (H.Slight, 1836)

  Slight states that this text was "compiled and collated with several curious Ancient black-letter editions." In my PhD thesis, I show that in fact this play was compiled from three texts published in the early 19th century (P.Millington, 2002, pp.217-218, fig.27). These are two scripts published in Hone's *Every-day Book* (1827) - a shortened reprint of the *Alexander and the King of Egypt* chapbook text, and the play from Falkirk contributed by J.W.Reddock. Curiously, a third text in Hone's book - a Cornish play contributed by "W.S." (William Sandys) - was not used. Instead, Slight's other source was the Cornish text published by Sandys in his *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* (1833).

In compiling his text, Slight generally did not tamper with the original source lines, although he did tidy up their language. This is most noticeable with the speeches taken from the Falkirk text, where Slight has converted Scottish dialect into Standard English.

- Juliana Horatia Ewing's *The Peace Egg* (J.H.Ewing, 1884)

  This play was compiled in 1884 from five texts, which Ewing lists in her introduction. I discuss the compilation of this text in some depth in my paper on the St.Kitts' Mummies plays (P.Millington, 1996)[4]. One of Ewing's declared aims was to make the play suitable for performance in children's nurseries. This is why the cast was increased to 17 characters, including bit parts for the younger and less-able children. It also explains why she Bowdlerised the text, for instance by omitting the character Beelzebub.

- Annotated Griffin Road Mumming Play (R.Holmes, 2002)

  This play was compiled in 2002 by Rich Holmes - sole dancer of Griffin's Corners Morris of New York state, USA. It was performed at a New Year's Eve party on the 31st December 2002. Holmes used numerous sources, all of which he itemises in copious endnotes. He included one or two non-traditional sources, such as lines from *Goon Show* radio programme, so as Holmes says, "modern corruptions were ... inserted rather than omitted".

  Having seen a draft of this paper, Holmes contends that his compilation is also a Performer's Rewrite, since one reason he compiled it was to extend the repertoire of Griffin's Corners Morris. This illustrates that the categories outlined here are not necessary mutually exclusive. However, I believe it is primarily a compiled play. His approach was "to include as many elements and jokes that [he] liked as possible" while also trying to develop his own style of play. He concedes that this could be considered "improving" the script (R.Holmes, Personal communication, 2003).

Other Modern Compositions

There remain a few plays that do not fit into any of the foregoing categories, being more exercises in vanity or experimental writing than plays intended for performance. Indeed, they may not be performable. For instance, at least one play lapses into narrative rather than scripted dialogue, so improvisational acting might be required.

With vanity mumming plays, the approach seems to be "I can do [better than] that!" - although often this self-assessment is arguable. With experimental writing exercises, the playwrights seem to be exploring what they can do with the mumming play *genre*. Can they make it non-violent, politically correct, etc.? Can it be made funnier, shorter, etc.? The results can be interesting.

Example of Experimental Writing

In Honor of the Season
The Shortest Known Mummers' Play

["RuTemple" (2003)]

(you must imagine the finger-puppets)

[Fool]: I'm the Fool!

[Hero]: I'm the Hero!

[Villian]: I'm the Villian! *[sic]*

[Hero]: Scum!

(they battle, Villian falls)

[Fool]: He's dead! Call a Doctor!

[Doc]: I'm a Doctor!

[Fool]: Can you cure him?

[Doc]: Sure thing

(raises Villian)

[Villian]: I'm alive!

(all bow)

Quoted in its entirety, this play by "RuTemple" (Ruth Temple of San Francisco, USA) is interesting because her implicit aim is to reduce the mumming play to its barest essentials. It therefore reflects her view of the vital ingredients of a mumming play - what is and is not important. Firstly, she focuses on cast and basic plot. The characters are designated by roles rather than names, which probably implies that, in her view, specific names are unimportant. The skeletal plot succeeds in following the traditional hero-combat form - dispute, fight, death, call for a doctor, revival and ending - although there is no introduction.

The script, on the other hand, differs in format from traditional plays. There is no verse, although this is probably because of the brevity of the lines. It is difficult to compose verse when there is only one line per speech. There are self-introductions, but neither "In comes I" nor "Here comes I" formulae are used.

Textual Analysis

The research collection of 45 composed scripts plus one fragment was compared with the database of traditional texts than I prepared for my PhD research. This comprised about 180 traditional scripts, and is available online at www.folkplay.info (P.Millington, 1999-2002).

303 different traditional line types were identified that occur in the modern sample. Of these only 29 types occurred five or more times. To put this in context, the database of traditional plays contained over 5,500 different line types, of which about 1,000 occurred three or more times.

Most Popular Retained Lines

The traditional lines that are more frequently retained in modern compositions mostly relate to the Doctor and his calling on, or to the play's opening speeches. There is also a pair of formulaic lines that is often used to introduce new characters.

Doctor-related lines

These lines have been arranged in the order they would usually appear in a play.

[Someone]	Oh no! Oh no! What hast thou done?
	Is there a noble doctor to be found To raise the dead to heal the wound? ***or*** To raise this man that's on the ground
Doctor	In comes I a Doctor
[Someone]	Are you a doctor?
	What can you cure?
Doctor	**I can cure hipsy, pipsy, palsy and gout** **Pains within and pains without**
[Someone]	Can you cure him?
Doctor	I've got a little bottle by my side called elecampane Here Jack take a sup of my nip nap And let it run down thy tip tap Arise <patient's name> and fight again

The two lines that have been given in bold face are the traditional lines that occur most frequently in modern compositions. Interestingly, they are also the most common lines in the traditional database itself.

Opening Speeches

The following lines are the commonly retained lines from three distinct opening speeches. These speeches may appear in modern compositions either singly or in combination. Traditional scripts also sometimes have multiple introductory speeches.

[Introducer]	A room a room I do presume, and give us room to rhyme For we've come to show activity, this merry <festival> time
[Opener]	I open the door I enter in I hope your favours I shall win ***or*** I beg your pardon to begin Whether I rise, sit, stand or fall I'll do my duty to please you all
[Father figure]	In comes I <*person's name*>, welcome or welcome not I hope <*person's name*> shall never be forgot

Formulaic speech

In many traditional plays, each character ends his part by introducing the next person to enter, using the following formula (the precise wording varies):

And if you don't believe what I say
Step in <*person's name*> and clear the way

This formula is also used in some modern compositions.

Character Substitution

When traditional lines are retained in modern compositions, new names are often substituted for the original character. Take, for example, the following traditional speech.

In come i old Father Christmas, welcome or welcome not
I hope old Father Christmas shall never be forgot

In the modern compositions, various names have been substituted for Father Christmas:

Saint Ogrek	- Play of Saint Blag (S.J.Ross, 1996)
Captain Christmas	- Christmas Chantycle (C.Roth, 2000). This is a nautical captain.
Gabrielle	- Viadopolis Mummers' Play ("Simahoyo", no date)
Father Yearend	- Zocalo - Babylon 5 [fragment] (W.Linden, 2000)

Usage of Traditional Lines in Composed Plays

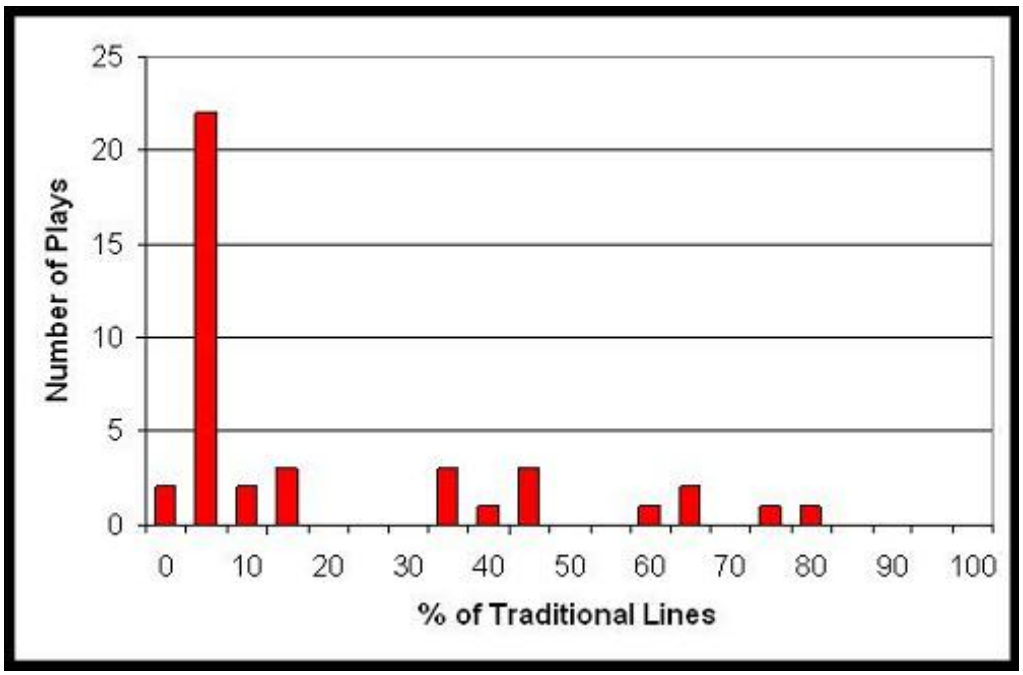

Fig.5 - Usage of Traditional Lines in Composed Plays

Figure 5 shows the frequency of the proportion of modern mumming plays that are composed of traditional lines. The majority of the texts have 15% or fewer traditional lines, and many of these lines are commonplace speeches such as "I am a doctor" that could have been composed spontaneously rather than inherited from a traditional script. The modern plays with the highest percentages of retained traditional lines are compiled plays or adapted mumming plays. This is much as one would expect.

Content Metrics

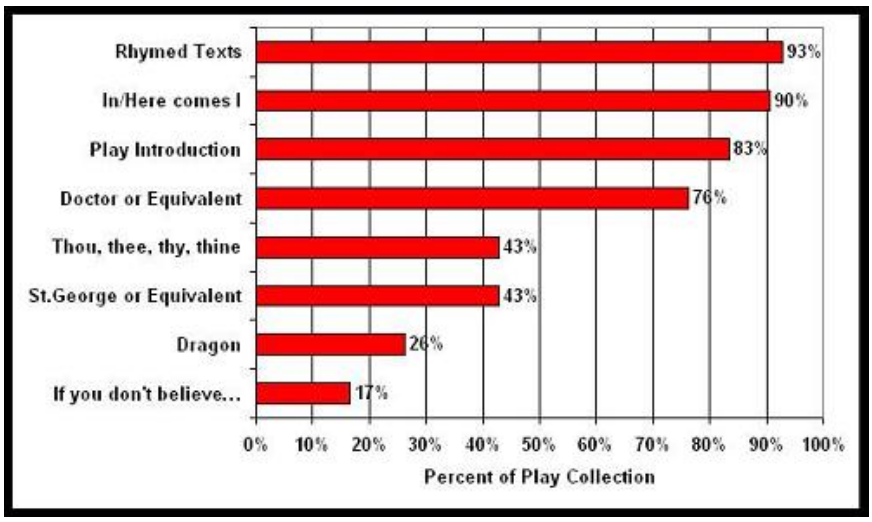

Fig.6 - Content Metrics

The frequency of occurrence of various features in modern mumming plays is given in Figure 6. They all have rhymed texts except for the *Þrimskviða Mummers' Play*, which is written in blank verse. The use of self-introductions using the formulae "In comes I" or "Here comes I" is also nearly universal. Other common traits include having a special character to introduce the play, and having a Doctor or an equivalent healer to perform a cure.

To quantify the use of archaic language, I looked for occurrences of the words "thou", "thee", "thy" and "thine". 43% of the modern plays had at least one or more of these words occurring at least once, but this dropped to 26% if two or more occurrences were required. This indicates that modern scripts generally use modern language. The few plays with higher occurrences of these words tended to be the plays that retained high percentages of traditional lines.

43% of the plays had the character Saint George or another character that used the lines normally associated with Saint George. This reflects the tendency for modern compositions to be of the Hero-Combat variety. 26% also had a Dragon. This is a higher proportion than is found with traditional plays, where the Dragon is unusual. Of course Saint George is usually paired with the Dragon because of his hagiographic legend. It seems likely therefore that modern playwrights feel that a Dragon should also be present if Saint George appears. This train of thought could explain how the dragon came to be introduced to the traditional plays - possibly by William Sandys in 1833 (S.Roud & C.Fees, 1984).

The textual formula "And if you don't believe...", which is often found in traditional plays to introduce the next character, does not appear to be common in modern compositions. Only 17% of the sample featured this formula.

Non-Rare Lines in Traditional Plays

It may seem pointless to determine the percentage of traditional lines that appear in traditional plays, because surely the answers would always be 100%. However, only about 20% of line types occur more than twice in the database I prepared for my PhD[5] (P.T.Millington, 2002). These are what I class as "non-rare lines". The other 80% of line types represent localised, often transient accretions, sometimes derived from literary sources. Therefore by determining the percentage of non-rare lines in

each traditional text it has been possible to plot a graph for traditional plays that is equivalent to Figure 5. This is shown Figure 7.

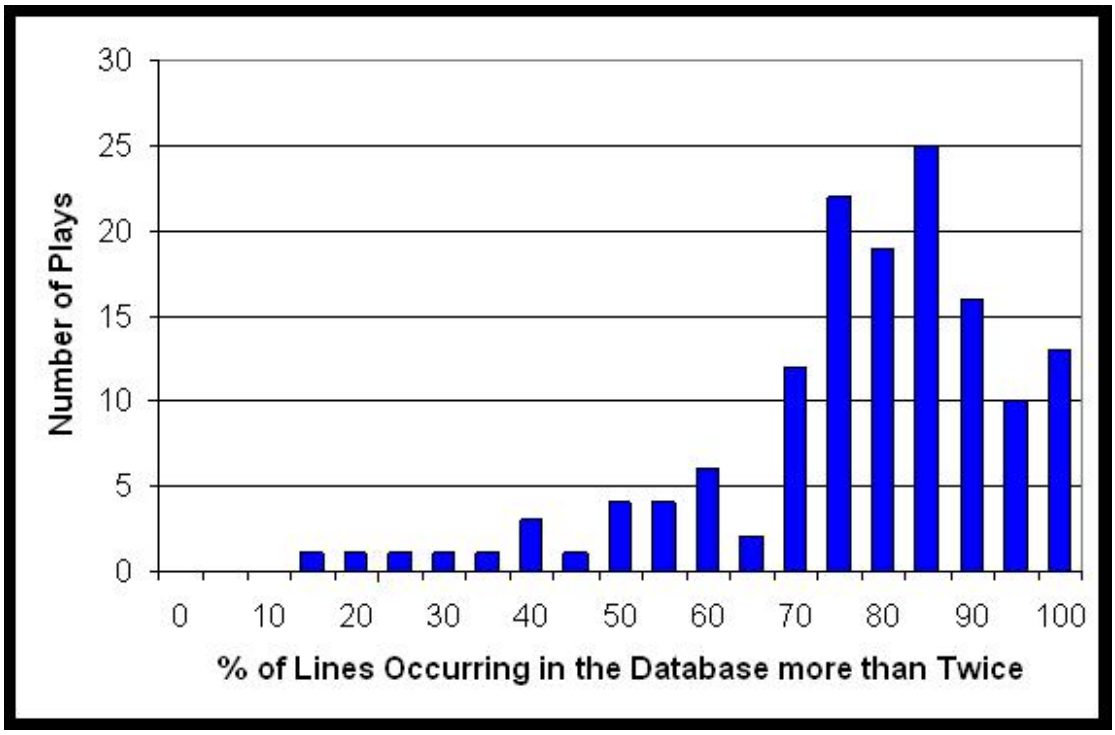

Fig.7 - Usage of Non-Rare Lines in the Traditional Play Database

Most plays have more than 70% non-rare lines. I therefore suggest that the presence of a low proportion of non-rare lines is evidence that a play contains rewritten or newly composed material, and/or inclusions from literary sources. The following plays have less than 40% non-rare lines (listed least first):

Symondsbury Mummers' Play	1880
Ampleforth Play	1898
Revesby, "Plouboys oR modes dancers"	1779
Christmas, Yule-Boys play from Galloway	1824
The Silverton Mummers' Rhymes	1873
A Christmas Play [Broughton, Lincs.]	1824

Because of the low proportion of non-rare lines in these plays they clearly cannot be regarded as typical of the *genre*. Indeed Georgina Boyes (1985), among others, has been critical of earlier folk play scholars who gave too much emphasis to such plays during their theorising. The Ampleforth and Revesby plays above are two specific examples that she discusses.

Usage in Exceptional Traditional Plays

Known or suspected compiled Texts were excluded from the main analysis, but had 59%-90% non-rare lines. In *The Peace Egg*, compiled by J.H.Ewing (1884), the proportion was 63%. In Slight's (1836) *Christmas: his Pageant Play...* the proportion was 83%. These percentages seem reasonable for plays that have been compiled from two or more traditional texts.

Four other plays excluded from the graph:

Walker's *New Mummer* chapbook	14%
Papa Stour Sword Dance Play	16%
J.A.Giles (1848) Bampton text	17%
Four Champions chapbook	18%

These texts show evidence of literary hands at work. In the case of the chapbooks, new versions were probably produced for commercial reasons. The Papa Stour text is another of the atypical plays discussed by Georgina Boyes (1985). In publishing his Bampton text, J.A.Giles admitted that he had forgotten most of the words of the traditional play he recalled from his Somerset childhood, and had written the bulk of the text himself to fill the gaps.

Wexford Mumming Plays

The folk plays of Wexford, Ireland show evidence of rewriting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There are three types of script in Wexford, the earliest being a traditional text. Examples of these are:

- **Ballybrennan** (P.Kennedy, 1863) - Performed 1817 or 1818

  This is a typical Irish Quack Doctor Play, which is textually very similar to the *Christmas Rhyme* chapbooks published in Belfast (e.g. Smyth & Lyons, 1803-1818 - see also G.Boyes et al, 1999)

- **Huddleston's text** - based on a text revised and corrected by J.Sinnott in 1873.

  This is the text of the "Wexford Mummers' Play" collected by the English folklorist N.A.Huddleston in 1958 and published by Jim Parle (2001, pp.295-305). This is essentially the same text as one published as a set of twelve *Mummer's Rhymes* by John J.Evoy (1898-1904) - one sheet of rhymes for each character[6]. The sheet headings state "Revised and corrected by James Sinnott of Bree, in the year of our Lord [1873]".

  Because Huddleston collated his text from at least six informants, it is not totally satisfactory. I have compared his text with the four *Mummer's Rhymes* sheets reprinted by Jim Parle (2001, pp.332-333). Generally, they tally with each other in terms of text and sequence, but Huddleston has more lines for the Doctor. Ideally, the following analysis should be repeated using the full original Sinnott script or at least texts collected from single informants.

- **"Patriotic Rhymes"** - 1905 to 1915

  Jim Parle (2001, pp.316-329) prints the full text of the "Patriotic Rhymes" that are used by most of today's Wexford Mummers. He states that they "came into general use in County Wexford 1905-1915". Alan Gailey (1969:31-32) also gives the Captain's first speech in his book *Irish Folk Drama*. Unfortunately, neither author gives the provenance of these rhymes.

Observations on the Wexford Mumming Plays

The most obvious change to be observed to have taken place during the rewriting of the Wexford plays is the increase in the length of the script. This is illustrated in

Figure 8. Huddleston's text is over five times as long as the traditional Ballybrennan version, while the *Patriotic Rhymes* are a further 50% longer that the Huddleston text.

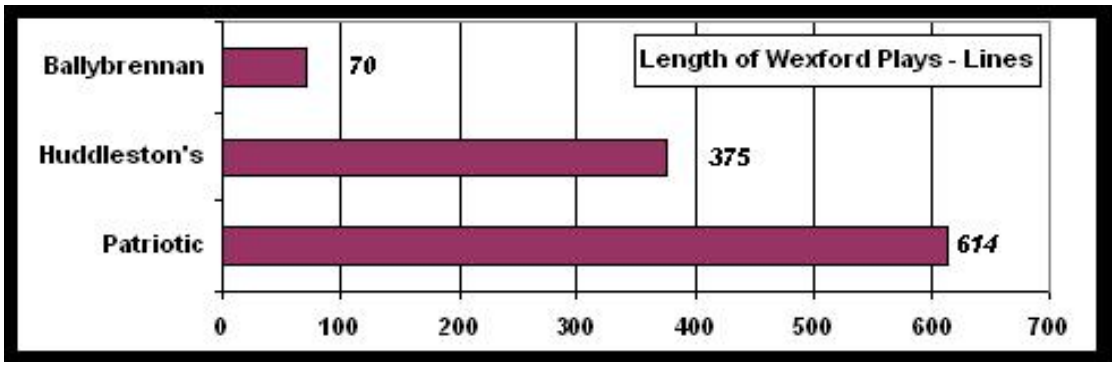

Fig.8 - Lengths of the Wexford Mumming Plays

Wexford Casts

The increased lengths of the plays are also reflected in the casts, with a doubling of the number of *dramatis personae* in the rewritten texts as follows:

Ballybrennan	**Huddleston's**	**Patriotic Rhymes**
Devil D'Out	Captain	Captain
St. George	Prince George	St Columcille
St. Patrick	St Patrick	Brian Boru
Doctor	Wellington	Art McMurrough
Oliver Cromwell	Dan O'Connell	Owen Roe O'Neill
Belzeebub	Napoleon Bonaparte	Sarsfield
	Lord Wellington	Wolfe Tone
	Czar	Lord Edward
	Grand Signor	John Kelly
	Doctor	Michael Dwyer
	Lord Nelson	Robert Emmet
	Polish King	Father Murphy
	Julius Caesar	

There is an additional Irish character - the patriot Dan O'Connell - in the Huddleston text, but the theme of the play is the reconciliation of the differences between England and Ireland, as personified by Saint George and Saint Patrick, in order to fight foreign adversaries. Sinnott's "revisions and corrections" really amount to a total rewrite of the play. It is still a Quack Doctor Play, but has no textual similarity with the earlier play, although it is in rhyme, and the characters introduce themselves with "Here am I...".

Tantalisingly, Huddleston's reconstructed text has just one couplet that is found in the earlier Ballybrennan text:

"The pox, the palsy and the gout,
and if the devil's within I'll run him out."

but this couplet does not appear in Evoy's *Mummer's Rhyme* sheet for The Doctor. It is therefore unlikely that it was in Sinnott's original script. Otherwise it would follow the practice of more modern Mummers' play compositions in retaining this verse.

The *Patriotic Rhymes* are also a complete rewrite, although most characters still introduce themselves with the formula "Here I am..." As one would expect from the title, the characters are all famous Irish patriots, except for the Captain, who acts as the master of ceremonies. Again with the exception of the Captain, the patriots replace all the earlier *dramatis personae*, and there is overall an anti-English flavour to the script. Interestingly, Saint Patrick has been dropped in favour of a more home-grown Irish saint, Saint Columcille. More importantly, from the point of view of folk play history, the Doctor has also been dropped, taking with him the motifs of a dispute and the revival of the loser. These motifs are ubiquitous elsewhere, so their omission is highly significant. In fact, the *Patriotic Rhymes* are not really a play at all in the usual sense. Instead they embody a procession of characters, who merely introduce and describe themselves (albeit at length), and do not engage in dialogue with each other.

What is barely evident from the text is that the Mummers who perform these rhymes also perform characteristic dances. These are performed in sets, and involve the clashing of special Mummers' sticks in a manner that is redolent of the clashes in English sword and morris dances. These dances have arguably become the principal feature Mumming in Wexford today.

Structures of the Wexford Plays

Figures 9 to 11 show graphs of the structures of the three types of Wexford play, plotted using the method already described when discussing the Eastwood plays. They have had to be plotted to differing scales, but they nonetheless exhibit some interesting trends and similarities.

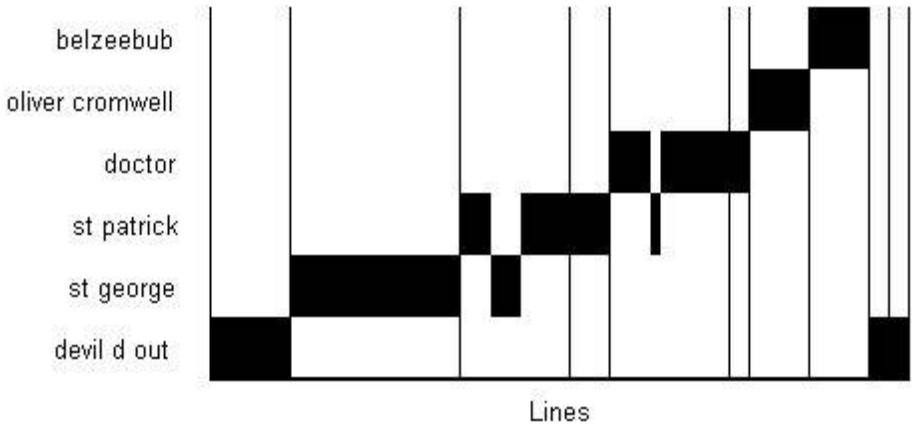

Fig.9 - Ballybrennan, Wexford play - about 1823 - P.Kennedy (1863)

As with the Eastwood plays, the structure of the Ballybrennan text conforms to the type of folk play where lines are focused on the most recent character, with very little in the way of real dialogue. The play is little more than a steady procession of personages, an interpretation that is supported by the straight near-diagonal arrangement of the speeches in the graph. Another feature worthy of note is that the same character, Devil D'out, both introduces and concludes the play.

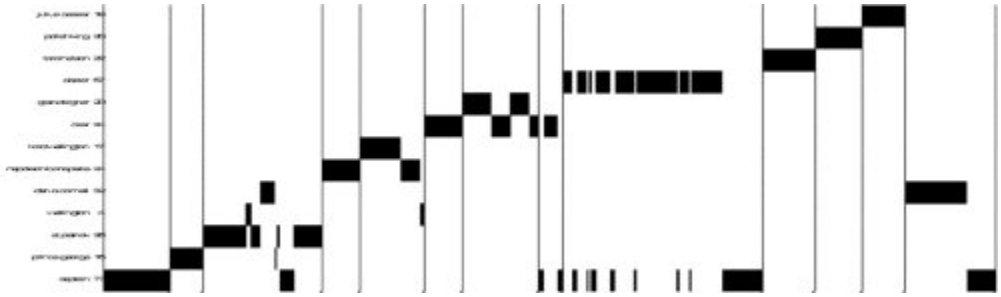

Fig.10 - Wexford Mummers' Play (Collected by N.A.Huddleston) - J.Parle (2001) p.295-305

Huddleston's text has more real dialogue than the Ballybrennan play, especially for the scene involving the Doctor. Even so, the graph shows that the lines are also focused on the most recent characters, again with a relatively steady procession of personages. The Captain both introduces and concludes the play, just as Devil D'out does in Ballybrennan. So, while Sinnott appears to have introduced more dramatic sophistication into his script, he also seems to have retained the basic structure and dramaturgy of the earlier play.

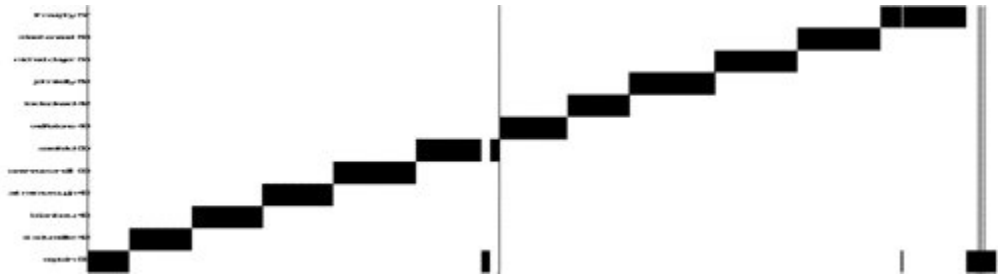

Fig.11 - Patriotic Rhymes - J.Parle (2001) pp.316-329

The structure of the *Patriotic Rhymes* is clearly just a procession of characters with speeches of approximately equal length. Two brief interjections by the Captain are the nearest we get to dialogue. They are used to enable the characters Sarsfield and Father Murphy to answer accusations of non-patriotic acts. As with Huddleston's text, the Captain acts as the master of ceremonies and he both introduces and concluded the performance.

Overall Trends in Wexford

The chronological trends within the Wexford Mumming tradition are for the texts to increase in length, and for the characters and subject matter to become more patriotically Irish. On the other hand, the overall structure of the plays has been retained throughout, with one character acting as master of ceremonies. The main aim of the Mumming tradition in Wexford appears to be to present a procession of interesting personages, rather than to present a drama *per se*. The characters are the main thing, and such plot as there is is subsidiary.

Conclusions

In using the word "play" it is natural to think of mumming plays in terms of drama or theatre. However, our analysis of the Wexford plays, suggests that perhaps we should reconsider them more as a progression of characters. The conclusions of many traditional plays are exactly that - a sequence of independent characters whose

speeches normally have nothing to do with the foregoing action, nor with each other. The linear structure of he graphs plotted for the Eastwood plays also lend support to this approach, as do similar graphs that I have plotted for many other plays both traditional and modern. Viewed in this light, the plays appear very similar to non-play mumming and guising customs, the difference mainly being in the degree of verbal performance. Indeed, this "paradigm shift" allows us to envisage a route by which drama came to be grafted onto the pre-existing house-visiting customs in the early to mid-18th century[7]. I posit a three-stage metamorphosis:

The original house-visiting mummers and guisers were essentially non-verbal, as we still see today in Newfoundland (H.Halpert & G.M.Story, 1969). The key element was disguise. Apart from colouring their faces or wearing masks, they would dress strangely or even cross-dress. Part of the fun was for the hosts to guess the identity of their disguised visitors. To maintain their anonymity, the mummers kept silent or made a "mumming" sound. Or if they had to speak, they would do so while breathing in. Once they had been identified, they were offered hospitality and/or largesse, and they could relax. The visitors often then provided additional entertainment - singing, dancing, and generally making merry.

The hypothetical intermediate stage was for the mummers to dress as particular characters - trades, personages, etc - rather than in non-specific disguise. An extension of this would have been for them to be introduced to the audience. Such introductions could have been spoken by the characters themselves (as with Wexford's *Patriotic Rhymes*), or by a leader (after the manner of a sword dance calling-on song), or sung jointly (as occurs with some Pace-Egging plays). Ostensibly independent, some of the characters could have complemented each other - e.g. a hero and a villain - and it would have been natural for them to engage in some form of horseplay or banter. The final stage, therefore, was to link such disjointed vignettes into a cohesive drama.

This hypothesis needs validating, although there may already be evidence to hand in the supernumerary characters. For instance, Georgina Smith (now Boyes) in a paper on the relationship between chapbook plays and traditional performance (G.Smith, 1981, pp.213-214) states:

> "If one recurrent element of performed plays can be proposed as deriving from pre-chapbook, 'traditional' forms, it is the occurrence of the supernumeraries..." "...it seems reasonable to suggest that the inclusion of supernumeraries in printed and performed plays reflects a tradition which, in some areas at least, predates the known chapbooks."

These would include Tosspot in the Pace-Egging plays, and in the plough plays, the Farmer's Man, Dame Jane, etc.

Once the first mumming play had been written, there appears to have been explosive evolution of the texts from the late 18th century onwards. With modern compositions, the main motivations are to increase the repertoire and/or to "improve" the scripts. It seems reasonable that the same motives and rewriting processes also applied in the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus some features, such as verse text and the quack doctor, were retained for authenticity and continuity. An interesting case in point is the Dragon. The earliest traditional texts do not have a Dragon. Instead King/Prince/Saint George's opponent was either Slasher or the Turkish Knight. Presumably it was felt that it would be an improvement if Saint George were to fight the Dragon, so one was duly added (possibly by W.Sandys in 1833). Despite this change, most traditional plays still lack a Dragon, so, as we have seen, today's

playwrights continue to add dragons to their "new improved" scripts. Clearly, modern compositions do give us a valuable insight into the processes that have taken place in the tradition.

Notes

[1] With so many scripts available free on the Web, one wonders why anyone would want to pay money for a script. However, some of the playwrights also provide performance advice and other services.

[2] Father Yearend would perhaps seem more appropriate to a mumming play adapted for a group of accountants.

[3] Dialogue is recognisable from a pattern of alternating rectangles - see for instance the speeches of Bull Guy and St.George.

[4] I can add that I have since discovered that the unaccounted for traditional lines in her play, and her declared "Mock Play" that seems to duplicate her *Alexander* chapbook source, both derive from another book by William Sandys published in 1852.

[5] The traditional database comprised 181 texts and fragments, of which 142 complete texts were selected for statistical analysis. The plays that were excluded consisted of compiled plays, literary parallels, fragmentary texts, and seemingly composed texts. Some of these were analysed separately.

[6] A complete set of these rhymes has not yet been located. Jim Parle has facsimiles of six sheets in his collection, apparently supplied by Dr.Kevin Whelan, and he reprinted the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 8th Rhymes in his book (J.Parle, 2001, pp.332-333). The imprints show various dates, suggesting there may have been several editions.

[7] This origin has been suggested by several scholars over the years and seems to be achieving some consensus (P.Millington, 2003:97,113 note 2).

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