

THE LADY OF THE RING The Historical Morris II

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The historical view of the morris dance has been bedevilled by populist views. Until it is rid of these no great progress will be made in the understanding of it for it encompasses kings, lords, citizens, artisans as well as the occasional peasant. The term morris may be used specifically or loosely. Many who write on morris are inclined to presume that any other person who has used the term knew exactly what he or she was talking about, certainly an unwarranted presumption. It would seem mainly to have been used to describe a fantastic dance according to the current ideas on what a dance should be, and occasionally to describe a dance with some ceremony or mumming attached to it. Certainly one must be extremely wary of projecting back in time the twentieth century reality of morris.

In my first article I dealt with possible realisations of two types of morris for plays of early Stuart times with what I hope was an approach to authenticity. I did not refer particularly to the Italian *moresca* such as we see at the end of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo Favola*, as Caroso and Negri give good guidelines for these in such dances as 'The Gentle Shepherd' and the torch dances.

The morris dance is the moorish dance. It is moorish as the Sicilian dance is Sicilian or the *almayn* is German, but it is greater than those for it has Europe for a reference while those others are contained within Europe. Nevertheless the whole thing is a merry conceit of dancers and always popular. To look for black faces when few there be or a disguise for folklore's sake is a waste of time. Morris is apparently xenogenous and but for Frazer in the wood and Freud lurking everywhere it could have remained unselfconscious.

If morris is a traditional dance, and this we must allow in some of its aspects, then one of the main elements is, as I have said previously, the revival of the dance. The dance that I propose to deal with is a revival of the sixteenth century, and I am putting together various bits of revivals to make a whole for the purpose of display, the bits may not fit so well but they are reasonably contemporary bits and at worst, better than your average anachronism.

Folklorists and antique shop owners share a delight in pretending that things are older than they are and typify a fetching failing of the human race that historians may not share. The renowned Betley Window, having been ascribed to various earlier periods, I here venture it to be late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. It represents an interest in things of an earlier period and it has been described many times and in great detail. It also represents Merrie England. Edward German put Merrie England firmly in the reign of Good Queen Bess, morris dancing and all. I do not wish to be unkind but there were some aspects of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I that were less than merrie. She was uncharitable to moors and she was uncharitable to morris. When King James I issued his 'Book of Sports' after the petition presented to him at Houghton Towers, he was allowing again those games that Queen Elizabeth I had proscribed. Now entertainments that were substituting for practice at the butts were one thing and the Queen's entertainments were another. Not that she was always as keen as James I for them, the accounts often tell of amusements prepared for her in vain, for she remained in her room and would not come forth.

In July 1575 the Queen spent three weeks at Kenilworth with the Earl of Leicester. One of the entertainments during this period was a morris 'after the auciont style — six dawnsers and a maid marion and a fool'. Now this is similar to the group in the Betley window except that this contains a friar, a hobby horse and a tabberer. One may suppose that they had a musician but the other characters appear to be optional, certainly the horse was. The Friar may have been there as one of the dancers, as a secondary fool he crops up all over the place, but perhaps absent sometimes because in the copartner dance he does not have a suitable spouse, but that is another tale. The Betley window is an echo of those groups of the fifteenth century such as we see represented by Israel van Meckenem, it is pure revival of olden times just as the Nuremburg Schembart drawings were seventeenth century illustrations of a festival of the late fifteenth century.

There is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that this Ring morris was a wooing play in which the fool is successful in gaining the lady. I now wish to introduce the play from a MS. in Dulwich College Library. It has no title but it belongs to this type of entertainment. The play is written in Elizabethan secretary hand and the speakers' names are in Italic hand; this would suggest that it belonged to the end of the sixteenth century. On the back of the MS. there is the forged signature: Kitt Marlowe. There are three transcriptions of this play but the most accessible is that

of Charles Read Baskervill in his 'Elizabethan Jig'. I am largely in debt to this reading but I have altered one or two words that I have seen differently and also altered speakers where to me it was an obvious error. I have also made up a line that was missing and which is given in brackets.

Baskervill considered that this play was a jig and that the words were sung, saying that the tune changed at the Fool's entry where there is a change of metre. Also he put in entries as one might a stage play. I suggest that it be treated as a mummers' play is played, that all the actors enter and stand in a circle and each approach the middle as his line is spoken. Again Baskervill feels that verses have been missed out, but this seems like a literary man's hankering after completeness when all that is needed is a quick sketch and on to the next to take another collection.

Morris wooing play

Rowland

Friend (Dick)

Perce

Nan (= marian)

Gentleman

Fool (Tom) *presumably also a tabberer.*

Rowland

Seest thou not yon farmers sonn
he hath stolne my love from me alas
what shall I doe I am vndonn
my hart will neer be as it was

oh but he gives her gay gold rings
& tufted gloves to were vppon a holly day
and many other goodly things
that hath stolne my love away

Frend

Lett him give her gaie gold rings
or stuffed gloves were they nere so sweete my boy
or were her lovers lords or kings
they should not cary the wench away

Rowland

Oh but a daunces wondrous well
& wth his daunce stolne away her love from me
yett she was wont to say I bore away the bell
for daunsing & for Courtisie /daunsing

Frend

fie lusty yonker what doe you heer
that you are not all a daunsing on the green to day
we feare perce the farmers sonn
is lik to carry your wench away

Rowland

good dick bid them all com hether
& tell perce from me beside
that if he think to haue the wench
heer he stands shall lie with the bride

Frend

Fy nan willt thou forsake thie olde lover
for any other newcom guest
thou long time his love did know
& whie shouldst thou now vse him so

Wench

Whie bony dicky I will not forsake
my bony rowland for any gold
if he can daunce as well as perce
he shall haue my hart in hold

Perce why then my harts lets to this geer
 & by dauncing I may wonn
 my nan whose love I hold so deere
 as any creatur vnder sonn /they daunce

Entr gent Good speed frende may I be so bold to daunce
 a turne or to wthout offence
 for as I was walking by chaunce
 I was told you daunst to gain a wench

Frend Tis true good sir & this is she
 I hope yor worshipp comes not to craue her
 for she hath lovers to or three
 & he that daunces best must have her

Gent how say you sweete hart will you daunce wth me
 & you haue both land & tower
 My love shall want nor gold nor fee
 (and you alone lie in my bower)

Wench I thank you sir for yor good wil
 But one of thes my love must be
 I ham but a homly cuntrye maid
 & farr unfitt for yor degree

Frend Take her good sir by the hande
 as she is fairest if she were fairer
 & by this daunce you shall well vnderstand
 that he can win her is lik to were her /daunce againe

Foole & see you not nan to day my mothers mayde
 see you not my true love my prety nany
 shes gon to the greene to day to seek her love they say
 but she will haue myn none self if she haue any

Wench wellcom sweet hert & wellcom my tomy
 wellcom my none true love wellcom my huny
 this is my love that my husband must be
 but when thou comst home boy as wellcom as he

Gent
 Wench whie how now sweet nany I hope you doe Iest
 no by my troth sir I love the foole best
 & if you be Ielous god give you god night
 I feare you are a gelding you caper so light

Gent I thought she had but Iested & ment but to fable
 but now I doe see she hath play with his bable
 I wish all my frends by me to take heed
 that a foole com not neer you when you mene to speed

Having acted their play the players will move out in line and on to the next stand. The 'frend' will be seen to act the same part as any Greek Chorus. There remains but the dance.

All the representations of this morris of the Lady of the ring, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, show gesturing with the hands, chironamia. Perhaps it is a long way from Kenilworth to Langrès but it would certainly help if one borrowed Arbeau's Moresques for the music and for the feet to dance. Here also is the writer speaking at the end of the sixteenth

century of something that he saw in his youth, or so he would have us believe, and certainly the tune is the ubiquitous morris dance.

If we thus borrow something from France we may well note that there is a parallel to this ribald morris play in the pastorale part of Robin and Marion. We have here also the country lovers and the gentleman who is rejected despite his gold.

The play noted at Revesby in 1779 has given trouble to folklorists, again because of their legacy of populist ideas, the text is rather literary, but then most mummers' plays have a heroic character and that is not our immediate concern. The second half of the Revesby play is a wooing scene where Cicely rejects a rich old suitor, Pickle Herring, in favour of the Fool. The Fool adds asides at the end of the speeches of other characters which tends to make a different kind of entertainment, but there are lines which echo the Elizabethan play. Pickle Herring has here offered Cicely gold and then he says:

Pickle Herring	Nay then sweet Ciss ne'er trust me more For I never loved Lass like the before	(enter Fool)
Fool	No nor behind neither Well met sweet Ciss well over ta'en	
Cicely	You are kindly wellcome Sir to me	

Cicely explains why she loves the Fool rather than him who offers gold:

Cicely	For I love a Lad that will make me laugh In a secret place, to pleasure me
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and at the end of the play the fool says:

Fool	Tis I that carries the Lass away
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which is a direct echo of several lines of our play.

The modern wooing play of the East Midlands tends to be of a different order and would not appear to be so relevant here though there are still occasional phrases that appear. The theme here is of the Fool who woos a young girl and then an old woman comes in with a baby which she says is the Fool's; after this there is a combat as in the St. George plays, between two of the other characters.

If my wedding of the Dulwich play to the morris of the Betley window is reasonable, and if its theme is also that of the fifteenth century Ring morris, it is perhaps possible that it stemmed from one of the mediaeval love games. We see one such in the painting of the Dance by Torchlight at the Court of Burgundy. The whereabouts of the original is not now known but there are reproductions in monochrome in several works. It has a date of 1463 on it and shows Philip the Good and his court dancing with Mlle. de Chimay de Croy as the presiding lady; here she holds a flower as the symbol of her favour, others may hold an apple or a ring. Crane considered this to be a basse dance, presumably on the grounds that anything before 1500 is a basse dance, he also thought the fool friar to be a musician playing a shawm but he is certainly merely mocking the tabberer. Perhaps this painting shows part of the celebrations at the reconciliation of Philip with his eldest son, for that was about this date. It could perhaps bear a relationship to the copartner morris.

The interesting feature of these wooing plays is the theme of the constancy of love and in particular the faithfulness of the maid for her lowly sweetheart, at least until 1779.

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Representations of Ring Morris and related types

Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (JEFDSS) Vol.I, No.2, 1933.

A Carved Morris Dance Panel from Lancaster Castle.

JEFDSS. Vol.VII, No.2, 1953

The Betley Window

JEFDSS. Vol.VIII, No.2, 1957

Round Dance in the Antique Manner, Ivory from Constantinople. c.1460–70.

Illustration from Liber Particularis of Michael Scot.

Borders of a Florentine Chessboard. c.15C

Rushbearing by Alfred Burton 1891

Munich Morris Dancers c.1480 (carved wooden figures)

The Dance by Sharp & Oppé. 1924

The Ring Dance, Israel van Meckenem. 15C.

Engraved ornament with men dancing. Israel van Meckenem. 15C.

The Torch Dance, from the Golf Book.

The Castle Museum, York

The Percy Panel

Manners, Customs and Dress during the Middle Ages and During the Renaissance Period, by Paul Lacroix. 1874.

and

Cyclopaedia of Costume. Vol.II by James Robinson Planché. 1874.

Dance by Torchlight at the Court of Burgundy

Bibliography

The Elizabethan Jig. Charles Read Baskervill. 1929.

Morris Dancers at Revesby. Preston, Smith & Smith. 1976.

Early Records of the Morris in England. Lowe. JEFDSS Vol.VIII No.2. 1957.

Some notes on the Betley Window. Nicol. JEFDSS Vol.VII No.2. 1953.

Robert Laneham's Letter. Furnivall 1890.

Elizabethan Handwriting. Dawson & Kennedy-Skipton. 1968.

Sixty Years of Folk, Folk Drama. Cawte. EFDSS. 1971

(Note: My date for the Betley window is at variance with Nicol's conclusions. I have not given my reasons but perusal of that article will show the date to be still a moot point.)

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