

WHAT WAS MORRIS?

The debate on a source for the English Morris continues, with selectivity, little regard to established facts and frequent surmises. It is like the phenomena of The Traditions of Glastonbury (Raymond-Capt, 1983)

The classic account, eg Young's "History of British Music" (1967), has "in 1381 John of Gaunt set up a Court of Minstrels at Tutbury in Staffordshire, which presided over by an elected King, was allowed to exercise authority over all of the craft in five of the midland counties. Five years later John of Gaunt brought back from Spain a troupe of Moorish dancers, and the combination of their practices with those proper to the traditional English Fool's Dance is said to have provided the basis for the Morris Dance. It was in honour of John of Gaunt, therefore, that the Robin Hood and Morris Dancers continued to wear his emblem - of three ostrich feathers - and the Red Lion on his shield after his marriage with Constance of Castile provided the name of inns - for example at Padstow and Kingston-in-Thames - which were for centuries the starting-point for ceremonial May Day dances." Note there is more to it than moors.

Heaney and Forrest assembled 800 references from 1500 to 1750, most that are likely to still exist and the basis of "Annals of Early Morris" and "Charting Early Morris" (both 1991). When analysed this work supports few claims made about the morris in recent years. The performance was overwhelmingly called by words that sound like morris and not moorish, moresque or morisco. A quarter of the records mention costume, half refer to bells and a third to coat or jacket. There is no mention of blacking faces and only one to sticks. By this time other dark skinned peoples were known, such as Turks who now frequent our mummers plays.

Interpreting scattered data is always difficult and limitations only become apparent with insights gained by study in depth. For how doubts arise from compilations, consider modern efforts to use the statistics in Domesday Book as shown in Welldon-Finn's "AD 1086-AD 1986 Domesday Book a Guide" (1986).

Attempts to relate the source for what has survived as the morris to direct contacts with Spain or France remain unconvincing, despite their moors and moriscos. However little considered has been the much closer link with the Netherlands where the local name for the dance was very similar, and the influences on other aspects of art and entertainment in England were large.

Morris coats appeared elaborate and expensive, fitting well with the views on costume of Jane Ashelford in "Dress in the Age of Elizabeth I" (1988), and sometimes they appear in wills as the most expensive thing owned by a dancer, perhaps also being buried in it, to the detriment of the local tradition, as at Puttenham near Guildford.

What about the performance justified the morris label? Not the dress, nor the dance, and probably not the behaviour of the extra characters, yet some association has persisted. As today the morris was instantly recognisable.

The one aspect not debated is the music. Most familiar western music instruments originated in the Middle East where music is not prohibited in the Koran, and were adopted through the 800 year Moslem occupation of Spain and the enthusiasm of returning crusaders and merchants, with some, such as the guitar, arriving in the 15th century. The musical instrument section of the Horniman Museum in South London has examples. Middle Eastern music is still modal, like European music when the morris first appeared, with a strong reliance on melody and complex rhythm, and not harmony, instrumental colour or musical texture, even when it is being improvised, like morris.

Consulted texts on late medieval music are concerned with polyphony or town waits and their monopoly of any public music making. I suggest that it was the type of music and the manner of its performance that acquired the morris label, rather as a particular type of music and social dance became known later as the Country Dance, even though it had little to do with the people of the countryside. Classifying by style continues to this day.

Origins

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