

Theories of Origin

Few modern academics have been willing to undertake a thorough analysis of morris dancing in its historical context because the field has been hopelessly dogged by a series of preconceptions imposed upon it by folklorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These preconceptions stem from an almost obsessional concern for *the* origin of the dances, which quest has in turn led generation after generation of devotees into extravagant flights of fantasy. As a prelude to the analysis of the historical materials it is useful, therefore, to consider why the concern for origins has been so perennially attractive, where this concern has taken generations of scholars, and what its many pitfalls are.

Interest in the origins of morris dancing is almost as old as the oldest of primary sources themselves; all theories of origin, old and new, come with political or social or ideological or intellectual agendas attached, although these agendas are rarely acknowledged explicitly by their authors. What is certainly a continuing curiosity is that morris dancing's own history had been forgotten almost as soon as the dances appeared in the primary record in England, so that the earliest hypotheses varied greatly and seem to consist largely of unsupported armchair theorizing. From these earliest days speculation has been endless and wildly diverse, although some themes have proven enduring.

Possibly the oldest belief concerning origins, and the most doggedly persistent in contemporary popular consciousness, comes from attacks on morris dancing by Elizabethan Puritans in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Theirs was an argument of guilt by association; that is, morris dancing is the work of the devil, paganism is the religion of the devil, therefore morris dancing is pagan. This argument has neither logic nor evidence on its side but its conclusion has had an endless appeal.

Actually the Puritan polemicists were not concerned with morris dancing specifically but, rather, were railing against a whole raft of customs including Whitsun

ales, May games, maypoles, and the like, which they found ungodly and reprehensible. The following diatribe from 1585 is a representative example of the kind of polemical argument by assertion used by the Elizabethan Puritans to link all these customs together and to associate them with paganism:¹

whereas a heathenish and ungodly custom hath bene used before time in many partes of this lande about this season of the yeare [Whitsun] to have Church Ales, May games, morish dances, and other vaine pastimes upon the Sabath Dayes, and other dayes appointed for common prayer, which they have pretended to be for the relief of theire Churches, but in-dede hath bene only a meanes to feed the mindes of the people and specially of the youth with vaine sight which is a strange perswasion among Christians, that they cannot by any other means of contribution repaire theire churches but must first do sacrifice to the Devil with Drunkenes and Dancing and other ungodly wantonnes.

(Atkinson 1963, 245)²

Throughout the period of Puritan struggle for the control of the English church the same perception of morris and other customs was continually reasserted with no more evidence or logic, but with the growing certitude born of endless repetition, as in this extract from the Quarter Sessions Order Book of 1655 from Henley in Arden:

... the court was informed that vsually heretofore there haue beene att Henley in Arden in this County severall vnlawfull meeteings of idle & vain persons about this time of yeare for erectinge of MayPoles and mayBushes and for vseinge of Morris dances and other heatheanish and vnlawfull Customs ...

(Warw RO QS 40/1 f 202v; see also Ratcliff and Johnson 1937, 275)

A century later some clerics were still making the same argument, as in this fragment of a now lost open letter from a minister in Stow on the Wold to his parishioners, dated 1736:

Morris Dances, so called, are nothing else but reliques of Paganism.

(Brand 1849, 1:227)

In the nineteenth century this and kindred references were used by John Brand in his *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* (Brand 1849) as 'evidence' that many of the folk customs of Britain originated in paganism. But of course it is no evidence at all, merely the continued repetition of unsupported assertions from bygone eras.

From Brand the notion of pagan origins became entrenched in popular works that used him as a source, and thus it entered the mainstream of twentieth-century folklore. This notion has been by far the most popular speculation on origins,

persisting in popular works down to the present day, and is also the most commonly articulated point of view by revivalist morris dancers at the present time. Nowadays the notion of pagan origins has a mysterious and romantic appeal, even though now, as in the sixteenth century, there is absolutely no evidence to support the belief, and a mounting body of evidence to suggest that it is quite mistaken.

Almost as soon as the idea of pagan origins was developed, competing hypotheses emerged, based on very different agendas. The classicism of the seventeenth century, for example, sought an origin for morris in classical antiquity, the commonest hypothesis being that it was invented by Pyrrhus, son of Achilles. This idea seems to have been ventured first by Philemon Holland in his translation of the works of Pliny the Younger:

The Curets taught to daunce in armour; and Pyrrhus the Morisk, in order of battell; and both of these were taken up first in Crete ... In the late solemnitie of tournois and swordfight at the sharpe, which Germanicus Caesar exhibited to gratifie the people, the elephants were seen to shew pastime with leaping and keeping a stirre, as if they daunced, after a rude and disorderly manner. A common thing it was among them ... to encounter and meet together in fight like sword-fencers, and to make good sport in a kind of Moriske dance.

(Holland 1601, 189, 192–3)

From this conjecture of translation came the general idea, to be found in dictionaries throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the classical dance called *saltatio pyrricha* (i.e., the Pyrrhic — the war dance in armour of the ancient Greeks) was either a precursor of, or identical with morris. John Minsheu gives a characteristic interpretation:

Saltatio Pyrricha. Πυρρίχη ὄρχησις, a Pyrrho inuentore, & authore vnde πυρρίχιζω, pyrricham salto, & πυρρίχιστής, i. pyrrhicho saltator, i. *a Morice-dancer. Nota Pyrrhum hanc saltationem in armis militibus instituit.*

(Minsheu 1617, 315)

An origin for the morris in antiquity was highly desirable for classicists because it elevated the dance in the eyes of the learned from something rude and unworthy of interest to an object worthy of admiration akin to a newly unearthed marble statue, now broken and fragmentary but still showing all the beauty of classical lines.

Towards the middle of the seventeenth century the theory of classical origins for the morris found competition in a speculation (based on the etymology of the words ‘morris’ and ‘morisco’) that the dance came to England from Spain, but ultimately derived from the Moors. Contemporary supporters of the Pyrrhic origin explicitly rejected reasoning based on names and etymology, as in Edward Phillips’s dictionary:

Morisco, (Span.) a moor, also a kind of Dance which seemeth to be the same as that which the Greeks call Pyrrhica, we vulgarly call it the Morris Dance, as it were the Moorish Dance.

(Phillips 1658a, sig. Cc4)

Phillips implies here that the name is part of the popular debasement of the classical form, thus prefiguring later intellectual discussions of popular entertainments as corruptions of earlier elite forms. Nonetheless, the notion of a Moorish genesis was attractive, imputing an exotic quality to the dance. The first attempt to expound the Spanish/Moorish origins appears in Christopher Wase's commentary on his translation of *Grati Falisci Cynegeticon*:

Those of the East us'd to wear bells about their legs in ornament: thus the Jews, Isa. 3.16.18. And the leaping about with bells ty'd on the legs after an Hoboy, and a Horse, is not originally an European frolique, though brought amongst us by Spaine, but the name imports to dance Alla Moresca.

(Wase 1654, 76)

The hypothesis that the dance came to England from Morocco via Spain became a mainstay of dictionaries and commentaries from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, and represents an attempt to apply scientific reasoning to cultural data. The speculation of origins in the Greek pyrrhic, by contrast, was no more than armchair reflection with little or no data to support it. First, there are no primary sources for descriptions of the classical pyrrhic, so there is no way to determine whether seventeenth-century morris was like it or not. Second, there is no clear mechanism by which a classical Greek dance, with semimythic origins of its own, travelled to and became rooted in rural England.

The reasoning behind the Spanish/Moorish hypothesis is largely implicit in the sources and is flawed in several respects. But it represents a step forward in historical theorizing. The argument may be summarized in a series of steps:

- Cognate forms of the word 'morris' exist in most European languages.
- All the cognates appear to mean 'Moorish.'
- Dances using these cognate names must, therefore, be Moorish in origin (especially since in some languages cognates are construed in phrases such as *danza alla moresca*, or *dance à la moresque*, meaning 'dance in the style of Moors').
- Moorish customs in general – moresque work, Moorish architecture, etc. — came to Europe via Spain during the Moorish occupation.
- Morris/Moorish dances are, therefore, likely to have come to Europe via Spain.

To some extent the inference that the morris was Moorish in origin carried the implication that it was wild and exotic (certainly a suitable origin and prototype for

rustic dances), but the theory also conveniently fit an aesthetic impulse of musicians and dancing masters in the mid-seventeenth century to expropriate non-Western forms or, at least, to incorporate into their inventions their notion of what these forms should be like. The morisco' was a conventional exotic piece for a number of Caroline dancing masters. There are, for example, five moriscoes in the 1670 edition of John Playford's violin tutorial and compendium, *Apollo's Banquet* (Playford 1670).

The Moorish origins theory is thus in direct contrast to the pyrrhic theory. The latter argues that the morris originated in an elite form that over time was debased and corrupted until it became the contemporary rural tradition, whereas the former proposes that contemporary 'primitive' dances must have a primitive origin. Thus, speculations on the origin of the dance in particular regions or eras veil more complex social notions of the development of traditional customs – notions which continued in relatively similar form into the twentieth century.

It is interesting to note that while simplistic theories of origin held sway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (that is, imputing a single point and place of origin), there was at least one attempt to introduce the possibility of syncretism and evolutionary development, albeit in slightly scoffing manner. Francis Peck commenting on Milton's masque *Comus*, in which there is a metaphorical allusion to morris, repeats the Spanish/Moorish theory with a slight twist:

The *morris* or *moorish* dance was first brought into *England*, as I take it, in *Edward III.* time, when *John of Gaunt* returned from *Spain*, where he had been to assist his father-in-law, *Peter K. of Castile*, against *Henry the bastard*. This dance was usually performed *abroad* by an *equal* number of young men, who danced in their shirts with ribands & little bells about their legs. But *here in England* they always have an *odd* person besides, being a boy dressed in a girl's habit, whom they called *Maid Marian* ... I cannot forbear observing on the boy dressed in girl's cloaths introduced into this dance, that tho' the young folks of *England* had, by this *Spanish* expedition, got a new diversion, yet they could not forbear dashing it with their old favorit one of *Maid Marian*.

(Peck 1740, 135–6)

This analysis suffers from a lack of primary data to support it (John of Gaunt was in Spain in the mid-fourteenth century, yet morris dancing does not show up in the English records until the second half of the fifteenth), but it does attempt to address some critical questions in the diffusionist model of dance development. First, he proposes an answer to how and when the dance got from Spain to England — previous theorists had simply assumed that it had, based on the indirect evidence at their disposal. But Peck envisages English and Spanish troops meeting in friendly circumstances and exchanging fads and fashions (as they are generally wont to do). Furthermore, he imagines a direct trade of peasant customs (including morris dance)

between men of the agricultural working classes, who formed the backbone of medieval armies. Thus he initiated the general search for ways and means for the ‘folk’ to act as vehicles for the transmission of ‘folk arts’ across Europe, working on the assumption that such arts always existed in a particular socioeconomic plane and tended to diffuse laterally between similar classes in different regions, rather than vertically between different classes. Second, Peck provides a solution to the question of how a Spanish import could involve such an obviously English character as Maid Marian. The answer, which seems to have eluded his predecessors (and was ruled out of court by many later scholars), was syncretism — even if his statements are hopelessly anachronistic and his tone towards English practitioners condescending.

Peck was responding to trends in antiquarianism that appeared in rudimentary form in the eighteenth century — to be greatly refined and elaborated in the nineteenth — that allowed for traditional forms to change and develop as they diffused and migrated across cultures. Thus Francis Douce in his classic essay, ‘A Dissertation on the Ancient Morris Dance’ (Douce 1807), proposes that the morris was not carried directly from Spain to England (because there is a lack of data to support this hypothesis) and, instead, proposes a general diffusionist model whereby the dance travelled slowly up through France and the Low Countries, arriving in England in the mid-fifteenth century (when primary sources begin to show up). Syncretism and evolution are inevitable associates of the process of diffusion:

The genuine Moorish or Morisco dance was, no doubt, very different from the European *morris*-, but there is scarcely an instance in which a fashion or amusement that has been borrowed from a distant region has not in its progress through other countries undergone such alterations as have much obscured its origin.

(Douce 1807, 433)

Douce thus brings us into the nineteenth century where the investigation of the origins and evolution of forms spanned almost all academic disciplines. Douce’s arguments might have been accepted by late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars because of their evolutionary flavour — but many branches of folklore, for political reasons, bucked the academic trend of the times and became antievolutionary and antidiffusionist.

Indeed, in the late-nineteenth century folklorists had the choice of whether to treat folk materials in an evolutionary framework or not, and they mostly chose not to. The clue to why is given by the name that folk materials had had before the coinage of the term ‘folk-lore,’ that is, ‘popular antiquities.’ Folk practices, under the rubric popular antiquities, had long been treated by collectors and scholars of culture as something like cultural atavisms — behaviours that had had a specific meaning and purpose in bygone eras but which had largely been forgotten.

This point of view had been popular in anthropology in the nineteenth century

spawning some of the classics of the era, such as *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer and *Primitive Culture* by E.B. Tylor. Tylor proposed a general evolutionary theory of culture, but suggested that running counter to cultural development was a conservative force that ensured the survival of a great many 'primitive' customs into later evolutionary stages. This became known as the 'doctrine of survivals' and was his way of explaining seemingly irrational cultural practices such as modern superstitions. They appear irrational only because their primitive origins are lost to us, and their status as 'survivals' from more archaic cultures has been forgotten.

Frazer's analysis of the origins of morris is a typical example of the doctrine of survivals in practice:

It is ... worth observing that in some places the dancers of Plough Monday, who attended the plough in its peregrinations through the streets and fields, are described as morrisdancers. If the description is correct, it implies that they had bells attached to their costume ... for the chief characteristic of the morris-dance is that the performers wear bells fastened to their legs which jingle at every step. We may suppose that if the men who ran and capered beside the plough on Plough Monday really wore bells, the original intention of this appendage to their costume was either to dispel the demons who might hinder the growth of the corn, or to waken the spirits of vegetation from their long winter sleep.

(Frazer 1907–15, 9: 250–1)

Although anthropology subsequently rejected Tylor's and Frazer's theories, folklore (especially in Britain), continued to embrace them, thereby retaining the general notion of folk behaviour as atavistic. Cecil Sharp, the great twentieth-century collector and revivalist of morris dances, whose theories of origin still reverberate throughout popular literature, is entirely Frazerian in tone:

There is reason to believe that the Mumming-play and the Sword-dance are no more than survivals of different aspects of the same primitive rite; and the fact that both are often called by the country people 'Morris-dances' is, perhaps, evidence that the tradition of this common origin still lingers in the minds of the country people. Little more than a cursory examination is needed to see that the same central idea permeates all three of them. Originally expressions of religious belief, in which the idea was as essential as the form, they have passed by various stages and along devious paths into the inspiring dances and quaint dramas with which we are now familiar.

(Sharp 1912–24, 1:13)

The reasons why folklore took an essentially nonevolutionary, nondiffusionist stance are complex; the sociopolitical climate in which the discipline was founded requires exploring. This will also help to explain why morris dance scholarship took the peculiar path that it did (and also how a great many misunderstandings about

English traditional customs have come to be so deeply embedded in popular consciousness).³

The nineteenth-century search for origins in numerous disciplines was part of the scientizing of social and behavioural science. Within this context it is possible to tease out two, not entirely mutually exclusive, models. The first, as typified by stories in the biblical book of Genesis, takes the principle of ‘origin-as-essence’ as fundamental. Take the following story from Genesis concerning Jacob’s change of name to Israel:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there.

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.

And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh.

Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew that shrank.

(Genesis 32:24–32, KJV)

The crux of this story lies in the fact that the Hebrew word ‘Israel’ can be read as meaning something roughly equivalent to ‘the man who will prevail with God.’ The putative origin of the name, embedded in this narrative, thus has profound meaning for descendants of Jacob/Israel (father of the twelve men who gave their names to the twelve tribes), because their eponymous ancestor has bequeathed them a racial geist – they are the people who can claim a special personal relationship with God (he prevailed in a personal way, so they will *always* prevail with Him) — and this fact is rooted in not only their personal identity, which can seem somewhat abstract, but also in a sacred place name, in a dietary practice, and in a national name tied to a specific parcel of land.

Following this kind of analysis, the world – culture, history, ritual, everything – is a giant intelligible *pattern* created as the intersections of the traces of a series of