

Church Proscription and Prosecution

The church's reversal of policy towards morris dancing from active support to rigorous prosecution marked a significant turning point in the evolution and diffusion of the dance. Nothing could be more dramatic than the evidence presented in figure 23 (p 173), which documents the absolute number of morris events over our period, superimposed with statistics concerning church prosecutions. The key point to notice is that in the 1601–30 period church prosecutions reached their zenith, and in the following period (1631–60) there was a calamitous decline in dance events.

Although the turnabout seems almost instantaneous and dramatic, the theological and legal preliminaries were, in fact, long and complex (and not readily represented by a simple graphing of overt actions). First, it is important to understand that although opposition to morris dancing came from a number of directions, the most decisive was from the episcopacy, which, in this stance, was directly at odds with the needs and values of local parishes. The clash was more a matter of centralized ideology versus parochial customs than of new versus old doctrines. There was certainly nothing novel, nor especially puritanical, in the bishops being opposed to potentially sacrilegious folk traditions of the church, as Robert Grossteste's thirteenth-century injunctions against various *ludi* attest. But the widespread vitriolic condemnation of the dance and its virulent persecution in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries owes a great deal to the political and social circumstances of Queen Elizabeth's Protestant settlement, with which morris dancing became unwittingly, but inextricably, entangled.²⁵

Church opposition to morris dancing manifested itself in three ways that are to some extent separable for analytic purposes. Beginning around 1540 sermons and polemical writings directly or indirectly moralized about the dance and dancers. Then in 1571 specific episcopal injunctions against morris dancing appeared for the first time, and rapidly became standard in visitation articles. Henceforth ecclesiastical courts prosecuted dancers: most actively in the early seventeenth century. It might

seem that the second two modes of opposition were effectively the same but, while it is true that prosecution could not have occurred without the relevant laws in place, the realms of legal *fact* and legal *practice* are distinguishable. There were, for example, many dioceses that banned morris dancing but never prosecuted anyone for dancing. Furthermore, laws opposing morris dancing existed on the books long after active prosecutions had ceased. Conversely, there are a few instances of dancers being prosecuted under general statutes when no specific ordinance against morris dancing existed. Although all three modes operated simultaneously for many decades, there were times when one voice was louder than the others, and times of clashes between them. Because these activities in relation to morris dancing were occurring against a background of religious and sociopolitical turmoil I shall dissect them into several parts based on major political periods – the reign of Elizabeth, the reigns of James I and VI and Charles I taken as a unit, the Interregnum, and the Restoration.

The Elizabethan Era (1558–1603)

Prior to Elizabeth I's reign there was the occasional gibe aimed sideways by reforming clerics at morris dancing in their attacks on popish practices. For example, Hugh Latimer in a sermon preached in 1552 says:

Here were a good place to speak against our clergymen which go so gallantly now-a-days. I hear say that some of them wear velvet shoes and velvet slippers. Such fellows are more meet to dance the morrice-dance than to be admitted to preach.

(Latimer 1845, 83)

Latimer here is using a mildly derisory tone towards morris dancing but dancers are not the main target of his invective. Rather, he is ridiculing Catholic clergy and their over-lavish vestments by comparing them to morris dancers who dress well, but are figures of fun. Even such references are scarce, however, although this casual association made between morris and old popish customs was to prove a hardy notion.

In some ways the opposition of the Puritans to morris is easy to understand because of their general antagonism towards all dancing and 'frivolous' pastimes, but it is a great mistake to assume that it was their attitudes that led directly to the prosecution of dancers. Although their polemical writings stirred up enormous controversy, they did not, for the most part, occupy the kinds of positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy that would allow them to legislate and litigate on such matters. Instead, it was the more moderate bishops – who did have the power – who undertook the bulk of the actions against morris, and who ultimately must bear the responsibility for its subsequent decline. But they did not do so because they supported the Puritans in this area – quite the contrary. It was the constant mutual enmity between Puritans and moderates that created the context within which morris became a helpless shuttlecock.

Precisely because the Puritans did not have the power to condemn morris through their actions, they were forced to proclaim their views through voluminous philippics, and even though these were subject to official censorship, a great deal of their point of view found its way into print. Probably their best-known assertion is that dancing is by its physical nature a powerful inducement to lustful sexual activity (which is inherently sinful because its primary purpose is pleasure rather than procreation). Stubbes provides us with a substantial dissertation on the topic, which is unquestionably typical of many other writers of the period since a great deal of it is cribbed (see, for example, Stubbes 1583, sig. Nl).

Stubbes's arguments range far and wide, but for present purposes the main points are that dancing involves gestures, such as hugging and touching, that induce lust, and others that are directly imitative of sexual activity, which likewise act as powerful provocations. He is, therefore, particularly contemptuous of mixed dancing. During his tirade on the ills of dancing he refers directly to morris only fleetingly and does not refer to its sexual nature specifically, but his general points apply nonetheless, since the sexual themes in the church-sponsored morris of the time were so blatant.

Other commentators (from whom Stubbes borrows materials) make the link between sexuality and the morris quite plain, however. Christopher Fetherston in *A Dialogue against Light, Leude and Lascivious Dancing*, for example, deals at length with the sexual aspects of morris dancing and May games:

For the abuses whiche are comitted in your maygaymes are infinite. The first wherof is this, that you doe vse to attyre men in womans apparell, whom you doe most commenly call may-marrians, whereby you infringe that straight commaundement which is giuen in Deut. 22.5. That men must not put on womens apparrell for feare of enormities. Nay, I myself haue seene in a maygaime a troupe, the greater part wherof hath been men, and yet haue they been attyred so like vnto women, that theyr faces being hidde (as they were indeede) a man coulde not discerne them from women. What an horrible abuse was this? what abhominable sinnes might haue herevpon ensued? The seconde abuse, which of all other is the greatest, is this, that it hath been toulde that your morice dauncers haue daunced naked in nettes: what greater entisement vnto naughtines, could haue been deuised? The thirde abuse, is, that you (because you will loose no tyme) doe vse commonly to runne into woodes in the night time, amongst maidens, to fet bowes, in so muche, as I haue hearde of tenne maidens which went to fet May, and nine of them came home with childe.

(Fetherston 1582, sigs. D7-D8)

Although the exact meaning of the reference to morris dancing here is obscure, and nowhere else is the image of morris dancers dancing 'naked in nettes' corroborated, nonetheless the general implication that morris dancing is expressly sexual is apparent, even though the evidence is hearsay and perhaps deliberately hyperbolic. To the essential lustful sexuality of the dance Fetherstone adds two factors that further

aggravate its condemnation in his eyes. In the first place, the dance involves the character Maid Marian played by a man dressed as a woman, which practice is not only opposed by Mosaic law as it stands, but is also an inducement to homosexuality. In the second place, the dance is an enticement to fornication, and the clergy who assent to such dances are equally susceptible to their consequences.

Although the notion that morris dancing is directly and indirectly sexual is the most prominent strain in Puritan polemics, several other themes, perhaps linked to the dominant one, occur with reasonable regularity. In particular the dances are spoken of as devilish and heathen. Generally the implication that morris dancing is devilish has no special meaning other than that it is sinful and is to be catalogued with a host of other traditional customs, as in the mockingly ironic poem ‘The Practice of the Divell’ by Laurence Ramsey (Ramsey 1577, sig. Cij). But Christopher Fetherston, in his diatribe against May games and morris, provides a more specific reason for the devilish appellation:

But are these all the abuses whiche doe followe your maygames? nay, nay, there be many more than these. What mere madnes is this, that a man whome God hath endued with witt & reason, shoulde put on a noddies coate, and feigne him selfe to bee a foole, and to be destitute of both these most precious giftes? doeth hee not thinke that if the Lorde shoulde deale with him in Justice, that hee doeth deserue to be made a foole against his will, which playeth the foole so willingly? What a shame, nay what a sinne is it for him, who wilbe angrie with that man which shall not call him a Christian: to play the part of a diuel, who is an vtter enemie to Christ and al Christians?

(Fetherston 1582, sig. D8)

These sentiments help to explain and pull together many of the foregoing issues. Featherston is following a standard Elizabethan Protestant philosophy in arguing that all beings have a God-given place in the world which it is their duty, their vocation, to cherish and nurture. To oppose one’s natural being is clearly the work of the devil. The devil opposes God in all things, and all things that oppose God spawn ultimately from him. So the lucid person who plays the fool, the sensible man who drinks himself witless, the man who dresses as a woman, the man who seduces another man (in the guise of a woman) – viz., morris dancers – threaten not only their own souls, but the harmony of the world.

Humans are uniquely capable of threatening the world order in this manner because of their median position in the chain of creation. Within them are united the carnal nature of animals and the spiritual nature of angels, and theirs is the power, via free will, to hold the middle ground, or move away from it towards either pole. Narcissistic adornment of the body and the choreographed representation of sexual appetite automatically serve to drag the morris dancer in the direction of the carnal.

But it is also important to understand that Elizabethans saw all humans as

occupying a position in a hierarchy that was a microcosm of the greater cosmic order, with kings and nobles closer to the angels and the peasantry closer to the beasts. The lower orders were already dangerously near the carnal by their very natures, so that morris dancing and other lecherous pleasures could readily cause their further descent, and upset the stability of the entire system.

As noted in chapter 1, some Elizabethan Puritans also wrote of the folk customs of their age as sinful because in their carnality they replicated the exercises of pagans' or 'heathens' whose unsaved natures condemned them to bodily excesses and to ultimate damnation. Thus Stubbes writes of the maypole:

And then fall they to daunce about it [the maypole] like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the Idols, whereof this is a perfect pattern, or rather the thing it self.

(Stubbes 1583, sig. M4)

The visitation book of Winchester in like manner condemns a range of folk customs including the morris, and links the customs of heathens directly to devil worship (see p. 4).

As well as simply finding reasons to assail certain customs, the Puritan polemicists were also trying to find a way to bridge their concerns and those of the episcopacy, from whom they were so widely separated on key ethical and political issues and, if possible, to shift moderates to a more radical position by force of argument. As it happens, the accusation that morris dancing was heathen proved to be just such a nexus because 'pagan was equatable with 'devilish superstition,' as was 'popery'; and all sides readily agreed that popery was the common enemy (see, for example, Moresinus 1594). The actual link in the Elizabethan mind between paganism and popery, going back to Polydor Vergil, was the city of Rome. Elizabethan Puritans, when they spoke of paganism, did not mean any pre-Christian culture (and certainly not pre-Christian Britain), but were specifically referring to ancient Rome, pagan capital of the classical world. According to a well-known Reformation argument, the Catholic church, because its capital was Rome, had become heir to the paganism of that city, and, thus, a great many traditions of the Roman church (including traditional sports and recreations) were seen as descendants of pagan customs.

The following extract from Samuel Harsnet's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* is one of the first clear statements of what was to become a standard slander under the first Stuarts, namely that morris dancing is popish and, as such, is the work of devils incarnate. Sara is a mad woman (possessed by devils) who in this piece acts as the central lady round whom four other devils cavort accompanied by their liverymen, signifying how the morris corrupts not only its practitioners, but all who follow it:

Frateretto, Fliberdigibbet, Hoberdidance, Tocobatto were foure devils of the

round, or Morrice, whom Sara in her fits, tuned together, in measure and sweet cadence. And least you should conceive, that the devils had no musicke in hell, especially that they would goe a maying without theyr musicke, the Fidler comes in with his Taber, & Pipe, and a whole Morice after him, with motley visards for theyr better grace. These four had forty assistants under them, as themselves doe confesse.

(Harsnet 1603, 49)

The idea that the morris was heathenish, devilish, and popish did indeed have an impact on the episcopacy, although such accusations were not the sole cause of the dance's official condemnation.

The proscription of morris dancing by the episcopacy began in 1571 coincident with two major events in English ecclesiastical history – the adoption of the Thirty-Nine Articles of canon law, and the appointment of Edmund Grindal to the archdiocese of York. Both were to a great extent responses to a Catholic crisis that had been engulfing Elizabeth, represented by such events as the papal bull excommunicating the queen, and the Catholic rebellion of the northern earls. The articles sought to solidify the Elizabethan religious settlement and place the nature of conformity beyond dispute. Grindal was sent to York, articles in hand, to root out Catholicism and recusant practices at the local level in order to eliminate the base of support for future rebellions. Thus, immediately on his assumption of the position, he issued a series of injunctions to the clergy and laity of the province and in May of 1571 began a visitation of all parishes based on these articles.

As one might expect, Grindal's injunctions and articles for enquiry set out Elizabethan orthodoxy very clearly, and established the means for educating the laity in it, and the penalties for negligence. But they are also shot through with direct and indirect references to papists and popery. Prior to the visitation he wrote that the province was

not well affected to godly religion: among the people there are many remnants of the old. They keep Holy days and fasts abrogated: they offer money, eggs, etc., at the burial of their dead: they pray on beads etc.; so it seemeth to be, as it were, another church, rather than a member of the rest.

(Grindal to Cecil 29 August 1570, in Frere 1910, 3:253)

His special task was to eliminate all such superstitious customs. Morris dancing might well have come under this rubric – certainly by the Puritans' lights — but its attachment to Catholicism was much more indirect than, say, praying in Latin or using a rosary. Certainly morris dancing was connected with the old religion, but it was not a direct outgrowth of its theology. But nor was it merely a profane abuse, such as adultery or drunkenness, to be condemned as sinful regardless of the circumstances. Grindal's injunctions deal forcefully with such matters, but in a completely separate section of articles. Rather, morris dancing was a profane activity that became an abuse

when directly supported by the church or when it interfered with the orderly functioning of the church as a Christian institution (as it had done in Catholic times). Its proscription, therefore, fit the standard Reformation mission – on which moderates and radicals agreed — of returning the church to its central Christian purpose.

Article 44 of Grindal's injunctions states:

Item that the minister and churchwardens shall not suffer anye lordes of misrule or sommerr Lordes or ladyes or anye disguised persons or others in christmasse or at may gammes or anye minstrels morice dauncers or others at Ryshebearinges or at any other tymes to come vnrever-entlye into anye church or chappell or churchyard and there daunce or playe anye vnseemelye partes with scoffes ieastes wanton gestures or rybaulde talke namely in the tyme of divine service or of anye sermon

(Frere 1910, 3:291)

This is the first record of morris dancing being officially banned, and the specific language and associations are worth close examination as a means of understanding what Grindal was really concerned about. First, though, it must be understood that these articles and injunctions were not made up from whole cloth. All such documents of the period are patchworks of scraps taken from canon law and earlier sets of injunctions and articles. Examination of John Parkhurst's injunctions for Norwich, 1569, shows that the spine of Grindal's article was taken directly from them, or from Parkhurst's model, now lost:

Item, that no person or persons calling themselves the Lords of Misrule in the Christmas time, or other irreverent persons at any other time, presume to come into the church unreverently, playing their lewd parts with scoffing, jesting or ribaldry talk, and if any such have already offended herein, to present them and their names to the Ordinary.

(Frere 1910, 3:209)

Grindal's additions to this basic framework are significant, and reveal a great deal about his attitude towards morris dancing. Parkhurst's article is relatively clear cut and simple: it bans the type of performance that could go under the general heading of 'Lords of Misrule,' and gives an epitome of the kind of performance that is intended (i.e., ones that involve 'playing their lewd parts with scoffing, jesting or ribaldry talk'). Summer Lords, morris dancing, mummers, masked players, and so forth could well be prosecuted under such an article – particularly since the phrase 'or other irreverent persons' gathers them all in — but the basic wording makes it appear that Parkhurst's primary concern was Christmas Lords of Misrule, and the more generalized language seems to be added as a catchall afterthought whose vagueness could work for or against a zealous prosecutor.

Grindal's language tightens the article considerably, giving many more specific references to the kinds of practices that he sees as akin to lords of Misrule (while still