Introduction

I

Contemporary studies of folklore customarily adopt either of two general perspectives. The text may be analyzed in order to discover internal structural relationships and intertextual resemblances among similar items from a given tradition. Alternatively, efforts may be made to consider examples of folklore in situ as performances whose meaning arises from the sociocultural, interactional, and aesthetic norms of a given community.

The older textual orientation characterizes the traditional folkloristic approach to drama; it is clear in the following excerpt from the introduction to a contemporary anthology of American folklore.

It would have been useful . . . to include a lecture on folk drama [in this volume]. However, Southwestern drama, the Coloquios, Los Pastores, is Mexican, or Mexican-American at best, and derive directly from medieval Spanish literature; British drama, the St. George's and Robin Hood Plays, is for all practical purposes no longer found in America, in spite of one or two remarkable discoveries of Marie Campbell in Kentucky.¹

From this perspective, folk drama is a closed account. The obvious limitations imposed by considering only fixed texts such as Los Pastores and the St. George Plays, each of which is traceable to Old World models, severely restrict the potential scope of folk drama research. Conversely, a performance-centered orientation can revitalize the study of folk drama by focusing on the enactment of dramatic forms derived from traditional aesthetic models.

Therefore, the present collection of essays on traditional dramatic forms, diverse in the methodologies adopted and the cultures considered, represents

an attempt to come to terms with folk drama as performance, cultural aesthetics in process, and relationships between various traditional forms. In order to establish the foundations upon which the following essays build and the orientations from which these analyses turn, a brief survey of folk drama scholarship is appropriate.

Unfortunately, it is impossible in a brief introduction to review exhaustively the entire scholarship on folk drama. Moreover, to examine the important, though peripheral, material on ritual, popular drama, and dance would drastically extend the length of this preface. In the interests of economy and unity, therefore, only examples of the work that forms the main intellectual heritage of American folk drama scholarship can be considered.

Given the established emphasis on Old World models, it comes as no surprise that English folklorists maintain the most consistent interest in traditional drama. Consequently, most of our notions of the forms and functions of the genre are derived from their investigations. From early in the nineteenth century, British antiquarians describe traditional dramatic performances close at hand. The diverse forms reported in the collectanea of the day include masked perambulations with a rudimentary dramatic core, dances in which performers linked by "swords" weave elaborate geometric designs, mock duels between costumed antagonists, and wooing plays, depicting the courtship of a female character by a series of suitors. With few exceptions, however, the data in these early accounts are not submitted to scholarly analysis.

The first genuine attempts at explication may be categorized as comparativist. The model for the comparative method of folk drama research is exemplified by the investigations of Sir James George Frazer, who calls attention to those performances focusing on the death of a character in either a mock combat or a stylized execution. Drawing on material from an impressive chronological and cultural spectrum, he argues that these dramatic events devolved from magical rites intended to insure the proper progression of seasons and the revival of the natural forces of life and growth. The basis of this theory is the model of a primitive mentality which utilizes the principle of sympathy between phenomena to allow man to influence the nonhuman forces of the universe by means of mimesis. Frazer contends that participants imitate, in a stylized form, the actions that they want to occur on the cosmic level. In Frazer's work we find the influential hypothesis of the ritual origins of drama. His arguments have had an enduring effect.

During the early twentieth century, the Cambridge scholars—Francis M. Cornford, Jane Harrison, and Gilbert Murray, for example—adopted a

Frazerian approach to classical drama, Shakespearean plays, and the Romance of the Holy Grail. Though not focusing specifically on folk drama, such studies characteristically use traditional expressive culture as evidence.

More central to our concerns are analyses such as Sir Edmund Chamber’s important study of the Mummers’ Play and its analogues. In this work Chambers reaffirms Frazer’s argument that “the primitive ludus” (that is, the folk play) represents a modern transformation of mimetic ritual. R. J. E. Tiddy, in the first book-length examination of the Mummers’ Play, also argues for a ritual origin. The more recent works of E. C. Cawte, Alex Helm, Norman Peacock, and Alan Brody pursue similar hypotheses, while Violet Alford, though employing the same comparative methodology, proposes the unique theory that these enactments emerged from the fusion of agricultural rites with the rites of metal workers. The preceding list is far from exhaustive and merely suggests the power and lasting influence of Frazer’s work.

Thus, a survey of all but the most recent scholarship in folk drama reveals a proclivity to characterize the folk play as a mere shadow of more meaningful activity. As Chambers writes, “It is, after all, the origin of the play, rather than its latter end, which is of interest to the folklorist.” As a result, folk drama was presumed to be the detritus of pre-Christian ritual, the rustic reworking of literary material, or a “popular survival” of liturgical drama. In spite of the tendency of such studies to force material into preconceived frameworks, they represent important contributions. There are parallels between drama and ritual, but we should be reluctant to explain all folk plays in terms of evolution or devolution. The drama of the folk has been enriched by church drama and by literature, but it appears also to have contributed to them; we can argue for cross-fertilization.

For the most part, the notion of folk drama as mere ritual survival has been discredited. On the other hand, surviving Spanish language dramas such as Los Pastores (the Shepherds’ Adoration of the Christ Child) clearly illustrate the con-

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6 Chambers, p. 12.
7 See, for example, Alan Brody, The English Mummers and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mystery (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969); Frazer; and Alford.
8 See, for example, Chambers, pp. 185–194.
9 See, for example, M. R. Cole, Los Pastores, A Mexican Play of the Nativity (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907).
nections between Catholicism and the folk drama of the Southwest. Beginning with John G. Bourke’s "The Miracle Play of the Rio Grande," most American scholarship focuses on textual annotation, sources, and variation. The most ambitious work in the area has been Juan B. Rael’s comprehensive study, The Sources and Diffusion of the Mexican Folk Play.

Recent folklore scholarship, however, departs from the textual orientation informing the works cited above. The interest in folklore as performance arises, in part, from the dramatic model espoused by scholars in related disciplines. In this model, drama is used as a paradigm for discussing a variety of interactions; theoretical concepts are employed to describe behavior in critically meaningful terms. For example, Elizabeth Burns, in interpreting the work of Richard Dorson has labeled the "Contextualists," though the dramatic model enters folklore theory much earlier. As early as 1957, William Hugh Jansen proposed, "The speaker, or reciter of a bit of folklore steps outside himself as an individual and assumes a pose toward his audience, however small, that differs from his everyday . . . relationship to that same audience." Jansen’s perception of the similarities between the

11 Juan B. Rael, The Sources and Diffusion of the Mexican Folk Play (Guadalajara: Librería La Vogita, 1965).
14 For example, Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).
bearer of oral tradition and the actor could hardly be more lucid. A more explicit link to the scholars cited in the previous paragraph, though, is found in Roger Abrahams' "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore." In addition, the advocacy of the principles of role-playing, performer-audience relationships, the influence of setting, and the multidimensionality of folkloric events by Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Dan Ben-Amos, Robert A. Georges, and Kenneth Goldstein, to name only a few of the more prominent American adherents to this approach, marks a move from purely literary concerns toward a desire to comprehend folklore as a behavioral complex.

Inevitably, this new orientation appears in folk drama scholarship as students of the genre focus on the contemporary context and performance of folk plays. One of the earliest efforts in this regard, Herbert Halpert and G. M. Story's collection of essays, provides valuable insights into the performance and social functions of Newfoundland's mumming tradition. Alan Gailey, too, illuminates the context and execution of the folk play in his survey of Irish folk drama. Although he deals with reconstructions and reminiscences, Henry Glassie further contributes to our understanding of the forms, functions, and performance ideals of Irish mumming.

It is not surprising that symbolic analysis has found rich material in folk drama, also. Opposed to the Frazerian concept of sympathetic magic, the scholars who formulate these analyses, in Henry Glassie's words, "think of the drama as metaphorically moving its participants, rather than magically moving their environment." Thus, in the study cited above, Glassie proposes the hypothesis that mumming embodies the polarities of human existence around which his informants organize their view of experience: isola-

18 Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, 81 (1968), 143-158.


21 Henry Glassie, All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1975).


23 Glassie, p. 181.
tion and communality, male and female, sterility and fecundity, life and death, hope and despair. Margaret Dean-Smith, along with her proposal that the modern Mummers’ Plays are fragments of an ur-drama of the wooing type, suggests that this archetypal play, with its juxtaposition of three generations (infancy, adulthood, and old age), symbolically recapitulates the human life cycle. In an effort to expand the scope of folk drama research, Roger Abrahams calls our attention to the common elements of the wide range of performances incorporating symbolic movement and utilizing common modes, including festival, ritual, dance, and drama.

While contemporary scholars have not abandoned altogether the attempt to determine textual provenience and cross-influence between folk drama and other dramatic forms, the impulse to understand folk drama in context gains popularity. The questions that demand the attention of contemporary scholars focus, in most instances, on current practice and seek to ascertain the meaning, means, and goals of traditional dramatic art. The studies in the present collection represent some of the current thinking in this area.

II

To investigators of folk drama, the need for reappraising the genre is clear. Obviously, the examination of texts in isolation from their sociocultural and performance context denies to the folk play those dimensions apparent in other genres of traditional verbal art. Moreover, it is clear that many studies have been too closely bound to assumptions concerning provenience, both of individual texts and the folk play in general. Consequently, such a thorough contemporary study as Alan Brody’s posits at the outset a ritual origin for the British Mummers’ Plays, and a reader’s acceptance of any conclusion reached in his and similar analyses is contingent upon the acceptance of this major premise. Notwithstanding the contributions to our knowledge of traditional dramatic art based on such an orientation, preconceptions of this sort necessarily narrow the focus of scholarship.

Conversely, the focus of another set of studies is far too broad. Into this category must be put many studies which apply the dramatic model of social interaction to behavior which falls outside the margins of drama per se. Basic

24 Ibid., p. 121.
27 Brody, p. viii.
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to this model is the recognition of similarity between various patterns of human behavior and the dramatic conventions of roles, stylized speech, plot development, and scene. While the model proves useful to arguments concerning cultural conventions and the expectations we bring to recurrent social events, the original use of dramatic terminology as analytical metaphor is too frequently misapplied as literal fact. As a result, the term "folk drama" is in danger of becoming imprecisely applied and ultimately useless as a scholarly concept. According to some analysts any conscious behavior that resides outside the realm of belles lettres, has an identifiable beginning and conclusion, and involves ensemble activity may be labeled folk drama. Left unchecked, this tendency leads to the extreme distortion evident in a recent work that argues that baseball constitutes folk drama.28

While the dramatic analogy may be used to explain behavior, and relationships between folk drama and a variety of traditional forms do exist, the imposition of limits becomes imperative. At this juncture, then, it seems appropriate to suggest a definition which can alleviate the problems noted above and can serve, further, to characterize the relationships between folk drama and similar traditional enactments. Moreover, the definition should be unfettered by preconceptions concerning the origins and latent implications of traditional dramatic performance.

In an earlier attempt to deal with the major criteria of folk drama, I proposed "that drama should be regarded as a performance incorporating mimesis and role distribution among two or more players."29 The goal of this initial effort was to limit the scope of the term "drama" to art forms (aesthetic constructs as distinct from mere social decorum) and, equally important, to art forms of a specific sort—those that derive their structure from the interaction of fictive identities in the presence of an audience. While this goal is still appropriate, in retrospect it is clear that the definition could benefit from further elaboration.

In this revision some additional matters should be addressed. While the earlier definition does define folk drama, it can encompass elite forms as well. Thus, it requires a clause specifying distinctions between folk art and belles lettres. This problem was considered in the earlier essay, but only in passing. Moreover, recent work suggests that it may be possible, and obviously would


29 Thomas A. Green, "Toward a Definition of Folk Drama," Journal of American Folklore, 91 (1978), 846.
be useful, to delineate in a general way the directions that should be taken to distinguish folk drama from other forms of theater.30 Finally, the definition could be enhanced by the addition of criteria to delineate the relationships between drama and other closely related forms of traditional verbal art. The group of genres which share common traits with folk drama have been designated as the "play genres" by Roger Abrahams.31 Like drama, which Abrahams includes in this category, these genres are characterized by an interaction between character roles, a predetermined pattern of activity, and a bounded arena of play.

In order to deal with these matters, let us define our subject in the following manner: folk drama is a scripted performance which incorporates mimesis and role-distribution among two or more players and which adheres to the traditional aesthetic and communicative models of the performing community. By characterizing the genre in this fashion both etic and emic matrices may be acknowledged. The first clause of the proposed definition replaces notions of a fixed text with a generic framework, while the final clause draws attention to the folk group’s criteria for constraining and modifying aesthetic formulas. Although emic criteria can be discussed only on a case-by-case basis, etic criteria can serve as a useful point of departure in future discussions of folk drama.

Unfortunately, however, the present format does not permit the luxury of elaboration on these general features of folk drama. Limited space forces me to postpone such an excursion to another time and place. Moreover, the primary point to be made at this juncture is that it is unnecessary to continue defining folk drama in reference to the fixed texts provided by Old World models. The criteria suggested above can provide the means for characterizing this genre as a distinct category of verbal art. While the folk play shares important qualities with other forms of folklore, it is clear that folk drama fixes or, at the very least, restricts those relationships and developmental patterns which in other play genres remain comparatively open-ended, variable, or unpredictable. Thus, although a text—or more accurately, a script—does emerge as a controlling principle, it is through a specific type of performance that this "text" is realized, and only by comprehending performance in specific contexts can we come to understand the folk play in any reasonable fashion.


III

In the following essays we shall notice that the authors share a number of concerns. An attention to forms and aesthetic formulas rather than to fixed texts, the relationships among a variety of traditional enactments, the semiotics of dramatic art, and the cooperation between actor and audience in defining performance emerge as important elements in these examples of contemporary folk drama scholarship.

Rather than claiming that this collection exhaustively covers current approaches to the genre, however, I might characterize it more accurately as a sampler. Predictably, the British Mummers' Play is well represented, although studies of other major traditions, such as Hispanic religious drama, are conspicuously absent. On the other hand, neglected forms such as Iranian folk drama, American adolescent enactments, and the puppet play are subjected to careful analysis. Thus, while our coverage of the field could not be comprehensive, each of the following essays represents a significant theoretical contribution and, therefore, adds to our resources for the study of traditional drama.

For example, Roger deV. Renwick puts forth possibilities for the rehabilitation of the comparative literary method for the study of folk drama. In "'The Mummers' Play and the The Old Wives Tales,'" he does not limit his investigation to the customary genetic goals of literary studies which rarely attempt more than establishing a folk or elite provenience for specific features of a given work of art. Instead, Renwick tests the usefulness of a structuralist perspective, delving beneath surface similarities in two texts to suggest profound differences between folk art and belles lettres. Comparing the distinctive structures of the two plays, he argues that only in the folk play is there a social message concerning self, other, and community. This theme is consistent with the import of the festival practices that coexist with folk play performances. In this heuristic essay, Renwick turns our attention from the play text as a separate entity to a more proper perspective on folk drama as an element of a symbolic, culturally relevant performance complex.

The Mummers' Play is the subject of the next essay in this collection, also. "'In Comes I, Brut King': Tradition and Modernity in the Drama of the Jacksdale Bullguisers," by Ian Russell, focuses on the activities of a contemporary troupe of traditional actors in the Northeast Derbyshire region of England. In his analysis of the efforts of these tradition bearers to preserve the Christmas play of "Bullguys," Russell examines some effects of the two conflicting impulses which influence all folk art: "modernity" (the modification of traditional performances to maintain relevance in contemporary society) and
 conservatism (the protection of traditional forms against alteration). Though he discovers radically different performances emerging from the same group of actors over a series of years, Russell confirms that the same aesthetic model produces these apparently dissimilar plays. In examining this ongoing tradition, Russell provides insights into the phenomena which lead to change in traditional art forms, the role of the community in defining aesthetic models before, after, and during performance, and the points in the creative process at which variation is introduced. This study also demonstrates the concern of contemporary folkloristics with the text in its proper social and interactional contexts.

Unlike the Mummers' Play, the dramatic forms of adolescents are well represented in American culture. Yet, these performances are rarely subjected to folkloristic analysis as drama. Undoubtedly this is due, at least in part, to the previously mentioned tendency to ignore those enactments not included in Old World corpora. In addition, the tendency to label nonadult lore as trivial may have discouraged the investigation of such performances. Beyond detrivializing this lore, Bill Ellis' study, "The Camp Ordeal: Theater as Life," enhances our understanding of the situated meaning inherent in folk dramatic performance. Concentrating on the mock ordeal, a consciously structured enactment in which camp counselors and their charges venture out to challenge "supernatural beings," the author considers both the function and structure of these events. The mock ordeal, Ellis contends, crosses generic boundaries by maintaining links to both drama and ritual. Like ritual, these events have an initiatory quality that incorporates campers into the communitas necessary for the "imaginative recreation of the 'frontier' world" of camp life. The ordeal shares with drama, however, the insulation that allows campers to maintain the role of audience to a scripted action with a foregone conclusion. In this article, Ellis calls to our attention the vital role of audience perception in defining drama, a feature which too frequently has been overlooked in our concern with internal form and provenience. By utilizing the insights of Erving Goffman and Victor Turner, the author demonstrates that theories which rely on an analogy between drama and other forms of structured behavior can serve as a means to define the folk play. He thus aptly employs methods which, as noted above in section II of this introduction, often lead to a blurring of necessary boundaries between genres. Moreover, in so doing he comes to terms with the sometimes difficult distinctions between drama, art, and performance vis-à-vis life, reality, and behavior by asking how and why the audience interprets action rather than relying on information gleaned from the formal analysis of the script itself detached from its living context.

Similarly, William O. Beeman demonstrates an interest in the relationship
between performers and audiences during performance events. By focusing on the patterns of message production, reception, and interpretation, the essay "Why Do They Laugh? An Interactional Approach to Humor in Traditional Iranian Improvisatory Theatre" tries to solve the problems of how spectators' laughter is inspired, and why such laughter is socially significant. This last question moves the scope of Beeman's argument beyond Ellis' concern with the features of the circumscribed enactment and the performance's effect on the larger event in which it is embedded. Beeman's purview is more comprehensive than Russell's as well, for while Russell is concerned with the relationship between the Mummers' Play and its larger social context, his arguments center on matters of aesthetics—how the group's feedback and the performers' perceptions of audience demands shape the art form. Beeman, however, turns his attention to the social structure per se in an effort to describe the means by which the traditional drama of Iran can alleviate societal stress as a whole, as well as symbolizing and relieving the specific tensions inherent in particular occasions such as circumcisions and weddings. The result is an exposition of the ways in which the dynamics of performance events may interrelate with the dynamics of their social and cultural contexts. This study, therefore, departs from speculative attempts to interpret the original sense of folk drama that stamp many of the comparative studies discussed above and proposes instead a more synchronic (and thus more accessible) goal of determining the situated meaning of specific performances.

Whereas Beeman explores the meaning of a specific performance tradition within a single culture, Frank Proschan investigates one element of a basic dramatic problem—the representation of character. Dialogue is undoubtedly the most fundamental of the various means by which dramatis personae and the relationships among them are revealed in action. Yet, despite the fact that scarcely a genre exists which has not been subjected to linguistic analysis by American folklorists, the rules of speaking in traditional drama remain largely unexplored. This is remarkable, but given the catalytic effect of recent English translations of the semiotic analyses of folk drama by the Prague Structuralists32 we may anticipate significant contributions by American scholars to our understanding of the linguistic qualities of traditional drama. Our final essay demonstrates the efficacy of this approach to folk drama.

Proschan's study, "Puppet Voices and Interlocutors: Language in Folk Puppetry," relies on Prague School notions of the aesthetics of signification to develop a cross-cultural analysis of one of the most prevalent conventions of

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the puppet play, the distortion of human speech. Although the major emphasis here is on the forms and functions of voice modification, our attention is drawn to transformation of various sorts. The importance of the greater understanding of the principle of transformation cannot be overemphasized, for, as Petr Bogatyrev asserts, this is "one of the most important features of the theater . . . the actor changes his appearance, dress, voice, and even the features of his personality into the appearance, costume, voice, and personality of the character whom he represents in the play."

Clearly, the essay has broad implications for the study of folk theater. As Proschan suggests, whether one draws data from theatrical forms employing live actors, or the leather, wood, and cloth human surrogates that populate the puppet stage, in this interplay of the natural and the contrived resides the basic dynamic of dramatic art. Furthermore, it is the conscious refinement of roles which distinguishes drama from other genres of verbal art. By examining the ways in which inanimate objects may be invested with life and personality through the vocal skills of a human manipulator, we come to understand the complexity of the principles of characterization and representation which infuse folk drama in all forms and contexts.

We can conclude from the studies contained in this issue, then, that while none of the contributors would argue that texts are irrelevant to the study of the folk play, these scripts are merely one product of the complex relationships existing between performer, audience, tradition, and society.

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33 Petr Bogatyrev, "Forms and Functions of Folk Theater," in Matejka and Titunik, p. 51.