VIII.—NORTHERN MINSTRELS AND FOLK DRAMA.

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[Read on 25th February, 1925.]

In the following essay an attempt is made to collect the records of such northern customs as illustrate the development of the drama traced in E. K. Chambers' illuminating book "The Medieval Stage."

In order to understand the first beginnings of acting in the north, it is necessary to take a very brief review of the state of the stage during the Dark Ages. Owing to the influence of Christianity, gladiatorial combats were abolished in the Roman Empire in the course of the fifth century, but these shows had long ago killed the classical drama. The Roman stage corresponded very closely to our own music hall performances; the entertainment consisted of farces, ballets, patter songs, conjurers, jugglers and wild beast shows. The actors formed a close caste, from which it was difficult to escape. They did not enjoy the rights of citizenship, were condemned by the church, and despised by the barbarian invaders of the Empire.

The theatre at Rome is mentioned for the last time in 533, and had definitely ceased to exist by 568. Its fall cannot be considered as a loss to the drama, but, on the contrary, proved the means of its final regeneration. The actors were probably little worse off than before, when they were turned out of their settled but degraded occupation to wander about Europe as strollers, devoting themselves to the amusement of the barbarians.

The Teutonic invaders had their own entertainers the bards, who held a very different position from the Roman actors. The profession of the bard was honourable and great chieftains did not disdain to play the harp in their own halls. A bard might either attach himself to some

particular chief, and fill a respectable post in his household, or might wander about the country from tribe to tribe, everywhere received hospitably and rewarded for his performance.

The wandering actors and the wandering bards gradually blended into one body, with results on the whole favourable to the status of the actor. The medieval minstrel had certain privileges; he might enter any house, and claim a reward from any man. He was a non-combatent and ought not to be attacked. His distinctive dress, the gaily-coloured tunic and close-cropped hair, if it was partly a badge of his trade, was also in part a protection.

During the winter evenings the emperors and kings of the Middle Ages demanded amusement, and at court the minstrels were organised into a regular college, which bore a strong resemblance to the College of Heralds. The minstrels received a fixed salary, but their attendance was required only at certain great feasts; for the rest of the year they were permitted to make their profit by travelling about from place to place, and they carried with them letters from their lord to prove that they were respectable persons and not mere strollers. Noblemen followed the king's example. They had their household minstrels, who went on tour from time to time. In corporate towns the waits or minstrels formed gilds of their own. The Newcastle waits obtained a charter in 1677 in place of an old one which had been lost, but dated at least from the sixteenth century.[1]

Any special festivity attracted a flock of minstrels. In 1328, when David Bruce married Joan of England, no less than £66 15s. 4d. was given in rewards to minstrels who attended the ceremonies.[2] From the Account Rolls of Durham priory some particulars may be gleaned about the regular establishments of minstrels in the north. Rewards were given in 1278, 1335-6 and 1360 to minstrels from Newcastle, in 1330-1 to the harper of lord Robert of Horncliff, in 1335-6, 1339-40 and 1394-5 to the minstrels of lord

[1] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chaps. i-iii, and ii, append. B.D. Richardson, Extracts from the Nc. Mun. Accts., 74.

[2] Scott, *Hist. of Berwick*, 49.

Ralph de Neville, in 1335 to the harper of lord Geoffry le Scrop, in 1355-6, 1357 and 1360 to the minstrels of the lord bishop of Durham, in 1360-1 to the Welsh harper of lord William de Dalton, in 1376-7 and 1394-5 to the minstrels of lord Percy and in 1394-5 to the minstrels of Hilton.[3]

The references to the minstrels of Newcastle are particularly interesting, as these must have been the town waits. There were also town waits at Darlington in the sixteenth century, and at Gateshead in the seventeenth, while the waits of Alnwick survived well into the nineteenth century. It is curious to notice that as the King's College of Minstrels were closely connected with the College of Heralds, so the town crier or bellman was gradually differentiated from the town waits, and frequently survived them.[4]

The repertory of the minstrels was exceedingly varied, as they combined the music-hall tricks of the Roman stage with the more serious music, songs and recitations of the bards. The church remained invincibly hostile to the former part of the programme, but even Robert Grosstete, bishop of Lincoln, who condemned all acting including miracle plays, made an exception in favour of the bards' recitations, and indeed kept a minstrel himself, an indulgence which he justified by the analogy of David.[5]

Other churchmen were not so particular, and the monks of Durham seem to have had a great inclination for the minstrels' diversions of all sorts. In the year 1237, bishop Richard le Poor of Durham having died, the convent elected their prior, Thomas of Melsanby, as the new bishop. The king made a number of objections to their choice, and among other charges against Melsanby it was stated that " He should be refused as a homicide, inasmuch as with his permission a certain mountebank having as-

[3] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, Append. E (1), where the references are collected from the Surtees Soc. vols. of Dur. Acct. R., Dur. Household Bk., and Finchale Priory.

[4] Richardson, *op. cit.*, 12; Gateshead Churchwardens' Accts., vol. i; Tait, *Hist. of Alnwick*, i, 424.

[5] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. iv.

cended a rope stretched from tower to tower [of Durham cathedral] fell and was killed, when he [Melsanby], so far from allowing such performances, should have strictly forbidden them."[6]

The king of course wished to place his own candidate in the vacant see, but in this particular instance he seems to have had some grounds for complaint. The monks, however, continued to indulge themselves now and then by watching acrobatic exhibitions. In 1381-2 a reward was given to "a minstrel of the Lord Duke's with an acrobat."[7] In 1310-11 they were visited by "a certain juggler of the Lord King's."[8] Exhibitions of animals were popular, bishop Robert de Insula of Durham (1274-83) used to banish care and delight his guests by setting two monkeys to fight for almonds,[9] and the convent of Durham was visited in 1532-3 by the keeper of the princess Mary's bears and monkeys.[10]

Some of the earliest performances which can properly be called acting seem to have been imitations of animals. In this connection canon Raine has a curious note in his book on Finchale priory. He says that in the Newcastle Chronicle of 2nd December, 1775, there was an obituary notice of a local character, Joney Davey, aged 95, who was noted for his performance called "killing the calf." The performer went behind a curtain and imitated alternately the butcher who declared that he was going to kill the calf, and the calf which pleaded for its life, and finally died in appropriate agonies. Raine himself could remember Joney Davey's son, who repeated his father's performance, and he asserted that he had once seen an account of a similar performance before the princess Mary, Henry VIII's daughter. He suggested that the well-known story of Shakespeare, himself a butcher's son, killing a calf in the grand style, with a solemn speech, arose from the fact that Shakespeare, as a boy, used to give a performance similar

[6] *Arch. Ael.* (N.S.), xx, 69.
[7] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. E (1).
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Chron. of Lanercost (Bannatyne Club), 14.
[10] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append E (1).

to Joney Davey's.[11] I do not know what Shakespearean scholars think of this theory, but the unpleasant entertainment may have been a survival from the repertory of the medieval minstrels.

The most common form of entertainment was singing and music. The prior had a harper of his own, called Thomas, for whom a harp was bought in 1335-6. The harp is the instrument most commonly mentioned, sometimes with the statement that the player was blind, but there are also players on tabours, pipes, trumpets, crowds or fiddles, a rotour, " a man who played a lute and his wife who sang," and other singers. About 1370 Richard of Eden, one of the monks of Jarrow, frequently attended the prior of Durham's " ludi " with a band of minstrels from the cell of Jarrow.[12]

Acting was practised to some extent in the songs which took the form of a dialogue between the singer and the chorus. The serious ballads and romances were essentially non-dramatic, but the minstrels also had in their repertory fables and short, witty modern stories called dits. These naturally fell into dialogue form, for it would soon occur to the performer that when he was telling such a tale as *The Clerk and the Girl,* it was much funnier to personate first the amorous Clerk and then the coy Maiden, then simply to tell the story in his own person. This fragment of dialogue, dating from the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) is of special interest as it is in the south Northumbrian dialect, and therefore must have been well known in this part of the country.[12a]

The prior of Durham had his own fool, who is first mentioned in 1310. One holder of the office, Thomas, lived from 1330 to 1356. His efforts were supplemented by the visits of touring stars. Hugo de Helmesley, the king's fool, visited the convent in 1310-11 and jester Jawdewyne came at Christmas in 1362. The bishops of Durham

[11] Raine, Priory of Finchale (Surtees Soc.), p. ccccxli.

[12] Chambers, *op. cit.,* ii, append. E (1), and i, chap. iv. Raine, Jarrow and Monkwearmouth (Surtees Soc.), 48, 56; for the ludi see below.

[12a] Chambers, *op. cit.,* ii, append. U; Ten Brink, *Hist. Eng. Lit.,* i, 255.

frequently kept jesters. In 1333-4 the monks rewarded the bishop of Durham's fool, and bishop Morton is said to have had a jester in 1633.[13]

The corporation accounts of Newcastle do not begin until the latter part of the sixteenth century, but in them there are frequent entries relating to the town fools. It has been suggested that these were charitable allowances to idiots, not payments to hired merrymakers, but it is improbable that ordinary idiots would have been dressed so gaily at the town's expense. It also appears that they rode with the mayor to the grand opening of the Newcastle fair, which shows that they had an official position. In 1595 there were as many as three fools, and one was still maintained in 1650, when the puritan domination of the town was complete.[14] The corporation of Alnwick had a fool in 1612.[15] The Hiltons were one of the last families to keep a household fool, but the very last of all was probably that of the Delavals, in whose accounts there is a payment for the fool's coat on 18th July, 1723.[16]

The minstrel repertory by itself was narrow and barren. It was the survival of a worn-out stage and did not contain within it the seeds of new dramatic life, but it was strengthened by contact with new and vigorous elements chiefly from the church, but partly from the folk-drama of the people. Primitive religion contained many dramatic elements which survived, although partly overlaid by layers of new faiths. These survivals were often magical rites connected particularly with the crops, the herds and the weather. They were not definitely religious, and thus they attached themselves to any religion, and were in part adopted by the Christian church.

It is well known that the ecclesiastical feasts often coincided with the ancient agricultural or even pre-agricultural festivals of the people. The prior and monks of Durham were in the habit of withdrawing to one of their

[13] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. E (1), Surtees, *Hist. of Dur.*

[14] Richardson, *op. cit.*, 11, 16, 19, 86, 21, 29, 30, 37, 41, 122.

[15] Tait, *op. cit.*, i, 424; Surtees, *op. cit.*

[16] *Arch. Ael.*, xv (N.S.), 130.

country manors, such as Beaurepaire, to recreate themselves with "ludi" at four great feasts of the year, namely, Candlemas, 2nd February, the ploughing-feast; Easter, the sowing-feast; St. John the Baptist, 24th June, the high summer feast; and All Saints, 1st November, the New Year feast of the early Teutonic calendar, in which the year began with the beginning of winter. To these must be added the mid-September harvest festival, which was Christianised as Holy Rood Day, and the great festival of Christmas, which was due chiefly to Roman and Christian influence.[17]

Primitive men were even more deeply interested in the weather than are men of the present day, and the chief business at their feasts was to make the weather for the coming season. Their efforts were based upon two principles, first, that like produces like, which resulted in mimetic magic, and, second, that two objects when in contact absorb each others' qualities, which resulted in sympathetic magic. Thus sunshine might be obtained by lighting a great fire in a prominent place. Men wanted light and heat, and consequently they made light and heat, as far as they were able, and they expected that the sun would follow their example. The midsummer fires are so well known that there is no need to discuss them at length.[18] Closely akin to the sun-charms were other fertility charms, which are very well represented by the festival of St. Mark's day, April 25th, as it was celebrated at Alnwick down to the middle of the nineteenth century. Tait gave a full account of it in 1845, but between 1850 and 1860 the Alnwick commons were enclosed and the old custom was given up in 1854.

St. Mark's day was one of the Christian holidays which absorbed the pre-Christian spring feast. According to the ancient reckoning the day lasted from sunset to sunset, not from midnight to midnight. Thus the eve was of equal importance with the day itself, being in fact part of the day. Traces of this way of reckoning are found in the

[17] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. v.

[18] *Arch. Ael.* (N.S.), viii, 73; xxv, 181; Longstaff, *Hist. of Darlington*, 296.

celebrations of Christmas Eve and other festivals. At Alnwick on April 24th, the Eve of St. Mark, the corporation of Alnwick met to admit the new freemen. All the young men of the town who were entitled by birth or apprenticeship to take up their freedom did so on that day. There might be only two or three, or there might be as many as thirty. In modern times there were usually about ten.

Next morning was St. Mark's day. Early in the morning the friends of the new freemen placed a holly-tree outside the door of each of their houses. This holly-tree was the representative of a very ancient symbol, the flowering bough, which appears as the may-pole, the may-garland, and in many other forms. It is believed to have been originally a fertility charm. Those who wore it, or decorated their houses with it, believed that they would thereby absorb its qualities and become like it fresh and fruitful.[19]

The new freemen at eight o'clock assembled in the market-place on horseback. Each was obliged to carry a sword, another very ancient custom, traces of which are found both in Greece and Rome.[20] They set out from the market-place, escorted by the chamberlains of the town, the bailiff of the duke of Northumberland, two halberdiers, and a band of music. The procession was led by the town moorgrieve to a certain place called "The Freemen's Well," near Freeman Hill, about 4 miles north of the town. "It is a dirty, stagnant pool, nearly 20 yards in length," wrote Mackenzie in 1825, "and is suffered to run out during the rest of the year; but those who are entrusted with this matter take special care that it shall not lose any of its depth or size at the approach of St. Mark's Day: and while they are preparing the well for the ceremonial plunge, they use various artful contrivances, making holes and dikes, and fixing straw ropes at the bottom, to entrap the heedless and unsuspecting novices into a miry plight. The young freemen, having arrived at the well, immediately prepare for immersion; and after divesting themselves

[19] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. viii. [20] J. E. Harrison, Themis.

of their proper garments, they are soon equipped in a white dress and a cap ornamented with ribbons. The sons of the oldest freemen have the honour of taking the first leap, and the whole being arranged, when the signal is given, they plunge into the well, and scramble through the noisome pool with great labour and difficulty. After being well drenched and half suffocated with mud, they are assisted out of the puddle at the further end" and resume their ordinary dress.[21]

This very curious proceeding may probably be identified as a rain charm. According to the principle of mimetic magic a man who wants rain to wet himself and his fields, must make himself wet first. Many dipping, ducking and sprinkling charms of this kind have survived. The Rev. G. Rome Hall in an essay on Well Worship (*Arch. Ael.*, N.S., viii, 72), collected some of those which are still practised in Northumberland, although he did not refer to the Alnwick freemen. In most of the ceremonies the dress of the dipper is an important point. Sometimes he must be clothed, in other cases naked—sometimes covered with leaves and branches, at others a priest in his robes.[22]

The municipal records of Alnwick go back only to 1594, and for the first half-century they are fragmentary. The ceremony of the Freemen's Well is first mentioned in 1645. From that time forward there are fairly regular allusions to it, and two eighteenth century accounts of it correspond to those of Mackenzie and Tait. There is a tradition which carries it back much further, to the beginning of the thirteenth century. According to all the historians of Alnwick the ceremony was instituted by king John, who, when hunting on Alnwick moor, was bogged in the Freemen's Well, and thereupon swore that no man should become a freeman of the town until he had gone through the well.[23] Tait discovered from "The Itinerary of king John," that that monarch passed the night of April 24th, 1206, at Alnwick. Now without accepting the aetio-

[21] E. Mackenzie, A view of North'l'd, i, 444.

[22] Frazer, The Golden Bough, i, 95.

[23] Tait, *Hist. of Alnwick*, ii, 241, *et seq.*

logical myth of the king's hunting, it is probable that if king John was in Alnwick on St. Mark's day, he would see the well-ceremony, which was exactly calculated to appeal to an Angevin king's sense of humour, and some tradition of his presence may have been preserved, as he was the only king who ever saw the performance.

It may be objected that the borough of Alnwick obtained its first charter only in the reign of Henry II, and that therefore the ceremony can be no older. It could not be associated with the admission of the freemen before that period, but the ceremony itself shows signs of being much more ancient. When the inhabitants of the little town obtained their first charter, every householder became a burgess, and consequently every householder's son was a potential freeman. Now, let it be assumed for a moment that the feast of St. Mark was already the chief holiday of the year, and that already every boy who had just attained manhood was required to go through the well as a sign of his coming of age. The ceremony of admitting the new freemen was also a sign of coming of age, and a feast-day which was celebrated by the young man and his friends. It seems very natural that the two should be combined. Going through the well occupied St. Mark's day, but there was St. Mark's eve, equally sacred and equally a holiday. What more appropriate time could be found for admitting the young freemen? A boy who was of age to go through the well was also of age to become a freeman. The two ceremonies became so closely united that when, in later times, a considerable number of young men of Alnwick were not entitled to the freedom of the town, they were excluded from the well also.

After this prolonged delay at the Freeman's Well, the cavalcade rode on, and went round the boundaries of the town's common lands. "In passing the open part of the common," says Mackenzie, "the young freemen are obliged to alight at intervals, and place a stone on a cairn as a mark of their boundary." The custom of beating the bounds is very ancient and widespread. It was observed in many parts of Northumberland and Durham, as for

instance at Gateshead, at Morpeth, and at St. Giles, Durham.[24] Originally the flowering bough was carried round the parish or water was sprinkled on the boundaries, in order to communicate fertility to the whole enclosure. The Roman church adopted the rite, and in Roman Catholic countries the priest still goes in procession to bless the fields in Rogation week or Gang week, as it was called in England.[25] After the Reformation the procession was long kept up on account of its use in maintaining the parochial bounds. A trace of the ancient fertility charm was retained when the young men of Alnwick who had just been through the well and were charged with the rain-powers were obliged to touch the boundaries.

The procession round the Alnwick bounds concluded with two horse-races. The young freemen raced first to Townlaw Cairns, where the names of all the freeholders were read over, and then for about two miles back to the town, the foremost being declared the "winner of the boundaries" and the leader of the day.

The freemen entered the town sword in hand, with music playing, paraded through the streets, and then went to the castle, where a banquet was prepared for them. Then they drank a bowl of punch together in the market-place, and returned to their homes, where after a last drink together round the holly-tree, they passed the rest of the day in domestic revels.

The final ceremonies point to an original sacrificial banquet. Where there are athletic contests for the leadership, it is often found that the winner is entitled to a particularly large or lucky share of the sacrifice. This was the origin of the Shrove-tide football which is still played at Chester-le-Street, Sedgefield, Rothbury, Wooler and Alnwick itself, where a very primitive form is retained, as it is the object of the victor to carry off the ball. The game is supposed to have originated in a scramble for the

[24] Monthly Chron., 1890, p. 222; County Folk-Lore, North'l'd (F.L.S.), 71; Barmby, Mem. of St. Giles, Dur. (Surtees Soc.), 2-8; *cf.* Bp. Cosin's Corres. (Surtees Soc.), i, 121.

[25] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. vi.

head of the animal sacrificed, such as takes place in many parts of India at the present day.[26]

The church countenanced the harmless sun and rain charms, but it was bound to endeavour to uproot the practice of sacrifice. Hence came the tailing-off in the ceremonies at Alnwick. Yet in spite of the efforts of the priests, the custom was not eradicated. Not only did Shrove-tide football survive, but animals continued to be sacrificed even in the very churches.

A most striking instance of this was maintained at Durham until the beginning of the fourteenth century. At the Feast of the Translation of St. Cuthbert, September 4th, lord Neville of Raby brought to Durham and offered at the shrine of St. Cuthbert, a stag, which was afterwards removed to the prior of Durham's kitchen. The monkish chronicler Robert of Graystanes was careful to explain that though this was called an offering, it was " baptized " a rent, which lord Neville rendered for his lands at Raby. Graystanes seems to have been writing more truly than he knew. The original offering had simply been baptized a rent and allowed to continue. The conflict between the two aspects of the offering were very clearly brought out in its subsequent history. The prior contended that the stag was merely a rent. Lord Neville came with a few servants, handed over the stag, and went away again. Lord Neville, on the other hand, claimed that he had the right to bring the stag into the cathedral with all his servants blowing their horns, and that afterwards he and his servants took possession of the prior's house and feasted there for the following day and night, turning out the prior's servants.

On 4th September, 1290, when the offering was made, there was a regular battle between lord Neville's men and the monks, who drove them out of the cathedral with the great candlesticks used for the service. The monks remained triumphantly in possession of the stag. After this the offering was given up during the lifetime of that lord Neville, but in 1331 his son proposed to revive it. The prior objected and protested, until lord Neville

[26] Monthly Chron., 1889, 54, 180. Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. i.

brought a writ of novel disseisin against him. Neville, however, lost his case, which was indeed a very curious one, for it was not often that a tenant insisted upon paying a rent to a reluctant lord.

The decision of the court was consonant with the state of religion and civilisation in the country, but not with strict justice, as the prior was unable to deny that such a custom had existed, although be quibbled over the particulars of it. One piece of evidence which he produced is very interesting. It is a fragment of a lament, sung, he said, after the death of lord Neville's great-grandfather, Robert de Neville, who died c. 1280:—

Wel qwa sal thir hornes blau
Haly Rod thi day
Nou is he dede and lies lau
Was wont to blau thaim ay.

The prior declared that this song proved that the offering had once been made on Holy Rood day (September 14th).[27] It also showed, incidentally that the blowing of horns to which the prior objected had been part of the original ceremony. The fact that the offering had once been made on Holy Rood day is of importance in relation to its antiquity. In its later form it could not be earlier than 999, the year when St. Cuthbert's body was laid to rest in the shrine at Durham.[28] But Holy Rood day dates from the seventh century, and coincides with the ancient harvest feast. It seems quite possible that the sacrifice of the stag was a relic of the harvest feast. Christianity in Northumbria during the seventh and eighth centuries had been chiefly confined to the royal families and the monasteries. The small number of missionaries, the difficulty of travelling, and the innate conservatism of the people prevented the new religion from spreading rapidly, and the Danish invasions practically annihilated the church in Northumbria. When more settled times came, and the church was re-established in 882, the work of conversion had to be begun over again. It was now, perhaps, that the

[27] Raine, *Hist. Dun. Scrip. Tres.* (Surtees Soc.), 74, 110.

[28] *V.C.H.*, Dur. ii, 8.

monks endeavoured to Christianise the heathen festival by turning the offering of a stag into a rent to the church.

Curiously enough St. Cuthbert seems to have had an attraction for animal sacrifices. At Kirkcudbright in the twelfth century, bulls were sacrificed "as an alms and obligation to St. Cuthbert,"[29] and three horses' heads were found built into a specially prepared chamber in the steeple of St. Cuthbert's church, Elsdon, which was early fifteenth century work.[30] The offering of the stag had a parallel in a similar custom at St. Paul's, London, which took place, however, on different days. On the feasts of the Conversion and Commemoration of St. Paul (January 25th and June 30th) a fat buck and a fat doe were offered alive at the high altar.[31] Lord Neville seems to have attached a good deal of importance to maintaining the ancient custom. The persistence of such customs, by which lay folk at certain festivals took possession of churches and other sacred places for dancing, singing, playing musical instruments and feasting is shown by repeated ecclesiastical fulminations against such uproarious doings.[32]

In order to understand the relation of the beast-sacrifices to the drama, it is necessary to give a very brief history of the rite. When primitive man was still a hunter, the capture of a large beast, such as a stag, was naturally the occasion of a feast for all the tribe. This feast was not merely a jollification, for, according to the belief in sympathetic magic, those who ate the stag obtained the strength and speed of a stag. Therefore the feast was a solemn rite as well as a meal, and the tribesmen not only ate the stag, but also wrapped themselves up in its skin, in order to absorb its qualities more thoroughly. The ceremony was magical rather than religious, for the learned have not yet decided whether primitive men had a religion, or, if he had, what it was. Nevertheless it is indisputable that in course of time men came to worship animals. They naturally made their god in the likeness of the largest beast with which they were familiar, for

[29] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, 98 n. [30] Berwick Nat. Club Proc., ix, 457.
[31] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, 141 n. [32] *Ibid.*, 161.

instance, a stag. But here a difficulty arose. They ate stags; they were obliged to do so, both by necessity and by old custom. But it seemed scarcely respectful to eat the god itself. Here the magical explanation came to the help of the worshippers. By eating the animal they partook of its qualities. Therefore it was necessary that the worshippers should eat it every now and then, to renew their union with the god.[33] The god became incarnate in the stag, in order that its worshippers might partake of it by feasting on the stag, but the god itself did not die. It lived on and might reincarnate itself at any time.[34]

When agriculture began to be practiced, new gods were worshipped, the gods of the weather and the trees and the fields. Their rites were mingled and confused with the older ones, for these gods also died and rose again. At the great spring feast when the young men danced with weapons in their hands, they performed a mimetic dance to represent the seasons. First summer conquered winter and reigned in triumph; then summer himself died and was lamented, but in the midst of the lament, suddenly he was restored, for in the new year he would come again.

Finally anthropomorphic gods superseded the gods of the animals and the fields, and the explanation of sacrifice was completely changed. The rite was no longer that of a god giving its life to its servants, but simply a gift which the worshipper made to the manlike god. The earlier idea was occasionally retained, as in the worship of Dionysus in Greece, or it might survive in curious forms of ritual, the meaning of which was lost.

Traces of both beast worship and nature worship lingered in the Christmas sword-dance, which even at the end of the nineteenth century was still occasionally performed in Northumberland and Durham, and has lately been revived by Mr. Cecil Sharp at the Newcastle Musical Tournament. Although it was transferred to Christmas, it was originally performed in the spring, and even in the eighteenth century it used to take place in Northumberland during Lent. It is recorded that the dancers dragged

[33] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. vi. [34] Harrison, *op. cit.*

about with them a plough, called the Fool Plough, and that they were accompanied by a man dressed in woman's clothes and a fool almost covered with skins, wearing a hairy cap and a tail hanging down his back.[35] In December, 1887, was printed in the "Monthly Chronicle of North Country Lore and Legend" (p. 464), a set of verses which the pitmen of Earsdon had sung for the last thirty years when they performed their annual Christmas sword-dance at Alnwick Castle. The verses are quite modern, and do not fit the old tune. The grotesques had disappeared, and the six dancers represented six nameless soldiers. In other parts of the country they became the Seven Champions of Christendom.[36]

A more ancient set of verses, with a fuller description, is printed in sir Cuthbert Sharp's "Bishopric Garland," 1834. This version belongs to the neighbourhood of Sunderland. Another set from the neighbourhood of Houghton-le-Spring is preserved, and a third "collated" set is printed in the Monthly Chronicle with the Earsdon version.[37]

According to sir Cuthbert Sharp, the dancers were usually six or seven in number. They "are girded with swords, and clad in white shirts or tunics, decorated with a profusion of ribbands, of various colours, gathered from the wardrobes of their mistresses and well-wishers. The captain generally wears a kind of faded uniform, with a large cocked hat and feather, for pre-eminent distinction, and the buffoon or Bessy, who acts as treasurer, and collects the cash in a tobacco box, wears a hairy cap, with a fox's brush dependent." The characters are the leader called True Blue, the Bessy, the Squire's son, Snip the Tailor, a sailor, a skipper or keelman, a jolly dog, a rector and a doctor. The two last do not dance, and neither does the Bessy, who fills the double part of the fool and the man-woman.

At Houghton-le-Spring the characters were king George, a Squire's son called Alex or Alick, a king of

[35] Balfour and Thomas, County Folk-Lore, North'l'd (F.L.S.), 85.
[36] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. ix.
[37] Henderson, North County Folk-Lore, 67.

Sicily, Little Foxy, a pitman, a skin-clad Tommy, and Bessy, a man dressed as a woman, who in other places was called Bessy Froggum. The Bessy and the Tommy did not dance.

All the versions began with an introductory verse sung by the captain, who then drew a circle on the ground with his sword. Each of the characters was introduced in a descriptive verse, the dance was performed, and finally came the collection. The Sunderland version contains an incident which does not occur in any of the others. At one point the dance became rough and seemed to be degenerating into a fight. The Rector became alarmed, rushed between the combatants, and was accidentally killed. The dancers were very much frightened and grieved, till the Captain called for the doctor, who appeared and after a preliminary patter restored the Rector to life. Thereupon the Captain recited the concluding verses of rejoicing, and called upon the fiddler, who always accompanied the party, for a dance, the music of which is given in the Monthly Chronicle.

The skin-clad Tommy, in all probability, was the latest representative of the worshipper who wrapped himself in the skin of the slain beast, in order to absorb its qualities; it is natural that he should be a buffoon, for an incoming religion always reduces the gods which it has overcome to devils, and their priests to clowns. The part taken by the man dressed as a woman in the proceedings is a matter of doubt, but it is certain that a man in woman's clothes had to take part in the slaughter of the beast-god from very early times, although no one knows why.[38] The Rector, in Sharp's version, must be a member of the company; it is almost impossible that a real rector should be meant, but it is interesting to see that the tradition lingered that a priest ought to take part in the dance.[39] Finally there is the death and restoration to life of the priest, as spring dies and is restored to life in the ancient ritual.

The sword-dance is very closely connected with the mummers' play, another survival of the spring festival.

[38] Harrison, *op. cit.*

[39] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, 207 n.

Professor Gilbert Murray has analysed the primitive spring dance, and has shown how it was the basis upon which the great Greek tragedies were built up.[40] In England the festival usually fell about St. George's day, May 23rd, and in the great majority of cases St. George became the spring hero. Sometimes, however, the mumming took the form of a battle between two armies, and sometimes there was an attack upon a wickerwork dragon or giant, which could be torn to pieces.[41]

During the sixteenth century the spring play was celebrated in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in May at the cost of the town. The evidence about it is very scanty, but it seems to have taken the form of a battle or an attack upon a giant, and did not form part of the cycle of plays performed by the trade gilds on Corpus Christi day. In 1552 the Merchant Adventurers paid for "fyve playes, whereof the towne must pay for the ostmen playe." The Hostmen were a company which had been formed about 1517. Possibly they took over the performance, but not the cost, of the town play. In 1554 and 1558 the Merchant Adventurers had expenses for Hogmaygowk or Hogmagoge.[42] This was probably the spring play. The name may have been connected with Hogmany, or more probably with Gogmagog, the London giant. There was a magnificent performance of the play in 1569. On May 29th the corporation paid the following account:—"Item, paid to Robert Watson for the bone (good) of the play: first, for 60 men's dinners, 50s.; for 35 horses for the players at 4d. a horse, 11s. 8d.; for wyne at ther dinners, 6s. 8d.; more for a drome, 8d.; to the waites for playeinge befor the players, 2s.; for payntyng the sergantes stauffes, 2s.; for the sergantes stauffes, 2s.; mor to John Hardcastel for makynge 46 litle castelles and 6 grete castelles for the bonne of the play, 8s; mor for paynting Belsyboub's cloak, 4d. Total £4 1s. 4d."[43]

[40] Harrison, *op. cit.*

[41] Chambers, *op. cit.*, chap. x.

[42] Dendy, The Merch. Adv. of Nc. (Surtees Soc.), p. ii, p. 161. Dendy, Hostmen of Nc. (Surtees Soc.), p. xxix. Dendy, Merch. Adv. (Surtees Soc.), ii, 165, 168. Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. x.

[43] Richardson, *op. cit.*, 17.

Beelzebub is a common character in folk-plays, who often took round the collecting box at the end; he sometimes wore a calf-skin and represented the same person as the Tommy of the sword-dancers.

In the Ordinary of the Joiners' Company of Newcastle, dated 1589 is the instruction "whensoever it shall be thought necessary for the mayor . . . to command to be sett forth and plaied or exercised any generall playe or martial exercise, they [the Joiners] shall attend on the same and do what is assigned to them," from which it seems that the corporation play was almost a review.[44] In October, 1591, the corporation paid "for keeping Hogmagoge this year 6s. 8d." In June, 1593, the town "paide in rewarde to Mr. Brucke for a plaie and other sportes to [by] him and his brethren plaied—commanded by Mr. Maior to be paid, 10s."[45]

After this there are no more corporation payments for the town play. Probably private players continued to perform it, and as usually happened in such cases, they found it more convenient to give the play in the general holiday at Christmas than at the proper time in the spring. Only one record of its performance in the seventeenth century remains. On December 28th, 1656, in the midst of the severest Commonwealth government, when all plays were prohibited, eight Newcastle men, three of them papists, ventured to perform a "comedy," probably the old folk play. But the magistrates were informed of their sinful courses, and the actors were seized and whipped in the market-place as rogues and vagabonds.[46]

At Morpeth a similar old custom was put down during the Civil War. It was stated in 1666 that the town's people before the war used "to choose one out of the young men in the towne to be St. George, and all the rest of the young men to attend him, and upon St. George day all to come to church, and at the rehearsing of the Creed, the St. George to stand up and draw his sword."[47] The

[44] Brand, *Hist. of Newc.*, ii, 372. Richardson, *op. cit.*, 22.

[45] Richardson, *op. cit.*, 26. [46] *Arch. Ael.* (N.S.), iv. 235.

[47] *Arch. Ael.* (O.S.), iii, 121. *Cf.* Northern Notes and Queries, p. 67.

spirit of destruction continued after the Restoration. In 1661 the borough court of Hexham ordered the constables to " take down the several summer trees or May poles in the several streets or wards of this town," and " upon the town's charge cause them to be made into ladders for the use and service of neighbours."[48]

It was not until late in the eighteenth century that the Newcastle mummers' play was printed in a chap-book dated 1788. If it was the survival of the town's play, very little of the original was left. There is no trace of Hog-magoge or Beelzebub or the 6 great castles and 46 little ones. The play is entitled " Alexander and the King of Egypt," names which the Houghton-le-Spring sword-dancers borrowed. Alexander enters first, introduces himself, and promises to bring three more actors, who have come " so far from Italy." The first is a king, who brings good news from the wars, the second is a doctor, as for the third :

" Old Dives is the next, a Miser, you may see,
Who by lending of his gold, is come to Poverty."

Dives the Miser, however, never appears. It is possible that he was the man-woman, who at Linton in Craven was called Miser.[49]

After Alexander's speech all the actors enter and speak a general prologue asking for room and introducing the king of Egypt. The latter introduces his son prince George, who boasts of slaying the dragon and other valiant deeds. Alexander addressed him by the name of Slasher and challenges him to fight. There is a battle and prince George is killed. The king of Egypt calls upon Sambo to avenge him, and the doctor appears. Here it seems that two actors have been run into one, as the king first calls for a champion, when the doctor offers to fight Alexander, and then for a doctor, when the doctor offers to bring the prince to life. He makes the usual patter speech, part of which is omitted in the reprint, not, perhaps, on account of any break in the original, but

[48] *North'l'd Co. Hist.*, iii, pt. 2, 293.

[49] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, 218 n.

because it was too broad for the chaste pages of the Table Book.' He then restores prince George to life. The prince, the king of Egypt and Alexander now indulge in an orgy of abuse, part of which is also omitted by Richardson; finally Alexander fights with and kills the king, whose corpse is carried off. The doctor does not revive him. The actors then speak a short and nonsensical conclusion.[50]

This is a very much debased form of the mummers' play, and the original elements have been mixed up in inextricable confusion. Properly speaking the hero ought to fight and kill an enemy, who does not revive, and then be killed himself and restored to life. But the actors have gone over to the winning side. The victorious Alexander, not George, who is killed and revived, becomes the hero of the tragedy, and the death of the old man, winter or the king of Egypt, follows, instead of preceding, the death and revival of spring.

A friend tells me that her nurse used to amuse her by repeating parts of the Christmas mummers' play, in a different version from the printed copy. The nurse came from Shotley Bridge, and the approximate date of her recitations was 1895. Her version seems to have been simpler and therefore probably older than "Alexander and the king of Egypt," but my informant could only remember a few lines from the beginning and end. The opening was:—

"Stir up the fire and make a light
For in this house there'll be a fight.
If you don't believe the words I say,
Step in, St. George, and walk this way."

The end was an appeal for contributions—

"If not a penny, a ha'penny will do,
If not a ha'penny [here money is supposed to be given]—God bless you."

Owing to the almost total destruction of early parish books in Northumberland and Durham, it is impossible to

[50] Richardson, The Local Historian's Table Book, Legendary, iii, 376; *cf.* Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. x.

discover where this and kindred plays were acted in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is only a single reference to its occurrence at Bishop Auckland. At Christmas, 1539, the " lusores " or players of Auckland received a present at Durham priory for playing before master Hyndley.[51]

Traces of similar May games are to be found during the seventeenth century, when the records are more plentiful. It was the custom of the town of Morpeth " to have a lord of Misrule chosen against Easter, and to continue till Whitsunday, and he to keep a barrel of ale upon the bridge and make all passengers drink thereof, and to collect money of them for repair of the high ways, and give a just account at Whitsunday."[52] At Hexham the lord of Misrule or the May game made a collection for the repair of the bridge in and before 1634.[53]

At Alnwick the lord of Misrule officiated at Easter. He received an allowance of 10s. or 15s. from the corporation together with his clothes, but he was expected to hand over the money which he and his proctors collected, to the corporation, and the receipts from 1611 onwards usually exceeded the expenditure by a considerable sum. In spite of the corporation allowance the office seems to have been an arduous one, for in 1633 two men refused to fill it, and paid 8s. in commutation. The reason for this was probably the same that operated at Aberdeen, where there was a similar custom. An order made at Aberdeen in 1552 gives a good idea of the lord of Misrule's characteristics:— " The council all with one voice, having respect and considerations that the lord of Bonnacord [the local name for the lord of Misrule] in times bygone has made over many great, sumptuous and superfluous banqueting enduring the time of their reign, and specially in May, which was thought neither profitable nor godly, and did hurt to sundry young men that were elected in the said office, because the last elected did aye pretend to surmount in

[51] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. E (1).

[52] *Arch. Ael.* (O.S.), iii, 121.

[53] *North'l'd Co. Hist.*, iii, pt. 2, 293.

their predecessors in their riotous and sumptous banqueting, and the cause principal and good institution thereof, which was in holding of the good town in gladness and blythness, with dances, farces, plays, and games in times convenient, neglected and abused; and therefore ordains that in time coming all such sumptuous banqueting be laid down altogether except three sober and honest, viz, upon the saint's day (St. Nicholas), the first Sunday of May, and Tuesday after Pasch day . . . . and in place of the foresaid superfluous banqueting to be had and made yearly two general plays, or one at the least, with dances and games used and wont."[54]

The lord of Misrule was given up at Alnwick during the wars, but the custom was revived after the Restoration, and the lord was last mentioned in 1677.[55] It is to be observed that the northern lords of Misrule held office in the spring, although Chambers considers that it is properly a Christmas custom. An example of the Christmas lord occurs in an interesting letter of 1616, and although it took place in Westmorland, which is beyond the present bounds, yet examples are so rare that it may be included here, especially as it was a complaint by the magistrates of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. They informed the government that lord William Howard of Naworth was a recusant and an encourager of recusants. Among other counts against him was the following:—

"In Christmas last (1615) at Bampton in Westmorland within the diocese of Carlisle, the tenantes and servants of my lord Willyam, together with others in the parish, did erect a Christenmas lord, and did most grosselie disturbe the minister in time of Divine service; the minister himselfe granting toleration because he doth ordinarilie dine and suppe at the lord Willyam's table, but never prayes with him, and thes Christenmas misrule men some of them drunke to the minister when he was at prayers, others stept into the pulpit and called the parishioners to an offering for mayntenance of ther sport, others of the lord Willyam's

[54] Chambers, *op. cit.*, ii, append. W.

[55] Tait, *Hist. of Alnwick*, i, 422-3. Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, chap. xvi.

servants came into the church disguised, others shott gunnes in the church and brought in flagges and banners, others sported themselfes with pies and puddings in the church, using them as bowles in the church-allies, others played with dogges and used them as they used to fear sheep, and all these were done in the church and in time of Divine service, and the said lord doth bring the ministers about him into contempt, scorne, and derision."[56]

It may be noted that none of the northern towns produced the elaborate processions, dumb-shows, and allegorical displays with which the southern cities were accustomed to greet royalties and celebrated persons. When princess Margaret Tudor made her famous progress to Scotland in 1503, she was received everywhere by troops of noblemen with their retainers, by mayors and corporations, and by the religious bodies of the towns, who conducted her in state through the streets and feasted her at rich banquets, but the only open air entertainment offered was at Newcastle where " at the bryge end, apon the gatt, war many children, revested of surpeliz, syngyng mellodiously hympnes, and playing on instruments of many sortes."[57]

A hundred years later, when the princess's great-grandson James I and VI passed through Newcastle on his way to London, he was received on 9th April, 1603, by the usual civic procession, and the mayor presented a purse of gold to the king, but there was no pageantry.[58] There were more elaborate proceedings on his subsequent visit to the north in April, 1617. At Durham he was received by the mayor and aldermen, who presented to him " a silver bowl gilt, with a cover," and an apprentice recited a speech in verse, requesting the king to take the part of the citizens in their quarrel with the bishop.[59] That year the Order of the Garter celebrated the feast of St. George in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.[60]

[56] Ornsby, Household Bks. of Lord Wm. Howard, Append. 424 (Surtees Soc., vol. 68).

[57] Welford, Newc. and Gateshead, ii, 15. [58] *Ibid.*, 158.

[59] *Arch. Ael.* (O.S.), iii, 125. [60] Welford, *op. cit.*, iii, 219.

There is some likelihood that on this occasion some Newcastle merchant presented before the king the play called " The Love-sick King," which contains so much about Newcastle. I gave some account of this play in the paper which I had the honour of reading before this Society in 1913, but since then some further facts relating to it have come to light. Professor Boas, in his book " Shakespeare and the Universities," gives an account of four manuscript plays which formed part of the repertory of a company of players about 1630. The names of some of the players are given in the MSS., and among them is Anth. Brew. which probably stands for Anthony Brewer, the author of " The Love-sick King." One of these plays, " Edmond Ironside," deals with the same period of history as " The Love-sick King," the reign of Canute and the wars of the Saxons and the Danes. From internal evidence it seems to be an old play written about 1590, and there are such resemblances between it and " The Love-sick King," as to suggest that Anthony Brewer re-wrote the old play, and added the underplot, about Roger Thornton, for the special occasion of king James's visit to Newcastle.[61]

" The Love-sick King," is a play about battles and sieges and contains a review. It thus falls well into line with the old martial town play. It has possibly another connection with the old folk play. At Coventry on Easter Tuesday (called Hock Tuesday) the townspeople used to have a kind of sham fight which " expressed in actionz and rymez " a battle between the Danes and the English. This was represented before queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in July, 1575, and was said to represent the massacre of the Danes by Ethelred on St. Brice's night 1002. But according to a fifteenth century account it showed the sudden death of Hardicanute and the end of the Danish usurpation at the accession of Edward the Confessor.[62] Chambers considered that the historical story had been

[61] See my paper in The Modern Languages Review, vol. xix, No. 2, April, 1924, " Edmond Ironside " and " The Love-sick King."

[62] Chambers, *op. cit.*, i, 154-5.

grafted into a more ancient custom, the fight between summer and winter which is a performance at the spring feast in most parts of the world.[63] If this be true Anthony Brewer's play has a long pedigree: first the primitive mimetic magic of the triumph of summer over winter, then the Coventry town play, then the performance before queen Elizabeth in 1575, then the play of "Edmond Ironside," c. 1590, and finally "The Love-sick King" performed before James I at Newcastle in 1617.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 187.