

Rescuing *Galoshins*, a Scottish folk play

Fiona Allen

The Meadows Mummers

In 2013, a postgraduate from the University of Edinburgh, who had been researching a Scottish folk play, known as *Galoshins*, formed a mumming troupe to participate in saving the play from relative obscurity. This piece of intangible cultural heritage has now been performed at community events in tents, church halls, on a canal bridge, in a pub, and in a museum. It has been feminised, updated, de-militarised, and due respect is paid to the Commedia dell'Arte roots of the original by adding in broad physical clowning and contemporary political references. The dialogue is largely presented in traditional rhyming couplets, with usage of Scots restricted to those elements of the script where the action is clear enough that speech is an optional extra.

Key words: Folk Play; Scotland; Commedia dell'Arte.

For anyone unfamiliar with the term «mumming», it refers to the practice of groups of amateur actors performing folk drama, frequently with a religious connotation, at specific and significant times of the year. The Mystery Plays (also Miracle Plays and Morality Plays, often termed interchangeably although they are different forms) come into this category. Mummers are, therefore, the performers.

By 2013, widespread social changes had meant that street theatre in general had declined, and anyone who had even heard the term *Galoshins* was likely to be either seriously involved in folklore and/or storytelling OR middle-aged and have heard of it from elderly relatives. The cultural expression was still alive, but the play itself was widely understood to be no longer performed. It was clearly time for the Meadows Mummers to make their appearance.

In presenting the Scottish folk play *Galoshins* as an example of intangible cultural heritage, I must

acknowledge that it cuts across many areas of cultural activity. Included in these are:

- traditional house-visiting customs;
- pre-Christian and specifically pagan seasonal observances;
- pre-Reformation civic performance of plays as part of religious observance;
- the proliferation and geographical spread of such customs.

Even among folklorists and students of theatre history, *Galoshins* is something of a mystery. We do know that the play was originally a house-visiting custom, initially carried out by men but later by children, and as the 20th century progressed it gradually faded from memory. However, there are some practitioners left, among whom are The Meadows Mummers, an Edinburgh-based troupe who may claim the distinction of being the only all-women group to present this play.

The form is simple: the players enter a performance space, and perform a short play in which a hero is challenged by a villain, there is a short sword fight, the hero is killed, and a doctor is summoned to revive him. This achieved, the antagonists are reconciled, the players receive their reward, and the performance is over. In the 19th or early 20th century the players would leave for their next performance in their next house. Thus it falls into the category of hero-combat drama; the “quack doctor play” designation is generally avoided since the doctor does actually revive the slain hero.

In the introduction to *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, the editor, G. A. Lester, defines the similarities between Mummings' plays and mediaeval morality plays, such as *Mankind*. Among these similarities are:

“the taking of a collection; then use of a familiar character (Titivillus) whose arrival is anticipated by the audience and deliberately built up by the actors; the singing and dancing; the fight (with the spade); the proximity of the audience, through whom the vices several times elbow their way; the seasonal, wintertime nature of the play; and the place of performance (perhaps an inn or a private house or any other suitable place where there was an audience willing to pay).” (Lester, 1981: 22).

This description of the structure of the morality play would, with some minor changes, serve as the blueprint for the *Galoshins* play, which, in all its versions, follows this pattern: at specified times of the year, the players arrive at their performance space and make their way in through the audience; a presenter “calls in/on” the characters in turn; there is a fight, generally with swords, during which the hero is killed; a doctor is summoned, who restores the hero to life, and he is reconciled with his killer; there is a brief song and dance; the players take up a collection (not necessarily of money, frequently of items of food and/or drink) and the players depart for their next venue.

The character who links *Galoshins* most closely with other forms of mediaeval drama is The Doctor. He, with his preposterous claims and overblown language, has descended directly from *Commedia dell'Arte*. Unlike the other characters, “(...) a busybody, a muddler and exceedingly presumptuous, he is a great wise-acre, expatiating on everything, for the most part inopportunately. His tirades are abstruse and

incomprehensible, interlarded with mispronounced and bungled Greek and Latin quotations” (Oreglia, 1968: 84).

However, given that morality play performances would frequently have been open-air, we can see influences of an even more distinguished pedigree for the folk play, none other than Shakespeare.

The “calling in/on” of the characters finds an echo in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. The rude mechanicals (Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snug, Snout and Starveling) are met to discuss the play they will perform for the Duke's wedding - “You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip”. Each player is then introduced not only by his given name but by his character name, together with a brief summary of his character (Shakespeare: Act 1, Scene 2).

Compare this with the Melrose version of the *Galoshin* play, the first man introduces “a pack o' feels.” [fools]. He is followed in short order by:

*“Here comes in Galashen, [sic]
Galashen is my name...”
“Here comes in the great King of Macedonia
who has conquered all the world around...”
“Here comes in the King of France
For a battle to advance”.
“Here comes in the King of Spain,
for a battle to remain...”
“Here comes in Dr Brown
the best doctor in the town”.*
(Hayward, 1992: 240).

In Act 3 of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, there is a discussion among the players as to how to indicate that the characters are not really dead, that they may not frighten the ladies of the court. It is probably safe to assume that an Elizabethan play-goer would not be unfamiliar with the concept of a stage death, but this plays with the notion of the boundaries between life and death. This issue of liminality will be returned to.

At this point, it seems fair to mention that The Meadows Mummings have taken the death-which-is-not-a-death theme and played with it. So far, our hero has, in various performances, twitched when the miracle cure has been applied, eaten a banana while the Doctor is haggling over the fee, and produced knitting to be getting on with while the Doctor introduces himself.

Finally, it must be remembered that the [Shakespearean] play before the Duke will happen on Mid-Summer's Night, a time of pagan celebration as the summer solstice. Given that there are in the text several references to the number of days before Mid-Summer, and the state of the moon during that time, it is clear that this was also a period of liminality.

A recent academic development relevant to this paper is *Studies in Liminality and Literature*, produced by The Gateway Press, an independent academic publisher, based in Spain. This is their statement:

"... by 'liminal' we understand any text generated between two or more discourses, a transition area between two or more universes and which thereby shares in two or more poetics. In a second, derived sense, we also apply the term 'liminal' to texts, genres or representations centered around the notion of the threshold, or whose fundamental theme is the idea of a crossover, an entry or a transgression into the unknown, the Other, the Numinous."

<http://northangerlibrary.com/gateway.asp>

The entirety of the *Galoshin* is concerned with the *liminal*: the performance at Hallowe'en carries the significance that All Hallows Eve is when the boundaries between this world and the next are felt to be most porous, and when the spirits of the dead can return to earth. In its early form as a house-visiting custom, there is a literal crossing of the threshold, in that the householders are inviting the performers in, or, interpreted another way, permitting a short and highly stylised encounter with the supernatural. Hallowe'en was also the Celtic Samhuinn, when summer departed and the long northern autumn and winter set in. It is possible to see how a relatively primitive people would have seen this seasonal change as dark banishing light, winter banishing fertility and plenty, and would have welcomed an entertainment which reassured them that light and warmth would eventually return. There is yet another piece of symbolism built into the various texts: the villain is frequently the Black Knight, the Turkish Knight, the Prince of Egypt, and the hero is Saint George, Prince George, King George. This would seem to link the Robin Hood plays quite firmly to the period of the Crusades, wherein (in the terminology of the time) the brave English Christian nobles fought the invading Muslim Saracens.

In Scotland, of course, the hero is *Galoshin* (Galatian, McGlashan, and numerous other near equivalents) while the villain is frequently just The Admiral.

A noted academic has made it possible for us to trace the more domestic part of the ancestry of *Galoshin* to the [English] Robin Hood plays, through his examination of 180 folk plays, from assorted sources but concentrating particularly on chapbook texts. These were then subjected to cluster analysis of key lines and phrases, from which he developed a "family tree" of folk drama. From this he demonstrates that the key text is the "Proto-George or Slasher play" which gives rise to the Northern English group and in turn to the Alexander chapbook. The Northern English group feeds into the "earliest *Galoshins*" and in turn to "later *Galoshins*", which latter incorporates elements of the *Sword Dance Play*, and the Alexander Chapbook. (Millington, 2002).

In all these plays, as with *Commedia dell'Arte*, the characters are merely archetypes – the hero, the villain, the Doctor, the simpleton – because in a strictly theatrical sense, there is no story arc, no character development, and nothing that we would recognise as "theatre". But it is most definitely drama.

"Folk drama had its origins in pagan summer and winter festival rites which followed the seasonal and agricultural calendars. Of particular importance was the regeneration of the land in spring and the victory thereby of summer over winter. Folk culture in mediaeval Scotland had many expressions of this drama of combat between death and resurrection, winter and summer, as seen in animal resurrection cults, ceremonial dances, contests between summer and winter kings and queens, and various Maying rites. This symbolic representation of death and resurrection characteristic of these folk observances was Christianised by adapting it to the story of Christ's Passion and by having the attendant ceremonies sometimes follow the Christian calendar in accordance with the importance of Christmas and Easter. This Christianisation was not achieved easily and both the Catholic Church and then the Reformed Church issued edicts against those folk practices which retained traces of paganism". Where it was deemed acceptable, the Church tacitly sanctioned folk festivities, and the municipal authorities gave organisational support, for example in the case of the May games" (Findlay, 1998: 2).

It is clear from succeeding paragraphs that, in Findlay's view, among others, the loss and destruction of all kinds of civil and ecclesiastical records have made it next to impossible to recreate the forms of Scottish mediaeval drama with any degree of accuracy. Such outbursts of loss and destruction were as a result of civil wars, internecine

struggles, wars with England, and the more austere forms of religious observance imposed by the Reformation.

"There is an early record of a spring rite in Scotland (...) the description of the rite, performed by a priest, is sufficiently graphic that it is easy to understand why the Diocese prohibited "turpes et inhonesti ludi" (shameful and indecent games/plays)" (ibid: 1).

"References to May festivities occur throughout the 15th and 16th centuries; someone was elected to organise and lead the festivities, and was generally referred to as "King of the May" or "Abbot of Unreason". (...) in 1508 there had already been a Robin Hood event in Aberdeen, at which "able-bodied citizens were commanded in to ride 'with Robert huyd and litile Johne quhilk was callit in yeris bipast Abbot and priour of Bonaccord'." (ibid: 3)

As the centuries progressed, and particularly as the Protestant Reformation took hold, many of the elements of the morality plays were losing their strictly religious interpretations and becoming more demotic. This was not without its dangers. By the time of the reign of Mary of Guise, mother of Mary Queen of Scots, the celebrations had become so disreputable that the following proclamation was made:

"Concerning Robin Hood and the Abbot of Unreason. Item, it is statute and ordained that in all time coming no manner of person be chosen Robin Hood or Little John, Abbot of Unreason, May Queen or otherwise, neither in burgh nor to land, in any time to come, and if any provost, bailie, council and community chooses such a personage as Robert Hood, Little John, Abbot of Unreason or May Queen within the burgh, the choosers

of such shall forfeit their freedom for the space of five years and otherwise shall be punished at the will of [Mary of Guise], the queen's grace, and the person who accepts such an office shall be banished out of the realm; and if such persons as Robin Hood, Little John, Abbot of Unreason or May Queen be chosen outwith the burgh and other landward towns, the choosers shall pay to our sovereign lady £10 and their persons put in ward, there to remain during the pleasure of the queen's grace; and if any women or others in summer tries singing, makes perturbation to the queen's lieges in the passage through burghs and other landward towns, the women perturbers, for the extortion of money or otherwise, shall be taken, handled and put upon the cookstool of every burgh or town" [Records of the parliament of Scotland, 20th June 1555.] (This has been translated from Middle Scots.) (Findlay, 1998:4)

The slide from respectability began. The play which had begun life as an important part of civic festivities would undergo many more changes before it became a semi-rural custom practised first by men, then by children, and, in the 21st Century, by groups of mummers, who are gleefully re-shaping it for performance purposes. In *The Meadows Mummers*, we use some lines from chapbook scripts, remembering always that we are performing a piece of intangible cultural heritage, but, if I may, somewhat immodestly, quote from our own script, the Presenter says:

"It is a classic saga performed in Northern Britain; we might have changed a line or two but kept within tradition".

References

- LESTER, G. A. (ed). (1981). *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*. Ernest Benn Ltd., London.
- OREGLIA, Giacomo. (1968). *The Commedia dell'Arte*. Methuen & Co. Ltd. London.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. (1965) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; ed. Peter Alexander. Collins: London and Glasgow. Act 1, Scene 2.
- HAYWARD, Brian. (1992) *Galoshins: The Scottish Folk Play*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- NORTHANGE LIBRARY, *Studies in Liminality and Literature*. <http://northangerlibrary.com/gateway.asp>
- MILLINGTON, Peter. (2003). "Textual Analysis of English Quack Doctor Plays: Some New Discoveries". *Folk Drama Studies Today: The International Traditional Drama Conference 2002*. Eds: Cass, Eddie, and Millington, Peter. Sheffield.
- FINDLAY, Bill. (ed.). (1998) *A History of Scottish Theatre*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press.