

FOOL PLOUGH AND SWORD DANCE

In “Dives and Pauper,” 1493, among superstitions censured we find the following: “*ledyng of the plough aboute the fire as for gode begynnyng of the yere, that they shulde fare the better alle the yere following.*” In Bales’s “Yet a Course at the Romyshe Foxe,” 1542, the author [declares]: “than ought my lorde (Bonner) to suffer the same selfe ponnysment *for not sensing the plowghess on Plowgh Mondaye.*”

In the Churchwardens’ Accounts of St Margaret’s, Westminster, 1494, is the following: “Item of Brotherhood of Rynsyvale for the *plowgere* £0 4s 0d.” In similar accounts for Wigtoft, Lincolnshire, 1575, is “Receid of Wyll^m Clarke & John Waytt, in the *plougadrin* £1 0s 0d.” There is a custom in this neighbourhood of *the ploughmen parading on Plow Monday*; but what little they collect is applied wholly to feasting themselves. They put themselves in *grotesque habits, with ribbands, &c.* [It appears that the “sign,” on which the plough used on these occasions stood, was charged to the parish sixteenpence or thereabout, in the reign of Edward VI]¹.

There was a light in many churches called the *plow light*, maintained by old and young persons who were husbandmen, before some image; who on Plough Monday had a feast, and went about with a plough, and some dancers to support it.²

This pageant or dance, as used at present, seems a composition made up of the gleanings of several obsolete customs, followed anciently, here and elsewhere, on this and the like festive occasions.

In the North of England there is a custom used at or about this time, which, as will be seen, was anciently observed also in the beginning of Lent. The Fool Plough goes about, a pageant that consists of a number of *sword dancers dragging a Plough*, with music, and one, sometimes two, in a very strange attire; the Bessy, in the grotesque habit of an old

woman, and the Fool, almost covered with skins, a hairy cap on, and the tail of some animal hanging down his back. The office of any one of these characters, in which he is very assiduous, is to go about rattling a box amongst the spectators of the dance, in which he receives their little donations.

It is also called the *fond Plough*, aliter the *white Plough*, so denominated because the gallant young men that compose it appear to be dressed in their shirts (without coat or waistcoat) upon which great numbers of ribbands folded into roses are loosely stitched on. It appears to be a very airy habit at this cold season, but they have on warm waistcoats under it. Hutchinson,³ speaking of the dress of the sword-dancers at Christmas, adds: “Others, in the same kind of gay attire, draw about a Plough, called the *Stot Plough*, and, when they receive the gift, make the exclamation *Largess!* but if not requited at any house for their appearance, they draw the Plough through the Pavement and raise the ground of the front in furrows. I have seen twenty men in the yoke of one Plough.” He concludes thus: “The Stot-plough has been conceived by some to have no other derivation than a mere rural triumph, the plough having ceased from its labour.”

In Tuffer’s “Husbandry,” 1580, under the Account of the Ploughman’s Feast Days are the following lines:

“Plough Monday, next to the Twelf-tide is past,
Bids out with the plough; the work husband is last:
If Plowman gets hatchet, or whip to the skrene,
Maids loseth their cocke, if no water be seen.”

which are thus explained in [Hilman’s] “Tuffer Redivivus,” 1710: “After Christmas (which formerly, during the twelve days, was a time of very little work) every gentleman feasted the farmers, and every farmer their servants and task men. *Plough Monday* puts them in mind of their business. In the morning the men and maid servants strive who shall show their diligence in rising earliest. If the ploughman can get his

1. Stukeley’s “Itinerary,” p. 19

2. Blomefield’s “Norfolk,” vol. iv. p. 287. In the Churchwardens’ Accounts of Heybridge near Malden, Essex, is the following account, “Item receyved of the gadryng of the *White Plowe* £0 1s 3d.” to which this note is affixed: “Q. does this mean Plough Monday; on which the Country People come and dance and make a gathering as on May Day?”

3. “History of Northumberland,” vol. ii. *ad finem*, p. 18

whip, his plough-staff, hatchet, or anything that he wants in the field, by the fire-side, before the maid hath got her kettle on, then the maid loseth her Shrove-tide cock, and it wholly belongs to the men. Thus did our forefathers strive to allure youth to their duty, and provided them innocent mirth as well as labour. On this Plough Monday they have a good supper and some strong drink.”

The Monday after Twelfth Day (as Coles tells us) was anciently called Plough Monday, when our Northern ploughmen begged plough-money to drink. He adds, “In some places if the ploughman (after that day’s work) come with his whip to the kitchen hatch, and cry ‘cock in the pot’ before the maid can cry ‘cock on the dunghill,’ he gains a cock for Shrove Tuesday.” Coles tells us also of an old custom, in some places, of “Farmers giving sharpening Corn to their Smith at Christmas for *sharpening plough irons*.”

[There is a long and elaborate account in the “Book of Days” of this rustic festival, and in “Notes and Queries” for May 19, 1860, Cuthbert Bede alludes to the custom as then kept up in Huntingdonshire. It is still customary for the Lord Mayor of London to entertain the officers of the corporation at a banquet on Plough Monday.]⁴

The *Fool Plough* upon the Continent appears to have been used after the solemn service of Ash Wednesday was over. Hospinian gives a very particular account of it from Naogeorgus, and explains the origin of its name.⁵

It has been remarked that in some places where this pageant is retained, the sword-dancers plough up the soil before any house at which they have exhibited and received no reward.⁶

In the “British Apollo,” 1710, number 92, [the following explanation occurs:] “Plough Monday is a country phrase, and only used by peasants, because they generally used to meet together at some neighbourhood over a cup of ale, and feast themselves, as well to wish themselves a plentiful Harvest from the great Corn sown (as they call Wheat and Rye) as also to wish a God-speed to the Plough as soon as they begin to break the ground to sow Barley and other Corn, which they at that time make a Holiday to themselves *as a finishing stroke after Christmas*, which is their Master’s holyday time, as Apprentices in many places make it the same, appropriated by consent to revel amongst themselves.”

Pegge, in the “Gentleman’s Magazine” for December, 1762, informs us that “*Plough-Monday*, the Monday after the Twelfth day, is when the labour of the Plough and other rustic toils begin. On this day the young men yoke themselves and *draw a PLOUGH about* with Musick, and one or two persons, in antic dresses, like Jack-Puddings, go, from house to house, to gather money to drink. If you refuse them they plough up your dunghill. We call them in Derbyshire the Plough Bullocks.”⁷

Macaulay⁸ says: “On *Plow-Monday* I have taken notice of *annual display of MORRIS-DANCERS* at Claybrook, who come from the neighbouring Villages of Sapcote and Sharnford.”

In a marginal note to Roiley’s “Poetical Relation of the Gleanings of the Idiotismes and Absurdities of Miles Corbet Esquire,” 1646, p. 6, we are told that the Monday after Twelfth Day is called “*Plowlick Monday* by the husbandmen in Norfolk, because *on that day they doe first begin to plough*.”⁹

Christie¹⁰ says: “The new year of the Persians was opened with agricultural ceremonies (as is also the case with the Chinese at the present day).” [He adds:] “The Athenians (says Plutarch) celebrate three

4. “Daily News” for Jan. 12, 1869

5. Hospinian, “De Orig. Fest. Christ.” p. 47; Google’s “Naogeorgus,” 1570, p. 82; and Reed’s “Shakespeare,” vol. viii. p. 241.

6. “Vocab. utriusque Juris,” a Scot. J. C. in v. ARATRUM

7. Aubanus tells us of a similar one in Franconia on Ash Wednesday, when such young women, he says, as have frequented the dances throughout the year are gathered together by young men, and instead of horses, are yoked to a plough, upon which the piper sits and plays: in this manner they are dragged into some river or pool. He suspects this to have been a kind of self-enjoined voluntary penance for not having abstained from their favourite diversion on holidays, contrary to the injunctions of the Church.

8. “History of Claybrook,” 1791, p. 128

9. Among the ancients the “Compitalia were feasts instituted, some say, by Tarquinius Priscus, in the month of January, and celebrated by servants alone, *when their plowing was over*.” Sheridan’s Persius, edit. 1739, p. 67, note.

10. “Inquiry into the Ancient Greek Game,” 1801, p. 136

sacred ploughings.” “The Chinese ploughing took place on the first day of their (solar) new year, (the same ceremony is practised in Tunquin, Cochin-China, and Siam) which, however, happened at an earlier season than with the Greeks, *viz.* when the sun entered the 15th degree of Aquarius; but the difference of season need not be objected to, since we have observed that similar rites were adopted by the ancient Persians, the beginning of the whole year differed again from the Greeks and the Chinese; but all these ceremonies may be presumed to have sprung from the same source. The Grecian ploughing was perhaps at first but a civil institution, although a mythical meaning was afterwards attached to it.”

Henry, in his “History of Britain,” says, “The Germans, and probably the Gauls and Britons, had a kind of martial Dance which was exhibited at every entertainment. This was performed by certain young men, who, by long practice, had acquired the art of dancing among the sharp points of the swords and spears, with such wonderful agility and gracefulness, that they gained great applause to themselves, and gave great delight to the spectators.”

Moresin, who has been a most accurate observer of Popular Antiquities, mentions a Dance without Swords, in Scotland.¹¹

In a Drama played by a set of “*Plow-Boys* or *Morris-Dancers*,” in their ribbon dresses, with Swords, October 20, 1779, at Revesby Abbey, Lincolnshire, the assumed characters of the piece are different from those of the more regular MORRIS, and they were accompanied by two men from Kirtley without any particular dresses, who sang the song of Landlord and Tenant. The Dramatis personae were: *Men*, The Fool and

his five Sons, Pickle Herring, Blue Breeches, Pepper Breeches, Ginger Breeches, and John Allspice; *Women*, Cicely; with a Fiddler or Master Musick Man. In the Play itself, the Hobby Horse is not omitted:

“We are come over the Mire and Moss;
We dance a Hobby Horse;
A Dragon you shall see,
And a wild Worm for to flee.
Still we are all brave jovial boys,
And take delight in *Christmas* toys.”

[A Writer in the “Gentleman’s Magazine” for May 1811, tells us that in the North Riding of Yorkshire the Sword Dance is performed from St. Stephen’s Day till New Years Day. The Dancers usually consist of six youths dressed in white with ribbands, attended by a fiddler, a youth with the name of ‘Bessey,’ and also by one who personates a Doctor. They travel from village to village. One of the six youths acts the part of the King in a kind of farce which consists chiefly of singing and dancing, when the Bessey interferes while they are making a hexagon with their swords, and is killed.

Mr Brand was a frequent spectator of this Dance, which, in his time, was performed with few or no alterations in Northumberland and the adjoining counties: one difference however was observable in the Northern Sword Dancers, that when the Swords were formed into a figure, they laid them down upon the ground and danced round them.]

As to the Fool and Bessy, they have probably been derived to us from the ancient Festival of Fools held on New Year’s Day.¹² [*Bess* was a common generic term for a female Tom-a-Bedlam.¹³]

11. “Papatus,” 1594, p. 160. I find a curious and very minute description of the Sword Dance in Olaus Magnus. He tells us that the Northern Goths and Swedes have a sport wherein they exercise their youth, consisting of a *Dance with Swords* in the following manner: first, with their swords sheathed and erect in their hands, they dance a triple round; then with their drawn swords held erect as before; afterwards, extending them from hand to hand, they lay hold of each other’s hilts and points, and while they are wheeling more moderately round and changing their order, throw themselves into the figure of a hexagon, which they call a rose: but, presently raising and drawing back their swords, they undo that figure, in order to form with them a four-square rose, that they may rebound over the head of each other. Lastly, they dance rapidly backwards, and vehemently rattling the sides of the swords together, conclude their sport. Pipes, or songs (sometimes both) direct the measure, which, at first, is slow, but increasing afterwards, becomes a very quick one towards the conclusion. [Douce had a very old cut representing the Sword Dance, which, according to Park, was still “performed (sixty years ago) by the morris-dancers in the vicinage of Lincoln.”] Olaus Magnus calls this a kind of gymnastic rite, in which the ignorant were successively instructed by those who were skilled in it: and thus it must have been preserved and handed down to us.

12. Concerning the Feast of Fools, see Du Cange, v. KALENDAE, and Du Tilliot, “Memoire pour servir à l’Histoire de la Fête des Foux,” 1751, [As well as the present work under APRIL FOOLS’ DAY.] Du Cange, v. CERVULA, Carpentier Supplem. ad Du Cange, *ibid.* and Delrio “Disquisit. Magic.” L. iii. P. ii. Quæst. 4, Sect. 5, p. 477. See also “Hospinian de Orig. Fest. Christ.” fol. 32 b. where the practice is mentioned in nearly the same words.

13. See Lovelace’s Poems, ed. 1864, p. 115, and note.

Wallis¹⁴ tells us, that the *Saltatio armata* of the Roman Militia on their festival *Armillustrum*, celebrated on the 19th of October, [was, in his time] still practised by the country people in this neighbourhood, on the annual Festivity of Christmas, the Yule-tide of the Druids. “Young men march from Village to Village, and from House to House, with Music before them, dressed in an antic attire, and before the vestibulum or entrance of each house entertain the family with the *Motus incompositus*, the antic Dance, or *Chorus Armatus*, with Sword or Spears in their hands, erect and shining. This they call the *Sword Dance*. For their pains they are presented with a small gratuity in money, more or less, according to each householder’s ability: their gratitude is expressed by firing a gun. One of the company is distinguished from the rest by a more antic dress; a fox’s skin generally serving him for a covering and ornament to his head, the tail hanging down his back. This droll figure is their chief or leader. He does not mingle in the dance.

There was anciently a profane sport among the Heathans on the Kalends of January, when they used to roam about in disguises, resembling the figures of wild beasts, of cattle, and of old women. The Christians adopted this: Faustinius, the bishop, inveighs against it with great warmth. They were wont to be covered with skins of cattle, and to put on the heads of beasts, &c.

[Ihre¹⁵ speaks of the sort of mummerly practised at this time and before by the youth who put on the forms of rams, and in that shape ran about molesting passengers and others. He seems disposed to identify this custom with that described by other writers, in which a stag, instead of a ram, used to be counterfeited in the same way. Bishop Faustinius¹⁶ in his Sermon for the Kalends of January, asks, whether any sensible person can credit, that people in their right minds could be found so silly as to put on the likeness of deer, while others dressed themselves so they ceased to look like human beings. This was

not peculiar to the Continent, but appears to have been practised among us formerly on more than one of our merry-makings ingrafted on the original holy feasts of the early Christian church.

Yawning for a Cheshire Cheese was, as the “Spectator” for September 25, 1711, tells us, a Christmas amusement at that period.] A credible person born and brought up in a village not far from Bury St. Edmunds, in the county of Suffolk, informed [Mr. Brand] that, when he was a boy, there was a rural custom there among the youths of *hunting owls* and *squirrels* on Christmas Day. [Forby alludes that this is now obsolete practice in his “Vocabulary of East Anglia, 1830”]

Notes

The Rev. John Brand’s work “Observations on Popular Antiquities: Illustrating the Origin of our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies and Superstitions” was first published in 1777 and based upon the Rev. Henry Bourne’s earlier book “*Antiquitates Vulgares*”, published in 1725. Both men were from Newcastle upon Tyne and had experienced the sword dance and associated traditions first hand. This work was later reprinted several times with minor changes by Sir Henry Ellis.

The work was substantially edited, corrected and updated with new material by W. Carew Hazlitt, and published in three volumes in 1870. This is an extract of Hazlitt’s edition of the work. The footnotes and comments in square brackets are Hazlitt’s.

John Brand, *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, edited by W Carew Hazlitt. London: John Russell Smith, 1870; volume 1, pp 281-286.

14. “History of Northumberland,” vol. ii. p. 28.

15. Ihre “Glossarium Suio Gothicum,” 1769, v. JUL.; Du Cange “Gloss.” Art. PELOTA.

16. Sermo Kal. Jan