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Article abstract

Morris dancing has historically been viewed by its scholars as an "English male dance tradition." Each of these descriptors can be deconstructed, but this article focuses primarily upon understanding how Morris has been gendered male, and the effects such gendering has upon actual dancers and how they understand their practice.

MAKING MORRIS (FE)MALE
Gender and Dancing Bodies[1]

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> At Christmas 1899 Cecil Sharp happened to be staying at Headington. On Boxing Day he looked out of the drawing room window and saw a curious procession of men in white clothes coming up the drive. It was the Headington Quarry Morris side, William Kimber among them, coming to give a performance of their dances (at the wrong time of year, because they were out of work, and wanted to turn an honest penny) (Peck 1974:4).

This axiomatic narrative about the prologue to English folklorist Cecil Sharp's monumental work collecting and disseminating Morris approaches the status of a creation myth for dancers and scholars alike. Used to describe how Morris became known outside its native locale, and to indicate the serendipity of its arrival on the academic and popular scenes, this text names Sharp as the Christopher Columbus who "discovered" — made significant to urban middle- and upper-class British people especially — a practice already known by rural working-class and upper-class communities in the English Midlands. The account also displays Morris as an English male traditional dance.

I want to tell another story. In 1985, doing research on contract for the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, I attended and tape-recorded the inaugural meeting of the Toronto Morris Men (TFMM)[2] and attended a few of their first practices and subsequent pub get-togethers. My sex limited me to observation of TFMM, but the nature of the contract and my academic interests at the time precluded my finding a team with which I could do participant observation. Nevertheless, while studying manifestations of English ethnicity in Ontario (see Greenhill 1994),[3] I became interested in knowing more. Consequently, I practiced and performed with Forest City Morris of London, Ontario, from 1989 to 1991. This provided me with the chance to work very closely with one Morris team, but it also meant that I had opportunities at

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1. I am grateful for research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Multiculturalism Sector of the Department of the Secretary of State, which funded this research. Substantial portions of this material have previously been published in my *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario* (Greenhill 1994), copyright McGill-Queen's University Press. Substantial portions of this work were previously published in Greenhill 1994.

2. TFMM members explain that the "F" is silent. Barrand and Reynolds suggest that "the team's full name is the Toronto Fucking Morris Men" (1991, 98).

3. I am grateful for the support of a Canadian Ethnic Studies research grant from the Multiculturalism Division of the Secretary of State.

Morris Ales — gatherings of Morris teams — to talk with, and dance with, people from other teams.

I generalise here from my experience with Forest City and those other teams with which I came in contact, while freely acknowledging variation between the knowledge and practices of teams, cities, provinces/states, and countries. Morris participants, who are primarily dancers and/or musicians, agreed that Morris is English — at least in origin; that it is traditional — linked to the past; that it is a dance — explicitly so described; and that it is supposed to be performed by men. Such concepts, I argue, are not the commonsensical descriptions they may appear to be, but are instead ideological organisations of material, which interweave with ideas of race, class, and gender.

What Forest City members and other Morris people say about what they do is based upon their assumptions that it is a traditional male English dance; what scholars have selected as their topics and evidence are also governed by those assumptions. In seeking to tell another story about Morris, I enter into dialogues with Morris scholarship, with my fellow team members (usually as they represented themselves in interviews), and with myself as folklorist/dancer. Finally, I examine how Morris is made into a (fe)male practice through the symbolic gendering of dancing bodies.[4]

Scholars and participants alike describe Morris as a custom associated with the English Midlands and certain more northerly and westerly regions, involving choreographic sequences of common figures and choruses, of which the latter make the main distinctions between named dances. The form done by Forest City is usually called Cotswold Morris, after the region of England in which it was discovered. Current Morris teams follow Sharp's assumption that each village had a distinctive style of performance. Forest City bases its dances on those of Kirtlington,[5] which have distinctive angular arm and leg movements and an unusual hey (closing chorus in which dancers execute a weaving patterned motion around one another).

Dances are normally executed by a set number of people. Six is clearly the most common, but almost any combination is possible. Solo and double jigs are conventional performance pieces; dances for eight, four, or odd numbers are usually explained away as necessitated by team numbers, particular dancers' capabilities, and so on. Dancers wear bells arranged on leather garters tied below the knee, and use large handkerchiefs or sticks as

4. I focus on the equally significant issues of race and class elsewhere (Greenhill 1994 and 1994a).

5. The most detailed description of Kirtlington dances I have seen is by Roy Dommett (1984).

part of the dance movements. Each team has a distinctive "kit" or costume; in most, white predominates. The music is in jig (6/8) or reel (4/4) time, played on concertina, pipe and tabor, drum, fiddle, banjo, and other "folky" instruments.

The beginning of Morris in Ontario is usually traced to Green Fiddle Morris, an outgrowth of the Fiddlers' Green Folk Club in Toronto, ca. 1975.[6] One main organiser of Forest City danced occasionally with Green Fiddle before 1978 when the group formed in London. In 1981 and 1982, differences between members led to the formation of three separate new teams, and all four continue actively to this writing. Between 1989 and 1991, Forest City alternated between having mixed dancers; female dancers with male musicians and squire/foreman[7] (director/teacher) fool character; and female and male "sides" — that is, gender-exclusive dance performance groups.

Forest City practices took place weekly throughout the year from around 7 p.m. till around 9 p.m., but some were foregone in the summer because of dance outs and other activities. Inexperienced dancers should start in September, but when numbers were in danger of falling below critical mass, they could join as late as February — as I did in 1989 — and still be incorporated into spring performances. Autumn was spent preparing for the Christmas "Wassail" show, presented with other interested folkies from the area and involving songs and plays as well as dance. In winter and spring the team worked toward the summer's climactic performances. Periodically, Forest City might dance out at some location in London or nearby — at a local school's multicultural festival or (for a fee) at a convention. "Ales" — annual dance get-togethers with other teams — were eagerly anticipated. The London Morris Ale, organised jointly by Forest City and other London teams, took place in mid-June. Teams from Ottawa, Toronto, and the U.S. came to London for a weekend of dancing out in London, and the nearby cities of Stratford and St. Marys. Forest City also attended other teams' ales, such as the Toronto Ale on the Labour Day weekend, and the Ottawa Ale usually on the Thanksgiving weekend.

Morris dancer-researchers like myself have an accepted, even pivotal role; I fit a pre-existing category.[8] I was fascinated, then, to see at the 1990

6. The first Morris team in Canada is dated to 1974 in Winnipeg (see "Morris in Canada" 1987), but there may have been earlier activity in the Maritimes, as suggested in "From one of our Canadian Readers" (1974).
7. I use this non-inclusive terminology because it is employed by Morris people.
8. I'm not the only anthropologist/folklorist to be placed in this position. Ranald Thurgood, who works with revival storytellers in Toronto, discussed some of his experiences pertaining to the need to educate his fellow storytellers. Many of his

Toronto Morris Ale a skit in which the folklorist/historian/dancer figured prominently;[9] a "history" of Morris included this foolish academic, whose chorus after each scene was "This is great! I must learn how to do it," along with a feeble attempt to imitate the dancing which had been illustrated.

Recently, scholarly attention has turned not only to what original Morris may have been like, which was clearly one of Sharp's concerns, but also to how it may differ from what is currently practiced and performed (see Sughrue 1988). A central distinction is between the "traditional" and the "revival." "Traditional" teams trace an unbroken line of Morris activity into the nineteenth century or beyond; "revival" includes teams in English towns which did Morris but cannot trace a continuous group of performers, and those in British, North American (see Barrand 1988), Australian, and other[10] communities not historically associated with Morris.[11] Some scholars focus on areas of divergence between traditional and revival, yet assume substantial similarity within types. Many assume such a degree of continuity that they posit, for example, that a traditional team in the 1880s would do the same Morris as that observed in the 1980s. As I'll show below, such concerns become significant in terms of gender when teams assert the necessity of "maintaining the tradition" of male Morris.

The construction of Morris gender is paradoxically related to its being perceived as dance. The body is seen as the primary vehicle for dance, to the extent that some suggest that dance is autographic[12] — a different dancing

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concerns in this area are directly related to the problem of the participant/observer folklorist who can be a full participant (Thurgood 1990).

9. Parody is an indication of centrality (Narvaez 1977); as ethnographer I'm socially and culturally part of the team. Of course it is not only in the revival that specialist analysts of a phenomenon are part of the cultural scene. Victor Turner's (1969) work suggests that in any ritual or ceremonial event individuals represent different roles, depending on whether they are specialists, presenters, audience, and so on. Their concerns in any event will be different, depending on their varying interests in it and its outcomes.

10. One Forest City dancer left the team to move with her new husband - also a Morris dancer - to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia:
They've got a Morris side in Saudi Arabia. It's a mixed side again, but it's in a different place. It's in a country where Westerners are trying to get together to maintain a sense of feeling that they're not too strange. There's a different philosophy there. Westerners over there will do what they can to feel they have their place as well (Rebecca, 90-6).

11. Folksong revivals, which are in at least some ways comparable to Morris revivals, have recently received attention in a collection edited by Rosenberg (1993).

12. Nelson Goodman distinguishes between autographic art, in which "the distinction between original and forgery...is significant" (Goodman 1968, 113) and allographic art, where "all correct performances are equally genuine instances of the work" (Ibid.).

body makes a different dance (Margolis 1984). Dancing bodies become particularly significant because many substantial differences between women and men are often located primarily — even causally — in the body.[13]

But as Pierre Bourdieu — among many others — suggests, the body is not only a physical manifestation, but also a symbolic one:

> Strictly biological differences are underlined and symbolically accentuated by differences in bearing, differences in gesture, posture and behaviour which express a whole relationship to the social world....The sign-bearing, sign-wearing body is also a producer of signs which are physically marked by the relationship to the body....The body, a social product which is the only tangible manifestation of the "person," is commonly perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature (1984:192).

Hence the body, although superficially linked to "natural" sex difference, is also gendered and cultured — symbolically created and interpreted as male or female (West and Zimmerman 1991; Epstein and Straub 1991, and so on). Recent studies from a variety of perspectives reflect on the body as a cultural as well as a physical entity (see for example Clover 1989; Martin 1987; Suleiman 1985 and Wolff 1990). Thus, "in taking gender to be a metaphor for the conventional oppositions they impose upon the world, people establish forever these oppositions in their own bodies" (Buchbinder and Rappaport 1976:33).

A physical expressive/communicative form like dance, which has the body as its primary medium, is thus particularly susceptible to gendering — and to the tendency to be seen as sexed, not gendered — biological, not cultural. As female and male bodies produce the physical movements of dance, they are seen metonymically to communicate ideas about women and men — what they (and their bodies) are like. Notions that "men are stronger" or "women are more graceful" are assumed to refer to sex because they refer to the body; in fact, such ideas, and the construction of the body in dance, are gendered.

The Euro-American dancing body is generally perceived as female. For example, feminist ethnomusicologist Susan McClary comments that "The mind/body-masculine/feminine problem places dance decisively on the side of the 'feminine' body rather than with the objective 'masculine' intellect" (1991:153). Though this is not an invariant separation (see Turner 1984), it is sufficiently pervasive in mainstream Canadian culture to problematise male dance. At the very least, male dance must be explained; sometimes, it

13. Most recently, and currently notoriously, in the arguments about brain sex.

approaches an oxymoron. Thus, current Morris practice carefully constructs difference between female and male bodies in dance, privileging male dancing bodies. The ultimate aim is "homosocial," "the seeking, enjoyment, and or preference for the company of the same sex" (Lipman-Bluman 1976:19; see also Sedgwick 1985).

Dance scholars have clearly been influenced by Sharp and his contemporaries' ideas about Morris gender: "English Morris dances are for male dancers only" (Kealiinohomoku 1972:383); "the English Morris dancers...are exclusively male" (Royce 1977:80), and so on. In revival and scholarship alike, Morris's maleness is presented in two forms: the first, following the scholarship's concern with origin, suggests that until recently only men performed it; the second asserts that only men *should* perform it.

The first assertion is problematic; historical accounts indicate that women danced Morris (see for example Heaney 1985:33 and Reynolds 1987). Theresa Buckland (1982:12-13) notes a bias against mixed, female, and children's teams in the scholarship; such groups were seen as unique and/or exceptional rather than traditional. The compilers of the ceremonial dance index in 1960, she says, "like Sharp,...regarded the existence of Morris dances performed by anything other than adult males as untraditional. Such ideas have extended into the twentieth century Folk Dance Revival" (Buckland 1982:13).

The connection between origin scholarship and Morris dance scholarship has reinforced the tendency of the first assertion — no early women's Morris — to lead to the second — no women should perform Morris now. Indeed, dancer-scholar Tony Barrand suggests that the work of Russell Wortley (1979), who linked the "fact" that Morris was a fertility dance to its performance entirely by males, "was used to justify the exclusion of women from participation in public performances of the Morris" (Barrand 1988:17).

The Morris revival has not been a passive receptacle of such ideas, but has exacerbated gender bias. For example, "The Cambridge Morris was started about 1922 to combat the effect of so many women doing the Morris" (Dommett 1982:78). This comment cites women dancing Morris as one of the effects of the revival, not as traditional. Recent historically sensitive works like Barrand's, Buckland's, and Jocelyn Reynolds' have deconstructed the notion of male Morris.

Ultimately, the paucity of scholarship on early women's Morris probably results from previous scholars — mainly men — avoiding the search for documentation and ignoring or discounting what they did find. Similarly, the involvement of women scholars like Buckland, Reynolds, and Cynthia Sughrue in discovering female Morris is surely not entirely coincidental. Yet a

last bastion protecting the maleness of early Morris remains, in the controversy about whether some female figures described in Morris accounts were performed by women or by cross-dressed men (see Reynolds 1987).

The surprise in Morris dance, however, is not that it is gendered, but that it is gendered male. Cultural biases extending beyond Morris itself affect it strongly:

> I think that sometimes it's hard for Canadian men to understand about this dancing, cause they look at these men as a bunch of woosies. And I say no, this is originally a men's dance. This is a very masculine thing to do. But you can't tell that to a lot of guys these days. Women of course are naturally maybe more attracted to the art form, perhaps a little more than the man would be (Lucy, 90-23).[14]

Women and men facing a pervasive cultural attitude which perceives dance as unmasculine impose a symbolic ordering upon Morris. To make it acceptable as a practice for men, it must be not only masculine, but exclusively male. Significantly, Forest City dancers who argue against this perspective do not deny its historic validity, but suggest instead that women dancing is a legitimate alteration of tradition:

> A lot of men have been very snobbish toward women that have danced and it's too bad because they shouldn't be that way. I mean, we're not talking about pagan times any more. We're talking about just having a good time and so who cares if women dance Morris dancing? So big deal, you know? (Lucy, 90-24).

The idea that Morris style and traditional performers alike are male was not questioned by Forest City members, including the female dancers. Since their information comes primarily from fellow dancers who have been strongly influenced by pervasive revival ideas, their attitude is not surprising. For example: "It was, in the beginnings, originally a men's dance, and the men were the ones that went out and danced" (Lucy, 90-23). And: "What little I know of the tradition, it was originally performed by men. And the diehards say that's how it should be done, or that it should not be a mixed group in terms of sexes" (Heather, 90-19). As Heather's comment suggests, the issue

14. This, and all subsequent quotations, are from my interviews with people who were members of Forest City Morris at the time of my research. I thank them for their participation in the study, and for their friendly co-operation with my work. The citation indicates the speaker (Lucy); the year in which the interview was conducted ([19]90); and the arbitrary number given to the interview in sequence (23).

of Morris gender is controversial, even political. Sociologist Bryan Turner locates a pervasive link between the body and the political:

> The body lies at the centre of political struggles. While it can be argued unambiguously that the physiology of men and women represents a major difference (in reproductive functions), gender identity and gender personality have to be inserted into physiology by socialization into specific roles and identities (Turner 1984:39).

I didn't know I was making a political statement when I joined Forest City, then a co-ed team; or, for that matter, that joining an all-female team would be a political statement. In fact, no one of either sex can join any team without making some sort of political comment as to how they perceive Morris and gender. Any man or woman who joins a co-ed team certainly indicates support for the idea that women can and/or should perform Morris, and implies at least some reservations about the strict gendering of the dance. Similarly, a woman who joins an all-female team clearly supports the idea that women can/should do Morris, but may also be expressing opposition to mixed Morris. Men on all-male teams can be expressing either a choice to dance with people of the same sex, a deliberate statement that women should not do Morris, or an impression that even though women may do Morris, they should not do so in mixed groups.

Thus, while it is impossible to join a Morris team without making, even inadvertently, an often inchoate political statement about what the gender of teams should be, it may not always be easy to determine the actual content of that statement. Even assuming that women can — even should — do Morris doesn't preclude asserting fundamental differences between their dance styles and those of men, and an ideological rejection of mixed Morris. Hence Dan Stone, squire of the male Winnipeg team, commented:

> With the probable exception of the Marlborough Women, whom I saw perform only one dance on one occasion, I have never seen a group of women dance with anything like "male" styling. I also did a couple of dances at an Ale with some women from Ann Arbor who danced delightfully vigorously, largely to prove a point. They did not dance with the same gusto with their own side. The next generation of women Morris dancers is likely to be stylistically more "male" as a result of great increase in women's athletics. In almost all cases, today's male and female Morris dancers mix about as well as women and men athletes — that is to say, not very well (personal communication 1991).

Morris people construct an idea of Morris as male through its differentiation from female dance styles. The binary oppositions created echo those manifested by gendered distinctions themselves, and reflect a need to form agreed-upon differentiations in the face of a continuum of actual activity and ability. That is, though dance abilities may vary from individual to individual, sex-based patterns are asserted. The underlying need is not simply to differentiate actions, but to create a context in which men can legitimately interact meaningfully but homosocially. An undisguised, unredressed wish to exclude women from any activity is generally not approved — nor is it legal — in Canadian society. Thus Morris — like sport — is constructed as male in "objective" physical terms.

Forest City musician Paul Siess's comments indicate that his explanation of the differences between female and male Morris relates more to physical than to symbolic issues:

> I'm not a Morris snob that says that women can't dance and if they're going to, they can't dance with men, and there's that real awful attitude that goes around with some Morris teams. But I think that there's a lot to be said for women dancing only with women, because of the way they dance — that men, in most cases, can move farther and will do things differently; will look stronger. That's sounding wrong, but it doesn't look the same. And when you get a group of women doing it, there's a common thing, and they dance the same, just the same as a group of men will dance roughly the same. I think [Forest City becoming all female dancers] has been a really good move because it's all of a sudden starting to look like something again instead of a sloppy mess, which is what I really think that last couple of years have been — kind of crappy looking — and then this year it's really come together, really come along (Paul, 90-11).

Some of the ideas expressed by the team indicate why — other than its purported male performative origins — and how Forest City members see Morris as a male tradition. In these discussions — though it is doubtful that the team members would see their comments as tropic — physical aspects of the body metaphorically represent the dance as male, and less often as female. Such representations happen through, as discussed above, "gender and its attributes and not pure biology. The meanings attributed to female and male are as arbitrary as are the meanings attributed to nature and culture" (MacCormack 1980:18).

Anthropologists Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead comment that "In the majority of cultural cases...the differences between men and women are in fact conceptualised in terms of sets of metaphorically associated binary oppositions" (1981:7). Two main symbolic processes take place, sometimes

simultaneously, in the differentiation of gendered Morris styles: opposition and intensification. In the case of aggressiveness, for example, a quality most dancers agreed is valued in Morris, both symbolic operations are used: female (Morris) is passive (serious); male (Morris) is aggressive (nonserious), *and* female (Morris) is aggressive; male (Morris) is more aggressive. Thus:

> When we did London Triumph before, I didn't like it, because I always looked at it as such a masculine dance with the punching, and the different types of steps that we did. It was a different way that we did it. I just didn't feel comfortable. And I always kind of whined a bit to Tom when he made me do it, cause I just didn't feel masculine enough. Maybe now I've changed a bit. I like the style now that we're doing it, even though we're punching....I think we're loosening up. I love a team that just fools around (Lucy, 90-23).

Lucy suggests that she re-interpreted this dance from aggressive (serious) — which she did not feel she was able to do — to aggressive (just fooling around). And terms such as grace and delicacy (female) versus strength and aggression (male) communicated differences as metaphorical gender (and perhaps also sex) variations:

> I hesitate to use gender language, but there's an element of maleness to [Morris]. That doesn't mean it's restricted to men. I've never gotten terribly caught up in that argument, although for some it becomes very important. Maleness in the sense that the dances should be strong and aggressive, and are not intended to be beautiful. That doesn't mean they should be unattractive, but you think of ballet. You work hard at grace and delicacy of movement as well as strength. But Morris is a much more raw, sort of aggressive tradition. And a lot of people would attach the word "masculine" to that (Tom, 90-14).

This brief quotation contains a multitude of symbolic judgements. For Tom, Morris dance, which is masculine, is to other forms of dance, which are implicitly feminine — such as ballet — as strength is to (less strength); aggression is to (non-aggression); non-beautiful is to (beautiful); and raw is to (less raw, or cooked) (see Lévi-Strauss 1969). Here the intensification is, selectively, of female rather than male traits; that is, Morris is implicitly less graceful and delicate than female dance, such as ballet. Since the male form of behaviour in Morris is seen as the original, it is usually the standard. Therefore to say that Morris is less graceful and delicate rather than more strong and forceful when men do it is unusual.

Evidently, like gender itself, Morris is a cultural construction which communicates ideas about what it means to be male or female. Forest City

members express its gendered aspect in physical rather than in cultural terms. They comment on differences between female and male Morris in vague, but clearly physiologically-oriented terminology. When they say that women and men dance differently, they refer to actual physical movements, yet such variations can be attributed as much to attitudes as to physiology.

Though the gender of Morris is culturally constructed, and distinctions between female and male dancing expressed in terms of the physical body, most members of Forest City experienced difficulty in communicating the specifics of such differences:

> I think it's good to have a team of the same sex. I think it just doesn't work when you have a mixed team, because men dance differently from women, especially in Morris. It's just a different style completely. They have a different way about them, as I've observed (Rebecca, 90-6).

Ideas about the gender of Morris were often expressed in the context of discussions about changes in the team. Feelings among members about becoming an all-female team in September 1989 for the first time in the history of Forest City were somewhat ambivalent, but generally positive:

> I don't know that it has anything specifically to do with gender, but it's just been my experience that teams that are men's teams or women's teams are better teams. And I don't know if it's the social dynamics of people being attracted to a unisex team, or what it is. And I think we're better now than when we were a mixed team, and particularly now we simply would be a very odd mixed team, having one or two men among mostly women. And I'm a fair bit older than the other members of the team, and so you get all the age, size and gender differences all mixed up together and it just doesn't make something that looks unified, and I think a team should look unified (Tom, 90-14).

Jane, who had danced for a couple of years with Forest City when they were mixed, suggested that the social dynamics as much as the actual dancing were problematic:

> I found that with that co-ed team, sometimes you get the male-female conflict because if there was a female who was just having a rough rough time, the men would get very intolerant very quickly. And the women would try and coax the woman, "Now come on, we can do it." And it was like this little challenge between the sexes sometimes, it was hard fleeting comments. You kind of go, "Well, do we need to do this, like do you need to say things like that?" I would get really upset. But I was the youngest, so I couldn't say anything, but I would sit there and go, "I don't care who you are, we're all here for the sake of the women."

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