Review

Robert C. Cosbey: All In Together, Girls: Skipping Songs from Regina, Saskatchewan (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina, 1980: Occasional Paper, 2: ix + 101 pp.)

The value of this book lies in the holistic approach which Cosbey has taken towards his material. Unlike most other collectors of small or simple folklore forms, Cosbey is not content merely to collect skipping songs, reproduce them on the printed page, and annotate them; although we certainly have a fine, well-annotated collection of skipping songs in this book, we also have much more. Along with his corpus, Cosbey has included a fifty-eight page discussion of skipping songs, and it is indeed the finest discussion I have seen of this genre.

Cosbey's discussion attacks the questions of transmission, preservation, variation, and source of skipping songs. In addition, he explores the nature of performance, meaning, and content of the songs, and discusses the importance of viewing skippers as a folk group. What is particularly interesting about Cosbey's discussion is that its relevance goes beyond the corpus of songs which he collected in the schoolyards of Regina, and indeed it even goes beyond the genre of skipping songs itself. For example, Cosbey makes some telling points about the effect of collecting methodology on theories of the origin of folklore forms. Most past scholars have assumed that skipping songs are a rather modern form of childlore, dating no further back than the late nineteenth century. Cosbey points out, however, that this perception is based, not on the absence of skipping songs among children, but rather on the absence of skipping song collections among folklorists. Because past collectors have had a certain "male orientation" in their collecting methodologies, and because there is a "triviality barrier" which makes scholars overlook obvious, everyday activities in favour of more extraordinary types of behaviour, girls' skipping songs have been largely ignored as a "game" or "childhood amusement". How many other genres have been similarly misperceived, because of biases in the collecting methodologies of folklorists? Cosbey teaches us an important lesson in this respect.

Of course, this is not to say that skipping songs are an age-old genre. Indeed, there may well be some negative evidence to the contrary. For example, among the eighty games depicted in Pieter Bruegel's painting, "Children's Games" (1560), there is no skipping—but perhaps Bruegel was as myopic as are modern folklorists in this respect.

Cosbey also makes some good observations about the strong social legislation among girls which preserve the contents of songs virtually unchanged over great time and space. In addition, Cosbey makes the important observation that skipping is a non-competitive game; indeed, the whole point of the game, keeping a skipping and rhyming sequence intact, demands a type of group cooperation not possible in competitive activities. Again, both observations are relevant to folklore in general in terms of how the integrity of texts is maintained, and how masculine and feminine roles are taught through folklore activities (girls and "cooperative" and boys are "competitive"). Cosbey also shows the "feminine" nature of skipping songs through his discussion of the content of the song texts; most concern domestic activities, finding a husband, or sexual anxieties. Such concerns reflect the traditional role expected of women in our society, and the skipping content allows girls to express these concerns "in the presence of a group of supportive women".

My only criticisms of Cosbey's study concern information which is either not given, or not given clearly enough. Although he does define some skipping terms, a full glossary would have been easier to use and perhaps more complete; for example, Cosbey uses, but does not define, the term "dip". Musical notation of the skipping tunes would also have helped, and photographs of the skippers in action would have been much more informative than Kathy Kokotalio's illustrations, which are purely decorative.

But such points do not detract from a truly fine study as this one is. Cosbey's fieldwork methodology and the reproduction of the texts he collected are excellent, and his discussion is most readable. The book would serve as a good example of a "genre study" for introductory classes in folklore.

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