

Traditional Threats and Threatening Figures in Childhood

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Traditional modes of controlling the behaviour of young children have received surprisingly little attention by folklorists, anthropologists, and linguists worldwide. The relatively few available studies were mainly undertaken in western European countries and in North America. One of the more extensive investigations of these social controls in an English-speaking region was carried out in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador in the 1960s (Widdowson, 1977). The present paper revisits and updates that study, summarises its essential findings, and sets them in their wider international context, with the aim of arousing interest in and further exploration of this neglected topic.

Traditional verbal means of controlling children's behaviour are not only practised worldwide, but also employ a range of figures of fear, as well as specific linguistic patterning. For over 150 years folklorists have been intrigued by supernatural, mythological, and fictional figures, as well as those of folk belief, but few have explored their role in social control. The Newfoundland study seeks to redress this imbalance by combining linguistic analysis with a survey of the types and variety of figures invoked. The investigation reveals that the structural patterning of these utterances is both limited and remarkably stable. It comprises three basic structures, which are replicated in all other English-speaking cultures, and have close parallels in continental European languages and elsewhere.

Like other forms of verbal social control these utterances function as a coping strategy to ensure the maintenance of cultural norms by expressing collective disapprobation of unacceptable or inadvisable behaviour. They demand or encourage conformity with certain norms acceptable to the user. They are also used to protect children from danger, and their utterance, often in loud tones, offers a means of venting the carer's anger, frustration, or anxiety, and acts as a safety valve for pent-up emotions. Typically, the effect of the threat of potential action if the child does not comply with the adjuration is to transfer the action to an external agent invoked in the utterance. The fearsome nature of these figures is deliberately exaggerated for maximum impact.

All cultures employ a range of traditional verbal devices to control the behaviour of children. These typically include such spoken usages as proverbial expressions, dits, putoffs and threats. Threats are the most direct means of verbal control and in many societies may take the place of physical punishment or be used in conjunction with it. They usually operate negatively, threatening retribution for unacceptable behaviour, as distinct from such positive controls as praise and reward for good behaviour. Negative controls and physical punishment are in significant decline in many Western cultures, positive controls being increasingly preferred by carers. This reflects a move away from position-oriented controls towards a more person-oriented approach (Bernstein, 1971). Threats are thus linguistic structures uttered with the specific intention of directing or influencing the behaviour of others, in this case of children.

Linguistic Structure

Like other traditional verbal forms, threats exhibit predictable linguistic patterning within a given culture. In the English-speaking world the typical patterns are remarkably limited on both the structural and semantic levels. Threats normally take the form of (a) an affirmative statement, (b) a conditional clause plus a consequence, or (c) an imperative. Each category is characterised by a favourite structure, but may include several subcategories.

An AFFIRMATION is a neutral or unmarked category typified by an affirmative statement. For example:

(The) will get you!
(I) will (smack) you!
(The) is coming!

In studies undertaken in Britain and Canada, threats with these structures predominate (Widdowson 1977, pp. 47-61). An interesting subcategory presents the affirmation in question form, e.g. “Do you want a good hiding?” which seems to offer the child a modicum of choice denied him/her in other forms of threat. The CONDITION and CONSEQUENCE category employs an interrelated structure in which a conditional clause introduced by *if* is followed by an affirmative statement of an ensuing consequence which is threatened if the condition is not complied with. Examples are:

	CONDITION	CONSEQUENCE
If you	(don't be good)	(the bogeyman will take you away)
	(are naughty)	(you'll be in trouble)
	(do that again)	(I'll tell your father)

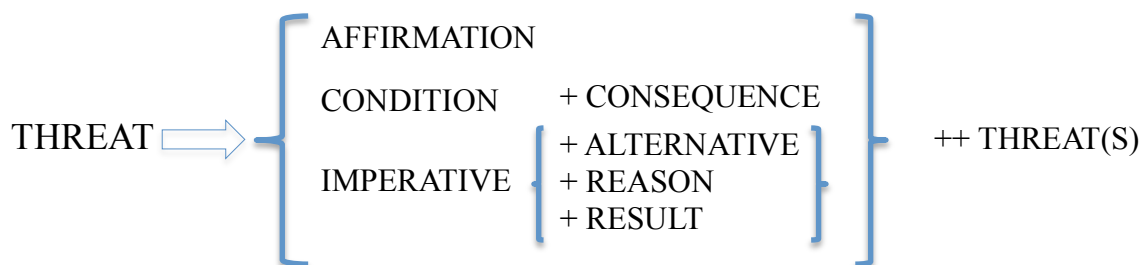
The CONDITION and CONSEQUENCE elements may occur in reverse order, and occasionally the CONSEQUENCE is left unstated, leaving the child to guess whatever retributive notion may be implied.

The IMPERATIVE has affinities with Bernstein's category of the same name, but can also have a more elaborate linguistic structure. Commands such as “Be quiet!”, “Don't do that!”, “Stop sucking your thumb!”, “Watch out for strangers!”, would be included in Bernstein's category and also typify the IMPERATIVE class in traditional threats. However, these commands may be followed by an affirmative statement specifying the ALTERNATIVE, REASON, or RESULT, added as a rider to or elaboration of the core IMPERATIVE. Examples of these are:

- IMPERATIVE + ALTERNATIVE: “Be good or you'll get a smack!”; “Don't go out in the dark or the wolves will get you!”
- IMPERATIVE + REASON: “Don't be bad because the Devil takes naughty children!”; “Go to sleep because the Sandman is coming!”
- IMPERATIVE + RESULT: “Just you dare do that again and you'll be sorry!”; “Come indoors now so Jack the Ripper won't get you!”

The various individual structures may be linked together to produce a range of compound forms so that each reinforces the other to produce a powerful cumulative effect.

The typical linguistic structure of threats in English may be summarised as follows:



The tight and predictable structural patterning aids memorability and its repetition alerts the child to the nature of the message conveyed. Similar patterning is evident in traditional threats in other languages. The assimilation of the typical patterning by the child is demonstrated in the numerous examples in which only part of the threat is uttered. The child’s imagination and knowledge of the control system make a fuller utterance unnecessary. A carer simply has to say, for instance, “You just wait, and ...” or even simply “I’ll ...” (often accompanied by a threatening gesture or facial expression) to achieve the desired response.

Social Function

Traditional threats and other types of traditional verbal control are used by society to ensure the maintenance of certain cultural norms, beliefs, and the like. Many of these linguistic forms stress that if an interdiction or taboo is violated, some kind of undesirable consequence, often of a mythical nature, may ensue. These threatened consequences imply social sanctions against unacceptable behaviour. All cultures appear to exercise such controls in broadly similar ways. The controls encourage children to become aware of their place in the social system and to recognise certain precepts regarding behaviour, morality and so on. Traditional threats may be seen as operating in a concentric system within which they have a variety of functions. At the centre of this system is the family unit in which the child is taught the appropriate rules and codes within the home; this in turn leads outwards into the immediate external environment, where children are warned against straying too far away and to avoid danger; beyond the immediate environment lie the encircling local culture and the wider world of the macroculture.

As Hertzler (1965, p. 28) notes:

“The threat, most often in the form of a verbal expression of an intention or determination to inflict injury upon or bring harm or deprivation to another, is used to proscribe or prescribe certain action for others. The threat usually contains reference to some form of punishment for the nonconformist.”

The primary function of traditional threats addressed to children is to express disapprobation of unacceptable or inadvisable behaviour. A second function is the desire to protect children

from danger, and a third is to provide a means of venting the carer's anger, frustration, or anxiety by verbalising these feelings, acting as an important safety valve for the release of pent-up emotions, and reducing the likelihood that the behaviour will trigger aggressive physical action.

A wide range of specific behaviours and actions are proscribed or discouraged/encouraged by traditional threats. Although these obviously vary from culture to culture, a number seem common to all. These include encouraging children to behave appropriately; to pay attention to and obey what parents say; to eat or drink; to come indoors before dark; to go to bed; and to go to sleep. The majority of threats, however, have the negative function of discouraging children, for instance, from the following: behaving in an immoral, irreligious, antisocial, or "naughty" manner; straying too far from home; going to dangerous or forbidden places; spoiling growing crops; touching or eating poisonous or proscribed plants and substances; going out after dark; annoying adults; interfering with adults' activities; crying, especially for no good reason; quarrelling; neglecting health and personal hygiene; developing bad habits; vandalism; mocking others.

Threats are the primary traditional verbal means of controlling children's behaviour, especially when a child is too young to understand the reasons behind their use. These devices frequently indicate the concern which carers have, not only for the welfare, but also for the social and cultural conformity of their children, but they are expressed in an oblique way. In acting as intermediary agents of social control, parents and other carers transmit to children the ideas and concepts held by the family, the immediate social group, and society as a whole. Responsibility for exercising social control over the young child is normally vested in the mother and forms part of a complex traditional teaching and learning process in which the child acquires the rudiments of language and behavioural norms. In close-knit conservative societies children are usually threatened by the invocation of an external figure, the parents acting in a protective role, thus reinforcing the child's sense of allegiance to home and family. In many such societies children are expected to remain within the family unit when they reach adulthood, and sustain their parents in old age. In Western cultures, by contrast, mothers frequently invoke the child's father, who is normally absent during the working day, as a figure of authority. This has obvious implications in advanced technological societies where children are expected to leave the family home in due course to make their own way in the world. The mother may even threaten to remove the child's primary protector, namely herself, by saying that she will go away and/or leave the child.

In many societies rudimentary forms of traditional verbal social control are utilised with infants and very young children whose linguistic competence is as yet undeveloped. These may be single sounds, sound groups or words repeatedly uttered whenever the child's behaviour is to be controlled. In the English language tradition these include:

- *sh* [ʃ] (a sound encouraging silence, often accompanied by or alternating with the gesture of the index finger across the lips)
- *agh, ugh* [aʃ], [a:ʃ], [ʌʃ], [ʊʃ] (sound groups indicating disgust or dislike)

- *boo, boh* [bu:], [bʊʃ] (sound groups which are intended to frighten, often in a playful way)

Many of these usages include a voiced pharyngeal fricative sound [ʕ] which is not part of the normal sound system of English, but is employed simply to indicate disapprobation. Indeed, it may be added to the pronunciation of any English word or expression used to discourage unacceptable behaviour in children. Such words and expressions are spoken with unusual loudness and emphasis, as in the use of “No!”, “Dirty!” in some dialects of British English. Such usages, uttered in prohibitory or cautionary situations, are referred to as “conditioning terms” (Raum 1940, p. 237; Widdowson 1977, pp. 27-28). Their constant repetition evokes an appropriate response in the child’s mind through their strongly negative associations. In some African cultures the conditioning term is later personified and takes on the status and characteristics of a threatening figure. The same appears to be true of the term *boh* [bʊʃ] and its variants in the Germanic and Celtic languages, and in several other Indo-European languages. With its visible initial bilabial and accompanying pharyngeal friction, this may be the ur-form of the complex of threatening figures in Germanic and Celtic centred on *bug, bogey* and their cognates. This remarkable complex suggests that numerous words beginning with [bʊ], [bu:], [pʊ], [pu:], [pʌ] in these languages have connotations of power, mystery and/or taboo, endowing them with the status of a semantic field associated with fear and/or disapprobation. More speculatively, their origins might even lie in age-old Indo-European terms such as Sanskrit **bhu* (be), the fiat lux of the ancient Hindu religious world. The etymology of the numerous variations centred on words with these initial sound groups in European languages has recently been revealingly explored and analysed in considerable detail (Cooper, 2005).¹

Threatening Figures

The figures used as the agents of retribution in traditional threats are many and various. Typically, however, they share certain characteristics across a broad range of cultures. The most frightening of these characteristics include associations with darkness and the diabolical, with devouring and savage physical injury, with the power to take the child away from the known and the secure to an unknown and unimaginable doom. They often involve vague shapes and shadowy entities with unnatural, inhuman and superhuman attributes of many different kinds. Even those figures which are identifiable as being of this world are endowed with similar fantastical or supernatural characteristics, thus aggrandising their apparent fearsome status. In the absence of comparative evidence across cultures it is difficult to generalise about such figures, and even a working classification based on the few available studies is a complex and difficult task. Nevertheless, the figures themselves have attracted more scholarly attention, notably from anthropologists and folklorists, than have the form and function of the threats as such. Based primarily on studies in North America (Parsons, 1891; Chamberlain, 1896; Bunzel, 1932; Halpert, 1967; Halpert and Story, 1969; Widdowson, 1977, 2013), Britain and Ireland (Green, 1980; Henry, 1959; Warner, 1998; Widdowson, 1971), augmented by information in the Herbert Halpert Folklore Collections,² and incorporating a small representative selection of examples from other cultures: Belgium

(Tijksens, 1965, 1966), Finland (Tommola, 1955), France (Alexandre-Bidon and Berlioz, 1998; Bétemps, 1998; Cramer, 1936), Germany (Ranke, 1931-1932), it is possible to suggest a tentative classification of the principal figures employed. All are intrinsically frightening and/or powerful in some way and, as already noted, their fearsomeness and power are deliberately exaggerated to maximise their effect. Threatening figures are therefore drawn from an extraordinarily wide range of frightening figures, fictional or actual, many of which have other roles to play within a given culture (e.g. Grimm, 1835, 1883-1888; Chamberlain, 1896; Ploss and Renz, 1911). The figures used in threats include celestial, diabolical and invented figures. Those of religious or mythological origin may be or have been the subject of belief by adults. However, von Sydow (1948) has argued convincingly that many figures of apparent belief are in fact deliberate inventions, or *fikts* as he calls them, designed at least temporarily to encourage children to believe in them and their supposed powers. At a later stage, rational explanation can take over when the child is old enough to understand. In some African cultures, for example, infants are not chastised or threatened, and threats and physical punishment are initiated at the age of two or three, increasing in severity until the age of twelve when the child is considered an adult (Raum, pp. 228-229). At this point the threats cease and future transgressions are regarded as bringing dishonour on the family, of which the teenager is now a fully fledged adult member with all its attendant responsibilities.

A preliminary outline typology of threatening figures identifies three major categories, to which might be added four minor categories more directly concerned with actual or potential physical action and/or punishment. The three major categories are:

- **Supernatural, mythological, fictitious and invented figures**, e.g. deities; diabolical figures; ghosts; figures of popular belief (fairies, elves, goblins, Jack o' Lantern, spirits of the forest, water, mountain, and other natural phenomena, witches, vampires, werewolves); figures adapted from literature and advertising; invented figures (comprising the *boo/bogey* complex and such figures as Rawhead and Bloody Bones, Crust Man, Sandman, koko [Chamberlain, 1896; Raum, 1940, pp. 212-213], croquemitaine [France – Cramer, 1936, Alexandre-Bidon and Berlioz, 1998, Bétemps, 1998;³ Belgium – Tijksens, 1965, 1966], (bicho) papão [Portugal – Bungay, 1992]; Santa Claus, and related Christmas figures).
- **Human beings with unusual characteristics**, e.g. mummers and other masked or disguised figures, katewa dancers (Parsons, 1891, 1916; Bunzel, 1932); strangers and foreigners; beggars; migrants; pedlars; gypsies; priests, welfare officers, policemen, nurses, midwives, dentists, doctors, teachers, fathers and other figures of authority (typically signalled by a uniform or other attributes); recluses; the physically or mentally disadvantaged; eccentric or unusual types and individuals.
- **Animals and other living creatures**, e.g. bats, bears, beavers, bulls, cats, cows, coyotes, dogs, eagles, eels, fish, foxes, frogs, goats, hawks, horses, hyenas, jays, lice, lizards, lynxes, moles, moose, mice, owls, rats, sharks, snakes, sparrows, spiders, wasps, weasels, whales, wolves, worms. Such creatures are either large or fearsome, and/or are negatively marked within the culture.

The four minor categories are:

- **Inanimate objects, including instruments of physical violence**, e.g. bars of a glowing coal fire, belts, boots, canes, foghorns, feathers, fur mittens, knives, mats, microwave ovens, slippers, sticks, (razor) straps, switches.
- **Frightening locations, and/or locations to which a child could be sent or in which a child could be confined**, e.g. bedrooms, cellars, cemeteries, closets, cupboards, dumb waiters.
- **Natural phenomena**, e.g. lightning, the Moon, the Northern Lights, thunder.
- **Modes of physical attack, again often deliberately exaggerated**, as exemplified in the following threats:
 - “I’ll knock the stuffing out of you!”
 - “I’ll knock you into the middle of next week!”
 - “Do you want a bunch of fives [i.e. a fist]?”
 - “I’ll beat your teeth down your throat!”
 - “I’ll beat your head as soft as your bottom!”
 - “I’ll tear your arm off and beat you with the soggy end!”

The second and fourth of these minor categories clearly indicate the anger, frustration, and potential violence underlying threats in general which all too easily translate into physical aggression.

It must be emphasised that a preliminary classification such as this can only scratch the surface of what is potentially an infinitely extensible listing of relevant figures, many of them culturally specific, which can be employed in systems of traditional juvenile social control. It is also inevitable that figures which are not classified in the first of the three major categories are often invested with supernatural and/or extranormal characteristics in order, as mentioned earlier, to exaggerate their apparent threatening power. It is also the case that many of the designated figures in each category are manifested in a bewilderingly wide and diverse range of variants, whose characteristics often duplicate or overlap with those of others. This is especially true of those in the supernatural, mythological, fictitious and invented category. Also, such words as the French *croquemitaine* are generic expressions equivalent to English *bogey(man)*, *frightening/threatening figure*, and German *Kinderschreck*. However, these generic terms may in themselves constitute something of a barrier in the development of intercultural studies of these figures, which hitherto have been investigated mainly within the specific cultures concerned, using their preferred individual terminology, and apparently largely in isolation from each other. Even so, it would be interesting to discover whether the generic *croquemitaine*⁴ might perhaps also be identified as an individual figure which is said to eat the fingers of disobedient children – a threatening trait which it shares with the Frisian *Fingerbiter*, a figure also associated with Continental European equivalents to the English Jack Frost (Parsons, 1891, 147; Chamberlain, 1896, pp. 140-141).

In the comparatively recent past the use of traditional verbal modes such as these has played an important role in the control and socialisation of children. Disapproval of such methods in the developed world, especially since the childcare revolution of the 1960s, has generated a major shift from negative or position-oriented towards positive or person-oriented controls, and the use of reasoned discussion, encouragement, praise, rewards, and inducements, especially on the part of the educated middle classes in the West. Elsewhere, however, the older traditions persist, and are widely accepted as the norm. While enlightened parents and other adult carers in the developed world would eschew such methods, not least because of the potential of threats to create fear and psychological trauma, let alone their frequent political incorrectness, the loss of these traditional usages also has disadvantages. Foremost among these is that, in the absence of the safety valve of verbal release of anger and frustration in uttering such threats, carers may be more liable to vent their anger in the physical punishment which otherwise they specifically wish to avoid.⁵

The challenge now is for all those interested in this topic, from whatever aspect, to continue their research in their respective cultures, share their knowledge, and work towards a concerted effort to investigate these older traditional verbal modes of the social control of children from an international perspective while these are still practised. It is hoped that the references in the present paper, together with the bibliographies in the works consulted, may perhaps serve as a starting-point for a much needed rapprochement between the various culture-specific investigations, past, present, and future. As we have seen, the available evidence suggests a remarkable similarity both in the verbalisation of such forms and in the range of figures invoked. Recent studies reveal that there has been a predictable shift of emphasis from creating a sense of fear, whether actual or simulated, towards a more playful approach, which children come to recognise as a kind of game, but a game with a serious underlying purpose. In fact, this playful element has always been evident in these traditions, often signalled by intonation and paralinguistic features which prompt children to realise that these apparent threats are not intended to be taken literally, and that the implied retribution is simply not realistic. Over time, children understand that the seemingly harsh and frightening system, for better or worse, is designed to maintain appropriate behaviour within established acceptable limits.

It is equally important to monitor and analyse the radical changes and developments taking place in the developed world now and in the future as older social traditions and attitudes give place to new. The ever present need for carers in all levels of society to introduce young children to the accepted behavioural patterns within their given culture, as well as the need to warn and protect them from perceived danger, ensure the survival of forms of guidance in the oral tradition, however much these may differ from those of earlier times. Paradoxically, many of the emerging ways of articulating these behavioural guidelines both maintain and subvert the older traditional patterns.

Of these aspects of childrearing, a couple of examples from my own recent fieldwork in England may serve to illustrate this.⁶ In the first, a househusband tells his children that their mother, who is the family breadwinner, will be upset or disapproving of their misbehaviour during her absence at work. Here the traditional role of the father, both in the

household and as a carer, is reversed. The suggestion that their mother will be upset appeals to the children's natural sympathy and concern for her. On the other hand, the notion of disapproval hints at possible repercussion, but any such outcome would of course be dependent on whether the father decides to tell her about the misdemeanours on her return, and in any case it is probably unlikely that she would take direct action, not least because of the lapse of time since the incident took place.

The second example, contributed by a young mother, occurs in the context of mealtimes at the family home. In the past, as now, these occasions offer opportunities for inculcating traditional table manners and other appropriate behaviour during the meal. In this case, the mother reports that, after the main course has been eaten, she says to all the assembled family that "When the table is cleared, ice cream will appear." She has evidently used the same statement on numerous occasions at mealtimes, and claims that it is always effective! Interestingly, the spoken words have the same linguistic structure (Condition + Consequence) already identified as typical of one category of the old-style threats. However, on this occasion the Consequence is not negative or undesirable, but promises a reward for compliance with the suggestion that the table first needs to be cleared of the plates, dishes, utensils, etc. from the previous course(s). As ice-cream is of course a favourite food for children, often offered or given as a reward for good behaviour, it can be assumed that her words are primarily directed at them, and that they are being encouraged to help by clearing the table. Note that no-one is being directly asked to do this – the suggestion is simply implicit. It is also noteworthy that no agent is directly involved in the desired Consequence. It is as if the ice-cream appears by magic once the table is cleared, even though everyone present knows that the mother will serve it. She therefore achieves this simple aim, and happily plays the part of the rewarder. This is in fact a game of negotiation in which each side knows the stakes and the rules, and both enjoy a satisfactory outcome.

Ingenious and imaginative spoken adjurations such as these, with their positive, person-oriented approach, stand in marked contrast with the typically negative utterances of the older traditional systems. They indicate actual and potential trends in the various verbal modes employed to guide and influence the behaviour of children in their early years, while at the same time reflecting contemporary social developments and attitudes. These behavioural guidelines, as in the past, continue to be transmitted from adults to young children primarily by word of mouth. In these respects the oral tradition appears to be remarkably adaptable to social, cultural, and linguistic change.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Dr. Simon Young for drawing my attention to this impressively detailed and wideranging etymological study.
2. My friend and mentor, Professor Herbert Halpert, generously made his extensive personal collection of frightening and threatening figures fully available during my research into the subject in Newfoundland. I am indebted to him for introducing me to this area of study and for his unfailingly sound advice and encouragement. Access to this material was instrumental

in setting the Newfoundland data in its wider international context. His collection is now deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), www.mun.ca/folklore/munfla/.

3. My thanks are due to Dr. Andy Arleo of the Centre de Recherche sur les Identités Nationales et l'Interculturalité at the UFR de Langues, University of Nantes, for tracking down these reports on the results of an enquiry into local threatening figures conducted under the aegis of the Centre Alpin et Rhodanien d'Ethnologie, Grenoble.

4. Despite the widespread use of this term, especially in studies from France and Belgium, its etymology is evidently obscure (see Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, <http://www.cnrtl.fr/lexicographie/croquemitaine>), although its individual constituent elements suggest the crunching of fingers, hence apparent parallels with the Frisian *Fingerbiter*.

5. As early as 1887 the whole process of threatening children with such figures as the bogeyman was being strongly condemned, as exemplified by the comments of the French Canadian Jos. L. U. Duprat. He regards the custom as irrational, perverse, and a deplorable means of weakening character. He begs "fathers not only to cease filling the heads of their children with these ideas, but also to forbid others in the family circle to disturb them in this way". (Duprat, 1887). On the other hand, Elsie Clews Parsons anticipated the problems inherent in abandoning the old traditional modes of verbal social control: "Truly, so far as society appeals for its support to the spirit of apprehensiveness, of docility, of hatred, and of long-suffering, the nursery bugaboo is an assistant invaluable and indispensable. If we reject its services, let us be sure we realize what we forego." (Parsons, 1891, 151). While in Western society this view is obviously dated now, the problem of how, indeed whether, to utilise any kind of juvenile verbal social control, traditional or otherwise, still remains.

6. The fieldwork includes a questionnaire on threatening figures as part of the Centre for English Traditional Heritage's ongoing Survey of English Tradition (SET).

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