

# Mumming

Mummers Plays, or Mumming (Momyng), are traditional performances with links to activities over 500 years old. They are traditionally associated with the Christmas period (Midwinter Solstice), but in some parts of the country they are performed at Easter (Pace Egging) and All Souls Day near Samhain (Soulers). The word 'Mummer' is derived from the old English word *mum* (meaning silent, i.e., miming) or the Old French word *mom* meaning masked or disguised. There is a similar word in German, for example a "mummerspiel" is a masked play. The French word "Momchance" (or "Mumchance") and German word "Mumenschantz" refer to a dice game, once associated with medieval mumming (momyng).

The concept of outdoor plays is of great antiquity and was happening in ancient Greece and Rome, but the emergence of Christianity added to the activity as a means of spreading the Christian message when bibles were scarce and the ability to read was rare. Biblical plays happening under the aegis of the church (known as The Ministerium) were taken up by travelling players in the Middle Ages and supplemented with other plays carrying a moral message like Robin Hood. The players, who travelled and slept rough, were regarded as vagabonds in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. and the activity was banned, making it even more popular!

Travelling players performed "Miracle" or Mystery" plays illustrating scenes from the bible such as the Fall of Lucifer, the Creation and Fall of Man, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, etc. but this was not mumming as we understand it. One of the earliest illustrations of momyng is in the decorated frieze of the Flemish version of the "Romance of Alexander" (ca. 1344) which shows disguised performers, music and a religious connection. (It resides in the Bodleian Library)

One of the main characters of mumming plays, St. George, was created by Edward III who made him our patron saint ca. middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The 23<sup>rd</sup> April was created as the National Saint's Day and there were processions and plays.

The first appearance of medieval momyng seems to have been on the accession to the throne of Richard II in 1377, when there was a procession, some mimed activity by disguised performers, a rigged game of dice ("Mumchance") and a dance. This was arranged by John O' Gaunt with the aid of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths. This links to house visiting during the Christmas period with an exchange of gifts, a performance by disguised performers, (mimed or with a narrator), a game of dice, and possibly a dance. What was popular with the Royal Court was also popular with the public! The visits could continue up until twelfth night or Shrove Tuesday. Celebrations and festivity at Christmas time may well derive from the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia or winter festivals like Carnival, popular in southern Europe but less so in the north. Father Christmas was certainly a popular representation of Christmas jollity; there is a carol dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> C. (Hail Father Christmas, Hail to Thee) and Ben Jonson wrote a play for James I that included Father Christmas.

When the Puritans gained power from the 16<sup>th</sup> C. Christmas celebrations were widely disapproved of, and Bishop Grindal (Elizabeth's Archbishop of Canterbury) in particular, issued "Visitations" banning Christmas festivities (such as momyng and house visiting). Once again, the bans increased the public desire for restoration and by 1653 there was an active public campaign for the "Vindication of Christmas". Phrases like "*Hoping Auld Veyther Christmas ull never be forgot*" (Berkshire) and Christmas visitors "*Welcome or welcome not*" came into common usage and the lines still survive in today's Mummers Play.

House visiting survived into the 18<sup>th</sup> C. and plays featuring St. George were popular. The two principal writers responsible for such plays were John Lydgate (1370-1451), a monk from Bury St. Edmunds, and Richard Jonson (1573-1659). The plays were published in chapbooks. Chapbooks were popular from mid-16<sup>th</sup> C. and contained popular items like recipes, poems, stories and plays to encourage reading in the

“lower” classes. Researchers\* have traced one such chapbook published in 1746 by J. White containing what is almost certainly the original of today’s most common mummers hero/combat play. It was called “Alexander and the King of Egypt” and subtitled – “as it is acted by the mummers every Christmas”. The popular play in the style of Commedia del’arte, was copied by other chapbook publishers all around the country (there were no copyright laws then!). Other plays followed and there were modifications due to local or national events, so that characters like St. George became King George with the appearance of our Hanoverian monarchy. The Turkish Wars (17<sup>th</sup> C.) produced a Turkish Knight (as the “baddy”) modified to a French Napoleonic officer in the 19<sup>th</sup> C.

As the plays were passed on by “folk transmission”, i.e., word of mouth, lines and characters became changed around the country but there are many more similarities between the various hero/combat plays than differences. \* Collection of the plays started with “antiquaries” from the 18<sup>th</sup> C. onwards but the collection of James Madison Carpenter, who wrote to local vicars to seek local plays, is rightly famous. The plays collected in Revesby (1779), Truro (1780), Islip (1780) and Oxford (1794) conform closely to the 1746 chapbook model.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> C. the plays had a tendency to become “owned” by families who used them to supplement their income at Christmas time, travelling up to 30 miles and possibly earning 2 weeks agricultural wage in 2 days. Expensive “character” costumes were not accessible to labourers, so they were frequently made from strips of newspapers, although old military clothing crept in around 1900. The 19<sup>th</sup> C. performances were somewhat ritualistic with spoken words and not much acting, a feature commented on by Thomas Hardy in “Return of the Native” in 1878. Some modern performances have become more like pantomime!

In the 20<sup>th</sup> C. mummers’ plays were thought to be survivors of our pagan, pre-Christian origins. This was largely due to the interpretation by the social anthropologist, Sir James Frazer. It is a view not supported by modern academic research. \*

The names of mummers’ groups vary around the country, viz: “Soul Cakers” (Cheshire, Staffordshire, Lancashire); “Tipteerers” (Sussex, Surrey); “Johnny Jacks” (Hampshire); “Guisers” (Northumberland, S. Scotland, Yorkshire) and “Geese Dancers” (Cornwall). Performance days also vary from the pre-Christmas period to Twelfth Night, Plough Monday or even Easter.

Mummers plays can feature a wooing sequence or a swordfight, but the common mummers play is the hero/combat model. The characters are a selection from:

**Master of Ceremonies:** Father Christmas, Anno Domini. Sweeper, Molly

**Hero:** St. George, King George, Africky King, King William, King Alfred, Robin Hood, etc.

**Opponent (anti-hero):** Turkish Knight, Turkey Snite, The Turk, French Officer, Bold Slasher, Beau Slasher, Duke of Blunderland, etc.

**Quack Doctor:** Dr Brown, Dr Good, Dr Spinney, Dr Skwyres

**Mystic/Faith Healer:** John Vinney, Jack Vinney, Jack Finney, Jack Spinney, Jack Winney, etc.

**Beggar Chap:** Happy Jack, Jolly Jack, Fat Jack, Pedlar Chap, Saucy Jack, Jumping Jack

**Soothsayer/Musician:** Old Father Beelzebub, Begbug, Bighead, Little Devil Doubt, etc.

The play performed every year by the Wantage Mummers is the mid-Berkshire version of the play collected by Lt-Col. Barzillai Lowsley from Hampstead Norreys in Victorian times. A play of this type was performed in many of the villages around Wantage at Christmas time (Ardington, Lockinge, Hendred, Stanford, Uffington,

Steventon, Brightwalton, Chaddleworth, Aston Tirrold, etc.). On Lord Wantages' Lockinge Estate it was performed in a trailer pulled by a tractor. The last "traditional" performance was for Lady Wantage in 1881. The play was revived in 1975 for a reading "in camera" followed by an Easter performance in 1976 in the Market Place. It was then re-established as a Boxing Day performance in 1977 and has been performed in Wantage, Faringdon and local villages ever since, "*welcome or welcome not!*".

Whilst strictly adhering to the "script" collected by Lowsley, the Wantage play has become famous for the ad lib action/sight gags, Greek chorus contributions and Auld Veyther Beelzebub's Rhyme "*to please you all!*". It is typically watched by around 700 people in three different locations.

### **Auld Veyther Beelzebub**

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