

A Brief History of Mummary and Guising in Medieval Europe
Lady Avelina Faber
Barony of Brendoken

Mummary and guising were forms of medieval festive entertainment centered on disguise, masking, performance, and the temporary concealment of identity. The terminology varied considerably by place and period, and medieval sources do not describe one standardized practice called “mumming”. Instead, surviving evidence shows a range of disguised entertainments practiced in aristocratic courts, urban households, guild celebrations, and public festivals.

In medieval England, one particularly well-documented form involved groups of elaborately disguised people entering or approaching a household to entertain its occupants. Participants could wear masks or “visers”, costumes representing particular social identities, and clothing intended to conceal who they really were. Entertainment could include music, dancing, gift giving, games, and symbolic performances rather than a scripted dramatic play.

A striking example occurred in London in 1377. A contemporary account describes approximately 130 disguised riders traveling through London by torchlight to entertain the young Richard, later Richard II, at Kennington. Forty-eight were dressed as esquires and another forty-eight as knights, while others represented an emperor, pope, cardinals, and other figures. Their faces were concealed by masks. The company was accompanied by musicians, trumpets, shawms, and numerous torches. (Twycross et al. 3-38)

The entertainment included a form of ceremonial gift exchange disguised as gambling. The visitors brought gifts and played dice with their royal host, apparently arranging matters so that the prince would “win” the objects they had brought. Dancing followed. This example demonstrates that medieval mumming could be an elaborate social and political performance, rather than simply a folk play performed from house to house. (REED Online 1)

By the fifteenth century, English mumming and “disguising” could become more explicitly theatrical. The poet John Lydgate, for example, composed several entertainments intended for household and civic performance. His *Disguising at London* presents personifications such as Fortune, Prudence, Righteousness, Fortitude, and Temperance and was intended for performance during the extended Christmas festive season. (Lydgate)

Lydgate also composed mummings for London guilds. In 1429, he wrote entertainments for the Mercers and Goldsmiths; the *Mumming for the Mercers* was associated with Twelfth Night and was performed by members of the Mercers' guild for London's Lord Mayor, William Estfeld. Such evidence demonstrates how disguise and performance could function not only as popular seasonal amusement but also as sophisticated civic entertainment. (Cohen 229-242)

Another noteworthy example that occurred in late period, during the first year of Henry VIII's reign. Edward Hall, author of *Hall's Chronicle* notes the following:

The kyng sone after, came to Westminster with the Quene, and all their train: And on a tyme beyng there, his grace therles of Essex, Wilshire, and other noble menne, to the nombre, of twelue, came sodainly in a mornyng, into the Quens Chambre, all appareled in shorte cotes, of Kentishe Kendal, with hodes on their heddes, and hosen of thesame, euery one of them, his bowe and arrowes, and a sworde and a bucklar, like out lawes, or Robyn Hodes men, whereof the Quene, the Ladies, and al other there, were abashed, aswell for the straunge sight, as also for their sodain commyng, and after certain daunces, and pastime made, thei departed.
(p.513)

This event took place on January 18th, 1510. The Kentishe Kendal is often associated with green cloth that is worn by foresters and was immortalized by William Shakespeare in *Henry IV, Part 1* ("three misbegotten knaves in Kendal Green"). The courtiers attending Henry VIII were also noted to be wearing hoods and hose that matched the coats and were carrying bows, arrows, swords, and bucklers.

Related traditions of disguise were found elsewhere in medieval Europe. Perhaps the most infamous example occurred at the French court of Charles VI on 28 January 1393, in the episode now called the *Bal des Ardents*. Charles and five noblemen appeared disguised as hairy "wild men" during a wedding celebration. Their costumes incorporated highly flammable materials. When a torch came too close, several costumes caught fire; the king survived, but several of his companions were killed. The episode was recorded by the contemporary chronicler Jean Froissart and subsequently illustrated in manuscripts of his *Chroniques*. (*Bal des ardents*)

It is important, however, to distinguish these medieval practices from the mummers' plays recorded in Britain in later centuries. The familiar folk-play structure involving characters such as St. George, a combat, the death of one participant, and a Doctor who miraculously restores him to life is primarily documented in the early modern and modern periods. Historian Ronald Hutton cautions against treating these later plays as straightforward survivals of ancient or medieval ritual; reliable evidence for the recognizable Christmas mumming play does not appear until centuries after the medieval examples described above. (Hutton 70-80)

Thus, medieval mummery and guising are best understood not as a single fixed theatrical tradition but as a broad family of disguised festive entertainments. Masking allowed participants temporarily to assume another identity, while music, dancing, games, gifts, allegorical figures, and dramatic presentation transformed ordinary social interaction into performance. In elite and civic contexts especially, the disguise could also carry political or symbolic meaning.

Examples



Fig. 1 - Manuscript of Bal des Ardents



Fig 2. - Bal des Ardents from the Royal 18 E II manuscript by Jehan Froissart



Fig 3 - 14th century manuscript, The Romance of Alexander (Bodleian Library, Oxford)

Works Cited

- Bal des ardents*. Department of Manuscripts, Paris, France. *Biblissima Portal*,
<https://portail.biblissima.fr/fr/ark:/43093/ifdataa9302cf3128f780a8029861aff6896f69aec4bfe#records>. Accessed 02 09 2026.
- Cohen, J., editor. *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000.
- Hutton, Ronald. *The stations of the sun : a history of the ritual year in Britain*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Lydgate, John. "Disguising at London." *METS*,
<https://metseditions.org/read/pGrVANxcjpjWUAavUN0GRC5rNEPpbKD>. Accessed 2 9 2026.
- REED Online. *The Masker's Letter to Sir Richard Paulet*. 1586. *REED Online*,
<https://ereed.org/records/hamps-ridp223495616/>.
- Twycross, Meg, et al., editors. *Medieval English Theatre* 43. D.S. Brewer, 2022.