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PART ONE: *The Origin & History of the Masque*

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CHAPTER I

The Origin of the Masque

'Who lists may in their mumming see
Traces of ancient mystery.' Scott.

THE story of the Masque begins with the dance of the seasonal festivals. Curiously enough, the Court masquerade, that very sophisticated amusement of Renaissance society, was more primitive than the drama of the rough Elizabethan playhouses. From the beginning to the end of its history, the essence of the masque was the arrival of certain persons vizored and disguised to dance a dance or present an offering. This brings us very close indeed to ancient and almost world-wide ritual.

At critical seasons of the year, spring, harvest, the winter solstice, there are strange doings among undeveloped races and superstitious peasants all the world over. At these times, when the fate of the food supply hangs in the balance, the mummers make their appearance. Dressed in leaves or flowers or beasts' skins, sometimes masked, sometimes with blackened or whitened faces, they parade the streets and fields, leaping and shouting, clashing swords and staves, sprinkling water, waving torches, ringing bells, all this to the accompaniment of much horseplay and many indecent jokes and gestures. But in spite of the noise and buffoonery, there is rhythm and purpose in the movements of the mummers. They arrive in procession, pass in and out of the houses, gather together to dance round the sacred tree or Maypole. They drive out into the woods some grotesque person or effigy, they bring back from the woods flowers, budding branches, and one of their number dressed up as a Jack-in-the-Green. They chase and kill an animal. They choose a sovereign to rule over them. They dance out a mimic battle in which their grotesque leader is supposed to be slain—this sham fight sometimes taking the form of a drama in which the hero is married, killed and brought to life again.

But who are the mummers? As a rule the term is used very loosely[1], but I think that it will always be found to imply a set

[1] It has, as I shall try to show, a more definite meaning, but at first I am using the word in the usual vague way.

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of disguised persons who perform some action which is of ritual origin but has little or no connection with the great historical and official religions, although it is still performed as a good custom rather than as a mere game. In England the mummers are familiar to us as villagers who disguise themselves at Christmas time and act a traditional play involving, among other things, a fight, the death of the hero, his revival by the doctor, and a final quête or money collection[1]. This Christmas mummers' play is substantially identical with the Plough Monday play and the Pace-eggers' play which is performed at Easter; it has points of resemblance with the folk-plays of countries as far removed as Scandinavia and Thrace; its main action is paralleled not only by European folk-customs but by the Old Comedy of the Greeks, by various myths and rites recorded of ancient peoples and modern savages in every part of the world[2]. Without knowing it, the Christmas village actor is keeping up practices proper to that early stratum of religion which persists unchanged while higher creeds and philosophies rise and fall. The same can be said of all other mummers, including the masquers of Whitehall. For the masque, as we shall see, is a sophisticated mumming.

Simple-minded and uncivilised people are apt to believe in the efficacy of magic and the existence of spirits. Volumes have been written on the nature of magic and its relation to religion; here it must suffice to remark that both religious ritual and the magic art consist chiefly in the performance of imitative acts, but that the doings of the priest appear to refer to powers outside himself; whereas the magician seems to be acting on the principle that 'like produces like' and that 'things which have once been in contact continue to act on each other even after the contact has been severed.'[3]

[1] For a typical mummers' play cf. E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), vol. II, p. 276, appendix K; R. J. E. Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Oxford, 1923).

[2] Cf. *Med. Stage*, vol. I, chap. X; T. F. Ordish, *Folk-Drama*, in *Folk-Lore*, vol. II, pp. 314 ff., vol. IV, pp. 149 ff.; F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London, 1914), especially chap. IV; Sir William Ridgeway, *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of non-European Races* (Cambridge, 1915); and *The Origin of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1910), pp. 16–24 (Sir W. Ridgeway does not believe in the ritual origin of Greek comedy); B. S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda* (Cambridge, 1920), chap. XI ff. especially p. 126.

[3] Sir J. G. Frazer, *Lectures on the Early History of the Kingship* (London, 1905), p. 37.

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Judging from known practices, it seems that part at least of the effectiveness of a magic act depends upon the purpose behind it, the chief function of the spell being to formulate the intention of the act[1].

There is then method in the madness of the mummers. They come leaping and dancing that the crops may grow, they perform sword-dances and dramas of death and resurrection to help on by imitative magic the eternal struggle between summer and winter, darkness and light, life and death.

Some of the mummers' doings are more difficult to explain. The folk-plays, May games, and sword-dances of European peasants probably preserve fragments of an old, widespread, and cruel ritual, in which at certain seasons of the year some poor wretch was chosen as a mock priest-king, was united in sacred marriage with a priestess, was allowed a short life of regal luxury, and finally was put to death for the sake of the god, whom, in some curious kind of way, he was supposed to represent.

This tragedy is the main theme of *The Golden Bough*, yet nobody really knows why the periodic death of the king or his substitute was regarded as essential to the well-being of the community[2].

[1] R. R. Marett in art. *Magic* in *E.R.E.* outlines the most representative views as to the nature of magic and its relation to religion. The most familiar theory of magic is that which Sir J. G. Frazer expounds in *The Golden Bough*; cf. *The Magic Art*, vol. I, pp. 52 ff. Marett disagrees with Frazer' conclusions. His own theory is developed in the aforesaid article and more convincingly in 'From Spell to Prayer' in *The Threshold of Religion*[2] (London, 1914), pp. 29 ff. For the view that magic is a religious activity (i.e. an expression of group consciousness) cf. É. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris, 1912), bk III, chap. III, pp. 501 ff., 'Les rites mimétiques et le principe de causalité.' He regards mimetic magic as an expression of the desires of the social group; and belief in its practical utility as due to experience of its psychological efficacity. This idea is the basis of Miss Jane Harrison's lucid and beautiful book on *Ancient Art and Ritual* (Home University Library), where she expounds the doctrine that art and religion both spring from magical ritual but that religion errs in attributing objective reality to its subject-matter.

[2] A vast amount of evidence on all these points is collected in the various volumes of *The Golden Bough*[3]; cf. vol. XII, Bibliography and General Index pp. 332–335 under *King*, *Kings* and *Kingship*. Cf. also A. B. Cook, *The European Sky-God*, in *Folk-Lore*, vols. XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, esp. XV, pp. 299 ff., 369 ff., XVI, pp. 299 ff.; and *Zeus* (Cambridge, 1914), esp. vol. I, pp. 11–14, 70–81, 644–715, and references given in vol. II, pt II, Index II, s.v. *King*.

The facts that bear on the sacrifice of the king are brought together

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The mock king was not the only being to perish in reality or pretence at the festivals. Some of our village customs make it evident that there was a time when an important action of the mummers was the killing of the sacred animal. After the death, the worshippers clothed themselves in the hide and horns of their victim, they sprinkled his blood over themselves, their fruit trees and their crops, they buried portions of his flesh in the fields, they all partook of a sacrificial banquet. This rite, also, has its obscure side (i.e. the relationship between god and victim) but the sequel to the slaughter shows that it rests chiefly on the principles of contagious magic[1]. Many of the sacrificial acts are only explicable on the assumption that the animal was full of contagious virtue, so that one at least of the motives leading to his death was the desire of the worshippers to shed his blood (i.e. his life) over themselves and their belongings, and to strengthen themselves and their crops by partaking of his fertilising flesh. Whatever else it may be, sacramental sacrifice is, at least, a means of establishing physical contact with a source of life and power, and the ceremonial procession which follows it, and which survives in the mummers' quêtes and processional dances, is an attempt to spread the infection of holiness through the whole community[2]. This quickening property was found in the sacred tree as well as in the sacred animal; so that it is not surprising to find that both tree worship and animal worship were practised at agricultural festivals, that both animal and vegetable offerings were acceptable to the gods, and that both skins and leaves were used as mumming disguises[3].

It is useless to re-invigorate crops and cattle if they are to be

with copious notes and references by Frazer in *Lectures on the Early History of the Kingship*, and more fully still in *The Dying God*. There is a brief discussion of Frazer's interpretation of these facts in *Med. Stage*, vol. I, pp. 133 ff.

1 *Med. Stage*, vol. I, pp. 130–131.

2 W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London, 1894), pp. 312–352; *Med. Stage*, vol. I, chap. VI (where further references are given); J. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, pp. 87–99; *E.R.E.* art. *Sacrifice*, 'Introductory and Primitive.'

3 The wild man, who appears so frequently in the art and literature of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, seems to be a descendant of the worshipper who has made 'a garment of his god.' Both the hairy and the

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left unprotected against their ghostly enemies. The lives of uncivilised people are profoundly affected by their belief that the world is swarming with spirits and souls of the dead[1]. Their attitude to these ghosts is ambiguous. Dead relatives are honoured, and there is some desire to keep in touch with them and to go on enjoying their help in war, agriculture, etc., and it is the main duty of some tribal medicine-men to invoke the dead or to become possessed by them[2]. The best way of keeping the dead in good temper is to supply them with plenty of food—particularly, it would seem, with beans or peas, which is interesting in view of the Twelfth Night custom of choosing a King of the Bean and Queen of the Pea[3]. Some peoples celebrate funerals and anniversaries by inviting the dead to a banquet, which is often eaten in silence—a fact worth recalling in view of the proverbial silence of the mediaeval mummers[4]. On the other hand, there is a strong feeling that the dead should not encroach too much on the sphere of the living, and steps are taken to keep them at a distance. One simple method of getting rid of ghosts is to sweep them out of the house[5]. Both attitudes are exemplified in the Balto-Slavonic festivals:

'One account describes the mourners at the funeral banquet inviting in the departed....What lay on the ground was not picked up, but was

leafy variety of wild man occur in the revels. He has possibly penetrated into Arthurian romance as 'the Grene Knyghte,' whose story looks like an account of an agricultural rite that has been misunderstood. Cf. *Med. Stage*, vol. I, p. 186, note 1.

[1] E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London, 1913), vol. I, chap. XI; *E.R.E.* arts. *Aryan Religion*, *Animism*; Frazer, *Belief in Immortality* (London, 1913, 1922), *The Scape-Goat*, esp. chap. II; L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), esp. chap. XII; E. Rohde, *Psyche*, English tr. of eighth ed. (London, 1925).

[2] W. W. Skeat, *Malay Magic* (London, 1900), pp. 59 ff.; G. Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians* (London, 1910), p. 209; J. Roscoe, *The Baganda* (London, 1911), pp. 273, 275, 283 ff.; C. G. Seligmann, *The Veddas* (Cambridge, 1911), pp. 128 ff.; *E.R.E.* art. *Shamanism*.

[3] W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals* (London, 1899), pp. 109, 110; Frazer, *The Scape-Goat*, pp. 143–155; *E.R.E.* art. *Aryan Religion*, section entitled 'The food of the dead,' p. 27.

[4] For silence in chthonic ritual see Frazer, *Folklore of the Old Testament*, vol. III, pt III, chap. XVII, 'The Silent Widow.'

[5] Cf. Tylor, *op. cit.* vol. II, pp. 25 ff.; *E.R.E.* arts. *Death and Disposal of the Dead*, p. 440; *Carnival*, pp. 227–228.

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left for friendless and kinless souls. When the meal was over, the priest rose from table, swept out the house, and hunted out the souls of the dead "like fleas," with these words, "Ye have eaten and drunken, souls, now go, now go!"'[1]

Rites of this kind have points in common with scape-goat ceremonies and with the popular customs of sweeping away evil spirits and witches with brooms[2]; for in certain moods all spirits are dreaded, irrespective of their origin or character. So the mummers shout, ring bells, brandish swords and brooms, to scare away hostile influences of all kinds; they drive them off with whips, they burn them by lighting bonfires and running about the fields with flaming torches. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between expulsory rites and imitative magic. Bonfires have been explained as sun charms, and the shouting and bell-ringing may be interpreted as either an attempt to frighten away ghosts or as a method of arousing the vitality of the crops. Very likely both motives are at work[3].

Magical and religious ritual is practised chiefly at times which are felt to be turning-points in the life of men and of nature, such as the attainment of puberty, marriage, burial, spring, harvest, mid-winter, etc.

The history of European masques and mummings is bound up chiefly with the history of the agricultural festivals. It is difficult, however, to give a clear account of the customs belonging to the various feast days, because identical rites may be performed at any critical time of year and, moreover, the festivals have been dislocated and confused by the clash of different civilisations. In Europe we have to reckon with at least Christian, Roman and Celto-Teutonic calendars.

[1] Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. II, p. 40.

[2] Broom-sweeping occurs in certain mummers' plays. 'Thus at Leigh the performance is begun by Little Devil Doubt, who enters with his broom and sweeps a "room" or "hall" for the actors.... In the Midlands this is the task of the woman....' The broom is also used at the quête with which the plays end. 'In a considerable number of cases, however, the *quête* is preceded by a singular action on the part of Little Devil Dout. He enters with his broom, and threatens to sweep the whole party out, or "into their graves" if money is not given.' *Med. Stage*, vol. I, pp. 216–217.

[3] Cf. *The Scape-Goat*, especially chaps. III–VI.

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In Western Europe, mumming took place at Christmas and Epiphany, Shrove Tuesday, Candlemas, May Day, St John's Eve, and many other festivals. For the history of the masque the most important mumming seasons are the Carnival and the Twelve Days of Christmas.

The name for a division of the year lasting from about mid-November to mid-January was derived from Yule[1], a mid-winter festival of the Teutonic peoples, about which we know little or nothing. For the Celts and Teutons the beginning of winter was the beginning of the year, when probably magical acts were performed to ensure the prosperity of the coming time. The feast at the beginning of winter was probably also a festival of the dead, and this aspect of it has survived in All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. But above all, winter was a time of animal sacrifice and of great sacrificial banquets, for which there was an economic as well as a religious reason, for, since it was impossible to feed large numbers of cattle during the cold months, a great slaughter at the beginning of winter was a practical necessity. Bede tells us that the Anglo-Saxons called November 'blot-monath,' or the month of immolations, because it was then that they devoted to the gods the cattle that were to be killed[2].

The Kalends of January was a New Year festival which spread all over the Roman Empire. It was celebrated by the relaxation of all ordinary rules of conduct, and the inversion of customary social status. Masters and slaves changed places, feasted and played at dice together[3].

Christian ecclesiastics were unsparing in their denunciation of the Kalends. Peculiarly hateful to them was the custom of the perambulation of the streets by mummers dressed in skins, beast-masks or women's clothes, carrying with them the *cervulus*, a kind of hobby-horse which was probably a survival of the sacrificial victim.

[1] On the Christmas festival see A. Tille, *Yule and Christmas* (London, 1899).
[2] Bede, *De temporum ratione*, chap. xv.
[3] The ceremonial game of dice survived in mediaeval and Renaissance mummings; cf. *infra*, pp. 30, 32, 36, 37, 39–41.

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'These miserable men and, still worse, some baptized Christians take on false likenesses and monstrous faces, of which people should rather be ashamed and sad....Others dress themselves up in the hides of their cattle; others put on the heads of animals....How horrible is it, further, that those who have been born men take on women's dresses, and effeminate their manhood by girls' dresses in an abominable masquerade!'[1]...'Therefore he who gives to anyone of those miserable men any human requirement in the Calends of January, when in the sacrilegious rite they rather rage than play, shall know he does not give it to men but to demons. Therefore, if you do not want to participate in their sins, do not permit that the stag or the cow or any such portent come before your house.'[2]

This cervulus procession seems to be a forerunner of the masque.

The Kalends, being a celebration of the New Year, was, like Yuletide, a time for prognostication and magic. Everything that happened on that day was ominous. People feared to carry fire or iron outside their houses, they offered presents to one another and to the Emperor, they decorated their houses with greenery to ensure a year of wealth and fertility. The same motive may lie behind the practice of setting out at night a 'Table of Fortune' loaded with food and drink; but there is some evidence that this was done partly at least for the sake of wandering spirits. The two ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive[3]. In the eleventh century Burchard of Worms explained the custom as an offering to the goddesses of fate:

'You do what some women at certain seasons of the year are accustomed to do, in that you prepare a table in your house, and you place upon it food and drink, together with three knives, so that if those three sisters—whom antiquity and ancient folly call Parcae—should arrive, they might be refreshed there....You believe that those whom you call sisters may prove useful to you now or in the future.'[4]

In mediaeval times these Tables of Fortune were sometimes

[1] In the original *demutatione*; I should prefer to translate it 'transformation.'

[2] Caesarius of Arles?, *Sermo Pseud.-Augustin.* CXXIX, *de Kal. Jan.* in P.L. XXXIX, 2001; CXXX in P.L. XXXIX, 2003. Quoted in *Med. Stage*, vol. II, pp. 297–299, and in (English translation) Tille, *op. cit.* pp. 97, 98.

[3] Cf. Tille, *op. cit.* pp. 108–111.

[4] *Decreta* (Coloniae, 1548), 198 *d*. Quoted by Tille (original Latin), *op. cit.* p. 108, note 7; and in *Med. Stage*, vol. II, pp. 305, 306.

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