

## Scottish Guising: Medieval And Modern Theatre Games

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In 1826 Walter Scott wrote to a friend from Abbotsford:

In our country there are carried on at Christmas time a sport call'd Mummery by the English Borderers and Guisardery by the Scotch.<sup>1</sup>

A few years earlier a brief account of this 'sport' had much more famously appeared in Scott's *Marmion* where he claimed:

Who lists may in their mumming see  
Traces of ancient mystery;  
White shirts supplied the masquerade,  
And smutted cheeks the visors made.<sup>2</sup>

The complex of ideas and information in Scott's lines offer a good starting place. The date is loosely intermediate: Scott is writing about a practice that in the early years of the 19th century seemed 'ancient'. The fact that what he describes has demonstrable parallels both with modern guising two hundred years later and with late-medieval guising two hundred years earlier makes him a useful stepping stone to explore a custom that seems at least relatively continuous, if not by any means unchanging. This paper aims to look at a current performance custom, present-day Hallowe'en guising as it manifests in part of Edinburgh, and see how far, if at all, it is possible to extrapolate back from it to throw light on the medieval and early modern winter festive practice also known as guising in Scotland, but as mumming in England.

Scott's notion of 'ancient mystery' is notorious, but also usefully open. What he himself meant, as he explains in his notes to the poem, is that the play some of his guising visitors performed offered a 'shadow of the old mysteries, which were the origin of the English drama.'<sup>3</sup> A century later, early twentieth century anthropological theorists such as E. K. Chambers and J. G. Frazer equally saw such practices as shadowing an 'ancient mystery', but this was now defined as pre-Christian: a luck visit, spirit-laying or a fertility ceremony.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this paper is more pragmatic, seeking to use the modern guising game to illuminate the late-medieval one, rather than moving any further back into a more hypothetically structural or conceptual comparison of origins.

A thumbnail sketch of the relative shapes of modern and medieval guising demonstrates the surface similarity of the two practices in terms of performance.<sup>5</sup> If we then try to unravel the contexts of these performances, an interesting mixture of parallels and contrasts emerges.

### Modern guising

My discussion of modern guising is based on a fairly particular kind of case study drawn from personal experience and a survey of guisers past and present, within one locality of present-day Edinburgh. The custom remains common through a good deal of Scotland, but in localised areas, with localised variations: some communities engage in it, some do not. Even in Edinburgh, while one group of streets may be guised extensively, just two or three streets away no houses may be visited at all. Today the practice belongs almost exclusively to Hallowe'en, and to children. On the evening of 31 October small groups of children will dress up and roam the streets. They knock at houses on

their way, and when the door is opened each guiser performs a 'turn': a song, a few jokes, a short poem. The householder is then expected to reward the guisers, most often with sweets, occasionally a little money, sometimes with fruit or nuts.

### Medieval mumming

The discussion of medieval practices is drawn from a much wider range of diverse, but scattered evidence. The game most commonly known as *mumming* was widespread through Northern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> Scottish *guising* was clearly one version of the mumming game though it is hard to pin down the detail of local variation. The fundamental activity of the game is overtly similar, though equally not identical, to modern practice. Despite modern assumptions, and Walter Scott's experience, medieval mumming apparently did not involve 'mummers' plays' and appears to have been a largely urban practice.<sup>7</sup> A brief description is found in a London proclamation of 14 December 1334, concerned with keeping the peace while the king is away fighting the Scots:

nul ne soit si hardi sur peyne demprisonement daller Wakeraunt en la Citee apres hour de corfeu...nul homme ne aille en ceste feste de Noel oue compaignies desgisees ou fauvisages ou en autre maner as hostels des bons gentz de la citee pur juwer as dees mes chascun se face bien a ese en son hostel demeyne.<sup>8</sup>

(no-one shall be so bold on pain of imprisonment as to go wandering about in the City after the hour of curfew...no man shall go at this feast of Christmas with groups of people dressed up in false faces or in any other fashion to the houses of the good folks of the city in order to play at dice; but let everyone make himself at ease in his own home.)

Similar prohibitions in sixteenth century Scotland refer to groups of 'gysaris' in masks or informal disguises who go 'guysing through the toun' and 'in divers houses' where they would dance and be fed.<sup>9</sup> As so often with surviving written evidence, in both Scotland and England we know about the practice largely from the evidence of those who wish to suppress it. This tends to give a false impression of its standing, implying it was always a subversive practice. Clearly it could involve disruption of the peace, and was recognised as a space in which imagined violence could be realised.<sup>10</sup> But what these edicts centrally appear to record is a popular seasonal visiting custom, with quasi-theatrical elements, where disguised or costumed revellers roam the streets and may claim the right of entry to homes.

Guising, then, appears to be an encounter custom whose underlying shape – disguise, street-walking, house-visit, engagement with the householder in some entertainment, reward – remains relatively constant from the medieval to the modern period.<sup>11</sup> But this is not to claim, of course, that the same practice carried the same meanings throughout five hundred years. Investigation of the detail and context of the central action may help us to assess how far the meaning of guising to individuals and communities today is the same as its meaning for individuals and communities in the late middle ages. How far is a child guising the streets of Edinburgh in 2001 really doing the same thing as a guiser on those same streets, or a mummer on the streets of London, in 1401, 1501 or 1601?

### Time

Guising has apparently always been a seasonal custom. Its specific timing will therefore be significant, and will define some part of its meaning. Throughout Europe in the middle ages, and certainly in Scotland today, this kind of thing is primarily a winter game. It is apparently important that it takes place during dark evenings. In the European middle ages it belonged to a prolonged winter festivity period that lasted loosely from Christmas to Lent, 'Christmas feast to Ashwensday'.<sup>12</sup>

As late as 1815 an account of Scottish guising claims that 'every evening from Christmas to Fasternse'en is allowable for the Gysarts to make their perambulations.'<sup>13</sup> But most communities fixed on one point within this period as the focus for its mumming. In the Netherlands it belonged particularly to Shrove Tuesday; in medieval England to the twelve days of Christmas. Sixteenth century Scotland also tends to record guising as occurring across the Christmas period, 'during the tyme callit Yooll',<sup>14</sup> although there are also records of guising at other winter festivals. In Scotland today, however, it is a Hallowe'en custom, though in the fairly recent past much of Eastern Scotland guised at Hogmanay.<sup>15</sup>

The variability of date might well suggest that the practice is only loosely a 'seasonal' one: it has its seasonal slot, but the activity has nothing intrinsically relating to a particular festival. Attempts to understand the custom through a focus on the festival it accompanies may therefore be misplaced. On the other hand, the particular festival can clearly make some contribution to the custom: pictures of medieval Netherlandish mumming do suggest a certain Carnival flavour in the nature of the anarchic costumes: weird and old-fashioned clothes, cauldrons and cooking pots as hats, suggest the carnivalesque inversion of the world upside-down.<sup>16</sup> Modern Scottish guising equally presents a Hallowe'en dimension, if only in the commonest costumes of witches and ghosts. While specific festivals may not provide the root meaning of the custom as a whole, they may therefore affect the particular purposes of guising for particular communities. The Hallowe'en context lends modern guising a somewhat different meaning from the Christmas or New Year context of the medieval custom: even if the activity itself remains the same, it may be understood differently by the community.

It is commonly assumed that modern Scottish guising must, in some 'original' state, be connected with the engagement and warding off of the evil spirits that are liberated the night before All Saints' Day. Modern objections to the custom often focus on this aspect of a perceived pagan involvement, a meddling with black magic. Superficially the modern costume themes of witches, ghosts and lanterns reinforce this, although scarcely any of the guisers I have questioned would admit to any kind of belief in ghosts, witches or evil spirits. When I asked adults who had guised thirty years ago the response, interestingly enough, was 'we would *pretend* to believe, because it made it more exciting.' But in spite of their professed non-belief, it is clear that children guising today do value the 'spookiness' associated with Hallowe'en, which becomes itself part of the purpose of their guising. Yet they claimed to see no strong semantic connection between guising itself and Hallowe'en. Those I questioned all denied that either the performance 'turns' or the costumes necessarily needed a Hallowe'en theme. When asked what they dressed as, 'just anything' was the commonest response. The sense, at least for these children, seemed to be that the seasonal connection adds an extra, but almost incidental, spice to a custom which, even today, has meaning of its own which is not entirely defined by the specifically seasonal context. Medieval and early modern mummers and guisers visiting at Christmas, New Year, or Shrovetide may equally have drawn local meaning from the immediate festival context; but the practice itself seems to have a wider and more generalised community value rather than one specific to its festival.

## **Costume**

The costume adopted by guisers is perhaps the most obviously theatrical element of the custom, signalling their removal from normal behaviour and transforming the rest of their activity into

performance. What the guisers wear will therefore partly determine the meaning of what they do. The dominant impression at all times is that disguises for this particular popular custom are largely impromptu and made with whatever is to hand. A variety of records suggests the early range:

London 1418: feynyd berdes, peyntid visers, disfourmyd or colourid visages

daller en mommon en robes retournees barbouillees de farine  
France 1528: et de charbon, faulx visages de papier

(to go mumming in clothes turned inside out, smeared with flour and charcoal, with paper masks)

Elgin 1598: he haid his sisters coat upon him and the rest that were with him  
haid claythis dammaskit about thame and thair faces blakit ...  
Archie Hayes haid a faise [face = mask] about his loynes and ane  
kerche [woman's kerchief] about his face

Elgin 1604: having a bedcod [pillowcase] on his heid

Clackmannan 1713: confessed his going disguised with his face blacked and straw  
ropes on his legs<sup>17</sup>

This fits well with modern guisers who claim their costumes come from 'anything they can find'. The black plastic bin bag is now one very common popular basis; paper hats, face-paint and adult clothes are also common.

For children today, as for young adults before the seventeenth century, cheapness and availability seem determining factors, far more than any particular notions of role play or spectacle. This is clearly illustrated in the history of one popular guising costume. A common disguise today is the white sheet that instantly turns the guiser into a 'ghost'. But such sheet disguises also appear back in the early nineteenth century and even further back in the sixteenth, without such 'ghostly' connotations. In a brief comic scene in one sixteenth century play, the victim of a robbery is left with a sheet tied round his face and told 'If they aske you any question say you goe amuming.'<sup>18</sup> Ghosts appear not to have assumed white floating shapes until the development of theatrical light technologies and of spiritualism in the second half of the nineteenth century, so it is not until the twentieth century that sheeted guisers become ghosts. This certainly invites caution in our interpretation of disguises: folk costumes that we might assume are deliberately designed to express carnivalesque inversion (such as the kitchen pot as a hat), or fertility rituals (such as the shaggy coverings of the Marshfield paper boys, or the vegetation of the Queensferry Burry Man), or identification with evil spirits (like today's bin bag witches), might have initially been simply a question of what was there. You can usually lay your hands on a sheet – or a bin bag – without financial outlay.

But this leads to one apparent difference of costume between older and modern forms of guising: evidence suggests that early mummers did not dress 'as' anything. They dressed wildly. But, in the English mumming and in a good deal of Scottish guising, what seems to have been most important was covering the face and so achieving *anonymity*. Masks feature prominently; sooted and floured faces, the pillow case over the head, all seem to stress that the important thing was, whether literally or symbolically, not to be known. The same may still have been true in some places in the 19th century where descriptions of guising costumes suggest obliteration of the player. Boys were said to wear 'old shirts belonging to their fathers, and ..mitre-shaped casques of brown

paper...attached to this is a sheet of the same paper, which, falling down in front, covers and conceals the whole face'.<sup>19</sup> At least in modern Edinburgh, this imperative seems somewhat diminished. It is still common to disguise the face, as the increasing spread of ready-bought masks testifies. But there seems less emphasis among guisers today on absolute concealment of identity. Perhaps relating to this shift, modern guisers tend to claim that they are dressed, even if only perfunctorily, 'as' some identifiable character (witch, devil, Frankenstein, Mrs Dracula, robber, teddy bear). If concealment of your own identity is no longer a defining part of the purpose, assuming another role is perhaps taking over.

A commonly recurrent early guising costume in Scotland and more widely in Europe, involved cross-dressing: men borrowing sisters' or wives' dresses, women wearing men's hats and coats are very frequent. Of course, this playful escape into another gender must raise important questions about social, communal and personal conceptions of identity.<sup>20</sup> It is not clear, though, that guisers were generally attempting to pass themselves off as members of the opposite sex, or even that in this costume concealment of identity was necessarily always the aim. In the Scottish records what seems to have been more important is the transgression of expected boundaries by the flouting of gender dress-codes. When George Kay was accused in Elgin in 1598 'for dancing and guising' with 'his sisters coat upon him', or when Elspet Dempster in 1615 'dansit with ane bonat [man's hat] on hir heid in Thomas Hardeis hous ... Maige Elchuner dancit with Androw Stalkeris hatt on hir heid',<sup>21</sup> it seems clear that they were not fully attempting to conceal their own gender, but simply signalling their festive rejection of its normal performance.

Scottish post-Reformation objections consistently present such cross-dressing as an 'abomination', invoking traditional biblical authority against cross-dressing. As the Kirk Session of Aberdeen recorded in 1605, it 'is accompted abhominatioun be the law of God that ony man suld put on wemennis rayment, Deuteronomie 22, vs. 5'.<sup>22</sup> A revealing record from Elgin in Jan 1600 tells us that:

Alexander Smythis dauchter for guising to be put in the joiggis gif it be prow in  
that scho ves in manis claythis.<sup>23</sup>

In post-Reformation culture wearing men's clothes was apparently a greater offence than the guising itself.

Cross-dressing customs will always carry a gender charge which the participants will tap into, although the nature of that charge will depend upon the culture of the community in question. Yet the ready availability of such easy means of identity-change may again have been a determining factor in the early guisers' initial choice of these costumes, particularly in an age when gender dress-codes were more clearly discrete and defined, and few people would be likely to own many changes of clothes or wealth to acquire or create disguises. I have not, personally, come across any cross-dressing among modern guisers, although I have been told of effective (and startling) boy-girl disguises. Modern children seem relatively resistant to the practice. There are likely, of course, to be complex cultural reasons for this; but one may be the relative age of the guisers. Pre-adolescent children are likely to have different attitudes to gender performance than did the young adults who guised five hundred years ago.

## Participants

A central question with all such encounter customs is, who takes part: is it everyone in the community, or specifically defined groups? This is probably the most obvious and the most significant difference between medieval and modern practice. Nowadays guising seems exclusively

the province of children. The Edinburgh range seems to be from about three to thirteen. The very youngest are initiated into the custom by adults: parents will help to dress, and will shepherd around, the under-fives. Nurseries, and the first and second year classes of primary schools, used until recently to make Hallowe'en costumes and teach Hallowe'en songs that were then frequently performed as 'turns', an institutional community approval which has now been largely withdrawn. But after about the age of five the adults seem to retire and guising becomes an activity managed entirely by the children: they devise and usually make their own disguises, choose and perform their own pieces, guise (usually in groups or pairs) without adult accompaniment. In Edinburgh a customary break seems to happen around the first year of secondary school. Group social custom appears to dictate that guising is no longer appropriate much after this point.

Up until at least the seventeenth century, however, guising seems to have been an activity of adults. Illustrations show adults; edicts concerning the control of the custom are directed at adults. It seems, though, that like most Carnival practices, guising was especially associated with the *young* adult. The Aberdeen complaint of 1605 centres on the 'young men and young wemen of this citie';<sup>24</sup> a 1701 record from Falkirk which identifies those accused of guising refers to each as 'servant of' or 'son of';<sup>25</sup> and accounts up until the early nineteenth century tend to refer to 'the youth' or 'the young men'. The shift from adult to child guisers seems to have happened a century or even more ago. An account from Crieff dated 1881 claims that within the writer's lifetime 'guisers have deteriorated from full-grown men and women to children'.<sup>26</sup> In fact Walter Scott's description back at the beginning of the nineteenth century records guising in his area as a children's practice.

This is a shift which clearly alters the meaning of the custom for both guisers and hosts. The rewards of such theatre games for those involved relate to the community status of the participants. Modern children, when asked about their experience, clearly valued the freedom from adult participation, the adventurousness of unsupervised trips in the dark, the group bonding with fellow-guisers, the chance to perform, as well as the gifts (which themselves, being customarily sweets, define the age-status of the guiser). All these are children's pleasures. Householders who enjoy the visitations today seem to find pleasure either in the indulgence offered to children's enjoyment, or in the continuance of a perceived tradition. For these adults, at least, it offers a sense of community through time: there is still a general sense that this is 'traditional', it is 'what we've always done', that gives participants a sense of connection with an older community identity. The custom also offers, or expresses, a certain social cohesion. But because the children rarely stray outside known streets (or with younger children even known houses) this cohesion is mostly offered to those households which themselves contain or know children, rather than to the community as a whole. Householders who do not take pleasure in the guising today tend to be those who did not guise in their own youth or who have no active relationship with children; if visited at all, they may see the visits as troublesome or as 'begging'. Certainly it is socially uncomfortable to be trapped into participating in a ritual for which you may not know the rules, and are unprepared with the appropriate rewards.

Both the pleasures and the displeasures must have been somewhat different when guising was an adult activity. If the sense of pleasurable liberation and sociability which modern children claim was, as we might reasonably hypothesise, similar for young adults in early times, their social position as adults would alter the nature and meaning of those feelings. The many edicts directed against mumming and guising practices often focus on the noisy, uncontrolled, potentially aggressive behaviour of excited groups of young adult guisers; 'nichtwalkers, maskings and gysingis' are also frequently associated with 'drunkardis royatus'.<sup>27</sup> While this certainly suggests the pleasure of social liberation to the participants, it also conveys the much more threatening effect it will have when young adults are involved. A 1511 English Act '*agaynst disguised persons and Wearing of*

*Visours'* suggests the extremity of the threat that was perceived, claiming that the disguised mumming visits led to 'Murthres felonye Rape & oder greate hurtes and inconveniences.'<sup>28</sup>

A Kirk Session record from Perth, February 1609, gives a flavour of both the kind of pleasure involved for the guisers and the more ordinary kind and level of threat it could be felt to pose. Two married couples:

being inquirit quhy thay went all disgysed about the towne on tuysday last wes at ten and ellewin houris at ewin with suordis and stawis trowbling and molesting thair nichtbouris on the streitis quhom thay met ansserit that eftir thay had all sowpitt togidder thay had resolwit to go about the towne of no ewill purposs or intentione bot of mirrines and denyit that thay molestit any. Thay being remowit it wes certenly found that they wer disgysed namly andrew Jhonestownes wyf hawing hir hair hinging downe and ane blak hat wpon hir head hir husband androw Jhonestowne with ane suord into his hand david Jakstone hawing ane curch [woman's kerchief] wpon his head and a womanis gowne...<sup>29</sup>

A convivial evening with impromptu guising turns into a street disturbance. When it comes to the house visit, adult guisers again will involve the householder in a more equal, and consequently more stirring, or more threatening and unsettling, relationship. To let a group of wildly disguised, over-excited (probably unidentifiable, possibly drunk) young men into your home to dance or play dice may not *feel* very safe, whatever the controlling conventions of the game. So the difference in status between adult and child makes modern guising a less charged, less challenging activity, with the visited much less obviously involved and participatory, much more in control of the tone of the encounter, than the visitors.

Participation also raises the question of gender. Today girls guise as much as, if not more than boys, with the dressing-up and performance aspects of the custom seen among children now as somewhat more of a girls' province. Most of the earliest injunctions against English mumming, on the other hand, imply male guisers 'no *man* shall go...' (nul homme ne aille...). In Scotland, however, at least from the immediate post-Reformation period of the later sixteenth century when we first start to hear about guising, there are plenty of instances where women are seen to guise; in fact it often seems important that it is a mixed activity. An injunction from Aberdeen in January 1606 sums up the general tone:

na man nor woman in this burght...sall presume to mask or disagyse thame selffis in ony sort, the men in wemennis claythis, nor the wemen in mennis claythis, nor utherwayes...ather on the streittis of this burt or in privat houss<sup>30</sup>

The edicts object to the women guising, but not, apparently, any more than to the men. It may be that early Scottish guising offers one of the relatively rare instances where women had access to the same kinds of ritual game as the men.

### **The Encounter**

One of the most important things that the house visits of both old and new forms of guising deliberately engineer is an encounter between the masked and the unmasked, the disguised and the undisguised. The wildly dressed (perhaps unknown) guiser, from the free and uncontrolled environment of the dark street, enters the home territory of householders who inhabit their normal

place and identity. Having entered, the guiser involves the householder in some reciprocal activity (dice, dance, 'turn').

For modern Edinburgh guising this encounter seems a core of the event. For the guiser the encounter with a 'normal' adult throws what they are doing into relief. Many children claimed that this recognition of their own weirdness is part of the pleasure of the event. Asked what they most enjoyed they replied, 'making a fool of yourself', 'people being amazed at your costume', 'getting attention and praise.' The obligation to perform to non-guisers rather than just run around in the dark dressed up, clearly adds a sense of challenge and of focus. For the householder it seems clear that the rules that govern the encounter are very important. If a group of wildly dressed children appears on your doorstep in the dark and you do not know the rules, then the game becomes either meaningless or disturbing. You do not know how to respond, what to *do* with the situation. Even with such small and unthreatening visitors, there is a sense of uncertainty and risk, if only a social one: the unknown is invading your home territory.

This must have been a much more pronounced feature of early guisings. The disguises being more complete, and the visitors more adult, creates a much sharper tension around the encounter between 'weirdness' and 'normality.' The rules of English and Netherlandish medieval mumming make the centre of the encounter not a 'performance' as it is now, but a game of dice: a challenge, a competition. The alien and unknowable invades your space and engages you in competition. The householder is supposedly 'in charge' since it is his home, yet he has an obligation to show hospitality to the invaders. Both the excitement and the unsettling disruption that child guisers now bring to the encounter must have been greatly heightened in medieval forms of the game.

There is less clear reference to dicing as an element of early Scottish guising.<sup>31</sup> Guisers in Scotland seem more likely to have invited the householders to join them in dance, a less competitive though possibly more intimate challenge. But apart from this, and the accompanying music, from the middle ages to the seventeenth century there seems no record of any kind of 'dramatic' performance associated with guising. By the early nineteenth century at least, guisers do seem to be performing, some of them the 'mummers' play'.<sup>32</sup> But this play itself gradually appears to have faded out, early in the twentieth century, being overtaken by the 'turn' for which each guiser is personally responsible. Even this feature may be beginning to modify under the influence of North American 'trick or treat' customs, themselves presumably developments of early European guising practices taken across the Atlantic by settlers. Enduring as it is, guising has never been an immutable custom.

### **Elite Guising**

Guising and mumming activity seems throughout its long history to have been primarily a popular and informal custom. Our lack of knowledge of earlier forms, except from civil or religious authorities attempting to control popular activity, tends to confirm that guising was chiefly practised by those without interest in or access to written record. But the structure of the guising was in the late middle ages and Renaissance adopted by courtly and elite communities to shape some of their own disguising play. Richly costumed dance had since at least the thirteenth century been a basis for court entertainment.<sup>33</sup> In sixteenth century Scotland, as in England and elsewhere, the court incorporated the particular shape of the guising encounter into that entertainment. Although the sequence of actions remains roughly the same, the courtly context interestingly modifies the meaning of the custom and the relationship between guisers and 'audience'.

The fullest evidence for this practice comes from the English court of Henry VIII, through the lovingly detailed accounts of court spectacle and entertainment from the chronicler Edward Hall. In the first

year of his reign Hall records Henry erupting into the Queen's chamber disguised as Robin Hood with his company:

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.<sup>34</sup>

This unexpected domestic visit of disguised, dancing 'strangers' echoes the form of the mumming. Henry continued to adapt the popular custom even more explicitly. A month later, on Shrove Sunday, he and five exotically dressed companions:

brought in a mommerye. After that the Quene, the lordes, and ladyes, such as would had played [i.e. at dice] the sayd mommers departed, and put of thesame apparel, & after entred into the Chamber, in their usuel apparell.<sup>35</sup>

This seems an entirely conventional mumming: disguised strangers visit, enter, challenge the hosts to dice, and disappear again still in disguise. Yet the courtly context clearly alters the event. These costumes were not a random and impromptu disguise: the king and his 'cumpeer', the Earl of Essex, were:

appareled after Turkey fasshion, in long robes of Bawdkin, powdered with gold, hattes on their heddes of Crimosyn Velvet, with greate rolles of Gold, girded with two swordes, called Cimiteries, hangyng by greate bawderikes of gold.<sup>36</sup>

These magnificently exotic costumes belong to courtly disguisings, identifying the strangers clearly as members of the court circle. Recognisable or not, these are friends and equals who return 'in their usuel apparell' after the mumming. The fact that, whether or not concealed, the King himself is known to be one of the guisers also alters the power relations of the mumming. In a normal guising encounter power is nominally with the householder, who is the host on home territory, even if that power is threatened by the unknown unpredictability of the anonymous guiser. In this kind of courtly event the guising monarch, known although unknown, remains the ultimate power in the relationship.

We do not have equivalent detail from the reigns of James IV and V of Scotland. The accounts of the Lord High Treasurer mention, briefly, that 'gysaris ... dansyt to the King' during the Christmas seasons of 1491 and several subsequent years, but we have no information about who they were or what they did.<sup>37</sup> In 1507 we hear of 'ane mummyng gown to the King', suggesting a more explicit participation by the court in a guising activity, although again the terminology is too loose to be sure.<sup>38</sup> This mumming gown was, however, apparently trimmed with wool on the shoulders and borders of fox furs, which sounds like a courtly imitation of the shaggy, shape-disguising costumes of many popular mummers. The minority of James V saw little in the way of recorded court entertainment, though the expense of £20 'eftir suppir in mummyn' on New Year's Day 1526 suggests that the dicing common in England and France also featured at least in the courtly Scottish version of the game.

It is not until the reign of Mary Queen of Scots that we find fuller accounts of court entertainments that borrow their shape from popular guising, though it is not clear whether the influence is from native Scottish custom, or from the French court from which Mary had come. During her first February in Scotland in 1562 Mary was apparently honoured by a courtly guising visitation:

after supper the honest young men in the toun come with ane convoy to hir,

and uther sum come with merschance ['mumchance'], weill accouterit in masry ['maskery'], and thairefter depairtit.<sup>39</sup>

The informal popular custom has become a charming and ornamental way for the young monarch to be complimented by her young subjects. Mary herself, an enthusiastic performer in courtly entertainments, was involved in various courtly guisings. When ambassadors from France visited the court of Scotland in February 1566 to invest Mary's husband Darnley with the order of St Michel:

at evin our soveranis maid the maskrie and mumschance, in the quhilk the quenis grace, and all hir Maries and ladies wer all cled in men's apperrell; and everie ane of thame presentit ane quhingar, bravelie and maist artificiallie made and embroiderit with gold, to the said ambassatour and his gentilmen.<sup>40</sup>

Mary has even adopted the popular disguise of cross-dressing, the elaborate gold trimmed men's costumes<sup>41</sup> on the well-known courtly ladies transforming the subversive gesture into a teasingly sophisticated performance. The guising encounter, as often in courtly settings, here became the pretext for the giving of gracious and complimentary gifts. The courtly context transforms the popular custom, in which wildly dressed, anonymous guisers engineer a challenging encounter with unmasked householders who are obliged to reward them, into a game of generous largesse from the guisers, in which lavish costume conceals yet draws attention to the teasingly hidden yet recognised presence of the sovereign. The same actions define a quite different relationship between guisers and guised.

After the removal of the Scottish court to London in 1603, and with the generally antagonistic attitude of the authorities towards performance games after the Reformation, guising in Scotland seems to revert to its popular roots. Social structures are different enough today to make the distinction of elite and popular, though still active, less clear cut. Popular guising in Edinburgh seems not to be restricted by class, but rather by community habit: guising is popular in some areas, but not in others, of whatever class. The young adult Hallowe'en fancy dress parties and dances that are perhaps becoming more common, may suggest a kind of elite formalisation of the popular custom. Here, as in the sixteenth century, the splendour and display of the costumes becomes more important, the notion of encounter between disguised and undisguised, between stranger and householder, less central. But in these early years of the twenty first century it is hard to define distinct popular and elite versions of the guising game.

## Responses

The similarities and differences between the early and modern popular Scottish guising games, and the role they held in their communities, may be summed up by a brief comparison of some contemporary responses. The nature of the evidence, as always, means we must focus mainly on objections and responses to those objections: those contentedly engaged in these customs, then or now, rarely discuss or analyse them. At both periods objections fall broadly into two categories: anxieties about social order, and spiritual anxieties.

Social objections have changed in emphasis with the changes in participants. When guising is frowned on today it tends to be either because it is 'begging', soliciting unearned rewards from acquaintances or strangers; or because it is unsafe for the children involved. Guisers should not be 'bothering' the neighbours, and children should not be roaming the streets after dark without adults. The first of these objections depends, presumably, on a different sense of community and community relations. This is no longer defined as a relationship in which such gifts of hospitality or alms are appropriate. Fears about safety may at one level acknowledge one of the important issues

for the participants: guising seems to be a way of playing with fear (of the dark, the unknown, the uncontrolled).

In earlier times the focus of social objection, reflecting the age of the participants, is far more on disorder and potential violence by the guisers. 'Trowbling and molesting thair nichtbouris' was not a question of soliciting gifts, but of disturbing the peace with riotous behaviour, drunkenness and aggression. Scottish records mostly seem to focus on street disorder, though many of the English proclamations concentrate on the dangers of allowing guisers into homes.

The spiritual objections are, possibly, more revealing of changing cultural attitudes. Seventeenth century post-Reformation Scottish records regularly accuse the guisers of 'superstition' and 'abomination'. In fact this seems often as much because the guising is associated with Roman Catholic festival holidays such as Christmas or Shrovetide than for the nature of the guising game itself. Those who have rejected Roman Catholicism should not be participating in 'the superstitious observation of auld reitis and ceremoneis' which mark its church feasts, of which guising is one.<sup>42</sup> But there is also some sense that the guisers are putting their souls in danger by such disguised and immodest behaviour. The fact that it is most often the Kirk rather than the civic authorities that took action against guisers, and that penalties involved acts of penance or even 'to be debarred from the priviledges of the kirk, sacraments and marriage'<sup>43</sup> confirms the spiritual significance that was seen to attach to guising activity.

In modern times objections from parents have led many primary schools to abandon Hallowe'en practices on the apparently similar grounds that these are unacceptably 'pagan'. This is no longer perceived as an association with Roman Catholicism, but as an implied commitment to 'black magic' which is held to be dangerous even if unconscious. Such objectors certainly seem to recognise in these customs 'traces of ancient mystery' which are threatening. Interestingly enough the response of guisers to such spiritual arguments seems entirely unchanged across the centuries. Every modern guiser I asked said unhesitatingly that what they were doing was 'for fun'. Most laughed at the suggestion that they might have any belief at all in the supernatural. Early modern guisers seemed to respond with equal blankness: 'he denyit ony abuse in the doing thairof'; they had 'no evil purpose or intention but of merriness'.<sup>44</sup> A millennium before, fifth century Christians accused of similar pagan guising practices by the early Christian Fathers made just the same answer: 'non sunt haec sacrilegiorum studia, vota sunt haec jocorum' (this isn't the deliberate pursuit of paganism, these good luck visits are just for fun'.)<sup>45</sup>

Of course, neither participants nor objectors can be held to have a full and objective understanding of the practice; neither can be taken as wholly right or wholly wrong. But since both objection and defence appear now to have persisted for at least 1500 years it would not be safe to dismiss either view of guising practices. As many cultural theorists point out, the same custom may carry many different meanings, even at the same time.<sup>46</sup> Guising clearly did not mean one thing even at any one time; certainly it cannot mean the same thing across five hundred years. But these claims and counter-claims, and the persistence of the grounds of the debate, themselves form yet another link in the chain that binds Edinburgh guisers of the twenty-first century to their predecessors four centuries ago.

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## Endnotes.

- <sup>1</sup> H. J. C. Grierson (ed) *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, Vol 9 1825-6 (London: Constable, 1935), pp. 445-6.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Logie Robertson, 'Marmion', Introduction to Canto 6, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (London: Frowde, 1894), p. 153.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Logie Robertson, 'Marmion' note LXXX, *Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (London: Frowde, 1894), p. 209.
- <sup>4</sup> E. K. Chambers, 'Folk Drama' (especially 'The Mummers Play'), *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), pp. 205-227; James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: a History of Myth and Religion*, abridged volume (London: Macmillan, 1922; repr Chancellor's Press, 1994), p. 538. For Scotland see also A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 15; F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, vol. 3 (Glasgow: MacLellan, 1961), p. 24.
- <sup>5</sup> For a full study of the 'folk drama' element of Scottish guising practices, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).
- <sup>6</sup> For a discussion of European mumming, especially in England, see Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor Britain* (London: Ashgate, 2002), Chapter 'Mumming'.
- <sup>7</sup> Though see Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), for later evidence.
- <sup>8</sup> Guildhall Letter Book E fol. 2r from *Calendar of Letter-Books Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall* edited Reginald Sharpe, 11 vols (London: J. E. Francis, 1899-1912).
- <sup>9</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 239-40.
- <sup>10</sup> Two mid-fifteenth century chronicles suggest that attempts at royal assassination were 'purposed ... undir the colour of mummeres' (*John Capgrave's Abbreviacion of Cronicles* (ed) Peter J. Lucas, *EETS 285* (1983), p. 216) and lesser violence is also recorded at times. See Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor Britain* (London: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 99-100.
- <sup>11</sup> A helpful introduction to this style of encounter custom can be found in *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History* (eds) H. Halpert and G. M. Storey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 34-61.
- <sup>12</sup> Fynes Moryson Itinerary [1617]: see *Shakespeare's Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary* (ed) Charles Hughes (London: Sherratt and Hughes, 1903), p. 457. Refers to Italy.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas Wilkie, *Ancient Customs and Ceremonies of the Lowland Scots* (1815), quoted in Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), p. 128.

- <sup>14</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood), p. 242.
- <sup>15</sup> For a discussion of nineteenth and twentieth century timing see Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 12-16; also F. Marian McNeill, *Silver Bough*, vol. 3 (Glasgow: MacLellan, 1961), pp. 23-4.
- <sup>16</sup> See eg 'Februarius' picture by Crispijn van der Passe, *Hollstein's Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca 1450-1700*, vol. XV, no 578 (ed) K. G. Boon and J. Verbreek (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger and Co [no date]), p. 201.
- <sup>17</sup> Guildhall Letter Book I fol. 223r from *Calendar of Letter-Books*; Martial d'Auvergne *Aresta Amorum LI Accuratissimis Benedicti Curtij Symphoniani commentarijs ...* (Lyons: Sebastian Gryphius, 1546), p. 422; A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 239- 240; M. McLeod Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*, vol. 2 (London: Folk Lore Society, 1939), p. 72.
- <sup>18</sup> Francis Merbury, *The Marriage Between Wit and Wisdom* (ed) Trevor S. Lennam (Malone Society Reprints; Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 27.
- <sup>19</sup> M. McLeod Banks, *British Calendar Customs: Scotland*, vol. 2 (London: Folk Lore Society, 1939), p. 69.
- <sup>20</sup> See Sarah Carpenter, 'Women and Carnival Masking', *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter*, 21:2 (1996), pp. 9-16.
- <sup>21</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 239, 241.
- <sup>22</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 163.
- <sup>23</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 240.
- <sup>24</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 163.
- <sup>25</sup> Falkirk Kirk Session Minutes, 1701, quoted Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 162-3.
- <sup>26</sup> Duncan Macara, *Crieff: Its Traditions and Characters, with Anecdotes of Strathearn*, quoted Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), pp. 133-4.
- <sup>27</sup> Dundee 1594 (in A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 174).
- <sup>28</sup> *The Statutes of the Realm, from original records and authentic manuscripts (1101-1713)*, printed by command of His Majesty King George the Third edited A. Luders and others, 12 vols, vol. 3 (London: Dawson's of Pall Mall for the Records Commission, 1810-1828; reprinted 1963), p. 30.
- <sup>29</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p. 282.
- <sup>30</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 163-4.
- <sup>31</sup> Except possibly in occasional allusions to *mumchance*, a term which in English derives from the dicing game associated with mumming. See eg A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh:

Blackwood, 1927), pp. 224, 277.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Hayward, *Galoshins: the Scottish Folk Play* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), passim.

<sup>33</sup> See eg Juliet Vale, *Edward III and Chivalry: Chivalric Society and its Context 1270–1350* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1982) esp Chapter 4.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Hall, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Houses of Lancaster and York* (ed) H. Ellis (London: J. Johnson, 1809), p. 513. This was a Christmas visit, despite the Maytime connotations of Robin Hood.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Hall, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Houses of Lancaster and York* (ed) H. Ellis (London: J. Johnson, 1809), p. 513; for accounts of similar ‘mummings’ see pp. 516, 595.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Hall, *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrious Houses of Lancaster and York* (ed) H. Ellis (London: J. Johnson, 1809), p. 513; for accounts of similar ‘mummings’ see pp. 516, 595.

<sup>37</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 314, 316, 318, 319, 321, 322.

<sup>38</sup> A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 324-5.

<sup>39</sup> *A Diurnall of Remarkable Occurrents that have passed within the Country of Scotland*, Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1833), p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> *A Diurnall of Remarkable Occurrents that have passed within the Country of Scotland*, Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1833), p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> *Inventaires de la Royne Descosse Douairiere de France* (ed) J. Robertson, Bannatyne Club (Edinburgh, 1863), p. 162.

<sup>42</sup> Elgin 1618 (A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 242).

<sup>43</sup> Glasgow 1583 (A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 245).

<sup>44</sup> Elgin 1594, Perth 1609 (A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), pp. 238, 282).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Chrysologus *Sermo CLV in Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 24B*, p. 964; also *Patrologia Latina* 52, p. 611.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (tran) Lydia G Cochrane (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).