

## The DUKE of CUMBERLAND and the MUMMERS

*Kevin Lodge, Eydon Mummers*

*One of the traditional pleasures of Christmas time was the arrival of the Mummers, whose anarchic pantomime fight between some hero like Saint George and his enemy, the Bold Slasher or the Turkish Knight, ended with the death of one of them, only for him to be brought back to life, after much 'business', by a quack Doctor. Until recently, if you asked the history of these plays, you would be told of pagan origins, with even hints of human sacrifice. If asked for evidence for this, an ahistorical mishmash of examples would be cited, from around the world and across time, without any explanation as to why or how these influenced Britain's Mummers' plays.*

Modern scholars of Mumming plays, mindful of the excesses of their predecessors, are wisely unwilling to go beyond what the written evidence can prove. Thus, although a history of Mumming in Britain can be traced back to ceremonies at the Royal Court at the time of King Richard II's reign in 1377, records of Mummers' plays only date back to the later Antiquarian period, from the middle to late eighteenth century. Although there is an argument (see Appendix) that this is more to do with the history of Antiquarian interest in popular culture rather than the history of the Mumming plays themselves, modern scholars are reluctant to concede that the plays originate much before 1750.

Current studies of a wide range of documents have now thrown much light on various aspects of Mumming during this later period, such as the influence of theatrical plays, of pantomimes and of the *commedia dell'arte*. They have not yet however identified the source of either of the two most characteristic features of the Mummers' plays: the formula "In comes I..." and the fight, death and bringing back to life again motif. Nor have they found evidence for the existence of the plays back beyond around 1750.

There is however, a class of records that seem to have been little used in these studies, the internal evidence in the collected plays themselves. Although, due to the process of oral transmission of the script from one generation of mummers to the next (think of Chinese whispers), some of the plays are gibberish, there are still themes, phrases and characters that