Masking with the Armagh Rhymers: Liminality and the Ritualesque

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the use of masks by the internationally acclaimed performance group, the Armagh Rhymers. The Armagh Rhymers are a charitable nonprofit comprised of talented musicians, dancers, and amateur actors who perform for children and adults in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and overseas. Their performances are based on the mumming tradition, a masked, rhyming folk-drama tradition featuring combat, death, and resurrection that was brought to Ireland from England in the seventeenth century. The group formed in the late 1970s to bring schoolchildren of Protestant and Catholic faiths together in one room during the Troubles, a period of intense sectarian violence that affected everyday life for all of Northern Irish society. To entertain audiences throughout the year, the Armagh Rhymers' expanded their repertoire to tell stories and to acknowledge the ritual calendar and special places.

My fieldwork from 2022 sheds light on the creation of their masks and the liminal experience of performing in a mask. The masks are spectacular, sculptural and memorable. Not only that, but the interactive nature of the Armagh Rhymers' performances brings audience members into the narrative in a way that encourages play. I argue that the liminality of performing in the Armagh Rhymers' masks, and the ritualesque elements that audience members participate in, allow for the transcendence of the self. This feature of transcendence and entrance into a play frame allowed for social healing in their early years, creating lifelong positive memories of neighbors from the other side of the sectarian divide.

KEYWORDS

Mumming; liminality; ritualesque; Northern Ireland; masks.

Masks are emblematic of the Irish mumming tradition. Irish mumming is a midwinter dramatic house-visiting tradition which focuses on a short play featuring combat, death, and resurrection. The tradition in Ireland originated in England, first appearing in areas of British settlement in the late 1600s. Despite colonial origins, mumming adopted uniquely Irish features with local variations, making it a Christmas tradition integral to many Irish communities, with the greatest concentration being in Ulster. Alan Gailey, a scholar who devoted his life to Irish mumming studies, states, "…If the plays were imported from England, they were later reworked into what can now only be called an Irish tradition" (Gailey 1969, 12). Mumming belongs to both British and Irish custom, which, as we shall see, made it a powerful opportunity to bring unity to the segregated society of Northern Ireland during the period of sectarian conflict known as the Troubles.[1] For centuries, small groups of mostly men and boys referred to as mummers or rhymers performed during the Christmas



Fig. 1. The death and resurrection scene of the mummers' play with the Fingal Mummers. Ballyboughal, North County Dublin, December 26, 2023. Photography by Ishmael Claxton.

season going door to door. There are elements of disguise, procession, verbal art and rhyme, traditional music and dance, comic tricks, luck-bringing, and money collection as the entertainment. (Fig. 1)

The play involves a cast of core characters, particularly a leader or Captain, two combatants, a Doctor, and a character that collects money. The combatants vaunt in rhyme and have a sword fight where one of them is slain, and a Doctor is called in to revive the dead with a litany of absurd cures and concoctions. Following the dramatic action is a procession of other characters who simply introduce themselves in nonsensical rhymes. There are standard characters documented in the archival plays I studied in the National Folklore Collection (NFC) at University College Dublin (UCD) and the Ulster Folk Museum (UFM), but they vary play by play, sometimes localizing in particular regions, and not all characters have a dramatic action of their own. Of these characters, usually the final one solicits money from the audience in their rhymes. Following the play is impromptu *céilí*-style entertainment,[2] such as traditional music, poetry recitations, dance, and song. Mumming is an oral tradition, with localized rhymes appearing in particular counties, but also chapbooks with printed scripts helped to expand and continue the tradition.[3] Mumming allows the community to come together convivially in the darkness of winter.

Masking is the most iconic feature of mumming. In my studies of six archival folklore collections from the twentieth into the twenty-first century in Ireland, 55% of the research participants report that their mummers wore masks, and 30% report that hats of some kind were worn. I learned in my 2022 fieldwork with Leitrim mummers that the masks were referred to as hats, so this might account for some of the use of the term hats. The collections I consulted to find these statistics were housed at the NFC and the UFM. The fact that information about masks was supplied without being asked about headwear indicates that it was so notable to the audiences of the tradition. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2. Mummers visiting a house in costume. NFC The Photographic Collection, H054.30.00183. Time and Festivals: Christmas. Jack Straw and Father Christmas. Photograph by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh. Ederney, Fermanagh. December 21, 2001.

According to my archival findings, descriptions by twentieth-century scholars such as Gailey and Henry Glassie, and testimonies of mumming revivalists that I interviewed, mummers in Ireland wore conical straw masks, often woven into plaits that allow the wearer to see through the gaps. Sometimes the masks would be paired with straw skirts and jackets or belts. Being a rural tradition, straw was readily available, but as time went on, other

costume materials became easier to access. The archives reveal that at times mummers wore hats with ribbons attached to cover the face. Sometimes hats with charcoal or face paint were used to disguise the wearer. Dressing according to character is a trend that began in the mid-twentieth century due to the availability of store-bought materials and Halloween masks. Many revival groups of mummers today stick closely to the tradition of using natural materials.

Glassie writes in *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming* that "The players were costumed. They spoke in rhyme and rann. Their entrance and exit, their appearance and sound, all removed them from daily life, welcoming a suspension of the usual, and calling attention to the play as an independent entity" (Glassie 1975, 60). Not only were masks prominent, but so was the disguising of the voice when lines were given. In neighbors' homes, sometimes the audience would guess who was under the masks, to much amusement. The masks defined the performers as such, differentiating them from the audience and clearing the way for the brief drama to unfold. Indeed, in my experience mumming as a fieldworker with the Fingal Mummers of North County Dublin in 2022, I noticed that the mask is what designates you as a performer, as giving the lines alone in a crowded pub room wasn't enough to create the carnivalesque atmosphere that mummers imbue.

Donning a mask puts the wearer into a performance persona before they even take the stage. Masks put the wearer in an in-between space, neither themselves nor entirely who they represent. Masks are liminal objects and are a significant part of the liminality in mumming. Mumming is a midwinter custom connected with the agricultural calendar, contributing to the notion of pagan origins of the tradition. Early mumming scholars were influenced by Sir James Frazer's myth-ritual theory, where they understood mumming to be the playful degradation of a solemn pre-Christian fertility ceremony. In the 25-minute documentary film shown to visitors at the Mummers' Museum in County Fermanagh, *Mummers, Masks, and Mischief,* Threase Finnegan-Kessie observes that pre-Christian burial tombs appear 10 times, symbolically leading the viewer to conclude that there is a connection between mumming and pre-Christian Ireland, an idea shared by the Aughakillymaude Mummers who are affiliated with the Museum (Finnegan-Kessie 2015, 63). However, recent studies, such as Peter Harrop's 2020 work on English mumming, emphasize the speculation of these arguments and refer to mumming as a secular dramatic custom deriving from secular sources rather than sacred ritual. So how have mummers in Northern Ireland invoked elements of liminality to expand the generic features and performance contexts of mumming into what they term ritual today, as compared to the hundreds of more conservative testimonies documented in the archives from the last century that never use the term ritual?

The Armagh Rhymers

In this article I will introduce you to the world-renowned Armagh Rhymers, mummers who made their art a full-time profession to intentionally combat the sectarianism in their society by invoking the carnivalesque and ritualesque elements of liminality and *communitas,* the merging of the Self with the Other in carnivalesque contexts, ultimately bringing Irish mumming to international audiences. I have been working with the Armagh Rhymers since 2016, visiting Ireland almost annually to conduct brief stints of fieldwork, conducting interviews and performing alongside them as an amateur actress. The Armagh Rhymers



Fig. 3. Portrait of the Armagh Rhymers, courtesy of the group.

are active educators of the tradition, and they welcomed me with open arms to study their work and enter their creative community. This chapter is based primarily on my January to June 2022 fieldwork in Armagh City,[4] where I conducted ethnographic interviews and participated in a range of dramatic performances that go beyond the mummers' play. To spend a year conducting fieldwork on mumming in Ireland, what a better way to learn about the tradition and its present iteration than with a group who performs mumming all year long as professionals who've made it their life's work. (Fig. 3)

The Armagh Rhymers formed in the 1970s in Armagh City, a location where mumming had a long tradition that declined. The original founders were Dara Vallely, Peter Shortall, and Brendan Bailey, and the core cast numbered to about seven performers. Peter and Brendan passed on before I met the group, but Dara remains the group's artistic director and agreed to interview with me well over a dozen times across nine years. I also regularly interviewed Anne Hart, the director, who joined the group after Peter and Brendan died, but supported the group throughout their earlier days as well. The artistic director makes creative decisions about what goes into the performances, whereas the director keeps track of communications and strategic plans of the group's mission. Dara is a prolific painter of mythology and often performs concertina while dressed as the sacred bull from local Ulster mythology or as the Irish sun god, Lúgh, whereas Anne performs as the locally celebrated horse goddess, Macha, and she cherishes this role. She does not consider herself a musician, but she often plays percussion on the horse's jawbone and sometimes on the bodhrán, the Irish ritual drum. Being community-minded, the Armagh Rhymers formed as a revival of their local tradition, looking to local scripts for inspiration. However, they had to greatly expand their dramatic repertoire, entertaining repeat audiences throughout the year. This was a natural

evolution, putting them on a more innovative end of a spectrum from traditional—performing folk dramas similar to what I found in early twentieth-century descriptions—to innovative practice that in some cases barely resembles mumming of the past only through the use of the same ritualesque features like masks and music. Some other revivalists[5] of the late twentieth century stuck more closely to the tradition than the Armagh Rhymers, but still brought their own innovations of characters and contexts to the hero-combat play documented in the archives. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. Anne Hart, director of the Armagh Rhymers, dressed in her costume as the local horse goddess Macha, performing at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium with the Roman Catholic St. Patrick's Cathedral in the background. June 21, 2022. Photograph by Ishmael Claxton.

Both Anne and Dara are Catholics who worked as schoolteachers before they brought mumming to school-children and the wider public. Anne speaks of the importance of the group's work in primary education and public education, having also worked in the education department at the Navan Centre, the visitor center at the nearby ancient ritual center, Emain Macha, also known as the Navan Fort, where they regularly perform. Anne grew up with a deep interest in China and Irish mythology and wrote her own play combining these interests, *The Navan Dragon,* which the Armagh Rhymers used to perform. Anne's reason for being a member of the Armagh Rhymers is central to the mission of the group. She explains,

> This is a group that had an ethical basis and part of that was to bring factions together here, to be a part of the peace process. That's what attracted me. Irish music, of course, I like it. But I certainly wouldn't have put the work and time into the Rhymers over the last thirty years than if it had been just a music group. I would have spent my volunteer time doing something else (Hart, Interview 3, 04/07/22, 2:21).

Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh sheds light on the fact that mumming performed before, during, and after the Troubles has been one of Northern Ireland's extremely rare cross-community customs. He remarks, "Indeed, it seems often to have been an important feature of mumming that representatives of the minority religion in a given area be invited to participate with majority religion groups in an effort to promote social cohesion" (Mac Cárthaigh 2007, 159). Additionally, there is evidence that mumming has often been applied to charitable causes in previous decades. In archival evidence from the early twentieth-century, there are rare examples of money being donated to the poor in the district. Money collected by the mummers would be used to pay for a dance at the end of mumming season, bringing the whole community together, but from the mid-twentieth century onward, mummers more often than not applied their income to local or international charities. In the later half of the twentieth-century, mummers expanded their routes to include more public settings like community centers and pubs, visiting homes much less frequently, a pattern that the Armagh Rhymers follow.

The Armagh Rhymers' Masks

The Armagh Rhymers today are a folk performance and charitable nonprofit, with a handful of core members and many performers who join in for one-off events. Perhaps nothing is more impressive about the Armagh Rhymers than their fantastic straw and wicker basket-style masks, which cover the head all the way to the shoulders. They also wear hats and face masks that only cover the face, but these are used only by a few people and more rarely. In their collection, they have a number of traditional straw conical masks, some braided and some with loose straw. They provided me with a list of the thirty masks in their collection, which they've named as follows: Dragon, Wren, Horse, Devil, Leather nose, Lá Lúgh (referencing the Irish sun god), Pig, St Patrick, Brown Bull, Willow Point nose, Macha (the Irish horse goddess from whom Armagh takes its name), Chinese Man, Celtic Cross, Heron, Jester, Conical stripped willow, Fionn, St Bridget, Conical Ribbon, Angry Man, White Bull, Harvest, Small Deer, Happy Man, Work Horse, Giant Blue Beard, Large Deer, Telephone Man, Cromwell, and Unicorn. These masks are mostly figurative and differ widely from the traditional homemade mummers' mask meant only to disguise the face. Some of the masks personify elements of Irish folklore, such as the Irish gods or patron saints, which is not a feature found historically in mumming. The sculptural masks are a creative innovation by the Armagh Rhymers and their mask makers.



Fig. 5. James Mulholland crafting a basket. Photograph courtesy of the Armagh Rhymers.

The first mask maker for the Armagh Rhymers was James Mulholland. Dara Vallely discovered Mullholland's work at the Gate Inn in Craigavon where his elaborately made wicker horse was displayed on the wall, with a moveable jaw, in the style of hobby horses. Dara asked about the maker and ultimately, he was invited to Mullholland's house in Aghagallon. Mulholland grew the willow that he used in his craft on his farm. Dara commissioned his first mask from him, a horse head with a moveable jaw. His next mask was a conical mask. He asked for a bull mask to represent the sacred brown bull from the *Táin*, local Ulster mythology. The horse mask was meant to represent the horse goddess Macha for whom Armagh is named. The horse and bull are staples in the Armagh Rhymers' performances to this day. James Mulholland created about a dozen of their sculptural wicker masks. (Fig. 5)

Dara's primary contemporary mask makers are Bob Johnson and Paul Carvel. Bob Johnson studied with the mask makers Alison Fitzgerald and Joe Hogan and began making wicker sculptures in 2000. I interviewed both Bob Johnson and Paul Carvel. Interestingly, these mask makers find different motivations for doing the work they do. Carvel is interested in the way that mask-making connects to folklore, being an avid collector of local folk poetry, and Johnson is interested in the technicality of the craft, challenging himself to create ever more elaborate designs.

Bob Johnson

I met Bob Johnson in May 2023 at his studio at the UFM in Cultra, Northern Ireland, where he was making traditional straw conical masks for a wedding scene with strawboys (a related masked Gaelic custom performed at weddings) for an Irish horror film. Bob's workshop is open to the visitors of the UFM, allowing the public to try on masks and admire his wicker sculptures, as well as to learn about the process of making them as I did in my interview. Bob was inspired by the Armagh Rhymers' masks by James Mulholland. Bob does very little straw work, even though that's what he was working on during my visit. Bob is from Bangor, Antrim and he was trained as a textile weaver where he was able to work with basket weavers who use willow, the primary material that he works with. He finds weaving textiles and weaving willow to be similar crafts, except you don't need a loom for willow and the material is so much firmer. Half of the willow that he uses comes from the land of the UFM, which is an open-air living history museum. The rest is shipped in from commercial growers from Somerset in the UK (Johnson, 05/07/23, 14:26). (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6. Bob Johnson in his studio making straw mummers' masks, May 7, 2023. Photograph by the author.

When it comes to working with willow, he says,

> It's a constant challenge. You're always looking to improve, or to learn something to develop. There's no such thing as a perfect basket. So it's quite nice if you can see faults and flaws and ways to improve it. To be honest, I try to focus on what's wrong with it rather than step back and see what I like about it (Johnson, 05/07/23, 39:08).

It takes a couple weeks of soaking in water to make the willow flexible, but at that point it's very forgiving to work with. It could take anything from a couple of hours to a couple of days to make a mask or sculpture. He explains that you must work from the bottom to the top for structure, and that you can end up spending most time on the detail at the top, which is risky, because you could end up ruining your hard work of the base if something goes wrong. "The more unusual the shape, the more of a challenge it is. Certainly, the sculptural side of it does interest me greatly" (Johnson, 05/07/23, 08:21). Indeed, as one of my other research participants discusses later, they can be thought of as living sculptures.

Paul Carvel

I met Paul Carvel at Aonach Mhacha, Armagh City's Irish cultural center, at an event for St. Brigid's Day[6] in 2022, where he helped a class of children create St. Brigid's crosses out of rushes. After the event ended, he continued to make use of the rushes to create a pile of St. Brigid's crosses. We talked over a tea, and I helped to make a few of my own, where he

taught me a couple of techniques. Paul is from Lurgan, County Armagh, and usually works with straw and more recently rye grass, not willow, although he has used it on occasion. He grows rushes and oat straw in his yard. He learned straw craft from his grandfather who lived on a farm by a bog where they collected turf. Paul has been making masks for thirty-two years and has made masks for wren boys (another related midwinter masking tradition found in Gaelic heritage) and folk performers in the US. Just like Johnson, he challenges himself to create sculptural designs. His latest creation is a St. Brigid's mask which features a woman's face, and he's also created a mask that Dara often wears, a mask of the Irish sun god, Lúgh. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 7. Paul Carvel and his masks and *críos bride* for the Armagh Rhymers, February 1, 2022. Photograph by the author.

Paul has been making masks for the Armagh Rhymers for ten years, mostly conical masks with a variety of ornamentations. He commented that he makes the masks for himself as well as for Dara. He explains, "If you don't put yourself totally into them, the standard slips… The standard is something you're setting for yourself" (Carvel, 02/01/22, 28:19). You must start with the base and factor in how the mask will balance on the shoulders. Once the base is made, you can start becoming more creative, producing more sculptural works like his face of St. Brigid.

Paul explains that he is particularly inspired by Irish folklore and that he does his work for his community, the music, the songs, and poetry, saying that it's "the whole package," meaning that it integrates a variety of Irish folklore genres (Carvel, 02/01/22, 47:18). He explains that poetry and mythology inspire him, saying, "The spoken word drives your imagination" (Carvel, 02/01/22, 54:56). He recited some lines that Dara often performs.[7] He feels that the "soul of humanity" can be found in poetry (Carvel, 02/01/22, 55:49, 58:25). He has been collecting folk poetry in County Armagh for the last thirty years and is compiling his findings into a book. Besides poetry, Celtic holidays influence his works, just as he was celebrating Imbolc with the children and the Armagh Rhymers.

Ritual Work

So how have the Armagh Rhymers put these fantastic masks to use? Masks disguise the wearer and free the performers from social norms, creating an opportunity for carnivalesque social inversion and communitas. The founders of the Armagh Rhymers' knew of the carnivalesque community-building effects of mumming which they performed in their youth and decided to put it to work to unite their divided society. Dara grew up mumming like his father in a mixed community of Protestants and Catholics. The Armagh Rhymers formed in the late 1970s in response to their social situation, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a period of

violent sectarian unrest that affected every aspect of daily life from the 1970s until after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

During the Troubles, the sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics colored the social and political landscape and affected all members of society throughout their daily lives. To this day, there are neighborhoods in Northern Ireland that are segregated along religious lines, and additionally most public schools are designated as Catholic schools or state schools, with state schools being Protestant. The Protestants who identify their heritage as being British seek to maintain their identity as part of the United Kingdom, the Unionist viewpoint, whereas the Catholic population with Irish ancestry seeks to acknowledge the Northern Irish counties as part of the island of Ireland, the Nationalist viewpoint. The Nationalist viewpoint is that Ireland should unite all its counties into the Republic of Ireland.

Most of the people who died during the Troubles were civilians, slightly more so than paramilitary members or soldiers. Many roads were blocked to inspect cars for bombs. Bombs, killings, and assaults were frequent realities. Local shootings were the most frequent cause of death. Many killings were "tit for tat" revenge killings on both sides. It was difficult to trust strangers and even neighbors, and this fact of life made mumming a risky activity. Over the course of the thirty-some years that the Troubles took place, over 3,000 people died and over 47,000[8] were injured (Wallenfeldt 2024).

In my own fieldwork with the Armagh Rhymers, the topic of the Troubles appears prevalently, mostly coming up in private conversations with Dara. With the onset of Brexit, new conversations and concerns arose around the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The news was always on the television when I visited Dara and his wife, the director of the Armagh Rhymers, Anne Hart. I would frequently listen to memories of the Troubles over dinner or in the long car rides to performances. Memories of the Troubles are connected to places that once were sites of tension. There are some remnants of the Troubles in everyday life in Armagh.

Dara began his career teaching in an elementary school, where he developed the idea of bringing mumming to schools where children could socialize and play no matter what their political affiliation. He formed the original group with his friends, not particularly as a mumming group like other revivalists, but as a workers' cooperative aiming at uniting schoolchildren of both faiths in Northern Ireland through the enactment of the mummers' play. Not only did it help the children, but it was a break for the teachers and it combatted the mass unemployment of young men during the Troubles. Dara knew that mumming was about more than just the spectacle of the masks and the drama for a passive audience. As Ray Cashman argues, the audiences perform neighborly reciprocity during the mummers' house visit: "Audience members are themselves performers, in a sense: they enact an ethic of reciprocal exchange and hospitality" (Cashman 2007, 52). Mumming contested the dark days of winter, bringing distant neighbors into an exchange of entertainment, and Dara saw that this ethos could be called forth to combat dreary days at school in a time when their society was at basically at war. In other studies, we learn that the Armagh Rhymers were not the only mummers interested in bridging the sectarian divide in response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

For example, in Cashman's study in Aghyaran, Fermanagh in the early 2000s, we learn that the Aghyaran Mummers performed for both Protestant and Catholic audiences in their neighborhoods, which was common for other mumming groups in the North. The *Room to Rhyme* Collection at the NFC, an ethnographic folklore collection project that explores the cross-border and cross-community nature of mumming, spearheaded by the NFC archivist Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh in 2001, demonstrates that there were cross-community aspects



Fig. 8. The Armagh Rhymers processing at Brynn Celli Ddu Burial Chamber in Wales over the 2025 Solstice weekend. Photograph courtesy of Rebecca Lampert.

in all eleven mumming groups studied in the border counties. Cashman explains, "Whether as mummer or audience member, participation in the tradition does much more than afford *cross*-community contact. Participation in mumming helps to re-establish *community,* as the higher ideal and more ambitious project whose time has come again" (Cashman 2007, 56). Through the liminality of masks, the playfulness of rhyming folk drama, and the conviviality of live music and dance, communities normally engaged in merely civil relations could see each other as friends. (Fig. 8)

Dara envisioned the mummers' play being extended to include interactive elements that would bring the children into the drama, taking turns in the action to the entertainment of their classmates and neighbors. The Armagh Rhymers were the only traveling dramatic performers in the country in their early days. They used mumming to create change in their society, seeing that mumming had long been a source of cross-community connection, belonging to both Catholic and Protestant tradition. The Armagh Rhymers expanded their performance repertoire to include various stories, using poetry, music and dance, and ritual elements like fire jumping to bring people together through play and *communitas.* The Armagh Rhymers and other mummers I have met in Northern Ireland think of what they do as ritual and have expanded the tradition into new contexts like sacred sites featured in Irish mythology. Being fully devoted to the tradition, Dara is well versed in the early literature on mumming by scholars like E. K. Chambers (1964), Alan Gailey (1969), Alex Helm (1980) and E.T. Kirby (1971), who identify mumming as a ritual with ancient pagan origins. Dara has also memorized dozens of poems that he writes down in a notebook to reflect back on so that

he remains word-perfect. Poetry recitation is a tradition in Ireland that Dara inspired in his students when he was a teacher. An example of a verse that he regularly recites is by John Montague's "Like Dolman's Round my Childhood, the Old People":

> Ancient Ireland, indeed!
> I was reared by her bedside,
> The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
> Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
> Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
> For years they trespassed on my dreams,
> Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
> I felt their shadows pass
> Into that dark permanence of ancient forms (Montague 1967, 213).

A clip of an early Armagh Rhymers' performance involving poetry recitation can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-w1Xmkp13WU.

For the Armagh Rhymers, the use of the word "ritual" gives them more creative license to adapt mumming to new contexts, such as the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium for musical fire-jumping for the staff on the summer solstice. Mumming as documented in the archives never involves fire-jumping at the solstice, a calendrical purity rite, only sharing similarity in that mumming is a calendar custom with elements of luck-bringing to those visited. An example of the Armagh Rhymers' calendar for the half-year I spent with them is as follows:

> Zoom mummers' play for The National Museum of Ireland
> Lunch break music, dance, and rhyme at a meeting at the Northern Irish Assembly
> St. Brigid's Day children's workshop at Armagh's cultural center
> Twenty primary school interactive bilingual storytelling visits for St. Patrick's month
> St. Patrick's Day Parade
> Urban Orchards ritual for tourists at St. Patrick's Cathedral gardens, Armagh City
> Children's strolling interactive performances and activities at Hillsboro Castle for Easter
> Music indoors at a local cultural night in Armagh City
> Sky Productions comedy fire-jumping film set at Emain Macha (sacred site) for May Day
> Mick Moloney tour bus stop ritual with Maypole dancing at Emain Macha
> Music and dance at a local children's barn dance night
> Film set at Beaghmore Stone Circles (sacred site)
> Confucius Institute Chinese Tea Ceremony at Armagh's cultural center
> Staff fire-jumping summer solstice ritual at Armagh Observatory and Planetarium
> Musical entertainment for a local care home visit

As you can see from this list, they only performed one mummers' play in the entire time that I spent with them. All of their other shows were original productions that involved elements of mumming like masks, costumes, poetry recitation, traditional rhyme, dramatic action, music, song, and dance. Dara has expressed to me that he sees everything that they do as "mumming," directly connected to the house-visiting tradition, but also he said to the group as they were preparing for the Zoom mummers' play and the Beaghmore Stone Circles film set, "Remember this is a ritual." He said this to emphasize the quality of the background in the Zoom play, and also to highlight the importance of ritualesque features like references

to mythology in the poetry chosen and the use of local songs for the filming. Throughout the year there are dozens of children's school visits that involve interactive storytelling with music and dance, their most common activity. Many of these plays are bilingual English and Irish to normalize the use of Irish in their society. While they may not perform the mummers' play during occasional visits to private homes, they perform music in friends' homes and at gravestones of friends, following the house-visiting element of the custom more in line with the Gaelic wren boy tradition which doesn't involve drama. Weddings are a frequent activity for the group, the setting where straw boys (another masking tradition derived from Gaelic heritage) would perform, although there were none during my extended stay. Their variety of contexts and creative productions highlights a desire to think about mumming as ritual, in a way that, as far as we know from hundreds of archival testimonies, it wasn't conceptualized by those who practiced the tradition un-self-consciously decades ago before the biggest revival period of the 1970s and 1980s (although there is evidence of many rises and falls in the popularity of mumming throughout the last century). The term ritual establishes a new a connection between masking and Celtic spirituality. In Ireland, mumming has long been associated with the Gaelic masking customs of the wren boys, who also perform house visits at midwinter, and strawboys at weddings, both of whom entertain through music and traditional rhyme. We can think of these customs as rites of passage marking change in social status for the community and the individual. Ritual in the scholarly sense produces change in society and rites of passage in particular reduce harm in the state of transition. Mumming performed historically and in some cases to this day, like the related wren boy tradition, marks the seasonal change between fall and winter, bringing the community together at a time when it might drift apart.

The Armagh Rhymers have applied the liminal and carnivalesque features of mumming to create performances that functioned to heal their divided society. The Armagh Rhymers applied mumming to new contexts like schools, using rhymes found in their local library's archive, performing in quick costume changes as a procession of unrelated characters, some of whom engage in brief moments of dramatic action, and Irish traditional music to create interactive performances geared towards influencing a sectarian society in positive, groundbreaking ways. In this way, while not being the relic of an ancient pagan ritual, indeed mumming marks seasonal change and has been applied to ritual purposes and taken on ritual features.

Catherine Bell considers the characteristics of ritual to be formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacred symbolism, and performance (Bell 1997, xiv). These characteristics usually apply in elite institutionalized formal contexts. We can see echoes of rule-governance and in some cases sacredness in the Armagh Rhymers' ritualesque performaces, and mumming is traditional and performative, but it is not, as we have seen, invariant or formal, meaning that scholars would hesitate to think of mumming strictly as a ritual. Jack Santino references Mikhail Bakhtin's term the carnivalesque in his 2011 article where he introduces the term the ritualesque. He explains,

> We recognize the carnivalesque in the festivity, but the ritualesque lies in the performative use of symbols—images, music, movement—to effect social change. Just as there are events that are not fully carnival but share some features with carnival, so too are there events that are not fully ritual but share important features with ritual (Santino, 2011, 62).

As I learned in my interview with the Armagh Rhymers' director, children who participate in and watch their play, "Fionn MacCool and the Scottish Giant," are aware of social

symbols that validate the distinct identities of being Protestant or Catholic, giving them the impression that the play is relevant to them no matter which background they are coming from, and allowing them to see the connection with the other side of the sectarian divide, which exists in subtle ways even contemporarily. Anne explains, "Even young children are aware of [the cultural politics] here," as the tartan worn by the Scottish Giant symbolizes Protestant heritage, while the use of the Irish language references Catholic heritage, adding that children will think to themselves, "This is a play I can watch..." (Hart, 04/07/2022, 21:27).

A clip about the Armagh Rhymers' interactive drama for Northern Irish children can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t8gL2oOyBY.

The Armagh Rhymers perform mumming year-round for a variety of contexts, occasionally marking special days throughout the year such as the St. Brigid's Day event where I met Paul Carvel. Mumming with the Armagh Rhymers has the ritualesque feature of *communitas* that they bring to their interactive performances. For decades, the Armagh Rhymers have fascinated audiences with their masks and brought people together through the play frames and performative symbols that Santino refers to with his term ritualesque.

While mumming typically only involves audience participation at the end, the Armagh Rhymers invite the audience to take part in the theatrical entertainment as well. The playful interaction of the audience inspires connection between mixed Protestant and Catholic audiences, drawing on the element of *communitas* found in the house visiting tradition. By referring to their work as ritual work, the Armagh Rhymers free themselves from the conventions of the hero-combat / death-and-resurrection play and the context of neighbors' homes, elements of mumming that are emblematic of the genre historically, to expand what their shows involve and accomplish. Through their work we can see the expansion of the genre on a spectrum of traditional to innovative, with their mumming-inspired performances being at the extreme end of the tradition. One factor in expanding the genre of mumming is the nature of revival, where the tradition is being brought back to meet specific contemporary needs like the celebration of place and community. The Armagh Rhymers draw on the ritualesque elements of mumming to create their original interactive performances, particularly masking, dancing, and verbal art.

Masking with the Armagh Rhymers

Masks are integral to all of the Armagh Rhymers' performances, and I was able to learn more about the intentions and experiences of masking with the group through my archival and ethnographic research. In the *Room to Rhyme* questionnaire of 2001, a survey issued by the NFC as part of the larger ethnographic project, Dara explains that the purpose of the mask for the Armagh Rhymers is to "reveal the character represented." In this sense, the masks are more part of the costume than a disguise. This fits with the trend in the broader archival evidence that costumes became more fitted to the individual characters in the mid-twentieth century. They have a couple half-masks that fit tightly over the face. However, while some modern mummers' costumes involve Halloween masks with monstrous faces, the Armagh Rhymers use mostly hand-made masks of natural materials.

The Armagh Rhymers' short documentary film from 2007, *Na Cleamairí (The Mummers)*, discusses the experience of wearing masks. Dara says,

> The wearing of the masks is part of the tradition. Masks have survived intact over the years. Anyone not familiar with the mummers would get a fright jumping into a group of otherworldly looking creatures. The most important feature of the mummers is the mask. Wearing a mask is quite a silly thing to do. We're clowns in a way, but there might be a magical element to it too (Vallely 2007).

Dara's suggestion that there might be a magical element too is something I experienced when I first met the group in 2016 at the festival of Lughnasa at Emain Macha, an ancient sacred site near Armagh, where I experienced ego death, or an out-of-body experience where I felt that I transcended my consciousness beyond my present life, in meditation with drumming following an hour of masked dancing with the group, which I described in detail in a previous publication (Tatem 2016, 34-44). In *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, Maya Deren explains that drumming has a powerful out-of-body effect on ritual dancers through the concentration and relaxation of the rhythm (Deren 1953, 242). I felt very tense and anxious during my dancing with the Armagh Rhymers, as I wasn't used to performing, and then went immediately into a relaxed state with drumming, which I imagine caused my shift in consciousness.

From this experience I know the power of a mask to pave the way for an experience of transcendence. In *Dan Ge Performances: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire*, Daniel Reed's research participant says about masking in the Dan tradition that

> From the instance that he places himself behind the mask, he becomes different. He is inhabited by wisdom, he is transported, he transcends, and at that moment, he becomes at the same time the physical mask that you see, and he becomes at the same time, spirit. (Gueu Gbe 1997) (Reed 2003, 87)

This is not a typical experience with the Armagh Rhymers, in fact, it has never happened before or since, as far as the group knows. I see that this performance and meditation ceremony was my initiation into the study of Irish mumming. Reed's primary research participant reports that an altered state of consciousness led to his initiation into working with masks (Reed 2003, 85), and also considers his involvement in the author's fieldwork as part of his initiation (Reed 2003, 216). It would be interesting in a future study to interview audience members at their Celtic-spiritualty-themed events like the annual Lughnasa festival where I encountered transcendence to learn if anyone could comment on the performance's influence on their spiritual state or perspectives.

Ray Dunne, a former Armagh Rhymer, appears in the film saying, "As soon as you put that mask on…The mask has a way of changing your normal self into this character and when you have these masks on, these costumes, you can be mad as you want to be." Deaglan Mac Thréinfhír, a man who I met at a book signing in Armagh, says in the film, "The first time I wore a mask it took me by surprise. What am I doing with this thing on my head? I thought it was probably a good thing… I could do the silliest things. So I take on a different persona." Masks affect the wearer as much as the audience, and in this section, I hope to give you a sense of what it's like to wear one of the Armagh Rhymers' masks from the point of view of contemporary performers and my own participant-observation.

Besides community building in the school system, sometimes the Armagh Rhymers are invited to lighten the mood at professional and political events through their carnivalesque performances. In the car on the way to a performance at a lunch meeting at the Northern Irish Assembly, Stormont, I asked their star performer Annie June Callaghan to give me some advice on performing, as it had been a couple years since I'd done anything with the Armagh Rhymers, and I felt nervous. Performing reminded me of my experience with teaching, but

without any content to share and without being able to use my face, I realized I was up against a different challenge. Fortunately, Annie was brimming with advice, some of which I recorded when I realized that it was amazing ethnographic material besides being a good pep talk. (Fig. 9)

Annie was born in Armagh, spending five years there, and grew up in Roslea, Fermanagh. She feels as though she is from both places and was raised Catholic. Annie is a couple generations younger than Anne and Dara. Annie's mother was an interior designer consultant for her community. Annie says that she was always interested in "textures and patterns and colors" and when she was younger, she was interested in fabrics and costume design and made all her own clothes (Callaghan, 05/04/22, Interview 1, 2:30). Her mother encouraged her creativity, and she went to art school in Belfast at age eighteen. She then lived in Wales to study fine art and in Bristol to study illustration. It was during her time in Bristol that she discovered the masks of the Armagh Rhymers in an ad for a performance. She says,



Fig. 9. Annie June Callaghan playing guitar and bell for the summer solstice performance at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, with the author and James McKee in the background. June 21, 2022. Photograph by the Ishmael Claxton.

> They were really striking. And I just felt a real draw...When I saw the Armagh Rhymers' masks, it just captured my imagination of everything that I've been, all these things have interested me over the years. So then I started drawing the masks (Callaghan, 05/04/22, Interview 1, 3:00-6:27).

Dara refers to Annie as an animator, someone who brings the show to life. Annie plays guitar and tin whistle, sings a variety of children's songs and folk songs, dances with ribbons and other props, and performs mime and dramatic roles. She also makes puppets for the group and creates all her own costumes rather than borrowing from the Armagh Rhymers' collection. The experience of wearing a wicker mask or straw mask is different than that of wearing a face mask that has slots for the eyes. She explains,

> With a mask that is sitting on your shoulders, it feels like you're in a world. Whereas if there's a mask straight against your face, then you still have most of your vision. It might be a little bit impaired around the outside, but it's coming over your face and it's pressed against your face, whereas if you're in a basket or in a straw mask, it is like you're in a little inner world and you can just see the woven straw. And you just see sort of patches of the world, patches of the environment. Which is a cool way to see the place because you know that people don't know who you are, so they're not looking at your face or your eyes. They're looking at your form, and that captures the imagination, because you've changed your form. You don't know if you're a man or a woman or a child or an animal (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 4:19).

She explained that you "just hold your space" (Callaghan, 03/04/2022, 12:35). Wearing the mask alters your sense of space and slows down your ability to move. I said that I will try to dance to the music, but she suggested that, "The music can lead you astray" (Callaghan, 03/04/22, 13:08). Annie explains that it is not important to move with the music, but rather that you don't want to make sudden movements. You want to make subtle movements that are independent of what's going on around you. She describes the person in the mask as a "living sculpture." She says in a later interview,

> You become like a vessel or a mediator. You're not yourself. You can be disoriented. You lose some of your senses spatially. So you have to be really aware of yourself and your surroundings, especially when you're on stage, and there's bright lights. You're out in sort of unfamiliar places. So you kind of have to really know the lay of the land (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 0:44).

I recall wearing the mask at Stormont and being careful not to bump into the audience members who were sitting all around the performance in the banquet hall. You can only see through the slats in the wicker. She explains that it affects your hearing as well. The mask affects your sense of spatial orientation and can muffle the sounds around you. She elaborates,

> It requires you to slow down. You can't be sort of ahead of yourself. You have to be really present, aware of where you are, and aware of every move that you're making. You can't walk because you're sort of debilitated a wee bit. Visually, if you're wearing a full mask over your head, your hearing can be distorted. And then, it depends on the room as well. If the music's loud, and there's shouting, cheering, and clapping, and you're moving around, and the sound is always changing, that can be disorientating as well (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 1:37).

Annie performs regularly in and out of masks, so I asked her how performing in one of the Armagh Rhymers' masks compares to performing without one. She explains,

> I think you can focus more on the lines or the music or the song when you're not wearing a mask. When you are wearing a mask for me because you haven't got eye contact, you haven't got your facial expression. So all you can do is kind of tune into the voice, or tune into the notes. That's all you have really. With a mask on you, you're a sculpture, you're sort of like a half, half animal, half human sculpture. And you've kind of lost a bit of your humanity. So there's something magical about that (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 2:56).

Annie expresses that the slowed-down pace that the mask requires came as a surprise to her initially. She says,

> At the beginning when I was wearing the mask, I thought that I could be really animated and moving around. I thought that that would lend itself to the character but then I realized that it doesn't. Just because you've a mask on doesn't mean that you need to be moving and doing all this action. There's beauty in that too, that playfulness but then just holding your character still in the space is also equally as powerful, not feeling like you have to overcompensate because you haven't got a face. Being still and owning your position and your skirt and your form (Callaghan, 06/15/22, 6:24).

Annie mentioned more than once that there is something significant about wearing one of the Armagh Rhymers' wicker and straw masks in that it changes your form. Face coverings might get rid of one's facial expressions, but the basket-style masks can transform

the upper body into a different shape. I related to her experience of feeling like you need to overcompensate for a lack of having a face. While you no longer have your own face, you indeed have a new face, and this speaks for itself.

Another member of the Armagh Rhymers in 2022, Larry Harte, spoke to me about wearing a particular black hat when he was performing rock music in his early years as a musician. He feels that, like the mask, the hat brought him into his stage persona. Now the Heron mask does that for him. He explains that even if you're having a bad day, once you put on that hat or mask, you are "in the zone" and you "leave all that behind" to put yourself "100% into the gig" (Harte, 04/28/22). He wears the new Heron mask regularly, but he finds a connection to previous performers when he wears the older masks on occasion.

Dara argues that disguise is essential and explains that performers must use the masks to disguise their height and practice a different walk or strut from their everyday comportment so as not to be recognized. He explains that because there are no facial expressions in the performance, body language is the most important element. He says, "The dash backward and forward, the quick turning of the head…thrashing the ground with a stick" create the drama (*Room to Rhyme* questionnaire, 2001). It was also important for the other members of the cast to sit or stand perfectly still while someone takes the floor.



Fig. 10. The Armagh Rhymers preparing for their procession on the summer solstice at the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium, 2022. Dara Vallely, founder and artistic director of the group stands in the center without his mask. To the left are Larry Harte and Barry Lynch and to the right is Anne Hart as Macha with James Mckee who holds a replica of one of the horns found in the nearby archaeological site, Emain Macha. These props demonstrate how the Armagh Rhymers incorporate local mythology and folklore into their performances. Photograph by Ishmael Claxton.

Conclusion

Mumming with the Armagh Rhymers allows performers to connect with their audience in entertaining ways, with humor, music, dance, and stories. The play frame that is established through elements of carnival and ritual such as masking and clowning allows mummers to step outside of their usual persona and take on a dramatic persona, taking the role of a fool, a character, a dancer, or a musician. In Northern Ireland particularly, the interactive

element found at the end of mummers' plays, or during the action with the Armagh Rhymers, brings people of both sides of the political divide together in creative ways into a mode of communitas. The Armagh Rhymers capitalized on this function of mumming to become first a workers' cooperative and later a charitable nonprofit that is ever expanding in their novel performance contexts and the content of their mummers' plays and mumming-inspired performances.

The Armagh Rhymers incorporate these ritualesque and carnivalesque features into original creative performances that invite *communitas* between mummers, musicians, and audience members. Not only do they share the mumming tradition with audiences, but also other elements of Irish folklore like legends and straw craft in their live performances. This puts their work at the end of a spectrum from traditional to innovative, expanding their mumming practice into one of invented rituals as compared to the house visiting hero-combat plays documented in the archives from the last century. (Fig. 10)

Mumming has long been a unique cross-community custom, but one that the Armagh Rhymers specifically mobilized to bring about social change during and after the Troubles. I argue that the liminality found in the masking element of mumming allows people of both faiths to relax their regular persona and take on a playful one that invites them to celebrate their common humanity. By referring to mumming as an ancient and ongoing ritual tradition, the Armagh Rhymers implicate a sense of wonder in masks and highlight their ability to transcend modern problems. The Armagh Rhymers highlight the role of masks cross-culturally, making them Irish representatives in the global context of masked performances, that allow for transcendence of the self through masked drama.

NOTES

1. The Troubles refers to the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 where bombs and killings were part of everyday life, initiated by paramilitary groups on both sides. The Protestant/Unionist side wanted Northern Ireland to remain in the United Kingdom, and the Catholic/Nationalist side wanted Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland.

2. A céilí is an informal gathering in Ireland.

3. Below is a version of a popular mummers' rhyme found in plays both historically and contemporarily: "Here comes I, wee Beelzebub / Over my shoulder I carry a club, / In my hand a frying pan / I think myself a fine wee man" (Heaney 2004, 7).

4. Armagh City is a medium-sized town in the south of Northern Ireland with a population of roughly 16,300. It is known as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, in ancient times being visited widely at the ritual center just outside its limits, Emain Macha, and today boasting of two cathedrals that are the seats of the Primates of All Ireland for the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland.

5. For example, the Sidh Gaoth Mummers of Sligo, the Fingal Mummers of North County Dublin, and the Aughakillymaude Mummers of Fermanagh took a more conservative approach to reviving mumming in their areas.

6. This holiday for one of Ireland's patron saints has pre-Christian origins as a feast of a fertility goddess, Brigid, known as Imbolc, marking the halfway point between the solstice and the equinox.

7. John Montague's "Like Dolmens Around My Childhood, The Old People": "Ancient Ireland indeed, I was reared by her bedside."

8. https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#05.

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