



Stories About Face Paint

There are many stories about face paint. As a person with a painted face, there will come a time, sooner or later, when someone asks you about it. Here are some stories that you might hear, and some that you might tell.

Story Number One:

“There was once upon a time when the dancers performed in the manner of going around the houses of the rich people, and “performing” outside their front doors in a raucous, noisy, uncouth way, until the householders paid them money to go away. They disguised themselves by rubbing soot on their faces, so that their employer / landlord / local dignitary would not recognise them, and thus they avoided getting into trouble.”

This story may describe something that did actually happen, but it surely does not explain the origin or the meaning of the face paint. You can be fairly sure that the “disguise” was thin, and the dignitaries would be expected to enter into the spirit of the joke, and “pretend” not to recognise the noisy rabble.

There is a similar tradition in the village of Llanwrtyd Wells in Powys, where a “Mari Lwyd” (a horse skull on a stick, held by a mystery person hiding under a blanket) goes around the houses and demands whisky. Crowds of villagers and visitors follow the Mari Lwyd with burning torches. There is a big bonfire at the end, and everyone gets drunk. (They also host the World Bog-Snorkelling Championships, but that’s another story).

Story Number Two:

“In Spain, they have a traditional dance which is a re-enactment of the wars between the Muslim Kingdom of Granada, and the Christian Kingdom of Aragon & Castile, which came to a conclusion in 1492, when Granada was defeated. The Muslims and Jews then had a choice between death, forced conversion to Christianity, or being driven out, to Morocco.

This triumph of Christianity is celebrated in a dance in which half the dancers have black face paint, and the other half have white face paint. No prizes for guessing who is who. At some point in the 15th Century, the dance found its way to England, maybe with Katherine of Aragon, when she came to marry Henry VIII. The “Moorish” dance became known as the “Morris” dance, and the rest is history.”

...or not...

There may be some truth in this. We don’t know what happened to the white-faced half of the side, and the “Moors & Christians” dance that they do in Spain is not much like the Morris that we know today. This is a story in which the black-painted faces did originally portray actual African people, so it is something that is rather an embarrassment.

The evidence that this is not the origin of face-paint in Morris is that early references to the “Morisco” (a dance that did come from Spain, and did derive its name from “Moorish”, and probably was the ancestor of Morris) do not mention faces being painted or disguised with soot, and don’t mention Moors & Christians.

Story Number Three

“Ever since the beginnings of human culture, and all over the world, people have painted their faces, as part of the process of taking on a persona for performances. These might have been magical / religious / spiritual performances, or they might have been just fun and larking about. Either way, it is a universal thing, and has been going on since forever.”

The theory is that, going back into the mists of time, there were some fun dances in which people coloured their faces black, originally with soot, latterly with theatrical paint. They may also have used other colours (e.g. red ochre) but soot was the most convenient thing.

Then, as one historian has put it:

*“The faces were not blackened because the dancers represented Moors, but rather the dancers were thought to represent Moors because their faces were blackened.”***

This would have been at some unspecified time, somewhere between 1500 and 1800, and the “Moorish” label became established.

This is a similar situation to the one in 20th and 21st Century Britain, in which there has been the perception that black face paint portrays black people. This has been a perception by audiences, in spite of dancers best efforts to explain that they are actually portraying Spirits of Darkness and Mystery, or telling Story Number One about Disguise.

There will also, no doubt, have been times in the 19th and 20th century when the dancers themselves also believed themselves to be portraying black people, and they didn’t think twice about it. The perception has been reinforced by the “Minstrel” shows, in which black-face really was used to portray black people, and did so in a mocking way. Fortunately, in the 21st century, we have thought twice about it.

In the 21st Century, we have realised that we don’t want to be perceived to be mocking black people, because we know that this is offensive! No amount of “explaining” or telling a story about disguise will change the perception. So, we changed the rules: we have more than one colour of paint, and we have branched out into lots of fun variations of designs.

Phew! What a relief!

Are we politically correct? Yes, and happy to be so!

Story Number Four:

“In England, somewhere between 1500 and 1700, some people stated using the word “Moorish” to describe a fun dance that was considered to be wild / barbarian / outlandish / outrageous. This was in a similar way to how words like “Tarter”, “Vandal”, “Young Turk”, “Red Indian”, “Voodoo”, “Heather”, “Pagan”, “Hooligan” etc., have been used at different times to describe things that are thought to be ‘wild’.”

This story doesn’t tell us anything about face paint, but it does link in with the origins of the name. It also tells us a bit about how the dance got its reputation as “Pagan” or “Ritual”...for which there is otherwise not the slightest bit of evidence.

In conclusion, we are part of a living tradition, which has as many “meanings” and “origins” as we might choose to find. People have always danced, and they have always taken on disguises and personas for performances. But that does not mean that we do not have a duty to ensure that those disguises and personas are culturally sensitive and informed.

Written by Andy Meyer

***Edmund Chambers: The Medieval Stage
Quoted in John Cutting: History and the Morris Dance, p53*

