

Elizabethan  
masques: mystery,  
intrigue, and  
suspense



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Masques, or masquerades as they are more commonly known, have always been a popular choice of entertainment because of the atmosphere of mystery they create. Masquerades began in the fifteenth century and are still a favoured theme for parties today, but an abundance of great masques were performed throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.\*

The defining characteristic of any respectable masquerade ball is the costumes, particularly the elaborate and fantastical masks found there. People attending masques always wear a mask that covers, or partially covers, the face. There are many varieties of masks. Some of the main styles of masks include the head mask, the stick-mounted mask, the full-face mask, and the half-face mask.\*

Stick-mounted masks are, as the name suggests, masks attached to long, thin sticks in order to be more easily equipped and removed. However, these masks are tiresome to continue holding for long periods of time, and so are usually only used at very short masques or as souvenirs. Head masks cover the entire face and head. They are usually of elaborate construction, huge, and covered in intricate designs and decorations. This makes it difficult to eat and drink while wearing one, so these masks were only for the most dedicated of partygoers. Full-face masquerade masks cover the entire face and are attached in the back by a string, unlike everyday riding masks, which were held to the face by a bead kept in the mouth.\* This is so that the mask can easily be moved to the top of the head for effortless eating and drinking. These masks as well as half-face masks were the most popular

choice because of their easy accessibility. Half-face masks only cover half of the face, usually leaving the mouth unhindered for easy access. Masquerade masks are vividly decorated in many ways and are often accompanied by a variety of extraordinary costumes.\*

The idea of the masquerade ball comes from mummers, mimes who led processions of torches during Christmas and wore costumes called “Guisers” that the tradition of wearing masks stems from.\* Mummers got their start in ancient Egypt, but the first masquerade balls occurred in Italy, particularly in the city of Florence.\*

When masquerade balls first began to be performed, they were more like carnivals than a formal dance. The air was filled with the sound of drinking, gambling, and dancing, and everybody, including commoners, could buy a ticket in order to attend.\* The upper classes could get away with expressing their political views without repercussions, and escape the ridicule that would come for even thinking of interacting with those of lower class.

Many criminals would attend masquerade balls so as to use the anonymity to hide their crimes, so it was not unheard of that there would be many robberies and fights at masquerades. The tradition stuck around anyway, and as time passed, masquerade balls gained more structure. They would typically be held from late evening to early morning, with music and dancing until supper was served. Supper was usually cold food and wine. There were theatrical performances after supper\*

Queen Elizabeth I herself was present at many a masquerade thrown in her honor. She was rumored to be quite fond of them, despite the fact that the <https://assignbuster.com/elizabethan-masques-mystery-intrigue-and-suspense/>

central theme of most masques at that time was along the lines of the protective nature of men as well as women's innate fragility and demure nature. One of the distinguishing characteristics of a masque is the theme. Besides themes of male authority, stories of spiritual guidance were often prevalent throughout the Elizabethan era, though the stories did not have so much to do with the church as they did the Greek and Roman cultures and their ideals.\*

Another distinguishing characteristic of masquerade balls is the fact that woman of the upper classes were allowed to perform in them. Upper class women were allowed, but if a lower class woman attempted to become a performer at a masque, it would have very lewd connotations. Queen Elizabeth's own mother, Anne Boleyn, made her first appearance to the Tudor court at a Masquerade ball on March 1, 1522.

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