THE MASK IN *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE* AND ANCIENT GREEK COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

Our study forms part of a wider project seeking to cover a void within interdisciplinary research in drama studies: its focus is specifically the study of the history of visual arts and the Italian theatre of the Renaissance in juxtaposition with the ancient Greek theatre. Our study proceeds on the basis of an attentive engagement with comparative evidence as regards the methodology of acting and the use of theatrical masks up to the beginnings of the 18th century. It intends to cover a certain gap within the scientific study, in Greece, of the research area of the history of Italian art as well as the history of Italian theatre, while simultaneously focusing on the connection between, on the one hand, the theatrical genre of *commedia dell'arte* and, on the other hand, ancient Greek and Roman art. This interdisciplinary research project aspires at bringing to light evidence concerning the ancient Greek, Roman and modern Italian cultures. We intend to present as fully as possible the historical and cultural map of each period as regards both acting and the use of theatrical masks. The novelty of this research project lies in the fact that it aims at projecting a new scientific subfield, within the area of visual arts and theatre, as well as the art of acting, which is mostly untouched by both drama studies and historiography.

Keywords: Renaissance, Mask, Acting, Commedia dell'arte, Ancient Greek Comedy

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we aim to offer a concise presentation of specific traits of the ancient Greek comic mask and its use, in both Old and New Comedy, as well as of the corresponding employment of the mask in *commedia dell'arte*. Ancient Greek comedy, via its impact on Roman comedy, certainly exercised influence on the development of the Italian theatre of the Renaissance. However, our study, which forms part of a developing research programme, at the University of Patras, will not focus exclusively on issues of influence, which are also not readily confirmable, but rather, importantly, on the foregrounding of key parallel traits, as well as divergences, between the two theatrical traditions. Such an endeavour will hopefully be able to shed light on both traditions from the point of view of theatrical practice, with especial emphasis on the methodology of acting.

1. THE COMIC MASK IN ANCIENT GREECE

The mask, πρόσωπον or προσωπεῖον, forms the principal symbol of theatre and μίμησις, namely of the performance rather than the mere narration of a story. Aristotle distinguishes between the mask with a severe countenance (appertaining to the tragic genre) and the comic one which "is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain" (*Poetics* 5.1449a 35-37) [1]. The mask in ancient Greece has the basic function of a face: it is exposed to the gaze from outside, while, at the same time, fulfilling a communicative role and acting as a mirror of a personality outwardly oriented [2]. Characteristically, the face (πρόσωπον), as it is presented and commented upon in ancient Greek drama, is particularly expressive and forms an index of emotions and personal existence: it does not enigmatically conceal inner life. The mask has been pertinently appraised as "the strongest symbol of presence", "nothing but encounter" [3].

The expression of a personality / human type necessitates presenting clearly 'readable' traits to the theatrical public and for this reason the ancient Greek masks were rather large, disproportionately so in comparison to the rest of the body. Research on masks is based on numerous depictions of them in painting, sculpture, as well as in terracotta figurines. The masks themselves were, of course, made of perishable materials, but we do possess replicas, particularly in clay or marble. From all those sources we are able to infer that ancient masks consisted of an inflexible, moulded face, with attached hair, in varying proportions according to the type. The mask actually covered to a large extent the head, as well as the face, of the actor, also supporting usually large ears; male comic masks were commonly bald on top, with hair at the back and sides. Male masks were brown as a rule, whereas female ones were white, alluding thus to the fact that women customarily stayed indoors. Mouths were not particularly large, excepting those of slave characters, while those of silent characters could have no mouth at all [4].

A comparison of the masks of Old Comedy with their tragic counterparts of the same period is in order. Comic masks actually inverted the ideal aggregate of character traits reflected on those of tragedy, which used to depict heroes and gods, who are by definition σπουδαῖοι. Their key characteristic is σωφροσύνη, moderation and virtue, which becomes evident from their depiction in classical art: far from the boisterous and disruptive behaviour which is the hallmark of comic characters. Hence, in contrast with the restrained expression of tragic masks, the comic ones were imbued with γελοῖον, since they rendered the rather grotesque physiognomic traits of φαῦλοι (φαῦλος, "inferior", is the opposite of σπουδαῖος, "admirable", in Aristotle's *Poetics*, 2.1448a 1-9 and 4.14448b 25-27): [5] bridgeless snub noses, bulging eyes and heavy brows, wide mouths and incipient baldness. Further, in contrast with, for instance, Lecoq's 'neutral' mask or with *commedia dell'arte* half masks, the ancient Greek comic mask can be considered as belonging to Lecoq's category of 'expressive' masks, since it was able to proffer a clear impression of character and 'dominant emotional states' [6].

2. IMPORTANCE AND FUNCTION OF THE GREEK COMIC MASK

Ancient Greek masks were connected to the worship of the god Dionysos and for this reason those worn in a victorious performance were subsequently dedicated at his temple. However, apart from the continuation of the Dionysiac tradition, the use of masks in acting was also a means of reinforcing the competitive spirit, which was crucial for the development of ancient Greek drama. Masks enabled actors to play more than one role –

in conformance with the three-actor rule – something that had as a consequence the nurturing of creativity. This rule certainly afforded the opportunity to a novice (third member of the cast, τριταγωνιστής) for training in acting, whereas, at the same time, the protagonist could display his versatility and talent by making a cameo appearance in a lesser role, while another actor took his place in the leading one.

As regards their contribution to acting, the comic masks of Old Comedy released, in a sense, the actors from the 'downward pull' of earthbound living, allowing them to soar high in the realm of Aristophanic fantasy, stretching theatricality to its limits. Thus, the actors freed themselves emotionally and moved away from naturalism. In this way, the masks provided the impulse to the body to express itself via moves and gestures appertaining to a 'surreal' situation [7]. The 'flight' to the worlds of fantasy reflected the need for an escape from the grim reality of the Peloponnesian War, of the corruption and economic hardships afflicting Athens and its citizens. The dramatic poet's reaction to those evils, or even the 'new gods', was equally facilitated by portrait masks, which were sometimes employed within the framework of the sharp political satire of Old Comedy in order to parody well-known Athenians, such as Euripides or Socrates. In both those cases the comic actor did not by any means 'incarnate' a character; in other words, he did not immerse himself in him, as was to some extent the case in tragedy. He, instead, 'presented' the role, by approximating the 'other' and adopting a 'second nature'. Acting required thus a certain 'distancing'; this did not equal, however, the suspension of dramatic illusion, since Old Comedy did not actually build up dramatic illusion in the first place, being rather presentational and metatheatrical.

The comic costume actually possessed a more pointed metatheatrical quality than the mask. The artificial character of the theatrical costume, with its seams and wrinkles, drew the attention of the spectators and broke the dramatic illusion [8], whereas the eye-catching mask (πρόσωπον) was identified with the 'face' of the character (πρόσωπον again) and hence with the role. This process of identification was supported by the words of the actors, which stimulated the imagination of the audience. Through this 'visualization' the audience discerned in the expressive comic mask the emotions felt by the characters. From a cognitive point of view we may argue that the spectators beheld on the mask the emotions they apprehended aurally from poetic speech. Emotional states were conveyed principally through the movements of the actor's body, through gestures [9], but also via the altering of the angle of the head and thus the mask, which was thus able to express different and shifting emotional hues [10]. One may well argue that the mask was indeed able to reveal, in a self-contained manner, a personality. It is possibly for this reason that we cannot find any direct reference by a comic poet to a mask, but merely to a πρόσωπον, namely to facial features of the comic hero. The grotesque mask could either confirm or ironically disprove the manner of presentation of the πρόσωπον: in this way the play of words enhanced the comic effect. For instance, a dialogue that emphasizes female beauty will acquire an ironic hue if the features of the mask are ugly. In that case the mask contributed towards the metatheatrical character of the comedy, reinforcing its sarcasm and the caustic satire of the comic heroes. Hence, the identification between visage and mask, with the parallel preservation of the metatheatrical quality of the play, facilitated the adoption of a 'second nature' by the actors and their rapprochement with the 'otherness' of the comic heroes, who were considered as φαῦλοι (inferior). To this aim contributed also the comic costume, which offered a parody of the 'earthly' characteristics of the characters: accordingly, they were presented as creatures

that were prone to incontrollable speech (big mouth), as well as greedy for food (large, padded belly) and sex (phallus).

As has already been underlined, the role of the mask was particularly important in shaping the actor's manner of moving on stage. According to Thanos Vovolis, it created a somatic/psychic state of 'emptiness': the restricted visual field led the actor to an enhanced awareness of his body, but also of the presence of the other actors around him, as if functioning within a chorus. The awareness of the body, understood as a unity, leads to a maximization of the voice, reinforced by the mask which covers the whole head and effectively functions as a resonator [11]. Research has shown that this quality of the ancient 'acoustical' mask created in the actor a renewed sense of his voice, helping him to approximate the 'otherness' he ought to incarnate and exercising a decisive influence on the shaping of the theatrical experience [12]. Additionally, this 'empty' psychosomatic state enabled him to adopt the traits of this 'second nature' that he was invited to embody. His difficulty in conveying through facial expressions the emotions felt, led him to adopt intense bodily movement. Hence, the mask 'activated' in a sense the body of the actor and and in combination with that it functioned as a 'schematic' visage, in order to produce theatrical sense. At this point we need to take into account, as an important parameter, the distance between actors and audience within the ancient Greek theatre, which rendered necessary the intense, active movement, that was facilitated by the rather short male costumes.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREEK COMIC MASK

Comic masks began to acquire a more naturalistic character in the second half of the fourth century BC, although not to the extent insinuated by the depiction of the Menandrean characters. Until then, they had kept the grotesque traits that are characteristic of Old Comedy; most of them, as already noted, were ugly, but in a ludicrous, not painfully repulsive manner, to follow Aristotle's description: hence capable of depicting a character that is φαῦλος. It becomes clear, therefore, that masks were beginning to be indicative of an ἦθος, as it was being conceived by the ancient Greeks, and that in a progressively more consistent way [13]. The distinction between human types, however, was rather rough (namely between young and older people or slaves, as well as between three key types of women); personal character was deduced from action, body language and gestures. In New Comedy the developed masks were gradually formalized in accordance with coeval studies on physiognomy, which forged a link between character and appearance. The grotesque appearance especially of old men and women or slaves was still in evidence at the time of New Comedy, an appearance that intended to convey the traits of the φαῦλος, such as bulging eyes beneath accentuated and asymmetrical eyebrows that descend until the middle of the face and a flattened, bridgeless nose. The slave was distinguished by a beard stylized as a 'trumpet', a spade-shaped funnel surrounding a wide mouth, whereas male hairstyles linked the members of the same family (father, son and servant). A smooth roll of hair often framed the forehead and was swept back over the head. On the other hand, long beards dressed in stiff, corkscrew curls were characteristic of old men, alluding, for instance, to the conservative attitude of a strict father [14].

However, apart from masks such as the above, there also appear new masks that are rather naturalistic and aim at presenting people in their real aspect. They were slimmer

and more close-fitting, so that the heads no longer appeared disproportionately large: they represented young men and the women who were the object of their desire. Some of them possessed the restrained expression characteristic of the σωφροσύνη of tragic heroes, while on other masks we see the bulging eyes and protuberant forehead of comic slaves. The variety attested within every general type suggests that the traits of the mask betoken a specific character and that the face could receive an autonomous interpretation. In this way New Comedy was able to express universal truths, that is, to show how a specific human type would react in a certain situation.

4. THE MASKS OF *COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE*

Commedia dell'arte emerged as a dramatic genre in sixteenth century Italy, most probably in Venice [15]. Actors, as a rule, wore on their faces masks that were meant to underline the personality traits of the characters they incarnated, who were 'standardized' in terms of aesthetics, dramaturgical role and movement. Those masks, having acquired their typical form in the eighteenth century, continue to be used to this day in performances that aspire to a stylistically faithful reproduction of the *commedia* [16]. The origins of *commedia* can be traced back to both the Greco-Roman tradition of scripted theatre and the indigenous Italian popular genres of farce and mime. Greek literary drama, in terms of aesthetics, visual arts, and dramaturgy, transcended temporal limits to be transplanted to Italy, an influence felt in Roman drama, from the second century BC onwards. The most conspicuous examples are the comedies by Plautus and Terence, playwrights who effectively continue the tradition of Greek New Comedy. The influence on *commedia* was partly direct, since Roman comedy was being read during the Renaissance, but, perhaps more importantly, effected in an indirect manner via the tradition of the coeval *commedia erudita*, consisting of plays written in imitation of Roman comedy.

Moreover, as a historical background of the *commedia* we equally need to include the Atellan farce (*fabulae Atellanae*), a form of crude, rustic theatre, involving impromptu performances. Among its key stock characters were Maccus, the fool and stupid clown, Bucco, the foolish braggart, Pappus, the foolish old man, and Dossennus, the cunning trickster. The Atellan farce exerted its influence on Roman Republican comedy in the first place [17], as is also the case with the ancient Roman tradition of the mime. Performances of mime were, like *commedia dell'arte*, largely improvisational, with a plot outline devised by the leader of the troupe (*archimimus*) [18]. A more cautious approach would postulate an indirect impact of those genres on *commedia* via Roman comic drama, and especially Plautus [19]. On the other hand, one may well posit the existence of a line of influence running alongside the formal dramatic genres of antiquity. Of course, the eclipse of formal dramatic genres during the Middle Ages led to the emergence of a variety of professional entertainers, wandering artists, most commonly referred to as *jugglers*, in English, or *jongleurs* in French. The use of masks formed an essential element of such performances, which involved mime and were accompanied by music and dance.

In *commedia dell'arte* every mask has its own distinct traits that respond to the exigencies of the society of the time. As we have seen with regard to ancient Greek comic masks, especially those of New Comedy, they may possess traits that can be read as clues concerning class, age, gender and, sometimes, emotive states. The same is true of masks in *commedia*, where each actor behaves in accordance with the mask he is wearing, which,

as soon as he appears on stage, affords to the audience a clear indication of the character of the comic hero. Therefore, the spectators of *commedia*, as they see the comic or dramatic heroes, they are in a position to recognize their 'temperamental' attributes, but also to predict their potential behaviour/reactions, something that was also the case with ancient Greek New Comedy, with its stock characters. A key difference, however, is that *commedia* masks cover merely the face of the actors, and usually just part of it, obeying to a sense of visual harmony with regard to human analogies, whereas their ancient Greek counterparts covered the whole head, as outlined above, with the aim of conveying in a recognizable manner personality, gender and other key attributes of the comic hero to the spectators. Of course, the participation of women in *commedia* performances signals a key difference and a break from the ancient comic tradition.

When *commedia dell'arte* emerges in sixteenth century Italy, it gradually evolves into a complex dramatic art, which acquires a dramaturgical texture based on antithetical pairs: masked–bare faces; standard Italian language–dialects; seriousness–comicality; master–servant; father–son; male–female lover, and so on [20]. We may argue that the most enduring element in *commedia* is linguistic variety: every 'mask' speaks in its own dialect, adopting a distinctive local idiom and thus attributing to each hero a separate style of acting in tandem with a recognizable symbolic code. [21]

The role of the mask is crucial in shaping the mode of acting: the *commedia* actors effectively 'abandon' their personality and immerse themselves in the *persona* reflected by the mask. The actors, from the very moment they incarnate a 'mask'-role, consciously 'sign a contract' that will last for their whole life. As a consequence, their personality is connected with the mask to such an extent that they may even find it difficult to distinguish it from their own character traits. In addition to that, within their social environment their name may even be mixed up with their theatrical role. Further, within a specific play actors shape their roles in relation to their fellow protagonists and the secondary actors of the cast, via improvisation, which is prepared every evening on the basis of the literary material that they have memorized, while they also experiment with various combinations during rehearsals. The actor's work, thus, may by no means be deemed as expressively liberated and spontaneous; instead, it presupposes absolute control over the role, oustanding sense of rhythm, as well as secure agility which guarantees the perfect enactment of this collective play [22].

Possibly the most famous 'mask' of the Renaissance and later periods is that of the Harlequin (Arlecchino). Both his mask and costume are designed with particular care, in comparison with those of other heroes: they possess eye-catching artistic elements of high aesthetic value. The mask of the Harlequin is certainly the *commedia* mask that has known the greatest acclaim from the public in the course of the centuries, acquiring fame and influence exceeding the borders of Italy [23]. It is a mask whose key trait is emotional ambiguity: indeed, the Harlequin is a hero who can be both sad and happy, arousing both laughter and emotional-dramatic tension in the audience. He may be considered as possessing tragicomic elements, which are, of course, also present in ancient Greek, especially New Comedy. Both the serious expression and the anxiety imprinted on this mask make their first appearance on ancient Greek comic masks [24]. In addition to that the Harlequin shares several traits with the ancient Greek and Roman comic slave [25]; for instance, like his ancient counterpart, he may deploy his inventiveness in order to help young heroes who do not yet possess the maturity to behave in accordance to the moral rules of the time. Further, the Harlequin may actually be deemed an incarnation and also

a representation of the Italian people of the lower classes in the theatre: poor, innocent and honest, but also resourceful and overactive. These are the attributes that always lead him towards the attainment of his objective. Of course, the inventiveness and energy of the Harlequin continued to develop and acquire manifold expression through the centuries.

CONCLUSION

As has already been pointed out, the masks of both theatrical genres represent distinct comic types and could be classified according to gender, behavioural attributes, age and, possibly, social class. Masks in both cases determine the manner of acting. More precisely, since they reflect specific comic types, they suggest to the actors a discrete group of characteristics belonging to the heroes they are incarnating on stage (mental attributes, manner of speech, moves, gestures). Of course, masks in both dramatic traditions have not only different material (fabric and plaster in Greek comedy; leather in *commedia*), but also a different shape: in ancient Greek comedy they cover the whole face and head, whilst in *commedia* half masks are used: in this way facial expression is complemented by the bare lower half of the actor's face, which is highlighted with white make-up, and most conspicuously by the mouth, whose outline is accentuated with lively colour. Therefore, whereas in ancient Greek comedy the mask substitutes for the visage, in *commedia* the half mask ought to be deemed as an index of alterity and for this reason it is hardly commendable for actors to touch their masks, in which case they would be treating them as an integral part of their 'natural' countenance [26]. A difference from ancient Greek comedy is, certainly, also the fact that in *commedia* certain characters do not wear masks; however, they still cover their faces with make-up.

As regards the manner of acting, we need to point out that the use of the mask imposed a crisp and accented way of moving and gesturing on stage, as well as an expressive voice. Moreover, in ancient Greek comedy the actor moves in an erratic, hasty and laughable fashion, which embodies a comic deviation from the norm and inverts the actor's expected behaviour in real life. As regards comic acting in *commedia*, it is of particular note that the restricted visual field, due to the small openings for the eyes – as it was especially the case with the Harlequin's mask – has as a consequence that the actor's moves acquire an intermittent, mechanic character, which reminds us of the marionette [27].

On ancient Greek comic masks we also frequently discern an ironic dimension, which belied the expectations of the audience. Although their grotesque features attest to the lowly status of the heroes (φαῦλοι), those very heroes could well serve higher aims, as is, for instance, the case with the Aristophanic Trygaeus, Dicaeopolis and Lysistrata. Similarly, the submissive and servile nature of the notary Tartaglia, alluded to by his large spectacles and military hat, which were indeed his 'mask', was contradicted by his comic but wise censure of the state machinery [28].

Another important point is that, in contrast to ancient Greek comedy, the *commedia* actor gets identified with his mask, acquiring thus a theatrical persona with attributes that exceed specific parameters of time and place. In this way the actors effectively 'serve' their masks and submit to the limitations imposed by them on the comic type, in a way that does not permit deviations regarding the expression of aspects of personality or emotions. Acting acquires complexity when the comic type is

characterized by opposing attributes, as for instance is the case with Harlequin, who is at once an innocent jester and a diabolical figure [29]. The mask is particularly helpful in this regard, since it allows the actor to embody the two opposing poles of his character, along with a wide spectrum of gradations in between. More specifically, the handling of the mask reveals a variety of characterological hues – a chameleonic ability to behave and adapt.

Accordingly, a mask may be considered, within a specific performance, as representing merely one moment in the life of the hero or revealing a certain attribute, which the actor may delve into for years. In this way, a comic type can be created, whose multifarious 'personality' the audience is able to recognize through the mask. For instance, as we watch the Harlequin, we understand his momentary action in relation to all Harlequins living in our memory [30]. Hence, fleeting theatrical moments build up and enrich the diachronic elements, which in turn are instrumental in interpreting the singular and the momentary. The Harlequin's character is built up in an accumulative manner, since the spectators actually 'place' the hero playing in front of them within a long array of Harlequins who have passed from the stage. Certainly this cannot happen in Greek Old Comedy, since its characters are *ad hoc* constructions. By contrast, in New Comedy the audience is confronted, as a rule, with stock characters, such as the old man Smikrines, with his characteristic mask and name; such characters can be interpreted, if not in an accumulative, certainly in a comparative manner, by juxtaposing other characters of the same type that the spectator has watched on the stage.

This search for similarities and divergences between the two theatrical genres could certainly continue. We close here our quest, which is part of ongoing research, by formulating a question that will inevitably emerge. Would it be correct to conceptualize the history of theatre as a succession of survivals and to what extent ought we to delve into the search for the origins? Indeed, are parallel actualizations not to be appraised as an equally engaging part within the history of the theatrical phenomenon?

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