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The Mask in *Commedia dell'Arte* and Ancient Greek Comedy. Towards a comparative approach, with emphasis on the methodology of acting

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*.[1] 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,[2] 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 special emphasis on the methodology of acting.[3]

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[1] We wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for *Mediterranean Chronicle* for the valuable feedback offered to us.

[2] "The mask in *commedia dell'arte* and ancient Greek comedy. Comparative and historical approach, with emphasis on the methodology of acting." Part of the National Strategic Reference Framework, 2014-2020: "Support of researchers, with emphasis on young researchers, 2nd cycle". Duration: 4/12/2019 - 03/03/2021; host institution: University of Patras.

[3] A comparable endeavour, with a wider scope though, is the research programme entitled "Theatrum Mundi", under the direction of Professor Theodoros Grammatas (University of Athens), with the support of the Creative Europe Program of the European Union. That programme, involving the organization of a conference in Athens in April 2017, focused on the study of specific theatrical traditions, such as the Italian tradition of comedy, ancient Greek drama and comedy, the storytelling tradition, and the meaning of these traditional theatre forms in contemporary multicultural urban contexts. For more details see "Theatrum Mundi: a journey through European performing arts" [https://theodoregrammatas.com/el/theatrum-mundi-a-journey-through-european-performing-arts-2/] In comparison with "Theatrum Mundi" our programme has a more delimited focus on the two theatrical genres of *commedia* and ancient Greek comedy, with a

1. The comic mask in ancient Greece

The mask, *πρόσωπον* or *προσωπεῖον*,[4] forms the principal symbol[5] 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".[6] 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. 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.[7] The mask has been pertinently appraised as "the strongest symbol of presence", "nothing but encounter".[8] It suffices to consider the etymology of the word *πρόσωπον*,[9] the preposition *πρὸς* being understood as "in the direction of", hence "in front of", always in relation to the eyes of the beholding subject.[10]

The expression of a personality / human type necessitates presenting clearly 'readable' traits to the theatrical public and for this reason the ancient

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further emphasis on the use of masks. As regards the practical realm of actor training we should mention the workshop organized by the Piccolo Teatro di Milano at the Drama School of the National Theatre of Greece, entitled "La commedia è un arte – Η κωμωδία είναι τέχνη", from 28 January to 1 February 2020. This workshop, led by Enrico Bonavera and Giorgio Bongiovanni involved both a teaching session with students of the Drama School, as well as a performance open to the public [https://www.n-t.gr/el/educ/dramaschool/news?nid=33532].

[4] *Πρόσωπον*, primarily meaning "face" or "countenance", is the term denoting mask in the classical period; the term *προσωπεῖον* is subsequently used. See *LSJ* s.vv. *πρόσωπον*, *προσωπεῖον*; also note 9 below.

[5] Concerning the term "symbol", see Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London – New York 1980, pp. 13-17. Specifically on the symbol of the mask, see Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre*, trans. J. Gaines – D. L. Jones, Bloomington 1992, p. 68.

[6] *Poetics* 5.1449a 35-37: *αἰσχρόν τε καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὀδύνης*; translation by Malcolm Heath (*Aristotle, Poetics*, London 1996, p. 9). See comments by Arbogast Schmitt, *Aristoteles, Poetik*, Berlin 2008, p. 302; Donald W. Lucas, *Aristotle, Poetics*, Oxford 1972 (1968[1]), pp. 88-89.

[7] For a study of masks (with references to ethnographic examples) as not merely pictures of what they represent, but also "simultaneously icons and indexes of identity", see Donald Pollock, "Masks and the Semiotics of Identity", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1 (1995) 581-597.

[8] Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, trans. R. B. Palmer, Bloomington – London 1965, p. 90.

[9] Stemming from **προτι-ωπ-ον*: "what is opposite to the eyes (of the other), the sight (of the other)"; by connection with *προτι-όσσομαι*, *προσ-όψομαι*, "to look at", *ὄπωπα* etc. *πρόσωπον* may have been (re)interpreted as verbal noun. See Robert S. P. Beekes *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Leiden – Boston 2009, s.v. *πρόσωπον*.

[10] Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, *Du masque au visage. Aspects de l'identité en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1995, pp. 39-41.

Greek masks, in both Classical and Hellenistic times, were rather large, disproportionately so in comparison to the rest of the body. Since female roles were impersonated by male actors, masks were also a key vehicle intending to convey the gender of the dramatis personae. Research on masks is based on numerous depictions of them in painting, sculpture, as well as in terracotta figurines.[11] 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 depending on 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.[12]

[11] See figs. 1a and b.

[12] On ancient Greek comic mask see, among a large bibliography, succinct treatments by C. W. Marshall, "Masks", in A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Greek Comedy*, Malden, MA 2019, pp. 528-530; Theodoros Pappas, *Ἀριστοφάνης. Ὁ ποιητὴς καὶ τὸ ἔργο του*, Athens 2019², pp. 291-306 (specifically on Aristophanes); Eric Csapo, "Performing Comedy in the Fifth through Early Third Centuries", in M. Fontaine – A. C. Scafuro (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, Oxford 2014, pp. 50-69; Alan Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 166-177; Gregory McCart, "Masks in Greek and Roman Theatre", in M. McDonald – M. Walton (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 257-262.

1a

1b

Figures 1a and 1b

Terracotta figurines (male, female) of ancient comic actors (late 5th–early 4th century BC). Part of a group of fourteen figures found in Attica. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (13.225.20, 21).

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 general characteristic is *σωφροσύνη*, moderation and emotional reticence, which becomes evident from their depiction in classical art: far from the boisterous and disruptive behaviour which is the hallmark of comic characters.[13] Hence, in contrast with the somehow restrained expression of tragic masks, the comic ones were imbued with *γελοῖον*, since they rendered the rather grotesque physiognomic traits of *φαῦλοι*:[14] bridgeless snub noses, bulging eyes and heavy brows, wide mouths and incipient baldness.[15] 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".[16]

[13] This is a general remark which is always open to discussion as regards the possible variations of tragic masks: one may only speculate, for instance, on the way a mask could actually reflect the emotional state of figures such as Philoctetes, Ajax, Clytemnestra or Medea.

[14] *Φαῦλος* ("inferior") is the opposite of *σπουδαῖος* ("admirable") in Aristotle's *Poetics*: we opt for Malcolm Heath's translation of those terms (*Aristotle, Poetics*, p. 5). Someone who is *φαῦλος* is considered as "inferior" not in moral terms, but as regards his capabilities and aspirations in life. See *Poetics* 2.1448a 1-9 and 4.14448b 25-27; with Schmitt, *Aristoteles, Poetik*, pp. 231-232, 245, 270; Lucas, *Aristotle, Poetics*, pp. 63-64, 75; Eckart Schütrumpf, *Die Bedeutung des Wortes ἦθος in der* Poetik *des Aristoteles*, Munich 1970, pp. 52-63.

[15] See esp. Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 167-168. Interestingly, those grotesque "uncitizenlike" traits, in tandem with the whole disguise of the actor, could well form an antithesis with the claims to citizenship laid by the characters in the course of a comic play: see Helen Foley, "The Comic Body in Greek Art and Drama", in B. Cohen (ed.), *Not the Classical Ideal. Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art*, Leiden – Boston – Köln 2000 (pp. 275-311), p. 304. See characteristically figs. 1a and 2 (the latter with Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 153).

[16] Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 153; cf. Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body. Teaching Creative Theatre*, in collaboration with J.-G. Carraso – J.-C. Lallias, trans. D. Bradby, London – New York 2000, pp. 54-59; also David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance. An Introduction*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 148-149, who points out, with regard to the comic "expressive mask", that "distortions of the face encourage the actor to distorted patterns of movement".

Figure 2
Slave carrying a bedroll and a small chest arguing with his master who carries a crooked walking-stick. Apulian Red-Figure Bell Krater, 4th century BC. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (96.AE.238).

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.[17] 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–[18] something that had as a consequence the nurturing of creativity.[19] 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

[17] On the Dionysiac symbol of the mask, see the classic analysis by Otto, *Dionysus. Myth and Cult*, pp. 86-91. Cf. also Angeliki Varakis-Martin, "Body and Mask in Aristophanic Performance", *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 53 (2010) 17-38: 30-31; Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, pp. 147-148.

[18] Which is not without exceptions, though; Aristophanes' *Acharnians* or *Frogs* for instance, would not easily have been performed with merely three actors: see, respectively, S. Douglas Olson, *Aristophanes, Acharnians*, Oxford 2002, pp. lxiii-lxv and Kenneth J. Dover, *Aristophanes, Frogs*, Oxford 1993, p. 106.

[19] On the three-actor rule in comedy, see C. W. Marshall, "Three Actors in Old Comedy, Again", in G. Harrison – V. Liapis (eds.), *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre*, Leiden – Boston 2013, pp. 257-278.

talent by making a cameo appearance in a lesser role, while another actor took his place in the leading one.[20]

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.[21] In this way, the masks provided the impulse to the body to express itself via moves and gestures appertaining to a 'surreal' situation.[22] 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.[23] 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/her, 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.[24]

The comic costume actually possessed a more pointed metatheatrical quality than the mask. The artificial character of the theatrical costume –an

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[20] See Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 169, who points out that "[t]here are more than twenty speaking parts in *Acharnians* and *Lysistrata*, requiring actors to 'double' several roles, which provided learning opportunities for the junior actor (tritagonist) and allowed a protagonist to display his versatility when a subordinate 'stood in' for him while he played a small but effective 'cameo'."

[21] We may think here most conspicuously of characters such as Trygaios, who travels to the heavens mounting a dung beetle (*Peace*) or Peisetairos, who establishes a city of birds in the air (*Birds*).

[22] An eminent case are the masks in *Birds*: see Gwendolyn Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes*, New York – Cambridge 2015, pp. 135-137.

[23] But how true to life were they, actually? This is rightly questioned by Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies*, p. 4. According to Alexa Piqueux, "Quels masques pour les κωμῳδούμενοι de la comédie ancienne?", in M.-H. Garelli – V. Visa-Ondarçuhu (eds.), *Corps en jeu. De l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Rennes 2010, pp. 135-152, they should be imagined as having symbolic rather than representational value.

[24] On this point, see Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 170-171; also analysis by Claude Calame, "Démasquer par le masque. Effets énonciatifs et pragmatiques chez Aristophane", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (1989) 357-376 [= *Masques d'autorité. Fiction et pragmatique dans la poétique grecque antique*, Paris 2005, pp. 213-233], who underlines the distance between the person indicated by the mask and the individual who wears it: a distance that contributes to the critique (the "unmasking") of the contemporary social and political reality.

"intentionally unsuccessful disguise"–[25] with its seams and creases, drew the attention of the spectators and broke the dramatic illusion.[26] More specifically, tights were noticeably wrinkled, and sagged over the actor's feet; whereas there were visible seams at the cuffs, and sometimes down the legs. Vase painters –who supply us with a prime source for the ancient comic disguise– actually delighted in exposing the theatrical costume in a "metatheatrical" manner; this is particularly true of the depiction of the "stage-naked" actor, who wore only the undercostume: they permit the viewer to see how the arms and legs of the tights (fleshings) were fastened to the torso, and how the latter was lumpily padded; the phallos, hanging from the undercostume, was also manifestly unreal.[27] The whole picture is rounded off by the mask, that was clearly shown as a false face, sometimes inhumanly grotesque. This eye-catching mask (*πρόσωπον*) was identified with the 'face' of the character (*πρόσωπον* again) and hence with the role.[28] 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,[29] 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.[30] 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

[25] Foley, "The Comic Body", p. 305.

[26] Analytically on the male and female disguise in Old Comedy, see Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies*, pp. 17-37; Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 178-191.

[27] Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 7, 69. On the testimony of vase paintings, see also the key work by Oliver P. Taplin, *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings*, Oxford 1993. Among other sources, the much-discussed *phlyax* vases from Magna Grecia provide a particularly valuable source for disguise in Attic, especially Middle, Comedy (with the possible influence of local, Italiote traditions); see the classic treatment by Thomas B. L. Webster, "South Italian Vases and Attic Drama", *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1948) 15-27 and now, Piero Totaro, "*Phlyakes*", in A. H. Sommerstein, *The Encyclopedia of Greek Comedy*, Hoboken NJ 2019.

[28] The transparently metatheatrical quality of both mask and costume could well be regarded as also indicating that beneath it there is the non-grotesque body of a citizen-actor: see Foley, ibid.; *contra* David Wiles, "The Poetics of the Mask in Old Comedy", in M. Revermann – P. Wilson (eds.), *Performance, Iconography, Reception. Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin*, Oxford 2008 (pp. 374-392), p. 380. Cf. now Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies*, p. 26.

[29] See especially Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, pp. 152-156.

[30] See now analytically Peter Meineck, *Theatrocracy. Greek Drama, Cognition, and the Imperative for Theatre*, London – New York 2018, pp. 79-119; also Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 167-168.

πρόσωπον, namely to facial features of the comic hero.[31] 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.[32] 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).[33]

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.[34] 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.[35] Research has shown that this quality of the ancient 'acoustical' mask created in the actor a renewed sense of

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[31] Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 171. Remarkably, the only time that the mask is referred to expressly in Aristophanes is in *Knights* (230-232), where it is said that the mask-makers (*σκευοποιοί*) were afraid of producing a "likeness" of the demagogue Kleon.

[32] For instance, how attractive was Lysistrata's, namely a young woman's, mask? Prior to the middle of the fourth century young women's and men's masks may not be regarded as particularly 'presentable': see Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 170, 176-177. But cf. fig. 1b (a courtesan, *hetaira*).

[33] Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, p. 156.

[34] The actor "develops a more conscious feeling for the body's axes, the spine (vertical) and the pelvic area (horizontal)": see Thanos Vovolis – Giorgos Zamboulakis, "The Acoustical Mask of Greek Tragedy", *Didaskalia* 7 (2007); similarly Wiles, "The Poetics of the Mask", pp. 161-185; id., *Greek Theatre Performance*, p. 152.

[35] Vovolis – Zamboulakis, "The Acoustical Mask": "The mask encloses the entire head and this form creates an extra resonance chamber for the voice of the actor. An acoustic phenomenon is produced in the space between the actor's head and the mask." Cf. Alexandros Tsilfidis – Thanos Vovolis – Eleftheria Georganti – Peter Teubner – John Mourjopoulos, "Acoustic Radiation of Ancient Greek Theatre Masks", *Conference Paper*, Patras (2011) [Online at https://www.academia.edu/1086019/Acoustic_radiation_properties_of_ancient_greek_masks] This view (based on specific experiments) is shared by Wiles, "The Poetics of the Mask", pp. 153-179 (focusing on tragic masks); id., *Greek Theatre Performance*, pp. 151-153. Disagreement is expressed by Meineck, *Theatrocracy*, p. 80.

his voice, helping him to approximate the 'otherness' he ought to incarnate and exercising a decisive influence on the shaping of the theatrical experience.[36] 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.[37] Hence, the mask 'activated' in a sense the body of the actor 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.[38]

3. Development of the Greek comic mask

In the 'transitional' period of Middle Comedy (approx. 380-320 BC) masks were adapted to the new forms of comic drama. More precisely, at the beginning they represented figures of mythological parody, a comic mode that started to flourish with the parallel retreat of political satire.[39] The parody of tragedy and the depiction of gods and heroes in a humorous manner as *γελοῖοι* required the use of grotesque masks.[40] The latter served the parodic depiction of myth and of "lowly" mythic characters, placing them in a jocular vein on an everyday and humble level.[41] However, the cultivation of a new genre of comedy with elaborate plots –composed along a fundamental schema that repeated itself– led to the creation of stereotypical characters with

[36] Tsilfidis et al., "Acoustic Radiation", pp. 1-2.

[37] One may compare here what Dario Fo says in "Hands Off the Mask!", *New Theatre Quarterly* 5 (1989) 207-209: 208-209, with particular regard to the *commedia dell'arte*: "The movement of the body goes far beyond the usual alternating of the shoulders. Why? Because the entire body must act as a frame to the mask, shifting its stability. Such gestures, varying in rhythm and dimension, modify the significance of the mask itself." See also Michael Lippman, "Embodying the Mask: Exploring Ancient Roman Comedy Through Masks and Movement", *The Classical Journal* 111 (2015) 25-36, esp. 29-31; Inih A. Ebong, "Mask and Masking: A Survey of Their Universal Application to Theatre Practice", *Anthropos* 79 (1984) 1-12: 5-6.

[38] Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, pp. 109-110.

[39] Political satire continued to exist to a lesser extent until its final extinction following the death of Alexander the Great. The last glimmer of political comedy can be detected at the time of the Macedonian expansion, prior to Alexander, a period characterised by a renewed interest in the political situation in Athens. See analytically Ioannis M. Konstantakos "Conditions of Playwriting and the Comic Dramatist's Craft in the Fourth Century", *Logeion* 1 (2011) 145-183. On mythological parody see id., "Comedy in the Fourth Century I: Mythological Burlesques" in Fontaine – Scafuro, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, pp. 160-180.

[40] Vase painting offer a prime testimony about the appearance of such grotesque masks; cf. the Apulian vase featuring Herakles delivering two cages containing ape-like creatures to king Eurystheus: see Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 34.

[41] Konstantakos, "Comedy in the Fourth Century I", p. 174.

a stable dramatic identity. For the needs of this new comic drama masks with fixed traits began to be produced, masks that catered to the repertory of typical figures and reflected their social position and role. Further, the fact that a moral defect was an important element of the plot conferred upon the figures a glimmer of inner essence. All these processes led up to the emergence of New Comedy and its painting of characters with sterotypical masks that projected a certain *ἦθος*.

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 portrayal of the Menandrean characters.[42] 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*.[43] 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. Gradually masks began to be indicative of an *ἦθος*, as it was being conceived by the ancient Greeks, and that in a progressively more consistent way.[44] Masks were also gradually formalized in accordance with coeval studies on physiognomy, which forged a link between character and appearance. However, 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, as well as a flattened, bridgeless nose. With recourse mainly to a later textual source, Pollux's *Onomasticon*,[45] as well as clay figurines and mosaics,[46] we may gather information about the appearance of specific masks. For instance, the slave was distinguished by a beard stylized

[42] This is the period of Middle Comedy; on the masks of that era, see Alexa Piqueux, "Typologies de masques et caractérisation personnages dans la comédie moyenne", in B. Le Guen – S. Milanezi (eds.), *L'appareil scénique dans les spectacles de l'Antiquité*, Vincennes 2013, pp. 51-83.

[43] See notes 6 and 14 above.

[44] See analysis in Antonis K. Petrides, *Menander, New Comedy and the Visual*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 156-201.

[45] The lexicographer Julius Pollux, of the second century AD, lists forty-four mask types (*Onomasticon* 4.143-154), with a short description; most of them have been matched with recurrent types found in art. Analytically on New Comedy masks, see Luigi Bernabò-Brea (with Madelein Cavalier), *Maschere e personaggi del teatro greco nelle terracotte liparesi*, Rome 2001 and David Wiles, *The Masks of Menander. Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance*, Cambridge 1991. More recently, Adele C. Scafuro "Comedy in the Late Fourth and Early Third Centuries BCE", in Fontaine – Scafuro, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, pp. 201 and n. 4, with further bibliography.

[46] Succinctly Petrides, *Menander, New Comedy and the Visual*, pp. 91-95.

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.[47]

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.[48] 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.[49] 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. As regards the physiognomic traits of New Comedy masks, they suggested, as already stated, an *ἦθος*, that is a predilection of the characters for virtue or vice. Those traits had shifted from the level of the merely iconic "to a more meaningful indexical or even symbolic function".[50] This evolution goes in tandem with a comparable development in fourth-century tragedy: in both genres masks are introduced that are expressive of moral choice.[51] This osmosis of the two poetic genres develops in parallel with the transformation of the comic myths into secularized and urbanized versions of tragic plots. Indeed, what is important to underline is that a distinctly more realistic comic theatrical genre has surfaced with New Comedy – something that is most characteristically reflected on the masks. We finally ought to remark, of course, that it is New Comedy, which – indirectly via Roman comedy – possesses much more extensive points of contact with the Western tradition of comedy. Hence it is also in this sense, along with the element of realism, that New Comedy offers a more promising field of comparison with *commedia dell'arte*, being firmly entrenched, in some very important ways, in the Western theatrical milieu.

[47] See esp. Csapo, "Performing Comedy", pp. 59-64; Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 226-227.
[48] See fig. 3.
[49] Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 227.
[50] Petrides, *Menander, New Comedy*, p. 142.
[51] Ibid., p. 148; for the whole analysis, see pp. 138-155.

Figure 3
Ornamental terracotta comic mask of young man (late 4th-early 3rd century BC) from Cyprus. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (74.51.1520).
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241076

4. The masks of *Commedia dell'Arte*

Commedia dell'arte emerged as a dramatic genre in sixteenth century Italy, most probably in Venice.[52] 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 *commedia*.[53] We particularly

[52] For a detailed study situating the emergence of *commedia* in its cultural, political and social contexts, see Peter Jordan, *The Venetian Origins of the Commedia dell'Arte*, London – New York 2014; succinctly id., "In Search of Pantalone and the Origins of the *Commedia dell'Arte*", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 64, n. 252 (2010): *Renaissance du théâtre, théâtre de la Renaissance*, 207-232, with emphasis on the figure of Pantalone. See also also M. A. Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia. A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with Special Reference to the Visual Records*, Amsterdam 2006, esp. pp. 31-43.

[53] On the so-called 'Neo-Commedia', see now Olly H. Crick, *Approaching Aesthetic Positions for Neo-Commedia (1946-2016): A Dramaturgical Investigation, Mindful of the Potential for Local, Social and Political Relevance*, PhD Edge Hill University 2018; Roberto Tessari, *La Commedia dell'Arte. Genesi d'una società dello spettacolo*, Roma – Bari 2013, pp. 209-246; on the relevance of *commedia* to contemporary theatre, see Chiara D'Anna, *A Journey Back Home Through a Mask for the 21st Century: The Legacy of Commedia dell'Arte in Postdramatic Theatre with Particular Focus on the Centrality of the Actor in Devised Performance*, PhD London Metropolitan University 2019.

refer to the performances directed by Giorgio Strehler at Piccolo Teatro, in Milan, from 1947 onwards, that will be discussed further in this article.[54] 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.[55] 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.[56]

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,[57] 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*).[58] A more cautious approach would postulate an indirect impact of those genres on *commedia* via Roman comic drama, and especially Plautus.[59] On the other hand, one may well posit

[54] See §5.

[55] On the reception of Greek comedy in Rome, see succinctly Michael Fontaine, "The Reception of Greek Comedy in Rome", in M. Revermann (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 404-423. Specifically on Greek masks on the Roman stage, see C. W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 126-140.

[56] See now the analysis by Paul Monaghan "Aristocratic Archaeology. Greco-Roman Roots", in J. Chaffee – O. Crick (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, London – New York 2015, pp. 195-206.

[57] On Atellan farce and its influence on Roman theatre, see esp. Gesine Manuwald, *Roman Republican Theatre*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 29-30, 169-177.

[58] On the Roman mime (*mimus/planipes*), see Manuwald, *Roman Republican Theatre*, pp. 178-183; Hugh Denard, "Lost Theatre and Performance Traditions in Greece and Italy", in M. McDonald – M. J. Walton (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, Cambridge 2007 (pp. 139-160), pp. 148-151; Elaine Fantham, "The Earliest Comic Theatre at Rome: Atellan Farce, Comedy and Mime as Antecedents of the Commedia dell'Arte", in D. Pietropaolo (ed.), *The Science of Buffoonery. Theory and History of Commedia dell'Arte*, Ottawa 1989, pp. 23-32.

[59] See Gabriele Erasmi, "The *Commedia dell'Arte* and the Greek Comic Tradition", in D. Pietropaolo (ed.), *The Science of Buffoonery*, pp. 9-22; now Monaghan, "Aristocratic Archaeology", refuting earlier views; similarly, Joel Trapido, "The Atellan Plays", *Educational*

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.[60] The use of masks formed an essential element of such performances, which involved mime and were accompanied by music and dance.[61]

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

Theatre Journal 18 (1966) 381-390: 386. More assertive is Fantham, "The Earliest Comic Theatre". For a review of the archaeological evidence, specifically on Maccus and a discussion of his possible connection with Pulcinella, see Franco Pezzella, "Maccus, il presunto progenitore di Pulcinella e le altre maschere atellane in alcune testimonianze archeologiche", *Raccolta Rassegna Storica dei Comuni (Istituto di Studi Atellani)* 18 (2004) 258-275; on the interesting history of the relevant scholarly debate, see Chiara O. Tommasi Moreschini, "Albrecht Dieterich's *Pulcinella*. Some Considerations a Century Later", *Studi Classici e Orientali* 53 (2007) 295-321. On the influence of Atellan farce on Plautine drama, especially in its visual dimension, see Antonis Petrides "Plautus between Greek Comedy and Atellan Farce. Assessments and Reassessments", in Fontaine – Scafuro, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, pp. 424-443.

[60] Terms deriving from the Latin (*joculor*, *joculator*): see Partridge (1966) s.v. *joke* and the CNRTL Dictionary, s.v. *jongleur* [https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/jongleur].

[61] For recent reevaluations of the evidence concerning those performances, see Jan M. Ziolkowski, *The Juggler of Notre Dame and the Medievalizing of Modernity*, vol. 1: *The Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018; Simon Gabay, *L'Acteur au Moyen Âge. L'Histrion et ses avatars en Occident de saint Augustin à saint Thomas*, PhD University of Amsterdam 2015. On the influence of ancient theatre on them, see Sandra Pietrini, "Medieval Entertainers and the Memory of Ancient Theatre", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 64, n. 252 (2010): *Renaissance du théâtre, théâtre de la Renaissance*, 149-176. On the roots of *commedia* in popular traditions, carnival and dance, see now Riccardo Drusi "Popular Traditions, Carnival, Dance", in C. B. Balme – P. Vescovo – D. Vianello (eds.), *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 34-45.

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.[62]

4a) Il Capitan Spavento

[62] On this point, see Erasmi, "The *Commedia dell'Arte*", p. 17; on women in *commedia,* see Rosalind Kerr, *The Rise of the Diva on the Sixteenth-Century Commedia dell'Arte Stage*, Toronto 2015 and Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century*, Oxford 2003. Also Pamela Allen Brown, "The Traveling Diva and Generic Innovation", *Renaissance Drama* 44 (2016), 249-267 and Simona Brunetti "Esordi del professionismo attorico femminile nella commedia dell'arte", in S. Chemotti (ed.), *Donne al lavoro. Ieri, oggi e domani*, Padova 2009, pp. 71-87.

4b) Pantalone

4c) Coviello (one of the Zanni)

Figures 4

Engravings from *Masques et Bouffons. Comédie italienne. Texte et dessins par Maurice Sand. Gravures par A. Manceau. Préface par George Sand,* Paris 1860. [Images from the British Library (11795.g.14) website]

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.[63] 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.[64]

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.[65] 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, outstanding sense of rhythm, as well as secure agility which guarantees the perfect enactment of this collective play.[66]

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

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[63] On this arrangement in pairs, see esp. Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin. A Critical Study of the Commedia dell'Arte*, Cambridge 1963, pp. 42-44.

[64] Nicola Fano, *Le maschere italiane*, Bologna 2001, pp. 23-59; Pietro Spezzani, "L'Arte Rappresentativa di Andrea Perrucci e la lingua della commedia dell'arte", in G. Folena (ed.), *Lingua e strutture del teatro italiano del Rinascimento*, Padova 1970, pp. 355-438 and Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 16-17.

[65] John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte. An Actor's Handbook*, London – New York 1994, p. 34.

[66] Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 31-39; on the coexistence of scenarios and improvisation, see analytically Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte*, Cambridge 2002. Also, among a large bibliography, Piermario Vescovo, "Between Improvisation and Book", in Balme et al. (eds.), *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*, pp. 34-45; Tessari, *La Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 164-208; Natalie Crohn Schmitt, "Improvisation in the *Commedia dell'Arte* in its Golden Age: Why, What, How", *Renaissance Drama* 38 (2010), 225-249; Cesare Molinari "Actor-Authors of the *Commedia dell'Arte*: The Dramatic Writings of Flaminio Scala and Giambattista Andreini", *Theatre Research International* 23 (1998) 142-151.

from the public in the course of the centuries, acquiring fame and influence exceeding the borders of Italy.[67] 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.[68] 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.[69] In addition to that the Harlequin shares several traits with the ancient Greek and Roman comic slave;[70] 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.[71]

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[67] On the emergence of the Harlequin, see, among a large array of studies, Katritzky, *The Art of Commedia*, pp. 226-241; Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell'Arte. La memoria delle compagnie italiane del XVI, XVII e XVIII secolo*, Florence 1982, pp. 210-240; Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 67-74. Analytically on the figure of the Harlequin, see Fausto Nicolini, *Vita di Arlecchino*, Naples 1958.

[68] See esp. Michele Bottini, "You Must Have Heard of Harlequin", in Chaffee – Crick, *Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 55-61. One may think, for instance, of Scala's scenario *The Pedant (The Thirty-first Day)* in which the Harlequin both weeps and eats macaroni, reacting to a story related by Pedrolino, who is equally crying and eating; see *Scenarios of the Commedia dell'Arte: Flaminio Scala's Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative*, transl. Henry Salerno, New York – London 1967, pp. 227-234: 229; cf. Natalie Crohn-Schmitt, *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: The Comic Scenarios,* Toronto 2014, p. 103.

[69] On ancient Greek comic masks incorporating features that are not exclusively compatible with laughter, but also send contrasting signals, see esp. Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter. A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 542-545.

[70] Pierre Louis Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy*, trans. R. T. Weaver, New York 1996 (1924), pp. 124-125; cf. Monaghan, "Aristocratic Archaeology", pp. 199-200.

[71] Finishing this section, it is worth referring to a number of key studies concerning the reception of *commedia dell'arte* in Greece and also, more precisely, Carlo Goldoni's dramaturgy, which has been the main vehicle for its influence: Eirini Mountraki, *Η πρόσληψη του Κάρλο Γκολντόνι στην Ελλάδα*, Athens 2020; Elias Spiridonidis, "Carlo Goldoni, *La vedova Scaltra* και *L'amore materno*. Ο κοσμοπολιτισμός και ο πρώιμος φεμινισμός της Μητιώς Μεγδάνη-Σακελλαρίου στο πλαίσιο του Νεοελληνικού Διαφωτισμού", *Επετηρίδα Τμήματος Ιταλικής Γλώσσας και Φιλολογίας* 3 (2008) 1-23; Anna Tabaki, *Η νεοελληνική δραματουργία και οι δυτικές της επιδράσεις (18ος-19ος αι.). Μία συγκριτική προσέγγιση*, Athens 1993; repr. Athens 2002, pp. 22-25, 39, 58, 129-142; Walter Puchner, "Σχέσεις του ελληνικού θεάτρου με το ιταλικό", in id., *Teatrum Mundi. Δέκα θεατρολογικά μελετήματα*, Athens 2000, pp. 191-200; Rea Grigoriou, "Νέα στοιχεία για τη διάδοση του έργου του Κάρλο Γκολντόνι στην Ελλάδα (τον 18ο και 19ο αιώνα)", *Μαντατοφόρος* 39-40 (1995) 77-

Figure 5
Johann Jakob Schübler, "Mezzetin and Harlequin, disguised as the Captain, disrupt Pantaloon's dinner", c. 1729. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (1990.4.1).

5. Moments of revival of the Comic Mask: Italy – Greece

As we have mentioned before, a milestone in the revival of *commedia dell'arte* has been Giorgio Strehler's engagement with this genre. More specifically he staged in 1947 Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, starring Marcello Moretti (1910-1961) in the role of the Harlequin.[72] Strehler chose this play as the departing point of his career, in order to redefine directorial art in his country through a staging in a 'traditional'

94; Walter Puchner, "Η πρόσληψη του Carlo Goldoni στην Ελλάδα", in id., *Δραματουργικές αναζητήσεις-Πέντε μελετήματα*, Καστανιώτης, Athens 1995, pp. 345-358; Anna Gentilini, "Il Goldoni di Karadzas", *III Convegno Nazionale di Studi Neogreci* (1989), Palermo 1991, pp. 81-91; Dimitris Spathis, "Η παρουσία του Γκολντόνι στο νεοελληνικό θέατρο", in id., *Ο Διαφωτισμός και το νεοελληνικό θέατρο*, Thessaloniki 1986, pp. 199-214; Anna Gentilini, "In margine alla fortuna di Carlo Goldoni in Grecia", *Studi Goldoniani* 4 (1976) 160-178; Giannis Sideris, "La fortuna di Carlo Goldoni in Grecia (1791-1961)", *Studi Goldoniani* 2 (1970) 7-48; Nikolaos Laskaris, *Ιστορία του Νεοελληνικού θεάτρου*, Athens 1938, vol. 1: pp. 115, 141, 148-149, 295-296, vol. 2: pp. 17, 24, 27, 102, 264.

[72] Concerning the directorial work of Giorgio Strehler, see his autobiographical work *Io, Strehler: Una vita per il teatro, conversazioni con Ugo Ronfani*, Milan 1986; on the staging of Goldoni, see Catherine Douël dell'Agnola, *Gli spettacoli goldoniani di Giorgio Strehler*, Rome 1992; Scott Malia, *Giorgio Strehler Directs Carlo Goldoni*, Lanham, ML 2014; Olly H. Crick, *Approaching Aesthetic Positions for Neo-Commedia (1946-2016): A Dramaturgical Investigation, Mindful of the Potential for Local, Social and Political Relevance*, PhD Edge Hill University 2018, pp. 30-36.

Italian direction. His rush onto the stage with *L'Arlecchino servitore di due padroni* betrays the aspiration, on the one hand, to rely on a successful, tested dramatic script of an unmistakably Italian style,[73] and, on the other hand, to renew this kind of dramaturgy and render it known on an international scale. Furthermore, the text, in the way it is composed, offers by itself room for stage presentation which a director may shape into various patterns of style. In Strehler's stagings the play itself, as plot, is allotted equal emphasis as the acting, the corporeal-kinesiological expression of the performers. The symbolic codes of acting and mimesis are in complete harmony with the rapid tempo of the staging. The so-called *lazzi*, namely the sketches of *commedia*, which feature a lively oral and mimic expression, are based –for the largest part– in lively comic gestures, as well as in corporeal acrobatics. A further comic element is supplied by the substitution of some parts of the text for the verbal and musical sounds produced by Harlequin through his mouth during his performance.

Strehler utlizes certain primordial hermeneutic keys developed by *commedia dell'arte* performers, which he renews and revitalizes within a modern form of stagecraft. Further, he engaged in meticulous study as regards the body of the actor and the interactive relationship he develops with his mask. In this vein he provided his actors with masks made of leather, created by the visual artist Amleto Sartori,[74] who follows a traditional technique of mask-making that harks back to earlier centuries. It is noteworthy that Moretti, the most famous modern Harlequin, initially did not want to wear the mask, but eventually did so and with great success.[75] He used exactly this leather mask, following Strehler's magisterial acting method and attaining a harmonious merger of realism, the grotesque, but also the element of dance, coupled with song and acrobatics.

Worth mentioning are also the modern theatrical renderings of the Harlequin during the 1920's, by Max Reinhardt (1873-1943),[76] Vsevolod

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[73] The text used by Strehler for the first performance of *The Servant of Two Masters*, with his own dramaturgical elaboration, is being kept in the archive of Piccolo Teatro (Archivio del PiccoloTeatro, "Copioni", n. 4: namely the fourth performance staged by the Theatre from the day of its establishment).

[74] Sartori (1915-1962) was a sculptor from Venice, whose favourite artistic material was wood. From the moment of his acquaintance with Strehler onwards he lays exclusive emphasis on the construction of masks for *commedia dell'arte*. In 1979 he founds in Padova the *Centro Maschere e strutture gestuali*. In 2004, many years after his death, the *Museo Internazionale della Maschera Amleto e Donato Sartori* has been established in AbanoTerme, a town in the region of Padova. See Donato Sartori – Bruno Lanata, *Arte della maschera nella Commedia dell'Arte*, Florence 1983.

[75] See esp. Gabrielle Houle, "Resisting Arlecchino's Mask. The Case of Marcello Moretti", *Theatre History Studies* 36 (2017) 7-28.

[76] See Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Staging Goldoni: Reinhardt, Strehler", in Balme et al. (eds.), *Commedia dell'Arte in Context*, pp. 266-276.

Meyerhold (1874-1940)[77] and Alexander Yakovlevich Tairov (1885-1950) in Russia. Also, in 1995 Nanni Garella, having Strehler's work as a model, ventured to stage Goldoni's The *Servant of Two Masters*, as is also the case with Michele Sambin two years earlier; Giuseppe Emiliani followed suit in 2001, at the Ravenna Teatro within the festival Estate Teatrale Veronese. The most famous Italian actor who associated his name –after Moretti– with Arlecchino's mask, is Ferruccio Soleri (1929-), who performed from 2003 up to 2019.[78] We may also mention here the engagement with *commedia* of Evgenij B. Vakhtangov (1883-1922), who directed Carlo Gozzi's *Turandot* at the Moscow Art Theatre (1922); of special importance is equally Jacques Copeau's staging of the same play at the Théâtre du Parc in Brussels (1923).[79]

Figure 6
Feruccio Soleri as Harlequin (performing at the Piccolo Teatro).

Shifting now our attention to Modern Greece, worth mentioning is the revival of theatrical masks in certain performances of comedy, which may be regarded as a sort of 'bridging' of the gap with classical antiquity, though not in the sense of imitation but of the potential recovery of a certain 'essential

[77] Marjorie L. Hoover, "V. E. Meyerhold: A Russian Predecessor of Avant-Garde Theater", *Comparative Literature* 17 (1965) 234-250; C. Moody, "Vsevolod Meyerhold and the 'Commedia dell'Arte'," *The Modern Language Review* 73 (1978) 859-869.

[78] Fig. 6.

[79] For a comprehensive discussion of Carlo Gozzi and Turandot, see John Louis DiGaetani, *Carlo Gozzi: A Life in the 18th Century Venetian Theatre, an Afterlife in Opera*, Jefferson NC 2000; Elina Daraklitsa, *Το θέατρο του Carlo Gozzi: Η σκιαγράφηση της μακραίωνης διαδρομής του παραμυθιοδράματος από τις βενετικές σκηνές του 18ου αιώνα στην όπερα του 21ου αιώνα*, Athens 2017.

element' of the ancient performance and/or of theatrical praxis in a generic sense.[80] A characteristic case is the staging of Aristophanes' *Clouds* by the director Sokratis Karantinos and the National Theatre of Greece in 1951.[81] That performance featured both masks and costumes created by the painter Nikos Xatzikiriakos-Ghikas, akin to those used in ancient Greece as they are known from terracotta figurines and vase paintings. The eminent theatrical critic Alkis Thrylos (Eleni Ourani) emphasized the outlandish, grotesque element imparted through this disguise: "S. Karandinos has found a worthy collaborator in N. Xatzikiriakos-Ghikas, who created splendid masks and costumes, that transformed the characters into figures of puppet theatre and caricatures".[82] On the other hand, Michalis Peranthis praised the masks and costumes stating that "[t]he performer ought to lose his sense of everyday individuality and to present himself in a guise that should contribute, itself also, to the creation of such a climate".[83]

In this regard we equally ought to mention the staging of Menander's *Epitrepontes* by Spyros Evangelatos and his "Amphi-Theatre" in 1980: in the first Act of the play actors wore masks and performed in a frontal manner, with the intention of creating a clear allusion to the ancient vase paintings.[84] The other four Acts were presented in accordance with other epochs of theatre and society: namely, *commedia dell'arte*, the time of Molière, Victorian England, Greece of the 1950's. In accordance with this variety each Act was played with different costumes, stage setting and code of movement. In the first Act the masks, in conjunction with the costume and the stage setting, were conceived of as a vehicle for the 'transportation' of the spectators, with a certain historical accuracy, to the epoch of New Comedy. It is worth mentioning that the *prima facie* 'archaic' mode of acting dictated by the masks

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[80] On the parallel (but not entirely comparable) case of the use of masks in modern Greek performances of tragedy, see Katerina Arvaniti, "Η χρήση προσωπείου στις νεοελληνικές παραστάσεις αρχαίων τραγωδιών", *Logeion* 4 (2014) 248-278.

[81] See Maria Mavrogeni, *Ο Αριστοφάνης στη νέα ελληνική σκηνή*, PhD University of Crete 2006, pp. 160-168; Gonda A. H. Van Steen, *Venom in Verse. Aristophanes in Modern Greece*, Princeton 2000, pp. 197-199. Valuable documentation (cast, programme, photos, newspaper articles) can be found at the Archive of the National Theatre of Greece [http://www.nt-archive.gr/playDetails.aspx?playID=875].

[82] *Nea Hestia*, 5 December 1951 [= *Το ελληνικό θέατρο*, vol. 5: 1949-1951, Athens 1979, pp. 434-439].

[83] *Athinaiki*, 26 September 1951.

[84] See Panagiotis Michalopoulos, "*Επιτρέποντες* από το Αμφι-Θέατρο: ένας πολύχρωμος πίνακας. Συμβολή στη μελέτη του σκηνοθετικού έργου του Σπύρου Α. Ευαγγελάτου", in G. Varzelioti – P. Mavromoustakos (eds.), *Σκηνή και αμφιθέατρο - Αφιέρωμα στον Σπύρο Α. Ευαγγελάτο, Πρακτικά Συνεδρίου, 7-9 Μαρτίου 2016, Ε.Κ.Π.Α. – Τμήμα Θεατρικών Σπουδών*, Athens 2018, pp. 99-110; also Kaiti Diamantakou, "Η συμβολή του Θεατρικού Οργανισμού Κύπρου και του Εύη Γαβριηλίδη στον θεατρικό επαναπατρισμό του Μενάνδρου", in A. Konstantinou – I. Hadjikosti (eds.), *Το αρχαίο θέατρο και η Κύπρος. Πρακτικά συμποσίου*, Nicosia 2013, pp. 75-94: 85-86.

became an imaginative and original endeavour within the Greek directorial trends of the time: in this manner antiquarian tradition was transfused into an innovative theatrical venture. This artistic perspective, an integral part of which was the wearing of masks, justified Evangelatos' statement that "this is the most daring until now staging of the Amphi-Theatre", adding that "from a historical point of view it is firmly founded".[85] Thus, the mask, having covered a large temporal stretch has proved a challenge for modern directorial approaches and a means of connection within the historical trajectory of theatre.

6. Towards some conclusions

A first point to be emphasized is that in both the New Comedy of Greek Antiquity and *commedia dell'arte* masks represent distinct comic types and could be classified according to gender, behavioral attributes, age and possibly social class.[86] 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 a different shape: in ancient Greek comedy they cover the whole face and head, whilst in *commedia* half masks are used:[87] 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,[88] 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.[89] A difference from ancient Greek comedy is, certainly,

[85] Michalopoulos, "*Επιτρέποντες* από το Αμφι-Θέατρο: ένας πολύχρωμος πίνακας", pp. 101-103.

[86] This typological classification of masks is much less obvious in Old and Middle Comedy.

[87] The material is also different: fabric and plaster in Greek comedy (see Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, pp. 173-174); leather in *commedia*.

[88] For this reason, it is neither self-referentially mentioned in the script (except very rarely) nor depicted in a pointedly metatheatrical way on vase-paintings or terracotta figurines; see Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 170.

[89] A "proscription" famously stated by Dario Fo ("Hands Off the Mask!", p. 208): "If touched, it disappears –self-destructs and becomes repulsive. To see an actor touch his mask while performing makes me shudder". See also Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 42-43. By contrast, in ancient Greek comedy the mask, being an integral part of the character's "constitution", may indeed be touched by the actor (*pace* Wiles, "The Poetics of the Mask", p. 381). A characteristic instance: the figurine of the old man touching his forehead in a gesture of dismay: Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 156 (Figure 4, p. 45).

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. *Commedia dell'arte*, on the other hand, may be considered, following Lecoq, as "an art of childhood", which frequently involves a swift move "from one situation to another and from one state to the next".[90] Actors are required to project this 'childish' ambivalence by going beyond the limitations imposed by the mask on the expressivity of their face through the very use of that mask. They are thus led to an intense level of playing, which may even take the form of acrobatics and certainly requires a perfectly articulated body that 'speaks' to the audience. Furthermore, the *commedia* actor accepts the challenge to express extreme emotions and transcend the level of everyday behaviour with the help of the mask.[91] In a comparable manner, the ancient Greek comic mask is capable of rendering key emotional states, leading thus the actor to adopt an exaggerated manner of acting.[92] However, it can be argued that the emotion evinced by ancient Greek comedy is not subject to equally brusque mutations as in *commedia*, since, in the world of the latter, characters are not merely confronted by urgent desires, but also more steadily concerned with their very survival.[93]

It is worth noting here that an additional, practical factor influencing the manner of acting in *commedia* is the fact 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.[94]

To return to ancient Greek comic masks, we also frequently discern on them 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. In a not

[90] Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, p. 118.

[91] Ibid., *The Moving Body*, pp. 118, 121.

[92] See Ebong, "Mask and Masking", pp. 5-6, who points out that "[b]y wearing the mask, the Greek actor was able to economize, clarify, and magnify his gestures and movements by simply transferring his facial expressions and gestures to his whole body."

[93] Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, p. 116.

[94] See now Houle, "Resisting Arlecchino's Mask", p. 18 on the Harlequin wearing the traditional mask; also ead. ("Dramaturgy of the Body: Marcello Moretti's Construction of Arlecchino at the Piccolo Teatro of Milan," *New Theatre Quarterly* 34 (2018) 130-144: esp. 140) on such a manner of movement by Marcello Moretti, who, however, preferred the "feline" mask with larger eyeholes.

wholly dissimilar manner in *commedia* we may adduce as a telling instance the notary Tartaglia: his submissive and servile nature, 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.[95] Further, a key function of the mask in *commedia* is to project the tragic depth that lurks behind the comic façade. The 'ugly' mask[96] indeed foregrounds the defects of each character, which are concealing in a humorous way the fear inherent in the consciousness of the limitations of human nature. Pantalone's avarice, for instance, is born out of his need to keep intact his possessions, driven by the instinct of self-preservation.[97] Tracing an analogy with ancient Greek comedy, we may argue that the 'tragic' may equally be felt in the 'derision' invited by the comic mask. More specifically, the 'lowly' status of the *φαῦλοι* and their ridiculous behaviour is employed in order to attack the evils of society. In this case the mask serves as a reflection of the lowly character of the heroes, but also of the 'tragic' essence of social life, which is sometimes considered as following a destructive course. Responding to that the comic genre seeks ways of amending things or escaping social life altogether – this being particularly the case in Old Comedy.[98] As we move towards New Comedy, the more 'naturalistic' masks of Menander, for instance, reflect a tendency towards 'internalizing' characterizations and employing physiognomy in order to divulge an inner propensity towards vice or virtue.[99] In this way we may trace a process of creative osmosis between New Comedy performance and the visual system of tragedy. Through this 'hybridisation' the mask of New Comedy effectively reflects the entanglement of comic and tragic elements that is the hallmark of this genre.[100] One must not forget, of course, that tragic myth is integral to the construction of the plots of New Comedy,

[95] Werner Müller, *Körpertheater und Commedia dell'arte. Eine Einführung für Schauspieler, Laiengruppen und Jugendgruppen*, Munich 2004, p. 103; cf. Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, p. 66.

[96] See Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 149-150, remarking that the physical defects featured on the mask create laughter in the world of phantasy, whereas in the real world they rather lead to compassion.

[97] Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, p. 116.

[98] Indeed, the successful hero of an Aristophanic comedy either changes the world in which he or she lives (*Wasps, Peace, Knights, Wealth*) or founds an imaginary city (*Birds*, *Women at the Assembly*). See, among many studies, Alan H. Sommerstein, "An Alternative Democracy and an Alternative to Democracy in Aristophanic Comedy", in id., *Talking about Laughter and other Studies in Greek Comedy*, Oxford 2009, pp. 204-222 [= in U. Bultrighini (ed.), *Democrazia e antidemocrazia nel mondo greco: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, Chieti, 9-11 Aprile 2003, Alessandria 2006, pp. 195-207, 229-233].

[99] Hughes, *Performing Greek Comedy*, p. 171.

[100] Petrides, *Menander, New Comedy,* pp. 130-151. As he points out, "[b]oth New Comedy and (most probably) fourth century tragedy developed inward masks, expressive of moral choice. To achieve as much New Comedy toned down or did away completely with the grotesque" (ibid., p. 148).

via their light-hearted adaptation to a realistic and urban milieu.[101] In the case of *commedia* we may argue that we are dealing with a situation whereby everyday people, living in real places, are transformed into figures exceeding the boundaries of the real world, belonging rather to the weird world of comedy. Hence, the spectators are viewing a spectacle positioned on the cusp between the realistic and the imaginary worlds. In this sense, *commedia dell'arte* does neither reflect the real life nor is sharply opposed to that, insinuating a total escape from it.[102]

Figure 7
Relief of a seated poet (Menander) with masks of New Comedy, 1st century BC-early 1st century AD, Princeton University Art Museum (y1951-1).

Moving now to another topic, namely the connection between actor and role, it is important to point out 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.[103] The mask is particularly helpful in

[101] Ibid., p. 101.
[102] See Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 152-154.
[103] Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 34-35; Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 70-74.

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.[104] 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.[105] 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.

Figure 8

Saverio della Gatta, "Performers of a Commedia dell'Arte", 1827. Note Pulcinella in white, next to a girl playing the violin. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York (1931-73-15).

[104] Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte*, pp. 35-36.

[105] Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin*, pp. 21-23.

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?

Abstract

The Mask in *Commedia dell'Arte* and Ancient Greek Comedy. Towards a comparative approach, with emphasis on the methodology of acting

Our study is part of an ongoing interdisciplinary research project intending to cover a significant desideratum within the scientific study of the *commedia dell'arte*, seeking to focus on the connection between that theatrical genre and the ancient Greek comic theatre. The novelty of this research project lies in the fact that it aims at searching for both similarities and divergences between the two theatrical genres with a special focus on the use of the mask, which forms a common element between the two genres. This issue is studied from the point of view of not merely origins, but more importantly acting practice and performance. Particular questions discussed are the symbolic value of masks, the connection between masks and the manner of acting, as well as the role of masks in shaping the very character and originality of the respective dramatic genres.

Keywords

Commedia dell'arte, Greek and Roman Comedy, Renaissance, Theatre, Mask, Acting.

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