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The Profane Art of Masking: A Study into the Darker Elements of our Winter Masking and Guising Rituals

--- by Shani Oates

"Masks were invented by Satan: 'It was he who put on the Mask of a serpent in Paradise"
[Gesner]

What is a mask, actually? Magically, a mask is understood to represent three characters: the wearer, the personage it represents and the spirit that synthesises the two. Dramatically, it is considered as the 'persona' (voice carrier, that through which sound is carried) contrived for profit, disguise or deception. Psychologically, in hiding the person, it frees the self, this double face imposes its will, engaging and manipulating the environment to which it is subject. Countless generations of revellers have exploited this expression of power, given free license to act, prompt, cajole, intimidate at will an audience always unsure of the motivation and intention of the figure in disguise. Ranging from animal to supernatural forms, something of their nature is imparted to its wearer. But is it really that simple? Why do people don mask and disguise? History reveals cultural practises that are secular, religious and/or supernatural.

Originally, cathartic dance, mime, drama and divine musing were all held as sacred acts by the ancient Greeks yet they gradually became secularised by the pragmatic Romans into farce and other hellish funereal acts (*fabula atellana*) separating worship from celebration, formerly held as one by their Grecian predecessors. Further east and north, supernatural or magical elements were emphasised as culture dictated. Naturally, considerable aspects of all three practices become synthesised to a greater or lesser degree, and this is typified in various Eastern, African and South American religious carnivals and festivals. However, when assessing the purpose and intent of these rites, academia cautions against the supposition that traditions over time (and more evidently over greater periods of time) remain the same. Traditions at opposite ends of such a spectrum may differ considerably [Twycross & Carpenter, 2002:1].

Masks are the oldest expression of humanity. They retain the element of mystery, inculcating uncertainty within the onlooker. According to anthropologists masking has just one role, to deceive by illusion, either by the gods inspiring them or the alter egos of people wearing them. They adopt a public face by hiding the private one; they transform, protect, scare, intimidate, shock, all by inversion! Masks generate transformation in the viewers mind, for the wearer of such a tool, this is immensely empowering. It is also liberating. They are the intercessors between the gods and man, hence all the superstitions accorded to them by onlookers. Masks command attention. As an idiom, mask is derived from the Italian word '*masca*' meaning hideous. Culturally, Anglo-Saxons are responsible for our modern concept of the 'Grim Reaper', a psychopomp (and epithet for the devil, the stealer of souls), formulated from the word for face-mask - '*grima*' the root of which originally meant the expression of ferocious or enraged man, which links again the violence and aggression associated with its adopted features [ibid.18]. Curiously it is now commonly worn in celebration remembering the dead, albeit in deflection of the spirit it represents, an apotropaic pagan concept that averts mischief from the wearer.

Mediaeval '*Comedia dell'arte*' descended from the '*fabula atellana*,' and as inheritors of the Christian Roman perception of masks as representations of 'evil,' the first mask made was a caricature of the Devil himself. This was used provocatively in satirical plays to parody the licentious or greedy natures of both nobility and clergy. Also popular was the '*Aliquino*' (Harlequin), the prince of demons. Excommunicated by the Pope, all players became wandering troupes of rogues, players of satirical buffoonery and farce. Subversive potential was further parodied by them as each Italian city and class were masterfully condensed into a character and typified by the artful features of each mask. [1]

In Britain, similar troupes know as 'mummers' would carouse the streets during seasonal celebrations, but more commonly over winter. Folklorist Ralph Whitlock [1978:21] suggests the unlikely meaning of disguised revellers common to Scotland and Cornwall, known as '*guizers*', is 'geese dancers'; due he claims, to their bizarre propensity to wear rags and skins/pelts of animals, incidentally, these traditions acquired the socially uncomfortable and normally forbidden aspects of begging, especially amongst children, thinly veneered in the custom of 'soul-caking.' Apparently, both adult 'mummers' and 'guizers' would gain entry to homes by an unwritten law, on the pretext of 'sweeping' away the ills of the old year to herald in the new, entirely reliant upon the superstitious need to avert ill fate and fortune for the coming year. Thus granted the threshold powers of Janus, they exerted a protocol which was known and readily accepted.

To cover ones face is alluring and motivates intrigue, it cultivates curiosity and fear; it arouses suspicion and often engenders unease. We cannot see through the mask to the face beneath and are unsettled by our reactions to that. Subtle expression, the guide to comprehension, is denied by the blank stare from a static mask: the poker-face, the dead-pan gaze of void-less emotion. We cannot know our tormentor, entertainer, anarchist; they remain shadows to our senses. These disturbing reactions assert the need to recognise the social and cultural complexity of masking and disguise, remaining mindful of their practise and purpose, from the past though to the present. There is no full communion between masked and unmasked, interaction is restricted. We are simultaneously seduced and repelled by it. The mask and disguise invites an intimacy that is at once a barrier, paradoxically enforcing separation. This duality sets the viewer on edge, considerably disadvantaged by the wearer.

Such a psychological advantage has been the vehicle by which a performance engineers a shift in our reactions at odds with the instinct it arouses. Movement and speech become grossly articulated, exaggerated, expanding the unreal. Visual images processed in one side of the brain, conflict with stimulus by words and aural information, processed by the other. Robbed of our wits, we are tormented by an alien foe. We are confused. Are we entertained or the entertainment? Do we project our fears or receive theirs? We are thus at their mercy and apparently defenceless.

We know them not and therefore cannot hold them to account; essentially they are beyond the bounds of Law. Do we ask or answer the puzzles and mysteries suggested by their antics and posturing. Do we imagine they are pointing the finger at us? Can they read our minds? Surely we agree, but why then do we shuffle, is it because we are unnerved in spite of the humour. Is this folklore, history or myth? Is it satire, protest or anarchy? All of them; assuredly? Fascination weaves its spell and we are engaged, hooked by the mesmerising magic of theatre, the immanence of something 'other'.

Mundanity is vanquished, momentarily banished in this small suspension of reality. We are drawn into an alternative worldview, and we believe it, just for a moment. We have become juxtaposed to our environs, severed from our comfort zones, cajoled into a spectacle of manic behaviour, amused by farce, within which we feel a distinct shift. For a few brief moments we experience euphoria, elation whilst riding the tide of unease. Friction or fiction? Success depends upon our willingness to engage. Fight or flight. Adrenalin rush either way. This is pure magic and heady stuff. So where and how did all this devolve?

Certainly during the 17th century, English public records do reveal winter folk activities that more closely resemble those former Roman/Continental methods of celebration, especially in the wearing of masks, popularised during the Middle Ages in spite of the several Penitentials between the 4th and 8th centuries condemning that practice. Commonly, it is suggested this may have been due to their desire to stamp out whatever they perceived as superstitious rural customs of the 'pagani' [Twycross & Carpenter, 2002:24-25]. Interestingly, the masking rites of the 'pagani' ridiculed and satirised the 'human' antics of their Gods. Early Christians too joined in these processions as exemplars of this 'mock' piety! Succinctly, humanity at its most bestial is an inconceivable affront to divinity, pagan or otherwise.

Pertinently, this is extremely relevant to this study because it calls to attention the often overlooked yet vital reasons why animal guising and masking was considered such an abomination by the Church offering a contra view to the popular and over simplified anti-pagan view as mentioned previously. So sacrilegious in fact, it was rendered the worst offence simply because it mocked nature, God's perfect creation, it violated the divine, in both Pagan and Christian celebrations during '*mundus inversus*' (the earth inverted) that is, when it is ruled by the Devil! [ibid., 27]. St Jerome in attacking Classical theatre, inveighed vehemently the horror and insult to God in the concealment of our natural state, the form He chose for us. Ironically though, Jerome had shown his supreme ignorance because, within Greek theatre, the Mask expressed or revealed 'Truth', personified in stylised conceptual forms to avert corruption by the actors' human features! [ibid., 285] Let us not forget; all theatre is illusion.

Deception is made real by our own belief in it. Magic manifests in our acceptance. Moralists and fanatics of the medieval period in openly citing the opinions of their predecessors during the early and formative years of the Church, especially in regard to the Kalends and Saturnalian celebrations, have erroneously forged a spurious link that is commonly perceived as revealing a continuity of practice of those festivals throughout [ibid., 296-7]. Hutton [1997:329] concludes how revelling, masking and the exchange of clothes redolent of these ancient festivals, indicate secular, rather than religious practises, wherein a relaxation of the normatively stringent laws surrounding the liturgical year regarding the sacred. This asserts that even in ancient pagan times, such secular activities were always understood as being outside these rules, beyond their bounds in fact, not worship in any way, given over to free and abandoned public license.

So were the Christian moralists right to condemn masking and guising? Was it or can it ever be, just harmless fun? Are we drawn inexorably towards aggression, depravity and decadence when immersed in our darker natures? How are such things determined and measured? Is it liberating and edifying or intimidating and oppressive? Surely it all depends from which side of the mask we view the world? And this is precisely where we enter the realms of the sacred use of masking within the Mysteries wherein the individual seeks the companie of the 'other' from *both* sides of the mask.....

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players....."

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