DAVID WILES

Mask and Performance *in Greek Tragedy*

From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521865227

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-86522-7 hardback

Acknowledgements

I have received help from many quarters. The necessary condition of research is time. Royal Holloway University of London granted me sabbatical leave, complemented by further leave from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The Rockefeller Foundation provided me with a month of uninterrupted tranquillity at Bellagio. Victoria Cooper at Cambridge University Press has been, as always, unfailingly supportive. Those who have spared time to read chapters or shorter sections and give me their comments include Richard Seaford, Edith Hall, Stephen Halliwell, and my research students Stephe Harrop, Goze Saner, Angeliki Varakis, Chris Vervain. Practical work with Greek-style masks informs all that I have written. I have learned much from my collaboration with Michael Chase and Thanos Vovolis, and two short projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board allowed me to experience the possibilities of the mask, so as to build bridges between the expertise of the modern practitioner and the historical concerns of the classicist. The participation of Danato Sartori at an associated symposium brought many issues and principles into focus. Teaching mask alongside Peter Bramley, and ongoing discussions with Chris Vervain (Lambert) about her forthcoming thesis 'Performing Greek tragedy in mask', have been an important part of my research environment. Observing Richard Williams' applied research into the New Comedy mask has been a stimulus and encouragement. I have lectured on the Greek mask in many contexts, including Paris VII, GITIS in Moscow, the IFTR scenography group in St Petersburg, the Getty Center, DESMI in Elefsina, an interdisciplinary community at Bellagio, the Athens festival, the Hellenic Society in London, the Cambridge Greek play symposium, the APGRD and a seminar series on mimesis in Oxford, and an inaugural lecture at Royal Holloway University of London. Feedback from these diverse audiences has on each occasion stimulated further thought.

Patricia Levasseur-Legangneux worked for a week on my behalf in the Bibliothèque Nationale, with great discernment. Dmitry Trubotchkin shared information about Stanislavski. Greg Hicks granted me an invaluable interview, and I have learned much from observing his work. Though I was privileged to meet two great mask-makers of the older generation, Jocelyn

Herbert and Abd'Elkader Farrah, alas both died before I was ready to interview them. Too many people have helped me with texts and references for me to note them all, but the list includes Florence Dupont, Richard Green, Barbara Kowalzig, Fiona Macintosh, Toph Marshall, Paola Piizzi, Richard Rutherford, Oliver Taplin, Michael Walton and Yana Zarifi. Pictures are an essential part of this book, and I am grateful to all who have assisted me: Ewen Bowie, Frank Brinkley, George Croft, Sandra Lousada, Paola Piizzi, Oliver Taplin, Dmitry Trubotchkin, Michael Vickers, Renato Villegas, Thanos Vovolis, Yana Zarifi. I have made every effort to contact copyright holders. The AHRC assisted with fees, and Victoria Cooper's assistants at Cambridge University Press helped with contacting museums. My greatest debt is of course to Gayna Wiles. Her delight in recreating the Greek line, and translating a 3-D artefact into a 2-D drawing, has led me to appreciate more fully the detail and artistry of ancient image-making, and left me in no doubt that the same sophistication must have shaped the work of Greek actors.

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1 | Introduction

I have no choice but to employ the word 'mask' in the title of this book, yet that word already carries embedded within it an unsatisfactory interpretation of my subject. In English, to 'mask' something is to hide the reality. Yet when fifth-century Greeks spoke of masks, they had only the word *prosōpon*, the regular term for 'face'. This in turn is derived from the preposition *pros* ('before') joined to *ōps*, a noun related to words for seeing and the eye. 'Before the gaze . . .' yet the gaze in question might equally belong to me the seer or you the seen. Slippage from seer to seen was easy in a classical world where *I am* coincides with *who I am seen to be.*[1] Later Greeks coined the word *prosōpeion* to separate false faces from real ones, but no such distinction was made in the age of Sophocles, when donning a face was no negative act of concealment but a positive act of becoming.[2] Roman terminology is a step less remote from ours. The Latin term for a theatre mask, *persona*, was not the same as *vultus*, 'face', and it gave birth to handy modern terms like 'personality', the front that we present to the world.[3] This brief journey through semantics reveals something of how other people once saw the world. If my overt topic, 'mask and performance in Greek tragedy', were redefined as 'fore-gaze and mimesis in goat-song at the Dionysia', we would enter a less secure cognitive domain, but might have more chance of intuiting what it is to inhabit another culture.

Greek theatre masks were made of light perishable materials, and have not survived. Yet even if, by good fortune, a set of masks were available to us, housed in a glass case in the British Museum, we should still be a long way from understanding how different those masks looked on the body of a mobile actor, trained in an unfamiliar tradition. We would still be at a loss to know why ancient Greeks chose to place such apparently constraining objects over their heads. When tragedies are staged today at Epidaurus, there is no call to wear masks under the powerful stage lights. Masks would seem

[1] Cf. Frontisi-Ducroux (1995: 10–34).

[2] Frontisi-Ducroux (1995: 14–16). Stephen Halliwell points out to me that the first appearance of the term *prosōpeion* is unusually problematic, being found in inferior manuscripts at Demosthenes 19.287, and a corrupted passage in Theophrastus *Characters* 6.3.

[3] Cf. Frontisi-Ducroux (1995: 39); Dupont (2000: 155–7).

an aesthetic intrusion, either archaeological pedantry, or the pretension of an avant-garde director. Why then did the Greeks find it necessary to wear 'masks'? The best way of answering will be to turn the question around: why is it necessary for us *not* to wear masks in *our* theatre?

This book stands at the nexus of four major debates. The first concerns the disputed ownership of 'Greek tragedy', a piece of academic turf which classical philologists (often reinvigorated by 'Critical Theory') and theatre historians (often set in their ways) jostle to claim for their own. Though it is self-evident that each contingent benefits from the other's help, there is a point of principle at stake: is a Greek tragedy essentially a text that happens to have been performed, or are the words a mere component in a historical, participatory, acoustico-visual event, such that a reading of the text which marginalises performance distorts its historicity? My own allegiance will be obvious. I have attempted in this book to recover some sense of the lost festive event, so the text can be more readily imagined in its performative context.

The second debate concerns the actor within Greek tragedy. The recurrent question of whether actors are in constant conscious control of their craft, or whether they are, in the best cases, somehow possessed by their part, seems particularly pressing in respect of Greek tragedy with its potent mix of formalism and emotionality, of political speech-making and divine intervention. The conclusions which I once reached about New Comedy are not the same as those to which I come in respect of fifth-century tragedy.[4] I am in broad agreement with Ismene Lada-Richards when she places fifth-century tragedy in the cultural sphere of Dionysos and argues that 'to retain one's cognitive hold over reality, is in the eyes of the god a grave insult, entailing the human being's disaster and delusion . . . More precisely, within the Dionysiac dramatic area, it is the mask, an inherently Dionysiac property, which guarantees for the performer the possibility of becoming "other", of acquiring a different identity.'[5] For the modern actor approaching Greek tragedy, enigmatic asides about acting culled from Aristophanes or treatises on oratory are of little practical assistance, but the simple fact of the mask is overwhelming. To wear a mask changes everything: one's voice, one's movement, one's awareness of self and other. For the practitioner, to understand the mask is to have an entry point into the historical practice of Greek acting.

[4] Wiles 1991.

[5] Lada-Richards (1997: 96). Lada-Richards (1999: 168–9) reverts to an orthodox view of the theatre/ritual distinction. Duncan 2006 gives only passing attention to the mask. On Greek acting, see Lada-Richards 2002 and Hall (2006).

The third issue concerns the relationship of theatre to ritual. This is a matter of heated debate within Classics, whilst Theatre Studies has found its own definitions challenged by an American discipline called Performance Studies, which extends the notion of 'theatre' to multiple areas of social interaction. Anthropologists have so often associated the mask with secret societies, power enforcement, encounters with gods, and engagement with death, that we might sensibly expect it to belong to the domain of ritual. In Greek vase painting, the mask is clearly an attribute of Dionysos, like fawnskins and fennel rods, and if tragedy is indeed *something* to do with Dionysos, then the mask must be at the centre of that something.[6] If, however, one takes the festival of Dionysos to be merely the residual frame for a new aesthetic activity generated by the new democratic system, then masking has to be explained in purely artistic and practical terms. So far as we can tell, the mask was invented to serve tragedy and was not the product of evolution from a primitive ritual source.[7] Attention to this creative leap, however, offers no answer to my inversionary question: why should the mask in theatre today seem such an alien object? The modern dichotomy between theatre (or art) and ritual requires further attention to semantics, for there are no classical Greek terms equivalent to *ritual*, *art*, or our institution of *theatre*. The Greeks conceptualised the world on the basis of different categories, which we must struggle to make sense of.

The fourth area of debate concerns the way faces are bound up with personal identity. For Cicero, the orator's performance 'is wholly a matter of the soul, and the face is an image of the soul, while the eyes reflect it'.[8] It is but a small step from here to the formulation of the American psychologist Paul Ekman: 'Emotions are shown primarily in the face, not in the body. The body instead shows how people are *coping* with emotion.'[9] One finds a different ideology at work in Lévi-Strauss, for whom 'the face of man is in opposition to the body of man: as the state of society is in opposition to the state of nature'.[10] The mask in this structuralist view provides escape from the socially constructed domain of facial expression, not a barrier to viewing authentic feelings. There are thus competing ways today of understanding face and self. When we turn to the sculpture of classical Greece, eyes are always powerful, enhanced in bronzes by the insertion of precious stones,

[6] Winkler and Zeitlin 1990 put the catch phrase 'Nothing to do with Dionysos?' at the centre of current debate, but their volume has little to say about masks.

[7] See Halliwell (1993: 199).

[8] *De Oratore* iii.221, translated in May and Wisse (2001: 294). Dupont (2001: 130–1) prefers to translate *imago* as mirror, though the term alludes to a death-mask cast from the face.

[9] Ekman and Friesen (1975: 7).

[10] Lévi-Strauss (1961: 11 – my translation).

but there is no evidence for a strong binary opposition between face and body. The Parthenon frieze, lowered to eye-height in the British Museum to provide the sort of intimate encounter we like, often leaves viewers troubled by the emotional coldness of these figures, despite their bodily perfection. When we scan these Athenian faces, it is hard to escape our own cultural hunger for a world composed of individuals. These males who exist only as part of a collective, who inhabit an uncertain limbo between human and divine worlds, and who have no existence over and beyond their harmonious bodies, collide with our modern need to place individuals in front of our eyes.

I have focused this book on tragedy, for comedy would require a separate volume.[11] Fifth-century Athens was a place of cultural ferment where tragedians were responsible for some unique performance events that have left their trace in the form of canonical scripts. Though this book may be seen as a sequel to my *Masks of Menander*, my methodology will be entirely different. There, my analysis of New Comedy masks relied on huge numbers of artefacts, and contemporary physiognomic treatises, material which lent itself to a semiotic and cognitive approach. In the fifth century, philosophical writings are more fragmentary, and philosophical thought had not percolated into the common-sense of ordinary Athenians, though all were aware of its presence. The iconographic evidence, mainly in the form of vase painting rather than terracotta replicas, is more enigmatic, but implies that masks, far from making distinctions which a semiotician can interpret, served to obliterate distinctions. Masks are never found as isolated objects, but only as functions of relationships. Whilst materialist philosophy provided a secure basis for explicating Greek New Comedy, in Greek tragedy the gods are a defining presence, and cannot be set aside. A more phenomenological approach is required. We have to ask how people felt when they watched or wore such masks? We need to explore the relationship between masking and a sense of the divine.

My intellectual stance in this book is broadly anthropological. In a recent survey of the discipline, Wendy James takes her title *The Ceremonial Animal* from Wittgenstein. Her thesis is that: 'Ritual, symbol, and ceremony are not simply present or absent in the things we do; they are built in to human action . . . because all human action relates in some way to arenas of culturally specified significance . . .'[12] If we start from the premise that the human being is essentially a 'ceremonial animal', then distinctions between different

[11] An essay, 'The poetics of the mask in Old Comedy' is forthcoming in 2008.
[12] James (2003: 7).

sorts of ceremony become more nuanced. In Theatre Studies, the logic of such a position was established by Richard Schechner, under the influence of Victor Turner. Even though Schechner's ritualised and participatory *Dionysus since 69* remained firmly within the domain of artistic expression,[13] his 'theatre anthropology' has established the intellectual grounds for loosening the distinction between 'theatre' and 'performance'. In an essay of 1966, for example, dismissing the notion that Greek theatre descended from a primal ritual, he argued that ritual, theatre, play, games, sports, dance and music are parallel performance activities that should not be placed on any developmental ladder.[14] Two other anthropological studies have helped to inform my approach. In *The Anthropology of Art*, Robert Layton examines Eskimo shaman masks and demonstrates how ongoing creative innovation and aesthetic pleasure are central to the practice of controlling spirits.[15] This helps us understand how Greek theatre may meaningfully have functioned as an offering to Dionysos, with a convergence of ritual and aesthetic concerns. In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell argued provocatively that the anthropologist should not think in terms of discrete art objects and ways of seeing them. The aim should be to investigate a network of relationships within which artefacts themselves acquire agency. The mask lends itself to analysis in Gell's terms, not a thing sitting on the face to be viewed, but endowed with agency, an 'index' pointing always at a reality elsewhere.[16]

There are two major strands to my methodology. In the first instance, I shall take a fresh approach to the main primary source, vase painting. I shall not view representations of masks as more or less imperfect renderings of a 'real' artefact, but will concentrate on the function of the vase as a whole, asking why painters chose to portray masking. I shall argue that the vase image communicates not a fixed state or a moment in time but a process of transition, and I shall look at the mask not as an *object* manipulated by humans but as an *agent* engaged in a set of transactions. French research on the Greek gaze, drawing inspiration from the intellectual tradition of Lacan and Sartre, provides an important stimulus for this re-examination. Vase imagery tells us much about Greek ways of seeing, for masks are visible as appurtenances in the sanctuary of Dionysos, but vanish from tragic scenes where we may imagine them to have been worn. Since we never glimpse tragic actors concealed by masks, we may draw appropriate inferences about how Greeks viewed enactments in their festivals. Masks,

[13] See Zeitlin 2004. [14] 'Approaches' in Schechner (1988: 1–34). [15] Layton (1991: 193–8).
[16] Gell 1998. Edinborough 2003 called my attention to the relevance of Gell; cf. James (2003: 97–9).

furthermore, are conspicuous in Dionysian iconography but absent from discourse. The silence of our written sources relates to the lack of a distinguishing name for the mask-object, this thing that can never be dissociated from the effect of its gaze, and from its condition of being subject as well as object. Images and words had different emphases in the classical world: the spoken and written *logos*, when separated from music, related to logic, and logical ways of organising the polis, whilst vision lent itself to more visionary or metaphysical areas of human experience.

My second methodological ploy is to draw on the evidence of twentieth-century practice. The history of reception is a burgeoning area in Classical Studies, on account of a professional crisis concerning the relevance of Antiquity to the modern world, and of an epistemological crisis concerning the difficulty of writing any positivist, fact-based history of the ancient world. The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Theatre in Oxford, and The Reception of Classical Texts and Images Project at the Open University have given a particular impetus in the UK to research into modern performances of Greek drama.[17] Studies of how the ancient world has been received can be conservative, tracing an unbroken line to the present in order to justify the timeless value of the past, or they can be radical, stressing the otherness of the past, and the socially constructed nature of all interpretations. It is the cultural otherness of the Greek world that I shall stress in this book, whilst not undervaluing the remarkable properties of texts and artefacts capable of engendering such diverse perceptions. I shall look at realisations of the Greek mask in modern theatre with equal attention to the functions of actor, writer and spectator, and the variety of work that I document will serve to relativise my own twenty-first-century viewpoint. Whilst I cannot finally escape from a historically and geographically conditioned way of seeing the world, I can at least open up a menu of choices.

It is axiomatic in Theatre Studies that theory and practice should converge, and a further strand in my methodology has been practice-based research.[18] I have worked on masks with students over many years,[19] and have also undertaken two focused projects sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, which I shall discuss in Chapter 7. The value of such research

[17] I should also signal the importance of three Greek-based organisations in stimulating academic activity: DESMI, the European Cultural Centre of Delphi, and the European Network of Research and Documentation of Ancient Greek Drama Performances – together with the individual contributions of figures like Erika Fischer-Lichte in Berlin, Helene Foley in New York and Marianne McDonald in San Diego.

[18] The place of practice in historical research has been marginal to debates within PARIP at the University of Bristol. Methodological issues are discussed in Bratton and Bush-Bailey 2002.

[19] Wiles 2004a offers an example of my practice.

does not lie in clinching what *must* have been done in antiquity, for it would be absurd to claim that that masks two and a half millennia ago meant the same and had the same effect as masks today. The point is rather to demonstrate what potentially *can* be done with a mask, and what masks *can* do to us. Moreover, even the most determined cultural relativist must accede to certain biological universals. For purposes of studying the mask, scientific experimentation could embrace the effects of sensory deprivation upon those who wear masks, the physics of producing sound within a shell formed like a second skull, and the brain-structure which 'wires' us to respond in special ways to faces.

This book builds on much earlier scholarship. Archaeologists have provided the bedrock by locating, classifying, dating and photographing artefacts. The tireless work of T. B. L.Webster and Richard Green in collating mask images, in association with the Institute of Classical Studies in London, has been of particular assistance, as has Arthur Pickard-Cambridge's handbook on the festivals of Dionysos, rewritten by John Gould and David Lewis.[20] If Webster's catalogue of *Monuments Illustrating Tragedy and Satyr Play* remains unrevised since 1967, this may in part be due to the inherent difficulties of the early material.[21] While most comic images present overt signs of their theatricality, the relationship between theatricality and images of heroes or satyrs is more elusive. Many data have been gathered, and the major need in the twenty-first century is for a higher level of theorisation. By 'theory' I refer not to a specific body of postmodern thought, but merely to sustained reflection about why mask research matters, and what the implications are of categorising masks in one way rather than another way.[22] Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux has done valuable work on Dionysian masks in a theoretically self-conscious manner, as has David Napier but their focus has been on ritual as distinct from theatre.[23]

Within Theatre Studies an overarching theoretical study of the mask remains to be written. Publications fall into three main categories: generalist books where the text is a support to photographs, manuals setting out the method of a particular practitioner, and specialised historical studies. I recommend to students Efrat Tseëlon's brief 'Reflections on mask and carnival' as the most useful overview of the subject I have encountered because it

[20] Pickard-Cambridge 1968. An appendix was added in 1988.

[21] Webster 1967. Eric Handley tells me that he has gathered materials for a future revision. I await eagerly Oliver Taplin's forthcoming study of theatre-related vase images, to be published by the Getty Foundation in 2007.

[22] Green 1991 sets out his methodology and rationale clearly and helpfully.

[23] Napier 1986; Frontisi-Ducroux 1991, 1995.