

Masquing vizards

Anne Daye

The wearing of masks or vizards by dancers in the seventeenth-century masque is the topic of this paper. The conference presentation was supported by the use of several images, not reproduced here; these served more to enliven the delivery than being essential to the argument. A display of masque, antimasque, social and commedia dell'arte masks was also arranged.¹ References to relevant images are included here, rather than reproductions themselves. There are two aspects for discussion: one their use by the noble and genteel dancer; the other the use of masks by the professional dancer in the antimasque. I will start with the clearer story of the noble use of mask.

Noble masquers

The vizard, vizer or face mask was an essential part of the disguise of the noble masquer from the first appearance of the masque in England on Twelfth Night 1512:

The Kyng with xi other wer disguised, after the maner of Italie, called a maske, a thing not seen afore in Englande, thei were appareled in garmentes long and brode, wrought all with gold, with visers and cappes of gold...
(Chambers 1923, 153)

The comment of the chronicler Hall that this innovation by Henry VIII was 'after the manner of Italy', seems to relate to the action of entering in disguise, then dancing as a group, and afterwards inviting the ladies to dance socially (in other words, a *mascherata*, or ball with *intermedio*), but part of the novelty was also the outfit of mask with domino, or a loose gown hiding other clothes. This festive practice spread across Europe, and is represented in illustrations, showing the use of the face mask to hide identity in the game of the *mascherata*.

One example is the Flemish miniature of c.1500 depicting a masking revel to represent the month of February. Men in white garments and caps bearing torches have plain vizards over their faces and a pinkish brown basket headpiece on the backs of their heads (Holme 1988, 19). In *Der Freydal* by Maximilian c.1516 (Henning 1987), there are several illustrations of mask entries in all of which men in costume are wearing mesh masks to cover their faces. In English, the words 'mask' and 'mesh' were closely linked to indicate a face covering, or a net. A similar practice is noted by Hall when he describes two women in disguise as moors, with faces, necks, arms and hands covered in gauzy black chiffon (Twycross & Carpenter 2002, 139). These

authors also record a netted mask with spangles for 1597 (Twycross & Carpenter 2002, 312).

The most important representation of Tudor mask practice is the Portrait of Sir Henry Unton c.1590 (National Portrait Gallery) featuring a masque entry in the central portion. Three pairs of female figures in silver dresses and headpieces with loose blonde hair wear red face masks. They are escorted by the goddess Diana, Mercury, a Presenter/Poet, and a taborer, all of whom wear the same red face masks. Three pairs of boys act as torchbearers, one of each pair in a flesh-coloured skin suit, the other in a black skin suit, all with faces to match. It is not easy to tell whether the boys are wearing masks, or have painted faces.

A development across the sixteenth century in the social use of masks made a change in the role of vizards in the noble masque. Women had used masks to protect their faces from the weather but from the 1570s covering the face with a mask when abroad from home or in a large company became an essential dimension of female discretion. Janet Arnold in *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* gathers valuable evidence together showing that the fashion of courtesans in Italy became the convention for noble and aspirational women in England, and was a custom followed by Queen Elizabeth. The social protection of a mask allowed women greater freedom to walk the streets or even attend public theatres incognito. This convention continued into the reign of Charles 1, being depicted very clearly in drawings by Wenceslaus Hollar: *A Masked Woman* 1639 and *A Group of Muffs, Kerchiefs, Fans, Gloves and a Mask* 1647 (Ribeiro 2005 125–6). Hollar draws the half mask whereas Abraham de Bruyn in 1581 illustrates the full mask worn by noblewomen in England with a caption confirming their use to aid riding or walking in public (Arnold 1988, 202). The practice was common in the eighteenth century as seen in Ricci's *View of the Mall in St. James's Park* c. 1710 showing a lone fashionable lady in a black vizard and a group of three, one of which is vizarded (Ribeiro 2005, 317). Henrietta Maria was the first queen to attend public theatres and semi-public events, with the protection of a mask; her clothes and attendance would have left no doubt as to her identity. Indeed Anne of Denmark was criticised for not using a mask in her regal progress south from Edinburgh to London in 1603, when clearly everyone knew who she was and might crave a glimpse of her face: '...but for her favour she hath done it some wrong, for in all this

journey she hath worn no masque' (Lee 1972, 34). This demonstrates how the custom became embedded in the etiquette of the royal, noble and genteel woman. The disguise afforded by make-up is also alluded to in the word 'mascara' for the eyes. During the nineteenth century, the mask was replaced by the use of veils attached to hats, and today famous women and now men both hide their faces and draw attention to their presence with sunglasses.

In prose accounts of this practice, we have further information on the practicalities. One writer makes a distinction between a mask that covered the face from the brow to the nose (a half-mask) which was worn with a chin-cloth to complete the coverage, and a vizard-mask that covered the whole face 'having holes for the eyes, a case for the nose, and a slit for the mouth, and to speak through' (Stubbes 1583 in Arnold 1988, 237). He adds that 'this kind of mask is taken off and put on in a moment of time, being only held in the Teeth by means of a round bead fastened on the inside over against the mouth'. This must have been the kind of mask that Queen Elizabeth used in 1602 '...walking as freely as if she had been only eighteen years old, always taking off her mascara [mascaram] and bowing deeply to his princely Grace...' (Arnold 1988, 12).

In the Stuart masque, the entries of the noble and genteel dancers remained the central and most important activity of the whole, and it is absolutely clear that vizards were an essential accessory. The costume designs by Inigo Jones never show them, as the drawings were a basis for discussion with the royal or noble masquer, indeed Jones attempted to portray the likenesses of royal clients from time to time. However, they appear in the financial records often enough to confirm regular use. A run of such records between 1619 and 1625 shows that Robert and Thomas Peake supplied vizards to the court, the price going from 12/6 up to 16/- and then down to 14/6 each. Venetian masks are sometimes specified. The vizards were supplied 'lined, perfumed, cut and ribboned' (Orgel & Strong 1973, 278, 308, 334, 349). This shows that they were prepared to be as comfortable as possible, and fastened with ribbons, as had the Elizabethan masquing vizard (Twycross & Carpenter 2002, 319). It seems likely that the bead system may have been more for social use than performance use. The social mask was usually made of silk, but the masquing vizard probably always of soft leather lined with kid.

The masquing vizard was of various colours, sometimes chosen to suit the disguise or the colour of the costume. In 1613, for example, the masquers as Virginian Princes wore 'olive colour vizards pleasingly visaged' (Orgel & Strong 1973, 256). Anne of Denmark made an unusual adaptation of this by adopting paint instead of a vizard for the *Masque of Blackness*. Both paint and masks had been used to represent moors in Edinburgh civic processions and in the Tudor masque, so she was

following a theatrical convention, but it upset the court, who called the appearance of her and her ladies 'loathsome'. It also caused problems in the social dancing with black smears on partners a danger, plus the impossibility of unmasking. She may have been seeking a more authentic representation, as the vizard was an artificial and conventional device, and did not always match the disguise. Charles and his companions wore black masks in 1618 with white and silver costumes. A rare illustration from France shows the strange effect of black-masked gentlemen: this depicts sixteen men in red and gold costumes à l'antique with head-dressings of feathers all in black vizards for the entry of *Le Ballet du Chateau du Bicêtre* 1632 (Christout 1987, 58).

The vizard continued to be an essential part of the disguise of a masquer, worn throughout the performance and the revels or social dancing. The unmasking at the end to reveal the identity of the dancers was an important conclusion to the whole, although the identities of the dancers were probably widely known. More tellingly, the decorum of the noble dancers was preserved by the mask, permitting them to appear in a theatrical function, in line with the social use of mask. However, with the newer seriousness of the masque established by James I and developed by Charles I, Neo-Platonic thinking added a significant dimension. The appearance of the masquers in matching costumes with blank faces allowed for their individual identities to be transcended so that the group became more clearly allegorical in support of the argument or moral idea of the masque. This was expressed as appearing 'in form', in other words in presentation of an abstract concept. We can still identify with the concept of universality in the masked figure, despite commonly experiencing fear or suspicion of the disguised individual. An example for today exists in the much-reproduced photograph of an injured woman, facial burns protected by a mask of gauze, being led to safety from Edgware Road tube station after the bomb attacks of July 2005. When reprinted in the Times as part of the review of the year, the photographer André Camara added this caption:

'The woman with the mask is being supported in the picture, so it represents the strength of mankind in the face of adversity. Most importantly, because her face is obscured, she can't be identified, and so comes to represent everyone who was affected by the attacks, not just one individual' (The Times, 31.12. 05)

The masquing vizard, then, is more than a disguise but an essential part of the meaning of the whole work. In itself it became the symbol of the activity, as seen on the external and internal decorations of the Banqueting House. There is little opportunity to appreciate the powerful effect of a group of masked dancers, as today performers find mask-wearing very unpleasant and disorienting and we have neither the time to become

Masquing vizards

accustomed to them nor the money to have suitable ones made. Gentlemen and ladies of the seventeenth century may have grown used to the wearing of masks through the visors of helmets and the social usage, and therefore have found dancing in complex figure dances with limited vision less challenging.

Antimasquers

Concrete evidence for the use of face masks by the antimasquers in their mainly comic and grotesque dancing is very elusive. In assessing the evidence, the first issue is that many antimasque dancers were also speakers. Although some use of masks is evident in the drama, I know of no visual or verbal evidence to confirm the physical actuality. One example of the possible use of masks by players occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Act 1, ii, when Flute might play Thisbe wearing a mask as he has a beard. I confronted the problem in researching the recreation of the antimasque of witches, the first venture in this vein of 1610. Jonson states in the notes to his published text that witches are sometimes vizarded and masked, without stating unambiguously that these witch antimasquers were. His learned note re continental practice is interesting: 'They participate in the dances sometimes covered with a mask or linen, bark, a net, a robe or other covering, or enveloped in a chaff of grain' (Orgel 1969, 541). A decision to use masks in the reconstruction was also prompted by the difficulty of presenting the emblematic features of these characters, such as: Credulity with one ear and that always ope; Two-faced Falsehood; Malice whetting of her forked tongue (Orgel 1969, 126).

Only a few antimasque characters occur often enough to provide evidence of a customary delivery. The presentation of the satyrs of *Oberon* 1611 is aided by a single financial detail: the payment for 'forheads and beards used in the maske' at 40/- (Herford & Simpson 1932 – 1966, 521). This is matched by an earlier record of the loan and return of costumes and properties in the Revels office for the pastoral *Alba* at Oxford in 1603, including '10 goats beards and pols of short hair of goats colour for Satyres' (MSC 1965, 251 – 259). This suggests another possibility for antimasquers: a combination of hair or headpiece and beards, akin to the half-mask and chin-cloth arrangement for gentlewomen going outdoors. False hair and beards or vizards with beards were used extensively in drama, and also occur in records of the Tudor masque (Twycross & Carpenter 2002, 321). In Inigo Jones's designs for the Stuart masque there are many antimasque characters with prominent beards. It is likely that a false beard would not impede the delivery of a speech as much as a conventional vizard.

A contrasting practice recorded is the use of commedia dell'arte half-masks, which were designed to facilitate speech. The only time these were definitely adopted was

for *Love's Triumph through Callipolis* 1631 when designs for the depraved lovers were based on Callot's engravings of familiar types. However, this is likely to have been a novelty, and furthermore the dancers were mute and did not speak.

A few more positive clues for the wearing of vizards by antimasquers exist. One is from the 1603 Oxford records, which includes 28 Antique vizards. Here the term probably denotes 'antic' meaning 'grotesque' and therefore likely to have been worn by each member of a large cast of characters, none of whom were noble masquers. Another is the observation of the Florentine ambassador Orazio Busino at Charles's debut in *Pleasure Reconciiled to Virtue* 1618 in which he saw 'dodeci stravaganti mascherati' and 'dodeci putti mascherati', which were the two antimasques, one of men dressed as a cask and bottles performing a mute dance entry and one of twelve pigmies who danced and also spoke (Orgel & Strong 1973, 280). The term 'mascherati' could refer to the whole disguise of costume and mask, but it is clear that Busino is specifying the vizard as he describes the singers as 'vestiti' and the masquers as 'vestiti à livrea' before singling out the 'mascheretta negra' or black vizard for comment. This scrap of information does confirm that speaking groups could be masked, but it is still unclear as to what kind of mask was worn. Another source of information is the financial bill for *Pan's Anniversary* of 1620 in which the antimasque characters of tradesmen are provided with vizards at £6/10/- (Orgel & Strong 1973, 316). Each one then cost exactly 10/-, a little cheaper than the noble vizards of the time. Only one speaks, the rest being mute dancers. As the majority of antimasque characters are human types rather than emblematic, animal or fantasy figures, this is the strongest clue to a convention.

Inigo Jones did not produce neat designs for antimasque characters until the 1630s, and whether finished or rough sketches, it is very difficult to get sure evidence of masks from them. The most obvious are the animal characters: a lion, an ass and apes in 1632. On the sketch of the ape, he writes: 'the hedes vizards/ and heavy scincotes like appes', confirming what we might surmise as the realisation in performance (Orgel & Strong, 492). These appear in *Tempe Restored* of 1632 alongside a fantasy figure of a dancing pagoda, while in *Salmacida Spolia* of 1640 there appear two Drollities with large heads and grotesque features. One would also expect distinctive facial types to be created by a mask: old women with prominent chins and noses and furies screaming with rage are depicted.

A possible representation of stage practice at the Restoration is the cut accompanying the play *Wit at Several Weapons* in the 1711 edition of plays by Beaumont and Fletcher, showing six vizarded performers dancing on a stage. The edition represents a revival of interest in the performance of Jacobean plays: *Wit at*

Several Weapons was first performed during the reign of James I, contemporary with the Jacobean masque, but no firm date can be assigned. The six characters in the engraving match the cast of the play, which has disguise as a key component of the plot, and a short masque episode to advance the intrigue. The cut can be linked most clearly to this episode when three men and three women enter masked and dance, but they also speak. One man and two women appear to be wearing the usual vizard covering the face, although one woman's vizard has a distinctive hooked nose: we can identify her with the Guardianess an 'old dotting crone'. The other men appear to wear vizards with moustaches. The third woman is wearing a half-mask and chin-cloth: this also relates to an earlier disguise scene in the action. The masque scene in the play is a social masque, for which plain vizards would be more conventional, yet the vizards depicted have character features that relate to antimasque practice. It is likely that by this time, the beginning of the eighteenth century, the two strands have become conflated, not surprising as the court masque, and therefore the social masque, had ceased seven decades previously without revival at the Restoration. The picture can only inform us about Restoration practice, but its value may lie in demonstrating that players could speak lines effectively in full-face vizards.

Although the evidence is slight, I am inclined to think that antimasque dancers wore some kind of mask or face-covering as a matter of course. One argument could be that, by the time antimasquers (that is, professional performers from the public stage) were admitted to the court masque, the wearing of vizards had been an inseparable convention for the performance of theatrical dancing for nearly a hundred years, so they adopted this practice as well. If we look at this within the continental context, we may be able to discern a trend.

When Louis XIV ceased to dance in ballets, the roles he and his courtiers had taken were adopted by professional dancers. The professional danseur noble also adopted the stage presentation of the courtier noble dancer, including plumes, costume à l'antique (skirted armour) and mask. A sketch from the 1630s shows a dancer getting dressed for a performance with five plain face masks laid out on the dressing table and three hanging on the wall: 'Danseur se préparant' probably depicts the gentleman dancer Louis Hesselin (Christout 1987, 57). We also have a few depictions of the grotesque dancer in a mask, for example a Bacchante from *Le Ballet du Roi* of 1651, and representations of other dancers wearing or holding masks (Kirstein 1984, 89). Across the eighteenth century the wearing of a mask by professional dancers on stage persisted as a convention even while more expressive forms of theatre dance were being pursued. Eventually the mask became a significant obstacle to the use of the face in the delivery of emotion within the ballet d'action. Calls were made for the abandonment of these

conventional attributes, most notably by Noverre. Images of the eighteenth century male dancer in tonnelet, plumes and mask show the problem (Beaumont 1946, 23). The wearing of masks did not fully disappear until the last decades of the eighteenth century in France, which indicates how much it was tied up with the decorum of the dancer. Remembering the vizard's strong association with the noble dancer in the seventeenth century may help us understand the persistence of a theatrical habit beyond its artistic function, in favour of the preservation of the dignity of a profession with noble foundations.

Note

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Frances Campbell in preparing the display and creating the antimasque masks for the witches in *The Masque of Queens*. I am equally appreciative of Jane Huggett's assistance in lending a bead mask she had recreated based on a doll's mask in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and guiding me to information on these and the information in Twycross and Carpenter.

References

- Arnold, J. (1988) *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*, Leeds: Maney
- Beaumont, C. (1946) *Ballet Design Past and Present*, London: The Studio
- Beaumont & Fletcher (1711) *Collected Works*, London: Jacob Tonson
- Chambers, E.K. (1923) *The Elizabethan Stage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Christout, M-F. (1987) *Le Ballet de Cour au XVIIe Siècle*, Genève: Editions Minkoff
- Henning, U. (1987) *Musica Maximiliana*, Neu-Ulm: Stegmiller
- Herford & Simpson (1932 – 1966) *Ben Jonson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Holme, B. (1988) *Princely Feasts and Festivals*, London: Thames and Hudson
- Kirstein, L. (1984) *Four Centuries of Ballet*, New York: Dover Publications
- Lee, M. (ed.) (1972) *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603 – 1624*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press
- MSC: Malone Society Collections Part III (1965), Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Orgel, S. (1969) *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, New Haven: Yale University Press
- Orgel & Strong (1973) *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, London: Sotheby Parke Bernet
- Ribeiro, A. (2005) *Fashion and Fiction*, New Haven: Yale University Press
- Twycross & Carpenter (2002) *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*, Aldershot: Ashgate