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Henrys and Harlequins: masquerade balls in 18th-century England and the subversion of social order

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Introduction

Imagine it's a cold and frosty evening in London — you're riding through the streets in your carriage — as you get close to your destination, curious onlookers try to peer into your carriage — you arrive, and enter a large room — it's shimmering with the light from four thousand wax tapers — a fairy land — 100 musicians are playing — and the people — two thousand are here — from all over the world — Persians, Polynesians, Pashas and Patagonians — and judging by their clothes, they are all exceedingly rich — vast quantities of jewels sparkle in the flickering lights — some must have spent at least a million pounds on their outfits —perhaps they're royalty, or foreign ambassadors — and there are plenty of people from the theatre — perhaps they are all from the theatre, for they speak with strange high-pitched voices — there are at least half a dozen Harlequins — and strangely, there are many people from the past — look over there, there's Henry the Eighth — in fact, the room is full of *Henrys and Harlequins*.

You are, of course, at a Masquerade Ball in eighteenth-century England — an entertainment of dancing, dining, drinking and gaming — at which all in attendance must be not only in a mask, but also in something that was recognizably a 'costume'. Most people came in full disguise, from top to toe; if someone wanted to completely conceal their real identity, they could easily do so. A dangerous situation, full of intrigue — provocative and thrilling to some, threatening to others. And the most threatening thing of all was the freedom it gave to the ladies. For, as was observed in the *Weekly Journal* of 1718, 'The mask secures the Ladies from Detraction, and encourages a Liberty, the Guilt of which their Blushes would betray when barefac'd, till by Degrees they are innur'd to that which is out of their Vertue to restrain' (cited in Castle, 39).

Masquerade balls were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in England in the eighteenth century. The first big public masquerades were held at the Opera House in the Haymarket, on nights when there was no opera performed. Then they were held at Vauxhall Gardens, Ranelagh, Mrs Cornelys' House, The Pantheon and Almacks, among other places.

Masquerade balls were enormously popular with all ranks of society, from royalty downwards. A French traveller remarked that 'all the beautiful and richest ladies in England were there in fancy dress of singular taste and magnificence' (Summers, 193). Although entry tickets were quite expensive, ranging from 3 shillings to 5 guineas (an unskilled labourer earned 5 shillings a week), the lower orders frequently gained entry, sometimes being given unwanted tickets by their masters. Most accounts attest to a great mingling of all classes in society, to a far greater extent than on the continent.

The masquerade

The whole ambience of the masquerade venue was full of glitter and excitement. Horace Walpole, an inveterate masquerader and fortunately for us also a great letter-writer, wrote of a masquerade ball held at Ranelagh that 'Nothing in a fairy tale ever surpassed' it (Castle, 90). Fanny Burney wrote that 'the magnificence of the rooms, splendour of the illuminations and embellishments, and the brilliant appearance of the company exceeded anything I ever saw before'(Summers, 206). Another journalist wrote that the 'richness and brilliancy of the dresses were almost beyond imagination' (Summers, 205).

In addition to the gaiety and glitter there was the thrill of being masked, of being in disguise. And a good part of the excitement from this disguising came from the fact that 'everyone ...wears a Habit which speaks him the Reverse of what he is' (Castle, 5). 'I found nature turned topsy-turvy, women changed into men, and men into women, children in leading-strings, seven-foot high, courtiers turned into clowns, ladies of the night into saints, people of the first quality into beasts or birds, gods or goddesses' (Castle, 5). 'All state and ceremony' was 'laid aside; since the *Peer* and the *Apprentice*, the *Punk* and the *Duchess* are, for so long a time, upon an equal Foot' (Castle, 30).

Not only could you be disguised as someone quite the reverse of your everyday self— you also had to *act* the character you portrayed, or perhaps caricature it. For instance a masquerader dressed as a friar 'incessantly preach[ed] up penitence and abstinence', although his 'face was the picture of luxury and voluptuousness' (Summers, 219). A cross-dressed woman was obliged to assume all the normal liberties of a man.

The anonymity afforded by the disguise gave people enormous freedoms. It must have been very exciting, very liberating, to be able to play the role of someone from a completely different class or gender. It was said that George II, 'well disguised in an old-fashioned English habit', was 'much pleased with someone who

Fig. 1. A Jubilee Ball at Ranelagh, 1759

desired him to hold their cup as they were drinking tea, (Castle, 28), a simple action, but one usually totally denied to a King.

To avoid one's gender being identified by the pitch of one's voice, masqueraders of both sexes adopted the very high-pitched 'masquerade squeak'; 'The first Noise which strikes your Ears upon your entering the Room is a loud confused Squeak, like a *Consort* of *Catcalls*' (Castle, 36).

Costume

What did people wear to the masquerade balls? Most importantly, all comers were obliged to wear a mask. These were usually made of black silk or white velvet, and a cloth usually covered the mouth and the bottom of the face, leaving no clue as to the person's real identity. Masks were also made of *papier maché,* painted skin colour.

Aileen Ribeiro (1984) uses three main categories to describe masquerade costume. The first was the Domino, an all-enveloping, totally disguising cloak, often black. You didn't need to play a character role if you wore this, but too many dominoes didn't do much for the fun of the ball. The second category was fancy dress; you didn't have to be a particular character in fancy dress, but you could weave a story around your outfit. The third category was character costume; the character could be historical, allegorical, theatrical or literary. Dressed as a character, one had to behave *in* character.

Various characters were extremely popular: historical ones (including Henrys); characters from paintings (especially those of Vandyke); commedia figures (Harlequin, Pantelone, etc.). Very popular too were animals: dancing bears, birds, donkeys, monkeys; there were also large numbers of Ecclesiastic Figures (great stuff for parody). Rather charming is the description of one man who came 'in women's clothes with a head-dress four feet high, composed of greens and garden stuff, and crowned with tufts of endive nicely blanched' (Castle, 68).

Costumes could be very expensive; the 'Sultana' dress of Lady Villars was estimated to have cost thirty thousand pounds (Ribeiro, 37); that wouldn't give you much change from three million pounds in today's money, and of course it wasn't done to wear the same outfit more than once (although it was permissible to recycle the jewels!)

One could go to big Masquerade Warehouses and buy a costume from their large supplies, or if one's finances were stretched, one could hire one just for the night. One could look through books of dresses of different nations, both modern and old-fashioned, to commission an outfit of one's choice; these books also advised of the behaviour appropriate for that exotic person! You can imagine the crudeness of these descriptions! (Castle, 60)

Inevitably, masquerade costume inspired general fashion, like tall headdresses for women, and fur-trimmed Turkish-style robes as lounging wear for men. Fashion and society also influenced the masquerade. Caricaturists would paint absurd pictures of the masquerade, then the masqueraders would have to live up to, and preferably surpass the caricature! (Ribeiro, 35)

Dancing at Masquerade Balls

Some accounts of masquerade costume are particularly interesting from the perspective of early dance research: 'Many ladies were dressed in fine Spanish and Turkish habits, several as shepherdesses with crooks; and some were *like dancers*' [italics mine] (Ribeiro, 59).

Of course, if you dressed as a dancer, singer, musician or actor, you had to strut your stuff! Some of the masqueraders managed this to perfection:

'Two of the most remarkable groups in the house were those of lady Villars and lady Carlisle, who came in most admirably dressed as pastoral dancers, attended with their own bands of music: They severally entertained all present with some excellent ballets, formed for the occasion, and executed with uncommon skill.. . . The dresses exhibited a refined taste and beauty, and were happily adapted to the stile and character of the Paysan' (Ribeiro, 80). Of course we all know what refined tastes *real* Paysans had!

What other dances would you have seen at Masquerade Balls? Minuets, Cotillions and Country Dances are frequently mentioned. I am not sure that we would always recognise these dances, however. For instance,

many people today regard the minuet as a rather stately dance; what would they think of a masquerader 'pranc[ing] a minuet on his hobby-horse, with a dancing bear for his partner'? (Castle, 23). Both sexes were at liberty to revel in virtuoso or grotesque dance steps, usually restricted to the theatre. In Defoe's *Roxana*, the heroine performs a solo Turkish dance. There are accounts of a sailor dancing a hornpipe, of morris dancing, of a devil dancing wildly, and of a Harlequin 'so full of agility, that in one of his jumps he was within an ace of falling into the street' (Ribeiro, 81).

The function of masquerade within society

What was the function of masquerade balls within society? They were certainly glittering occasions, and they also afforded an opportunity for conspicuous consumption, but perhaps equally important was the fact that they afforded enormous freedom to the individual. In this role, their capacity for subversion of the conventional order was very apparent and was, no doubt, part of the reason for their popularity. It was also one reason why they attracted such venomous opposition.

Eighteenth-century England was obsessed with social hierarchy, in which class, occupation, gender and wealth determined a formal, and almost inviolate structuring of society. And one's position in this society was precisely marked by costume and deportment. At the masquerade ball, however, the constraints of this social hierarchy were totally subverted; masqueraders were freed from the constrictions of their conventional roles.

Disguise also enabled those of little religious faith to parody religious figures with obscene or heretical sermons of their own devising. In the same way, hated authority figures could be cut down to size by suitable costuming; apprentice boys could ape the aristocracy; men could woo any lady of their fancy - occasionally, this turned out to be their own wives, in heavy disguise! Women could behave with the predatory freedom normally accorded only to men. Subversion of the normal constraints imposed by gender were particularly liberating for women. Women of any social rank could go to a masquerade ball without an escort; church was the only other place to which she could go alone. Addison complained that 'the Women either come by themselves or are introduced by Friends, who are obliged to quit them, upon their first Entrance"'(Addison, vol. 1, 32).

While some might see the subversive behaviour manifested at masquerade balls as threatening to society, others believe that a temporary reversal of roles acts to define and reinforce society's classifications, serving more as a safety valve than as a means of subversion. A commentator from an earlier age nicely sums this up: "Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air" (Davis, 102). The masquerade ball could well serve both functions: subversion, as well as the provision of a safety valve.

Opposition

The masquerade ball created a world where everyone was equal, where everyone could create their own identity. Not everyone approved of this liberation. Many disliked the deceit inherent in the act of disguising; disguise hides a person's true nature, their inner core. Addison complained that 'instead of going out of our own complectional Nature into that of others, 'twere a better and more laudable Industry to improve our own, and instead of a miserable copy become a good original' (Paulson 124). Count Heidegger, who first introduced the masquerade ball to England, defended them against this accusation of deceit:

> 'The World it self, excuse the Phrase, is
> A Ball; where, mimic Shapes and Faces,
> The Judgement of our Senses cheat
> And Fashion favours the Deceit...' (Ribeiro, 4)

If our everyday persona can be seen as a 'mask', how do we find our 'true' self? Oscar Wilde remarked that 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell the truth"'(Sorell, 13). In the eighteenth century, the satirist Henry Fielding expressed similar sentiments in his poem *The Masquerade*; the ball-goers 'masque the face, t'unmasque the mind' (Fielding, 7). So was it only at the masquerade ball, behind the shelter of a mask, that people could reveal their 'true' nature?

Subversion of the social hierarchy would have rendered the masquerade highly threatening to many. But equally disturbing was the common assumption that under the protective cloak of anonymity, an individual's innate licentiousness would inevitably emerge, particularly women's. Masquerades were seen as midnight orgies, as 'Nurseries of Lewdness, Extravagancies and Immorality' (Ribeiro, 315). They represented the work of the devil. Hogarth's engraving *Masquerades and Operas, or the Taste of the Town* nicely illustrates this view, showing the devil leading masqueraders into the Opera House for a ball; Heidegger, the opera house manager, can be seen leaning out the window. On the other side of the engraving, people are going in to see a Pantomime, *Harlequin Dr Faustus*. Pantomimes were considered to be as frivolous, unnatural and potentially subversive as the masquerades. In the middle of the picture, a wheelbarrow is full of 'Waste Paper for Shops' — Shakespeare, Dryden, Congreve etc. (Burke & Caldwell, 42).

The very concept of masquerade has been seen by some to epitomize evil; indeed, it was often claimed that it was a masquerade that led to the original Fall of Mankind, since the devil first addressed himself to Eve in a mask.

Masquerade today

Masquerade balls almost faded away in England in the 1780s. This can partly be attributed to the rise of the middle classes, with their belief in duty and hard work

Fig. 2. A Hogarth engraving *Masquerade Ticket* 1727. On the left is the altar of Priapus; on the right is Venus, masked; at the back there are 2 *Lecherometers* for measuring sexual excitement.

rather than frivolous pleasure seeking. The Enlightenment, too, carried a thread of increased respect for sincerity, which undermined the wilful deceit inherent in masquerade. And events across the channel, heralding the French Revolution, would certainly have both sobered the mind, and rendered participation in masquerade potentially dangerous.

And what of the masquerade today? The title of this conference is "Masks, masques and masquerades: *a living tradition*". Masquerades are seldom to be seen in England in the 21st century (apart from elaborately costumed carnival parades, where there is usually a strict demarcation between performer and audience, turning them into something more akin to street theatre). Would the twenty-first century be a suitable time for a revival of the masquerade ball? Part of the fun of the masquerade in the eighteenth century was the subversion of social order. Could one hope to gain such fun in the present day from subverting gender and class distinctions? Or are we no longer sufficiently concerned with such distinctions? It is true that there is much greater equality of the sexes nowadays, and more social mobility. Women wear trousers, and the Queen's clothes are usually indistinguishable from those of Mrs Joe Bloggs. But let's take a closer look. In the eighteenth century, it was not unknown for Parliament to adjourn, in order that the MPs could stroll down to the masquerade ball in costume - many of them in drag, some in mock ecclesiastical outfits. Imagine just such an event today. I suspect there would be even more of an outrage, firstly because it would reveal an unacceptable level of frivolous pleasure-seeking in people in positions of authority, and secondly because it would give affront to gender and religious roles.

Further, there is clearly no shortage of extremely powerful and hence potentially threatening authority figures in the world today, from George Bush to Osama bin Laden, from the catholic Pope to the wild mullahs of Iran. Any of these could provide suitable subjects for parody at a twenty-first century masquerade ball. Moreover, there is no shortage of outraged opposition to the donning of such garb, to lend that *frisson* of excitement to the masquerader; witness the outburst at Prince Harry's dressing as a nazi officer at a private party.

The ground might therefore seem fertile for a revival of the masquerade ball. There is, however, one big stumbling block. Imagine members of royalty and many heads of state at a ball where the identity of most of the guests was unknown, hidden behind a mask. It would be totally and ludicrously unthinkable on the grounds of security alone. Yet this was the very situation of the masquerade ball in the eighteenth century. Nowadays, even hoods on coats and ladies' hats are barred from pubs and shopping malls, because of the partial anonymity they provide the wearer. It is difficult also to imagine our Prime Minister, or any person in a position of authority, going in public view to a masquerade ball in drag (masked or otherwise). The ubiquitous paparazzi would have a field day, and jobs might soon be on the line. For these reasons, it is difficult to see any scope for a full-scale revival of the eighteenth-century masquerade ball.

However, despite the fact that only vestiges of the masquerade ball remain in the modern day, some of its *spirit* seems to have survived. Clothing that allows the wearer to subvert not only sartorial conventions but also social roles has been adopted by many groups, from the Teddy Boys and Hippies to the Punks and Goths. These dress styles all involved a large degree of costume *creation*, an activity that was a part of the thrill of the eighteenth-century masquerade ball. Punks, like postmodern artists, created their images from the least appropriate items imaginable, from safety pins to bin liners and lavatory chains (Wilson, 195); the more 'unnatural' the look, the better. This recalls a contemporary comment on the eighteenth-century masquerader, that 'the more extravagant and out of nature his dress can be contrived, the higher is the joke' (Castle, 72). And just as the eighteenth-century moralists feared that men masquerading in female attire would turn into effeminate homosexuals and cross-dressing women would change into Amazons, so in the twentieth century people grumbled that Punks would reduce the human race to degenerate and uncouth barbarians.

Finally, there is a domain very close to home where people wear costumes representing roles largely opposite to those they play in everyday life - the world of early dance — in which people with relatively powerless positions in society don the clothes of kings and queens, lords and ladies. The Early Dance and re-enactment worlds are even more similar to that of the masquerade ball in situations where participants act out their roles and 'play the part'. I was once dressed as an eighteenth-century lady, attending a concert. When, a few minutes into the concert, we started commenting on the performers in unhushed voices, the rest of the audience was profoundly shocked by such flouting of modern conventions, until they realised we were acting 'in eighteenth-century character'. The rules of dress and deportment, of social hierarchy and polite behaviour, that dominated eighteenth-century society may have, as their modern equivalent, the constraints of *political correctness*. One should never assume that life in the tewbty-first century is governed less by rules and constraints than it was in the eighteenth, it may just be that the rules are different.

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