

Masks in the ancient Roman dance theatre

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The nature of Roman pantomime

The so-called pantomime, as perfected by the ancient Romans, was a voluptuous and extravagantly mysterious form of dance theatre, and many of its aesthetic qualities entailed signifying practices that 'imitator of all.' The pantomime has assumed a 'mysterious' identity because of the density of ambiguity associated with its performance code. This code blurred distinctions between genres, between sexualities, between audiences, between performance contexts, between dance and drama, between text and enactment, between actor and character, between singing and speaking, between the mythic and the pseudo-mythic, and between cultures of the Mediterranean. The ambiguities of signification created by the pantomime indicate fascinating problems of perception. For audiences in antiquity, the pantomime codified a highly complex and sophisticated way of looking at the world and especially at the body's freedom to act within the world. For these spectators, this power of the body to convolute perception of itself was the source of an intense, enduring, and unstable emotional attachment to the pantomime aesthetic. The use of masks in the pantomime typifies this sophisticated and fundamentally aristocratic taste for convoluting rather than clarifying the 'meaning' of bodily action and identity.

The pantomime that flourished between 280 BC and 700 AD was a professional theatrical performance in a tragic mode in which narrative elements in a mythic vein manifested themselves through the movements of a dancer or dancers accompanied by a singer/narrator (*interpellator*), chorus, and musicians. This is the definition that Ernst Wüst offered in his excellent 1949 *Real Encyclopedie* article on the pantomime, and no one has seriously questioned it, even if it has not produced any accurate or even particularly vivid image of pantomime performance. But while the definition seems bland, it nevertheless subtly indicates by its deceptive precision and congenial opacity not only the extraordinary power of the pantomime as performance, but the basis for the difficulties of perception provoked by the performance. For one thing, the definition describes a mode of performance that other performance contexts besides the conventionally designated theatres accommodated: the circus stadiums, the banquet-symposium milieu of the great villas, the ritual processions to the temples, and, eventually, the ancient forms of nightclub entertainment. Moreover, the

definition describes performances given by star pantomimes.

The star pantomimes, however, tended to appear as the outstanding attractions within a program of spectacles provided by a company of entertainers. While the conventions of the pantomime remained quite stable over the centuries, the conventions defining the program of spectacles in which it appeared were not only less stable, they were and remain much more difficult to define than even the pantomime itself. The physical, material ambiguity of the pantomime performance world invested it with considerable, and often volatile, political, moral, and cultural ambiguity. Furthermore, its ambiguous, uncertain relation between the performing body and the space of performance allowed the pantomime aesthetic to construct a complex, innovative, richly enigmatic, and hitherto completely underestimated relation to narrative, language, speech, sound, and visual sensation. The power of the pantomime aesthetic to elude vivid definition or provide a stable image of itself was what made it such an enduring and seductive embodiment of an imperial consciousness or attitude toward the freedom of bodies in a reality defined as much by the cosmic concept of fate and the pressure of mythic imagery as by the evidence of sensory perception.

To heighten voluptuousness, the pantomime did not locate the identity of dance in steps or in footwork but in the upper body, especially the hands, arms, and head. The pyrrhic step remained the basic source of propulsion, while innovation focused almost exclusively on the upper body. It was probably the virtuoso use of hands that above all differentiated the professional performer from the occasional ceremonial dancer. Folk dances innovated, if at all, in the deployment of steps. But complexity of footwork does little to intensify the dramatic, visual qualities of dance, because increased complexity of steps tends to be dominated by rhythmic patterns that do not increase the emotional complexity of the spectator's response to the movement. The pyrrhic step offered a martial sense of linear propulsion and boldness. It placed one foot in front of the other, often lifting the body on the balls of the feet. The step supported elegant movement in any direction and at varying rhythms and tempos. It also allowed the upper body to lilt and sway; it was the ideal step for maintaining balance while arms, hands, head, and torso performed extravagant gestures, often with props (Poursant 1968; Delavaud-Roux 1993).



Figure 1. Bronze statue of a faun performing the pyrrhic step in the House of the Faun, Pompeii, 1st century AD. Photo by Karl Toepfer.

Pantomime costumes emphasized the beauty of the performer's body and movement. In the pantomime aesthetic, luxuriousness implied above all a refined physical sensuality. Performers selected and designed costumes on the basis of how well the costumes made them look. The 'authenticity' of a costume had nothing to do with revealing the character impersonated, nor did it have much to do with glorifying the status or rank of the character impersonated. Pantomimes employed costumes that allowed them to move freely while glorifying the contours of their bodies. Such costumes were slight variations on the basic clothing worn by virtually all people in the ancient world, the chiton or tunic for males and the peplum or stola for females. Roman culture did not invest much significance in elaborate designs or complex weaving practices that designated the wearer's capacity for luxurious effects after the Christianization of the Empire, when the Byzantine royalty introduced increasingly opulent patterns into fabrics to signify rank and wealth. 'Roman clothing was simple and elegant, practical and comfortable. Based on the rectangles that came directly from the loom, first in wool and linen, then in cotton, in silk, and in combinations of fibers, the basic garments for men, women, and children were the tunica, toga, peplum, stola, palla, and pallium' (Goldmann 1994: 217). These garments could be dyed in a wide range of

colors in different shades or intensities: yellow, green, blue, purple, pink, violet, orange, turquoise, black, and indigo; and some parts of the Empire, particularly Egypt, developed industries that specialized in producing borders, hems, or trims that could be sewn (sometimes with cloth-of-gold) onto the basic garments (Sebesta 1994). But the beauty of a dye and the quality of the cloth were for the Romans a more important sign of wealth or status than the splendor of designs sewn onto the cloth. Cloaks or mantles worn with the tunica (male chiton) could provide dramatic color contrasts, and different cloaks served different functions.

Nudity

Indeed, the display of nudity shaped audience perception of the pantomime much more than the display of extraordinary costumes. The pyrrhic movement was originally a display of warrior nudity. Visual artists for centuries pervasively depicted dancers in various degrees of nudity. Recently, Pierre Cordier (2005) has described at length the extent to which imperial Roman civilization encouraged and discouraged the display of nudity according to an elaborate, unscripted code that designated when the display of nudity was appropriate, depending on the social relations between those displaying their nudity and those viewing it. Nudity was appropriate in art only in relation to certain themes; it was appropriate in public only in relation to particular functions, including the theatre and bathing, but never in relation to a situation in which nudity leveled distinctions between social classes or social status. Indeed, the code may have been so intricate that it regulated degrees of exposure of the body, thus encouraging in the pantomime scenes in which otherwise nude performers wore masks.

Art that represented mythic themes was abundant with nude or partially nude figures; in images related to Dionysus, nudity was almost inescapable. The pantomime sought to 'bring to life' the sort of mythic images that appeared in paintings, friezes, sculptures, and mosaics; performance functioned to affirm the 'reality' of myth, although perhaps it would be more accurate to say that myth functioned to affirm the idea of a 'reality' that existed beyond the power of the culture to define or control it but within the power of individuals to experience. In *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius uses the *Judgment of Paris* scene to show how the 'perfect beauty' of the naked and almost naked bodies of the male and female performers has the effect of metamorphosing a glamorous myth of selecting the most beautiful body into the communal 'reality' (that is, pleasure) of enjoying the bestial degradation of a murderous, 'wicked harlot'.

Literary chroniclers sometimes make disparaging remarks about the immodesty of the pantomimes to indicate the moral decadence of the culture about which they are writing. In his *Roman History*, written about 30 AD, Velleius' 'treacherous' general Glaucus Plancus,

assigned by Caesar to guard his former employer Cleopatra, staged a banquet pantomime in which he performed the role of Glaucus the Nereid, 'a dance in which his naked body was painted blue, his head encircled with reeds, at the same time wearing a fish's tail and crawling upon his knees' (Velleius 1924). Nearly six hundred years after Plancus performed his dance, Procopius, in the *Secret History*, described (9.15) how Theodora (500-548 AD), future empress of Byzantium, displayed her nudity before pantomime audiences. By referring to state regulation of nudity, he makes clear that nudity was an expected feature of pantomime performance:

'... she would throw off her clothes and exhibit naked to all and sundry regions, both in front and behind, which the rules of decency require to be kept veiled and hidden from masculine eyes. [. . .] Often in the theatre, too, in full view of all the people she would throw off her clothes and stand naked in their midst, having only a girdle about her private parts and her groins—not, however, because she was ashamed to expose these also to the public, but because no one is allowed to appear there absolutely naked; a girdle around the loins is compulsory. With this minimum covering she would spread herself out and lie face upward on the floor. Servants upon whom this task was imposed would sprinkle barley grains over her private parts, and geese trained for the purpose used to pick them off one by one with their bills and swallow them. Theodora, so far from blushing when she stood up again, actually seemed to be proud of this performance. [. . .] Many times she threw off her clothes and stood in the middle of the actors on the stage, leaning over backwards or pushing out her behind to invite both those who had already enjoyed her and those who had not been intimate yet, parading her own special brand of gymnastics' (Procopius 1966: 83-85).

Costume

Lucian defended the pantomime against accusations of excessively voluptuous nudity by ignoring them, although these, of course, eventually became an obsessive feature in the anti-theatre diatribes of early Christian propagandists, such as Tertullian, for whom the pantomimes best typify that 'immodesty of gesture and attire which so specially and peculiarly characterizes the stage' (Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 10.84). Instead, he justified what for him were the merely modest costumes of the pantomimes by condemning the affection of actors for ludicrously extravagant costumes in the performances of spoken literary dramas. 'As far as tragedy is concerned, let us form our first opinion of its character from its outward appearance. What a repulsive and at the

same time frightful spectacle is a man tricked out to disproportionate stature, mounted upon high clogs, wearing a mask that reaches above his head, with a mouth that is set in a vast yawn as if he meant to swallow up the spectators! I forbear to speak of pads for the breast, for the paunch, wherewith he puts on adscititious, counterfeit corpulence, so that the disproportion in height may not betray itself the more conspicuously in a slender figure' (Lucian 1936: 241). In any case, a costume was significant and beautiful, not because it accurately or glamorously bestowed rank, importance, class, or wealth upon either the character or the performer, but because, along with sensuous movements, it invited the spectator to evaluate the whole performance in relation to the erotic appeal of the performer's body. Pantomime identified erotic appeal with the 'incarnation' of a mythic persona. But to say that pantomime 'reduced' erotic appeal to the incarnation of a mythic persona is to miss the point of this art and to betray an anxiety about the phenomenon of incarnation that did not afflict audiences in antiquity.

The aesthetic appeal of pantomime costumes depended on the use of accessories. Pantomimes could strengthen the theatrical effect of their performances by the wearing of beautiful helmets, brooches, tiaras, sashes, wreaths, fibulas, or jewels. Performers could supplement accessories with props, such as swords, shields, wands, torches, mirrors, or flowers. Apuleius mentions numerous props and accessories in his description of the pantomime in Corinth. Mercury wore 'little wings of gold' and carried a gold apple. Juno wore a 'white diadem upon her head' and brandished a 'regal sceptre'. Minerva 'had on her head a shining helmet, whereon was bound a garland made of olive branches, having in one hand a target or shield, and in the other shaking a spear as she would fight'. Castor and Pollux wore 'pointed helmets with stars'. Accompanying Minerva were 'two young men, armed and brandishing their naked swords in their hands'. The many Cupids in Venus's retinue carried torches, while the 'comely Graces' scattered before her 'garlands and loose flowers'.

Masks

Perhaps the most mysterious costume accessories associated with the pantomimes were masks. Lucian asserted that the pantomime's 'mask itself is most beautiful, and suited to the drama that forms the theme'. But he also insisted that pantomime masks did not look like those used in the performance of spoken tragedies and comedies. The pantomime mask's 'mouth is not wide open, as with tragedy and comedy, but closed, for he has many people who do the shouting in his stead' (Lucian 1936: 241). Yet it is not certain that masks were always part of every pantomime's performance. Apuleius, in his description of the Judgment of Paris pantomime, made no mention of masks worn by any of the many performers in the scene, and other literary commentators on the

pantomime avoid explicit reference to masks. Fulminating against the idolatry of the theatre, even Tertullian, in *De spectaculis* (XXIII), treated masking in the pantomime above all as a matter of transvestism (men impersonating women), a worse manifestation of masking than the facial masks of tragic actors in the spoken drama, although he did not explicitly separate pantomimes from the conventional use of masks in performance. In the Porto Maggiore frieze, the figure of Agave holds high a mask designating the head of Pentheus, but she herself appears not to wear a mask (Weege 1926, plate 157). The mysterious silver plate examined by Jahn appears to depict a pantomimic performance involving the handling of torches by some of the dancers.

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Fig. 2. Pantomime scene with masks displayed rather than worn, engraved on a silver plate, 3rd century AD. Reproduced from Jahn (1687). Masks are displayed but not worn by any of the several performers (Jahn 1867).

Bieber (1961: 231-232), supported by Elia (1965: 177), proposed that a spectacular wall painting at Pompeii, in the House of the Gladiators, depicted a pantomime representation of the contest between Apollo and Marsyas. But although Bieber assumes that masks were a pervasive element of pantomime performance, none of the several figures in the painting, a couple of whom are naked, wears a mask, and the scene does not even contain images of masks as autonomous, decorative symbols, such as appear in so many other paintings. On the other hand, the visual evidence does not seem to reinforce the frequent assertion (e.g., Bieber 1961: 237) that the mimes always performed without masks, for they do wear masks in perhaps the most famous images of them.

The Roman mask culture followed a complicated aesthetic because it arose from an inclination to treat masking as both an efficacious, stabilizing value and an obstacle to clarity of perception. In the 1961 edition of

her book, Bieber provided a comprehensive, though not complete, survey of the archaeology and representations of masks in Greco-Roman antiquity. Her evidence reveals that the Roman preoccupation with masks manifested itself in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, masks could possess the status of a kind of *fetish object*, a thing worth representing in itself because its meaning transcended any relation to an impersonation by a particular person. On the other hand, masks served a *performative* function to dramatize the belief that a particular person projected 'other' or multiple identities and was thus capable of 'metamorphosis'. The performative and fetish functions entailed different mask aesthetics.

But before discussing these two functions, let me examine the Roman preoccupation with masks itself. The Greeks did not share the same preoccupation. For them, at least in the Athenian theatre of the fifth century BC, masks belonged above all in the theatre and enjoyed little, if any, importance outside of it in the sense that the Greeks regarded masks as symbols of a basic condition defining humanity. They saw the mask as a device for concealing the identity of the actor, so that audiences would not confuse the actor with the role. The mask allowed the actor to assume roles that otherwise he would be afraid to play, and by freeing the actor from public misperception or censure, the mask also freed dramatists to deal with messy themes, motives, or characters that are independent of those who enact them in a designated space, the theatre, at a designated time, the festival. When the acting of plays was the privilege of aristocrats, the mask served to protect the actor from his inclination to play roles that in some way compromised the dignity of his social class. The mask preserved a distinction between a 'real' identity and a mythic or imaginary identity.

By the time the Romans began to consider that theatre might be a worthwhile pleasure, in the third century BC, actors had long since ceased to enjoy a privileged status anywhere in the ancient world. They now belonged to the lowest classes; many of them were slaves. Audiences expected performances that entailed a display of exceptional prowess, glamour, charm, or ingenuity. They required professional performers governed, not by literary ideals, but by audience tastes and commercial motives. It was not to the advantage of a professional actor to hide his identity. On the contrary, success as an actor depended on the extent to which performance was the revelation of the performer's unique personality. In the pantomime, after all, nudity was a pervasive attraction. Masks did not separate a 'real' identity from an imaginary one; rather, they signified how a single personality projected multiple identities. People wore different masks in different situations, so that no mask was a completely reliable image of a person's character. Indeed, from this perspective, the face itself was a mask,

and the concept of a 'real' identity implied a dynamism, fluidity, and instability of being. The idea of a 'real' identity as something essential or absolute was a myth. Masks codified a will to self-transformation, and acting was a cultural codification of a human power to achieve metamorphosis. Thus, the pantomimes displayed their masks before wearing them. Thus, actors sometimes wore masks and sometimes did not, or some actors in a play wore masks and some did not. Thus, visual artists represented theatrical scenes in which figures do not wear masks, even if in performance they actually did. The mask was an object that a performer *chose* to use because it dramatized his own body in a unique way and not because the cultural milieu, seeking to regulate the representation of 'character', imposed it upon the actor as a 'convention'.

Fetish function of the mask

Roman culture tolerated and even encouraged the perception that human identity was divided by contradictory images of itself. Masks symbolized a constant conflict within the self insofar as they possessed a value independent of their practical use for an actor. To make masks and collect or display them as decorative emblems is to fetishize or objectify a desire to respect, honor, or at any rate appreciate the power of this 'eternal' yet masked conflict defining human identity. Bieber presents many examples of bronze, stone, and terra cotta masks and masked figurines that apparently decorated homes throughout the domain of Roman civilization; these examples she supplements with images of masks in paintings. These masks assume stereotypical qualities that easily separate into symbols of either tragedy or comedy, with comic masks much more numerous than tragic. Whether tragic or comic, the masks project a uniform, even monotonous sameness of expression. The tragic mask is always a variation on a cry of horror or dismay, and the comic mask is always a variation of a grotesquely distorted laugh or grin. The bulging or hollowed out eyes, the gaping mouths, the corkscrew hairstyles (tragedy) and balding pates (comedy) that define these masks are actually caricatures of masks rather than of social types. The presence of these artifacts theatricalized an environment. To display a masked figurine or a painted image of a mask or a frieze of persons holding such masks was to announce: "Here we acknowledge the power of masks, independent of whoever wears them, insofar as they are grotesque exaggerations of identity pervasively and eternally imposed on humans by myth or rather, by a human inclination to mythologize a fundamental conflict within all human identity between tragic and comic conditions". These often elaborately carved stone, marble, terra cotta, or frescoed masks, with their permanence and sometimes monumental dimensions (such as the mask towers at the theatre of Ostia), signified immutable identities or conditions imposed upon people rather than assumed by

them. For this reason, the mask artifacts have little connection with the performance masks used by pantomimes. While such fetish masks may bear some resemblance to the masks actually used by mimes and tragedians, their autonomous, rigidifying power merely reinforced the inferior social status of the performers and constrained their ability to represent the power of "metamorphosis". Indeed, even the tragic masks on actors in representations of theatrical scenes are such caricatures of tragic expression that they often evoke an atmosphere of bizarre comedy or at any rate fantastic remoteness, as if to suggest that the tragic condition was more absurd than anxiety-inducing.

This quaint remoteness seems only amplified when tragic actors appear on 'stilts' (*okribantes*) that 'elevate' their bodies and attempt to make them 'larger than life'; as already noted, Lucian viewed the performance of tragic scenes by actors using stilts and exaggerated masks as 'ridiculous'. And Philostratus (*Apollonios Tyana*, V, 91) describes the provincial performance of a tragic scene in Spain in which the actor, 'walking on high stilts' and 'with a wide open mouth,' had only to speak to frighten the unsophisticated spectators out of the theatre, as if they were 'persecuted by a demon.'. Philostratus invites his reader to see this confusion of the demonic with the human as amusing. But it is amusing only because the description of the actor's performance is itself amusing. Certainly, the tragic masks seem merely weird compared with the powerful aura of foreboding or doom cast by a masked gladiatorial helmet.

Julius Pollux, in his *Onomastikon* (early third century AD), described 28 types of tragic masks (IV, 132-142) and 44 types of comic masks (IV, 143-155). Bieber (1961: 245) believed this inventory surveyed 'the typical wardrobe of the traveling troupes' and as a result could give 'only a small selection of those used in different periods'. If this is true, then both tragedy and comedy were the responsibility of the same ensemble and the social status of the actors remained constant whether they performed in tragic or comic scenes. Pollux classified masks for both genres according to social class, gender, and age. But each category of classification contained significant variation. For example, in the 'young man' category, the inventory listed eight masks for tragedy and eleven for comedy; tragedy provided eleven 'women's' masks but comedy only five. However, tragedy included no 'courtesan' masks, while comedy supported seven, as well as masks for two 'young servant maids'. Tragedy inspired masks for six different 'old men' but no old women, while comedy had opportunities for nine old men and three old women. Tragedy needed only three 'slave' masks while comedy required seven. Pollux's catalogue implies that the masks used by a single ensemble displayed a much wider range of expressions and differentiating attributes that the fetish artifacts depicted in Bieber's treatise.

Masks served to demonstrate the individuality, not only of characters and actors, but of the mask makers. The fetish masks probably functioned in much the same way as Venetian carnival masks do today: they signified a kind of permissive or carefree atmosphere; they were not an image of a standardized, uniform code of representing characters that spectators expected actors to use. Theatre mask makers required pliant materials to carve or mold the details that bestowed individuality upon a face. Perhaps some masks were ceramic or even metallic, but most were probably made of wood or wax, then varnished and delicately painted. Unlike the fetish masks, theatre masks were delicate objects that showed the mask maker's skill at combining unique physiognomic details with expressive textural and color effects. The pliancy of the materials perhaps does not mean the performers wore masks that were 'realistic' in the sense of simulating the face of a real person. Rather, performers favored masks that produced a refinement or subtlety of expression one would never expect in a fetish mask. Some actors simply relied on cosmetic coloring of their faces; Maiuri (1953: 94) contended that the actress playing the courtesan in a famous image from Pompeii employed 'the thickly powdered face of the typical *hetaira*'. The grotesque physiognomic exaggerations of the fetish mask, especially the huge mouth, were probably not a consistent feature even of the mime or tragic performances of literary drama. A Terence manuscript from the fourth or fifth century AD precedes each play with a miniature display of masks for all the characters in the text. Of the masks displayed, fewer than half have the enlarged mouth, and even in miniatures that purport to depict scenes from the plays, only some actors wear masks with gaping mouths—indeed, some characters, chiefly female, appear not to wear masks at all (Jones and Morey 1931). The point is that even in the performance of literary drama and farcical mimes, actors relied as much on their faces as on masks to signify the emotional life of characters. A comparison between faces and masks was a fundamental element of performance.

In any case, the gaping mouth mask, as Lucian insisted, had no practical value for the pantomimes. Such a mask hardly amplified the mood of aristocratic voluptuousness the pantomime sought to cultivate. The physical beauty of the performer was essential to the power of the genre, and only masks that somehow heightened this beauty were acceptable. In the fourth century AD silver plate described by Jahn in 1867, the artist has depicted a mysterious, torchlight pantomime scene of inscrutable solemnity. Four masks are on display before the scene, but no one in the scene wears one, none of the masks feature the gaping mouth, and when thirteen unmasked performers appear behind four mounted masks, it may be that the masks merely constitute symbolic décor and have no representative function within the performance itself.

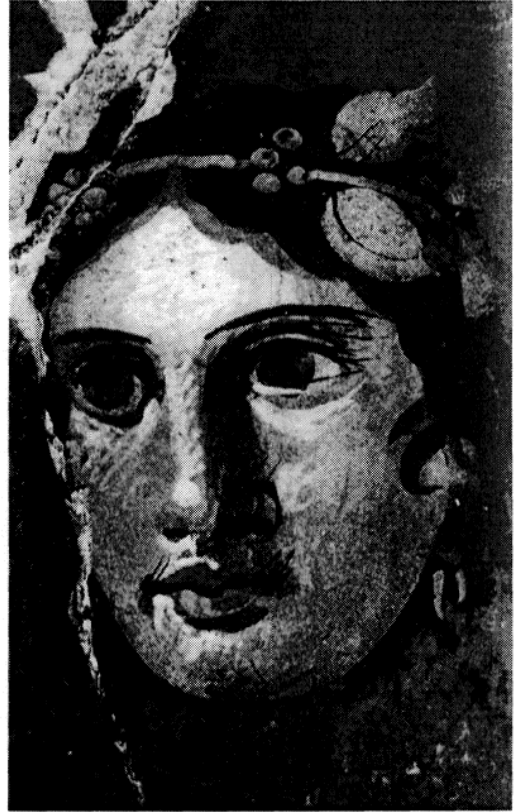


Fig. 3 Fragment of a wall painting displaying a pair of masks of indeterminate sex from the Casa del Braccialeto d' Oro in Pompeii. Reproduced from Dierichs (1997).

Or it may be that the masks merely signify that one is viewing a theatrical scene, and without the masks one would not know that the artist sought to represent a theatrical scene, because in the theatre it was not easy to distinguish myth from reality—that is, it was not easy to distinguish the actor from the character he played because it was not altogether easy to distinguish mask from face. The sort of 'beautiful mask' that achieves this effect of fusing reality with myth appears in a first century AD wall painting from the Casa del Braccialeto d'Oro in Pompeii. This mask of Dionysos, with its idealized rather than grotesque physiognomy and its refined, mysterious emotional coloring, represents the kind of mask favored by the pantomimes (Dierichs 1997: 58).



Fig. 4. Female pantomime displaying three masks, from an ivory found near Trier. Reproduced from Bieber (1961).

When an actor held such a mask next to his face, the effect was much more dramatic than if he held some variation of the gaping mouth mask of comedy or tragedy, for it was always more dramatic to reveal that the difference between the ideal and the real was *less* than the absurd difference between the real face and a grotesque *deformation* of the face resulting from a fetishized eternal, immutable tragic or comic condition of humanity. Further evidence that the pantomimes used idealizing or at any rate physiognomically attractive masks comes from a fourth century AD ivory relief discovered in Trier (deposited now in Berlin) that depicts a female pantomime holding up three masks in her right hand while holding a lyre in her left.

These masks do not have gaping mouths. Bieber contended that the masks 'represent a hero, a heroine and a youth,' while the 'sword, crown, and lyre indicate the

content of the *Fabula Saltica*' (1961: 236). But an especially startling feature of the image is how closely the mask nearest the face of the pantomime resembles her own face. The artist's effort to carve the three masks together reinforces the perception that each face is the metamorphosis of the other, that the mythic face is embedded in the real face, and that the real face is itself but a mask. Pantomimes used masks to the extent that masks idealized a condition of metamorphosis and the mutability of human identity: masks dramatized the ability of a person to choose or assume an identity rather than the power of fate to determine identity. The Trier ivory relief provides an exquisite representation of this theatrical condition of metamorphosis. The artist places the pantomime's lyre next to her sword, and, having clothed her in a flowing *palla*, he nevertheless further contrasts her sword with the nakedness of her belly and navel. With her crown, lyre, sword, masks, and nudity, the pantomime provokes great uncertainty as to what her 'essential' identity is. The crown, if that is what it is, perhaps bestows a queenly aura on her. But the important thing is that she embodies the imperial idea of multiple identities absorbed into a single female body.

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