Women and Carnival Masking

Medieval Carnival is one version of an enduring European tradition of winter popular festivity, stretching from at least the Roman Kalends to the present day. For an extensive period around the Middle Ages the wearing of masks seems to have been a significant aspect of this festive play. It is in the later fourth century AD that we first hear about masking in the winter games: by the fifteenth century it had become so popular a part of the celebrations that masking often dominated Carnival activity, with not only street masquerading, but also dancing, dicing, gift-giving and good luck visits, all in masks. This medieval Carnival masking was largely, but by no means exclusively, a men's game. This paper aims to explore the roles played by women in the maskings of Carnival, and to attempt to determine how far attitudes to women's and men's masking differed.

Carnival activity seems to have varied across Europe, both in particular customs and in prominence, from the flamboyantly developed celebrations of Italy, Tasso's 'thousand forms and thousand appearances,' to the virtual non-existence of Carnival as such in Britain. In Southern Europe, where the festival was more celebrated and masking and masks themselves more elaborate, sophisticated and spectacular, contemporary evidence certainly confirms that both men and women participated. Sixteenth and early seventeenth century pictures show women among street masqueraders, and eyewitness accounts from travellers in Italy, Spain and Southern France refer to both men and women maskers. As the prologue to an Italian Carnival comedy observed, 'Most men, and perhaps women too, either are going or want to go around in masks.'

However, as this perhaps hints, women seemed rather more likely to take a secondary role. Descriptions of Carnival festivity tend to imply that it was the young men who dominated masking; a recurrent image of bands of young masked men roaming the streets,
throwing eggs and perfumes at women watching at the windows, seems to confirm a
commener pattern of women as spectators, though necessary and participating spectators,
of at least the street masking.\footnote{Whatever it was that masking conferred - licence, com-
munality, freedom from social or personal constraints of whatever kind - women seem
to have been more often the objects, than the subjects of the experience.}

In Northern Europe Carnival masking seems much more impromptu: there are fewer
organised events and popular street masking is more likely to involve home-made disguises
of soot-blackened or flour-whitened faces, or the sort of makeshift grotesque costumes
many of us still associate with Hallowe'en. Again it is clear that women did sometimes
join the disguising: Kirchmeyer's reference to girls dressed in men's clothes in Germany
is typical: 'wanton wenches drest like men do travell by the way.' A later Scottish record
catches the informal flavour of such a carnivalesque guising, finding that the two couples
involved in a street incident 'wer disgysed, namly andrew jhonestownes wyf hawing hir
hair hinging downe and ane blak hat wpon hir head.' But equally, accounts generally
imply that the commonly perceived danger to women was as victims of, rather than as
participants in, the riotous behaviour of the maskers.\footnote{Respectable women either suf-
fered, or were seduced by, the licence of male maskers.}

Medieval attitudes towards Carnival masking are hard to determine fully, in part be-
cause, predictably, most surviving evidence comes from those attacking the practice and
their particular antagonistic viewpoint selects and colours what we can learn. Although
it was so widely and enthusiastically practised there is relatively little existing defence
or celebration of Carnival masking. Equally, when considering issues of masking and
gender we must recognise not only the obvious selectivity of expressed opinion, but the
fact that recorded attitudes are themselves dominated by men's perceptions. Nonetheless
the antagonistic evidence can throw interesting, if clearly partial, light on masquerading.

Objections were advanced on theological, social and personal grounds. Theological
condemnation of Carnival masking appears to be largely directed at men, and frequently
to centre on the sacrilege of corrupting the image of God located in the human form.
Since the identity of the human individual is therefore inextricable from the identity of
God himself, any altering of one's face by a mask is 'a kinde of violence to Gods owne
Image.' This argument was applied to the grotesque and fantastic masks of street revel-
ling from very early on: Peter Chrysologus, for example, tells winter revellers in the fifth
century that the man who puts on a mask rejects the image of God in himself, making
himself a tool of the devil.\footnote{This kind of argument rarely, if ever, seems to assume female maskers. But fascinat-
ingly most of the commentators who address this issue, in ascribing their ideas to the
authority of the early Fathers, turn out to be drawing on treatises concerned originally
not with masks at all but with women's cosmetics. In the second century Tertullian, in
a discussion developed in the third century by Cyprian, wrote eloquently against the
practice of female face-painting, presenting a theological analysis that was widely influ-
ential on medieval and sixteenth century thinking about masking. 'What is born' claims
Tertullian 'is the work of God; so what is produced artificially is the devil's business.'
To paint the face is to alter what God has made, accuse God of poor workmanship; it
becomes, according to Cyprian, 'an assault ... on the divine work, a defrauding ... of}
the truth.' Masking, then, interferes with the soul's truthful relationship with God. Widely offered in medieval Europe as a critique of male masking behaviour, these arguments about moral identity and spiritual integrity were first formulated as applying specifically to women.

When it comes to more social issues there seem to be sharper differences between attitudes to men and to women. The commonest objection to men's Carnival masking was that it both encouraged, and became a cloak for, violence. The excitement of night-time masking by bands of partying young men, together with the release from moral and social inhibition that the anonymity of the masks conferred, led to inflammatory opportunities for violence and theft. ‘Beneath this long-standing licence to run wild they commit six hundred outrages each day, and that with impunity,’ claimed Polydore Vergil in the early sixteenth century. Anthony Munday, observing the Roman Carnival in 1578, claimed that:

During this time, euery one weareth a disguised visor on his face, so that no one knowes what or whèce they be: and if any one beare a secrete mallice to an other, he may then kill him, & no body will lay hands on him, for all this time they will obey no lawe.13

The excitement of communal masking not only encourages violence itself but by removing inhibitions allows the maskers to set themselves outside the normal rule of law.

For women, perhaps predictably, fears centre not on violence but on sex. Carnival masking is a threat to female chastity, whether women are participants or merely observers. Attitudes to this illicit sexuality themselves vary. An interesting account by a Swiss observer of Carnival in Barcelona suggests that the sexual freedom allowed to women maskers was tolerated, almost as an acceptable safety-valve in a highly controlled society:

Women too take their part. Throughout the year they are so severely restricted that they are not allowed to talk to strangers ... But at Carnival time there are no such shackles and hindrances. They put on masks and run the streets in complete freedom ... So for more than one husband, the cuckoo sings before Spring comes. No matter, at such times they are no longer the masters and must confirm to common usage.14

Carnival was certainly considered as a time of semi-official licence: but that licence when accorded to women appears to focus specifically on their sexuality.

By definition, though, sexual licence was not confined to women. One effect of the anonymity conferred by the Carnival mask seems paradoxically to have been to strengthen the sense of community and intimacy between maskers. For individuals this manifested in the sexual licence for which Carnival was famous: ‘Il est au Carnaval où chacun fait l’amour.’15 Many of the disguises and games of Carnival were erotic, and there are various riotous, if mythical, tales of masked husbands and wives unknowingly committing passionate ‘adultery’ with each other. One pertinent German example tells of a married couple who, both masked, met unwittingly at Carnival time and ‘indulged their sudden
fancy on their way in the penumbra of a cloth worker's shop ... and never did the hal-
lowed joys of matrimony taste like the forbidden fruit of infidelity; at any rate so each
imagined. Next morning all came out and 'denial was impossible, but the one hap-
penned to be as guilty as the other.' This tale, fact or fiction, demonstrates what was clearly
agreed to be an effect of Carnival masking for women as well as for men: by heighten-
ing excitement and suspending identity, sexual desire could be more freely and intensely
fulfilled without the trammels of familiarity, responsibility and consequence.

Most comment, however, is less tolerant. In Northern Europe various moralists warn
that it is not only women who mask themselves who are open to illicit sexual experiences.
German critics in particular assert that the chief purpose of the male Carnival maskers
is to gain entrance to houses and seduce chaste wives and daughters. Women are seen
as having little defence against the combination of traditional licence, anonymity, and
excitement that masking involves. The threat is almost exclusively one to their chastity:
participating or not, that is what is in question. So an Aberdeen record of 1605 which
condemns a band of male guisers for sacrilege (an 'abhominatioun be the law of God'),
blames the accompanying 'young wemen for daunsing opinlie throw the streittis, with
maskis on thair faces, thairby passing the bounds of \textit{modestie} and \textit{schamefastness quhilk}
aucht to be in young wemen' (emphasis mine). A sixteenth century treatise on dancing
neatly sums up this general distinction between men's and women's masking: 'he schall
perceive men with wane of theyr goodnes, and women with eclyppes of theyr chastitie
returne home.'

The fullest and most interesting discussion of women's street masking comes from
the early sixteenth century work of the humanist Vives. In the 1555 edition of his com-
plete works the treatise \textit{De Institutione Feminae Christianae} contains a criticism of young
women's masking that analyses its significance in terms specifically reflecting moral per-
ceptions of women. Interestingly this passage does not appear in early published versions
of the treatise: it is not clear when, how or why it came to be included. Discussing the
dangers of dancing, Vives refers to a sport in which 'men and women in masks would
run around the whole city, dancing through well-known houses such as those of leading
citizens, of rich men, or those in which people are having a party, or rather drinking.'
Although not directly ascribed to Carnival, this is clearly a Carnival-type activity, com-
bining festive street masking and house-visits. At first Vives presents a lively version of
the general arguments about the moral dangers of the sense of liberation and irrespon-
sibility conferred on maskers by the anonymity of masks:

They see and know everyone, but no-one recognises them; like little children
who enjoy thinking that when they cover their faces in their hands they can't be
seen by others, and hearing other people ask for them. But under this kind of
mask lurk many outrages.

The particular sins he goes on to enumerate, though, are those traditionally specifically
associated with women:

first the unruly inquisitiveness of women, who are very eager to know what's
going on everywhere, who's feasting, what are the arrangements, how they're

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dressed, what lavish preparations; whence springs envy (and) gossiping, backbiting (and) slander.\textsuperscript{22}

The faults here attributed to masking are precisely those traditionally held against the unruly descendants of Eve: curiosity, garrulousness, envy and scandal. Vives also explores in more detail the moral implications of anonymity for women:

Then the reins of female shamelessness are loosed; for a woman who would blush to go out and dance if she was known, doesn't fear to do it masked ... Not only do they hear things that are obscene, and unbecoming to them, but they boldly say things they wouldn't dare to think if they were known. ... So they gradually grow accustomed to shameless behaviour so that the harm modesty suffers beneath the mask is openly displayed without it.\textsuperscript{23}

By releasing them from both social and personal constraints, Vives suggests, masking encourages women to behave in uncharacteristically uninhibited ways. Modesty is thus harmed both externally and internally, both by the improper actions of others to which the masked women are exposed, and by the erosion of personal responsibility and shamefastness. In Vives' analysis the women are both objects and subjects of the moral dangers of the masking experience, though still particularly in relation to their modesty. This rarely full and revealing discussion may obliquely reflect the changing notions of the spiritual and social self manifested in sixteenth century Humanism.

An area with particularly interesting implications for the relation between male and female Carnival disguising is the long-standing custom of cross-dressing. The earliest allusions to festive masking from the fifth century already refer to cross-dressing as one of the common disguises. Initially objections refer specifically to men, but by the end of the seventh century women are occasionally included: `no man ... should put on women's clothes, or a woman the clothes proper to men.'\textsuperscript{24} Evidence suggests, however, that male cross-dressing remained more widespread, and then as now more unsettling. This seems to remain the pattern throughout the middle ages. Cross-dressing remains a central part of men's medieval Carnival disguising that at various times and places might stretch to include women.

The functions of this cross-dressing and its gender implications are obviously very complex. At one extreme we should not underestimate a forceful practical reason for its commonness: the lack of easily available means of disguise in communities where few had many changes of clothes, or access to disposable costume. In societies where gender dress is more codified than is now the case, cross-dressing is a readily accessible means to a decisive transformation of normal appearance. On the other hand, these maskers' playful escape into another gender also clearly raises potentially profound issues of social, communal and personal identity.

Modern commentators on early male cross-dressing often stress the element of caricature involved, of macho larking about.\textsuperscript{25} Certainly some early comments confirm a grotesque discrepancy between burly, bearded male body and female dress (`squeezing soldiers' muscles into women's dresses, showing bearded faces'). Yet there is also an anxiety
about the non-comic threat to male identity, revealed in such claims as 'a man, by softening the vigour of his manly strength, totally crushes himself into a woman, uses such art and wiles as if he repented of being a man.'

Where later medieval Carnival most flourishes, in Southern Europe, there is relatively little comment on the cross-dressing of either sex: it seems to be accepted as just another version of playful liberation and variety. But where objection to male cross-dressing re-emerges it generally claims serious scriptural authority. Commentators invoked the prohibition from Deuteronomy, 'neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God' (Ch 22, 50). This injunction turned the alteration of male gender identity into a sacrilege, an offence against God more than society, an 'abhominatioun be the law of God.'

Women's cross-dressing tended to attract a different kind of response. In Italy the Carnival motif of girl-dressed-as-boy became so popular an element of comedy that it is hard now to judge how far it operated as a factual or a purely fictional release. The literal truth of the claim of the cross-dressed Lelia in The Deceived (1538) cannot be certain:

I have seen hundreds in Rome dressed like this; and in Modena there must be many every night who go about their private affairs in this disguise.

But fact or fiction, the attitude conveyed is that female cross-dressing not only contributes to the delightful instability of Carnival, but allows women a quasi-legitimate freedom to act independently. When female cross-dressing is attacked it is usually on the grounds simply of wantonness and immodesty. Young women who cross-dress are impudent, and put themselves in dangerous situations. This is rather different from the sense of taboo that is expressed about the men: Deuteronomy is rarely cited in relation to women even though its prohibition in fact refers to both sexes. The assumption of male dress, though improper, is not generally presented as a threat to women's spiritual and moral identity. But men who put on women's clothes are, it seems, endangering their whole sense of self in relation to God.

This perhaps confirms a sense of what constitutes the central difference between recorded attitudes to male and female medieval Carnival masking. For both sexes masking is recognised as a release that may be interpreted as having either positive or negative consequences. But for women these consequences are most often presented as objective and external, for men subjective and spiritual: while women gain socio-sexual independence, or lose their chastity, men are released from the trammels of self, or endanger their souls.

Notes
2 See Giacomo Franco, Habiti d'Huomeni et Donne Venetiane (1609); W.Thomas, The Historie of Italie (London, 1549), 39v; Felix Platter, Beloved Son Felix: the Journal of

3 'la / Maggior parte degli uomini, e fors'anco Delle donne, o 'ranno, o 'desiderano … di andone attorno in maschera.'

GM Cecchi (1518–87), 'Le Maschere e le Samaritano,' in Commedie (Firenze: Pagani, 1818), 5.


7 See comments by Locher and Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg quoted in Sebastian Brant's Narrenschiff, ed. Friedrich Zarncke (Hildesheim: G.Olms, 1961), notes to cap 110b, 'von fasnacht narren.'

8 William Prynne, Histriomastix (London, 1632), Pt 2, 895.

9 Peter Chrystologus, PL 52, 611A.

10 'Quod nascitur opus Dei est; ergo quod fingitur, diaboli negotium est.' Tertullian, De Cultu Feminarum II, Cap 5, 4, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol 1, pars 1 (Turnhout, Brepols, 1954), 358.

11 'Impugnatio … divini operis, praevaerari … veritatis.' Cyprian De Habitu Virginum Cap 15, PL 3, 455B.

12 'inveterata iam lascivendi licentia, sexcenta flagitia quotidie faciunt, et illud impune.' Polydore Vergil, De Rerum Inventionibus (Basle: J Bebelius, 1532), Bk 5, 314.

13 Munday, p 96.

14 T Platter, p 224.


17 See note 7.

18 Mill, p 163.

19 A briefe Tracte concerning Daunting (London, 1580), c7r.

20 'viri et feminae personati urbem totam circumcursissent, saltanted per celebros domos, quale sunt procerum, divitium, aut in quibus aliqui convivantur, seu potant verius.' JL Vives, De Institutione Feminarum Christianarum, Lib 1, cap 12, in Opera (Basle, 1555) Vol 2, 684.

21 'vident ipsi et noscunt omnes, a nemine cogniti, ut infantes pueruli, qui magnam capiunt voluptatem, cum admotis oris manibus putant se ab aliis non cerni, et audient se se alios requiri; sed sub larva eiusmodi multa delitescent flagitia.' Ibid.

22 'primum curiositas immodica mulierum, quae scire quid ubique agatur vehementer avent, qui convivantur, quo ordine, quomodo ornati, quam splendido apparatu; unde nascitur invidentia, loquacitas, detractio, infamatio.' Ibid.

23 'tum habenae laxantur impudentiae muliebri; quae enim aliquò proficisci et saltare
erubescere [sic] cognita, non veretur id facere larvata ... nec solum audiunt obscena, et se indigna, sed dicunt intrepide quae ne cogitare quidem auderent si noscerentur ... ita assuescunt paulatim impudentiae, ut detrimentum, quod sub persona accepit vere-cundia, citra personam proferat, et ostendat.' Ibid.


25 See eg Michel Meslin, La fete des kalendes de janvier dans l'empire Romain (Brussels: Latomus, 1970), 82–3.

26 'tunicis muliebris insere militares lacertos: barbatas facies praefuerint.' Caesarius of Arles?, de Cal lan CCL 104 (1963), 780 (see Chambers, 297).

27 'vir, virium suarum vigore mollito, totum se frangit in feminam, tantoque illud ambitu atque arte agit, quasi poenitat illum esse quod vir est.' Maximus of Turin, de Cal Ian PL 57, 255 (see Chambers, 295).

28 Mill, p 163.

29 Act 1, quoted in Leo Salingar, Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy (London: CUP, 1974), 216.

Cameron Louis

Two Fools from Sussex

While researching for the Records of Early English Drama: Sussex volume, I have come across two references to fools which, because they do not directly refer to performance, will probably not make it into the final REED volume. However, both texts are nevertheless of interest to REED researchers, because they indirectly point to, in one case, the existence of a fool in the household of a nobleman in Sussex, and in the other, the recognition of fools as familiar figures on the performance stage.

The first reference is from the King’s Bench Ancient Indictments (London, Public Record Office, KB 9/442, mb 92). This document is a coroner’s report dated 31 May 1506:

Inquisicio indentata Capta apud westden in Comitatu Sussexie Coram humfrido Sydeneey vno Coronatorum domini regis in Comitatu predicto xxxj die mensis Maij anno regni regis henrici septimi xxinto primo super visum Corporis Iacobi Cuitsdam stulti sub nomine Commorantis tunc apud dow,[n]ley Cum domino Thoma Comite Arundell per Sacramentum Roberti Copeden willelmi smythe Iohanni ayllwyn Ricardi ayllewyn willelmi Peynter Iohanni Colpas Roberti Colpas Thomi horsham Iohanni Cort wyllelmi kempe Roberti helden Thomi Crocher Ricardi Cort willelmi tille willelmi Colloke et Iohanni Bodi Qui dicunt per Sacramentum suum quod [pre

5, 6, 8/ Iohanni: for Johannis 6, 7/ Thomi: for Thomae