

THE POET AND THE MASK AGAIN

C. W. DEARDEN

THE PRIMACY OF THE MASK in conveying to the actor the poet's conception of the character he is producing and, at an earlier stage in composition, in fixing the poet's own conception of that character has been argued conclusively by T. B. L. Webster.¹ The poet, he showed, writes with one eye fixed on the mask and, having established the outline of his plot, adapts his character to that expressed in the features of the mask, just as the modern actor when masked (and presumably his ancient counterpart) must strive to play to his mask. There are, however, a small but significant number of dramatic monuments which depict two or more characters on stage together wearing the same mask. The question inevitably arises of how the poet approached such a situation.

Consideration should first be given to the monuments. The latest example to come to light, and perhaps the most puzzling, depicts a scene from Menander's *Messenia*.² The central figure of the scene is a young man named Chareinos. He is approached by two slaves, distinguished by name (Syros and Tibios) and by costume, in that the girdles round their respective waists are of different colours, but not distinguished apparently by mask, unless what appears to be a white streak in Tibios' hair is intended as some sort of differentiation. What they are doing is not clear. Kahil and Ginouvès argue, rightly I think, that the two are not trying to arrest the young man but that Chareinos has seized the right hand of Syros and may be attempting to brush him aside. The interpretation is difficult, but it is clear that we are dealing with a scene of some importance for the play or it would not have been illustrated, and equally the slaves cannot be dismissed as "walk on" parts or they would not have been named.

This illustration of a New Comedy scene with two similarly masked actors is, so far, unique. But for Old and Middle Comedy there is more substantial evidence, and though it is mainly confined to Phylax vases the connection between these and Athenian comedy has been argued at length,³ and it is almost certain that they do reflect conditions in the

¹T. B. L. Webster, "The Poet and the Mask," in *Classical Drama and its Influence* (London 1965) 5 f.

²See S. Charitonidis, L. Kahil, R. Ginouvès, *Les Mosaïques de la Maison de Ménandre à Mytilène* (Berne 1970) T 10, p. 51 pl. 4,4 and 21,2.

³T. B. L. Webster, "South Italian Vases and Attic Drama," *CQ* 42 (1948) 15 f.; *Monuments Illustrating Old and Middle Comedy*², *BICS* Supp. 23 (1969) 3 f. (hereafter *MOMC*).

Athenian theatre. The list of monuments that follows is exhaustive, as far as I am aware, for published material.

*PV Ph 52*⁴ in the Louvre, dated 375–350, is a typical example. It depicts two actors obviously in conversation: the left-hand one holds a basket (Bieber suggests it contains a bird, Webster that it is a shopping basket and that the man is off to buy provisions⁵), the other raises his hand in a gesture of argument. Both wear the same mask, B, and are identical except that the left-hand one has a band, or wreath, round his head. It is a lively scene of conversation, possibly conducted between identical twins, if we are to interpret the masks in that way, but more probably between two people that the poet found it unnecessary to distinguish. Even more lively is a vase from the end of the fifth century (*PV Ph 75*).⁶ Here a slave with a zigzag stick is about to beat a second slave whom he has secured by means of a rope round his neck and who bends his knees and lays his hands upon them, probably to protect his ribs from a beating (cf. *Frogs* 662). Between the two of them is the disembodied head of a third slave wearing the same mask as the slave who is about to be punished. He thumbs his nose at the action, and this gesture may be intended to convey the idea that he has deliberately let his fellow-slave in for punishment. Twin slaves are an unlikely possibility here; rather the poet must have introduced two slaves whom he felt it unnecessary to distinguish. Bieber notes the beating scene in the *Frogs* as a literary parallel; Aristophanes' disavowal of such scenes (*Peace* 737 f.) suggests that they were commonplace among his contemporaries. Lively action again is indicated on a vase of the second quarter of the fourth century (*PV Ph 14*), a red-figure piece from Corinth.⁷ Two comic actors using pestles in a mortar are attacked by geese. They run opposite ways, one hand upraised against the geese, the other still clutching the pestle. Again the masks are B and again there is nothing to suggest they are identical twins—they seem to be two slaves with the same mask painted because of the novelty of the scene. It would be interesting to know how the geese were managed on the stage.

A more famous vase by Assteas painted ca 350–340 (*PV Ph 36*)⁸ has two disreputable characters, one climbing a ladder, the other holding a torch, making advances to a woman who peers anxiously (or willingly, if we believe Bieber) from her window. Costume alone distinguishes the two men: the left-hand one is naked, that is he wears his tights which are

⁴A. D. Trendall, *Phlyax Vases*², *BICS* Supp. 19 (1967) (hereafter *PV*). Illustrated in M. Bieber, *History of the Greek and Roman Theatre*² (Princeton 1961) fig. 515, p. 141 (hereafter *BHT*²).

⁵*CQ* 42 (1948) 24.

⁶*BHT*² fig. 513, discussed p. 141.

⁷*BHT*² fig. 203. See note in *PV* 25 f. on provenance and date.

⁸*BHT*² fig. 501; M. Robertson, *Greek Painting* (Geneva 1959) 160.

purple; his companion wears a chiton cut short. Yet the action clearly distinguishes them as lover (the man on the ladder holds a gift of apples in his right hand and a fillet in his left), and assistant. Bieber calls them "a lover and his slave," Robertson prefers an "elderly wooer and his slave," yet as they both wear the same mask it must be assumed that the playwright felt no qualms in writing the part so that the type portrayed by the mask was acceptable for both characters. In this case we have a parallel vase of the same date by Assteas (*PV Ph* 65)⁹ that depicts a slightly earlier stage in a similar adventure, but in this latter case the distinction between the Old Man, probably Zeus, and his assistant, Hermes, is made obvious by their different masks (G and Z).

PV Ph 37¹⁰ in the British Museum (dated 380–370 B.C.) depicts "Cheiron's Cure." The main scene shows Cheiron being helped up the steps to what appears to be a shrine. To the right are two ugly ladies both apparently wearing the same mask, though with one shown full face and the other in profile it is a little difficult to be certain, in conversation with each other. Their masks are T, and what is illustrated is an animated tête-à-tête, conducted by "Nymphs" according to the legend the painter has added. It could be argued that the two are meant to be representative of the chorus and should therefore be excluded from the argument, but the fact that the artist has made an attempt to indicate that they are looking out from behind rocks and are seated suggests rather that they are actors. Another possibility is that they are the ancestors of Menander's Pan and the Nymphs in the *Dyskolos* and that they are to be imagined as holding a watching brief over all the events of the play, whether they actually appeared on the stage or not.¹¹

A number of possibly less relevant examples remain. On *PV Ph* 118¹² (second quarter of the fourth century) in Syracuse two actors stand on opposite ends of a merry-go-round (?) while a third sits in the middle playing a reed-pipe. All three wear mask B. The presence of the merry-go-round makes it tempting to assume they are actors rather than chorus, but the presence of a piper in a similar mask to that of the actors might well indicate that these are speciality dancers from the end of a play, like the sons of Karkinos (Ar. *Wasps* 1497 f.), painted because of the unusual merry-go-round. Speciality dancers probably also account for *PV Ph* 132¹³ of the third quarter of the fourth century where two men are dancing, though Trendall, because of the hooks on the top of their masks,

⁹*BHT*² fig. 484.

¹⁰*BHT*² fig. 491.

¹¹In that case they would be parallel to Castor and Pollux at the end of Euripides' *Electra*, who presumably also wore the same mask. Bieber suggests that Cheiron is to receive a cure from the nymphs and identifies them as the nymphs of Anyrus in Elis.

¹²*PV Ph* pl. VII D.

¹³*BHT*² fig. 516.

suggests we are dealing with marionettes, while Bieber prefers to see here a parody of a boxing match, and explains the rings as hangers for the masks. Parody is also suggested by a slightly earlier vase, *PV Ph 44*¹⁴ (375–350), where a woman in a Phrygian cap and veil is escorted by two actors carrying torches. A wedding scene is indicated; possibly, as Trenchard suggests, Helen of Troy being escorted to Paris. Both the attendants wear mask B and one of them turns his head in front of the woman and appears to make a remark to her, though it may be no more than a ritual cry and need not indicate any prolonged or important part in the play for him. A final vase, *PV Ph 125* of the third quarter of the fourth century, depicts two dancers next to a doorway and a piper, but again these need be no more than speciality dancers.

The evidence of terracottas gets us little further. In the set said to be from a single grave in Athens and now in New York (*MOMC AT 8–14*) three different figures wear mask K. This may simply mean that the same mask was worn by different characters at successive points in the same play¹⁵ rather than that two or more of the characters wearing the same mask were present on stage at once, but the evidence discussed above suggests that it would be wrong entirely to discard the possibility.

The poet wrote with his eye on the mask and sought to express what he saw there in his characters. To have two characters on stage together in the same mask must imply that, beyond basic distinctions between old man, young man, slave, etc., there were occasions when the poet felt he required two characters on stage but felt that the action of the play would tolerate their being roughly alike in physiognomic type and that though there might be minor individual variations within the type, the variations were not sufficient to suggest a different kind of mask. We must be dealing with relatively minor characters in the play as a whole but characters whose position in a particular scene is important for poet and artist. The vases make clear that they are not simply silent characters: they have a part to play and in playing it they attract attention.

There are a number of figures in Aristophanes who might be considered to fulfil these requirements. The clearest example is that of the slaves who introduce the *Wasps*. The two are named as Sosias and Xanthias but for all that they never become individual characters in their own right in the time in which they are together on stage (their names are in any case sufficiently common as slave names to have little significance *per se* for the audience, and the former is only named two lines before one of them disappears from the play). Indicative of their lack of differentiation is the fact that editors find it difficult to decide which of the two has

¹⁴*PV* pl. III C.

¹⁵See T. B. L. Webster, *Greek Theatre Production*² (London 1970) 66 f.

disappeared¹⁶ (138). Characterization there is; the problem is that it is the same for both of them—they are both fond of sleep (1, 6/7), the bottle (9, 10) and oracles (13, 14). Even their fear over the outcome of the oracle is duplicated (24, 47), as is their easy dismissal of each other's fears. They seem to be indistinguishable in the mind of the poet, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that their masks too were indistinguishable. Yet this opening scene is a lively one, as prologues must be if they are to catch the attention of the audience, and might well have fired the imagination of a vase painter. The slaves who introduce the *Peace* are in the same category. The two remain on the stage for only 49 lines before Slave B goes in and never reappears. The fact that they are slaves is important to the poet because of the view they are to give of their master for the audience. It is the view from the servants' quarters of a man who, in the slaves' estimation at least, is out of his mind. But characterization beyond this point the poet presumably considers unnecessary, because he gives us none. It is perhaps significant, however, that when Slave B has gone Slave A is developed a little more, and shows such pleasing characteristics as loyalty to his master and a desire to see him prevented from breaking his neck. Again it is evident that this opening scene is the stuff of which vase paintings are made, with the two striving to keep up with the appetite of the monstrous beetle that hovers in the background. It seems a reasonable supposition that the two slaves both wore the same mask and were indistinguishable.

The duplication of slaves at the beginning of the *Knights* is a more complex problem involving their supposed identification as Nikias and Demosthenes. As Dover suggests,¹⁷ it is difficult to see how the reference to Pylos (55) cannot have suggested to the audience the slave's identity as Demosthenes, just as it clearly did to the writer of the hypothesis, but whether this necessarily implies a continuing identification of the slave as Demosthenes and a possible portrait mask for him, rather than suggesting that at this particular point in the play the slave has assumed the character of Demosthenes, is less clear. The identification of his companion as Nikias is even more uncertain, based as it is on his fondness for oracles and dreams, exactly the sort of background which any conservative aristocratic Greek must have had and one, incidentally, that is paralleled by the slaves in the *Wasps* discussed above. These considerations apart, the characteristics of the two are barely distinguished, except that "Demosthenes" seems the more forceful, "Nikias" the one whom he uses for his errands. This may imply that the two do wear different

¹⁶Hall & Geldart (OCT) and Starkie remove Xanthias, Bergk removes Sosias, Coulon calls them A and B and removes A.

¹⁷K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London 1972) 89 f.; see also his article "Aristophanes' *Knights* 11–20," *CR* 9 (1959) 196 f.

masks, but it seems possible that a variation of this kind could be accommodated within the "type" that a single mask would convey.

In the opening scene of the *Women in Assembly* there seems again to be some duplication of characters. As Ussher notes in his text, Woman A and Woman B are differentiated at least in some minor respects (and other women too, depending on how the text is divided up).¹⁸ Woman A seems more forthcoming, of more assistance to Praxagora, and is assigned more lines of praise for her leader; Woman B is more domestic in her attitude at times but not consistently so (cf. *Assembly* 159). Ussher concludes that the women are differentiated only by their physical proportions, though there is no evidence to support this conclusion, and it might well have caused the poet some difficulty in obtaining his actors. The two actors have little that distinguishes them, but the problem is further complicated by the relationship of these two women to the women of the chorus, of whose numbers they are both a part in logic if not in fact. Were they then distinguished from one another and from the chorus or did both these actors and the chorus all wear the same mask?

The examples indicate that Aristophanes may not always have considered it necessary to seek out two masks and characters every time he needed two people on stage at once. The mask could fix the type he wanted and yet permit within it individual characteristics of a minor kind. Menander on the other hand was famous in antiquity for his ability in characterization, and the extant remains clearly support his reputation. The situations that might suggest to him two actors with identical masks are much less clear, but a number of avenues of approach do present themselves.

The most frequent use of two similar masks would be, presumably, in the case of twins, where the plot hinges on confusion between the two because they are identical. In that case, however, the problem is one of *major* characters, as it is also in cases of impersonation of one character by another, as for example in the case of Mercury's impersonation of Sosia in the *Amphitryo*. As far as minor characters are concerned, the *Aulularia* may provide an example. The stock character of the cook is used twice in that play in the persons of Congrio and Anthrax, who are brought face to face in the scene 280 f. They display the typical characteristics of cooks, without any really distinguishing characteristics of their own and, if it is correct to assume there was a stock cook's mask, as Pollux (4.143 f.) asserts, then possibly the two faced each other wearing the same mask and were distinguishable only by dress. Midway between the two categories stands the *Asinaria*. Plautus in his adaptation of his Greek original

¹⁸R. G. Ussher ed. *Ecclesiazusae* (Oxford 1973) xxxv. See also J. C. B. Lowe, "The Manuscript Evidence for Changes of Speaker in Aristophanes," *BICS* 9 (1962) 27 f.

has a scene (591 f.) in which the two slaves Leonida and Libanus tease their young master by demanding kisses from his girl friend Philaenium and making him play donkey and carry one of them. To persuade him to play this role they wave in his face a purse containing the money he needs. In this scene and throughout the play the two act as an undifferentiated pair: perhaps Leonida is the more forceful of the two but there is little really to distinguish them except perhaps for the description that Libanus gives of Leonida as the pseudo-Saurea *macilentis malis rufulus aliquantum, ventriosus, truculentis oculis, commoda statura, tristi fronte* (399, 400). This may imply that the two do wear different masks, and the fact that their roles in the play are fairly large probably points in the same direction. Certainty, again, is impossible.

The *Messenia* mosaic, however, indicates slave masks, and twin slaves can almost certainly be ruled out. A possibility is that we are dealing with free-born youths, abducted when small, and sold into slavery, in which case the names Syros and Tibios could be the names they had gone under throughout most of the play, though it is hardly likely that free-born characters would not have been given their real names by the fifth act of the play. The artist, however, may have wished to indicate their position throughout the earlier part of the play. The fact that it is the fifth act suggests that the scene is probably subsequent to the high point in the action, and that the feeling of it may be parallel to the end of the *Dyskolos*, as Handley notes,¹⁹ with the slaves ragging their young master. They would then presumably play parts throughout the play that were sufficiently uncharacterized or at least sufficiently undistinguished from each other that there was no reason why they should not wear the same mask. Nevertheless this final act must have been sufficiently important in the play, whether because of the action involved or because of the character change it implied, for it to stand, in some sense at least, for the whole of the play in the artist's eyes, just as the Arbitration scene in the mosaic of the *Epitrepontes* is a significant pointer to the play as a whole though it avoids the climax of the action. A further complicating note here, of course, is the overall design of the room in which the mosaics were found. The artist may well have sought to avoid reproducing the culminating point of each play, even though this would provide him with the best material for illustration, in favour of a more aesthetic concept which would provide scenes from different points in the different plays and yet give a clue to context and plot.

¹⁹See Charitonidis *et al.* (above, n. 2) 52 n. 13. Kahil notes that "la situation n'est pas analogue," and probably the young man's gesture tells against it. No case can be made for identical masks for Sikon and Getas in the *Dyskolos*, since the former is a fully-developed cook character and presumably wore the Maison mask, the latter is a house slave and probably wore the wavy-haired leading slave mask. See Handley ed. *Dyskolos* 36-37.

Certainty is impossible and will no doubt remain so until the literary remains of the *Messenia* are significantly increased. It is clear however that Menander was working within a tradition in which the poet was not averse to putting two or more actors on the stage wearing the same mask and that the poet, as he gazed at the mask, might on occasion produce two figures from a single mould.

McGILL UNIVERSITY