

DANCES OF MASQUERS AND THE BIRTH OF THEATRE

by Dr Voula Lambropoulou

Dept. of Philosophy

Man has been dancing since his appearance on earth. He learned how to dance by looking at the star dances, the birds, the animals, the air which makes the branches and the flowers bend, the waving of the water, the flames, the flashes in the chiaroscuro. Dance was always a source of joy and beauty, religious contrition, worship, magic, delight or grief.

Dance was greatly respected in ancient Greece. In legends and narrations, literature refers to dances and dancers and inspires art. The Greeks used to dance during their religious festivals, weddings, harvests, vintages as well as the naming of the dances. Everybody was taught dance and music. There were teachers of music and dance. The uneducated, the ignoble and the ugly were ignorant of dance, while the noble men knew how to dance.

Our sources inform us about the multitude of festivals and fairs in ancient Greece. No ancient ceremony could take place without dancing. Orpheus and Mousaeus, who were excellent dancers themselves and decreed mystical ceremonies, "considered it very good that initiation into these ceremonies be made by means of rhythm and dance". As a proof that such were their laws, Lucian (On dance, 15) says that the initiated simply "perform by means of dancing".

Dance should be examined not only regarding initiation, but also within the genetics of theatre. Four are the archetypical forms of the theatre, generations and pillars of its many variations: Dance mimicry, Pantomime, the more significant and more deeply integral Dramatic art and the more compound Theatrical art, which gives the spectator the joy of viewing (θεάσθαι).

Dance - mimicry is the simplest theatrical form. It is mainly a form of dance, but its strong mimetic element can make it belong to the domain of theatre. Rhythmical dances, too, may sometimes belong to theatre. When the rhythmical motion is mimicry, then we have the generation of dance mimicry, i. e. the expressive dance which often mixes with rhythm. Its perfection is to be found in the chorales of the ancient Greek tragedy owing to the irreplaceable prosodic verses. Plato (Laws VII, 816 a 3) in search of the cause which generates dance says: "And in general, no one who is using his voice, whether in song or in speech, is able to keep his body wholly at rest. Hence, when the representation of things spoken by means of gestures arose, it produced the whole art of dancing". Plutarch (Quaest. conv. IX 747 C) calls dance -mimicry as "mimicry of form and of idea" and Phrynichus (in Eustathius' Commentary on Homer's Iliad, XIII 636) was proud that he "created so many choreographies for the chorales of the tragedies as many makes the stormy winter night upon the sea". Aeschylus made also many and significant choreographies, inspired by the

ancient dance mimic treasure of the Greeks. The wonderful chorales of the tragedies, the rhythmic motion of the performers, together with the rhythm of music and the then prosodic Greek speech, created the renowned "unity of arts", unique and irrepeatably in the history of the theatrical art of humanity.

Aeschylus "making the speech a protagonist", founded the dramatic poetry which influenced the whole theatrical art of the Europeans in the East, both in the ancient as well as in modern times, dance -mimicry remains traditionally the first and leading art and, at the same time, the psalmodic speech is shaded basically by a dominating symbolism. Research on such topics belongs to other branches of the science of theatrology. Genetically speaking, the ultimate natural cause which allowed the generation of dance -mimicry was the upright standing of the first men. This posture, freeing the body and the hand from the four - footedness allowed the development of free sight far in space and supported their motion and agility. Ethologists and zoologists examine the mimetic movements of the playful little monkeys. Analogous are the conclusions drawn from the mimetic hops of the children and physiology considers these expressions as a common source, as a genetic heritage of man. Genetics also asks whether the primitive adults and their immediately posteriors did mimetic dance hops like children in the childhood of mankind.

Genetics also examines problems of priority, but cannot ascertain if pantomime is prior to dance - mimicry. It is probable that as dance mimicry combines the expressibility of many different motions with a musical rhythm, it is something compound and therefore was cultivated in more developed societies.

Speech, imperfect in the beginning, was sometimes replaced by screams which imitated the cries of the birds or the animals and aimed at finding food or the performance of some act. The Genetics of Theatre has concluded that magic and mimetic dancing - dramas as well as impromptu plays of masquers or religious acts were much prior to the ancient Greek dithyramb. Since then we have dances imitating different animals.

Animal dances in ancient Greece and elsewhere were decreed or, rather, had their beginning in the ceremonial expression of the worship of a deity, but as time went by, animal dances degenerated and caused cheerfulness only. Before their being used for the recreation of the spectators, in the more ancient times of the Greek civilization, religion used primitive dances performed in a sacred, ceremonial way.

Primitive man considered animals to be very important as they were the best companions of his life and observed their motions. Some animals were worshipped as real gods or as temporary incarnations of gods. Athena was called "owl - eyed", Hera was called "ox - eyed" or "bull -eyed". The snake was a sacred animal for Gaia, the earth goddess or for other goddesses or priestesses. Therefore, masks or animal fleeces play an important role in

ceremonies and are believed to have powerful magical properties.

The Greeks - as well as other ancient civilizations - knew that some animals dance. Monkeys, elephants, wild - cats, dolphins, bees, bears, butterflies and other animals dance in their wild nature. Birds dance one by one or in swarms, so the Protohellenes naturally imitated animals in the dances. There were cases when dancers, and particularly women dancers, held animals when dancing, e.g. snakes, roes, deers, hares. This topic is often found in ancient, pictures. The second century A. D. relief, found at the temple of Despoina at Lycoscoura from the lower part of a marble tunic, might be an echo of ceremonies performed by masqueraded women - dancers in more ancient times. Eleven women with animal -masks and shoes, looking like hoofs, dance a swift litany, with the sounds of the lyre and the flute. One of the women dancers bears a swine mask and strikes the front hoofs. Another lady wears a horse mask, some other a lion - mask or a cat - mask etc. and there are three ladies bearing ram - masks. It seems that the marble tunic was a copy of a embroidered or a woven tunic, which, in the past, was offered to the goddess. Despoina could be called a great goddess, like all goddesses worshipped on tops of mountains, holy caves or sources. She looked like the great Cretan goddess which had different names, e.g. Artemis, Dictyna, Vritomartis, Goddess of Plants, Goddess of Beasts, Goddess of Mountains.

We know that in honour of the Great Goddess, worshipping mysteries were performed as well as dances "by dancing animals" as the ancient sources say. In Her temple small animal idols were found. By her altar there have been found statuettes of women with cow heads. Similar, but of unknown origin, is a small statuette made of terracotta, which is now exhibited at the Museum of Louvre. It shows a woman, with a pig - like head and hoofs instead of hands, striking a tympanum.

Bear - dances were performed by young virgins in Vravron since the 5th cent. B. C. in honour of Athens who was also called "Bear" or "Virgin". Daughters of eminent families participated in these dances. These girls 5-10 years old, had yellow hairy costumes, which looked like bear fleeces. The dormitory of the little bears which were dedicated to the goddess and the place they danced were excavated in Vravron.

To honour Mithras, the women who participated in ceremonies, roared and danced like lionesses. While worshipping Dionysus, the Thracian ladies who participated in the dionysiac dances often wore clothes made of fox fleeces. The Thracian word "vassara" means "fox" and the dionysiac woman - dancer is often called "vassara" in the Greek and Roman literature. On an inscription at the New York Metropolitan Museum, there is a list of members of a dionysiac troupe, i.e. of groups of women - dancers or of flowers of later mysteries. Four of these dancers were referred to as "Leading - Foxes". Two are men and

two are women. The fox - dance, about which we have more information, might have been performed for fertility and later during different religious festivals.

In Laconia some priestesses of Demeter and Persephone were called "colts" and the inspired women dancers were often metaphorically called "colts". The donkey in the ancient Greek religion was a symbol of vegetation, fertility and music. A lady bears a donkey mask in the Lycosourian tunic.

The Cow and the Bull were represented in Greek ceremonies and Hera was related to the Cow. The Panther is considered a sacred animal in Dionysus' worship and little as well as big panthers were pictured in the arts. Pindar (Pyth. X 36) mentions that Vromios (Dionysus) "is amused by dancing herds of animals".

There's also the curious case of the Athenian girls who were obliged to serve Vravra Artemis (the worship of whose took place also in the Acropolis) for some time. This fact is connected with religious women -dances. Their duties were called "bear -like" and there are legends explaining why they had "to act as bears", even though the testimonies lack full details. "The young girls, before their wedding, had to imitate the bear". "They had to serve Artemis as basket - holders before their wedding as if they offered their virginity not to be exposed to the revenge of the goddess". The legend had it that a bear which was killed was favoured by the goddess.

Little "bears" as well as other women faithful to the Goddess, imitated the bears in the classical era with a certain dance they learned. We do not know whether years ago there was any transformation and whether a mania of any kind appeared, more or less fictitious. These little girls knew what happened to Iphigeneia, the first priestess of Vravra Artemis; so, in their yellow dress - the formal dress of the "bears" they satisfied the will of the goddess and "redeemed their freedom and virginity" according to H. Jeanmaire. As for the virgins who served Athena under similar conditions, they knew well that the queen Aglavros and her sisters their curiosity, violated the commitments of the goddess, were punished with craziness and fell over the Acropolis cliff. The legends of Heraeum present the virgins as dedicated to the great goddess after a contagious mania, which indicates the difficulties of both sexes during puberty and the manifestation of wilder feelings.

Other testimonies about punishment inform us about Proitidae who were wandering naked (according to Aelianus) and in absolute disorder (according to Apollodorus). According to Hesiod they lost their beauty: their hair fell and whitish spots covered their bodies. The appearance of the dysmainai is similar to that of the women who still performed collectively particular ceremonies, according to the testimonies. The white spots might have been a coating with gypsum or some white colour for the initiation. During a ritual in Eleia, of which Artemis was the leader, by the banks of the Alfeios river, young girls masqueraded

that way, because, according to the legend, the Goddess and her nymphs coated their faces with white clay. The dances to honour the Alfeiaia Artemis had an orgiastic character, as well as other dances in other parts of the Peloponnese in honour of that goddess.

The archaic characteristics of the Great goddess of Nature in the Prohellenic period are better recognized in the multiform Artemis, who was the great goddess of the Greeks and their dances, exacting and dreadful as she was.

The author of the article "Saltatio" (Daremberg - Saglio Lexicon) includes "Cordacas" among the orgiastic dances performed in Sparta to honour Corythalia Artemis. This dance was performed in Elis to honour Artemis Kordaki or Alfeiaia Artemis. During the dance women were coloured white following the example of the goddess and her nymphs. The name "Caryatides" may have made us think that in Caryai, Sparta, the dance had had a slow rhythm, because this name has been given to the beautiful column - shaped women with baskets on their heads.

On the contrary, the dancing Caryatidae danced a variation of the "kalathiskos (= little basket) dance", which is a swift, vivid dance with many turnings. From the title of a lost comedy by Pratinus "Karyatidal or Dysmainai" we conclude that there was a peculiar masquerade. Dysmainai were ugly Bacchae in Sparta, masqueraded with wreaths of thorny leaves on their heads, the thorns turning upwards.

The Zoomorphy of the Maenadic dance

A permanent feature of Maenadism is the dress made of a sacred animal's fleece. The fleece of the leopard or the fawn or the goat were the emblems of the maenadic worship. They must be related to a system of deterrent ceremonies, e.g. the Athenian Vouphonia. The ecstatic motion of dancers with animal masks, their dramatic performances and their procession like order manifest a troupe act. In all similar forms we have the beginning of theatre in antiquity. The performers in some ancient worshipping ceremonies were named after animals and this is a reminiscent of the zoomorphic tradition. The divine services at the Arcadic Lycaeum show the troupe - like character of a generation of wolves.

The girls who served as worshippers of Vravronia Artemis were called "bears", the dance and their service was called "bear" and their yellowish dress is a remnant of the bearlike figures. The initiating character of these two worships shows troupe - like religious services. The adolescents who pour wine during the festivals of the Tauric god Poseidon in Ephesus are called Bulls. The Sileni or Satyri have horse -tails and a category of troupe -members of the lobacchi are called "Horses".

Many are the dances and the dancers imitating different kinds of animals.

1. Morphasmos (Aristoph. "Wasps" 1169; Anacr. Frg. 57) According to Socrates

"morphazo" means "to dance". 2. Gypones. The dancers had wooden legs imitating the motions of the vultures.

And other similar dances, during which dancers had fleeces or masks of animals or birds or fishes, were often performed in ancient Greece.

1. Leon (Lion), sort of horrifying dance according to Athenaeus

2. Scops - Scopias, sort of dance with turnings of the neck, imitating the cock or a captured bird.

3. Glaphx, "Owl dances", are often referred to in Greek literature (Ael. Var. hist. 15. 28; Polyd., Onom. IV 103) imitating the proud gait of the bird, the shaking and the excessive turning of its neck and its persistent and penetrating look (Aristoph. Wasps 1479, 1490). There were also a cock - dance and a sparrow - dance. (Athen. VIII 360 b -d). Aristophanes, Crates and Magues, each wrote a comedy under the title "Birds". The first wrote another comedy under the title "Storks" and Cantharus wrote the comedy "Nightingales". In all these works, the dancers were dressed like imaginary, multi - coloured birds and the chorus danced in all these first comedies.

The grace, the beauty of the bird, which was floating in the air, or its funny motions on the ground, its flying, its "landing", its gait seem to have caused the imitations all over the earth since the Stone Age until today.

Among the animal dances we should mention the Kirke dance. Kirke was a goddess, according to new interpretation. She uses the stick and a melodic song and makes men animals. The myth has been examined together with ecstatic dances, where men danced with animal masks. Lucian (On dance 85) says that the dance itself and the fondness for the dance make the spectator a maniac, so he appeals to Kirke:

"I wonder how you are bewitched, without having drunk these magical drinks"

"Because you will be bewitched without having at the same time a donkey's head or a pig's heart"

"Nyssa" is a dance discussed by Nonnus (Dion. XIX 148 - 155) where the dancer dances with his legs, hands, fingers, head, eyes. Priestesses of Demeter and Kore in Laconia are called "colts". The three priestesses in Dodona are called "wild - pigeons". Priestesses of Demeter are also called "bees". The zoomorphic and zoomimic dances are multiplied by the conjectures of the researchers.

It is surprising that sometimes in initiating arts or religious services there are scenes made of branches. The places where these festivals took place were called "shades". This element is again found in Laconic festivals, like the Tithenidia and Yakinthia, where they are connected with "branches". "They make the scenes by the god, and in these scenes they lay wooden branches, on which they place carpets where those resting drink and eat".

In Alea every second year the "Sicereia" connected with "Skias" are performed. The scene of the Athenian theatre seems to be the daughter of the "skias" (shade, tent) who comes from the attic of the exclusion from the initiation. The worships of a Skianthus Dionysus, of a Skiastis Apollo and of a Skiatis Artemis seem to derive from this ancient initiating element performed on stage.

It is believed that in the orgies of the maenadic revel routs there is a male chorus - leader, dressed like a woman. This is guessed on the basis of Pentheus in the "Bacchae" who is dressed by Dionysus like a woman, in order to be led to the maenadic revel - routs. Indirectly it has also been conjectured by the dresses and the "women's shoes" of the tragic actors. So Dionysus, as a god of troupes of women dances is dressed like a woman. He wears women's shoes, "crocotos" (saffron -coloured robe worn by women) and "mitra" (a woman's head - dress).

A picture of Philostratus ascertains that it is the custom that "men were dressed like women (in the Dionysia festivals) as well as women were dressed like men". This custom is widely known since antiquity.

We know that the change of the dress of the sexes is an initiating custom in seasonal ancient Greek festivals.

"Comos" is such a festival in the rural areas with songs and dances to honour Dionysus. Afterwards, it was a festival with songs and dances in the streets to honour a winner or for the celebration of a victory in the four big games of Greece (Demosth. Nom. 517, Pindar, Olymp. IV 15; Pyth. V28). "Comos" also means participation in the festival where all guests after a symposium were running in the streets singing and dancing with music (Aristoph. Pl. 1040, Plat. Theaet. 173 b).

Demosthenes mentions that performers of Komos used masks. So widely spread is the use of masks, so that the leading member of the troupe, during processions in honour of Dionysus, held only the mask which is supposed to represent Dionysus. They danced at the same time. Demosthenes, already, names those participating in the "comos" dances as "comedians and tragedians" (21, 517). During this dance people were masqueraded like animals and regarding this feature this festival is analogous to a Syracusan one to honour Artemis Lyaia.

The Epiphany of Dionysus, the "Katagogia", sometimes were like a triumph because of the processions and the masquerades. It was the triumph of the powers of Life and Revival. "Comos", i.e. the masqueraded, formed a big procession having Dionysus as its leader, as they imagined. They walked dancing in a triumphant way, thing which was in accordance with the liberality of the festival.

In the Greco - Roman era during the ceremonies of the worshipping mysteries to honour

Mithras, emphasis was given to metempsychosis. Believers were dressed like animals or with dresses with representations of animals. Some of the worshippers were named after birds.

During Ecdysia, a festival held in Phaestus, Crete, men were dressed like women and women like men (Anton. Liver. Metamor. 17). During "Hyvristica" in Argos, "Oschophoria" and the worship of Aphroditos (the man woman Cypriot Aphrodite), initiation group weddings were performed.

In Sparta and particularly at Dictynaens (Pausan. III, 24, 9), Limnes (Paus. III, 4, 2) and in the temple of Othia Artemis, there was the tradition that the God abducted Helen while she was dancing. (Plut, Theo. 31). Therefore, during her festivals the women - dancers were honoured and called "corythalistriai". These dances formed the main part of the festival. The name "Korythalia" (= synonym for laurel) must be an evidence for some sort of tree - worship, during which swift and funny dances were performed. Some had wooden masks and were called "cyrittoi" ("the clowns with the wooden faces according to the Italians celebrating the Corythalia).

Numerous studies have been made regarding the ancient, even the primitive, use of masks. Different interpretations have been given: Cat.Cacouri writes: "With the study of the primitive mask, anthropologists, ethnographers, researchers of the pictorial arts enter the world of the legend and are not able to locate the irrational symbolisms of the masquerades". While the masks and masquerades are in collections of large museums and are used for the study of the generation of the theater, the use of the masks by hunters had a different purpose. Hunters wanted to deceive animals not easily accessible in order to come closer or animals, like the American wild buffalos, which stay still when sightened at the sight of a wolf. There have been preserved wolf like masks used by hunters. It is not known, however, whether a masqueraded man in the cave - paintings of the Early Palaiolithic era, was the first magician of humanity who danced, as it has been supposed or whether he was a masqueraded hunter.

The dances of masqueraded persons, the masks and the dresses of the dancers, who were later called tragedians and comedians, were sacred and respected by the rest people. The performers themselves became untouchable and inviolable.

Tragedians and comedians wore masks, so that the spectators could easily identify them and recognise the persons who played the part of Prophets and soothsayers. They wore masks in order to lose their personalities and be able to speak on behalf of the god they represented.

For the history of dance, we have to mention the legend of Proteus who could take the forms of animals. As mythographers, poets, sculptors, potters and goldsmiths have shown in their arts, Proteus could be transformed even into water or fire: "Proteus first took the form

of lion, snake, leopard, pig and then of water and tree". The historians of dance have interpreted these transformations as dancing abilities of a good dancer, i.e. of a man who knows how to imitate and be transformed into different forms. He could imitate the liquidity of water and the vividness of fire as well as the wildness of a lion, the ire of a leopard, the motion of a tree and generally anything he wanted. But he was presented in a peculiar way by the myth as if he was transformed into anything he imitated.

This can be considered to be applied to dancers who change forms just like Proteus. Embussa, was some other goddess who changed myriads of faces. She must have been a dancer, but the myth presented her differently. According to the mythologists, her name was simply a variation of Ecat, the three faced goddess of the Hades and crossroads, but she sometimes appears as a different, goddess. Her ability to change faces reminds a bit of the strange body of Skylla. If someone met Embussa at the entrance of the Hades - as it happens in one comedy by Aristophanes - this monstrous goddess once appeared as a cow, once as a mule, or a beautiful woman or a female dog. Her face was shining like fire. Her one leg was of copper. Others say that Embussa or Hecate wore only sandals of copper as they were the dominators of Tartara. There are times when she appears as a merry, wearing golden sandals. The other leg of Embussa was dirty with the manure of the animal she was transformed into. Myths have so many narrations which could only symbolically be understood.

Women dancers had a leg of copper or rather a shoe of copper in later times so that they could strike their feet according to the rhythm. Spanish women dancers today have metallic shoes. Sandals and feet are often stressed and sung during the dances of the Muses or the goddesses. The whole picture in the myth of Embussa is a "dancing" one. There is a hint in the narration that the dance was performed with arms.

In the "Lysistrata" the revel - rout enters the scene after the end of the διποδία (273 - 1322) in a mixed formation, i. e. man and woman side by side, dancing the "Callinicus" (= good winner) dance. In this formation, "Callinicus" looks like "Hormos". It was related to Hercules in the beginning, but could be offered to some other hero or deity in case of an athletic or a military victory. The coreography varied (procession, spiral or rectangular form). This was often applied to tragedy and comedy.

On a red - coloured pot (6th cent. BC) at Municipale Corneto Museum in Italy we can see a religious dance connected with the worship of Hercules. Young men dressed like women holding each other's hands dance some sort of sacred dance. They may play the part of Nereids, because in the middle of the picture we see the struggle of Hercules against the snake - faced Triton. The dance is some sort of Callinicus performed by men who were dressed like women. We conclude that they are men, because the faces of men in ancient

pictures on the pots were painted black, conventional artistic colour, and the faces of women were painted white.

The custom of changing of clothes between the genders was known in antiquity. The phenomenon is also common in other civilizations up to nowadays. A metriarchical remnant, probably a symbol of maternity, fertility. It may also call on or commemorate some event. In ancient Greece the phenomenon was noticed many times.

Plutarch (Thes. 23) describes it as follows:

"It was Theseus who constituted also the Athenian festival of the Oschophoria. For it is said that he did not take away with him all the maidens on whom the lot fell at that time, but picked on two young men of his acquaintance who had fresh and girlish faces, but eager and manly spirits and changed their outward appearance almost entirely by giving them warm baths and keeping them out of the sun, by arranging their hair and by smoothing their skins and beautifying their complexions with urgents; he also taught them to imitate maidens as closely as possible in their speech, their dress and their gait and to leave no difference that could be observed and then enrolled them among the maidens (...) And when he came back, he himself and these two young men headed a procession arrayed as those are now arrayed who carry the vinebranches. They carry those in honour of Dionysus and Ariadne, and because of their part in the story, or rather because they came back home at the time of the vintage. And the women called Deipnophori or supper - carriers, take part in the procession and share in the sacrifice, in imitation of the mothers of the young men and maidens on whom the lot fell, for these kept coming with bread and meat of their children.

In the Mycenaean centers of worship the priestesses has as a mission to preserve the sacred treasure, take care of the altars and the sanctuaries of the palace or keep the key of the sacred grave of the goddess and the altar. The priestesses and keepers of the keys, just as the "peleiai" and "peleidae" of Dodona, were persons of high rank and wore a long dress and a tunic, like men -priests. Up to nowadays men -priests wear women's clothes.

In Sparta there was in the later times an orgiastic dance, called vrydalicha, in which men wore masks and women's clothes.

There are times when the women dancing to honour Demeter, Persephone, Adonis or Dionysus, - dressed with long, heavy tunics covering the hands and even the face - are considered to be men. Men dressed like women were the dancers of the Maimacteria festivals.

Writers discuss the beautiful dances where two dancers play the parts of Dionysus and Ariadne. Xenophon ("Symposium") describes vividly the presence of a very good woman - dancer sitting on the throne dressed like a nymph. When she heard the Bacchus' song she stood up and waited for Dionysus who appeared on the stage dancing in different variations,

until he held Ariadne with his hands and started dancing a vivid erotic dance.

The posterior antifeministic belief that the Antichrist is a woman is to be attributed to the change of dresses or to the masquerade between sexes. The Antichrist is said to be a "shameful woman, Mondion from Pontus, a Bacchus' dancer, daughter of the Devil, a witch, crazy both for man and women..." When she appears, satanic guitars play and (satanic) dances and tragedies are performed. Despite the bitter disposition of the hermit, the prophecy for the coming of the Antichrist is really fascinating: songs and guitars and a charming woman - mimic dancing on air souls.

In the Byzantine era in cases of social decadence there were some ridiculous situations and one woman flute - player was dressed like a man and riding a horse she saw the Patriarch off.

The beliefs of the Byzantines did not stop the tradition. The Church cursed the dances many times and particularly the dances of the masquerades and those who wore masks of animals. They cursed those who were masqueraded in the opposite sex, but at the end the Church was forced to accept some and dominate over others. Bacchus became Saint Bacchus and the dances to honour Apollo and Artemis became dances and festivals to honour Saint George and Virgin Mary. To honour her there are big religious ceremonies every year and many people in our island worship a Dancing - Virgin.