

James Johnson's *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic*

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I want to begin today with an anecdote that Shaftesbury tells in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711). Shaftesbury invites us to imagine that “a native of Ethiopia were on a sudden transported into Europe and placed either at Paris or Venice at a time of Carnival, when the general face of mankind and almost every creature wore a mask.” Under these circumstances, Shaftesbury notes, “it is probable [that the Ethiopian] would for some time be at a stand before he discovered the cheat, not imagining that a whole people could be so fantastical as, upon agreement at an appointed time, to impose on one another by this universal confusion of characters and persons.” The Europeans might laugh at the Ethiopian’s simplicity in taking masks for faces, Shaftesbury notes, and once his eyes cleared and he recognized the true situation, the Ethiopian might join in the laughter. But neither Shaftesbury’s naïve Ethiopian nor Shaftesbury himself should actually get the last laugh here, for—as *Venice Incognito* shows—neither of them really has the foggiest idea what is going on. Jim Johnson’s absolutely wonderful book reveals the philosopher’s understanding of masking as a figure of disguise, as a metaphor for the plasticity and duplicity of identity, to be itself a kind of error (a cultural misreading), involving a set of assumptions about Venetian carnival and about masking that are not borne out by its actual practices. Indeed, seen from a certain angle, Shaftesbury’s duped Ethiopian is closer to the mark than Shaftesbury!

I begin with this anecdote both because it shows the ubiquity of the assumptions about masking and carnival that *Venice Incognito* brilliantly draws into question, and because it gestures, in small, towards the vast number of modern concepts that rest upon the way we understand the mask. I want to take a rapid tour through some of my favorite points in Professor Johnson’s argument before raising a couple of questions about its implications—which are stunningly far-reaching, particularly given the deceptive simplicity of the revelation with which *Venice Incognito* begins: that Venetian society donned masks not just for Carnival but for six months of the year. This simple fact compels us to reconsider not only many long-cherished assumptions about the purpose of masking and the function of carnival, but also about our very understanding of the dynamics of self-fashioning and early modern subjectivity. For the ubiquity of masks in eighteenth-century Venice, in Professor Johnson’s analysis, demonstrates that we should understand them not as implements of self-transformation, or as disguises that afford a license to misbehave, but rather as screens that protected and preserved identities by generating the *illusion* of anonymity. This imperative for masking existed because of the quite specific strains on the socio-political structures of Venice, where the enduring monopoly on state institutions of a dwindling and enfeebled patrician class had created a rigid stratification of ranks (and limited social mobility) that made social, political, and economic commerce a fraught affair. The fiction of anonymity produced by masks made social exchanges possible, by creating the (fictive) semblance of equivalence in the face of a profound and seemingly unalterable inequality. Permitting the commoner to refrain from showing deference and sheltering the down-at-heels aristocrat from slights, the mask saved face for those nobles whose economic circumstances had nudged them from the rank into which they were born and protected the patricians from overt challenges to their increasingly fragile claim to authority, power, virtue. “How,” as Johnson asks, “can your authority be defied if it isn’t publicly acknowledged?” (124).

Masks on these terms operate not as disguise, but as a front or a blind that removed the imperative to recognize or acknowledge the identity of another. *Venice Incognito* thus invites us

to think about the mask as an assertion not (or not just) of personal but of public or corporate identity. That the title of the book attaches the adjective “incognito” not, as is usual, to a person, but to a city, indicates the ways Professor Johnson’s argument allows us to think about a collective identity gleaned not from the communal energies we associate with carnival, but from modes of incorporation that enable participation in the body politic. By suspending hierarchy—the actions that would reveal the reality (or the *real*) of an altered status quo—the mask preserves the fiction that what has been lost (the embattled patrician world) has *not* been lost. (At risk of importing a terrible anachronism into the discussion, I was struck by the ways the mask operates as a kind of collectively held fetish, in the psychoanalytic sense: allowing something simultaneously to be there and not there; providing an object that enables the pursuit of normative aims or satisfactions (sexual for Freud, but social and political for Venice)). Inasmuch as going incognito protected identities grounded in a status quo whose material and economic basis was rotting underfoot, *Venice Incognito* might be understood as *Venice Preserved*.

As someone trained in comparative literature, I have been taught to seek commonalities and relations—the portmanteau concept, like carnival or the carnivalesque or the mask, that will reveal the existence of cross-cultural connections or points of contrast. The portability of theoretical concepts that gives them such heuristic power may blind us to the distinctive nature of the object before us, in ways that are wonderfully illuminated in the book’s commitment to the *particular* in history. *Venice Incognito* reminds us of that time and place shape practices in ways that resist such universalizing descriptions and among the book’s many achievements is the extraordinary skill with which it brings to life the constellation of practices and historical circumstances that shaped and were shaped by masking. Transporting us from the dimly lit gambling halls (where the banker, by law, went unmasked) to the reception chambers of the Doge’s palace where masked nobles awaited the arrival of foreign ambassadors, from the crowded theaters bustling with nobles, prostitutes, commoners, and actors (variously masked and unmasked) to the quiet precincts of a Murano convent, *Venice Incognito* makes audible the cacophony of the public spaces of Venice, with their bull fights and equestrian ballets, with their hucksters and beggars, imposters and thieves. In the process, the book makes visible the ritual forms that policed and gave order to the *apparently* unruly and the state institutions that regulated who might (or must) wear masks—and who, conversely, might or must not. The on-again-off-again nature of the rules—prostitutes may wear masks; now they may not—indicates the vicissitudes of state institutions trying to stay one step ahead of the crowd, but their adoption—or not—in practice offers a glimpse of an aggregate will that reminds us of the difficulty of writing a history of the practices of populations composed of individuals and groups of individuals. The book’s commitment to the particular influences some of the methodological choices implicit within its form. The book is structured around a series of *sorties* into a wonderful array of instantiating examples, while resisting grandiose assertions that would subordinate those experiences to one blanket form.

I wanted to ask about the difficulties that you might have encountered in writing the book, and the benefits, and perhaps some of the costs, entailed by this mode of proceeding. So, here come the questions:

In the grammar of objects that conjugate the relation of persons, places, things and indeed animals (and the animals in the book are intriguing), masks operate—in Professor Johnson’s evocative phrase—as “apparel in the subjunctive mode, upholding the hierarchy by temporarily effacing it” (120). I was curious about whether we might compare the mask—as accessory or even maybe as a kind of prosthetic—to the English wig, which, as Marcia Pointon among others

has argued, created a visual uniformity that muted differences of rank and political interest by generating the appearance of undeviating similitude among men.¹ My question here is actually less about the kinds of cultural and political labor performed by the mask or the wig, than about their nature as *things*—about the properties of the mask as a material object and the degree to which it becomes integral (does one feel naked, so to speak, without it?). It seems like the mask might operate as one of what Barbara Johnson called “the numerous little prostheses of daily life” (she was talking about dental crowns and eyeglasses), which are remarkable because they possess a perdurability that supersedes both the decay of the mortal body and by extension, perhaps, the altered status of individual. This is a question really about the fall-out of granting the provisional fixity of identity to a thing and about the status of the mask as an object.²

Of course, things like wigs and masks and eyeglasses are detachable—one puts them on and also takes them off—and part of the question I wanted to raise involves the process of unmasking and the meaning of being unmasked. What happened the other six months of the year? I presume masking didn’t go on all year round because the wealthy disappeared to go “summer” on the mainland but were there strategies that emerged during the off-season to deal with the strains that the masks allayed during the rest of the year? You note in the book that there were regulations (tacit and explicit) about who could (or must) be unmasked: the holders of the bank in the gambling halls, the lovers in the commedia dell’arte, but I was wondering about what appear to be by-standers in, for example, the Pietro Longhi image of *The Rhinoceros* (16). You talk about what it meant to go unmasked when others were masked, but I was wondering if you had other thoughts on it.

Finally, and still on the question of the material properties of the mask—how did wearing a mask alter other sensory capacities, like speech or hearing? You draw attention to the etymology of *per sona*, from “to sound through”—and I wanted to ask about this notion of sound, not only because the distinctive timbre or accent of the voice betrays identity, but also because “voice” is a word increasingly associated with individuality (poetic voice). I exclude here the women wearing the morèta mask, rendered speechless by the necessity of keeping a button clenched between their teeth—and I’m going to use their silence to stop speaking myself.

¹ Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); see also *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38:1 (fall 2004), “Hair” and Michael Kwass, “Big Hair: A Wig History of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century France,” *American Historical Review* 111:3 (June 2006), 631-659.

² Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 90.