Masked actors: mosaic from the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, Italy. 1st century BCE-1st c. CE. Naples Archaeological Museum. [Credit: WikiCommons]
Unmasking Ancient Colour

Colour and the Classical Theatre Mask

By Andrea Sinclair M.A.

The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with an overview of the characteristics of traditional theatre masks from the Hellenistic Greek and the Roman Imperial periods. The primary literary source employed to illustrate this discussion is the *Onomasticon* of Julius Pollux, which will be examined from the point of view of the importance of colour to convey meaning in the creation of a theatrical mask.

Who introduced masks, prologues, the number of performers and such things is unknown.
—Aristotle, Poetics, 1449b

The idea of theatre performance in ancient Greece and Rome conjures up a variety of images for me, one of vast semi-circular auditoriums, layered schema with elegant columns and facades, audiences dressed in their ‘Sunday best’ reclining leisurely on steeped seating and, of course, the performers. Somehow I cannot help but be influenced by the elegance of modern reconstructions of classical theatre when I envision ancient theatre performance. Perhaps this may be blamed on my own background in theatre design. But this assumption of austerity would be faulty, for theatre performance in antiquity was a different animal, less refined and more diverse in its application and unlike contemporary theatre, all actors wore masks.

The intention of this article is to elaborate on a topic relating to theatre from ancient Rome and Greece that appears to be sadly
absent. A factor which one could argue is as crucial to the nature of an object as its form and texture: the colour of these masks worn by performers in early plays. Much literature has applied itself to the physical characteristics of masks from late antiquity and their relation to earlier Greek masks from the Classical and Hellenistic periods, with particular emphasis placed upon masks from comedy. However, there appears to be little or no discussion of the nature of colours associated with these highly visual objects.

Classical masks were intended to provide strong visual cues to an audience in what was, to all intents and purposes, a large performance space. This goal was achieved by using full head/helmet masks with broad and exaggerated features. The sculptural qualities of these very visual theatrical tools were an important feature of their legibility, but this legibility ought also to entail the use of colour. I consider this article to be an opportunity to discuss this facet of ancient mask and also, unlike academic publications, to take advantage of the visual nature of a magazine format by providing a range of relevant colour images.

When we think of Greek and Roman theatre masks our own perception is highly ‘coloured’ by the extant material that we have available to us as representative of these early performance tools. Sadly, because the original masks were constructed from degradable materials, such as leather, fabric and fibre, we do not have examples of the original artefacts. Instead, we are dependant on imagery of masks from the visual arts
and some (few) references in texts for the physical nature of these objects.

The visual evidence consists of two primary sources: the two dimensional, via wall paintings, ceramics and mosaics and the three dimensional, from sculpted terracotta figurines and from architectural ornaments. Of the aforementioned types, only mosaics and wall paintings employ colour, and I would hazard that you, the reader, when thinking of a mask, conjure up a monochrome image most likely related to masks from architectural and sculptural sources.

**Theatre Performance in Greece and Rome**

To begin this discussion, I will provide a brief overview of the theatrical context with which we are dealing. The performance of public theatre in Greece and Rome has a long and illustrious history which one could argue remains with us today with contemporary interpretations of the plays of renowned tragedians such as Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus and comedic writers such as Aristophanes, Menander and Plautus.

In ancient Greece plays were an important component of public festivals and were designed to be performed by a reasonably small group of actors. This troupe comprised three core actors who would perform all the speaking roles, in addition, there was a chorus of up to fifteen performers who sung and danced and guided the audience through the storyline. Finally there was the
potential for a non specific amount of non-speaking roles, such as attendants, slaves, guards or citizens. All characters, actors, chorus and extras were masked, and all parts were performed by men.

Within the theatre space, the action proper would take place on a raised stage, while the chorus would sing and dance in the semi-circular orchestra at the front of this stage. It is worth noting that with the limited number of actors performing all speaking roles, the use of mask would have been a convenient device to facilitate scene, character, and particularly, gender changes in a performance. But this may not be considered the sole motivation behind the choice of mask for performance.

The earliest use of mask was not bound to character types and thus the masks of 4th century Athenian drama and comedy would have been constructed to suit the requirements of a given play and playwright. It was not until the second half of the fourth century and the plays of Menander and his contemporaries that costume and mask types became clearly defined. The grotesque padding and phalli of the Old Comedy were dispensed with and masks too were adapted into more rigid characters. This does not mean however, that a playwright could not still adapt or invent masks to suit his own requirements.

What is a mask and what was a classical mask?

In any dictionary a mask may be defined in a variety of ways: as the likeness of a face, a covering for all, or part of a face, an object worn as a disguise, or to amuse, or
frighten others. When employing this term ‘mask’, I am referring to the head coverings in the likeness of beings (divine, human and animal) that were employed in the performance of theatrical plays in Greece and Rome in the classical period (500 BCE-300 CE). I use the term ‘head coverings’ intentionally, since it must be emphasised that a mask in the context of classical drama was not simply a covering for the forepart of an actor’s head. Rather, it was a combination of hair, headdress and the face.

For the intentions of this work I clearly distinguish between a mask that is designed to be worn on a human head and a reproduction of a human face. And it is worth noting that the features required to identify a mask that may be worn in performance are the presence of eye sockets, breathing holes and suspension holes. They also must be light and durable. There is absolutely no point in describing a ceramic mask as a performance mask; these on the contrary, must be either ornamental copies of an original, or replicas perhaps intended for votive use.

The term used in Greek literature to describe a mask was πρόσωπον (πρόσωπον). This noun may be literally translated as ‘something which is (placed) before the eyes’, that is, a covering for the face, but it can also be used to refer to the face proper. Another word which may be used in the discussion of masks in antiquity is προτομή (προτομή) which actually refers to a reproduction of a
Satyr mask: marble (source unknown). 2nd century CE. Capitoline Museum, Rome [Credit: WikiCommons]
bust, head, or face, and may therefore, not be considered crucial to this discussion. (It is however, of value to an examination of the origins of masks).

**The sources for masked performance**

It is a considerable disadvantage to modern scholarship that we have only limited textual evidence for the use and description of masks in antiquity. While we do have secondary sources, we are casting about in the dark with regard to the original objects. Aristotle in the *Poetics*, his discussion of 4th century Greek theatrical practice, refers sparingly and somewhat dismissively to the use of masks in Greek theatre and with a few sentences he passes laconically over them.

*A direct example (of this) is the comic mask which is ugly and distorted yet without (being) distressful.*

—Aristotle, *Poetics*: 1449

Somewhat later in the Roman period, we have another brief but colourful reference to mask characteristics in Lucian's *Anacharsis*.

*I have seen those tragedians and comedians of whom you speak, if they are those individuals wearing heavy raised shoes, with costumes decorated in gold and quite ridiculous head-dresses with enormous gaping mouths from within which they shout out mightily, and I do not know how they cannot fall over in those shoes when walking. I believe at that time the city was celebrating a festival of Dionysus. But comedians are shorter than them, use their feet, are more human and bellow less. Their head-dresses are more comical and the entire theatre laughed as one.*


From the fact that these sources are often employed in literature to describe mask characteristics from Greece and Rome may lead you to the realisation that our information pool is indeed small. However, we have one detailed account by a classical author left to discuss.

The primary textual source employed in literature for mask in antiquity is the *Onomasticon* (Ονομαστικόν) of Julius Pollux of Naucratis, (2nd century CE). Now this text is a form of thesaurus and was intended by its author as a general description of a variety of topics from geography to astronomy and so forth. Therefore, the discussion of theatre and theatrical masks is necessarily concise and most probably functions on the assumption that the reader has a basic awareness of the topic. This applies particularly to his discussion of the characteristics of masks. For each detail provided, there appears to be much that is absent, or assumed.

This text is nonetheless our best literary source for the description of masks in antiquity and for this reason I too have used it as my source, but I would emphasise here that this article is naturally biased towards the late 1st millennium before the Common Era (BCE) and the early Common Era (CE). This time frame is governed by the period contemporary with Julius Pollux (2nd century) and on the understanding that his information is considered to be derived from an earlier 3rd century BCE Alexandrian source. Discussion of the nature of 5th century Attic theatre masks shall therefore be considered a topic for another article.

**The Masks in Pollux: the Satyr Play**

In antiquity there were three specific
varieties of theatrical performance and each was masked. In the *Onomasticon* of Pollux these three are duly listed as masks that were used in the performance of Tragedy, those for Comedy and those belonging to the Satyr play.

We shall begin with the Satyr play since it has been argued that it is from these that later theatrical performances were derived (Aristotle, *Poetics*). The Satyr play was a risqué rough and tumble farce which (much like that of tragedy) revolved around anecdotes sourced from traditional mythology. The costumes somewhat reflected the animal nature of these followers of the god Dionysus and consisted of horse tails, erect phalli and masks.

The Satyr masks described in the *Onomasticon* pose the least challenge to us and contain only four clearly defined characters: an old satyr, a bearded satyr, a clean-shaven satyr and one that was worn for the god Silenus. Pollux is sparing with detail for these masks, but describing their characteristics is not difficult, since we have adequate resources for the characteristics of satyrs and of satyr masks from antiquity.

The satyr mask may be identified by the bestial characteristics of the classical satyr: the presence of horns on the upper forepart of the mask, elongated and pointed goat ears framing the face and unkempt, shaggy hair. Colour is not indicated in the text with the exception of the use of *polios* (πολιός) or ‘grey haired’ to describe the old satyr, and Pollux is emphatic that the distinction between the four rests with their names: old, bearded, beardless and the god Silenus.
The Masks in Pollux: Tragedy and Comedy

In the *Onomasticon* the categories for masks from both tragedy and comedy have been arranged into four groups: those for old men, young men, male servants and for women. In addition there is a description of ‘equipped’ (ἔνσκευα) or ‘extra’ masks belonging to tragedy. These were masks with unusual features, such as animals, deities, demi-gods, or monsters (nymphs, gorgons, titans, sea monsters, giants, centaurs); forces of nature (rivers, mountains, cities); and abstract concepts (justice, death, persuasion, deceit, envy). It is worth noting that Pollux states that any one of these masks may also be used for the performance of comedy.

The following is a brief list of the names for characters that are given by Pollux.

**Old Men**

*Six tragic masks:*
Shaved hair, White, Greying, Black, Yellow, More yellow.

*Nine comic masks:*
1st Grandfather/Pappos, 2nd Grandfather, Leader, Old man, Hermeneios, Brothel keeper, 2nd Hermeneios, Peaked beard, Lycomedeios.

**Young Men**

*Eight tragic masks:*
All purpose young man, Curly haired, More curly, Delicate, Dirty, 2nd Dirty, Ochre, Faded Ochre.

*Eleven comic masks:*
All purpose, Black, Curly haired, More curly, Delicate, Bumpkin, Wavy haired, 2nd wavy haired, 1st Parasite, 2nd Parasite, Foreigner, 3rd Parasite.
Servants

Three tragic masks:
Leather, Peaked beard, Snub nosed.

Eight comic masks:
Grandfather, Leader, Lower 3rd or 4th attendant, Curly haired, Middle attendant, Tettix (cicada), Wavy haired leader.

Women

Eleven tragic masks:
Grey old woman, Freed old woman, Old domestic servant, Domestic (medium hair), Leather, Ochre (long hair), Ochre (medium hair), Medium cropped, 1st sallow maiden, 2nd sallow maiden, Young girl.

Seventeen comic masks:
Lean old woman, Fat old woman, Old domestic, Talking, Curly haired, Girl, False girl, 2nd false girl, Grey talking, Mistress, Hetaira (prostitute) at the end of her career, Hetaira in her prime, Golden hetaira, Diademed hetaira, Hetaira with torch hair-do and two serving girls.

Perhaps the one notable detail for women’s masks is that they mostly differ by hairstyle and, excluding the mention of specific characteristics, may therefore be viewed as having reasonably regular features. In fact, this observation may be made for all the masks listed in Pollux. Where facial features are absent, we must assume that they are in fact there, but in each example relatively regular, such as aquiline nose, level brows and so on.
And this brings us in a roundabout way to the issue of the characteristics for these masks. I do not feel that I can throw you headlong into a discussion of mask colour without some brief explanation of the features of the masks in Pollux. There are actually a limited range of features listed in the text and they may be summarised as follows:

— Hair: straight, curly, wavy.
— Hairstyle: various for women: for men: waving forward, bald, receding.
— Headpieces: onkos, stephanē and speira.
— Beards: long, short, curly, peaked, beardless.
— Brows: knitted, raised, lowered, asymmetrical.
— Eyes: lazy, cheerful, severe, distorted.
— Nose: hooked, snub.
— Mouth: flat lips.
— Battered ears and snaggle teeth.

Finally we have descriptions of the complexion which may be ‘good’, wrinkled, lined or of a specific hue, and thus we come to the discussion proper.

**Colour for Masks: Age and Gender**

On examining the characteristics above, it could be argued that the distinctions between masks in classical drama were based on stereotypes: a character’s age, their social standing and their gender. In addition, it has been asserted in the past
that due to the auditorium distance, only age and gender would be easily recognised by an audience and that there was actually little distinction between the characteristics of individual masks.

It is not this writer’s intention to support such a claim, for while costume, hair, and physical features do provide enough scope for identifying a character, mask colour could also provide similar important visual cues to a distant audience. Nonetheless, these three basic distinctions: age, status and gender are reasonably apparent from the evidence of extant plays and the description in the Onomasticon and it is worth noting that they are still basic distinctions for a modern audience.

Age distinction for a mask could be conveyed through a variety of methods, such as wrinkled skin, or varying shades of grey through to white hair on both men and women. In Pollux white hair is indeed reserved for the oldest characters. For the complexion, age is conspicuously indicated by lack of pigment and older characters have whiter skin than younger. Facial hair on men is another criterion for distinguishing age, as after the Hellenistic period it became fashionable for young men to shave. Thus the absence of a beard infers youth (although in earlier periods this would have been used to convey a notion of effeminacy). Older, respectable men are correspondingly to be recognised by the various styles of beard.

Gender distinction is consistent with Greek artistic convention and is characterised by the use of dark and light skin tones. Thus, a male character will have a darker complexion.
Tragic woman: fresco from the House of the Golden Bracelet, Pompeii. 1st century CE. [Credit: WikiCommons].
than a female, whose ideal colouring was white, no doubt from a notion of seclusion in the domestic environment (but this may apply more to women of higher social standing). For young male characters the complexion is generally described by a verbal form of μελάς, ‘black’, here more appropriately translated as ‘dark’. Ideally a healthy active Greek or Roman man was athletic and tanned, thus masks of young men are described as dark and in some instances, ‘flushed with red’ (υπέρυθρος).

For male characters this convention could also be manipulated to express character nuances, and a man could indeed have a pale mask, but this could convey specific visual cues to the audience. Thus, a paler mask could be effeminate, sickly, dying, pining away from love, or of delicate constitution. On the other hand, a pale mask on an older man conveys a notion of advanced age and/or physical weakness. Finally a pale or white mask on a male character could also be used to indicate a ghost or a spirit of the dead.

For female character masks the opposite ought to apply and the presence of colour in a mask could be said to infer absence of social standing, since only women of lower status would necessarily have extended exposure to the sun. This is not as clearly illustrated in the Onomasticon where most female character masks are described as white or sallow. No female mask is described as red, and only one prostitute past her prime is described as flushed, none is of a dark complexion.

One tragic old woman mask is named ‘leather’ (διφθερίτις), and the question would be whether there was a colour significance associated with this epithet. Most dictionaries translate this term as referring to an individual who is ‘clad in leather’. I am not entirely satisfied with this solution, as only two characters, both from tragedy, bear this name, an old male servant and an old woman, both are endowed with little description other than with onkos and I am aware that the choice of name in Pollux often appears to reflect the nature of a mask. One has to concede that ‘leathery’ does conjure up a specific (perhaps modern) notion of texture and age.

**Colour and Mask Character**

To turn to the broader colour terminology encountered in Pollux, we have a limited range of colours used to describe theatre masks. These may be divided into two groups: the first is ‘pure’ colour terms: black (μέλας), white (λευκός), grey (πολιός), yellow (ξανθός), red (ἐρυθρός) and ochre (ώχρα). The second consists of shades: greying (σπαρτοπολιός), flushed red (ὑπέρυθρος), fire red (πυρρός), pale ochre/sallow (ὕπωχρος), faded ochre (παρωχρός), pale yellow (ὑπόζανθος), slightly white (ὕπόλευκος), faded white (παράλευκος, literally: ‘beyond white’).

There are two contexts where the colour of a mask is referred to in the Onomasticon: one describes the colour of the hair (both beards and head hair) and the other appears to refer to the complexion, or skin colour of the prosȏpon, and it is worth noting that the Greek stem used to indicate complexion, chrôma (χρῶμα, also χροία) may be translated as, ‘skin’, ‘complexion’ or indeed, as ‘colour’. In fact χρῶμα is the etymological source for the English terms chrome/chromatic.

There are five colours used to describe hair for masks, black, grey, white, yellow and fire...
red. Brown is conspicuous by its absence from this list, but I would suggest that from the visual evidence it is subsumed within ‘black/dark’. As already discussed, white hair is used for the oldest characters in tragedy and comedy, both male and female. Grey hair is applied to older characters, but not the oldest. Black hair is characteristic of middle aged and young men, both athletic and for less than worthy individuals like parasites. Although one prostitute from comedy is black haired, the rest appear to be fair. Yellow hair was fitting for young men and young women, while flame red hair is employed only in comedy for male servants and for one old man.

The skin colour of individual masks is defined by these terms: black, white, ochre, sallow, pale yellow, ‘livid’, red and flushed red. Dark, livid and flushed red are colours specifically associated with healthy male characters and I would suggest that where flushed is used it may not necessarily describe the entire mask, but rather could refer to gradation of colour, or additional colour over another hue. This is best illustrated by the hetaira past her prime who has a sallow yet flushed complexion.

As you may observe, there is little attempt at obtaining actual flesh tones for these masks. Rather, we are dealing with quite highly
visible pigments that span a reasonably limited range of hues: white through off-white, pale yellow, sallow, ochre yellow to red and finally to black. And this brings us finally to another possible motivation behind this use of colour for masks.

**The Hippocratic Theory of Humours**

The followers of Pythagoras call the family of colours white, black, red and ochre. And the differences for colours derive from the mixtures of the elements involved.

—Aëtius, (Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*)

I would like to leave you with an interesting proposition regarding the choice of colour for mask in classical theatre performance. This is that mask colours may have provided an audience with effective visual signals beyond those of gender and age. In the Onomasticon the colours employed to describe masks also reflect the Hippocratic theory of the four humours associated in philosophy with the elements and with the types of human temperament. These four humours or personality types are based in the spectrum of black, white, red and ochre and are summarised in Table (1).

On examining these four humours and their corresponding colour associations it becomes abundantly clear that there is
potential here for an additional set of visual clues for an audience seated at a distance from the stage in a large auditorium. Indeed, this idea of human personality based on humours will not have been unknown to Pollux in the 2nd century. In fact, we are aware that such theories did contribute to the comedies of both Menander and of Plautus. Therefore, to apply these ideas to the masks of the Onomasticon is no great leap of logic.

And they do apply. Without much effort it is relatively easy to associate the colours cited by Pollux with the masks he lists. Old men may be dark or pale and therefore could either broadcast a message of irascibleness (black) or dignity (white). Younger men could be volatile and aggressive (ochre), courageous (red) or weak and passive (white). Male servants may be a range of colours, but favour the irascible reds and ochre. Women are predominantly restricted to white and pale hues and therefore convey a notion of passive temperament, but may lean towards colours associated with less self control, such as ochre, sallow, or flushed red.

What this template provides is yet another means for the ancient playwright to give his audience clear visual cues regarding the characters he presents and with these there is scope for combining these cues to create characters of reasonable subtlety and complexity. In this case the mask of a disreputable young man with dark hair and dark complexion could be easily differentiated from that of a delicate young man whose skin was paler and hair was yellow. Perhaps it is reasonable to argue that with these broad colours and exaggerated features masks could be easily manipulated by the ancient dramatist to convey a range of character nuances to his audience.

I would hope that this article has introduced some new perspectives on our current perception of mask in antiquity. It would not be out of place to point out that the foregoing only describes the potential for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Humour</th>
<th>Temperament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Μέλας/black</td>
<td>Μελανχολή/black bile/melancholic</td>
<td>irritable or despondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Λευκός/white</td>
<td>Φλέγμα/phlegm/phlegmatic</td>
<td>calm and unemotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Έρυθρός/red</td>
<td>Αίμα/blood/sanguine</td>
<td>courageous and amorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ωχρός/ochre</td>
<td>Χολή/yellow bile/choleric</td>
<td>bad tempered and easily angered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table (1): The four humours or personality types based in the spectrum of black, white, red and ochre*
visual expression that may be contained in a document on theatrical mask from the 2nd century CE. One can only look at the range of visual examples given here to realise the diversity of masks produced in antiquity. So, rather than considering the nature of masks as static and monochrome, I would advise you to instead shift your focus towards a livelier, meaningful and, most of all, polychromatic image of ancient theatre.

For Further Reading

The English translations of the Greek are the author’s. For lexical citations see the Greek-English Lexicon by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, or the online database: Perseus Digital Library: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection?collection=Perseus:collection:Greco-Roman.


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