

Many masks, many selves

In both real life and mythology, people set out to become other people but, through a kind of triple cross¹ or double-back, end up as themselves, masquerading as other people who turn out to be masquerading as them. Sometimes entire ethnicities indulge in this self-imitation. The inhabitants of places known for their ethnic charm, where tourism has become a major industry, consciously exaggerate their own stereotypes to please the visitors: the British lay on the 'ye olde' with a shovel, the Irish their blarney, the Parisians their disdain for tourists. The politics of colonialism produced another, more serious sort of self-parody, in this case perhaps unconscious: Edward Said wrote of "the paradox of an Arab regarding himself as an

'Arab' of the sort put out by Hollywood. The modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing."² Orientalism, like other forms of political domination, has also inspired what James Scott has taught us to recognize as the arts of resistance, the weapons of the weak,³ which include a kind of apparent self-mockery that actually mocks the mockers. There are so many examples, but in this essay I will consider just those in two broad categories: politics and gender.

Individuals are often driven to self-impersonation through the pressure of public expectations. The sorts of public figures who are nowadays called icons are often famous for nothing but being famous. Politicians, in particular, are

Wendy Doniger, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1989, is Mircea Eliade Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago Divinity School and director of the Martin Marty Center. Among her numerous publications are "Siva: The Erotic Ascetic" (1973), "The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology" (1976), "Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India" (1999), and "The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was" (2005).

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1 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'triple cross' thus: "The act of betraying one party in a transaction by pretending to betray the other, or of betraying a person who has betrayed another." I am paying the word a bit extra, as Humpty Dumpty would say, to extend its meaning to the act of masquerading as a person who has masqueraded as another person.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 325.

3 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

great self-imitators. Hillary Rodham Clinton once reported: "Suddenly a woman came up to me. 'You sure look like Hillary Clinton,' she said. 'So I'm told,' I answered."⁴ And when an actor actually becomes a politician the felonies are compounded. Consider the self-imitation of film actors who play the parts of politicians who then become actors.

When Ronald Reagan auditioned for the role of the president of the United States in the 1960 Broadway production of Gore Vidal's play "The Best Man," about a presidential election, Vidal turned him down because he didn't think Reagan would be believable as the president. When asked about this in 2002, Vidal said, "Reagan was a first-rate actor as a President."⁵

Indeed he was. Lou Cannon, in his aptly named biography, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, tells how, at the June 6, 1984, celebrations on Omaha Beach, commemorating the Normandy invasion, Reagan, who had never been outside of the United States during World War II, "gave the impression of returning to Normandy," to the utter mystification of the other world leaders, including Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, Queen Beatrix I of the Netherlands, and Francois Mitterand, who had actually been captured by the Germans and escaped from a POW camp. (In fact, more recent evidence of Mitterand's connection with Vichy in the early days of World War II indicates that he, too, could turn and turn about.)

4 Hillary Rodham Clinton's first newspaper column, copied in the *New York Times*, July 24, 1995, A10.

5 Interview in *Cape Cod Times*, July 13, 2002, C2. More precisely, in 2002, Vidal said, "Yes, I turned him down on the grounds that he was not right for an Adlai Stevenson-style politician while Melvyn Douglas was. The joke has been refashioned over the years."

Reagan had conjured up this imaginary war record, the film actor playing the part of a real actor in history. Cannon explains how it happened:

Films are real to Reagan. His performance in Normandy recalled the experiences of Captain Reagan – an actor who wore his uniform to work in Culver City, played the lead role in *This Is the Army* and participated in a top-secret project used to train U.S. bombing crews for their destructive raids on Tokyo. As Reagan tells the story, "Our special effects men – Hollywood geniuses in uniform – built a complete miniature of Tokyo"⁶ on a sound stage, above which they rigged a crane and camera mount. They then photographed the miniature, showing the targets as they would look from planes flying at different altitudes and speeds under varying weather conditions. Reagan was the narrator, guiding pilots onto their targets.⁷

This war game, the antecedent of the computer games that children play, enabled pilots, real pilots, to practice their bomb runs on Tokyo – real bomb runs that Hollywood would then reenact in fictionalized films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944). Thus, as Garry Wills argued, Reagan's war service was "based on the principled defense of faking things."⁸

This was Reagan's war. As he told Landon Parvin, "Maybe I had seen too many war movies, the heroics of which I some-

6 Ronald Reagan and Richard G. Hubler, *Where's the Rest of Me? The Autobiography of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Karz Publishers, 1981), 137.

7 Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 485 – 486.

8 Garry Wills, *Reagan's America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 164.

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times confused with real life.”⁹ When Oliver North was exposed and put on trial, Reagan’s comment was, “It’s going to make a great movie.”¹⁰ As an actor, he had helped real fighter pilots bomb a fake Tokyo; as an actor pretending to be a president, walking on a real battlefield with a real war veteran who had become president of France, Reagan could not distinguish his performance in films about World War II from his (nonexistent) performance in World War II. He was narrating the plot of a war film he’d starred in, which – like so much of what passed for his memory – was more real to him than reality, so much simpler, so much more flattering to his vanity.¹¹

Vidal always referred to Reagan as “our acting President,”¹² which became the title of a book about Reagan in which the following anecdote appears: “His entry into politics inspired a famous utterance by his former studio boss Jack Warner. When told that Reagan was run-

ning for governor of California, Warner, always quick to recognize a casting blunder, protested, ‘No, no! Jimmy Stewart for governor, Ronald Reagan for best friend.’”¹³

But something even more invidious was accomplished by Reagan’s impersonation of a president. The masking and unmasking went in both directions, finally exposing not just Reagan but the part he was playing. Because of Reagan, as David Thompson put it, “The fraudulence of the Presidency was revealed so that the office could never quite be honored again.” In retrospect, we saw that other glamorous presidents, like Kennedy, had also been impersonating presidents. And F.D.R.? And Lincoln? Why was the character in *The Truman Show* (about a person whose life is entirely encased within a television serial that he mistakes for real life) named after a president – indeed, a president famous for his blunt honesty and lack of pretensions?

Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California, has been well trained for the part: he starred in three self-imitation movies (*Total Recall*, *True Lies*, and *The Sixth Day*). Many have sighed in relief at the knowledge that, born in Austria, he can’t be president. But here’s an alarming bit of trivia. In the film *Demolition Man* (1993), John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone), who is frozen in a coma in 1996 and thawed out in 2032 (when the movie is set), discovers the Schwarzenegger Presidential Library. He expresses astonishment (perhaps because it is not the Stallone Presidential Library?) that “the actor” could have been president. His colleague (Sandra Bullock) then explains that, even though Schwarzenegger was

9 Cannon, *President Reagan*, 486.

10 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 338.

11 Still more bizarre, but less amusing, is the report that Reagan had told Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, during his November 29, 1983, visit to the White House, and Simon Wiesenthal, on a February 16, 1984, visit, that he had photographed the Nazi death camps. [Cannon, *President Reagan*, 487.] Reagan later denied this story and said merely that he had seen “secret” films of Eisenhower’s visit to the town of Ohrdruf on April 12, 1945, a week after its liberation. In fact, he had seen a film that was widely viewed throughout the United States at that time.

12 Personal communication from Mike Macdonald, September 2002. But Norman Mailer (cited by Alan Brinkley in 1960 – the year that Vidal turned down Reagan) said that Kennedy was the first actor as president.

13 Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), 167.

not born in this country, he was so popular at the time that people passed a “61st Amendment, which states that . . .” – Stallone interrupts her by saying, “I don’t wanna know.”

Out of the mouths of hunks: since Schwarzenegger’s election as governor, there has been a movement to ratify an amendment to the Constitution so that he can run for president, and Schwarzenegger himself has publicly expressed his belief that immigrants should be allowed to run for president. Moreover, in a move eerily reminiscent of Reagan’s old unsuccessful bid for the role of president in Gore Vidal’s play, Schwarzenegger almost failed to be cast in his greatest role, the Terminator, in 1984 because the director, James Cameron, had O. J. Simpson in mind for the part; Simpson lost it to Schwarzenegger, however, because, as Cameron told *Esquire*, “People wouldn’t have believed a nice guy like O. J. playing the part of a ruthless killer.”¹⁴

The implications of this comparative judgment are chilling. So is the further distancing from reality implied in the belief that Schwarzenegger is imitating Reagan (imitating a president): the title of a *New York Times* article about Schwarzenegger’s bid for governor was “An Actor, Yes, but No Ronald Reagan.”¹⁵ This was already an imitation of a well-known joke about Jack Kennedy: The story went that a woman said of every man she slept with, “He’s great, but he’s no Jack Kennedy,” until she finally got to sleep with Kennedy himself and reported, “Great, but no Jack Kennedy.” Lloyd Bentsen may or may not

have had this story in mind in his famous rejoinder to Dan Quayle in Omaha, Nebraska, on October 5, 1988: “Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.” Uncertainty regarding the original date of the anecdote makes it unclear whether the political joke is punning on the sexual, or the sexual on the political.

Bill Clinton’s great contributions to this genre, such as making it X-rated, were capped by the film *Wag the Dog* (1997), in which a president embroiled in a sex scandal deflects public attention from the scandal by selling a fictitious war film to the American people as if it were real news footage of a war against Albania. That film-within-a-film was implicitly cited after September 11 to undercut President Bush’s use of the war and war footage, against first Afghanistan and then Iraq, to avert public unrest at the collapse of the stock market and the failing economy at large. In Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Afghanistan* became the title of a Western movie starring Bush and Cheney. A book about Homeland Security, reviewed under the title “Just Like in the Movies,” details procedures that one reviewer said “lends itself to dramatization at a theater near you,” with “a broad roster of castable characters” and a great deal of fantasy, including a 2002 counterterrorism exercise that involved “over a dozen current and former officials role-playing the president and the National Security Council.”¹⁶ Once faith is shaken, it is hard to keep it out of free fall.

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14 Anthony Lane, “Metal Guru: Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines,” *New Yorker*, July 14 and 21, 2003, 85–86.

15 Dean E. Murphy, “An Actor, Yes, but No Ronald Reagan,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2003, sec. 4, 1.

16 Matthew Brzezinski, *Fortress America: On the Front Lines of Homeland Security – An Inside Look at the Coming Surveillance State* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004); reviewed by Hugh Eakin, “Just Like in the Movies,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 7, 2004, 9.

People can pretend to be their own genders via other genders. A man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man, or a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman, is in double drag – or, as the *New York Times* headline reviewing the 1995 musical *Victor/Victoria* called it, “in Drag, in Drag.” Literature and film abound in such characters: Rosalind pretending to be Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind, in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*; Julie Andrews playing a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman, in the film *Victor/Victoria* (1982); and so many more. Let us here consider two historical figures, the Chevalier d’Eon and Casanova.

In a case from recorded eighteenth-century French history, the Chevalier d’Eon turned out to be a man who pretended to be a transvestite. This is the story:

Once upon a time, more precisely on October 5, 1728, a child named Charles Geneviève Louis Auguste Andréa Thimothée d’Eon, also known as Charles de Beaumont, was born to a low-ranking nobleman in the town of Tonnerre in Burgundy. The child grew up to have a distinguished career as a diplomat and spy and a captain in the dragoons and was honored with the title of Chevalier for his bravery in the Seven Years’ War. In 1770, rumors that he was a woman began to circulate in France and England, and in 1776 Louis XVI officially announced that d’Eon was and had always been a woman. The Chevalière, as she now became known, left France and lived the rest of her life as a woman in London. When she died, on May 21, 1810, it was discovered that she was anatomically male.¹⁷

17 Gary Kates, *Monsieur d’Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

After d’Eon announced that he was a woman, he insisted that he did not want to wear women’s clothing but had the right to wear his dragoon’s uniform. Still wearing men’s clothing in France, apparently concealing but actually revealing his anatomical sex, he encouraged people to conjure up the two negatives that cancelled one another out.

That sexual triple cross explains how d’Eon got away with it. Apparently, as long as no one with any status in Paris had any knowledge of d’Eon’s male anatomy (and the strange thing is that no one apparently did: he was either celibate or very, very careful), he was safe from accusations or rumors from people who had known him in the provinces. (Half of his names are women’s names, but the French *do* that.) He set it up in such a way that he could not lose. He was able to project his fantasies upon the people he fooled without actually changing anything, just making other people imagine him differently.

People later remarked that he had looked more feminine in his uniform than he did later in a dress. Like the fools in the tale of the emperor’s new clothes, who persuaded themselves and one another that they didn’t see the emperor’s nude body, the French courtiers imagined that d’Eon’s ‘invisible’ nude body was what he told them it was (female) and discounted what they actually saw (male). A French humorist once remarked, “Somebody points at a woman and utters a horrified cry, ‘Look at her, what a shame, under her clothes, she is totally naked!’”¹⁸ It’s not that ‘the Chevalier has no clothes’ but, rather, that ‘the Chevalier is naked only beneath

18 Jacques Lacan, citing Alphonse Allais, in his 1986 seminar, “The Ethic of Psychoanalysis.” Cited by Slavoj Žižek, “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 11–54, 28–29.

his clothes.' The Chevalier created a brazened-out social fiction that no one dared to challenge. Even when people noticed that the Chevalière (as she was now called) shaved; had a beard, a voice, and a chest like a man; and urinated standing up, still they went along with it.

One of the players in this drama was Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais, the author of the play *The Marriage of Figaro*, in which the page Cherubino (always played by a woman in Mozart's opera version of the story) is dressed in women's clothing: a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. Beaumarchais not only thought that d'Eon was a woman but spread the rumor that he and d'Eon were in love and contemplating marriage and, later, that d'Eon was trying to marry him. Most significantly, Beaumarchais negotiated the document in which Louis XVI announced that d'Eon was a woman. But the true genre of the work of art that d'Eon made of his life was not opera buffo but myth; he created a myth of his birth and an imaginary childhood. The story he told was the widespread tale of a daughter whose impoverished parents made her dress as a son:

[A]ccording to d'Eon, his father squandered whatever he found in his wife's dowry, and by the mid-1720's was in debt up to his ears. The way out of debt, it turned out, was to have a son. [His mother's] family will stipulated that a large inheritance of some 400 louis would go to the d'Eon family only if [she] had a son Although born female, the new infant was to be raised from the start as a boy Thus according to d'Eon, he was born female, but he never knew what it was like to exist as a girl because from the first breath his family raised him as a son.¹⁹

19 Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman*, 47–48.

The tale of the girl raised as a boy is a story that has been told, and retold, for many centuries in many cultures, ranging from the tale of Amba/Shikhandin in the ancient Indian *Mahabharata* to the plot of the opera *Arabella* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal.²⁰ It is a myth.

The myth of the girl raised as a boy was mistaken for true history not only by d'Eon's acquaintances but also by a contemporary of his who prided himself on his sexual acuity, Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798). In his posthumous memoirs, Casanova describes an encounter with a person named Bellino, who was said to be a castrato and dressed as a man. This is how Casanova describes his reaction to Bellino:

The masculine attire did not prevent my seeing a certain fullness of bosom, which put it into my head that despite the billing, this must be a girl. In this conviction, I made no resistance to the desires which he aroused in me . . . His gestures, the way he moved his eyes, his gait, his bearing, his manner, his face, his voice, and above all my instinct, which I concluded could not make me feel its power for a castrato, all combined to confirm me in my idea.²¹

Because Casanova desired the castrato, he had to persuade himself that the castrato was a girl; he trusted his groin feeling. Later, however, when Casanova thought he saw a tell-tale bulge in Bellino's trousers, he became thoroughly confused. Bellino finally admitted that

20 For Amba/Shikhandin, see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 271–278, 281–286.

21 Casanova, *History of My Life*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), vol. 6, 2, 15–6, 15, 16.

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he was not a castrato after all; he explained the trick, an elaborate sort of padding in the groin, and the reason for it: he was a girl, but his mother had thought it a good plan to continue passing him off as a man, for she hoped she could send him to Rome to sing.²² So Casanova's instincts were right all along; Bellino really was a girl. Or was he? Was Bellino telling the truth?

We can immediately recognize the myth told by the Chevalier (or Chevalière) d'Eon and all the others. We may therefore take seriously the possibility that Bellino was lying when he said he was a girl, taking the old story and pretending that it was the story of his life; that he really was a castrato; and that, therefore, Casanova was wrong. Bellino may have been a boy pretending to be a girl pretending to be a castrato.

In Peking in the 1960s, a popular Chinese opera singer, Shi Peipu, then in his twenties, told the same cock-and-bull story to a gullible young French diplomat, Bernard Boursicot, who was stationed there.²³ As the *New York Times* reported it in 1986, "Mr. Boursicot was accused of passing information to China after he fell in love with Mr. Shi, whom he believed for 20 years to be a woman."²⁴ Shi, who often played women's roles in operas, dressed offstage in public as a man, and at first Boursicot thought Shi was a man. Then Shi told Boursicot that 'she' was born a girl but

22 Ibid., 2.1.17–18, 20.

23 This was the story that inspired David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly*, in 1989 (New York: Plume [Penguin], 1989); see Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 340–342, 370.

24 Richard Bernstein, "France Jails 2 in Odd Case of Espionage," *New York Times*, May 11, 1986, sec. 1, 7.

her mother had pretended she was a boy in order to keep an inheritance that followed the traditional male line, or (in another version) that her mother had told this lie in order to keep her husband from divorcing her after she had produced nothing but girls. And now, Shi argued, "It is far too dangerous, in Mao's China, where men and women are supposed to be equals, to admit that one follows an old, feudal sense of values."²⁵ And so, even when Shi continued to dress as a man, Boursicot thought she was a woman pretending to be a man, when in fact she was a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man.

These are spectacular cases, the stuff that myth is made of, but also the stuff that ordinary people make out of myth. People often triple-cross-dress as their true genders. Men in drag imitate the great sex queens like Mae West, but Mae West (who never wore male drag) became, particularly as she aged, a self-parody, regarded as an imitation of a man imitating her, "the greatest female impersonator of all time."²⁶ When Gloria Steinem was given in 1973 an award from Harvard's Hasty Pudding (which specializes in drag shows), she remarked, "I don't mind drag – women have been female impersonators for some time." And Marjorie Garber comments that transvestism shows us that "all women cross-dress as women when they produce themselves as artifacts."²⁷

25 Joyce Wadler, "The Spy Who Fell in Love With a Shadow," *New York Times Magazine*, August 15, 1993, 30ff.

26 Marjorie Garber, *Vice Versa: The Bisexuality of Everyday Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 150; *ibid.*, 52, citing the journalist George Davis.

27 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 65, 49.

It could be and has been argued that every woman since Pandora has masqueraded as herself, concealing within the deceptive superficial image of a woman the true nature of a woman. A woman who habitually dressed as a man remarked, "I suppose I could wear dresses, but then I think I would just look like a man dressed in drag If I dress up and put on high heels, or make-up, or things like that, they will call me madame. But I'm not going to be a transvestite to myself." And the woman who interviewed her and other women who dressed as men, comments, "One is left wondering whether these women believed that average women, in the course of their normal everyday lives, look like transvestites and prostitutes Sadly, their view of 'typical females' was tainted by misogyny."²⁸ Or, I would say, by a certain sort of mythology.

What do these stories, both historical and mythological, tell us? We assume that masquerades lie, and they often do, at least on the surface. But masquerading as ourselves often reaffirms an enduring network of selves inside us, which does not change even if our masquerades, intentional or helpless, make us look different to others. Erving Goffman speaks of "the field of public life," wherein our public self must play its part, versus a place "backstage," where the individual can relax before having to put on the theatrical persona.²⁹ Goffman assumes

28 Holly Devor, *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 128, 130.

29 Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press, 1963), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

that the private self is unmasked, that we are most genuinely ourselves when alone, an assumption I do not share. Rather, I think, we are never ourselves merely to ourselves but always in relation to others, even if only imagined others. Like Bishop Berkeley's tree in the quad, we exist only when someone sees us.

We become the person we see mirrored in the eyes of others, ideally someone we love or someone who loves us. The eponymous hero of Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) becomes black when he is with black people, fat when he is with fat people, and so on, because each individual calls up a response from that same aspect inside him. Zelig does, in an exaggerated form, what we all do all the time: we censor our language in one way when we talk with children, in another when we speak with more formal, older people, and so forth. But all of these really are our own ways of speaking; we simply choose the mask that matches the mask of the person we're trying to please. We need an audience to play out the self and a mask to give us that refreshed, vivid sense of self that is inspired by actively playing a role, the frisson of the masquerade. Moreover, we project what we regard as our best self to the world. Upward hypocrisy³⁰ can be a very good thing.

We wear a mask because we feel vulnerable and, paradoxically, want to attract the one person who will love us as we are without our mask. But this is a double bind. Instead, I think, we often fall in love with the people who love, among our many masks, the mask that we too love best, feel happiest in – the self that we prefer to pretend to be. And our touchstones may not be human be-

30 This is Wayne Booth's excellent term; personal communication, June 2002.

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ings: I agree with the bumper sticker that said, “I want to be the person my dog thinks I am.”

The bizarre historical episodes that embody the myths of self-imitation tell us that each of us has several selves, several personae, whether or not we are aware of more than one of them. And so when, failing to be the other person we hoped to change into, we fall back to our default position, we may find a different form of our many selves awaiting us. We are imprisoned in our self, but it is a very big prison. When we put on a mask we have a choice, like Lon Chaney, of a thousand faces, and in a sense they are all our own.

Nowadays an attractive young professional woman will wear one mask when she wants to attract men and a very different one when she applies for a job in a male-dominated field, not to mention the ones that she wears with her children or with her mother. There are limits: we cannot, perhaps, choose to be Einstein or Marilyn Monroe. On the other hand, there are people who believe we can only choose to be either Jekyll or Hyde – but I think there is a little more wiggle room in there.

Some stories begin and end with the relatively simple assumption that the mask is false and the face underneath it real. Never venturing beyond this first level, these stories give us a happy ending: we find the true self, take off the mask, and all ends well – or not so well, as in the case of Oedipus. Others turn this assumption on its head and argue that the mask is what is true, the face underneath it false. In either case, the stories that assume a mere duality of selves – self versus mask – imagine pairs that are mutual referents of one another, such as two genders or nature/art, nature/culture, yin and yang. The polarized variants are fairly easy to play with:

Jekyll to Hyde, Communist to anti-Communist, virgin to whore.

But even the dualistic toggle, if it happens more than once, destabilizes the dualistic paradigm, so that Rosalind plucks out one of her selves as Rosalind, then another as Rosalind-as-Ganymede, and still another as Rosalind-as-Ganymede-as-Rosalind. The copy of the copy produces an infinite regress once we break out of the simple dualism of surface and depth and acknowledge the equal authenticity of each version of the text. And some stories reject the ultimate reality of the mask or of the face beneath it and move on to more complex insights.

We see in them an implicit belief in a single self that is revealed and concealed in intricate ways, but we also see glimpses of dual and, occasionally, even multiple authentic selves. Such stories break open the theme of single identity to reveal an infinite possibility of variations, an infinite regress (*mise en abîme*, or endless displacement) implicit in any narrative in which x imitates y while y imitates x, and so forth.

Many films mock multiple identities, often through the use of a hall of mirrors. Groucho Marx encounters multiple Grouchos in the famous mirror scene in *Duck Soup* (1933). There are multiple Ginger Rogerses in *Shall We Dance?* (Mark Sandrich, 1937), multiple Rita Hayworths in the mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), and multiple (but different) Leslie Carons in *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), a film in which Oscar Levant (whose 1990 autobiography was entitled *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*) fantasizes that he is the pianist, the conductor, all the members of the orchestra, and all the members of the audience, all of whom are the same. In John McTier’s 1999 remake of *The Thomas Crown*

Affair (already a double of the 1968 version with Steve McQueen), Pierce Brosnan outfoxes the police by hiding in plain sight as a man in a bowler hat straight out of a Magritte painting – surrounded by hundreds of other men wearing Magritte bowler hats. In *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), Malkovich (playing Malkovich) goes through the portal that puts him inside his own mind, and finds himself in a dining room in which everyone is wearing his face and saying only “Malkovich Malkovich Malkovich.” There are also multiple doubles of Jack Nicholson in a theatrical number staged in *Something’s Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers, 2003).

Since we do have multiple masks, personae, selves within us, how foolish we are to tell lies in order to preserve the one mask that we think is really us and/or should be perceived as. Many people cling to the old dualistic model of the self and the mask. The fanatical belief that I am (only) the new I, the now I, makes it impossible to keep, let alone to cherish, so much as a hair of the head of the then I, the old I. As Oliver says of himself in *As You Like It* (4.3), “’Twas I; but ’tis not I. I do not shame to tell you what I was, since my conversion so sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.”

Disdain of the old I is common among the old Communists who became rabid anti-Communists when they were disillusioned by Stalin, and also among people who clean up some particularly messy aspect of their lives with such monomania that they hate their former partners, the people who knew them when. Such people seem to fear that they will turn into pillars of salt if they so much as glance back at their former selves. This self-loathing is shared by the sort of scholars who renounce the work, often extremely good work, they did under the influence of other scholars who

later turned out to have the wrong sort of politics – the deconstructionist Paul de Man, the Indo-Europeanist Georges Dumézil, the psychologist C. G. Jung.

A very different problem is posed by people who suffer from multiple-personality (or borderline-personality) disorders, like those of the woman whose story was told in *The Three Faces of Eve* (Nunnally Johnson, 1957) or the people described in the aptly named book *Lost in the Mirror*:³¹ people who have so many selves that they have no abiding sense of self, who feel hollow inside, all mask and no stable self. It is, of course, notoriously difficult to draw an objective line between healthy (rather than merely culturally accepted) and pathological fantasies. But I would venture to suggest that in the stories of pathological multiple selves, the multiplicity is experienced passively, helplessly, and with that special terror that Freud called “the uncanny” (*Unheimlich*), the feeling that one is lost in the maze of selves. Involuntary masks are also imposed by race and gender, not to mention the masks our parents bequeath to us, often simultaneously making us incapable of wearing them.

By contrast, the people who actively and knowingly accumulate all their former selves, who don’t kill off their past selves, believe that all their selves are them, even though all selves are not created equal. The more cohesive the sense of perduring personal identity, the more freedom one feels to choose to don masks and delve into past selves. (This self-conscious switching of masks has the incidental advantage of allowing you to console yourself with the memory of

31 Richard Moskowitz, *Lost in the Mirror: An Inside Look at Borderline Personality Disorder* (Dallas: Taylor Publications, 2001). The foreword is by Chris Costner Sizemore, author of *I’m Eve*, the source of *The Three Faces of Eve*; see Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 79 – 84.

*Many masks,
many selves*

one self when you're not doing so well in another. When I lived in England I rode to hounds, badly, and taught Indian history, also badly. As I picked myself up out of the mud in the hunting field, watching the others soar over the fence, I would mutter to myself, "Well, I'd like to see some of *them* translate Sanskrit," and among my more erudite Indologist colleagues I'd think to myself, "Well, catch one of them doing a change of legs at the canter.")

The healthy sense of an enduring self who does not lock the other selves up can be maintained by a kind of Wittgensteinian family resemblance – a polythetic cluster of resembling selves, none of which is essential but some combination of which, a kind of critical mass or minyan, is sufficient to create an enduring sense of self. Or one might see it as a kind of Venn diagram made into a Zen diagram: intersecting rings with no single center, not an empty ring in the center, but no central ring. The multiple forms or layers of the self are all somehow alike and all somehow different.

Thomas Hobbes described this sort of composite self in his famous image of the ship:

When a man is grown from an infant to an old man, though his matter be changed, yet he is still the same numerical man; for that identity, which cannot be attributed to the matter, ought probably be ascribed to the form For if, for example, that ship of Theseus, concerning the difference whereof made by continual reparation in taking out the old planks and putting in the new, the sophisters of Athens were wont to dispute, were, after all the planks were changed, the same numerical ship it were at the beginning; and if some man had kept the old planks as they were taken out, and by afterwards putting them to-

gether in the same order, had again made a ship of them, this without doubt, had also been the same numerical ship with that which was in the beginning; and so there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd.³²

So the trick is to convert the dualistic paradigm into the open-ended, multiple model by decentering the conventions of the self, which is what masquerading does. It reveals a complex subjectivity/objectivity that allows paradox to thrive, the truth that we both love and hate, both know and do not know.

There's a natural human tendency to search for a real self, a center, but I think that's the coward's way out. As we go deeper and deeper through the alternating layers of masks and faces, we never reach a monolithic core. Putting on a mask gets us closer to one self and farther from another, and so does taking off the mask. Since every lie covers up a truth, a series of masks passes through a series of lies and truths. Perhaps, then, the best bet is to wear as many as possible, realize that we are wearing them, and try to find out what each one conceals and reveals. As we strip away masks, or faces, each time, we see more in the hall of looking glasses. If we just stand there with our unconscious masks on our faces, like egg in the saying, we never learn anything about the selves.

Mary McCarthy once said, "It's absolutely useless to look for [the self], you won't find it, but it's possible in some sense to make. I don't mean . . . making a mask . . . but you finally begin . . . to make and to choose the self you want."³³ This

32 Thomas Hobbes, *De Corpore*, in Sir William Molesworth, ed., *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 1 (London: J. Bohn, 1839), 132, 136.

33 Cited as the frontispiece to Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

nice distinction between self and mask is hard to call. The stories with the double twist bring us back to the position where we don't seem to have a mask, which is where most people think they are all the time. But the memory of the double journey out and in, unsettling the assumption that we are either masked or unmasked, reminds us that we are never unmasked. The attendant who demonstrates oxygen masks on airplanes before take-off used to promise, "An attendant will tell you when it is safe to take off your mask" – but no one ever does. For most of us, it is never really safe, or true, or possible, to take off the mask. We prefer, rather, merely to glimpse the reality in the mask. We need our masks.

If we always tried to be one single self, without our masks, the world would grind to a halt. With them, the world proceeds from self to self.

*Many
masks,
many
selves*