Between Face and Faceless: Meanings of Masks in Greek Antiquity and Romanian Folklore

Sorana-Cristina Man
National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Romania

Dr. Sorana-Cristina Man is specialized in Classics, with a thesis on Greek Tragedy published in 2020 at Cambridge Scholars Publishing. She has been a researcher at the University of Bucharest and works as an editor at the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Correspondence: sorana.man@gmail.com

Man, Sorana-Cristina. 2026. "Between Face and Faceless: Meanings of Masks in Greek Antiquity and Romanian Folklore." *Martor* 31, 113-25. [DOI 10.57225/martor.2026.31.07].

ABSTRACT

In Romanian folklore there are masks for the spirits of the dead (such as the *Moșii* and *Uncheșii* of Nereju), whereas in Greek folklore, the face and the mask are both conflicting with death.
The deceased lacks a prosopon in either sense of the term ("face" or "mask"), both in life and after death. While still on earth, his face is at once covered: to see another clearly in the sunlight presupposes mutual visibility, and death terminates this reciprocal visual relationship. In Hades, too, he has no prosopon: Ulysses calls the shades he encounters there *karena*, "heads," not *prosopa*.
A word that expresses sight, a link between "to see" and "to say," *prosopon* also implies being seen. For the Greeks, the mask is *prosopon*, it is that which stands before the eyes and has eyes, it is the face. The Romanian mask, on the other hand, seems rather to have inherited the Latin *persona*, which has emerged from the dark world of Persephone. The Greek mask, endowed with sight and meant to be seen, like the face with which it is confused, exists only in the light of day, only in its relation to the gaze directed upon it, to the other *prosopon*.
Are the two types of masks, the Romanian and the Greek, fundamentally different, or is there something that links them? If such a relationship exists, is it best understood as historical, as anthropological, or as grounded in a shared sensibility that links the two mentalities?

KEYWORDS

Mask; face; *prosopon; persona;* Greek mythology.

Dionysus and the mask

The mask, be it a part in ritual, theatrical, votive, cultic or funerary attire, has played a decisive role in the mentality of archaic and classical Greek antiquity, which it has shaped and has been shaped by. The masks visible today in European history and archaeological museums are overwhelmingly Roman imperial productions. No original Greek theatrical masks survive, since they were made of light, perishable materials such as linen, leather, and wood (Pickard-Cambridge 1968, 179; Webster 1970, 37-8). What do survive are Roman terracotta, stone, and marble objects—figurines, reliefs, and decorative pieces—that represent or imitate Greek theatrical masks rather than being the actual masks used in classical Greek performance (Bieber 1961, 89-92; Green 1994, 23-5).

The origin of the Greek mask is intrinsically linked to the figure of the god Dionysus: it appeared as a form of celebration of the god and as an object of worship that allowed his followers to get closer to him. Before becoming a tangible object, the mask had its origins in the smearing of grapes during the Dionysian festivals, representing a transformation, a splitting and an embrace of otherness, a liberation of the self from the rigours of reality in order to get closer to the god. Once theatre appeared, many tragic poets used mythological subjects as sources of inspiration, appealing to the cultural identity of the audience and representing elements of social and emotional cohesion (Cassidy 1991, 26) which triggered, above all, collective memory. The theatrical mask had the role of simulating the presence of one of the gods or heroes on stage, transporting the spectator *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1963, 11), so that they could be imbued with a sense of belonging to a glorious past and to a certain community. The Greek theatre thus reflects a desire to create a link between the human and divine worlds, but especially between the past, present and future.

Eliade (2000), Tailor-Perry (2003), Ridgeway (1910) and other researchers believe that Dionysus is a deity of Thracian origin, worshipped by the tribe of *satyrs,*[1] who practised orgiastic rituals. The laxity of social constraints would be an argument in favour of establishing the main Dionysian sanctuary in the area of Thrace.[2] Ridgeway uses Aristotle's view of imprinting the figures of gods with human qualities and defects to treat with irony the connection between the excess of freedom offered by the cult of Dionysus and the social mores of these Thracian populations. The orgiastic celebrations were, however, linked to vegetation rituals, Dionysus being a god of vegetation. At the beginning of the 20th century, such fertility festivals, which included ancient Dionysian elements, were still being organised every spring in communities in Turkey and Bulgaria (Dawkins 1906). The community members who performed the spectacle (the *kalogeroi*[3]) wore goat skin on their heads, stuffed so that it rose 20-30 cm above the head. This apparel covered their face and head like a mask; round holes were cut out for their eyes and mouth; one of the two masked men carried a wooden phallus in his hand. Together with other costumed characters, the *kalogeroi* went from house to house, knocking on doors with the aforementioned phallus; they were rewarded with cheese, eggs, or money. In the afternoon, they staged an imitation of a death and resurrection story alluding to the killing of Dionysus by the Titans.[4] The Thracians celebrated such plant rituals related to Dionysus, and these traditions, including the mask wearing, were perpetuated in Greek, Turkish and Bulgarian communities. They still exist today, having been modified in accordance with the Christian religion.

During the Dionysian festivals, in the frenzy caused by the high wine intake, believers, shedding their usual clothes and constraints, surrounded themselves with symbols such as vines and ivy or wore goatskin masks and staged symbolic deaths and resurrections. Theatrical death, in turn, substituted individual death, the hero confronted the world beyond in the presence and with the help of the spectators, the sacrifice was rendered by theatrical means, and thus a form of *catharsis* was produced that applied to the entire assembly present. The evolution of the mask took place alongside that of theatre, but it is not known whether it originated in theatre plays from the Dionysian ritual or whether it was introduced only as a necessary prop in the presentation of dramatic action.

The Dionysian world, populated by *maenads,*[5] satyrs, dancing men, and animals, is linked to the idea of the Stranger, who comes from the wilderness that lies at the edge of the human world. Thus, the orderly human world has access, through Dionysus, to the surrounding wilderness (Isler-Kerenyi 2009, 61-72).

There has been much talk on the transformation experienced by the actor wearing the mask, which gives him not only the feeling of closeness to the god or of being possessed

by him, but also the power to possess someone else in his turn (Csapo 2010). This is how access to a new and unknown world takes place, and simultaneously a warning about how small mankind is in the face of death and of the supernatural. The mask is therefore closely connected to the experience of possession and otherness.

For the Greeks, performances took place outdoors, and the mask was the most effective way to induce a sense of the theatre's presence. Meineck (2011) argues that the mask was attached with the help of a soft cap, called *sakkos,*[6] to which hair and facial hair were attached, as appropriate, but draws attention to the small, though wide-open mouth, which excludes previous theories about the inclusion of a device for voice propagation in masks. The features of the mask were naturally complemented by a play of shadows to give the impression that the mask was changing its expression, just as in Japanese Noh theatre.[7] Different expressions can be observed depending on the angle at which the mask is tilted, expressions that can vary from joy to sadness. The tragic mask had a fierce look, the actor's voice resounded through the wide-open mouth, and a conical part called *onkos*[8] was added to the forehead to make the character more imposing (Haigh 1907, 152). The masks were made of wool, cork or wood.

The myth of Dionysus' birth and death indicates an existence at the extremes of suffering, like human existence itself. In Thebes, there is a cult of Semele (the god's mother), where his apparition and the return of his mother from the realm of the dead are celebrated. In such celebrations, the emphasis is on the resurrection of Semele. They are found in several areas of Greece, including Delphi, being associated everywhere with her divine son (Otto 1965). Both in myth and in cult, the mother becomes immortal through her son. The death and dismemberment of the god, recurrent in the myths about Dionysus, are linked to the symbol of the phallus. The attention paid to the genitals is also found in the myths of deities such as Osiris, Attis, Adonis and others, being linked to the process of fertilisation. Dionysus's phallus is carried by believers in processions as a sign of the intimate connection between death and reproduction. Through death, the god becomes a scapegoat for the sins of the entire community, and the supreme sacrifice he makes brings the promise of new life (Leeming 1998). With the appearance of the mask, transfiguration was taken to another level: not only did the god and, later, other mythical creatures communicate with mortals through it, but the mortals also tried to communicate with the deities in this way. Through dances and songs, *the Liberator* (*Lysios*, another name of Dionysus) transformed the rigid into the flexible, breaking the chains of ordinary order and the barriers that separate the human world from the invisible aspects of everyday life and divinity.

Friedrich Nietzsche (2024) sees in the Dionysian experience the event that renews the connection between nature, whether wild or tamed, and people. This form of communion with the mythical realm entails an intrusion of the sacred into the profane, an alteration of the state of affairs characteristic of mortals, which culminated in a revelation that temporarily transformed the individual. The celebration of Dionysus was a rite of passage, during which the participant was initiated not only into the mysteries of the cult, but also into those of their own individuality, into the hidden recesses of the Self.

Dionysus represents a boundary between the life and death of the individual, but also between the disappearance of a temporary instance of the Self and the rebirth of a new one, or the same one as before, but deeply enriched by the contact with the sacred. Between man and divinity, he is somewhere in the middle, a stranger and a wanderer between the two realms, as well as between the different Greek cities. Impossible to limit to a single attribute, to a single valence, he was compared by the Greeks both to the other gods and to themselves as mere humans. Dionysus is life and death at the same time, both of humans and of vegetation. Not only does he symbolise the opposites, but he also bridges them. There were

representations of him alongside Hades himself. In a play by Aeschylus, *Sisyphus*, the name Zagreus borne by Dionysus refers to the lord of the underworld, and in another play by the same author, *Aigyptioi*, the term refers to a son of Hades identified with Dionysus (Seaford 2006). According to Heraclitus, Hades and Dionysus are similar in the principle of the unity of opposites.

A means of imitation, but also of concealment, the mask is at the origin of the concept of *mimesis*, the basis of religious processions and, later, of the dances and performances that took place in honour of the god. Imitating the divine figure in the form of a mask is also a way of evoking an archetype, a hero or even a danger, divine or human, which must be avoided.

The participant in the ritual and the actor are receivers of divine inspiration, imbued with a form of magic, driven by complete faith (Seaford 2006), and so the mask is the source of acquiring a ritualistic power. The effect of the mask persists in time, awakening memories of the character embodied, leading to the creation of a mental bridge across space and time. This effort requires the total commitment of the actor, who must step outside the boundaries of the self and abandon themselves to the character they are playing. By participating in the myth, the spectator steps out of everyday life and escapes mortality, as the performance brings together myth and everyday reality.

The mask allows one to conjure images. It hides or substitutes a presence, either by hiding the actor behind the character, or by substituting the presence of the mythical hero among people. It also opens the way to immortality for both the character and the actor, thus becoming a necessary object in a rite of passage. The mask reveals the existence of a secondary reality, often preferable to everyday reality and considered much more truthful.

While facilitating the assumption of another identity, the mask restricts the wearer, making them feel controlled by forces greater than themselves (Grimes 1992). By changing the expression of the mask following the actor's movements, the viewer seeks to interpret it and superimpose a certain meaning on it. The tragic mask did not display a fixed or neutral image. Instead, it gave the actor strong control over the transmission of emotions, by associating movements with music, text and song, arousing deeply personal responses in the mind of the viewer. Thus, the mask would be more powerful than an actor's real face because it constantly changed before the audience's eyes and elicited profound emotional responses from each individual (Meineck 2011).

In an undefined space, not isolated from the surrounding environment, the mask attracts the attention of spectators and stimulates a strong personal reaction, because it demands to be seen. The success of ancient theatre was based on a symbiosis between mask, text, movement and song, underpinned by the human instinct to associate movement with emotion, while wearing a mask deprived the actors of their peripheral vision. They were therefore forced to develop that instinct, thereby increasing the emotional response of the audience. In this way, the mask allowed the audience to contemplate and accept emotions at a much higher level than they would normally.

The main types of masks used by the Greeks. To see and to be seen

Designed for contact, communication and dialogue, both verbal and visual, the ritual mask of the Greeks could take the form of a goat, bear or pig head, referring to hybrid, fantastical creatures, such as the mask worn by participants in some religious ceremonies; but there

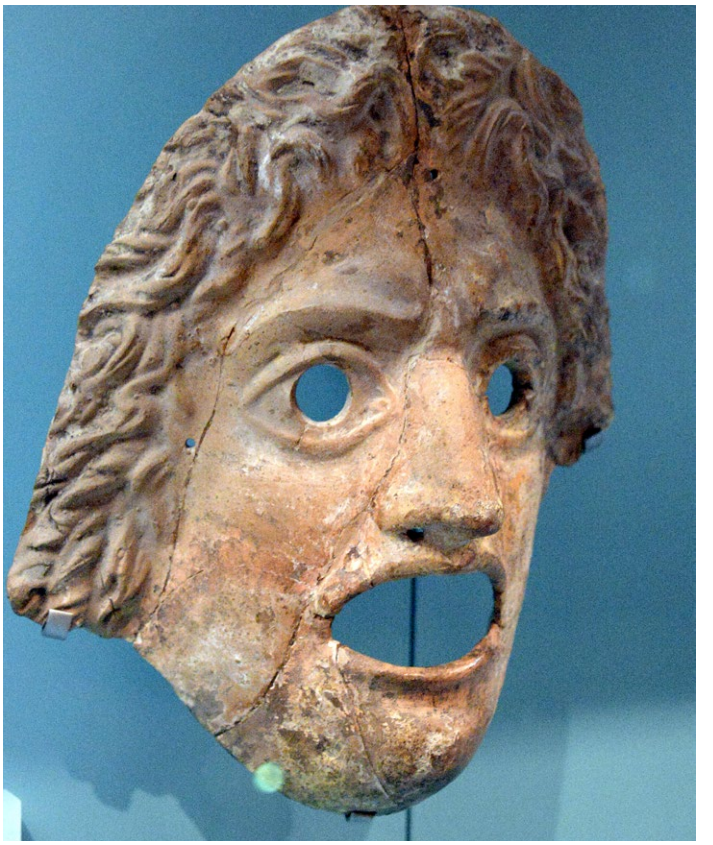
have also been documented ritual masks of warriors, young men and men wearing helmets (such as those on display at the museum in Sparta), old men and women, wrinkled and toothless, satyrs—both ritual and theatrical masks—or Gorgons. The mask is designated in Greek by the term *prosopon*[9] and its derivative *prosopeion*[10] is used only for theatrical and ritual masks. Two other terms, less common and with a more specialised meaning, are *gorgoneion*[11] and *mormolykeion.*[12] Decorative or cult masks are also called *prosopa*.

A mask from Syracuse (Sicily) made of fired clay in the 6th-5th century BC (Frontisi-Ducroux 2012), can serve as a tangible starting point in demonstrating the reciprocal nature of sight according to the Greeks and the incompatibility of both the face and the mask with the lack of mutual sight. Without colours, without the wig that covered it, the mask highlights the organs of sight and speech. All its orifices (mouth, eyes and nostrils) are widely perforated, necessary with the masks worn by actors, while the Roman replicas have different characteristics: some have pierced eyes and a closed mouth, others the opposite, and others have no openings at all. Sometimes the eyes are endowed with pupils and a gaze.

For the Greeks, the mask is *prosopon*, it is what stands before the eyes and has eyes, it is a face. If *prosopon* is the term for all other types of masks (except funerary ones, as we shall see), the Gorgon mask is designated by the term *gorgoneion*, which, unlike *prosopon*, is not a visual term, but an auditory one: the reduplication of *gr* suggests, in infantile language, through the sounds coming from the throat, the approach of a terrifying monster that devours. The name Gorgon evokes, through its phonemes, the various noises of mythical creatures, especially those at the moment of Medusa's death: blood gurgles from the severed artery, her mourning sisters grind their teeth, their jaws clatter, and furious moans and mutterings can be heard along with the hissing of the snakes in their hair. All this serves as a sound backdrop for the appearance of the term *gorgoneion*, suggestive of the monster's terrifying throat.

In the *Iliad*, on Athena's shield, ready for battle, there is not a *gorgoneion*, but a *gorgeie kephale*, "Gorgonian head," an expression referring to the severed head that Perseus offered to the goddess. In the *Odyssey*, the same expression is used to designate the object of Ulysses fear, which would have petrified him at the edge of Hades. Gorgo is, therefore, the property of Persephone, who uses it as a terrifying weapon to prevent the living from entering her realm. Due to its ugliness and lethal power, this deformed monster is inaccessible to the sight of mortals, whom it kills with its gaze. That is why the face of the Gorgon cannot and is never called *prosopon*: it cannot stand before the eyes, and no one can stand before her eyes. The impossibility of encountering the Gorgon translates, on a linguistic level, into an impossibility of describing her clearly. No Greek text gives a complete description of the Gorgon. Her featureless, amorphous, monstrous face, which kills with its appearance and gaze, surrounded by snakes, haunting the borders of Hades, her severed head or *gorgoneion* are rendered only through vague or allusive descriptions.

Mormolykeion, in turn, is defined as "a mask meant to frighten": tragic or comic, ugly and misshapen, it is named after the bugbear Mormo,[13] also a word that is more sonorous, than visual. If *Gorgo* had its origin in the throat and even in the noises of the digestive system, *Mormo* comes from the mouth and the edge of the lips, being formed identically, through expressive reduplication. It expresses a mixture of confusing noises and mutterings capable of arousing fear, designating the disturbing murmurs and deafening creaks that announce the appearance of ghosts. These are the masks with which children were frightened. Mormo has a less well-defined face than Gorgo, and it was easier for adults to joke about her. *Mormolykeion* was, however, sometimes used euphemistically for *gorgoneion* and is linked to the Dionysian universe, to his companions, the *satyrs* and *sileni,*[14] who embody the laughable



Greek theater mask, 2nd or 1st century BCE. National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh. Wikimedia Commons, online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greek_theater_mask,_from_Greece,_2nd_or_1st_century_BCE._National_Museum_of_Scotland,_Edinburgh.jpg.

Greek Tragedy Theatre Mask, Possibly by Silanion, 4th century BCE. (Archaeological Museum of Piraeus). Online at: https://www.worldhistory.org/image/3701/greek-tragedy-theatre-mask/.

but also hideous aspects of the Dionysian world. The hypothesis that they were masks of *satyrs* and *sileni* cannot be ruled out.

As for the gold foil funeral masks of the Mycenaean kings, these are supposed to be much older than the Greeks, being attested in the Archaic and Classical periods only on the periphery of the Greek world. The Greeks said nothing about them, as they could not see or even name the faces of the dead (*Idem, ibidem*). Polybius calls the funeral masks of the Romans *prosopa*, *imagines maiorum*, worn in Rome at the funerals of aristocrats. Modelled from a wax impression of the deceased's face and then painted, they were carried in the procession by figures who resembled the deceased in stature, appearance and clothing. They had a cap and wig, just like the theatrical ones, which is why Polybius calls them *prosopa*, but they did not cover the face of the deceased. There is no word for the latter in Greek. We are therefore dealing with a refusal to think about and name the faces of the dead.

If *prosopeion* competes with *prosopon* only to designate ritual or theatrical masks, for the others only *prosopon* is used. Decorative masks, those on vessels or furniture, as well as cult masks are called *prosopa*. The only term designating a mask that can never be replaced by *prosopon* is *gorgoneion*.

Persona (Latin for *mask*) was long understood by the Romans as "that thing through which sound is emitted" (*per-sonare*), i.e. a megaphone, thus having a sonic origin (somewhat similar to *gorgoneion* and *mormolykeion*, even if not onomatopoeic). Today, its etymology is linked to the Etruscan Phersu (see Frontisi-Ducroux, 2012), an infernal demon whose name is associated with Persephone, queen of the dead, and Perseus, both holders of the Gorgon's head. Therefore, for the Latins, the mask is an infernal power that has emerged from the world of darkness, the invisible and the amorphous, the world without faces.

Prosopon means "what we put in front of the eyes of others." The face is what can be seen. For Aristotle, the name *prosopon* comes from its function: the human being is the only being that stands upright and therefore looks straight ahead and speaks with their face forward, and, as Frontisi-Ducroux points out, this gives the term an active value. *Pros-opon*, however, means what is in front of the eyes of the other, in front of the eyes of a viewer. It requires a viewer, so its first value is passive. *Prosopon* is not perceived as a distinct unit, located somewhere in the body, but as a set of elements that offer themselves to the gaze. Hence the plural, *ta prosopa* (features), is found in Homer more often than the singular. For the Greeks, seeing is not separate from *being seen*. *Ops* designates both the function of sight and appearance, being sometimes the subject and sometimes the object of sight, for the eye is both transmitter and receiver, active and passive at the same time. By the simple fact of being seen, *prosopon* becomes what it sees.

If we close the eyes of the dead in order to expose them to the gaze of those around them, the Greek reciprocity between *seeing* and *being seen* requires that their face be immediately covered, so that it becomes invisible when their gaze fades. The fact that the dead no longer have a face is perfectly reflected in language, for the face of the dead is no longer called *prosopon*. Life is defined by the clear sight of daylight and other human beings, and the interruption of mutual visual relations announces and signifies death.

For ancient Greeks, the face does not conceal, hide, or close anything; it does not veil the mysteries of inner life, like in our case. On the contrary, it expresses and reveals, it is the mirror of an outward-looking personality. Similarly, the mask does not hide the face it covers, according to Frontisi-Ducroux (2012, 79). It abolishes and replaces it. Under the dramatic mask, the actor's face does not exist, and their individuality, which the face revealed, has given way to that of the character they embody. The same is true of the practitioner of a ritual. The tragic actor, like the celebrant of a ritual, performed a liturgical function: he was

the vocal or voiceless animator of the costume he wore and of the hero he brought back to life. The mask did not hide; on the contrary, it designated and signalled the hero it brought back to life. In this sense, it was a mouthpiece. Linguistically, the expression *hypo tou prosopou* ("under the mask") is not attested, because it could also mean "under the face," which is nonsense for a Greek. Besides that, in iconography, on Attic vases, the mask worn is not marked by any demarcation line, the face hidden under it cannot be guessed. It no longer exists as *prosopon* because it is no longer visible, but has been replaced by the new *prosopon*. Unlike Greek masks, Roman masks, with perforated holes, appear in opposition to the face, as indicated by the Eros figures on sarcophagi, with the face of a child hidden under huge, distorted masks of tragedy (*Ibidem*). The reason for this difference in figurative terms would be the linguistic distinction between *persona*, on the one hand, and *vultus*[15] or *facies,*[16] on the other. The two notions are autonomous, because the Romans thought of them together but distinct, superimposed.

The multiple meanings that *prosopon* came to have evolved from face and mask to character, then to role, from there to personality and, finally, to individual and person. The mask is thus the intermediary between face and character. The meaning of "character" could stem from the oral recitation of epic texts, whose representation already involved a form of performance, with movements and dances, gestures and even facial expressions. Therefore, the importance of the mask in the evolution of the meanings of *prosopon* cannot be appreciated as being too significant because very early on, *prosopon* began to mean "individual," the face being what identifies each human being.

Persona, which meant "mask" in Etruscan, already meant "character" when it was introduced into Latin, at a time when Roman theatre did not use masks, while *prosopon*, whose primary meaning is "face," became "character" based on "face" and not on "mask."

Masks among Romanians: similarities and differences

As with other peoples, the archaic Romanian mask[17] allows its wearer to identify with their ancestor or their tribe, defined as a supernatural being. Therefore, masks can be anthropomorphic or zoomorphic (but there are also phytomorphic masks), sometimes fantastic, always endowed with supernatural powers. Rituals with masks, processions with dances and songs were linked to vegetal, cosmogonic and astrological rites, such as *Dragobete night,*[18] *Saint Toader's Day,*[19] *Blajini Sunday*[20] or Pentecost. Romanian masks can be made of cardboard or paper, straw, wood, feathers, textiles, leather or fur, rubber, metal, reeds, tin foil, mirrors, beads, bells, horsehair, boar teeth, sequins, beans, practically from anything.

The libertine language, licentious expressions and gestures, and phallic symbols found in Greek masked rituals or in the Roman Saturnalia and Lupercalia are also found in numerous Romanian folk dances with masks. In the *Călușarii* of Muntenia, the *Mute*, who at the end of the 19th century wore a mask of an old man, a goat, a stork or a heron, has a representation of a horse phallus hanging from his belt, with which he touches women to ensure their fertility. In the masked games at wakes, once widespread in Moldova, Maramureș and Oltenia, the group of masked people make obscene gestures and jump over the embers, which is a manifestation of vitality and aims to ensure fertility. The text to which the goat from Nereju dances is also peppered with licentious expressions, which are part of the ritual of renewal of time and nature. The other masked figures (wearing masks of old men, old women and

Mutul [The Mute], the masked character of the *Căluș* ritual in Bârla village (Argeș county), 2014. Credit photo: Anamaria Iuga.

devils) make indecent gestures. The same thing happens in the New Year's masked games in Ostra, Suceava.

Just as the Greeks covered the face of the dead, who could no longer be seen by the living because they could no longer see them, in Romania, the faces of monks are covered with an embroidered veil when they are placed in the coffin, even though they can still be called "faces" (*chipuri*). In Gorj, the "eye cloth" with which the dead are covered is still preserved, a remnant of the funeral shirt mask, a means of defence against the evil power of surrounding corpses and the spirits of the deceased. In fact, the mask is present in moments of rupture in Romanian life: the face of the newborn is smeared with ashes or mud, that of the bride is covered with a veil, and that of the dead, during the night, with a white cloth. The child is "masked" until its consecration as a human being through baptism, being disputed, until then, by people and unclean spirits. The bride undergoes a transition from maidenhood to wifehood, a transition fraught with unimaginable dangers. The dead person is also ambiguous, as he belongs, for a time, to both realms. These hidden faces represent three cases of extreme masking. Similarly, the white veil covering the faces of the *Călușari* mummers, as described by Dimitrie Cantemir in *Descriptio Moldaviae* (Nicolau *et al.* 2002), symbolises the power of the unexpressed, which can be anything and nothing. In these cases, we are dealing with a temporary return to non-existence, in order to then acquire a new being. As can be seen, masks appear among Romanians at all moments of "transition": in some places, immediately after the birth of a child, during visits to the midwife, the godparents wear masks; the cloth covering the face of the deceased, the "shroud," hides their face, as does that of the young people in the masked games at the wake. In the game with the *hârca,*[21] the ancestors of the deceased also participate in the masquerade.

For Romanians, masquerading mediates between the community and the supernatural. Contact with the sacred involves risk and does not allow complete freedom. The scenario has serious stakes, community control is severe, and the identities assumed temporarily, as well as the words and gestures, cannot be arbitrary. The presence of masked people is only allowed in a certain space and at a certain time: "As an actor in more or less formalised scenarios, the masked man is ambiguous, oscillating between two worlds, and the whole community must benefit from the power conferred on him by the mask." (Nicolau *et al.* 2002, 25)

In the custom of *Boriţa cucilor,*[22] found among the Csangos around Braşov, there is a scenario of the death and resurrection of one of the four masked "Cuci." The Game of the Cuckoos, which takes place on the first day after "Lăsata Secului" (Shrove Tuesday), in order to purify space and time, belongs to the Thracian tradition or perhaps descends from the Dionysian Antesteria taken over by the Greeks from the Thracians. In some versions of the game, a cuckoo died and was resurrected. In *Boriţa cucilor*, there are masks called *chipuri* (faces). These are structures attached to a cylindrical mask and decorated with paper flowers like those used to make *sorcove* (sticks or twigs decorated with artificial flowers of different colors, with which children gently tap their parents, and acquaintances on the back on New Year's morning, wishing them health and good luck in special verses). In Romanian, there is also a special use of the term *închipuiţi* to name masked people (Nicolau 2002). The word obviously refers to the *face*, but also to something that is being imagined or that stands "as if" it were something else. In *Turca*,[23] a game played around the old man-animal couple, the animal dies, is mourned and is reborn. The same happens in the game with the bear. The goat game from Ostra includes a death and resurrection sequence, too, an archaic reminiscence of the vegetation cycle.

In the Nereju area, New Year's masked games have been juxtaposed onto the funerary game *Chiperul*, a very old wake game. It involved a funeral dance with an archaic mythical

substratum: the deceased had to be assisted in his passage to the other world by the spirits of his ancestors, who took the form of "uncles" and "aunts," the depositaries of the authority and wisdom of the tribe. The participants (10-15 masked people) were linked by a chain meant to suggest the cohesion of the tribe, which united to protect the deceased and to integrate them into its ranks. In the wake games of eastern Transylvania, in the Gurghiu Valley, there is even a mask of death. The player, wrapped in a white sheet, represents the demon of death and dances a fantastic dance while a mourner cries out in grief. The mask and the game protect both the dead and the officiant from evil spirits (Vulcănescu 1970).

The Greek comedy makes direct references to masks. The semantic ambivalence of *prosopon* can refer, through a wordplay, both to the character's face and to the actor's mask, the comic effect residing in the parallelism between the fictional plane of the text and the material reality of the performance, revealed suddenly, without the former being abolished. In Romanian popular culture, too, a member of the masked troupe addresses the bear or goat in the New Year's games in the Bacău area by the name of the mask worn by the performer, but the comic effect comes from the fact that the audience knows that there is a person underneath the mask.

Conclusions

Even though the Greek mask seems incompatible with death, while the Romanians have masks for the spirits of the dead and even for death itself, the mask is born, in Greek culture, in a way that is intrinsically linked to the god Dionysus. He represents life, but also death, oscillating between his association with wine, his priceless gift to humanity, nature, madness and the spirits of the dead. His journey is not only on the surface, but also through the world beyond. Dionysus represents the symbiosis between joy and suffering, between play and violence, between hunter and prey, going as far as the overlapping of life and death. He is a god who dies and thus embodies the contradictions that exist and manifest themselves in human nature. Like Persephone, Dionysus makes the distance between the world of the living and Hades more bearable for humans. He witnesses the same cycle of death and resurrection, both deities being associated with major rites of passage: birth, marriage, death and resurrection. They are always together, and those who knew their mysteries were convinced that both had power over the other world, so they surrounded themselves with symbols of the two in order to pass beyond. It can be said that Dionysus' popularity in the Greek world stemmed from people's desire to secure not only the god's goodwill in the earthly world and freedom from constraints, but also his help in passing into the afterlife.

The Gorgon's mask is not a face, it is only a head. It is not called *prosopon,* because it is charged by Persephone with driving away the living or killing them on the spot. Seeing it is equivalent to death. It eliminates both sight and life. Although it is a mask, it is not *a prosopon*, a name that designates the set of features that each person offers to the other's gaze and which implies visual reciprocity. We can therefore conclude that, if the Latin *persona* originates from *Persephone*, its counterpart in the Greek world cannot be just *prosopon*, which it is commonly thought to translate, but the Latin term also includes the meaning of *gorgeie kephale* in its semantic sphere. There is no etymological connection between *prosopon* and *persona*. On the contrary, as we have seen, the etymology points to opposite meanings. In fact, *prosopon* has only a secondary meaning of *mask*. However, the remarkably similar phonetics play in

favour of the overlap of the two terms, which, according to etymology, would otherwise be "false friends." The original semantic difference between *prosopon* and *persona* (face and mask, respectively) seems to be closely related to the etymological one and to account for the cultural hiatus between the two meanings of the mask.

As with the Greeks, in Romanian folklore, the mask is implicitly a face, even when it is not called that. The masked person retains their identity, which they enrich with the one they have temporarily adopted, but the solemnity of the ritual makes them more than just an actor.

NOTES

1. Greek: Σάτυροι, rustic deities represented as creatures with human bodies covered in hair, with horns and goat (or horse) legs, personifying brutal instincts.

2. For part of this bibliography I am indebted to Ms Eliza Lăzărescu's doctoral thesis, *Masca—de la imaginar la realitate în tragedia greacă* (*The Mask, from Imaginary to Reality in Greek Tragedy*), which was defended in September 2025 at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest, within the Department of Classics.

3. Greek: Καλόγεροι, literally meaning "monk," a type of masked character believed to be connected to Dionysian rites as described in the text.

4. A name given in Greek mythology to each of the 12 sons of Uranus, known for their struggle against Zeus for the control of the Earth.

5. Greek: Μαινάδες, the boisterous female companions of the god Bacchus.

6. Greek: Σάκκος, meaning bag, sack or sack-cloth.

7. The Japanese Noh theatre is the oldest form of mask theater still performed in its original form, with a tradition dating back over 650 years.

8. Greek: ὄγκος, meaning bulk, heap, but also size, weight, dignity, importance, pride.

9. Greek: Πρόσωπον, meaning face, countenance, look, appearance, figure; mask; person.

10. Greek: Προσωπεῖον, meaning theatre mask.

11. Greek: Γοργόνειον, meaning the face of Gorgo on goddess Athena's shield.

12. Greek: Μορμολυκεῖον or Μορμολύκειον, meaning puppet which frightens the children, bugbear, spectre, phantom.

13. Greek: Μορμώ, the name of a monster in ancient Greek lore which frightened the children.

14. Greek: Σειληνοί, sons of the elder Seilenos (Silenus) and the fathers of the tribes of Satyrs. Seilenoi were depicted as fat, elderly, white-haired men, with snub noses, balding heads, and the ears and tails of asses. They were sometimes covered in fluffy white hair and occasionally sported a pair of ox horns.

15. Latin: *vultus* means facial expression, look, countenance, face.

16. Latin: *facies* means appearance, look, guise, aspect.

17. Archaic by symbolism and function.

18. *Dragobete* Night (February 23 to 24) is a magical time in Romanian tradition, heralding the arrival of spring and celebrating love. It is believed that this is the moment when *Dragobete*, the god of youth, appears in dreams to teach young people the secrets of love, and unmarried girls can find out who their soulmate is by placing holy basil under their pillow.

19. Saint Toader's Saturday (Toaderul Mare): Takes place during the first week of Lent. Tradition has it that Saint Toader asked his horses to stop limping, transforming himself from a feared saint into a protector of horses and the community.

20. Easter of the *Blajini* (or Sunday/Monday of the *Blajini*) is a Christian Orthodox holiday commemorating the dead, celebrated mainly in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. It takes place one week after Easter (usually on the Monday after Thomas Sunday, although in urban areas it has been moved to Sunday) and is dedicated to the *blajini*, gentle beings believed to be our ancestors. *Blajin* means "gentle" in Romanian.

21. Romanian, untranslatable, meaning "ugly" or "grotesque"—noun used to designate a distorted face, in this case a frightening masked character.

22. A mask game practised in the Middle Ages throughout almost the entire territory of present-day Romania, but found today only in southern Muntenia (in Brăneşti, Ilfov). *Cuc* means "cuckoo" in Romanian.

23. An agrarian fertility rite practised at the turn of the year, which comes from an ancient magical hunting practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bieber, Margarete. 1961. *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cassidy, William. 1991. "Dionysos, Ecstasy, and the Forbidden." *Historical reflexions/ Réflexions historiques* 17(1), 23-44.

Csapo, Eric. 2010. *Actors and Icons of the Ancient theatre.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Dawkins, R. M. 1906. "The Modern Carnival in Thrace and the Cult of Dionysus." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 26, 191-206. https://doi.org/10.2307/624371

Eliade, Mircea. 1963. *Myth and reality.* New York: Harper and Row.

Eliade, Mircea. 2000. *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase* [The History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas]. Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic.

Frontisi-Ducroux, Françoise. 2012. *Du masque au visage*. Paris: Flammarion.

Green, J. R. 1994. Theatre in Ancient Greek Society. London: Routledge.

Grimes, Ronald L. 1992. "Sacred objects in museum spaces." *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses* 21(4), 419-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/000842989202100404

Haigh, A. E. 1907. *The Attic Theatre*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

Isler-Kerenyi, Cornelia. 2009. "New contributions of Dionysiac iconography to the history of religions in Greece and Italy." *Mystic cults in Magna Graecia,* eds. Giovani Casadio, Patricia Johnston, 61-72. Austin: University of Texas Press. https://doi.org/10.7560/719026-006

Leeming, David Adams. 1998. *Mythology. The voyage of the hero.* New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195121537.001.0001

Meineck, Peter. 2011. "The Neuroscience of the Tragic Mask." *Arion: A Journal of the Humanities and the Classics* 19(1), 113-58. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/arn.2011.0024

Nicolau, Irina, Georgeta Roșu, Magdalena Molnar. 2002. *Măști* [Masks]. Bucharest: Muzeul Țăranului Român.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2024. *Nașterea tragediei* [Birth of Tragedy]. Bucharest: Cartex.

Otto, Walter. 1965. *Dionysus Myth and Cult.* Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press.

Pickard-Cambridge, Arthur. 1968. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. 2nd ed., revised by John Gould and D. M. Lewis. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ridgeway, William. 1910. *The Origin of Tragedy with Special Reference to the Greek Tragedians.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X00199524

Seaford, Richard. 2006. *Dionysos, Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World.* London and New York: Routledge.

Tailor-Perry, Rosemarie. 2003. *The God Who Comes. Dionysian Mysteries Revisited*. New York: Algora Publishing.

Webster, T. B. L. 1970. Greek Theatre Production. 2nd ed. London: Methuen.

Vulcănescu, Romulus. 1970. *Măștile populare [Folk Masks].* Bucharest: Editura Științifică.