

The Mask

Born of man's use of the mask in religious ritual to inspire awe in the congregation by appearing more than mortal and to hide his face from the gods as he impersonated them, the theatre adopted the mask as one of its more significant conventions. To complete the larger-than-life picture, the actor wore a large **mask** which served both as a megaphone with its large aperture for the mouth, and as a symbol to distinguish the role. It identified age, sex, mood, and rank. Fully hooded, it rested on the shoulders of the actor. Usually the mask was constructed of bark, cork, leather, or linen. The most beautiful were tragic; the grotesque and bizarre depicting creatures like frogs and birds were reserved for comedy. The flexibility of changing masks allowed actors to change roles easily. A mask was called a **persona**.

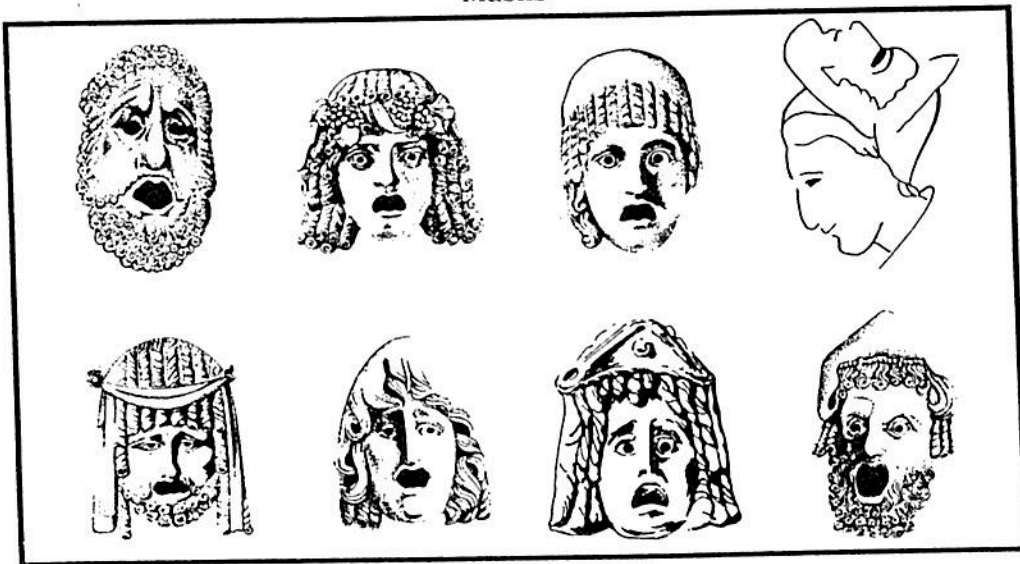
Tragic Mask



Comic Mask



Masks



¹ Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Concise History of Theater* (New York: 1969, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.) 19.

1. What English word or words might have developed from the Greek word for mask? What might this indicate about the influence of the mask?
2. Think of as many situations as you can in today's life when we use masks. You might even broaden your understanding of the mask to include the effect of makeup. In each situation, why do we feel it is important to be masked? What is the effect of the mask in each situation?
3. What is your personal reaction to seeing someone masked? Why do you suppose you feel this way?
4. Why do you think tragic masks were aesthetically more beautiful than comic masks? What might this fact indicate about the nature of tragedy compared to the nature of comedy?
5. Design a mask for *Oedipus the King*, as the play opens, when Oedipus rules Thebes imperially and confidently. You might prefer to color features of the mask, or at least, to add shading.