
STERLING KEYNOTE 2020

You Are Invited to a Masked Ball P.S.: Do Not Wear a Mask

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Rob Reiner's 1987 movie *The Princess Bride* tells the story of a princess, memorably named Buttercup, who is kidnaped and rescued. Fans of the film will recall that Princess Buttercup's abductors are a lovably inept trio of villains, and that her savior in dogged pursuit of the band is a mysterious man in black. His outfit includes a black mask. Genuinely curious, one of the kidnapers, a giant named Fezzik, asks his pursuer, "Why are you wearing a mask? Were you burned with acid, or something like that?" The man in black replies, "Oh no, it's just that they're terribly comfortable. I think everyone will be wearing them in the future."

More than thirty years later, the prophetic nature of that whimsical dialogue enhances enjoyment of it, though many would claim it was a bit off in its assessment of comfort level. However, the prediction of universal face coverage resonates no less during the Covid-19 pandemic than does a bit of advice that Fezzik gives his fellow accomplice Inigo Montoya elsewhere in the film. As Montoya prepares to engage their pursuer in a sword fight, he tells his friend. "You be careful. People in masks cannot be trusted." In addition to the role of the mask in various health practices over time, representations in popular culture, theater, literary prose, and eventually in film provide a revealing account of human masking and unmasking over the centuries. America's tumult of mistrust and apprehension over pandemic face coverings in 2020 has unfolded as the latest chapter in the history of humans alternately covering their faces and leaving them unmasked. In particular, a selective examination of masking in other times, both in historical context and in the virtual venues of literature, reveals much about American society since the election of Donald Trump. In *The Princess Bride* the man in black, played by Cary Elwes, makes his way up the Cliffs of Insanity, through the Fire Swamp,

and into the Pit of Despair--fantasy destinations that again scream metaphorical comparisons to 2020. This tour, however, first provides historical context, then drops in on a couple of exceptionally garish masked balls from 19th and 20th century literature. They are the type of festivity that would be inconceivable for a non-literary party planner. Similarly, prior to the ascendancy of Donald Trump in politics, the unprecedented spectacle of his administration could scarcely have been conceived outside of fantasy. While the Pit of Despair is not a destination on this overview of mask culture, we will drop by 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Masks are optional there.

Humans have always found reasons to cover their faces, whether as a means of expression or as a tool for concealment. Even the use of masks as protective equipment by various professions in the technological age has historical precedence. Beginning in the 17th century, European plague doctors wore beaked visors with glass eye coverings to protect themselves from miasma, the putrid and supposedly infectious air that was believed to cause the disease. In some European cities and towns, including many where a memorial plague column dominates the public square, historical epidemics remain a part of the cultural fabric. For example in Venice today, replicas of the plague mask are sold as curiosities. Medieval Venice is a particularly instructive example of pandemic response, due to its development of the forty-day quarantine for incoming ships and their crews on two outlying islands, a prerequisite for permission to disembark in the harbor. The word quarantine derives from the Italian term for forty days, *quaranta giorni*. Between plagues, Venice's embrace of mask-wearing has historically found a less macabre outlet in costume balls that highlight what is called "cosplay" today. During Carnival season in particular, elaborately decorative face coverings are a staple of Venetian galas.

The social convention of the masked ball emerged during the Middle Ages, around the same time as the first epidemics. Though the two phenomena are not necessarily related, their separate deployment of masks is enlightening. After the emergence of the plague doctor's head gear, that grim apparition co-existed with civilian masks worn for fun and fashion, but it fulfilled a distinctly separate role in public life. With the advent of the Covid-19 face covering in early 2020, however, Venetians, along with most of the world, have necessarily

accommodated mandatory protective gear--this time around, thankfully without grotesque snouts. In the current pandemic, however, because gatherings of people in close proximity to one another promote viral spread, functional and festive mask wearing have become mutually exclusive. The coronavirus has intruded upon masking traditions worldwide. Participants in parades and balls during Mardi Gras in New Orleans in February, 2020, as another example, may well have contributed to the surge of coronavirus infections that hit the city soon afterward. The danger in New Orleans is not anticipated to abate before Mardi Gras season in 2021, at which time pandemic masks will replace party masks. However, in strange commonality, contagion and costume share common ground as democratizing phenomena. A longstanding appeal of the masked ball is the opportunity for participants from very different backgrounds freely to interact with one another while their disguises obscure otherwise troublesome differences in station, appearance, or affiliation. The circumvention of difference finds a parallel in the current novel coronavirus. Covid-19 joins its pestilential predecessors with an ability to infect the most powerful and supposedly best protected among us as easily as it can sicken the masses.

The late medieval plague mask and today's recommended face covering differ in an important way. The plague doctor sought to avoid acquiring the symptoms of a disease that he could see vividly in people around him, or at least as clearly as his primitive goggles would allow. Covering the lower face in today's pandemic, however, is primarily a means of protecting others from something *unseen*. The microorganism in the mask wearer's potentially virus-laden respiratory droplets is, as Donald Trump briefly described it, "an invisible enemy" (Shafer), and in the at least 20% of contagious persons who are asymptomatic cases, there are no discernible signs of the disease (Citroner). The invisibility of the threat makes it easier to dismiss, and in the United States especially, some health experts fear that Donald Trump's diminishment of the crisis and his flouting of guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are impediments to gaining control over the spread of infection (Rivas, Neikirk). Readers of plague literature and viewers of pandemic movies, however, can vividly see diseases, or fantastical imaginings of their consequences. In the context of narrative, a reader

or viewer is not allowed to forget the might of the unseen microbe. Examples have been as frequent as epidemics themselves, from Daniel Defoe's document-based account of the effects of bubonic plague in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) to Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion* and a host of 20th and 21st century pandemic novels and films. *Contagion* recounts with remarkable prescience the crossover of a deadly respiratory virus from bats in China to humans worldwide. One can see civilians in the movie wearing now familiar homemade face coverings, as well health professionals with personal protective equipment. Even a film as carefully imaginative as *Contagion*, however, failed to predict the politicization of mask wearing among the affected population.

The many faces possible in complex arrays of traditional masks in Asian, African and Native American cultures contrast with Western masks that often have reductive, dichotomous meanings and functions. Face coverings for women, such the burqa, are a longstanding part of religious practice in many Islamic societies. In a secular context, the Noh theater tradition originated in Japanese culture during the 14th century, about the same time that Europeans were dying of the black death and attending masked balls. In Noh dramas a myriad of distinct types of mask represents combinations of gender, social ranking, age, mood, and other standard characteristics, in addition to the distinction between humans and non-human characters such as demons. By contrast, Western theater is often represented with considerably less complexity by the dual masks of comedy and tragedy that emerged in ancient Greece. Historical adaptation of head and face coverings have been abundant in the West, including as implements of torment (Louis XIV's prisoner "The Man in the Iron Mask"), instruments of intimidation (the Ku Klux Klan), and personal protective equipment (Covid-19), but masks find their greatest prominence in popular fiction. Functional masking occurs among fictional characters who recognize that they look better when wearing a mask, or they wish to conceal disfigurement, which is Fezzik's assumption concerning the man in black. The phantom's mask in Gaston Leroux's novel *The Phantom of the Opera* (*Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*) and its derivations, and later Darth Vader's mask in *Star Wars: Episode VI*, join many other examples in fulfilling such a purpose.

In addition to the functional vs. festive distinction for masks

that emerged in Venice and elsewhere, masks in Western culture are frequently categorized in binary categories of virtuous and villainous. Cosplay, comic book superheroes, television, and film demonstrate the same oppositional dualism found in the Greek symbols for comedy vs. tragedy. The dichotomy remains a primary aspect of Western mask culture, regardless of whether the disguised figure is an archetypal protagonist or antagonist. Good guys in popular culture often choose to obscure the upper part of the face. The Lone Ranger, Zorro, Batman, Robin, and as it turns out, the flawless underlying appearance of the man in black as the fair-haired farm boy Westley in *The Princess Bride*, all fit into this category. These virtuous figures stand in opposition to bad guys who cover the lower extremity of the face. For bandits and stagecoach robbers in westerns, a raised bandana is *de rigueur*. Full face coverings also often enhance the fearfulness of demonic types, such as the masked slashers in *Friday the 13th* (1980) and particularly its sequels, as well as in the *Halloween* series of movies. Some identity-conscious avengers, such as Guy Fawkes in *V for Vendetta*, Spiderman, and others, also cover their entire countenance.

Writers are unrestrained by stock images and are free to operate outside the confining frames of comic book panels. While continuing to observe basic binary categorizations for face coverings, authors have frequently sought to blur the lines between types of masks and to complicate their typical purpose with overlapping and creatively ambiguous functions. Shakespeare, for example, occasionally enjoyed placing his characters behind masks, both as earnest disguise and for frolicsome reasons. In the masked ball scene (Act II, Scene 1) of *Much Ado about Nothing*, he introduces both a physical mask and masked intent. Beatrice, whose face is uncovered, gains the upper hand when she pretends to be fooled by the disguise of a masked partygoer, even though she knows the wearer is Benedick, a potential suitor whom she hopes to discourage. Benedick's mask gives Beatrice the freedom to speak her mind, even as she masks her directness with a sly trick. Her masked partner in the exchange is trapped behind his disguise and is forced to perpetuate a ruse he believes still to be intact (132). In Germany in the late 19th century, Frank Wedekind introduced a masked man (*der verummte Herr*) in the final scene of his play *Spring Awakening* (*Frühlings Erwachen*, 1891). Ironically, the play's only faceless character faces down the tragedy and despair that afflicts the other

figures. His life-affirming conclusion to the play's dialogue extends the symbolism of the masked stranger to an everyman figure. The lack of facial features allows the viewer or reader to supplant the blank visage with universal identity. (The 2006 rock musical adaptation of *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik omits the masked man.)

Overlapping functions and perceptions of the mask are especially illuminating in two prose works that use the masked ball as a revelatory site, where masks fail to disguise human frailty. Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Masque of the Red Death," published in 1842, resonates in the 21st century not only because its action takes place during an incurable plague. The story's main character, Prince Prospero, demonstrates inclinations that are comparable to proclivities seen in Donald Trump. Arthur Schnitzler's novella *Dream Story* (*Traumnovelle*, 1926) similarly uses the masked ball as a crucible for challenging presumptive power and for unmasking surreptitious desires that exact a cost in human life.

Prince Prospero, the principal character in Poe's tale, seals himself off from the pestilence spreading across the country by retreating to a "castellated abbey" that he himself designed. The prince assembles a thousand knights and ladies to join him in this secure environment, which has no ingress or egress. Outside the walls, however, half of the population has already died, their demise preceded by ghastly blood splotches on the skin, a symptom that gives the red death its popular name (256). The isolation is as much a frame of mind as a physical separation. The prince in Poe's tale is content to let the disease run its course. His policy position resonates with Donald Trump's infrequent and seldom empathetic references to America's astronomical death rate from Covid-19, and presciently anticipates repeated public statements by Trump that the pandemic will simply "go away" after herd immunity is accomplished (qtd. in Stephanopoulos). Rather than grapple with the calamity in rational or practical ways, the prince declines serious personal engagement with the red death and takes responsibility only for the comfort and security of his immediate surroundings. The massive mortality in his country is not a problem he seriously contemplates. To his followers he appears "happy and dauntless and sagacious" (256). Prince Prospero's fortress against the epidemic is "amply provisioned," and the narrator adds, "With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion.

The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think” (257). Poe’s characterization of the prince reads like a reference that may look back on Donald Trump’s tenure in the White House from a vantage point in the future. The narrator reports, “There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not” (258).

Poe devotes considerable attention to the floor plan and architecture of the prince’s remarkable residence, which is “provided with all the appliances of pleasure,” while it also demonstrates the designer’s “love of the bizarre” (257). The unique *feng shui* flows through a long series of seven connected halls, each decorated solely in a different strident color. Poe scholarship often views the chambers as color codes for the natural stages of the prince’s life (Bell, 101). Reminiscent of the sunrise and sunset of life, a progression from east to west through the halls originates in a blue room and ends six stations later in a space carpeted in black with walls covered by funereal tapestries (257). Unlike the previous six rooms, the seventh chamber is not monochromatic. Scarlet casements of “a deep blood color” (257) provide a stark contrast to their surroundings and commit a blatant faux pas of interior decoration by piercing the bubble of pandemic isolation with a reminder of the red death. The connection is indelible at the conclusion of the story, when Poe, in his inimitable style, makes clear that “the blood-bedewed halls” are an inadequate refuge from disease (260).

Interior decoration at the White House receives considerable attention at Christmas, when tradition calls for the current occupants, usually guided by the first lady, to deck the halls of the People’s House with a uniquely festive flourish. Melania Trump’s holiday pageantry has generally not received flattering reviews, though some of the displays have garnered wide-eyed attention. Christmas 2018, for example, was the occasion for lining an expansive hallway with irregularly shaped, relentlessly red objects of various sizes. The possibly intended allusion to Christmas trees was largely lost in the zinging critical reception of the spectacle. While the study in scarlet was likely not inspired by Prospero’s “fine eye for colors and effects,” the decoration did seem to align with Poe’s additional qualification that the prince’s “tastes . . . were peculiar” (258). Journalistic accounts of the first lady’s design concept were actually more reminiscent of Poe’s prose than was the

festoonery itself. Few responses are more vivid than *Slate's* appraisal of the “red Christmas trees of death,” in which the appalled critic cold-bloodedly depicts a “macabre take on ‘trees’ . . . that resemble piles of human entrails” and “reek of the threat of execution . . .” (Cauterucci).

With that picture firmly in mind, it is easy to transition to the masquerade ball that Prospero sponsors for the one thousand courtiers in his plague fortress. Poe eschews subtlety when describing the masked revelers and begins the account bluntly: “Be sure they were grotesque” (258). Impressions of the ball are related with a bit less acerbity than one finds in many holiday reviews of Trump White House decor, but the narrator does toss a few brickbats: “There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (258).

Wearing a mask at Prospero’s masquerade ball signifies that one belongs to an august company. Almost as if the mask itself shields the revelers from contagion, their disguises distinguish them from the unfortunate and exposed peasants outside the abbey. However, an intruder from beyond the fortress walls crashes the party. Even though he likewise wears a disguise, it is eventually clear that the tall, gaunt figure with the visage of a death’s head was not invited to the ball. Despite the forthrightly grotesque costume choices of the guests, the mysterious figure’s blood-spattered gown and “habiliments of the grave” are clearly over the top during a plague, or as the narrator puts it, “beyond the bounds of even the prince’s indefinite decorum” (259). To make matters worse, the trespasser assumes free reign of the place and roams about through all seven of the connecting ballrooms. The narrator describes how the figure even passes “unimpeded . . . within a yard of the prince’s person . . .” (260). Unable to avail himself of 21st century CDC guidelines on social distancing during a pandemic, the prince suffers the direst of consequences from his close contact with the intruder. At first intimidated by the audacious stranger, then enraged by his impertinence, Prospero approaches with a dagger and deadly intent, only to drop dead himself as a victim of the red death. (Predictably, his demise occurs in the farthestmost ballroom, the one decorated in black, with blood red as an accent color.) In response, a throng of the prince’s followers rushes the offender and rips away his mask. They find the vestments “untenanted by any tangible form”

(260). The contagion rapidly completes its fatal course among the remaining courtiers.

Prospero is predictive of world leaders in the non-fictional realm who turn out to be vulnerable to deadly contagion, despite extraordinary measures put in place to protect them, but also in no small part due to their willful disregard of the danger. The cosplay masks at Prospero's ball are in keeping with his refusal to face the pestilence, naïvely choosing instead to retreat behind facades of denial. The disastrous fallacy of illusory invulnerability is only revealed once the mask of the uninvited transient is torn away, exposing the dangerous truth and the ubiquitous reach of the red death.

Throughout 2020, Donald Trump exhibited a fraught attitude toward Covid-19 face coverings, as well as to other CDC guidelines. While occasionally allowing himself to be photographed wearing a mask, he has also expressed unease over his personal appearance, for example pointing out in April that a mask would leave an inappropriate impression with foreign dignitaries who approach the Resolute Desk (CBC/Associated Press). In May Trump removed his face mask before being photographed during a visit to a Michigan automobile plant and explained "I didn't want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it" (qtd. in Jiang and Watson). After his return to the White House following hospitalization for Covid-19 in October, Trump, still infectious, wore a mask as he ascended the steps to the Truman Balcony, then promptly removed it before acknowledging well-wishers and turning to enter the building, where White House staff braced themselves for the miasma. Donald Trump's acute awareness of the visibility of the mask is tied to the unique nature of face coverings in general. In his study of masking, Robert Kahn clarifies that face coverings, in addition to their medical functionality, more easily become symbols than do other measures that combat the pandemic, such as physical distancing. Kahn's summary of the principal features of masks could easily refer to Donald Trump's conflicted and uncomfortable photo-op with a mask after leaving the hospital. Masks are "highly visible . . . connected to a specific individual . . . and easy to put on and remove" (8).

Masks in public life and popular culture have always denoted professional identity or personal character, and the Covid-19 face covering could scarcely be immune from infection with similar meanings. In the United States, mask wearing has emerged as a political fault line.

One camp openly defies mask recommendations as an abridgement of individual liberty and a sign of weakness, while pointing to a high rate of survival from the virus and maintaining that the danger from Covid-19 has been exaggerated. Another camp emphasizes the rapidly growing infection rate and the high death toll from the virus and asserts with its adherence to masking guidelines that citizens do not have an inalienable right to infect fellow citizens with a contagion. Both camps are recognizable by visible signifiers: the uncovered face or the mask. Trump culture has reversed the signifiers of belonging that are common at masked balls or in a group identifiable by what its members wear. Unlike the masqueraders in Prospero's fortress, mask wearers at Trump-sponsored gatherings are conspicuous outliers. The guests in Poe's tale hope to forget the dangerous world outside as they revel behind masks. Many passionate Trump supporters, calling attention to identity by means of something they are *not* wearing, similarly applaud how their leader publicly diminishes the seriousness of the health crisis. The pandemic has forced Americans into a grand affair, where the prediction about masks uttered by the man in black in *The Princess Bride* has become conceivable: "everyone will be wearing them." The prospect is unsettling for many advocates of Trump culture, who acknowledge their awareness of the pandemic by denying its danger—as if contriving a masked ball at which no one wears a mask.

As pointed out earlier, while a mask over the face is strikingly visible, the virus and its effects remain out of sight, particularly among millions of asymptomatic carriers. As a television personality, Donald Trump is fiercely concerned about what the public sees and how they perceive it. Clearly, in his estimation medically recommended face coverings are not consistent with the desire to put the administration's best face forward. It may be impossible to deny the existence of a genuine health emergency; however it is possible to abstain from responding to it with corresponding urgency. Observing an unfolding spectacle without betraying a reaction that is commensurate with its seriousness is in itself a type of performative masking. In ways that fictional treatments of the mask also demonstrate (Stanley Kubrick's film title *Eyes Wide Shut* comes to mind), masking one's public face does not obstruct vision, yet it permits the mask wearer to abstain from personal engagement with what is seen.

Donald Trump's personal awareness of the serious threat posed by Covid-19 provides a clear example of seeing a critical reality while conveying the appearance of seeing something less serious. Trump telephoned writer and reporter Bob Woodward on February 7, 2020 to provide the author with additional material for a book Woodward intended to publish on the Trump administration. The book appeared in September, 2020 under the title *Rage*. "It goes through the air," Donald Trump remarked to Woodward, referring to the coronavirus. "That's always tougher than the touch. You don't have to touch things. Right? But the air, you just breathe the air and that's how it's passed. And so that's a very tricky one. That's a very delicate one. It's also more deadly than even your strenuous flus. . . . Pretty amazing. . . . This is deadly stuff" (xix-xx). However, in a subsequent conversation with Woodward on March 19, 2020, Trump revealed that his public stance on the pandemic would not correspond to his private awareness of the "very tricky" challenge of contending with such "deadly stuff:" "I always wanted to play it down. . . . I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic" (xviii). Indeed, contrary to Donald Trump's own understanding of the disease, public pronouncements from Trump and his administration throughout 2020 frequently denied or diminished medical evidence that the pandemic is more dangerous than the flu and that impeding the diffusion of respiratory droplets through the air by wearing a mask would slow the spread of the virus.

The Trump re-election campaign has also used the face mask as a prop. Trump rallies have frequently paid lip service to mask recommendations and mandates by strategically positioning masked supporters behind the podium, in direct view of the cameras that photograph Donald Trump. Among supporters located behind the camera, however, far fewer face masks have been in evidence. On October 12, 2020 in Sanford, Florida, at Trump's first campaign appearance since leaving hospitalization for the coronavirus, Donald Trump tossed to his supporters face masks imprinted with campaign messaging. The distribution from a raised platform to a non-socially distanced crowd resembled the Mardi Gras tradition of tossing trinkets and candy from a float in a Carnival parade. Trump did not himself wear a mask, nor did he encourage the catchers of the pitched masks to put them on. These celebratory political events transmit conflicting messages, as if to announce, "This is a masked ball," with the postscript

“Not really.”

The Western binary deployment of the mask as either functional or festive is evident in responses to Covid-19 in 2020. Navigating public health policy in a polarized society is a difficult challenge. It has proved helpful in some quarters to divert the discourse around masks from an emphasis on their function to a portrayal of the pandemic face covering as paraphernalia for cosplay. Donald Trump, who early in the crisis stressed that the mask is problematic due to appearance, turned to cosplay allusions to ease his discomfort over the medical reports from his own administration that masks make a functional contribution to saving lives. In a July 1 interview with Fox Business News, Trump briefly allowed the pendulum of his position on masks to swing toward acceptance. Again emphasizing outward appearance, Trump assured viewers, “I’ve had a mask on, and I sort of liked the way I looked,” adding that when wearing a mask he “looked like the Lone Ranger” (qtd. in Crisp. Fox News itself did not repeat the quote in its coverage of the televised interview.) The *New York Times* has reported that Trump has a lingering interest in cosplay and recognizes that symbolic costuming has the potential for projecting an image of strength. After contracting the virus, the chief executive reportedly considered ripping open his dress shirt after being released from Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in order to reveal a Superman T-shirt underneath (Karni and Haberman).

A strip of cloth over the upper part of the face with holes cut out for the eyes, such as the Lone Ranger wore, would of course not meet CDC standards. However, if one chooses to deny the pervasive (and invasive) plague outside the fortress, the romantic image of a valiant hero can be more appealing and more useful politically than a partisan-tainted pandemic face covering. As plague-weary Europeans learned centuries ago, the festive mask happily worn at the masquerade ball is much more appealing than the plague doctor’s compulsory and creepy protective gear.

So it is with the doctor who is the main character in Arthur Schnitzler’s novella *Dream Story*. Fridolin, a successful physician in Vienna and a handsome man about town, enjoys exchanging his surgical mask for the diversionary disguises of Vienna’s many traditional masked balls. Schnitzler makes clear early in the narrative that the anonymity of these masked social events suspends discretion and can lead to

flirtation and sexual liberties among the guests, particularly around Carnival time. At one such ball, both Fridolin and his wife Albertine playfully engage in naughty but mostly innocent fun with various other guests, though unlike his wife, Fridolin does not curb his lust when he leaves the party. His adulterous inclinations gain momentum from frank bedroom exchanges with Albertine, in which the couple daringly tell each other their erotic dreams about attractions to other people. For Albertine the tales she retrieves from her slumber are honest and redemptive, and she is unperturbed by what her husband dreams. Fridolin, however, feels shame about his libidinal drive, though he fails to admit it. Quiet guilt over his concealed dalliances with other women, even when he is not dreaming, leads him likewise to mask the real love he feels for his wife. Fridolin's dilemma is made worse by Albertine's talented storytelling. Her vivid honesty in describing her erotic dreams titillates Fridolin, who insists on hearing all the details, even as the disclosures also makes him jealous (Chapter 1).

In that state of mind it is no wonder that the doctor leaps at the chance to attend a masked ball without his wife, though it is not just any ball. He learns of a highly secret masquerade party where the guests are given the opportunity not just to flirt, but to consummate their carnal desires. Fridolin has not been invited to the ball, but he reasons that crashing the party should be easy, since everyone will be in disguise. With the help of his acquaintance Nachtigall, who has been engaged as a musician at the orgy, Fridolin learns the secret password for admittance to the ball. Nachtigall emphasizes that given the high station of the powerful attendees at the gathering, it is extremely dangerous to divulge any information about it. Moreover, the ball enforces a strict mask mandate. Fridolin is too enticed by the prospect of an anonymous and illicit sexual adventure to heed the warnings against attending without invitation. Equipped with full costume and mask, he follows his friend at a distance after the organizers arrange for discreet transport of the musician to the secret location of the affair. Portentously, Nachtigall is conveyed to the party in a horse drawn vehicle that resembles a hearse (*Trauerkutsche*). However, Fridolin takes the mask requirement less seriously than he should and upon his arrival at the mansion, he waits too long to cover his face. As he alights from his coach, a female guest entering the ball recognizes the doctor and warns him to turn back, which he refuses to do (Chapter 4).

Unlike the masked intruder in Poe's tale, who proves fatal to all the other guests, Fridolin, as an uninvited stranger, is himself in grave danger. The death mask worn by Poe's intruder serves primarily to conceal, while it also conveys a symbolic message. Schnitzler's deployment of the face covering is more complex, since it does more than preserve anonymity. Fridolin's mask conceals the undignified facial expressions of a gaping voyeur while also permitting him full view of the debauchery, a function that Julia Freytag has called "veiled curiosity" (*verhüllte Schaulust*, 53). As is typical of masked gatherings (with exceptions made for Trump campaign rallies), the compact to cover the face creates a sense of group belonging. The irony of the mask as a duplicitous ruse in and of itself helps both the red death and Fridolin to gain admittance to closed societies. Both narratives also approach the topic of unmasking. The intruder at Poe's affair, as well as the uninvited guest at Schnitzler's orgy, arouse suspicion among guests who have much to lose if their security is compromised. In Fridolin's case, the woman who recognized him outside the mansion again unsuccessfully begs him to depart while it is still possible. However, enticed by her nakedness, since she now wears only a mask, he hopes to seduce the woman and declines to leave without her. Her whispered entreaties attract attention to Fridolin from others at the ball. Unable to produce a second password, a security measure of which even Nachtigall was not aware, Fridolin is found out and ordered to remove his mask.

Schnitzler relates the doctor's dread at being the only person in the company with an uncovered face ("*mit unverlarvtem Gesicht unter lauter Masken*,") which he considers a thousand times worse "than finding oneself naked among the clothed" ("*als plötzlich unter Angekleideten nackt*.")) Fridolin's blustering resistance fails to alleviate the desperate situation. However the unidentified woman who had warned him becomes his savior and secures his release by offering herself for punishment instead ("*. . . ich bin bereit, ihn auszulösen*," Chapter 4). Fridolin is ejected from the ball but is able to retain his mask and his life. At home he hides the mask from Albertine. All of Fridolin's efforts fail when he attempts to learn who organized the ball, and to determine the identity of the woman who interceded for him. A newspaper report about the unexplained suicide of a young baroness catches his attention, since she would be just the type of high

society person who may have attended the ball. However, since the woman at the fete never removed her mask, Fridolin is unable to make a conclusive match, even when he examines her body in the morgue (Chapter 6).

At the conclusion of the story, Albertine discovers the hidden mask and lays it on the couple's bed for Fridolin to find. The sight of the mask effectively rips away Fridolin's own toxically masculine emotional concealment and prompts him to take a decisive step toward reconciliation by tearfully revealing his secret activities to a receptive partner (Chapter 7). Schnitzler's use of the mask in the story consistently indicates that though the mask is intended to be seen, it also permits the wearer to see. As Susan C. Anderson has pointed out, the end of *Dream Story* "suggests a way out of fixed gender concepts and set ways of seeing" (303-04).

Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of the novella, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) purposefully makes the mask a visual spectacle in ways that Schnitzler's prose cannot. Kubrick's career reveals a long fascination with the narrative possibilities that masked faces create, beginning with the clown masks in *The Killing* (1956). In her study of veiled vision in Schnitzler's novella and in Kubrick's film, Julia Freytag explains the significance of the dark, ostensibly empty eye openings in the masks worn by the guests at the orgy. Particularly when shot in close-ups, the seemingly vacant masks give the impression of sightlessness, and yet they conceal a gaze. They are "eyes wide shut" (116). Kubrick also pays special attention to the mask worn by Fridolin's counterpart in the film, Dr. Bill Harford, played by Tom Cruise. Consisting of two layers made of different materials, the mask that lies underneath is plain, merely functional cloth. However, a festive, glittery eye mask adorns the upper part of his face. As Freytag observes, Bill's surreptitious identity as an uninvited, but compliantly masked infiltrator ("*sein maskenhaftes Gesicht*,") is replicated by his costume, which is also a double mask (110).

The Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 forced the concept of face covering and the practice of mask wearing into unprecedented public consciousness. Historical attitudes toward the mask, often reflected and elaborated in popular culture, literary fiction, and film, are useful touchpoints in considering contemporary attitudes and practices regarding masks. As the promotion of masks for purposes

of public health became increasingly controversial, and masks acquired political symbolism in the United States, a crossover occurred between the binary categories of goal-oriented utilitarian mask wearing and masks worn for play. Literary and cinematic treatments of the mask demonstrate the validity of both perspectives, while sometimes also blurring the lines between them or combining the two categories in the same mask. Within their narrative contexts, creative artists demonstrate how the mask can lead to new ways of seeing others and oneself. In *The Princess Bride*, none of Fezzik's assumptions about why his nemesis wears a mask comes close to the novel explanation he receives. Novel ways of viewing the face covering that protects from a novel virus will likewise be helpful, especially if they look past the boundaries between polarized characterizations of either virtuous or villainous mask wearers and mask abstainers. For example, a more gallant understanding of the civilian pandemic mask formulates it as a visible means of protecting others from an unseen danger posed by asymptomatic carriers, as opposed to the visceral view of masks as either self-protective shields or expressions of group affiliation. Late in 2020, when statistical modeling by epidemiologists estimates that wearing masks could save 100,000 lives by 2021 (Fearnow), the culture surrounding masks will determine not only ways of seeing the world, but also what that world will be.

Masks will remain with us, whether to adorn an extended range of vision, or as a way to see with eyes wide shut.

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