THAT the wearing of Masks, and other ways for people to disguise themselves, is of great Antiquity, is apparent by the prohibition which God made to his own people, that the man should not put on the habit of the woman, which is a disguise commonly made with the Mask, in regard that otherwise the hair and beard of the man would discover his Sex. So that the Question seems to be already decided, and that it follows from this prohibition, that Masks are not to be allowed. But however, we may enquire, What repute they were in among other Nations. And we find, that they were frequently us’d among the Romans, who, about the beginning of the Spring, celebrated a Feast in Honor of the Mother of the gods; in the pomp of which solemnity, it was lawful for any one to mask and disguise himself, and to represent what person or part he pleas’d, which was done bluntly enough, as the French Comedians were heretofore content to have only a certain powder or meal cast over their faces, as they still have in the Farce. To shew the viciousness of that posture, we need only urge the indecency of it, and alledge that the use of it ought not to be allow’d, in regard that all Dissimulation and Hypocrisie is a great sin in the sight of God and men: Now the Mask is so hypocritical, that the very word it self is commonly taken for Hypocrisie. Thence it come that Seneca, defining the masked or hypoeritical person, gives him this Character, *Cum præ se fert aliquis quod non est*, When any one would seem, or appear to be what he is not. Besides, if Painting be forbidden, and be accounted a capricious humour so prejudicial to decency and good manners, that there is no Maid nor Woman, but thinks it an injury to be reproach’d with painting her self, what opinion ought we to conceive of those who disguise themselves? For it is imagin’d done out of no other end then to cloak their lewd actions, who make use of it; as we frequently find in the informations for Murthers and Felonies, that they are committed by desguis’d persons, who thereby would prevent the discovery of their crimes. Let therefore the use of the Mask be utterly discarded, as a thing which is contrary to that uprightness of disposition, the signs whereof ushers in impudence, abusiveness, and a contempt and falsification of God’s Image Imprinted on the face of man.
The Second said, That in times of War, the Horsemen, who are commanded out against the Enemy, having close head-pieces over their faces, seem to be so mask’d and disguis’d that they are not to be known; not so much to prevent their being wounded in the face, as to elude their Enemies, so as that they may not discover the Commanders and persons of quality, upon whose safety the gaining or loss of a battel depends. And this Dissimulation hath sometimes been practis’d with great advantage, when some private Souldier hath put on the armour, and rid the horse of the General of the Army, so to draw the Enemies Forces from that side; while they unexpectedly charge him on the other. And whereas he is commonly the Master of his desires, who can discover the counsels of his Enemy, and those cannot be known otherwise than by Spies, who would never be admitted either into Cities or the Enemy’s Camp, if they did not in their habit and demeanour imitate him, What Question is to be made, but that it is lawful to put on disguises upon such a design, to get the more certain intelligence? To divert from Military Affairs to Merchandize, it is the safest way for him whom would travel to dissemble his condition; and whereas Poverty is that which is least of any expos’d to dangers, unless a man will follow the example of Ulyssus, who counterferred himself a Beggar or Pedlar, of which profession all are not equally capable, it will not misbeseem a great Lord to demean himself as an ordinary Gentleman, and sometimes to avoid surprizes to act the part of his Servant, while the Servant acts that of a Prince. Let us divert thence, and make our appearance before the Courts of Justice; and we shall there find, that Attorneys and Lawyers, when they speak, are ever mask’d & disguis’d in laying open the Causes of their Clients, who on their side are also apt enough to dissemble & conceal whatever they think might prejudice them. So that the Painters had much more reason to represent the Lawyers, Attorneys, and their Client, with a veil over their Eyes, then Justice; since that among them, he hath the reputation of the bravest man, who is the greatest Orator, and hath the best Lungs; and according to their saying, who have best defin’d the Art of Oratory; It is the Art of persuading people to what they please, by making great things little, and little things great, which, in other Language, is for a man to disguise all things, and himself into the bargain, inasmuch as he seems to believe the contrary to what he sayes and knows, and that among the rules of Oratory, this is one, that the Orator is to personate even to his voice and gesture, and accommodate himself to what he sayes, which is properly to mask himself, and that not only the face, but also the feet, the hands, the tongue, and all those parts of the body which are employ’d in pronunciation, elocution, and the gestures suitable to the thing treated of. Nor is it to be expected that Divines and Physicians are absolutely exempted from these kinds of disguises, since that, the
better to insinuate into the affection of their Penitents and Patients, which is the way to gain their hearts, and by that means to Convert and Cure them, they ought to be very complaisant towards them, comply with their infirmities, and accommodate themselves to their humors in all things indifferent, that they, on the other side, may submit to their advice in those things which are necessary. And not to descend to particular Instances which might be made in all other Professions, this will be the result, that those who will find fault with Masks and Disguises, must, with the same breath, cast an aspersion on all humane society, which as Augustus said at this departure out of this world, is nothing but a Comedy, wherein every one acts his part under a disguise. The same thing was said by one of the Satyrists, but much more pleasantly; for being, as we say here, upon the Save-all, that is, ready to give us the last gasp, he cry’d out to his friend, Draw up the Curtain, the Play is done. For the greatest part of our Complements being only so many disguises, and humane life consisting in those actions, the consequence is, that all the world is under a Mask, and that the less dangerous, since there are some make it their Profession to be mask’d, as do also Ambassadors and other persons of quality in some places of Italy when they have a desire not to be known. And as to what hath been said against Painting, it seems to be a little too severe to blame that pardonable curiosity, which the women are only guilty of, to preserve and heighten their greatest Treasure, that is, their Beauty, upon the account whereof they are principally recommendable to men; who, were it not for that, would be apt to sleight them much more than they do. For what do the poor women do more in that than is daily done in Medicine, whereof one part treats of Cosmeticks, that is, of Painting, and is brought in for the reparation of the defects and deformities of Nature.

The Third said, That the Mask or Vizzard, by the Latines called Persona, either upon this consideration that it changes the condition of the person, causing him to be taken for some other; or haply à per-sonando, by reason of the new sound he gives the words pronounc’d through the Vizzard. This invention of Vizzards, as also that of speaking Prologues before Playes, is by some attributed to one Thespis, an Athenian Poet, of whom it is said,

--------Et planstris vexisse poemita Thespis
Quæ canerent agerentq; peruncti fœcibus ora.

By others, to Æschylus The Tragidian,
Post hunc personæ pallæq, repertor honestæ
Æschylus,---------

At first they painted with divers colours the faces of those Comedians, who were carry’d about the streets in Charlots; but that humor not taking so well, because the same Actor by that means found it very troublesome to act several parts, they found out the convenience of Masks and Vizards, made as near as they could like those whom they were to represent, till such time as the Macedonians became formidable in Greece. For these meeting with some persons in Vizards who resembled them, the Actors were somewhat at a loss how they should handsomely come off: whereupon the business being taken into deliberation, it was resolv’d that those made thence forward should be for the representation of extravagant or ridiculous persons, or such as might frighten the Spectators; such as were those which the Greeks called Mormolycaa, bug-bears, and Oxyodentas, and the Latines, Larvas, (wherewith the Mothers threatened their little Children) Gumias, Lamias, Sillos, & c. These last represented the counrestances of ridiculous and abhominable women,

-------- Cum personæ pallentis biatum
In gremio matris formidat rusticus infans.

She was also ------ Magno manducus hiatu.

They were at first made of the leaves of the Fig-tree, then of a certain herb that had large leaves, and, from its being us’d upon that occasion, called personata. Afterwards the said Vizards were made of the back of Trees; whence came this expression,

Oraq; corticibus summunt horrenda cavatis.

And at last they come to be of wood, whence this other,

Vt tragiens cantor, trgno tegit or a cavato.

Whence it may be inferr’d, that the design of using Masks and Vizards upon the Stage, where it is most us’d, is in order to imitation, and to heighten the confidence of the Actors, who by that means are not known. And the convenience and decency of that custom is such, that one of the greatest reproaches lying on
the memory of Nero, is, that having brought some persons nobly descended upon
the Stage for to be Actors, he caus’d them to put off their Vizards while they
play’d on the Flute, and forbad the Comedians to appear vizarded upon the Stage.
To this may be added, that, according to the Counsel of the Holy Fathers, women
and young maids, when they walk abroad, nay, when they go to Church, ought to
be not only mask’d, but also veil’d, to prevent the temptations which the full sight
of them might cause in men, and the destruction of their own and the others
devotion. Now the female sex making up above one half of the world, we cannot,
upon any rational grounds universally find fault with that thing or custom, the
use whereof is allow’d to the greater part.

§§§§§§§§

THÉOPHRASTE RENAUDOT (1586-1653)
General Collection of Discourses of the Virtuosi of France, Upon Questions of all Sorts of
Philosophy and other Natural Knowledg.
Two Volumes — London, 1664 & 1665.

Selected, Transcribed & Edited, by Dr Robert A. Hatch©

This WebVersion transcribed, edited, & paginated
By Dr Robert A. Hatch©

Educational use with links is permitted with full citation.
Commercial use of any kind is prohibited.