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*Masks and the Romantic Historical Closet Drama:  
Lorenzaccio and Marino Faliero*

**Keywords:** mask, closet drama, Romanticism, Italy, Renaissance history, carnival, masked ball.

**Abstract:** Our paper approaches the *mask* in the specific context of the romantic historical closet drama, with a focus on two masterpieces of the genre: Lord Byron's *Marino Faliero* (1821) and Alfred de Musset's *Lorenzaccio* (1834). We shall attempt to identify the place of the mask as a technical device and as a literary motive in the economy of the dramatic plot, and at the same time to draw some of the barely visible background lines of what one may call a romantic anthropology of the mask.

In English literature, the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, marked by the strong presence of the great romantic poets even in playwriting, define a “golden” epoch of the closet drama. A change of mentality and taste, combined with a dynamic view and a businesslike attitude towards art production lay at the origin of the phenomenon. London theatres, Drury Lane and Covent Garden included, were (literally!) the stage of a “booming theatrical industry”. This tremendous success was not due, however, to a second Renaissance of the English theatre, but to the lucrative opening of the theatre gates to lower popular entertainment plays, such as farce, burletta and pantomime. To avoid the hissing and whistling of an uncultivated audience in search of light entertainment, intellectual drama had to withdraw to the “closet”<sup>1</sup>.

Lord Byron, for instance, though in a permanent dialogue with the classic<sup>2</sup> and Renaissance models who used to give prominence to stage representation over the dramatic text – in English, the term *play* itself (used to designate a theatrical production since the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century) implies, like *drama* in Old Greek, the idea of “action”, of “performance”<sup>3</sup> –, showed repeatedly in his career as a playwright his penchant for the closet drama<sup>4</sup>, with *Manfred*, *Cain*, *Marino Faliero*, *Heaven and Earth*... He explained in the letters to his publisher and also in the prefaces to his historical plays that his option for this genre spared him both

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<sup>1</sup> V. Greg Kucich, “A Haunted Ruin”: *Romantic Drama, Renaissance Tradition, and the Critical Establishment*, in Terence Allan Hoagwood and Daniel P. Watkins (ed.), *British Romantic Drama, Historical and Critic Essays*, Madison; Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1998, pp. 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> He strove, for instance, to obey the classic rule of the unities in *Marino Faliero*, an effort that cost him a necessary compression of historical truth.

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of the noun *play* sends back to O.E. verb *plegian* = “to exercise, frolic, perform music”.

<sup>4</sup> V. also Jonathan David Gross, *Byron, the Erotic Liberal*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, pp. 113-114.

the negative emotions of the hostile backstage, so familiar to a member of the Drury Lane Theatre sub-committee, and the rebuke of an ignorant audience.

In his study devoted to the romantic drama, Greg Kucick interprets Lord Byron's preference for the closet drama in the larger context of the English dramatic trend of the time and in tight connection with his (and his whole generation's) ambivalent attitude towards playwriting:

“His fascination with the drama began as early as his adolescence, when he composed a play he called *Ulric and Ilvina*. His decision to burn that composition is paradigmatic of his lifelong, often tortuous ambivalence toward dramatic production. (...) These contradictions between Byron's ambitions and denials, his gestures toward the theater and strides away from it, provide a striking paradigm of a peculiar kind of ambivalence that runs throughout Romanticism's engagement with the drama”.<sup>1</sup>

The critic explains this ambivalence that goes from oscillation to contradiction by the complicate relation of the Romantics with their Renaissance forerunners: the wish to imitate Renaissance drama is counteracted by the fear of not being able (or the failure) to rise to the height of the challenge. In the specific English context, closet drama might have been a compromise solution to a historical-psychological crisis.

A comparative approach to the Western Romantic drama, however, reveals a taste for this genre in other literatures, as well. After the bad reception of his *Nuit vénétienne* in 1830, Alfred de Musset decided to give up writing for the stage. Under those circumstances, he conceived his dramatic masterpiece, *Lorenzaccio*, as a closet drama: « un spectacle dans un fauteuil », and the subsequent efforts undertaken by the poet's brother, Paul, to take the play to the stage met a whole range of difficulties: one obstacle came from the political prudence and moral standards of the Second Empire (in a report of July 23, 1864, *Lorenzaccio* was labelled a “dangerous play” – « un spectacle dangereux à présenter au public »<sup>2</sup>), but many other obstacles were inherent to the “closet” nature / aspect itself of the drama. No wonder it took four decades after Alfred de Musset's death for the French stage to witness the miracle of *Lorenzaccio* being produced: by Sarah Bernhardt, at the Théâtre de la Renaissance.

The case of the French romantic drama was, nevertheless, different from that of its English counterpart; looking towards the powerful personality of Victor Hugo, the French Romantics had good reason – or so they thought – to aspire to a new Golden Age of the theatre. Moreover, instead of inhibiting the dramatic impetus of the French Romantics, the playwrights' look back towards Shakespeare (as opposed to the French classics) actually spurred their creative faculties and offered a strong ally in the clash between the Classics and the Romantics.

The status of the closet drama among the literary genres approached by the Romantics, no matter the background variables revealed by any bird's-eye view of

<sup>1</sup> Greg Kucick, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>2</sup> Apud Bernard Masson, *Musset et le théâtre intérieur: nouvelles recherches sur Lorenzaccio*, Paris, Colin, 1974, pp. 229-230.

the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western literatures, is definitely ambiguous. Sometimes, closet drama is only a failed stage drama. *Cromwell* itself is one of the kind: published in 1827, it was performed only in 1956, for several good reasons – its “epic” proportions, its large number of characters, its obsolete Alexandrine meter<sup>1</sup>... In certain particular contexts then, closet drama was essentially the aborted fruit of a magnificent dramatic project. Consequently, a smell of failure has attached itself to the genre, a pejorative connotation has stuck to the corresponding term. Some other times, however, as with Lord Byron, Alfred de Musset, P.B. Shelley or Keats, closet drama was a generic option: the result of an original, deliberate technical choice made by the playwright. Sure, this discreet genre fit the acute sensitivity, the titanic pride and the horror of vulgarity of the romantic artist. The romantic playwrights – who most often than not were also, and usually foremost, poets – were naturally attracted towards a genre that favoured a close, intimate one-to-one relationship between a solitary writer and a solitary reader (sometimes a small circle of select listeners too), in the confessional-like atmosphere of one’s “closet”.

This genre, though, offered more than mere psychological gratification to the romantic playwright. From an artistic point of view, closet drama, usually called “dramatic poem” during the romantic age, not unlike another boundary genre – the prose poem –, opened a range of luring possibilities: to create a text that could be read like a story and internalized like poetry, preserving meantime the appearance of real life, through the importance allotted to action and movement, the construction of three-dimension characters and the sustained use of dialogue. In other words, the romantic writer was offered the opportunity to be simultaneously on and offstage, and even to solve, in the Gordian knot way, the intricacies of an old theoretical dilemma: “Is drama literature or theatre?”...

Being vowed, from its very grain, to reading and not to stage representation, romantic closet drama required no “performance”, had no “audience”, and needed no “masks” in the theatrological sense of these terms. In fact, going further, beyond the special case of the closet drama, 19<sup>th</sup> century actors were gradually abandoning the many-century old habit of using masks while acting their parts; the theatre mask had to wait another one hundred years to be revalued by the Western dramatists and stage managers. Meanwhile, as we shall see, masks of other kinds are, somehow ironically, an intriguing presence in at least two closet dramas of the age.

To start with, the settings of the two plays that make the object of the present paper are quite related: mid-14<sup>th</sup> century Venice for Byron’s *Marino Faliero* and mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Florence for Musset’s *Lorenzaccio*. The Romantics’ fascination with Renaissance Italy can hardly be exaggerated; but in the case of Byron and Musset, Shelley also, it goes beyond mere fashion. They made Italy enter their biographies, not only by taking temporary residence in Venice, Genoa, Pisa or Ravenna – which they in fact did –, but also by actually exploring an Italy they were gradually making their own. The most important part of this emotional *Italianization* process is related to the Romantics’ study and interpretation of the

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<sup>1</sup> V. Heike Grundmann, *Shakespeare and European Romanticism*, in Michael Ferber (ed.), *A Companion to European Romanticism*, Blackwell, 2005, p. 41.

Italian history. For Byron and Musset – who shared, like many politically disillusioned young aristocrats of their time, the revolutionary ideal of individual liberty and the abhorrence of tyranny – the Italian Peninsula, with its early passage to Renaissance, which combined a rediscovery of the republican values and the bold perspective of a new social order, turned into a constant source of intellectual meditation and literary inspiration. The preface to *Marino Faliero* is only one of the many instances in which Lord Byron avowed his fascination with Venice: “Every thing about Venice is, or was, extraordinary – her aspect is like a dream, and her history is like a romance.” And before that, with reference to the choice of his dramatic subject: “The conspiracy of the Doge Marino Faliero is one of the most remarkable events in the annals of the most singular government, city, and people of modern history.”

Obscure episodes of a complex and very tormented history – that alternated republican and despotic regimes in a permanent failure of a much wished for equilibrium –, such as the disgrace of the old duke Marino Faliero, the fall of the house of Foscari (Byron) or the political treason of a depraved and adventurous Lorenzino dei Medici (Musset) are thus turned into and stand for samples of an exemplary history of modern Europe.

Our purpose here is not to re-tell the story behind the two plays: the background or, better say, the “backstage” of both Byron’s and Musset’s creation (of *Marino Faliero* and *Lorenzaccio* respectively), the two writers’ fair or unfair treatment of the historical sources, their management of historical truths and contemporary political and literary issues, their debt to other playwrights of the age or of times past, their reception by the public and the quality of the theatre reviews they received on their turn, have made the object of serious and thorough analysis by literary historians. We shall focus, instead, on a “minor” issue: the presence of masks in the two dramas, both as visible “stage” accessories and as implied technical devices.

At the basis of the dramatic conflict in *Marino Faliero* lies an apparently minor incident: the patrician Michael Steno, one of the “tre Capi” of the Forty had written on the ducal chair, on a night of the 1357 carnival, a calumnious remark against the patriarch and Doge Marino Faliero. In a combination of due decency and cultivated mystery, the trouble-making inscription is never actually revealed in the play. The old Doge energetically forbids his nephew to repeat the offending words in Act I, scene 2, and the attempt to utter them is never resumed. According to the Venetian chronicler Marin Sanuto, author of *Vitae Ducum Venetorum*, the main historical source used by Byron while documenting the play, the trouble-making inscription was: „Marino Faliero, Doge, dalla bella moglie, altri la gode, ed egli la mantiene”. Discontented with the penalty decided for the offender by the Council of the Forty – two months imprisonment and one year banishment from Venice – the doge prepares his own revenge, interpreted by Byron, after Sanuto, as an intention to overthrow the patrician government of Venice and restore the republic in its primary rights.

Byron was strongly impressed by the posthumous destiny of old Marino Faliero, who had received a black veiled empty frame and not a magnificent portrait in the gallery of the Venetian Doges, and instead of seeing him as a

“Venetian mafioso who tried, in his senescence, to go too far, and paid the penalty”<sup>1</sup>, as most of the chroniclers had described him, made him the protagonist of a republican myth, and his beheading as a country traitor – a heroic death. The resemblance to the Lorenzaccio “case” is remarkable. Alfred de Musset took over George Sand’s subject of *Une Conspiration en 1537* (1831) inspired by the chronicle of Benedetto Varchi, turned it into most likely the best historical drama of the French Romanticism, and – as happened before with Lord Byron and Marino Faliero – conceived the dubious historical character Lorenzino dei Medici as a republican hero and as an *alter ego* besides.

By which miracle could Lord Byron transfigure an old man’s personal jealousy raised by a petty insult into a pre-revolutionary state of mind? It was the Western image of Southern Europe that must have contributed to the process: in the context of a Mediterranean culture that places at its core the concept of patriarchal honour and that encourages retaliation or *vendetta*, Steno’s insult could not be taken easily. However, it is more to it. The key to this spectacular transfiguration is given by the confusion between the private and the public, the domestic and the civic spheres all through the play. Marino Faliero was not only the husband of young and lovely Angiolina and the head of the Falieri; he was also the man mystically united to the sea through the ducal ceremony. Steno’s gesture was not, in this symbolic context, a forgivable act of youthful insolence and a personal insult, but a political crime, a *lèse-majesté*.

The nineteenth century witnessed a reassessment of the statuses and roles within the family and the domestic circle, and a revaluation of the society members as citizens; in this context, the paternal figures, guarantors of the old political order, are challenged and defied. The family head or *pater familias*, the monarch, the Pope and the other heads of the Catholic Church, the military commanders and the abusive patrician class in general, seen as one single monstrous body – were equated and judged within the same general frame of representation. Here is, in *Marino Faliero*, one of the rebels’ heads, Calendario, portraying the Venetian alliance of the patricians against the common people as an “o’ergrown aristocratic Hydra”<sup>2</sup>:

“(…) they form but links  
Of one long chain; one mass, one breath, one body;  
They eat, and drink, and live, and breed together,  
Revel, and lie, oppress and kill in concert.”<sup>3</sup>

This radical view of the public and private authority explains the recurrent overlapping of the domestic and civic-civil plans in the romantic historical drama. It can be perceived not only in Lord Byron’s *Marino Faliero*, but also in P.B. Shelley’s *The Cenci*, another historical closet drama of the age, in Kleist’s *Prince*

<sup>1</sup> V. Peter Cochran, *Faliero the Myth*, in “Editor’s Introduction” to *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice, A Historical Tragedy in Five Acts*, by Lord Byron: [http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/marino\\_faliero.pdf](http://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/marino_faliero.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Lord Byron, *Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice*, M. Carey & Sons, 1821, I, 2, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, III, 2, p. 81.

of *Homburg*, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, later in Ibsen's *Pretenders* and, of course, in *Lorenzaccio*, where a family strife – between Lorenzino dei Medici and his cousin Alessandro, the duke of Florence – turns into a political gesture.

The mask as a dramatic technical device plays a special part in the layered construction of the private-public identity of the characters. In order to fulfill their revolutionary destiny, Musset's Lorenzo de Médicis and Byron's Marino Faliero have got to betray their peers<sup>1</sup>. The protagonists' belonging, by birth and political position, to the spheres of patrician power and not to the lower ranks of society is a meaningful aspect of the two plays. It contributes, on one hand, to the general conception of Lorenzo and Faliero as dramatic doubles (or masks!) of the two playwrights. On the other hand, this aspect enhances the dimension of personal sacrifice in the case of the two protagonists, which eventually leads to the tragic effect of the plays. The dramatic situation, with all its moral paradox, is emblematic for the historical tragedies. It is in this context that we interpret the repeated evocation of Brutus in the two plays, a name carrying along its historical ambiguity<sup>2</sup> and all the complexity of its socio-political symbolism: parricide<sup>3</sup> and republican hero.

As the hard road to freedom passes through betrayal, both dramatic heroes must obey the rules of political duplicity, and adopt at least one mask. Dissimulation makes possible what Marie-Joséphine Whitaker calls « la force de la faiblesse »<sup>4</sup>. The Doge conspires with his rebel subjects to overthrow the tyrannical government of the Forty: his silence, his discretion in his conspiratorial activities and his stifled resentment and hate are part of his strategy of dissimulation. He wears no special disguise apart from his simulated indifference and reserve. Lorenzo, however, is a complex and gifted mask-wearer; while he is meticulously planning his political blow, he is playing, in a convincing way, the “Lorenzetta” and “Lorenzaccio”<sup>5</sup> roles<sup>6</sup>, in front of the duke and of the whole court. Though certain people around him are not too easy to mislead – the Cardinal Cibo<sup>7</sup>, for

<sup>1</sup> To renegade one's comrades-in-arms is not an easy decision to make for the Doge: “(...) can I see them dabbled o'er with blood? / Each stab to them will seem my suicide”; v. Lord Byron, *op. cit.*, III, 2, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> V. Idem, *ibid.*, II, 2, p. 69; V, 1, p. 146. Alfred de Musset, *Lorenzaccio*, édition présentée et annotée par Anne Ubersfeld, Le Livre de Poche, 2000, II, 4, p. 61; III, 3, pp. 89-90, 92, 94. In *Lorenzaccio*, not one, but two ancient Roman heroes called Brutus are invoked, who have as a common biographical fact a tyrant's murder: Lucius Junius Brutus, who contributed to the assassination of the legendary king Tarquinius Superbus, respectively the better known Marcus Junius Brutus who took part in the plot against Julius Caesar.

<sup>3</sup> At the trial, Marino Faliero's political gesture is labelled a “parricide” by his judges; v. Lord Byron, *op. cit.*, V, 1, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Joséphine Whitaker, *Lorenzaccio ou la force de la faiblesse: lecture dramaturgique*, in Michel Crouzet (sous la dir. de), *Musset. Lorenzaccio. On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, Paris V, Sedes, 1990, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> V. Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 4, pp. 37 and 34.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bernard Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> V. Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 4, p. 32.

instance –, the duke himself is completely seduced by Lorenzo's mask, as fully shown in the scene of the failed duel<sup>1</sup>, where Alexandre mocks Lorenzo's apparent want of military abilities and his lack of virtue:

« *Le Duc* : (...) Renzo, un homme à craindre! le plus fieffé poltron! une femmelette, l'ombre d'un ruffian énérvé! un rêveur qui marche nuit et jour sans épée, de peur d'en apercevoir l'ombre à son côté! d'ailleurs un philosophe, un gratteur de papier, un méchant poète qui ne sait seulement pas faire un sonnet! »<sup>2</sup>

« *Le Duc* : (...) Regardez-moi ce petit corps maigre, ce lendemain d'orgie ambulante. Regardez-moi ces yeux plombés, ces mains fluettes et malades, à peine assez fermes pour soutenir un éventail, ce visage morne, qui sourit quelquefois, mais qui n'a pas la force de rire. C'est là un homme à craindre? »<sup>3</sup>

« *Le Duc* : (...) Tout ce que je sais de ces damnés bannis, de tous ces républicains entêtés qui complotent autour de moi, c'est par Lorenzo que je le sais. Il est glissant comme une anguille; il se fourre partout et me dit tout. (...) Oui, certes, c'est mon entremetteur; mais croyez que son entremise, si elle nuit à quelqu'un, ne me nuira pas. »<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, in order to win the duke's confidence, Lorenzino becomes his partner of debauchery, his « entremetteur », his buffoon and his informal intelligence service, in a word: “Lorenzaccio”. If simulation of cowardice and frailty are added to his moral portrait, we get the whole picture of his “Lorenzetta” & “Lorenzaccio” mask.

The construction of the mask starts – as Bernard Masson, probably the best known critic of *Lorenzaccio*, shows<sup>5</sup> – with the very first scene of the play. It gets consistency in the memorable second and fourth scenes (the Nasi masked ball and the failed duel) and gets the finishing touch by the end of the first act. Nonetheless, it is only with the end of the first and the opening of the second act that the reader / spectator may gradually begin to perceive it as such – as a mask and not as the character's true personality.

Lorenzaccio's confession to old Philippe Strozzi in Act III, scene 3, marks a new turn in the evolution of the mask. As the protagonist himself avows, his mask has undermined his psychological stability and has gradually taken control of his ego: « Le vice a été pour moi un vêtement, maintenant il est collé à ma peau »<sup>6</sup>. The discrepancy between Lorenzo's former young, pure, idealistic self and his present corruption (originally conceived as a mask), is close to inaugurate, at this point, a personality splitting. The danger of losing himself behind the mask is increased by Lorenzo's deliberate interchange of perspectives: while he is trying to give credibility to the “Lorenzetta” & “Lorenzaccio” mask, his true self acquires the shallowness and artificiality of a mask: « J'avais commencé à dire tout haut que mes vingt années de vertu étaient un masque étouffant. »<sup>7</sup> The question is whether

<sup>1</sup> V. Idem, *ibid.*, I, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, I, 4, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Masson, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-195.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, III, 3, p. 92.

the character will be strong enough, at the end of it all, to plug the mask and regain his original sense of the self. Philippe Strozzi believes in the power and chance of redemption of this newly revealed heroic Lorenzino de Médicis: « (...) si tu es honnête, quand tu auras délivré ta patrie, tu le reviendras. (...) alors tu jetteras ce déguisement hideux qui te défigure, et tu reviendras d'un métal aussi pur que les statues de bronze d'Harmodius et d'Aristogiton. »<sup>1</sup>, but Lorenzo, for his part, is highly pessimistic:

« (...) moi, qui n'est voulu prendre qu'un masque pareil à leurs visages [les visages des débauchés], et qui ai été aux mauvais lieux avec une résolution inébranlable de rester pur sous mes vêtements souillés, je ne puis ni me retrouver moi-même ni laver mes mains même avec du sang! »<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, as early as Act I, scene 6, Marie Soderini, trusting her own intuition as a mother, remarks the subversive efficiency of Lorenzino's disguise:

« (...) il n'est même plus beau ; comme une fumée malfaisante, la souillure de son corps lui est montée au visage. Le sourire, ce doux épanouissement qui rend la jeunesse semblable aux fleurs, s'est enfoui de ses joues couleur de soufre, pour y laisser grommeler une ironie ignoble et le mépris de tout. »<sup>3</sup>

The protagonist's countenance has apparently already acquired the essential physical features of a real, material face mask: one single fix and hypertrophic expression against a chromatically frozen background. In fact, the face mask representation comes back later in the play, when Lorenzo evokes, when referring to himself, a reified plaster mask: « Non, je ne rougis point; les masques de plâtre n'ont point de rougeur au service de la honte. »<sup>4</sup> The plaster mask motive suggests the double dimension of Lorenzo's image of himself: it shows, in a visionary élan, what he would like to become (the statue of a hero) and, in a painful evaluation of his present estate, what he has become (a shameless court buffoon).

Bernard Masson considers the end of the second act and the third act to be crucial in Lorenzo's evolution as a mask-wearer: « L'homme au masque cède alors le pas à l'homme à visage découvert. Commence alors aussi le drame de l'homme qui ne peut plus, à tous les sens du terme, découvrir son propre visage. »<sup>5</sup> Within her critical approach to Bernard Masson's Marxist, existentialistic and psychoanalytic treatment of *Lorenzaccio*, Marie-Joséphine Whitaker remarks Masson's inadequate position as to Lorenzo's mask. Lorenzo is a mask-wearer indeed, but the mask he wears – that of « maquereau sinistre » (I, 1), « écolier irresponsable » (I, 2), « femmelette incapable de soutenir la vue d'une épée » (I, 2), « chien de cour » (I, 4), « modèle titré de la débauche florentine » (I, 4) « [paresseux qui s'amuse à] cracher dans un puits pour faire des ronds » (II, 6) etc. – is not meant to deceive the reader / spectator, but the other characters in the play.

<sup>1</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, III, 3, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, IV, 6, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, I, 6, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, *ibid.*, III, 3, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 197.



His disguise is a dramatic device, part of a coherent action strategy having a very well-defined and clear purpose, and not solely the mark of a psychological deficiency or of a personality crisis. What matters is how Lorenzo's mask functions inside the dramatic plot, and not what the reader / spectator makes of it: « (...) les images trompeuses » – she writes – « ne nous sont pas destinées. En effet, si Lorenzo trompe son monde au début du drame, Musset, lui, qui ne veut aucunement nous mystifier, nous *détrompe* peu à peu sur le compte de son héros par touches savamment graduées.»<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect that complicates even further the essence-appearance issue in *Lorenzaccio* is related to the double or the ghost / spectre motive – representing a pertinent alternative to the mask motive. Lorenzo occasionally meets his old self that comes back to haunt him and his mother too, under the guise of a mournful spectre. Barbara T. Cooper remarks the persistence of the old, undefiled self of the protagonist as an autonomous double, behind his assumed mask of debauchery. In fact, she concludes, there is a fluid boundary between Lorenzo's old self and his new one.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, the key concepts that make possible a unitary understanding of masks as both technical devices and literary motives in *Lorenzaccio* and *Marino Faliero*, are, in our opinion, the carnival and its off-spring, the masked ball. No wonder the two plays open upon the aftermath of the carnival! It is on a carnival night that an uninhibited, intoxicated maybe, Michael Steno defiled the ducal chair with his insulting, troublemaking inscription, and it is on such a day that an insolent Pierre Strozzi dragged the huge carnival balloon on the streets of Florence, upsetting the passers-by and destroying the merchandise on display in the street shops. The fact that allusions to the carnival disorders are made in a scene close to the beginning of the first act (I, 2 – in both plays) is not a mere coincidence; though fugitively mentioned, the carnival incidents contribute considerably to both the exposition of the plays and the genesis of their dramatic plot. We also consider the evocation of the carnival, with all its transgression and impudence<sup>3</sup>, to exceed, in the two closet dramas, the role of setting artifice or of local colour effect. In reality, the whole development of the dramatic action seems to lie, in both plays, under the sign of carnival.

This significant aspect may seem to open the possibility to extend the analysis of the texts towards the interpretation of the dramatic *carnivalesque* as a contestation of, and an attack on authority, as the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin theorized it<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the carnival seems to fulfill in *Lorenzaccio* and *Marino Faliero* a rather baffling function: as we shall see, instead of raising the low, as part of its social levelling attribute, the carnival debases the high, turning itself into a metaphor of social and political decay, instead of an optimistic symbol of deliverance.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Joséphine Whitaker, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> V. Barbara T. Cooper, *Congruences mussétistes*, in Michel Crouzet (sous la dir. de), *op. cit.*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>3</sup> V. Lord Byron, *op. cit.*, I, 2 and II, 1; Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 2.

<sup>4</sup> V. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana Univ. Press, 2009.

In Venice and Florence alike, the growth of the political power of certain patrician families, sometimes in alliance with foreign powers, repeatedly menaced the democratic equilibrium of the state. The Doge Faliero in Lord Byron's play denounces the tyranny and abuses of the Venetian Council of the Forty that refuses to give him satisfaction in the Steno case, as Lorenzino (a crown pretender?) in Musset's play, secretly condemns the authoritarian political regime of his cousin, the duke Alexandre de Médicis, raised to the throne by the Pope (Clement VII, natural father of Alessandro) and the German Emperor (Charles Quint). (Thus, in *Lorenzaccio*, an internal affair – both private and public – is complicated by foreign intrusion.)

The citizens of the two Italian states, who keep in mind the memory of a past democratic regime, look with nostalgia towards the past, with skepticism towards the future, with bitterness at their own present:

« *L'Orfèvre* : La Cour! le peuple la porte sur le dos, voyez-vous! Florence était encore (il n'y a pas longtemps de cela) une bonne maison bien bâtie ; tous ces grands palais, qui sont les logements de nos grandes familles, en étaient les colonnes. Il n'y en avait pas une, de toutes ces colonnes, qui dépassât l'autre d'un pouce ; elles soutenaient à elles toute une vieille voûte bien cimentée, et nous nous promenions là-dessous sans crainte d'une pierre sure la tête. (...) Après quoi, ils ont jugé de prendre une des colonnes dont je vous parle, à savoir celle de la famille des Médicis, et d'un faire un clocher, lequel clocher a poussé comme un champignon de malheur dans l'espace d'une nuit. »<sup>1</sup>

The same in the 14<sup>th</sup> century Venice depicted by Lord Byron:

“*Bertram*: (...) the accursed tyranny (...) rides  
The very air in Venice, and makes men  
Madden as in the last hours of the plague  
Which sweeps the soul deliriously from life!”<sup>2</sup>

Freedom and democracy represent, in the two plays, conditions of political normality. On the contrary, authoritarian regimes, such as that of Marino Faliero's Venice and Alessandro dei Medici's Florence, mark an abnormal and degraded state of things (by comparison to a past time of political and social harmony), an upside-down, carnival-like world, that is. Indeed, Lorenzo de Médicis and Marino Faliero reveal themselves, within the romantically-tinged historical situation depicted in the dramas, as mask-wearers moving on a carnival-infected stage, which they are trying to restore, to bring back to normality.

Meanwhile, the basic features of the traditional carnival itself, such as total participation, community feeling and temporary suspension of social differences – in *Lorenzaccio*, at least – are drastically limited. Among the upper class members, old conflicts and *partis pris* are temporarily forgotten – a Salviati and a Strozzi may party together at the masked ball at the Nasi's, and murder each other afterwards –, but ordinary people are excluded from the common feast<sup>3</sup>. So, essentially, the

<sup>1</sup> Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 2, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> V. Lord Byron, *op. cit.*, IV, 1, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> V. Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 2.

carnival has lost its traditional form and function, while the real world acquires certain carnivalesque features, such as chaos, licence, abuse and excess.

The masked ball at the Nasi's, depicted in Act I, scene 2 of *Lorenzaccio*, illustrates this paradoxical situation. Merchants, schoolboys full of idle curiosity, bourgeois wives are standing in the street, watching beyond the walls of the sumptuous Nasi residence, to get a glimpse of the masks dancing and enjoying themselves inside the ballroom. The playwright uses a double spatial artifice in order to underline the increasing abyss between two already segregated social groups: the patricians and the German mercenary troops that ensure their protection, on one hand, and the common people or the « bourgeois », on the other. Following the logic of an inside-outside dialectics, the residence of the Nasi family is presented as a garden of delights, open to a merry and boisterous patrician company, but forbidden to everybody else. So, instead of being a space of genuine social interaction, the ballroom proves an exclusivist club, a kind of private carnival!

The other clear and even more powerful division of the dramatic space that carries a social significance is drawn on a vertical plan: the pedestrian people in the street are small and powerless in front of the duke's mounted police and of the patricians themselves, who leave the ball scene in groups and on horseback. The masks invade the public space, proliferating into a chaotic, carnival-like explosion of colours and shapes, with a hypnotic effect on the bystanders: « *Le Second Écolier*: Rose, vert, bleu, j'en ai plein les yeux; la tête me tourne. »<sup>1</sup>

It is in this context that Lorenzo himself is putting on a ball mask or a masquerade disguise – upon or, more precisely, within his larger “Lorenzaccio” mask: « Car l'homme au masque y figure masqué doublement »<sup>2</sup>. Dressed in nun's clothes (guise that stands for a double transgression: of gender and of religious good sense<sup>3</sup>), like his two party companions – the duke and Julien Salviati –, Lorenzo plays a nonsensical, childish trick on Roberto Corsini, the Commander of the Fortress, by throwing a bottle at him from above, and hurting his horse. This puzzling gesture may well be just an absurd and bad taste farce (« [une] de ses farces silencieuses »<sup>4</sup>), in the carnival spirit, fit to the disorder of the moment and typical to the “Lorenzaccio” mask. But it may as well be a test for the duke's guardians – if the *Provéditeur*'s level of vigilance is so low that he is not even capable to anticipate a blow aiming at him, should he be expected to be more careful with Alexandre's protection?

Alfred de Musset's recourse to the carnival and the masked ball in order to create, through metaphor, the panorama of a society, is not an element of exoticism for his time. As François Gasnault shows in a most interesting study on the 19<sup>th</sup> century French ballrooms, around the 1830s<sup>5</sup>, the ball becomes a popular

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<sup>1</sup> V. Idem, *ibid.*, I, 2, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Idem, *ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> V. Alfred de Musset, *op. cit.*, I, 2, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> V. François Gasnault, *Les salles de bal du Paris romantique; décors et jeux des corps*, „Romantisme”, 1982, no. 38, „Le spectacle romantique”.

entertainment in Paris and, which is more important, a manifestation of the community sense for people of all social layers. The ball, he continues, is in post-Revolutionary France what the religious procession used to be in the Ancient Regime: theatre and street movement at the same time, offering to the city people the chance to be simultaneously spectators and performers.<sup>1</sup> Replacing the carnival and contributing to a reassessment of the community feeling, the ball becomes then in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, something close to a *total social fact* – « un fait social total », as the ethnologist Marcel Mauss would have called it.

It is in an atemporal Venice, however, that the mask gets the full of its Western cultural significance and the most prominent part in the social rituals; it appears over and over again, under various shapes and in different contexts: as carnival mask, *commedia dell'arte* mask and street mask. Worn by the duke himself and by his patrician adversaries, the street mask in *Marino Faliero*<sup>2</sup> reveals, like the ball mask in *Lorenzaccio*, a whole world of farce, secrecy and dissimulation, contributing meantime, beyond all historical contingency, to the general process of the *anthropopoiesis*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Idem*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> V. Lord Byron, *op. cit.*, I, 2, p. 37; IV, 1, pp. 104-105.

<sup>3</sup> V. Francis Affergan, *Les modèles anthropopoiétiques du masque*, in F. Affergan et al., *Figures de l'humain*, Les représentations de l'anthropologie, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2003.