

18TH Century Masquerades & The People that Hated Them

History

Masquerade balls have a long history dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries, where they were part of carnival celebrations. Masquerades quickly became popular in France and the most notorious masquerades were often held in celebration of Royal Entries, which occurred when villagers welcomed the king and queen to their cities.

In the 16th century, masquerade balls were more commonly associated with Italy and Roman Catholicism, as we continue to today. Linked with Venetian Carnival celebrations, masquerade balls became known for their decadence and gluttony.

In the 18th century, John James Heidegger, a count from Switzerland, brought Venetian costumes to England after the fall of Venetian Republic caused the masquerade to go out of fashion in Venice. These balls were wildly popular with the lower classes and the upper classes as masks allowed for a certain level of anonymity and mixing of the social classes. During the summer, the balls were held at Vauxhall, Ranelagh, and other similar pleasure gardens that became known for decadence and licentious behavior.

As masquerades became more of a commercial venture, separate from Roman Catholicism and carnival celebrations, they became more associated with Twelfth Night celebrations. Jane Austen participated in one such celebration:

“On Twelfth Night we had a delightful evening...about our dress King and Queen, W Morris was King, I was Queen, Papa– Prince Busty Trusty, Mama– Red Riding Hood, Edward– Paddy O’Flaherty, G.– Johnny Bo-peep, H.– Timothy Trip, W.– Moses Abrahams, Eliz.– Mrs O’Flaherty, Ma.– Granny Grump, C– Cupid (by his own desire), Louisa– Princess Busty Trusty, Uncle H.B.– Punch, Aunt H.B.– Poll Mendicant, Jane– Punch’s Wife, Mary– Columbine, Uncle John– Jerry the Milkman, Mrs Morris– Sukey Sweetlips, Sophia– Margery Muttonpie.’

Soon After, according to a preconstructed plan, some of us retired upstairs to dress Jane as Punch’s wife, in a witches hat, a green petticoat and a scarlet shawl (the remains of our last year’s masquerade) Mrs M.J. and I in beggars clothes to sing carols at the parlour door, and myself in a long scarlet cloak for a royal robe and a wreath of natural primroses (which we had gathered and made up in the morning for whoever would be queen) around my head.”

*Fanny Austen to Miss Dorothy Clapman
February, 1812*



Figure 1: Anon., Remarkable Characters at Mrs. Cornelys' Masquerade (1771)

Masquerade ball guests attempted to reveal the identities of their fellow masked guests. This made masquerades more enjoyable than the more typical balls and allowed guests to be more playful than usual.



Figure 2: Metropolitan Museum of Art, c. 1765-1770

Costumes, the most important aspect of a masquerade, usually fit in one of three categories:

1. The Domino – this was a neutral costume comprised of a large hooded cloak that hid the body. It could be worn with a mask and was generally considered to be rather generic.
2. Fancy Dress – this includes a wide variety of different character-based costumes, like milkmaids, clerical figures, military, and exotic foreign dress, such as Persian or Turkish dress.
3. A Particular Figure – this includes the goddess Diana, Elizabeth I, Henry VII, Harlequin and Punch, and Don Quixote.

The Anti-Masquerade Movement

After the first masquerades were held in the 1720s, opposition to them became apparent. As a place of social interaction between the lower and upper classes, a group of dissenters, comprised mainly of clergymen, pamphleteers, journalists, and “Middle Class Moralists” such as Henry Fielding, began to raise their voices against masquerades. They mainly made their opinions clear through pamphlets and poems, such as Henry Fielding’s “The Masquerade”, and art, such as Hogarth’s *The Masquerade Ticket*. Samuel Richardson and Eliza Haywood also considered themselves part of the Anti-Masquerade movement.

Anti-Masqueraders mainly criticized the balls for the immoral behavior associated with the balls and especially the freedom women enjoyed at there, sexual or otherwise. In fact, women were often blamed for seducing men and encouraging the bad behavior masquerades were thought to encourage.

Discussion Questions

1. In which novel do you think a masquerade ball would fit better: *Northanger Abbey* or *Frankenstein*? Why?
2. Why do you think masquerade balls were so popular in England in the 18th century? What purpose did they serve for the populace?
3. Like Gothic novels, a main appeal of masquerades was the feeling of “otherness” or “strangeness” that accompanied anything having to do with the Continent, heightened by the masks and the link to Roman Catholicism. What else do Gothic novels and masquerades have in common?
4. Masquerades often allowed women to subvert contemporary gender norms. To what extent do you think Jane Austen or Mary Shelley would support these subversions?

Further Reading

Novels Featuring Masquerades:

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- Rendall, Mike. "Let's have another visit to the ball: the 18th Century masquerade." *Georgian Gentleman*, 20 Feb. 2018, mikerendell.com/lets-have-a-ball-the-18th-century-masquerade/.
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