University of North Carolina at Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
May 2015

Embodying the Dead: Ancestor Masks and Worship in Roman Aristocratic Funerals

Melissa Huggins
Department of Classics
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Laurel Taylor

Abstract

Aristocratic funerals in Rome were highly ritualized and interactive processions that celebrated the life of the deceased and his predecessors. By law and tradition, the men of the elite families would pass on wax portrait masks of their ancestors known as *imagines*, which were worn by actors portraying the dead during the funeral parade. These funerary masks were used as transformative objects of embodying the spirits of the dead. Not only did the actors adopt the likeness of the deceased, they wore his clothes, and took on mannerisms and personality traits known to the individual. Using anthropological theory on masks and sources written during the Republic and Empire, the goal of this presentation is to demonstrate how the Romans hired actors to not only portray the dead but to literally embody their ancestors in a performative, "magical," and religious ritual that went beyond the enforcement of social hierarchy in Rome.

1. Body of Paper

Along with the religious festivals, triumphs commemorating successful military advances, and the events sanctioned by the Senate, aristocratic funerals were interactive, ostentatious events that interrupted the daily routines of the Forum and absorbed the Roman people. The *pompa funebris* (the funeral procession) was a massive march of the patrician family followed by their deceased relative, accompanied by musicians, professional mourners, and actors hired to portray their prominent deceased ancestors during the procession and eulogy.[1] These actors would don the *imagines*, wax portrait masks created during the life of the deceased for the explicit purpose of being worn during funerals. By tradition and by law, the masks were passed on to the men of elite families whose ancestors had been founders of Rome, magistrates, or famous generals. The participation of the actors and the *imagines* had a twofold role of serving the family and the deceased: by displaying their ancestors the families maintained their social position in Rome, but also appealed to the spirits of the dead in a performance of veneration. By applying anthropological theory of masks and identity this paper aims to understand the Roman act of *transforming* the performers into ancestors as a ceremonial process of ancestor worship.

Roman aristocratic funerals were held during the day to attract more spectators and mourners, wound their way through the Forum, and left the sacred walls of the city as mandated by the ancient laws of the Twelve Tables.[2] Some aspects of elite funerals were similar to those funerals of the lower classes: the body was washed by the women of the family, dressed, and then displayed[3] in the family atrium for friends and clients before the procession. They were then carried upon a funerary couch (*lectus funebris*) from their home by four to eight male family members,[4] and were preceded by mourners, musicians, family members, and friends. From there, aristocratic funerals become more ostentatious, both in size, presentation, and attraction than the funerals of lower citizens. The masked performers portraying the ancestors led the bier, arranged in chronological order, from the earliest ancestor and traditional founder of the clan, ending with the mime impersonating the newly deceased.[5] They were literally the "living and breathing Roman magistrates at the height of their careers, who had reappeared in the city to accompany their newly-dead descendent on his last journey. On this occasion they welcomed and received him as one of their number."[6] The masks allowed the family members to demonstrate their ancestry while simultaneously honoring

their predecessors and "promote a common heritage between the spectators and their leaders."[7] Once the cortège had twisted through the city and flooded the Forum, the body would be placed on the *rostra* in front of the crowd of observers. "With the newly deceased now displayed against the background of his own ancestors seated behind him on the *rostra*, the tableau presented to observers assembled in the Forum basin offered a static visual ordering of the past, present, and… future of the clan."[8] Now, the crescendo of the whole performance began, the eulogy was dictated to the audience by a close male descendant or a formal magistrate, who recounted the exploits of the deceased aristocrat and his ancestors.[9] Surrounded by the resurrected ancestors and a masked figure portraying the most recently deceased man, the eulogy would have been mesmerizing and awe-inspiring to the crowd.

When and why the ancestor masks first came into use has remained unclear; although the Romans adopted many of their funerary customs from the Etruscans and Greeks, there is no evidence for the use of funerary masks in either of these cultures. John Pollini in "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome" theorizes that the masks appeared after the Conflict of the Orders during the Early Republic: "Internal political, legal, and religious factors, as well as external foreign artistic impulses, combined to give rise to the wax ancestor mask in the second half of the fourth century BC."[10] According to Pollini, in an effort to solidify the hierarchical bounds between themselves and the plebeians, the patricians began this tradition as early as 494 BCE to demonstrate their illustrious legacy and confirm their position in Roman society. Harriet Flower explores this issue in her book, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* stating, "During the first century BC families certainly possessed and displayed *imagines* of ancestors from the early Republic, but the age of these objects is not documented. The Romans generally considered this an ancient custom."[11] Due to their organic material there are no surviving ancestor masks and there is no definitive way to date their use. There are several authors from antiquity, however, that discuss the ancestor masks used during funerals, but unfortunately historians such as Livy never confirm a specific date or mention their origin, which may indicate that the custom was so commonplace that they thought little of it. The earliest allusion to the masks was made in the 190s BCE by Plautus,[12] but they are mentioned in passing, and the audience is assumed to have some prior knowledge of them.

The two primary sources that thoroughly discuss the masks and their performative function during funerals come from the Greek historian Polybius and Diodorus of Sicily. Both come from the late Republican period of Rome as outsiders or foreigners, and describe the *imagines* in detail; but they offer conflicting descriptions of the actors and the preparation that went into the funeral procession. Polybius writes in his *Histories*:

> … they place the image of the dead man in the most public part of the house, keeping it in a wooden shrine. This image is a mask, which is made to resemble closely in both the shape of the face and its colouring the features of the dead man. The masks are displayed during public sacrifices and they compete in decorating them. And when a leading member of the family dies, the masks are taken to the funeral, and are there worn by men, who seem most like the original, both in height and in their general appearance. These men are dressed according to the rank of the deceased: a toga with a purple border for a consul or praetor, an all-purple toga for a censor, and one embroidered with gold for a man who had celebrated a triumph or done something similar. These men all ride in chariots with the rods and axes and other symbols of those in power according to the dignity of rank and station achieved by each man in his lifetime. When they reach the *rostra* they all sit down in order on ivory stools. It is not easy for an ambitious and virtuous young man to see a finer spectacle than this. For who would not be impressed at the sight of the masks of all these men who have won fame in their time, now gathered together as if alive and breathing? What spectacle could be more noble than this?[13]

According to Polybius the actors were chosen based on their general likeness to the deceased and the ancestors they represent. They would wear the corresponding clothing to the highest office position held by the individual when he was living, which was important for accurately portraying and respecting the ancestor. Polybius includes that they were accompanied by the "rods and axes," or the *fasces* that followed high-ranking magistrates throughout the city of Rome – further than that, these actors were also given a place to sit on the *rostra* in ivory curule chairs, a symbolic gesture reserved to those in the highest levels of the aristocracy. Polybius himself describes the ancestors as "alive and breathing" in front of the entire Forum, alluding to the intensity and accuracy of the actors performance and the masks they wore. Owning the masks and being able to present them on significant religious days and funerals was a right few Romans possessed, and established the family's importance in the Roman community. Although Polybius does not make it clear whether or not the family members hired actors to portray the dead or if they were part of the immediate family, Harriet Flower argues that they must have been professionals because they lead the funeral bier as opposed to falling behind toward the end of the procession among the mourning family.[14] This is an important distinction especially when comparing Polybius's account to the description provided

by Diodorus on the funeral of Lucius Aemilius Paulus. He explains that the actors were instead hired early on and would absorb the characteristics of the ancestor while they were still living:

> Those Romans who by reason of noble birth and the fame of their ancestors are pre-eminent are, when they die, portrayed in figures that are not only lifelike as to features but show their whole bodily appearance. For they employ actors who through a man's whole life have carefully observed his carriage and the several peculiarities of his appearance. In like fashion each of the dead man's ancestors takes his place in the funeral procession, with such robes and insignia as enable the spectators to distinguish from the portrayal how far each had advanced in the *cursus honorum* and had had a part in the dignities of the state.[15]

The two accounts agree in that the actors would take on the "insignia" of the deceased so that the spectators were aware of how far they advanced in the Roman political system, but the addition of the actors being hired throughout the man's life to "observe" him contradicts the impression given by Polybius that the actors were chosen at the time of death. Instead, Diodorus is implying that the actors were training, for possibly several years, to take on the role of the deceased nobleman.[16] The opposing descriptions reflect a possible shift in the way that funeral processions were handled during the time of the Roman Republic. Nevertheless, the actors were hired to imitate every characteristic of the deceased as they led their descendants to the *rostra* through the Forum and through both of their accounts it is obvious that Roman funerals had become highly professional by the late Republic. During this process the actors *transformed* into the ancestors; they began to embody the masks, and by studying the aristocrats before death as Diodorus writes, they were literally becoming them in a transformative and religious performance.

Another ancient author to write about the *imagines* is Pliny the Elder, in his encyclopedia of the natural world, *Naturalis Historiae*. His description comes from Book 35, which was written after the fall of the Republic, almost one hundred years after Polybius and Diodorus offer their accounts. Pliny discusses how portraiture and the arts have "fallen out of fashion" but recounts the use of the *imagines* in the *atrium* of the house:

> These matters were different in the *atria* of the ancestors where portraits offered a spectacle to behold, not the statues by foreign artists either of bronze or of marble; but faces rendered in wax were arranged in separate cupboards, so that they should be 'true portraits' (*imagines*) to accompany funerals in the extended family. And whenever someone died the whole crowd of his family members who had ever lived was present. Moreover, the family trees traced their lines to painted portraits.[17]

Pliny's description sheds light on the appearance of the masks and where they were stored in the home. According to him, the masks were "true portraits" that would have accompanied the deceased to the grave. The portrait masks were designed and decorated to look *exactly* like the family member they were intended to portray, so that whenever their descendant passed away, "the whole crowd of his family members who had ever lived was present." To specify, Pliny's use of "family members" exclusively implies male family members, since the women of Rome did not have masks cast in their appearance. In another letter written by Pliny to C. Plinius Macrino in 97 CE, he states, "And indeed, if the masks of the dead put up at home console our grief, how much more do these by which not only the appearance and faces of those men are recalled in a most public place, but also their official dignity and reputation."[18] Here, Pliny is attesting to the idea that the masks were placed in the home to not only confirm a family's fame, but to also offer some consolation for the mourners. Recalling their faces in public during funerals would have also eased the public's mind as they lost an important figure to Roman society. The masks then, had several purposes that went beyond the basic Roman need of confirming fame and reputation.

Although the ancient sources offer brief descriptions of the *imagines* and their role in the obsequies, they demonstrate how funerals in Rome were part of a "protracted social process,"[19] that would "link the dead and the living, the past and the present, and to show the status and continuity of the family."[20] Because Polybius adds that there is no nobler sight to a young man to see, he illustrates how important Roman funerals were to push striving, eligible, men to join the *cursus honorum* and to support Rome. Possessing the masks indicated that the family had power and influence in Rome, as proved by the revivified ancestors leading the funeral bier. To further strengthen their place in Rome and as funerals became increasingly flamboyant, "an increasing number of *imagines* from different families were paraded, as well as more legendary ancestors who had been 'discovered' by antiquarian researchers."[21] The aristocracy began to find more illustrious and well-known heroes from Roman mythology to draw in more spectators and bring more attention to the deceased, demonstrating how important having a strong-rooted family in Rome was. "The focus was on the family, as much as on the particular individual who had died, and on the glory and prestige one reaped from a life of service to the state."[22] Although the deceased was at the center of the *pompa funebris*, the family was equally as important, and would embellish their lineage and history to attract a larger crowd. Similarly, the masks would have been recreated in order for the bride of a certain patrician family to

bring her masks into her husband's home. "A son or daughter could… expect to have their own copies of ancestral *imagines* if they moved from their father's house. Thus *imagines* needed to be reproduced on the occasion of a marriage, or when a son set up his own household."[23] Although females were banned from having masks cast from their own appearance, they would have brought the *imagines* of their father's ancestors to the home of their spouse, eventually causing certain ancestors to reappear at the funerals of different aristocratic families.

Engaging with the community publically and privately in the home via these ancestor masks was fundamental for the survival of the family. The masks were constantly present in the aristocratic household as a poignant reminder of the family's position in society and the impact the ancestors had on the family's vitality in Rome. In the *Naturalis Historiae*, Pliny describes how the masks were stored in the *atria*, "arranged in separate cupboards." Polybius corroborates with Pliny in his account, explaining that the masks were stored in wooden shrines in the front of the home. Whenever the preparations for the funeral procession began, presumably the actors met at the home of the deceased to take on the masks that were stored in *armaria* or cupboards in the main atrium where the master would have welcomed guests.[24] The public location of the masks was no doubt an intentional move made by the elite Romans, so that when they received clients and friends they would have been thoroughly impressed with the family's repertoire of famous magistrates.

Because of the sheer size of the funeral, the sound it would have made throughout the Forum, and the attractiveness of the musicians, dancers, and actors, the procession gathered a massive crowd of spectators since "it passed through the busiest part of the city and would be obvious to any in the Forum, including those who had come there on other business."[25] Since aristocratic funerals were also held during the day, the overtly public element demanded the interactive participation of the people of Rome. The parades more than likely began in and followed the Sacra Via, mirroring other religious processions and triumphal marches.[26] The audience of onlookers that had formed around the cortège would have faced the *rostra*, waiting to listen to the oration presented by the closest male descendent of the deceased, and would have gazed upward at the ancestral masks that stared back at the crowd. "The jostling audience at ground level looked up to the famous ancestors represented by actors wearing death masks who were seated among the statues crowding the platform; behind them the Curia Hostilia[27] formed a monumental backdrop. The ancestors, in turn, looked down on the majority of the audience."[28]

By this point in the procession, the actors were no longer perceived as actors, but had become the ancestors themselves. As Polybius writes, the actors were adorned with the insignia that marked high-offices in Rome, and were followed by their *fasces* and were being treated not as themselves, but as magistrates. Similarly, in modern cultures accuracy is important when embodying the dead; in Papua New Guinea, the Kiwai people choose the performers that will play the deceased in the obsequies by measuring height and size. "At the burial of a dead man his height is measured with the aid of a stick, and during the *horiomu*,[29] that spirit is impersonated by a man of the same height… Each spirit wears the ornaments of the dead person he represents."[30] Accuracy ensures that the masks and the actors that embody the dead will be able to perform their duties respectfully to the dead. By dressing the actors in the same clothing as the deceased and by choosing players that look closest to the dead, they are honoring them in the procession. The mimes were wearing the clothing of the deceased, had taken on their personality traits and mannerisms, and now welcomed their descendent to join them in the afterlife. This intimate transformation would have been impossible without the wax portrait masks. "The transformations taking place allow us to observe a previously impossible phenomenon: a power struggle between the 'other' (a supernatural entity) and oneself. Much literature has insisted that the mask wearer is no longer himself because his dress invests him with another personality… this allows a supernatural entity to intrude and take possession of the body and the spirit."[31] The procession had become a transitional ritual mediated by the ancestor masks that allowed the actors to transcend their role as an ordinary citizen, and to adopt the lifestyle, and the power, of a supernatural spirit, in this case, the spirit of the deceased ancestor. The audience interacted with the actors as if they were the ancestors themselves; the masks successfully erased the identity of the mime and replaced it with that of the deceased.

The use of the masks also speaks to the significance of respecting the dead in Roman society. The Romans celebrated festivals to propitiate the spirits of their predecessors and even had cults of the dead that maintained balance between the two worlds. The duty that fell onto the family members to attend to the dead went beyond moral obligation and crossed into a sacred responsibility, "for denial of burial, grave, and rites meant the end of a family."[32] Attention was closely paid to the ancestors well after they were inhumed or cremated, which is suggestive of the Romans' intense belief system that the spirits of their ancestors could intervene in their real lives. "For the Romans the dead were gone, but they were still with them. Belief in the existence and threatening power of the dead spirits is also shown by burial rites, attention to tombs, and epitaphs and sepulchral warnings written as if spoken by the dead. Even ancestral ghosts were seen as fearsome gods demanding attention."[33] Especially in Roman mythology and stories, the dead continuously return as vengeful spirits of they are betrayed by the living. "The dead will be devastated if they are not honoured and might become aggressive. If offered proper tribute at a ceremony in his honour, the deceased will leave the living world peacefully and without vengefulness."[34] Keeping the deceased

appeased meant that the family would avoid angry spirits who would act out and intervene in their lives; therefore the symbolic representation of the ancestors in the form of masks was twofold in that it meant the survival of the family and avoiding a revengeful ancestor. Using the masks as transformative objects of communication with the deceased was important in appeasing the dead. "Since masks are often supposed to communicate with supernatural entities that, although bodiless, exert presence, will and power, we can consider them tools of mediation with the unseen. They represent an ostensibly indefinable being supposedly best suited to approach and negotiate with supernatural forces."[35] The Romans felt anxiety about appeasing their ancestors and the masks were tools of mediating the past and present with the supernatural entities that interrupted their daily lives. The *imagines* were religious instruments designed "to approach the divine, and if need be, speak with it,"[36] while simultaneously attempting to represent the supernatural to the Roman community.

Honoring the deceased through the presence of the masked actors went further than the funeral; it is implied that the disguised actors would escort the family to the burial site for ritual offerings and meals. "It is likely that the mask-wearing actors accompanied the corpse to the grave and stood by as sacrifices were offered to the *Di Manes*, or the *Di Parentes*, whom the ancestral wax *imagines* represented… The performance of the customary rites after the body is interred must refer to sacrifices at the family tomb, which was the locus of the cult worship of ancestors."[37] Part of the consecration that occurred at the gravesite involved a sacrifice to the goddess Ceres, presumably because of her association with the underworld, and then several offerings of food were made to the deceased.[38] The accompaniment of the masked ancestors as onlookers to these sacrifices was a symbolic gesture that welcomed the deceased spirits to the obsequies of their descendent, as he embarked into the afterlife. Their participation throughout the cortège and the oration was necessary for both sociopolitical reasons as well as religious symbolism in the process of death.

After the ancestors participated in the consecration of the tomb, they are returned back to their place in the wooden cupboards of the home.[39] Placing them back into the atrium would return them to their active role in the daily lives of the Roman aristocracy. The location of the masks was "intended not only to impress visitors with a nobleman's lineage but also to inculcate moral and civic values in members of his family."[40] Roman aristocrats owed every success to their predecessors since status was hereditarily passed down through the male line. Furthermore, the Romans had shrines and household gods (*lares*) that were related to the ancestors that previously inhabited the home. The inclusion of the masks in the main atrium was presumably an attempt to connect the spirits of the past with those of the home, in order to offer protection to the family, "masks represent authoritative beings that provide protection, well-being, and prosperity, ensure cosmic order and social harmony, and resolve tensions or simply even entertain."[41] In this sense the masks shared qualities with the household gods in that they were ancestral and protective to the home, and "promoted a shared past of the family and connections between the dead and living."[42] The connection between the *Lares* and the *imagines* demonstrates how important ancestor worship was to the continuation and preservation of a family's legacy.

The ritual process of the funeral was a semiotic manifestation of the superstitious beliefs surrounding vengeful spirits of the dead and the repercussions they have on the social and economic stability of the living. This manifestation, the *imagines*, was a clear and interactive medium for religious celebrations for the deceased, and enforced the political and social position of Roman elite families. The practice of these ceremonies, taking care of the deceased, having feasts and their gravesites, and inviting them to participate in the funerary processions was possibly a performance of habit, fear of the supernatural, or obligatory tradition.[43] Anthropologically, this phenomenon of transforming actors through the use of masks as convoys between the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, is common in cultures that are socioeconomically and religiously dependent on families and lineage. "As indicators of identity and agents of change, [masks] are used in social and religious ceremonies in both traditional and secular modern societies… masks play a central role in rites of passage, particularly in funerals and other death ceremonies."[44] Although the Roman practice of masking for funerary rituals existed thousands of years before contemporary rituals, ethnography written about modern cultures provide a useful framework to understand why and how the Romans used the *imagines* to communicate with the supernatural world.

Funeral ritual has three separate stages of social process that interrupt daily routine and demand a medium of mediation: "The first stage, the 'rite of separation,' is a ceremony which moves those involved out of their normal conditions of life into the second stage, a liminal status… The third stage is the 'rite of aggregation,' a return to normal life."[45] Using these three periods as a model, the performer or the funerary mime is in the "liminal" stage, since they are in the middle between life and death, "the deceased was shown both as a corpse and as a living being, as if captured at that moment of transition between the mortal world and the afterlife."[46] Similar to these three stages, Victor Turner offers the stages of "social drama," in his book *The Anthropology of Performance*. According to him, there are four main phases that manifest themselves in public action that occur upon crisis, or a funeral:

(1) *Breach* of regular norm-governed social relations; (2) *Crisis*, during which there is a tendency for the breach to widen. Each public crisis has what I now call liminal characteristics, since it is a threshold (*limen*) between more or less stable phases of the social process, but it's not usually a sacred limen, hedged around by taboos and thrust away from the centers of public life… (3) *Redressive action* ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual… (4) The final phase consists of either *reintegration* of the disturbed social group, or of the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties.[47]

Considering the mask-wearing performers, they are located between the *crisis* and the *reintegration*, along with the family members of the deceased man. Turner's *breach* is of course the actual act of dying. Whenever the aristocrat passes, it causes a disruption in the flow of everyday life and is controlled through the funeral procession. Geoffrey Sumi's three-step social process is similarly based on Turner's, but the distinction of *breach*, *crisis*, and *reintegration*, is necessary for evaluating the performance of ancestor masks. The *crisis* that occurs is the opening of the liminal passage to where the mimes are able to mediate between life and the afterlife. Because it is a liminal, chaotic portion of the social process, the *crisis* is the split moment that leads to the *redressive action*. The *crisis* is what justifies the *redressive* performance. The third stage then, is the crescendo of the mimes show, when they participate in the cortège and accompany the family to the gravesite. In this phase the actors play along with the bereaving family by attempting to reconcile the death and reestablish order in Roman society. The final phase is when the actors are stripped of their temporary transition into the supernatural world and are driven back to their normal lifestyles. The aristocratic families experience something similar, as they are removed from the spotlight of Roman society, where they were acknowledged by the public in a significant, religious, and special way, and are returned to their place in maintaining the tradition of Rome. This last step is important because it ends the funeral and the mourning period while ensuring the family receives the recognition they deserve.

As stated, the implementation of masks was a way of symbolizing this liminal passage between life and death. "Masks are related to death not only by their own dangerous power to take life, but also by their widespread use in mourning… They appear as both conductors of soul to the after-world and agents of purification, given that death is generally perceived as a troublemaker."[48] Because masking is a way of transporting the living to the other side, in this case, allowing the actors to become the ancestors in order to mediate upon behalf of the family, they are clearly liminal objects of religious importance. "The mask's role in managing perceived oppositions is emphasized by the radical categories to which masks calls attention. The repeated presence of masks in conjunction with shamanistic practice indicates their indispensability in making special contact with an unapprehensible, often radically dissimilar world."[49] Without the masks the actors would not be able to penetrate the other side and therefore could not maintain a negotiated peace with the deceased. The masks allow the mimes to stand in the threshold and communicate with both the living and the dead. Roman patricians therefore used the masks and the funeral procession in an attempt to control the disruption death caused in daily life, and to regain some sense of power in the loss of their family member, by sending in a disguised identity to negotiate.

The actors can only access this liminal space "between the mortal and the afterlife" by putting on the wax *imagines*. Wearing the masks will be the only time these professional mimes experience the aristocracy and the life of a patrician. The masks were explicitly designed to communicate with supernatural entities; they disguised the wearer, or the performer, concealing his identity by assigning him a new identity that belonging to the ancestor, which gives the actor the ability to reconcile life and death, the past and present. Like an actor on stage during a theater production, they are *becoming* the individual they are "playing," in a performative trance state that could not be achieved in any other arena. Not only do the actors mirror the deceased's actions, mannerisms, and characteristics, they also put on his toga, and sit in a *curule* chair before all of Rome, as if they were living magistrates themselves. "Masks embody 'form' – they are ready-made templates in much the same way that spirits, gods, and demons encapsulate particular forms – that are reinforced by tradition and ritual. Thus these forms are readily invoked to 'possess' the performer… these forms can attain heightened power in trance states- they 'take on a life of their own.'"[50] By taking on the form of the masks the actors are reformed into the character they are playing; the hired professional performers of Rome physically and symbolically embody the dead aristocrat in a trance-like, alternate state. During this transportation of balance between the dead and the living, a struggle between the spirit and the actor occurs.[51]

The act of masking is contingent on the ability to recognize the action as "make-believe" or "illusionary," but still being able to lose one's self in the process.[52] Clearly, the masked actors did not fully believe themselves to be the dead ancestors of an aristocratic clan, nor did the audience and the family members believe so either. However, because of the structure of masks and their design, they are intended to deceive, and provide a moment of freedom

for the wearer. Like any other performer embodying his character, the professional mimes adopted the lifestyle, the essence of the person being portrayed. The actors suddenly experience what Richard Schechner in *Between Theater & Anthropology* calls a doubling of " the sense of being taken over by a role, of being possessed by it – in its 'flow' or in the flow of the audience for illusion."[53] He elaborates, "This surrender to the flow of action is the ritual process."[54] For Schechner, "acting is the art of temporary transformation – not only the journey but also the return… The continuum runs from those performances where the performer is changed through the 'work' of the performance to those in which he is transported and retuned to his starting place."[55] The actors that portrayed the ancestors were engaged and enveloped by their roles, and were able to lose themselves behind the masks because masks provide a sense of freedom that normal theatrics cannot provide. The experience of the temporary transformation is contingent on the use of the mask and the mimes losing themselves to the character. The performers become less aware of their actions as they "surrender" to the transformation of their own consciousness into the famous Roman aristocrats they are assigned to play.

Schechner's differentiation of "transformation" and "transportation" is interesting in defining the experience the Roman mimes had during funeral processions. "The performer goes from the 'ordinary world,' from one time/space reference to another, from one personality to one or more others. He plays a character, battles demons, goes into trance, travels to the sky or under the sea or earth: he is transformed, enabled to do things 'in performance' that he cannot do ordinarily."[56] The masked actors similarly experience this sort of trance state of transporting into another world, another identity, and another life. They become the heroes of Rome whenever they step out of the atrium of the aristocrat's home, as the actors are covered in the insignia of the patrician, and are followed by his opulent cortège. The invitation to become an ancestor in a performative sense was a temporary invitation to become a patrician; the actor was able to do things that would have been outside of the bounds defined by his social status in Rome whenever he was hidden behind the mask.

Presumably the actors that were cast to portray the ancestors took on these roles for an entire lifetime. If Diodorus's account is correct in that they observed the magistrate for years prior to his death in order to fully absorb his essence, then they were no longer simply themselves, but had dual identities of themselves and the noblemen they portrayed. After years of becoming this ancestor repeatedly, every time stepping through the liminal bounds of life and death, they too could have become disillusioned with the act, convincing themselves that they belonged to the patrician family. Schechner writes of one of the most famous actors in India who portrays a semi-divinity, Narad-muni at the Ramlila festival in Ramnagar:

> When Narad-muni speaks or sings, the audience – sometimes more than twenty-five thousand – listens with special care; many believe the performer playing Narad-muni has powers linking him to the sage/character he plays. This man is no longer called by his birth name (Omkar Das), not even by himself. Over the thirty-five years he has performed Narad-muni he has increasingly been identified with the legendary figure… Narad never claims to be an incarnation of Narad-muni, but each year at Ramlila his connection to Narad-muni is renewed, displayed, deepened, and ritualized before an audience of thousands. This man is not Narad-muni, but also he is not not Narad-muni: he performs in the field between a negative and a double negative, a field of limitless potential, free as it is both the person (not) and the person impersonated (not not).[57]

Similar to this anecdote about Narad-muni, the attending funerary mimes would have become fairly well known in Rome, and after several performances, synonymous with the ancestors they portrayed. Again, because aristocratic funerals occurred during the day and swallowed the Forum, they would have attracted thousands of spectators, especially if the deceased was extremely well known. Therefore, the actors would have become familiar to the audience and more than likely were identified with the ancestor and the patrician family they represented.[58] Both the spectators and the performers become enveloped in this illusion of identity.

Masks have long been recognized as methods of transformation and identity control in the realm of funerary ceremonies. Roman funerals were no different, and the actors used the masks as a medium of transitioning between the world of the living and the world of the dead.[59] In *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*, David Napier explains that, "the mask is a means of transgressing boundaries *because it provides an avenue for selective personification in manipulating certain paradoxes*."[60] Masks offered the actors a sense of fluidity that allowed them to mediate between the natural and the supernatural, something that could not have been achieved without them. Since the Romans lived and breathed religion, and by including the masks in their funerary rites, it is clear that they offered some "religio-magical dimension."[61]

"A mask is far more than merely a facial covering. It is also more than a mere disguise, for it gives expression to the bond between a group of people and their ancestors. At the same time a mask is the embodiment of a tradition and a guarantee of the continuity of an order hallowed by tradition."[62] Masks are used across the world as conduits

of communication between the natural and the supernatural. They provide liminal access for mourning and celebrations of the dead that cannot be achieved in another form of worship and commemoration. In Roman culture, the ancestors were embedded into their daily life and function, both symbolically and metaphysically. Supernatural beliefs in revengeful spirits of the dead led to the religious responsibility the Romans felt they owed to their ancestors, beliefs that manifested in the extravagance of aristocratic funerals. Patrician families were indebted to their ancestors and displayed their gratitude by hiring actors to not only imitate the dead, but to embody them in a magical performance of religious piety. This practice was extraordinarily unique for the ancient Mediterranean world and can only be described as Roman. Although there are instance of modern cultures exhibiting similar beliefs in ancestry and have similar funerary performances, the Romans remain unmatched in their overindulgent obsequies. The presence of the ancestors was twofold in that they continued to support the Roman elite families by reminding the plebeians of their ancestry, but also appeased the gods and the spirits of the dead, preventing them to lash out at their descendants and cause misfortune. In all, the *imagines* served the purpose of solidifying the social hierarchy in Rome through a religious-magical experience that honored the dead.

2. Notes

1. Geoffrey Sumi, "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals," *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002): 559.
2. J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 48.
3. Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 122.
4. J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 47.
5. John Bodel, "Death on Display: Looking at Roman Funerals," *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 264.
6. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91.
7. Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 122.
8. John Bodel, "Death on Display: Looking at Roman Funerals," *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 264
9. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 95.
10. John Pollini, "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 246.
11. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 46.
12. Ibid., 46-47.
13. Polybius, *Histories.* 6.53-54 trans. Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 123.
14. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99-100.
15. Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*. 31.25.2, trans. Francis R. Walton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) 377.
16. Geoffrey Sumi, "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals," *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002): 561.
17. Pliny, *Natural History*. 35.6-7 trans. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 304.
18. Ibid., 306.
19. Donald G. Kyle *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 128.
20. Ibid.
21. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 103.
22. Geoffrey Sumi, "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals," *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002): 582.
23. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 103.

24. John Pollini "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 238-239.
25. Harriet Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98.
26. Diane Favro and Christopher Johanson, "Death in Motion: Funeral Processions in the Roman Forum," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 69 (2010): 16.
27. This would have been the Republican Senate House.
28. Ibid., 22.
29. The equivalent to the Roman funeral procession.
30. Henry Pernet, *Ritual Masks: Deceptions and Revelations*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 93.
31. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 64.
32. Donald G. Kyle *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 128-129.
33. Ibid., 130.
34. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 217.
35. Ibid.,125.
36. Ibid. 217.
37. John Pollini "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 243.
38. Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book.* (London: Routledge, 2007),115.
39. John Pollini "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 243.
40. Ibid., 239.
41. Debby Hershman, *Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2014), 30.
42. Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book.* (London: Routledge, 2007), 231.
43. Ibid.
44. Debby Hershman, *Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2014), 30.
45. Geoffrey Sumi, "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals," *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002): 578.
46. Ibid.
47. Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications 1992), 74-75.
48. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 217.
49. David A. Napier, *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 20-21.
50. Ronaldo Morelos, *Trance Forms: A Theory of Performed States of Consciousness* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009), 76.
51. Anne-Marie Bouttiaux, *Persona Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 64.
52. David A. Napier, *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 3.
53. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 124.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 125.
56. Ibid., 126.
57. Ibid., 121-123.

58. John Bodel, "Death on Display: Looking at Roman Funerals," *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 260.

59. John Pollini "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 245.

60. David A. Napier, *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 17.

61. John Pollini "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture," *Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 245.

62. Andreas Lommel, *Masks: Their Meaning and Function* (New York: Excalibur Books 1981), 9.

3. Bibliography

Bodel, John. "Death on Display: Looking at Roman Funerals." *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, edited by Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon, 259-281. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Bouttiaux, Anne-Marie. *Persona Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2009.

Favro, Diane and Christopher Johanson. "Death in Motion: Funeral Processions in the Roman Forum." *Journal of the Society of Architectural History* 69:12-37, 2010.

Flower, Harriet. *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Hershman, Debby. *Face to Face: The Oldest Masks in the World*. Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2014.

Hope, Valerie M. *Death in Ancient Rome: a source book*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Kyle, Donald G. *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Lommel, Andreas. *Masks: Their Meaning and Function.* New York: Excalibur Books, 1981.

Morelos, Ronaldo. *Trance Forms: A Theory of Performed States of Consciousness*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009.

Napier, David A. *Masks, Transformation, and Paradox*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Pernet, Henry. *Ritual Masks: Deceptions and Revelations*. Translated by Laura Grillo. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992.

Pollini, John. "Ritualizing Death in Republican Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition's Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture."*Performing Death: Social Analyses of Funerary Traditions in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean,* edited Nicola Laneri, 237-285. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater & Anthropology*, 117-150. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Siculus, Diodorus. *Library of History*. Vol. 11. Translated by Francis R. Walton. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957.

Sumi, Geoffrey S. "Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals." *American Journal of Philology* 123:559-585, 2002.

Toynbee, J.M.C. *Death and Burial in the Roman World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1992.