The Mask of Apollo Short Guide

The Mask of Apollo by Mary Renault

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Overview

All of Renault's historical novels achieve what the ancient poet Horace saw as the double purpose of literature: to simultaneously delight and instruct.

As adventure stories they are filled with action; the characters travel widely and suspense keeps the plot moving. But her works are not simply novels of plot.

Their historical settings evoke an important age in the civilization of the Western world. Renault's fictional characters mingle with historical ones in settings of realistic detail. These characters face situations that present philosophical as well as physical problems. The Mask of Apollo, for example, explores the nature of virtue, the role of art in life, the balance between reason and emotion, and other themes that will be important as long as human nature remains the same. This novel, like Renault's other historical novels, shows how people today are both different from and similar to the people who lived so long ago.

About the Author

Mary Renault was born Mary Challans in London on September 4, 1905. She was the first of two daughters of Frank Challans, a physician, and Clementine Mary Baxter Challans. She attended boarding school and studied English at St. Hugh's College, Oxford.

Instead of undertaking the teaching career she had prepared for, she took a clerical job but soon returned to Oxford, this time to Radcliffe Infirmary, to study nursing. Her first published novel.

Promise of Love (1939; published as Purposes of Love in Britain), earned sufficient royalties to allow her to write full time. When England entered World War II, she returned to nursing but continued to write. At the end of the war, Renault traveled in Europe, the Mediterranean countries (particularly Greece and the Aegean Islands), and Africa. In 1948 she moved to South Africa, where she lived for the remainder of her life.

Before this move she had written three more novels set in contemporary England: Kind Are Her Answers (1940), The Middle Mist (1944; published in Britain as The Friendly Young Ladies), and Return to Night (1946). The last of these won the Metro Goldwyn Mayer prize of $150,000. There followed North Face (1948) and The Charioteer (1953), her sixth and last novel set in contemporary times.

While studying English at Oxford, Renault's primary interest was the Middle Ages. She later remarked: "Innocent of its barbarities, for some time I regarded the mediaeval period as a golden age. With a little more maturity, I turned to the Greeks." And once she turned to the Greeks, she never looked back. She eventually published two nonfiction works on Greek history, The Lion in the Gateway (1964) and The Nature of Alexander (1975), and eight novels: The Last of the Wine and The Mask of Apollo, both set in the time of Socrates and Plato; The King Must Die and The Bull from the Sea, both about the hero Theseus; The Praise Singer, about the poet Simonides; and Fire from Heaven, The Persian Boy, and Funeral Games, all three about Alexander the Great and his legacy.

Renault was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1959 and president of the P.E.N. Club of South Africa in 1961. Several of her novels were Book-of-the-Month Club selections, and she won the Silver Pen Award in 1971 for Fire from Heaven. It is remarkable, considering her stature as a novelist, that little has been written about her work and even less about her private life. She died in Cape Town, South Africa, on December 13, 1983.

Setting

In the middle decades of the fourth century B.C., Athenian society was in eclipse. The protracted Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), which the Greek historian Thucydides chronicled, had taken a terrible toll in moral, social, political, and economic terms. Nikeratos, the narrator of The Mask of Apollo, records the decline of the theater; he also records the failure of Plato to train a philosopher-king and the failure of Dion to become one. The novel presents many aspects of Greek life: the internal workings and traditions of the classical theater, the festival of the Olympic games, the life of Plato's Academy, the dissolute courts of the tyrants Dionysius I and his son, and the world of the Pythagoreans in Italy. Much of the action takes place in Syracuse and Sicily.

Critic Moses Hadas's comment about Renault's earlier historical novels also holds true for this one: "Her narrative is not, nor does it claim to be, history: but it is a well-considered suggestion of how things may have happened, and for the personality and culture with which she deals we have nothing more plausible."

Social Sensitivity

As much as we admire ancient Athenian culture, the society that produced it was in many respects very different from our own. Attitudes concerning religion, women, and sexuality in The Mask of Apollo could shock and offend some readers. The issue of religion is probably the least troublesome since Greeks living in the fourth century B.C.

would not as yet have encountered any of the modern world's major faiths. Both philosophy and the pagan pantheon function as religions by which serious characters seek to live their lives.

The role of women in Athenian society is portrayed as it was, and most people in modern society consider that reality unfortunate. The Mask of Apollo lacks important female characters because women, being allowed neither independence nor equality, would seldom have had even a passive role in the public events that make up most of the novel. Axiothea, a female member of Plato's Academy, is a possible exception, but her status is definitely unique.

Partly because of the inferior status of women, male homosexuality was prevalent in ancient Greece. Society had no taboos against homosexuality, and Nikeratos regards it as quite natural.

Renault describes his casual promis cuity and one heterosexual encounter with much indirection and decorum.

The answer to challenges to these topics—and others such as the descriptions of violence, senseless cruelty, and the corruption of virtue—lies in how one answers the arguments of Plato about whether literature's role in society is to portray human beings as better than they are, worse than they are, or just as they are.

Literary Qualities

Renault embarked on a difficult task when she wrote The Mask of Apollo and her other novels set in ancient Greece.

The historical novel is a genre that sometimes generates hostility from critics.

Detractors question whether the unfamiliar setting is just an attempt to make a superficial plot seem more exotic and substantial. Also subject to harsh scrutiny are the authenticity of the historical details; the feasibility, in the given setting, of the fictional characters' thoughts and speeches; and the accuracy of the fictional speeches and actions of historical characters. Some critics, such as Philip Toynbee, feel that by their very nature such novels are "monstrous hybrids." Although Toynbee is in the minority, he is right in pointing to the difficulty of combining story and history. Renault's success puts her in select company.

The historical setting effectively illuminates the complex themes of The Mask of Apollo, such as tragedy and the stage as metaphor. The title of the novel itself functions on a number of different levels. The mask of Apollo could be any dramatic mask an actor donned when playing a role in the ancient theater sacred to the god. The title also refers to a very specific mask of the god Apollo that Nikeratos values highly because it epitomizes for him the purity of the past glorious age of drama as well as his own devotion to his art; it is this mask that speaks to him when he faces the most critical of personal and professional choices. Apollo is also the god of reason.

He shares his shrine at Delphi with Dionysus, the god of unreason, the god in whose honor drama—specifically tragedy—was created. In the novel Dion comes to his tragic end because he tries to wear a mask of Apollo and ignores the Dionysian in himself and in other men.

Themes and Characters

The Mask of Apollo is narrated by Nikeratos, a fictional character who observes and interacts with the historical characters Plato, Dionysius II, and Dion.

Dozens of other men and women people the novel, but these three historical figures are responsible for the events that shape the destiny of Syracuse.

Nikeratos first sees Plato at a dinner party hosted by Dion. The gray-bearded philosopher looks like "an old athlete" with battle scars from long ago on his arm. Nikeratos mistakes him for a poet.

Both Plato and Dion demonstrate that they do not understand the motivations of average men when they misinterpret why the crowd murdered the man who tried to harm Nikeratos in the theater earlier that day. The novel begins long after Plato's return from his first disastrous trip to Syracuse; before the end of the novel, he makes two more—equally disastrous—trips there. Plato tries repeatedly to put his political theories into practice and each time sees them fail.

The theories fail when imperfectly applied by his sometime student, Dionysius II. Late in the novel one of the men from the Academy describes the interaction of Plato and Dionysius as being "like a dialogue between bird and fish, each calling from an element the other could not live in." In the final analysis Dionysius loves decadence and self-indulgence more than he loves philosophy. The novel traces Dionysius's path from his powerless and secluded youth, through the height of his abuse of power and wealth, to his life as an ordinary, rather pathetic man in Corinth.

Dion, another of Plato's pupils, is anything but ordinary. When Nikeratos first meets him, he introduces himself simply: "My name is Dion, a citizen of Syracuse." This understatement typifies the elegant good taste that Dion brings to everything he touches. Handsome, rich, educated, and uncorrupted by the corrupt city of his birth, he seems to Nikeratos to be bigger than life—and more perfect. Dion tries to live by Plato's philosophical system with uncompromising steadfastness. When the ideal ultimately succumbs to expediency, the result is a tragedy from which his traitorous assassin almost mercifully removes him.

Raised in the theater, Nikeratos is an actor of great talent but not genius. He fusses over day-to-day matters and has a weakness for casual affairs until he meets the young man Thettalos, after which his affairs are less frequent and more casual. A traditionalist, he decries the quality of current plays, appalled at those actors who are so lost to propriety that they would even consider acting without a mask. He tries to be an apolitical artist and is drawn into political events only reluctantly or for personal reasons. Despite all this, Nikeratos is an appealing person, primarily because he never abandons himself to despair and because of his devotion to his art.

These characters and others in The Mask of Apollo are participants in events that call into question the relationship between reason and emotion; that explore the nature of virtue, of right action, and of art; and that examine the sometimes conflicting demands of personal and social responsibility.

Topics for Discussion

1. The Latin word for the mask worn by dramatic actors is persona. Which characters in the book mask their true identity? To what extent do you believe that an individual's "personality" is a "mask"?

2. What does Apollo's antique mask symbolize?

3. Nikeratos tells his fellow actor Thettalos that he objects to an interpretation of a play "because men could be more than they are. Why show them only how to be less?" (chapter 16). What do you think the object of drama is?

4. This novel describes disappointments and failures that are personal, artistic, philosophical, and political. List them.

5. Greeks, Romans, Carthaginians, and Macedonians appear in this novel.

How do the cultures of these groups differ?

6. Before Dion becomes ruler of Syracuse, Nikeratos says, "Perhaps it is impossible for a philosopher to be a king—at any rate, to be both at once" (chapter 17). Considering the events chronicled in this novel and other specific evidence, do you agree?

7. Why does Plato return to Syracuse the second time? Why does he return the third time?

8. Timonides, a man of Plato's Academy, meets Nikeratos in Syracuse and quotes what he calls "these old saws": "Knowyourself" and "Nothing too much" (chapter 22). These two old saws are Apollo's maxims. What do they mean?

9. What role does irony play in the events described in The Mask of Apollo?

10. In The Hellenism of Mary Renault, Bernard F. Dick draws an analogy between Dion's "folly" and Lyndon B. Johnson's policy in Vietnam (p. 99). Do you agree?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare The Mask of Apollo and The Last of the Wine. How are their themes and characters alike and how are they different?

2. Nikeratos acts tragedies on stage and observes them in life. Which events that he observes are tragic and which are merely unfortunate, pathetic, or regrettable?

3. Dionysius II is a clever but superficial and incomplete student of philosophy. Is it the student or the subject that fails?

4. Nikeratos says: "I was here to honor the god, in the precinct where if a man meets face to face his own father's murderer, still he must hold his hand" (chapter 11). This quotation exemplifies one of the purposes of ancient theater.

Compare and contrast the purposes and conventions of ancient and modern theater.

5. Read what Anchises tells Aeneas that the special prerogatives of the Greeks and the Romans are (Vergil's Aeneid 6.847-853). Does this novel or anything else you have read confirm these opinions?

6. While in Syracuse, Nikeratos performs Euripides' Bacchae, a play that demonstrates the extremes of emotion and reason. How are those extremes demonstrated by the characters and the action in the novel itself?

7. Read Plutarch's Life of Dion. How is the picture of Dion in Plutarch the same and how is it different from the picture of him in The Mask of Apollo?

For Further Reference

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Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 23. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Contains a briefer version of the Contemporary Authors article on Renault.

Dick, Bernard F. The Hellenism of Mary Renault. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972. Because of its publication date, this book does not discuss The Persian Boy, The Praise Singer, or Funeral Games; it, like Wolfe's book, does discuss all of Renault's earlier novels, both those set in contemporary England and those set in ancient Greece.

Gunton, Sharon R., ed. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol 17. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Quotes excerpts from reviews of Renault's novels by eminent critics such as Moses Hadas and Dudley Fitts.

Locher, Frances Carol, ed. Contemporary Authors. Vols. 81-84. Detroit: Gale Research, 1979. The entry on Renault gives a review of her career and writings and includes a bibliography. It contains a factual error (The Last of the Wine is not about Theseus).

Plutarch. "Dion" and "The Comparison of Dion and Brutus." In The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough. New York: Modern Library, 1932. An update of John Dryden's lively seventeenth-century translation.

"Dion and Brutus." In Lives, translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Vol.

6. 1918. Reprint. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961. One of the popular Loeb Classical Texts, with the original Greek and its English translation on facing pages.

Wakeman, John, ed. World Authors, 1950-1970. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1975. The article on Renault briefly reviews her novels through The Persian Boy, and quotes the author on such subjects as her early life, her education, how she came to live in South Africa, and what she thinks of historical fiction.

Wolfe, Peter. Mary Renault New York: Twayne, 1969. The first book-length study of Renault, this work intends "to fit its subject in a cultural tradition, to show where the subject belongs in this tradition, and to judge the artistic merit of the subject's work."

Related Titles

Renault's eight historical novels cover a range of time from the Greece of prehistory to the Hellenistic world the generation after Alexander the Great.

The King Must Die deals with the earliest of these eras. Theseus, portrayed as a real man in Mycenaean Greece, lives at a time when the matriarchal societies that worshipped a female deity were being overtaken by the patriarchal Dorians. This Theseus sails to Crete, conquering the labyrinth and slaying the minotaur. The novel provides rational explanations for mythological elements that would delight the original rationalist, Euhemerus. Its sequel, The Bull from the Sea, tells the story of Theseus from his return to Athens until his death; in the process Renault also tells the stories of the Amazon queen Hippolyta, the centaurs, Oedipus, Phaedra, and Theseus' son Hippolytus.

The Praise Singer, a first-person account narrated by the poet Simonides, presents the events of the second half of the sixth century B.C. The story begins shortly before Cyrus conquers the Ionian cities of Asia Minor and ends in Athens with the murder of Hipparchos by Harmodios and Aristogeiton. In addition to the political events he relates, Simonides pays special attention to the art of the poet.

The Last of the Wine relates the story of Athens's demise in the terrible Peloponnesian War. Alexias, the son of a landowner, tells the story of Socrates, Phaedo, and Plato, of Pericles and the tyrant Critias, of the historian Xenophon, and of the generals Lysander and Alcibiades. The Mask of Apollo continues the story of Athens's decline into the next century. Both novels look toward Alexander the Great. The Last of the Wine ends with a postscript, announcing that the grandson and namesake of Alexias, currently serving in the army of Alexander of Macedon, "Leader Supreme of all the Hellenes," had found his grandfather's memoirs. The Mask of Apollo ends with the actor Nikeratos just back from a trip to Macedonia, where he had performed Aeschylus's The Myrmidons for the boy Alexander; as the book closes Nikeratos wishes that the two giants, Plato and Alexander, might have met.

In Fire from Heaven, one of Renault's two historical novels narrated in the third person, the story is of Alexander from the ages of five to twenty. His complex father, Philip, and his even more complex mother, Olympias, are here along with his friend Hephaestion, his tutor Aristotle, and his horse Bucephalus. In The Persian Boy the first-person narrator returns in the character of Bagoas, a eunuch who follows Alexander to India and back. The book ends with Alexander's death. Funeral Games, the other novel without a first-person narrator, recounts the murders and treacheries that filled the years after Alexander, who on his deathbed left his empire "to the strongest."

Only three of these eight novels—The Bull from the Sea, The Last of the Wine, and Fire from Heaven—are classified in Books in Print 1987-88 as young adult literature. But if these three are suitable for young adults, then they all are. Each of these books examines men and, less frequently, women at their best and their worst, exploring love

and passion, art and philosophy, fame and honor in the context of the culture that Western civilization still looks to as setting the standard for such things.

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