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**Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco
Federico Schneider**

Woman and carnival



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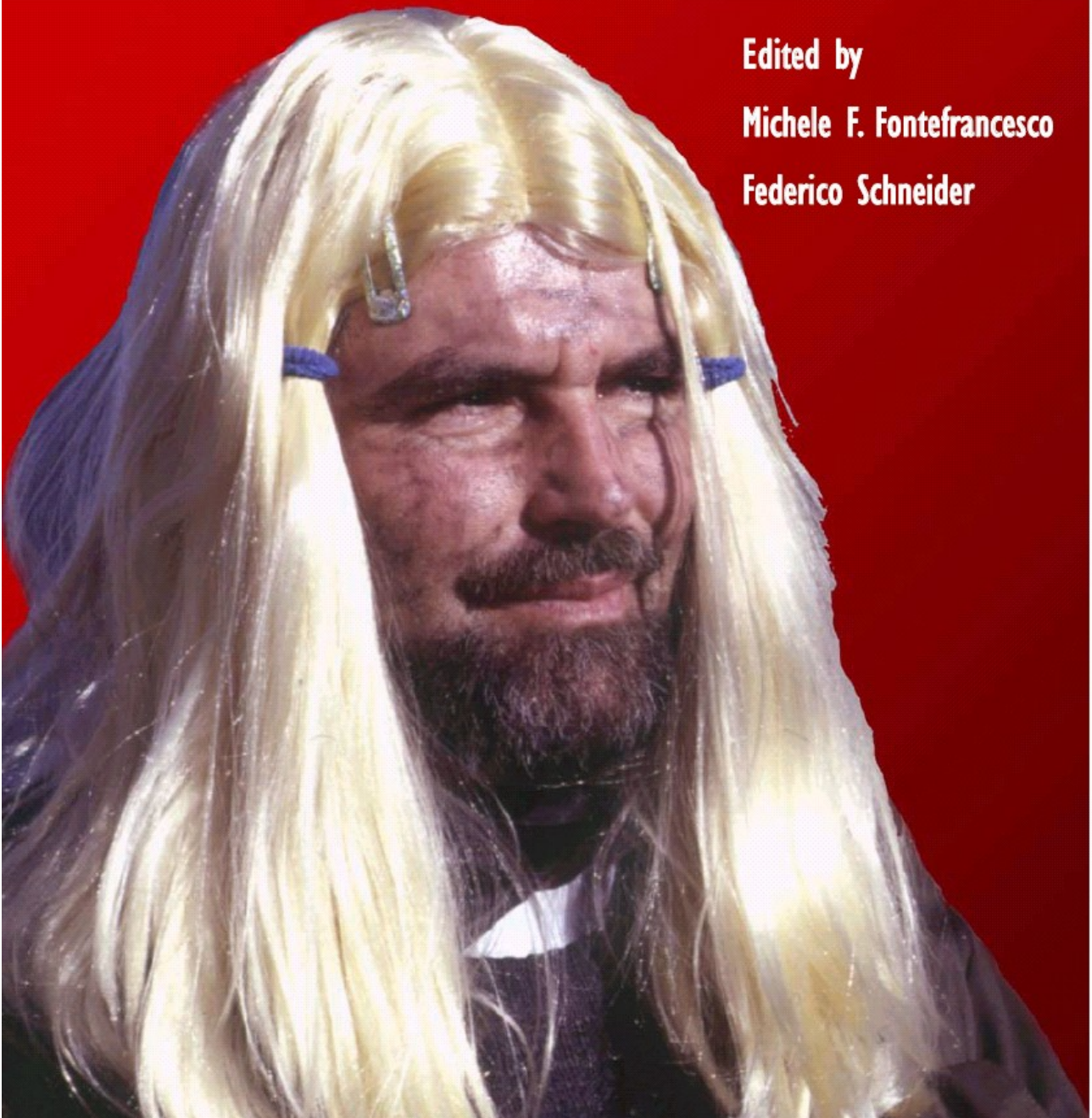
Woman and Carnival

Masks of Women in the Traditional Carnival of Piedmont, Italy

Edited by

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Woman and Carnival

*Masks of Women in the
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Preface

This volume collects all the contents of the photo-exhibition “La Maschera della Donna. Feminine Masks in the Carnivals of Piedmont,” which took place during the celebration of Women’s History Month, at Mary Washington University, Fredericksburg VA, March 10-30, 2008.

Following a string of earlier events that started with the exposition "Bestie, Santi, Divinità"(Turin, winter 2003-2004), and continues through the research of the "Laboratorio Etno-Antropologico" of Rocca Grimaldi (AL), and the photo exhibition “Dei Selvatici. Orsi, lupi e uomini selvatici nei carnevali del Piemonte,” which was the main event for the Carnival 2007 of Maison de l’Italie – Cité Internationale Universitaire of Paris, this exhibition wanted to give its visitors the opportunity to meet a lesser known aspect of the Italian folklore.

For the occasion of Women’s History Month the main topic of this collection of photos was woman masks used in Piedmont’s traditional carnivals. The photos exposed were taken by Piercarlo Grimaldi (Università degli Studi di Scienze Gastronomiche) and by Davide Porporato (Università del Piemonte Orientale) in nine different carnivals across Piedmont. In this respect the event represented a rewarding experience of International collaboration.

The exhibition, and this book, were made possible thanks to the support of the Simpson Program in Medieval Studies, the Department of Modern Foreign Languages at UMW; the Program of Italian Studies at UMW, UMW Women’s History Month, and Università Piemonte Orientale: Facoltà Lettere e Filosofia

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Summary

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The Masks

Through the Masks of Women

By Michele F. Fontefrancesco

In Italy, nowadays carnival is often reduced to only one day, Mardi Gras, a day that suggests excess, parades, confetti and much more. In this respect it is safe to say that the significance of carnival has changed greatly from what it was in the past. The original meaning of this feast, however, has not died with the industrialization and the growing importance of mass media in Western culture. To find such meaning we have to search in the countryside, among what are called “traditional carnivals”. This term defines all the carnivals that display visible traces of an archaic rituality embodied in the masks, the dances, and in the actions performed year after year in the streets of the community. What is the role of woman in such carnivals and what does this tell us about the place and role of woman in the Italian rural society is the question that this essay addresses.

Before getting to the question at hand, a brief explanation of the feast is in order. Both modern and traditional carnivals are masquerades, interruptions of what is considered to be the “normal” daily routine. However, while the significance of the exuberance of the feast today can find an explanation in man’s necessity to break the linear and standardized cycle of time imposed by the industry, the traditional carnivals are parts of a specific rural and agricultural model of interpretation and forecasting of the cycle of the seasons.

Traditional carnivals last for about one month: from “Ash Wednesday” to the beginning of Lent: during this time the entire community performs a series of rites which create an agrestic counterrhythm to usher out winter, and welcome a fruitful spring. The most magical moment of carnival is not, as one would imagine, Mardi Gras, but the two weeks around the 1st of February. During these days, the elders forecast the spring lunation to understand when to start the sowing season. The procession of masks is concurrent with this crucial planning operation. In its essence it is, then, a collective representation of the drama of a savage Nature tamed by Man.

Like in all the theatrical plays where the characters are fixed and stable, the type of masks in the ceremony has remained unchanged for decades. The main protagonist is Nature that is personified as anthropomorphic animals, the most common being the “Bear.” Nature can also be personified as “Savage-man”, sometimes accompanied by a “Savage-woman”. During the procession these wild beings interact with the spectators, making jokes or asking for food, until they are entrapped and neutralized by other masks that represent some aspects of the mankind. Sometimes there is a mask of a “Woman” that has the “Bear” dance until it is exhausted and unarmed. This happens in the feast of Saints Brigida and Orso at Urbiano di Mompantero (TO). Sometimes there is a group of young men that capture or slay the beast. If it is not murdered, the Spirit of Nature is entrapped, and the captivity could end with the spirit turning into man, thus destroying the costume that represents it. An example is the shearing of “Bear” operated by “Barber”, one of the masks in the carnival of Lanzette (AO).

Symbolically carnivals can be considered as complex rites of fertility that operate on two levels. The first level is the fertility of the fields: in a world completely based on agriculture, people look to be given a good harvest, which may avoid famine and death. It is therefore not rare to see the act of dispelling Death staged. In Villa d’Acceglio (CN) (pp.39-40), for example, the people drive the mask of Death (or Lent) away with the same offers of food that are able to calm the “Bear”. The second level is fertility intended as ability to beget – i.e. sexuality. The “Bear” and the “Savage-

man” are not only symbols of the wildness of Nature but also of savage and destructive sexuality. Thus, when the “Bear” is tamed, also an uncontrolled sexuality is led back to a prosperous normalcy. Nature masks are not the only masks with a sexual meaning. There are other lesser masks that represent aspects of social aberrations. As these unacceptable behaviors, these taboos, are made concrete through the masks, they can be managed, weakened, and exorcized, thereby restoring the peace in the community.

To gain a thorough understanding of the characteristics of a carnival, and of a parade, it is also necessary to understand how social rites are influenced by the history of the community. For this reason Carnival cannot be reduced simply to a magical-divinatory dimension. Generally a carnival is a means through which all the most dreadful collective fears of a society are conquered through their staging. Death could be the main fear, but it is not the only one. Sometimes a military invasion that happened in the remote past could be such an indelible trauma that the village needs to ridicule the enemy and push his army back every year, so as not to feel endangered by the outer world. This is what happens at Sampeyre (CN) or in numerous carnivals of the Valle d’Aosta, where masks of soldiers dressed with harlequinesque uniforms are equal companions of “Savage-men” and anthropomorphic animals.

The carnival masks’ parade was an important part of public life and generally it was staged by groups and organizations of young men. Women were not accepted. Hence, even though women had an important role in the preparation of the costumes, it was completely precluded to them to be material protagonists of the feast. A possible explanation for that is the fact that, until the last century’s industrialization in the country villages, the domestic management and great part of the family’s strategies were led by women, while the public life and the field works were almost exclusively a prerogative of men.

In studying any aspect of today’s traditional carnivals, it is necessary to pay close attention to detail. Even if there is an important connection between the actual traditional carnivals and the ‘the old tradition’, the link that connects the lore of the past with the present was actually broken in the early years after World War II, when the rites were abandoned. The majority of these celebrations were resumed in the late ’70s, after decades of suspension and a complete modification of the social context. In fact, in Italy, the end of the second world conflict coincided with the depopulation of the countryside. Communities of hundreds of inhabitants became ghost villages. Such dramatic change in the demographics of the villages led to the overcoming of the gender bipartition. It is in fact around that time that one can see women acting the roles traditionally assigned to men during carnival. This is testified by the photos of “Orso di Piume” [Feathered Bear] of Cortemilia. (pp. 41-43)

That notwithstanding, when the traditional masks were re-staged, about all the roles in the masquerade were re-assigned to men. This predominance, however, does not mean an absence of woman masks, since in the parades there are animals, women, men, children and elderly, hunters, barbers, farmers, soldiers, spirits and ghosts: all the elements of the human landscape. For this reason it is possible to consider the traditional carnivals as an incredible selfportrait of an entire society.

From the perspective of gender studies the traditional carnivals are interesting objects of study, that allow to analyze the significance of women masks, so as to understand the role played by woman in the public image of a traditional community. The eleven masks that are part of the exhibition offer sufficient evidence to outline the main characteristics of this role.

Without a doubt, woman is a symbol of fertility. The masks embody all the moments of her life: for example the height of fecundity of the young brides of Sampeyre (pp. 19-21), its end, for example, the Lent of Villar (pp. 39-40), the adulthood of the wives of Limone Piemonte (p. 24), the maturity of the women of Volvera (pp.33-34), the seniority of the hags of Monastero Bormida (pp. 37-38).

Connected to the concept of fertility are issues of civilization and encoded sexuality. If the carnival itself is a play about the hard equilibrium between the wild and the ruled, this antinomy is stressed in woman masks more than in masculine ones, this antinomy: the “Savage Woman” and the “Bride”; complete liberty, the former, the ultimate form of bonding, the latter one.

Moreover there is the subordination of female masks to masculine masks. An extreme example is Doupla of Champlas du Col, where the mask itself is a couple of a married woman carrying her husband on her back (pp.33-34). This reflects the fictional reality of the parade, the role “sub conditione” that the women had in the social rural world.

This omnipresence of a masculine mask also relegates woman in a grey zone between man and animal. Just like a man or a group of men has to conduct the “Bear” inside the community in order to make it stay there, implicitly the same thing happens to woman masks. Just like the presence of man leashes the animal, it controls the potentially destructive presence of woman. This is underscored by the fact that all the masks of death are feminine, and at the same time death is the only woman without a partner! That notwithstanding, the presence of woman masks is required in the parade, because both are necessary. This concept is well represented in Sestriere, where man and woman both plough the snow to make spring start again.

In the parade the masks represent a concert where the actions of any single actor could not directly affect the main drama staged. In the carnival of Sampeyre, where the liberation of the valley from the Moorish occupation is revived, a woman mask like the Veio (pp. 27 -29) seems to live on the border of the battle, acting only a buffoonish role, while the meaning of the young Sarazine, the messenger of victory, can only be found in the story staged.

In this context it is interesting to observe how in the carnivals that stage a collection of food – generally justified as propitiatory gifts – the collectors are children or men in woman masks like, for example, the Volvera’s Catlin-a or the Monastero’s Bormida and Villar’s Lents. Both woman and child are borderline masks, not completely part of the male social world. For this reason they are ‘natural’ mediators between man and that which is not human: the wild or even death.

This brief examination of all the masks portrayed in the collection published in this catalogue, suggest that woman is indeed a connector between the world of man and the world of the nature. Congenitally the main part of human life, woman incarnates the alpha and the omega of life. In fact, whereas the masculine masks, savage or civil, are always parts of a mosaic where the theme is the struggle for life, woman masks are virtually the beginning and the end of this struggle. The fact that this role of woman is conveyed through these contemporary carnivals, which take place in the XXI century, connects the feast of carnival to an archaic semiology common to other European and extra European cultures.

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Il Carnevale della Donna tra Tradizione e Post-Modernità

by Piercarlo Grimaldi
and Davide Porporato

Il calendario rituale che scandisce il tempo circolare dell'anno tradizionale è attivo nelle campagne piemontesi ancora nella prima parte del Novecento. Lo sviluppo industriale che segue alla seconda guerra mondiale ha determinato l'abbandono di massa del mondo contadino e lo sviluppo della città. La cultura del gesto e della parola che caratterizzava lo scorrere del tempo della tradizione è stata sostituita da quella della scrittura che organizza il tempo in modo lineare e cronometrico.

I processi culturali che hanno trasformato la società si sono portati appresso, però, al presente, ancora tracce attive del passato festivo dai caratteri anche precristiani. A queste pratiche e forme rituali persistenti che possono essere lette anche come una sorta di resistenza alla trasformazione, si aggiunge ora il fenomeno inatteso e sorprendente della ripresa, della reinvenzione del tempo festivo che recupera i gesti e le parole della tradizione. Un fenomeno, questo, che trova la spiegazione nel vivere strumentale, non affettivo, che la società complessa, globale, riserva alle giovani generazioni che sempre di più avvertono il lutto dovuto alla mancanza di radici, di un indirizzo di senso che, nell'autorevolezza delle tradizioni, ritrova i tratti innovativi per costruire la società del futuro.

In questo contesto il tempo del Carnevale tradizionale piemontese del presente continua, da un lato, a rappresentare, senza soluzione di continuità, un teatro umano trasgressivo, dall'altro, a rioccupare spazi comunitari dove, ossimoricamente, il silenzio rituale era ormai diventato assordante e, quindi, a ripopolare le campagne di personaggi, di maschere tradizionali che erano scomparse anche da lungo tempo.

In particolare, di questo teatro rituale della vita, la mostra intende evidenziare un tratto che ci sembra rilevante: la presenza della maschera della donna. Nel tempo del Carnevale la donna non poteva partecipare attivamente alla festa. Ad essa veniva riservato solitamente il compito di preparare i costumi e i cibi rituali e di assistere alla festa popolare, di stare ed operare al margine del tempo orgiastico d'inizio anno. I ruoli femminili previsti dalle narrazioni mitiche carnevalesche venivano quindi rivestiti da uomini. Un'inversione di genere che rientra compiutamente nell'essenza più intima del Carnevale che, in un tempo e in uno spazio definito del calendario rituale dell'anno, ha lo scopo di invertire i segni, di trasgredire le regole orali che nel corso dell'anno organizzano e scandiscono il vivere comunitario.

L'uomo che si traveste da donna è portatore di una doppia, inquietante sessualità che la quotidianità non riconosce. Nella parentesi temporale del Carnevale la donna viene interpretata dall'uomo. La *Vecchia* che sfila con il *Vecchio* nel Carnevale alpino di Sampeyre e porta con sé un bambino appena nato, rappresenta una sfida biologica sino a poco tempo fa innaturale e che, invece, la scienza del presente rende improvvisamente possibile. Il Carnevale alpino quindi, sembra anticipare con una sorprendente preveggenza mitica le sempre più inquietanti scoperte del presente e, nel contempo, suggerirci che questo estremo teatro della riproduzione può solo essere rappresentato in un tempo e in uno spazio simbolico definito.

Ancora più funambolica sul piano sessuale è la maschera della *Doppia* che viene rappresentata nel Carnevale di Champlas du Col, una frazione di Sestriere, centro alpino dove si sono svolte le ultime Olimpiadi invernali. In occasione dell'evento che ha concentrato sul paese di alta montagna gli occhi del mondo, i nativi hanno ripreso un Carnevale interrotto da alcuni decenni per rivendicare i loro più profondi tratti etnici di fronte all'acuto processo di globalizzazione imposto dalla sfida olimpica. La *Doppia*, "la *Doubbla*", è l'esito di un abile mascheramento. Il personaggio è costituito da una donna che porta sul dorso un uomo. La singolare e teatrale figura, interpretata da un uomo, origina un complesso e trasgressivo rovesciamento di genere e sessuale che la vita tradizionale quotidiana delle Alpi non contempla affatto. Nel mondo contadino della tradizione l'esplicita posizione sessuale che la figura della *Doppia* genera, fa parte di un codice non traducibile agli occhi della comunità nel corso dell'anno, mentre nella società del presente, il trasgressivo lessico che il tempo della tradizione riconosce solo al Carnevale, fa parte del linguaggio utilizzato dai mezzi di comunicazione che raggiungono quotidianamente ogni famiglia del globo.

Se le cose stanno così, ciò che resta del travestimento femminile nel Carnevale popolare del presente ci narra di un sistema culturale che già metaforicamente sembrava intuire gli orizzonti che la scienza oggi sta disvelando con sempre più aggressiva rapidità; ci racconta di un simbolismo sessuale e di genere su cui non abbiamo ancora cessato di riflettere e di stupirci.

Oggi che i Carnevali tornano a ri-nascere, sempre più la donna interpreta se stessa e diventa anche la maschera di figure antropomorfe che sono espressione del selvatico, del maschile. La giovane donna bionda che indossa il costume di piume che genera il ritrovato orso di Cortemilia ne è un esempio trasparente. La festa per ritornare a rappresentare il teatro della vita non censura più la donna, anzi, a volte, è la donna stessa a riprogettare e a far rivivere il teatro rituale, impegnandosi come organizzatrice e come attrice in ruoli e funzioni tradizionalmente interdetti.

Il Carnevale oggi, una parentesi spazio-temporale ancora importante che trasforma, macina ruoli e segni ma che sembra indicare, proprio in questo complicato processo in corso, la sua inaspettata, inesausta vitalità.

A partire dalla donna che diventa maschera di sé stessa.

The Masks



Sarazine
[Saracen]

Sampeyre (CN),
Carnival,
Photos: Davide Porporato, 2007

Sampeyre's Carnival takes place during the last two Sundays and the last Thursday before Mardi Grass.

During the feast, some children wear feminine, elegant dresses. They communicate the rout of the Saracens to the village, waving their fans.







Sarazina
[*Saracen*]

Bellino (CN)
Carnival,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 1999

The Carnival in Bellino is celebrated the last Sunday of Carnival, and on Mardi Grass. During the feast, *Sarazine* must dance and jump past the fences that block the parade course. Then, the *Sapeur* [sappers], other masks of this Carnival, can destroy the ritual fences and let the parade go forward.





Tupina
[Chamber pot]

Limone Piemonte(CN),
Carnival,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi

A group of young men dressed in feminine costumes bring with them a chamber pot, which is called in the local dialect *Tupine*. During the feast, they follow the parade and offer the hot chocolate that is contained in their pot to the public.



Magnin
[Tinsmith]

Monastero Bormida (AT)
Mardi Grass ,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 2002

Magnin are a group of people with their faces dirtied by ash. They conduct the Carnival collection, going from farm to farm. All of the families give hospitality to *Magnin* and donate food and wine.





Vieio
[Old women]

Sampeyre (CN),
Carnival,
Photos: Davide Porporato, 2007

Sampeyre's Carnival takes place during the last two Sundays and the last Thursday before Mardi Grass. The mask *Vieio*, literally "Old woman", is the wife of the mask "Old man". During the parade, this couple walks forward with difficulty, stressing their age. *Vieio* carries around a cradle with a big doll.

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Vecchia
[Old woman]

Sestriere (TO)
Carnival,
Photos: Davide Porporato, 2005

On Mardi Grass, *Vecchia* is the wife of a couple dressed with fur coats. These particular costumes make them seem like Savage People.

Vecchia leads the plough that is towed by both the old people. Ploughing the snow is part of a magical counter-rhythm concerning the change of seasons.







la Doubbia
[the Double man]

Sestriere (TO)
Mardi Grass,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 2005

Only a man can perform the *Doubbia* role. This mask represents a woman who carries her husband on her back. This image is complex and demonstrates a role reversal.





Catlin-a
[Katherine]

Volvera (TO),
Mardi Grass,
Photos: Davide Porporato, 1996

Youngsters dressed as old women take part in the food collection with others wearing masks, like *Orso* [Bear] and *Capra* [Goat]. They collect and keep the gifts in a spacious hamper.
In the local dialect, *Catlin-a* means “Katherine” but it also can refer to “Death”.





Quaresima
[Lent]

Monastero Bormida (AT)
Ash Wednesday,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 1990

During Ash Wednesday, a man dressed as Lent is followed by a group of men and women dressed in white. This group visits the village homes and sings a traditional song that makes fun of the Carnival, which has ended the day before.

This singing was traditional in all of the geographical areas of the Langhe hills.





Quaresima
[Lent]

Villar d'Acceglio (CN),
Carnival,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 1989

The Carnival in Villar d'Acceglio is celebrated the last Sunday of Carnival, and on Mardi Grass.

At the end of the feast, *Carnevale* [Mr. Carnival] is put on trial. When the trial is finished, *Carnevale* is condemned to die. Then the ritual tribunal calls *Quaresima* and charges her to dig the grave where *Carnevale* will be buried after his execution.





Orso di Piume
[Feathered Bear]

Cortemilia (CN),
Carnival,
Photos: Piercarlo Grimaldi, 2005

Cortemilias's feast is celebrated on the last Sunday of Carnival. In 2005 the mask of *Orso di Piume*, which was part of the local Carnival tradition, was rediscovered. Despite the tradition, which made only men perform this role, *Orso's* mask was worn by a woman of the village.





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