VOL 3, No 3&4: DEC 06

QUARTERLY MAGAZINE ON LITERATURE, CULTURE & THE ARTS IN CYPRUS

DOUBLE ISSUE

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BIOLOGY IS NOT DESTINY: MASK AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN GREEK THEATRE

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The aim of this article is to show that the mask in Greek theatre was also[1] used as a medium of gender concealment and gender construction. The seemingly paradoxical conclusion of this article that 'women' were present in Greek theatre is made possible by testing a theoretical hypothesis in practice in a contemporary performance of Euripides' Bacchae.

Feminism and Fictive Women: The Masks of Patriarchy

American feminism has long been critical of the mimetic strategies of Greek theatre. The ancient cross-dressed actor has been the seed of discord between two tendencies of feminism: the first one sees the transvestite actor as veiling the lack of 'real woman' in theatre, whereas the second lays emphasis on the mimetic strategies of the performance as a socio-political event which is determined to include the 'feminine' in its agenda.

Sue-Ellen Case concludes what she calls a feminist deconstruction of traditional theatre history with the following exhortation[2]:

Overall, feminist practitioners and scholars may decide that such plays [i.e. Greek plays] do not belong to the canon- and that they are not central to the study and practice of theatre.

More interestingly, she had already launched an indictment against Western academia:

1. Generally for the use of mask in Greek theatre see Wiles, David, The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991; Pickard-Cambridge, A.W., The Dramatic Festivals of Athens. 2nd edition revised by J. Gould and D.M. Lewis, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968; some late illustrations in Trendall, A.D., 'Masks on Apulian Red-Figured Vases', Betts, J. - Hooker, J. - Green, J.R. (Eds.), Studies in Honour of T.B.L. Webster, 2nd volume, Classical Press, Bristol, 137-54.

2. Case, Sue-Ellen, Feminism and Theatre, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988, 19.

essays

Each culture which valorizes the reproduction of those 'classic' texts actively participates in the same patriarchal subtext which created those female characters as 'Woman'[3].

Clearly, the first wave of feminist performance theory castigated Greek theatre for banishing real women from the public stage. Simplistic in its proto-feminist critique that women were at all times treated as commodities[4], such theory took the establishment of Greek theatre practice to be a firm patriarchal strategy: 'as a result of the suppression of real women, the culture invented its own representation of the gender, and it was this fictional woman who appeared on stage... representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender while suppressing the experiences... of real women'[5].

Furthermore, this type of textual analysis illustrates a way to recognise the images of woman in male-produced literature as fetishized objects of male, often misogynistic, imagination, which tries to preserve its authority over an 'object'. This type of feminism is looking for the resisting Reader who, for tragedy, is called to exercise their interpretative energy upon the male actor's transvestism -an invented issue of feminist criticism according to which women's parts descend into nothing but 'drag roles'. The male actor's representation of women was said to institutionalise 'male-originated signs of... appropriate gender behavior',[6] thus, dramatic action on the Greek stage is supposed to take place in the 'absence' of the female as an active participant, who is annihilated by silence or appropriation[7], and, finally, Greek tragedy is made the symptom of a pathogenic civilization: "But in forming culture... tragedy [was] most concerned with forming male subjectivity, in part through an articulation of gender and appropriate gender roles[8]."

Nonetheless, the performance strategies of the Greek text deictically prove it to be a drama of absence of 'action' (i.e. action sometimes remained within the domain of narrative), or rather of a presence which stands for an absence[9]. The question that Case[10] raises is how a man can depict the absent woman. Surprisingly, the reply comes from another feminist. Fiona Shaw in an autobiographical essay on her cross-dressed Richard II (Royal National Theatre, London, 1995) argued that it remains 'a miracle of imagination that an audience will choose to believe the impossible'[11]. Also Honzl has long ago showed that this is a proof of the spectator's 'psychological capacity for concentration, for focusing intense attention along lines designed by the drama and by the interpretative fantasy of... the spectator's own imagination'[12]. Of course, the actress was not physically present, but the Woman was not absent from the mise-en-scène evoked by the text and realised in the imagination of the spectator. The Woman was an actor with a mask, the neutrality of which 'was ready to take its expression from the tragedy rather than imposing a certain tone upon it'[13].

Even if it is impossible to deny the establishment of patriarchy in classical Athens convincingly, the Athenian

3. Case, Sue-Ellen, 'Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts', Theatre Journal 37.3 (1985): 322.

4. The unorthodox application of such liberal methodology to conservative Classics which have long relied on an almost total empiricism rooted in the textual study of culture is discussed in Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin, 'Introduction Part I: Redefining the Field', in Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin - Richlin, Amy (eds.), Feminist Theory and the Classics, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, 3-5.

5. Case, op.cit., 1988, 7. Cf. Aston, Elaine, An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, 17-19.

6. Case (1985) 321.

7. Cf. Douka-Kabitoglou, Ekaterini, 'Mistresses of Mimesis: Ancient (Meta)Drama and (Post)Modern Feminism', in Patsalidis, Savas - Sakellaridou, Elizabeth (eds.), (Dis)Placing Classical Greek Theatre, University Studio Press, Thessaloniki, 1999, 408ff. And, '... the action deictically... "points out" gender as a fictive construct... [a] demonstration of the absence of women', Aston, Elaine, An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, 17.

8. Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin, Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, 35.

9. Ubersfeld, Anne, 'The Pleasure of the Spectator', translated by Pierre Bouillaguet and Charles Jose, Modern Drama XXV.1 (1982): 129.

10.Case, op.cit, 1988, 9.

11.Shaw, Fiona, 'Foreword', Goodman, Lizbeth - de Gay, Jane (eds.), The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, xxiv; Meyerhold, Vsevold Emilevitch, Meyerhold on Theatre, translated and edited with a critical commentary by Edward Braun, Methuen, London, 1969, 27 gave a similar reply: 'How did medieval drama succeed without any stage equipment? Thanks to the lively imagination of the spectator'.

12. Honzl, Jind_ich, 'The Hierarchy of Dramatic Devices', in Matejka, Ladislav - Titunik, Irwin R. (eds.), Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA - London, 1971 (Czech original 1943),120. Similarly, cf. Hourmouziades, Nicolaos C., Production and Imagination in Euripides: Form and Function of the Scenic Space, Greek Society for Humanistic Studies, Athens, 1965, 8 '... text... does not appear to contain any "superfluous" scenery indications pointing to features unlikely to have been visible at the performance, and, consequently, serving only as a means of expression exclusively appealing to the audience's imagination'.

13. Taplin, Oliver, 'The Pictorial Record', Easterling, P.E. (ed.), op.cit., 74.

culture had invented an effective system of 'pressure release' in order to secure its stability by temporarily subverting the established social order (mainly through cult and ritual). Hence, the social 'actor' departed from their normality into something socially intolerable, and through the cathartic effect of this transformation returned to the suppressive normality liberated from the 'neurosis' of oppression. Nevertheless, such events both subvert and confirm the conventional distribution of authority, which surrounds and licenses them[14], proving the instrumental element of fictional subversion in exercising social control[15]. The Athenian theatre particularly recognised the need to restore the balance through the cross-dressed actor:

The variety of attempts to respond to the force of Dionysus by such role reversals not only stresses Dionysus' potential to make humans different from their normal, controlled selves, but also emphasizes the way in which theatre itself is an essentially Dionysiac experience, where men play roles of others and enact in the transgression of tragedy... the reversal or subversion of the norms of social behaviour .[16]

We can now identify the two academic tendencies of feminism: one that sees the Greek actor as the transgendered substitute for real women, a replaced mask of patriarchal production; and the other, that views cross-dressing as being part of the mimetic and educational dynamics of tragic theatre, with Froma Zeitlin being the most influential advocate of the latter. Her view is, beyond doubt, a woman's voice which takes as a starting-point the absence of women from tragedy, assuming neither that the texts allude to some specific external reality of social status, nor that every male dramatist is a phallocrat. She manages thereby to establish an alternative reading as mainstream:

"...men are the only actors in this civic theatre... it is not a woman who speaks or acts for herself and in herself on stage; it is always a man who impersonates her."[17]

First, Zeitlin puts the female in the position of the observed (the visual object, as Irigary puts it) as Other to the adult male spectator. Luce Irigary showed how the 'ancient' function of the male preoccupation with the visual, caused the female always to be constructed as the object of coveted knowledge that the male both fears and desires to possess[18]. Tragedy, Zeitlin argues, uses the Other to raise questions about a rigidly masculine citizen self-projection in a way that opens up 'the masculine view of the universe'[19], even if the final closure of tragedy reaffirms patriarchal structures of authority. The very fact that theatre allows the masculine, strong and unemotional self to undergo some species of the 'weak'/passive female experience denied in normal life, seems to reinforce the dynamics of tragic theatre in a way that tragedy may be taken to end with more political questions than affirmations. One could argue, therefore, that the mask was used as an apparatus of gender concealment and transformation ('a safe passage... to the Other'[20]), which covers the real prosopon of the actor, and gives the pretence to experience femininity, offering thereby 'the possibility of assuming a fictional persona'[21], or 'multiple identities'[22].

As a final point, it needs to be stressed that fictional texts do not necessarily witness the established practices of a society, but they are rich repositories of civic ideology, as in the case of Greek drama. Greek tragedy, in particular, seems to have had the power to democratically lower the male in the position of a passive victim with a female mask.

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14. Bremmer, Jan, 'Greek Maenadism Reconsidered', Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 55 (1984): 167-86 concludes that after 'the trance the women would return home and resume their dull and isolated existence, which the monadic ritual, like other female cults, helped them to endure'. Henrichs, Albert, 'Greek Maenadism from Olympias to Messalina', Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 82 (1978): 136 also highlights the fact that 'the freedom of movement which they enjoyed during the ritual formed a marked contrast to the seclusion of ordinary women'.

15. Cf. Goodlad, J.S.R., A Sociology of Popular Drama, Heinemann, London, 1971, 27.

16. Goldhill, Simon, Reading Greek Tragedy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, 273-4.

17. Zeitlin, Froma I., 'Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality and the Feminine in Greek Drama', in Winkler, John J. - Zeitlin, Froma I. (eds.), Nothing to Do with Dionysos?: Athenian Drama in its Social Context, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1990, 65.

18. Cf. Irigaray, Luce, Speculum of the Other Woman, translated by Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1985; Fuss, Diana, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference, Routledge, New York, 1989,72: 'on the one hand, woman is asserted to have an essence which defines her as woman (designated through qualities such as weakness, passivity, receptivity, and emotion) and yet, on the other hand, woman is relegated to the status of matter and can have no access to essence...'.

19. Zeitlin, op.cit., 87.

20. Calame, Claude, 'Facing Otherness: The Tragic Mask in Ancient Greece', History of Religions 26 (1986): 141.

21. Vervain, Chris - Wiles, David , 'The Masks of Greek Tragedy as Points of Departure for Modern Performance', New Theatre Quarterly 67 (2001): 255.

22. Easterling, op.cit., 49.

The homosocial [23] acting of Greeks

Peter Hall's masked production of Euripides' Bacchai (Royal National Theatre, Olivier Theatre, London, 2002) can help us test the above theoretical points in practice, precisely because Agave was played by a man in a female mask and costume, who also played the role of Pentheus.

Peter Hall assisted by the intensity of William Houston's acting, who transformed himself from Pentheus to Agave -from male to female and from prey to slaughterer- provided a completely new envisioning of the Agave scene, enthralling and eye-opening. Houston entered the stage with his female mask wearing a blood-stained white dress and holding Pentheus' head/mask. He was neither transported, nor, as expected, hysterical, but rather acted as a hypnotized marionette. His movements were slow and choreographic and his voice sounded warm and entranced. From the beginning to the end of the scene, Houston invented Agave as an assaulted mother, and not as a remorseful maenad. This touching, though un-psychological, performance proved Agave to have been the victim of Dionysos' vengefulness, even if this effect was later destroyed by Dionysos' uncomfortable 'elevation' above the stage with the assistance of a little platform on which, shining and covered with glitter, he undeniably looked like 'a darling little ashtray'[24]. At the moment of the anagnorisis, Agave acted as if she always knew: an unobtrusive, short 'ah!' was uttered (not the deafening scream we are used to from other performances[25]), and her stichomythia with Kadmos continued in an interrogating tone.

A logical question would be: does a man dressed like a woman look 'camp' in performance? There have been serious speculations in 'queer philology'[26] that men 'in drag' playing women stimulates the male spectator's anxiety, and that there is a hidden eroticism behind this gender-construction mechanism[27]. This hypothesis departs from the wrong prerequisites: first, that there is a fixation regarding male-to-male eroticism in Athens, unresolved and repressed; and second, that 'disavowed male homosexuality underpins all patriarchal cultural organization'[28]. One could accept this thought-provoking assumption easily in other cases, but not in the case of Classical Athens where the homosocial ethos was openly articulated and practiced. Identifying the theatron as the locus where male affectivity takes place, is possible with respect to the imagining of young ephebes (the Athenian eromenoi) playing frenzied women as the subject of mental masturbation for the male spectator. But claiming that there occurs a secret identification between the spectator and the cross-dressed actor is unrealistic. Hall's Bacchai offers some stimulating conclusions. The trans-gendered actors all exposed by their voice and physiology, but concealed by their masks and costume, force the spectator to submit to illusion, and to believe what is phenomenologically unbelievable: what one 'sees' is the feminine, otherwise what one sees is not a performance.

In Peter Hall's production, the actors were guided to rationalize the use of masks in order to be able to perform in them. At the International Conference on the Greek Mask, organized by the Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway College, University of London (20-21 April 2002), Craig Hicks who played Dionysos, confessed:

> Really I had no sense of my body at all. I didn't like my body. I didn't feel my body was expressive as an instrument. I didn't have any sense of my own body. What the mask has done for me is to broaden that out to put me directly in touch with the expressive power of my own body and also to realign my relationship with myself through my body. I studied something called butoh which is a Japanese deconstructionist dance. ...The body is in a critical state all of the time, so that each gradation of gesture, each flick of the neck each step of the foot is critical. So each step is a thousand miles, each step is on fire, you are on fire in each step you make... For some particular reason this works when you wear a mask and apply these techniques and in my present production of the Bacchae with Peter Hall...[29].

So, Hicks argues that the mask, along with his training, helped him to acquire a certain degree of corpore-

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23. Term by Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, 1; in her words, to 'draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire', of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual'.

24. Susannah Clapp, The Observer, 26.5.2002.

25. Cf. my "Dionysus Restitutus: Terzopoulos' Bakchen', RADDATZ, Frank M. (ed.), Reise mit Dionysos: Das Theater des Theodoros Terzopoulos, Theater der Zeit, Berlin, 2006, 90-102.

26. I could characterize as such Halperin's, Winkler's, and especially Rabinowitz's writings. It is not only the methodologies of Queer Theory (i.e. gender and sexual identities are performative resultants of social enactment), but also that most of them have willingly included their work in collective 'queer' discourses, in Abelove, Henri - Barale, Michele - Halperin, David (eds.), The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, Routledge, New York and London, 1993.

27. Rabinowitz, op.cit., 1993, 35.

28. Douka-Kabitoglou, Ekaterini, op.cit., 408.

29. Hicks, Greg, unpublished transcripts from the International Conference on the Greek Mask, Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, 20-21.04.2002, 1.

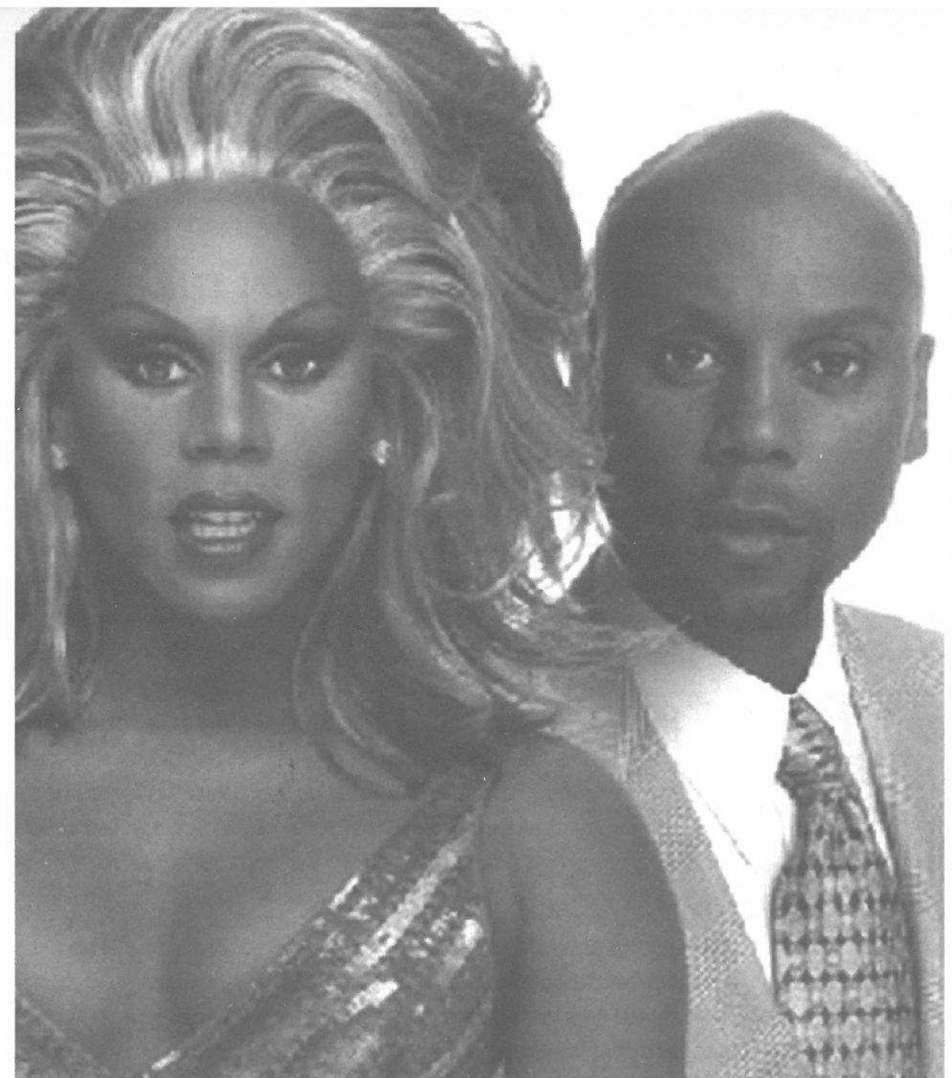
al consciousness. This is true to the extent that with the actor's face covered, the 'body' remains the only expressive unit per se. But Hall has offered some conjectural arguments to justify the use of masks:

The mask is not something that hides - that's an unfortunate word in its English translation- it reveals. And in fact the Greek word for mask means your persona, your essence, your true self. And a mask properly used allows you to express hysterical, vast emotions, horrible stories which would be simply unendurable and over-the-top without the mask. The mask contains the emotion and allows you to express it[30].

They [i.e. actors in masks] are and they remain undirectable. You can't direct people in mask because as soon as you do, that takes his mask off because you've fractured his credibility. So you have to rehearse the play separately from the masks. And that is difficult[31].

In fact, Hall's masks deny the expressiveness of the human face and lend, particularly the chorus, a strangely impersonal movement. The most serious objection against the use of masks is that it contravenes a long established tradition of acting based on facial expression and emotional precision, that is, the mask 'de-psychologizes' the actor[32]. How could a director construct a whole theory about the mask with no practical/ physical/biological justification, rehearse his actors only for a few weeks with the masks they are about to perform in, and, on top of that, expect them to express vast emotions? The case is that contemporary acting (especially in Britain and the Anglo-American tradition of the RADA and the Actors' Studio) is based on psychology, and Hall has deprived his actors by rehearsing them without masks and let them perform in masks[33]. The mask makes the actor impersonal, un-Ego so to say, and this tradition depends on the acting Ego and the active face. This is the safest explanation one could give to Oliver Taplin's ingenious comment that masks de-psychologized Tantalus. No doubt, Hall has constructed a mythology around his masked performances with little practical proof and less experimentation behind it. As Wiles puts it, '[t]he greatest weakness of Hall's productions stems from a contradiction in the working method thrown up by his conception of the mask'[34], a contradiction which is overblown by his rehearsal practices.

In concluding, the mask is a mechanism of gender concealment and gender conversion for the male actor who stands for a woman. What remains to be remembered is that the intense focus on the presence of woman is not only designed by the text, but it is also entirely dependant on the interpretative fantasy and openness of the spectator.



Rupaul, famous female impersonator

30. Unpublished transcript from Peter Hall's radio interview Work in Progress, Radio 3, March 2002, Slot 2, 1.

31.Ibid. 3.

32. Cf. Taplin, Oliver P., 'Masks in Greek Tragedy and in Tantalus', Didaskalia 5.2 (Autumn 2001); and Wiles, David, 'The Use of Masks in Modern Performances of Greek Drama', in Hall, Edith - Macintosh, Fiona - Wrigley, Amanda (eds.), Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of Third Millennium, Oxford University Pres, Oxford, 2003, 256-7.

33.Hicks, op.cit, 4. The same happened in Tantalus as McDonald, Marianne, 'A Classical Soap Opera for the Cultural Elite: Tantalus in Denver, Colorado', Didaskalia 5.2 (Autumn 2001) points out: 'Masks were used and, as usual with Peter Hall, the result was disastrous. The addition of masks was a late one and there was obviously not enough rehearsal time. In Hall's Oresteia, by Tony Harrison, and Hall's Oedipus Plays, including Tantalus, masks muffled the sound. In Tantalus, they give the illusion of moustaches for both males and females.'

34. Wiles, op.cit., 2003, 256.