

# Disguise as an art form

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In Euripides' *The Bacchae*, disguise is used as an art form, seeing that Dionysus is the god of the mask who offers his worshippers the freedom to be individuals that are other than themselves. Hence, Dionysus, the most important character in the play, uses disguise when he enters Thebes after many years wearing the costume of a stranger, and accompanied by bacchantes. It is only at the end of the play that Dionysus unmasks himself to reveal his true form to the people. Moreover, the rites alluded to in the play happen to be replete with masked dancers, choral performances and processions of citizens in costumes (Segal).

Pentheus is the second most important character in Euripides' play. This man is the ruler of the state as well as the preserver of social order. During the course of the play, Pentheus acts as Dionysus' double. The two are seen to switch roles. What is more, Pentheus masks himself as a woman by cross dressing. He wears a wig and long skirts, stripping himself of his masculinity and authority, only to be with women who have been seen resting blissfully in the forest, feasting on milk, honey and wine that springs from the ground.

The women are playing music, suckling wild animals, and singing and dancing with joy. Pentheus cannot resist the sight. In his woman's costume, he is attacked by the ladies and eventually killed in the fight by his own mother, Agaue (Segal). Whereas masking, disguise, or the use of costume to act as someone other than oneself, is an important art form throughout the play - and Euripides' play would be nothing without it - the use of costume to disguise one's lecherous intentions leads to the death of Pentheus. There is a strong message from the divinity of Dionysus, which practically rules the play.

The message is: creativity through disguise is desirable, especially when the intention of the one who masks himself is good; however, evil intentions are strictly punished. As a matter of fact, the punishment of the mask is inevitable, seeing that Dionysus is also the “god of confrontation,” with his big, penetrating eyes foretelling doom for those who misuse the mask (Henrichs). While it is true that Dionysus – being the god of the mask – is the model for Pentheus, who would like to use the mask to enjoy life to the fullest, Dionysus as the god of the play must exercise his absolute authority.

After all, the teaching of virtues is the responsibility of god. When Pentheus uses the mask just to eyeball the ladies in their private moments, the omnipresent god must allow the ladies to attack him. Dionysus allows the mother of Pentheus to kill him for his immorality, seeing that the man with the mask has merely used disguise to satisfy his lecherous inclinations. It can be inferred from this that the mask of Dionysus, the god of the mask, was simply a tool to help the god live on the earth with his people. While living with his people, the god must take action against man’s wrongdoing.

Hence, Henrichs quotes Walter Otto on the subject of the mask thus: “Here there is nothing but encounter, from which there is no withdrawal – an immovable, spell-binding antipode.” While the mask of Dionysus is a “sacred object,” it is also a “source of the fascination and confusion” for the people, given that Dionysus is wearing the mask to merely live among his people and judge them according to their good or evil deeds (Henrichs). In a way, Dionysus is fooling his people by wearing the mask. Even so, it is his prerogative to fool his people if he wants to do so.

There is a vast difference between the god of the mask and the man of the mask. The latter has not been granted the right to fool the people. This is the reason why Dionysus must keep an eye on his people to ensure that all those who imitate him by wearing masks would use the mask for good as opposed to evil. The immediacy of Dionysus' gaze is a warning for the wrongdoers (Vernant). Nevertheless, Pentheus is totally unmindful of the god's presence on earth. The masked dancers, on the other hand, do not have to be punished by Dionysus, for they did not use his attribute of masking for unethical deeds.

The mask of Dionysus actually reveals that the masked one is not an ordinary human being. In point of fact, there is a "radical otherness" emphasized by the mask of Dionysus (Vernant). Moreover, it reveals the masked one as an elusive and enigmatic character who has the power to disorient all those who come across him. The smile of the mask may have allowed the masked dancers, at least, to understand that the attribute of masking must not be used for evil doing. Unfortunately, Pentheus could not understand the true use of the mask.

After Dionysus has unmasked himself, however, the rest of the people may appreciate the reasons for Dionysus' presence among them. According to Su: The mask of Dionysus is a simulacrum not a representation. As Ginette Paris argues, "Dionysus is not the God behind the mask. He is the mask." The mask of Dionysus is its own double which imitates nothing, a double that nothing anticipates. There is no original mask of Dionysus as such. The mask is always the mask of a mask. It is with this mask that Dionysus enters into

the theater and becomes the patron god of the theater, a place which celebrates the

art of miming, of disguise, of illusion, and of role-playing. Like the mime's operation professed by Mallarmé in *Mimique* and interpreted by Derrida in "The Double Session," the mask's performance does allude, "but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass." The mask of Dionysus defies Platonic or metaphysical conceptions of limitation. Through the mask, Dionysus introduces the unpredictable dimension of the 'elsewhere' into the very heart of daily life. This 'elsewhere' is the 'distancing places,' where Nietzsche the

Dionysian piper would like to lure us. This 'elsewhere' is also the 'outside' where Blanchot would like to lead us; it is a radical outside which has nothing to do with the dialectical struggle of the inside and the outside, and transgresses the limit set by the idea of a self, of the subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work. Undoubtedly, Dionysus' mask also serves the purpose of helping his people to experience the difference between truth and falsehood. All that is seen by people may not be real.

There are hidden intentions and objectives that we cannot see behind people's actions. Similarly, the mask of Dionysus - while deluding his people with regards to the presence of the supreme judge among them - also allows his people to experience the fact of truth being mixed with falsehood in the lives that they ordinarily live. The fact that Dionysus unmask himself at the end of the play is to teach his people the lesson to look beyond the obvious.

Perhaps there are many shades of truth, or no truth at all in our visions of the world.

Dionysus would like his people to be strongly aware of the fact that there is much more to life than what they observe. The mask of Dionysus is always smiling, which expresses the fact that the god of the mask is fooling his people by appearing among them as a masked character - solely for judgment, as shown in the case of Pentheus. Dionysus enters the theatre with the mask, which is believed to have risen from the deep sea. The mask appears foreign and strange - an enigma that the people of Dionysus must decipher.

It is also an unknown kind of power for them to appreciate. In short, the mask with its penetrating eyes calls for an interpretation. Although the masked dancers are able to interpret the mask of Dionysus in a perfectly innocent way, Pentheus is punished for his wrongdoing by way of the mask. At the end of the play, however, the god of the smiling mask also reveals to his people that there may be truth or falsehood behind what they see. Thus, the stranger's mask serves many purposes, all of which are intelligently designed by the god of the mask.