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The Mask Behind the Man

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Around November 23 in the year 534 B.C.E. the world of western drama was shaken when, during a newly instituted Athenian festival in honor of the god Dionysus, a man by the name of Thespis performed a play in which he stepped out of the traditional chorus line, donned a unique mask, and became Dionysus himself. The audience was stunned and unsure what to make of this stark change in tradition, for no one had dared to do so before. For his revolutionary idea Thespis won the festival and received a goat as his prize (The Parian Chronicle). Thespis challenged many of the old ways of the theatrical art, but he did keep one commonality with them: he kept the use of the mask. He was already close to heresy for daring to question the ‘correct’ way of doing theatre; why would he not simply do away with all the traditions and begin anew? This would be an easy enough question to answer if masks had only been tools to help the Greeks tell their stories, but they were so much more than that. Full helmet masks were the soul of drama. They were vessels by which the story was told and while there were undoubtedly many other factors which lead to their development and continued use, the original and most important function of the mask was to allow the actor to relinquish his identity for the good of the play, just as Thespis had done.

Theatre in Greece was much different than it is today—it was first and foremost a religious celebration to honor the gods, specifically the god of wine, revelry, and madness.
Dionysus. In addition these festivals and celebrations served to educate adults and children alike about the gods, common myths about day to day life, and heroic tales coming from epic poems such as The Odyssey and The Iliad. While the plays could be entertaining, their primary function was to educate. Another stark contrast lay in the use of a chorus which was, in essence, a group of actors portraying a single entity. They gave up their identities and wore very similar masks so that one could not tell them apart. These masks, however, were not like the small, fine porcelain ones normally found in European operas, but were rather large and bulky, known as helmet masks. They covered the entire face of the actor leaving only holes for his eyes and his mouth, being built in such a way to leave a lasting impression on the audiences that saw them and to give the actor a role to fill, a character to become. These masks were thus often quite illustrative and, being large and heavy, actors would be forced into positions which helped them better play their part. Convenience and comfort were secondary to doing justice to the role given. It was ordinary and quite commonplace for actors to give up their identities to become whatever creature was illustrated by the mask. It was a simple precaution to prevent actors from committing the act of hubris.

Hubris, from an ancient Greek perspective, was a detestable sin, especially so in Athens, a city-state noted for its arts and drama. In fact acts of hubris were, under Athenian law, harshly punishable, in some cases by death, and Athenians spared no effort to ensure that this was understood. It was such a commonly held notion that it pervaded even the literature of the time. In the Athenian written Odyssey, Odysseus suffers many agonizing torments on his journey home after defiantly refusing to give proper sacrifice to the god Poseidon. In The Iliad Achilles stubbornly refuses to go into battle after feeling as though he had been insulted, and in doing so
caused the deaths of many fellow soldiers and friends. A final example being in the Greek play *Medea* as the audience watches Jason try to use the sorceress Medea for his own goals and ends up losing everything and everyone he loved. Hubris was not just excessive, sometimes fatal, pride; it was considered an aggressive defiance of the will of the gods. The gods were not the finest examples of morality, so they did not expect moral perfection by their followers. Rather, as David Wiles wrote in his book *Greek Theatre Performance: an Introduction*, “Classical Greek society was more overtly ritualized than modern European and American society…Greek religion had no holy books and no interest in what the individual privately believed. Piety was a matter of performing ritual acts in honor of the gods” (Wiles 27). They expected obedience from their followers, and respect. This lead to interesting philosophical implications, for it was then completely appropriate to mock and ridicule the gods, such as by depicting Dionysus cowering in fear, as long as the Greeks then venerated the deity through ritual, typically by revering his wooden idol and giving adequate homage on the proper day. This was because the gods were divine, and to imply that they were anything less was the worst form of hubris imaginable. This respect was the foundation for the entire Greek religion.

As with any religion, it was common for the Greeks to associate objects with the divine. Most religions have done this, for instance, through associating sacred texts with divine inspiration and items such as the Star of David and the Cross with holy and divine power. The masks of ancient Greece were held in similar esteem. They were used in religious ceremonies to venerate the gods. Mask makers were highly respected and there was a level of awe surrounding the act of actually putting on the masks. This is because they were so much more than pieces of wood but, in the words of author Inih Ebong, “concretized actualizations of mythological
abstractions, specifically contrived to amplify, reinforce, and codify the beliefs, metaphysics, and cosmology of the community” (Ebong 1). Masks, in essence, took the divine and brought it down to earth for all to see and take example from. Man was able to become a god and demonstrate his best and worst traits. As a normal person, even with makeup, this would have been impossible. It would have been insulting to demonstrate divinity upon a naked, mortal face. Masks were even more useful, for the mask makers could specifically shape the characteristics of the subject to whatever was needed for the story. When an actor had to portray a god, the god’s characteristics were not limited to what could be done with the actor’s face.

Truly masks were a way of transforming the actor, removing his personal identity, and making him ‘become’ whatever he needed to portray. As David Wiles wrote later in his book, “the wearer… [was] guided by the form implicit in the structure of the mask which [became] ‘like a vehicle, drawing the whole body into the space, into specific movements that reveal the character’” (Wiles 148). The masks forced the body of the actor to change. This was due both to the sheer unwieldiness of them and the feelings they invoked. When an actor donned a mask, he relinquished his identity in exchange for that of his role. There is a certain psychological element that takes over when one puts on a truly gruesome face. It helps the actor absorb the role, take it all in, and morph into a new being. In this way acting was really a highly selfless and humble undertaking, as it involved surrendering one’s sense of self in order to venerate another person. This was a grand deed for sure, as Greek culture prized renown for the self and creation of a personal legacy and identity above anything else. A person only had one chance in life to make a lasting impression on the world before being forever forgotten in the underworld. To do justice to these ancient giants such as Odysseus, Achilles, and Agamemnon the masks had to be able to
convey the character in a way the bare face could not, and they did. Any man could be transformed into a grotesque beast, a beautiful avatar of Aphrodite, or a horrible demon. There were no limits to what he could become.

Thespis stepped out from the chorus line wearing a different mask in order to portray the god Dionysus. Rather than talking about the story as an outsider looking in, he directly stepped into the story. It is interesting to note, though, that instead of forgoing the use of a mask completely to further distinguish himself from the chorus he kept an, albeit different, mask for his performance. This was, in part, because his new approach to drama was definitely radical enough to be considered blasphemy without looking as though he had the audacity to actually call himself an avatar of Dionysus. This fact is important when looking back at what Thespis did, because it could have backfired horribly on him. On the website ‘This Day in Alternate History’ the writer of an article describing Thespis’ defiance of tradition describes how “Thespis was obviously not Dionysus, and portraying himself to be an avatar of a god was a strict crime of sacrilege.” Although clearly satirical, the author raises a good point of the dangers involved in this revolutionary idea. Thespis could have been accused of blasphemy and punished with exile or worse for daring to imply that anyone could be a god. But the mask was his safety net. This was not him arrogantly claiming divinity, but him humbling doing his part to honor the gods in a new manner. With the mask, he was not Thespis. He was a blank artistic slate. He was not Dionysus, but was channeling him through a sacred instrument.

Of course many will argue that this talk of respect for the gods and sacrifice of identity is all nonsense and that the masks were in reality developed purely to help convey the overall message of the play. Author Torbjörn Alström wrote about his studies regarding full helmet
masks and described how “vocal nuances are enhanced by full masks, so that the spectator listens to speech and song with increased attention” (Alström 133-138). They improved resonance and forced the singer to concentrate more on posture and breathing, for through the mask the audience was able to notice nuances as small as the rhythm of the singer’s breathing. As well they enlarged the physical movement of the actor, making it easier for the spectator to understand the action of the play without having to look for fine and minute characteristics on the actor’s body. Both effects were brilliant in themselves and revolutionary in their own rights, altering the course of theatre and drama too. However these points are more reasons as to why masks stayed with the art rather than why they came to be used in the first place. When one looks at what masks truly are they seem highly counterintuitive, for it doesn’t make all that much sense to obstruct an actor’s vision and mouth in order to improve the clarity of the play and understanding of the speech. There would have had to have been some other overarching motivation, some purpose or rationale that created a tradition which would later be adapted and improved upon until it eventually became what we now recognize as a full helmet mask. There would have been a fear so gripping that no one would dare show their true face, a fear of making an insult, perhaps, to some sort of omnipotent being. It does make sense for actors to be afraid. They were emulating highly irrational and easily insulted beings. They had plenty of motivation to sacrifice their identity for the good of the play and to avoid offending their gods.

Masks in the past hid the identity of the actor, at least during the play. Because of this, a performance was all about the story: the actors were the characters they portrayed. The audience didn’t necessarily care about who played which role, as actors were at the same social status as vermin of the street, such as prostitutes. At the time this made sense; rather than taking up a real
craft, actors were content to emulate the heroes of old. Most Greeks, even patrons of the arts, looked down on this whoring out of the body. There was no respect for the performers, for drama was about the art, not the actor. And theatre was first and foremost a religious matter. In the same way other gods demanded fresh livestock for sacrifice, Dionysus wanted fresh plays. It was not enough for the playwrights to use the same characters in slightly different scenarios—they had to write entire new dramas. In the same way an actor could not mimic an earlier role, but had to completely lose himself in the current one. Nowadays modern film and theatre has moved away from that humble and selfless dedication to drama, focusing more on the actor than the story. This is evident in all media; where once the show’s title stood bold, now it competes for space with the names of the leading actors. Tragically, there are many who let this fame go to their heads. They become Prima Donnas, which were a part of the problem that ancient masks remedied, for when someone is so completely self-involved, their work suffers along with the wellbeing of their fellow actors. Yet there are also those actors who become highly famous, highly wealthy, and highly philanthropic. They take advantage of their notoriety to do good deeds in the world. They go on missions to war torn nations, make large donations, and generally try to better their fellow man. It is curious, for the lack of masks has very much had the effect of a double-edged sword. One can argue how beneficial this has been, but the change itself cannot be argued. For better or for worse, the world of theatre has changed greatly since the times of Thespis and the ancient Greeks, but we should never forget from where it came, the revolutionary ideas that have lead to its modern form, or the truly humble and selfless mentality of those thespians of antiquity.


Euripides, *Medea*.

Homer, *The Iliad*.

Homer, *The Odyssey*.


