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## Mask, Strength and Revenge in "Medea", "The Book of Judith" and "The Ecclesiazusae"

Writer Oscar Wilde once said: "A mask tells us more than a face." Throughout history, lies and masks have been a means to an end in achieving the goals of women who are limited in their current situations – social, political, or economical. Women traditionally cannot simply lash out in moments of angry frustration. The strict manners of behavior of the ancient times prohibit them from doing so. Instead they choose the same method of defense through deception that has been used by animals and humans alike for thousands of year – the disguise.

Whether verbal, physical, or emotional, these disguises enable women to proceed with their plans while diverting any suspicion away from themselves. Medea hides her malicious, murderous intentions behind a shield of tears and emotion as a scorned wife. In the Bible, Judith transforms herself from a widow into a beautiful seductress in order to behead the Assyrian general Holofernes.

Yet is not her physical changes which brings her success like the assemblywomen, but rather the lies she generates to gain entrance into the enemy camp and the sweet praises she uses to lure in the unsuspecting Holofernes before she violently kills him. Praxagora and the women of *The Ecclesiazusae* dress themselves in literal disguises – as men toting fake beards and thick robes – so that they can bring about a tide of political changes, installing the women as the new leaders and correcting their problematic government in hopes of steering their ship of state into the right direction.

Each of these women face challenges and each of them take the unconventional route. They forge their disguises into armor and string together webs of deception to solve their problems and draw their unsuspecting enemies into violent traps of vengeance. In *Medea* by Euripides, *The Book of Judith*, and *The Ecclesiazusae* by Aristophanes, the various strategies of disguises and deception are utilized in Medea's emotional mask, Judith's twisting words, and Praxagora's clever physical costuming as a means to achieving their ultimate goals of victory over those who have wronged them.

Euripides paints Medea as a complex character in the way she changes roles over the course of the tragedy. Her behavior is not unlike the way a chameleon changes the color of its skin, adapting to the situation of her marriage as it changes. Her thoughts, her emotions are multifaceted, masks and shields as she decides to carry out vengeance against those who have taken away her family and her position of nobility as the wife of Jason. She has been misused

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and mistreated, her sacrifices to further her husband have all been for naught for the weakness of his character drives him into marriage with the princess of Corinth.

Her reputation for anger and murder are well known among Creon and Medea's staff, who fear her lashes of fury. "She is a deep thinker, you know, and she will not put up with this kind of abuse. I know her and I am terrified that in silence entering the house where the bed is laid she might thrust a sharp sword through the heart or kill the princess and the one who married her and then suffer some greater tragedy. She is frightening. It won't be easy for an enemy to come out victorious in a battle with her" (Euripides 37-44).

Medea knows that she will not find the satisfaction of justice she so desperately craves in snapping blind anger. Instead, she uses her intelligence, her cold and calculated nature, to construct a surprising façade of emotions. She plays the role of grieving mother perfectly. She replaces usually anger with crying sadness. "She won't eat; she just gives in to her grief, washing away all her hours in tears, ever since she realized her husband had abandoned her" (Euripides 23-25). Her sorrow touches the heart of the children's Nurse who begins to take pity on her situation rather than assume that she will jump to violence.

She cries shrilly out for the gods to kill her rather than suffer her fate. "Oh Zeus and Earth and Light, hurl your fiery bolt of lightning straight through my skull. What use is life to me? Aah, aah. Let me die and leave this life I hate" (Euripides 142-146). Never once does she reveal her secret plot. Medea instead gives speeches of pathos, appealing to the women of Corinth. "I am cast adrift. I have lost all pleasure in living and I want to die, my friends. The man who was everything to me, try to understand this, has turned out to be the vilest man alive, my own husband. Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the sorriest lot" (Euripides 225-230).

Medea reigns in her temper and begs for Creon to change his ways, even though he expresses his fear for her retaliation. She becomes like one of his subjects in order to his favor. She pretends to agree with his choice and understand his justification for the marriage. "I suffer the envy of some, and to others I am a rival; but I am not so very clever. And then you are afraid of me. What harm can you suffer from me? It is not in my power — don't be afraid of me, Creon — to do wrong to the royal family. What wrong have you done me? You married your daughter to the man you chose for her" (Euripides 302-309).

She waves a false white flag of peace, telling him that she has accepted her defeat and has no intention of harming her former husband. Creon is the only one who sees through the act she puts on. He knows that she is forming a secret plan and she will not just go without a fight. She weeps and pleads with him but he continues to refuse her requests. In secret, his rejections only add kindling to her revenge. "Do you think that I would ever have fawned on him if not to

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get something or with some plan in mind?

I would not even have spoken to him or touched his hands. He has reached such a state of recklessness, that though he could have destroyed all my plans by forcing me out of the country, he has allowed me to remain this one day, in which I will turn three of my enemies” (Euripides 367-373). She plots behind closed doors “with deceit and in silence proceed to the murder” (Euripides 390). Her evil plot of bloodshed and corpses sits simmering behind her teary eyed mask, although at times it can be difficult to keep the anger from seeping into her words.

Her disguise is not tangible. She uses her emotions to throw off suspicion of a surprise attack on the new bride and groom. She creates confusion by going against her reputation and becoming the traditional wife she actually is not. Everyone expects her to be yelling and angry, not shrill with tears falling down her face. Her cold, intelligent mind is necessary for not only the brutal murder of her children but it also makes it much easier to put the different masks of her personality when the need may be. She skillfully lies to her husband, lulling him into a false sense of security. “In contemplating these things I realized I was suffering delusion and that my rage was in vain. I accept it now.

You seem to me to be acting logically in bringing us this marriage alliance, and I was foolish” (Euripides 881-884). His inability to recognize the lies spewing from her mouth causes him to believe her and she uses her position as his former wife and their relationship as points of emphasis in her appeal of pathos. He makes the mistake of trusting that these emotions she is producing are true. Medea’s tears, her emotional state, carry as much power as the sword she uses to slay her own children. Without her pretend blubbering sorrow, she would not be able to carry out the brutal plot. She tailors her behavior to each person she speaks – she acts as submissive and full of praises in front of Creon. She addresses Jason in a firm yet reassuring manner as to convince him of her compliance with the new marriage.

In front of the important people who have and still continue to decide her fate, she presents herself with the sugary smile of the perfect housewife with daggers just out of sight tucked behind her teeth. Her constant shifting of speech and feeling make her a threat to those who have wronged her and ultimately they all fall into the trap she has created with her tears and false offerings of peace and understanding. Although her physical appearance never changes over the duration of her play, she puts on a show of various emotions in order to mask her sharp intelligence and true barbaric nature.

Judith, in the Book of Judith in the Bible, arms herself with words. As her fellow Israelites grow weaker under the strain of the siege placed on them by the general Holofernes and his army, Judith prays with them in hopes of some salvation. Her words, her pleas up to God are necessary strengths in order to go to Holofernes and save Jerusalem. “By guile of my lips strike

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down slave with master, and master with retainer. Break their pride by a woman's hand" (Book of Judith. 9. 481-482). When the Israelites face depleting resources and starvation and the eminent domination of the Assyrian army, they too rely on words and prayers in hopes of protection and salvation.

"All the men of Israel cried most fervently to God and humbled themselves before him. They draped the altar itself in sackcloth and fervently joined together in begging the God of Israel not to let their children be carried off, their wives distributed as booty, the towns of their heritage destroyed, the Temple profaned and desecrated for the heathen to gloat over" (Jud. 4. 143-146). Judith, a pious widow who has been mourning her husband for three years, realizes that desperate prayers alone will not save her people. She is infuriated by the worshippers, who grow frustrate and angry, and berates them for believing that demanding rescue from God is the right thing to do. "You put the Lord Almighty to the test!

You do not understand anything, and never will. Although it may not be his will to help us within the next five days, he has the power to protect us for as many days as he pleases, just as he has the power to destroy us before our enemies. But you have no right to demand guarantees where the designs of the Lord our God are concerned. For God is not to be threatened as a human being is, nor is he, like a mere human, to be cajoled" (Jud. 8. 306-311).

She then decides to take matters into her own hands and allow her faith to be tested by Heaven. "You left their wives to be carried off, their daughters to be taken captive, and their spoils to be shared out among the sons you loved, who had been so zealous for you, had loathed the stain put on their blood and called on you for help. O God, my God, now heat this widow too; for you have made the past, and what is happening now, and what will follow. What is, what will be, you have planned; what has been, you designed" (Jud. 9. 464-468).

Judith is described as very beautiful, yet perpetually dressed in robes of mourning. She undergoes a transformation that echoes Praxagora's own dramatic shift in appearance, exchanging her widow's dress and sackcloth for perfumes and jewelry. However, she recognizes that looks alone will not get her into Holofernes' tent. She knows that she needs to be "so lovely of face and so wise of speech" (Jud. 11. 600-601) in order to slay the general. Judith crafts her words into the perfect deception, she disguises herself in lies.

There is a biting irony to her words as she praises the Assyrian general and wishes a long life for him but she never once revealing her true intentions: "We have indeed heard of your genius and adroitness of mind. It is known everywhere in the world that throughout the empire you have no rival for ability, wealth of experience and brilliance in waging war" (Jud. 11. 565-567). She disguises herself into the ideal submissive woman for an egotistical man like Holofernes, "makes herself beautiful enough to beguile the eye of any man who saw her" (Jud. 10. 501) but

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with an eloquence and sophistication that commands respect.

The words she exchanges with Holofernes create the perfect mask for her secret plot to unfold, more than seductive beauty. She brushes off his inquiries over her lack of supplies with a sweet irony. “‘May your soul live, my lord,’ Judith answered, ‘the Lord will have used me to accomplish his plan, before your servant has finished these provisions’” (Jud. 12. 573-574). Her calm, direct way of addressing the general is as sharp and cool as the curved blade she takes to his neck. Her beauty “takes his soul prisoner” (Jud. 12. 747) after she had lured him into a false sense of security with her soothing language.

“‘Who am I’, Judith replied, ‘to resist my lord? I shall not hesitate to do whatever he wishes, and doing this will be my joy to my dying day’” (Jud. 12. 596-597). Her beautiful face and her sugary words mask her true intentions. It is the perfect defense. As the Assyrian soldiers say: “‘who could despise a people who have women like this?’” (Jud. 10 . 538)? Her willingness to cooperate, to feed information to the enemy of Israel, makes her a desirable asset during the siege.

The beauty of her face causes everyone who encounters her to automatically assume that she is good and innocent, incapable of such a brutal execution yet it is the way she weaves her words around the unsuspecting Holofernes, flattering him and seducing him, that ultimately leads to her successful beheading of the Assyrian general. Her disguise in the form of lies and manipulation get her into Holofernes’ tent and ensures her success in saving her people from army that seeks to drive them to destruction.

In Aristophanes’ satire, *The Ecclesiazusae*, Praxagora is a Greek woman who has grown tired of the problematic Athenian government so she masterminds a rather unusual plan to correct these issues that had been unresolved by the men up until now. She, along with the other women of Athens, takes on literal disguises rather than the metaphorical ones of Judith and Medea. “When this is done, fix on your beards, and when they are arranged in the best way possible, dress yourselves in the cloaks you have stolen from your husbands; finally start off, leaning on your staffs and singing some old man’s song as the villagers do” (Aristophanes 291-294).

Praxagora, their leader, relies on the stupidity of the men in order to succeed in making these political changes. She knows that they will be easily fooled and willingly comply with her proposition simply because it is one solution that they have not tried yet in repairing the various problems littered across the Athenian government. The new appearance gains her entrance into the assembly and now Praxagora can garner the votes she needs to completely change the Athenian government. Her group of female followers commit to their masks – discarding the traditional conventions of beauty and cleanliness for the sake of their city.

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“I began by throwing away my razor, so that I might get quite hairy, and no longer resemble a woman” (Aristophanes 61-62). She believes that the women of Athens will do a much better job of running the city than the men ever had. Her disguise is of great importance of her cause. If her real identity were to be revealed, she and her fellow women would be subject to severe punishment. “Let us not forget to give ourselves this name and may that of woman never slip out of our mouths; woe to us, if it were discovered that we had laid such a plot in the darkness of night” (Aristophanes 304-306).

Although the eloquence of her argument will initiate agreement amongst the other members of the Assembly, it is absolutely necessary that she and the others be treated with respect. Their costumes give weight to their words. Praxagora’s speech would otherwise be disregarded if she appeared in front of the Assembly in her usual dress. Praxagora trades in her smooth complexion and beauty for political power and a false, all for the greater good. “Let us drive away these men of the city who used to stay at home and chatter round the table” (Aristophanes 314-315).

Her clever disguise proves successful in achieving the social and political changes she had been pursuing. She convinces the other men to establish a new system of socioeconomic equality, all lead and organized by the Athenian women. With the skill of an orator, she persuades the government to place the helm of authority in the hands of the Assemblywomen. “Let us therefore hand Athens over to them without endless discussions, without bothering ourselves about what they will do; let us simply hand them over the power, remembering that they are mothers and will therefore spare the blood of our soldiers; besides, who will know better than a mother how to forward provisions to the front? I omit a thousand other advantages.

Take my advice and you will live in perfect happiness” (Aristophanes 243-246). Praxagora, under the guise of a man, transforms the traditional submissive role of a Greek woman in a patriarchal society with the same dramatic change of her appearance. Unlike the men, Praxagora is adept at righting the wrongs of the corrupt government. She does not encourage the rowdy drinking habits. “That’s why their decrees breathe of drunkenness and madness. And why libations, why so many ceremonies, if wine plays no part in them” (Aristophanes 153-154)?

Her focus is on equality and the greater good for the people of Athens who have unhappy for far too long in a useless corrupt government and she will go to the lengths that she does in her male costume to bring the benefits of wealth and success to all. Rather than remain a meek, obedient wife, she “will not easily let herself be deceived; she understands deceit too well herself” (Aristophanes 247-248) in the strength of her disguise and the arguments she brings to the Assembly to bring about a new political order.

Medea with her false tears and sugary praises, Judith with a tongue as sharp as the scimitar

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she takes to the exposed hollow of Holoferne's throat, Paxagora with her stolen husband's clothing and her false beard. Each of these women do not hide behind the cloak of their husbands but rather behind the strength of their plots and the sweet masks they wear before they strike down on those who have behaved unjustly towards them. They craft plans with keen intelligence whether their final goal is murder or a change in political systems. They do not shy away from a challenge or respond with boisterous anger. They maintain their false identities in the lies they tell, the disguises they wear, or the fake emotions they project.

They weave carefully through the forest towards success rather than cut and slash their way through with reckless wrath. Their cleaver use of disguises and deception demonstrate a determination to succeed, even when the odds of a patriarchal society, the power of noble families, and military force stand against them. Prematurely betraying the truth of their personality or letting slip their true intentions would bring unspeakable punishments and there is courage to the high level of commitment in Paxagora's manly mannerisms, Judith's honeyed seduction, and Medea's dramatic pleas for pity.

The women of these works mask themselves in makeup and kindness, dresses and deception. The lies they tell and the costumes they wear – literal and metaphorical – ultimately bring them victory. They ambitiously plan their elaborate facades. They do not wait for respect and justice to be handed to them. Although the ultimate outcome of their plans may not always be entirely beneficial towards them, each of these women go out and get the authority they have fought for and deserve. Medea, Judith, and Paxagora armed with costumes, false feelings, and clever lies succeed in their own individual tasks, despite an unfair society that actively seeks to limit the scope of their power.

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