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## Make not a Mockery of Me: Feminine Performance and Masculine Mockery in Medea and A Midsummer Night's Dream

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**Make not a Mockery of Me:  
Feminine Performance and Masculine Mockery in *Medea* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

A person existing with the male sex and electing to perform the male gender is privileged. Unencumbered by limitation, men like these will bond together to create societies, which tend to impose limits on anyone outside of their realities. Judith Butler explains, “Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences ... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (522). The other, the non-cis, the queer, the POC, the non-male individual must perform their gender with the caution of punishment, should it defy social custom. Butler explains that in reality, a rebellious performance can institute reactions from discomfort to violence (527). However, on a stage, where actors all perform their identities, real repercussions for the audience can be inconsequential, yet the actors subject each other to punishment in their contrived worlds. Actors performing a woman express fear that a radical performance might be punished by mockery, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “Derision [or] ridicule; A person, thing, or action that deserves or occasions contempt or ridicule; an object of derision; a laughing stock” (Mockery). Most literature on mockery deems it jocular and used among friends as opposed to an aggressive act among the powerful collective at the hands of the other. When the subject of mockery is authentic identity, performers of that identity exist wary of such ridicule. Creating these performances on stage minimizes the risk to the performed work only, while allowing the audience to engage with the consequences of a rebellious performance and the challenges the non-man performer must overcome in order to exist. In creating this space for the audience, playwrights tend to cast the implications of gender performance as a plot accessory, in order to protect the playwright from the same punishments for exploring such rebellion. Euripides explores the consequences of gender performance in *Medea*, where Medea exists at the whims of Jason, initially to benefit the needs he demonstrates.

Monks explains, “Medea was a woman who was *playing* at the role of wife and mother, attempting to conform to the social *mores* of the culture she had adopted, but who was ill at ease and uncomfortable with the part she was playing” (37). Medea’s discomfort stems from the instability of gender, as she started to perform as a domesticated woman for Jason, thereby sacrificing her independence and power. The notoriety of her old performance creates an easy point for the collective powerful to mock her, which initially delays her liberation. The powerful masculine collective has cause to ridicule the women in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who attempt liberation by choosing to marry for love. Helena is vulnerable in her quest for love, without the protection of a powerful father, and her journey represents a division between sex and gender. The union between sex and gender is unstable because biology informs sex and social custom informs gender (Butler 9). The collective expects her to marry to procreate, which assumes her identity is her female sex, but her desire to marry her beloved reflects the expression of her individually contrived gender. Both Helena and Medea must break out of this tie between sex and gender, in order to create their own gender identities. Medea and Helena must also overcome the risk of mockery from the masculine collective in order to perform their individual gender identities; furthermore, expressing these identities on stage allows an audience to experience diversity without the burden to punish it.

Jason, as the popular cis straight male, representing the patriarchal collective in this play sets the conditions of social performance for his partner Medea. Up until his entrance, the audience has learned about Jason’s attempts to exile Medea from her identity, Creon, and the chorus. As Jason enters, he announces, “[Medea] had the choice of living here ... calmly accepting [her] superiors’ will. But, ... for the sake of useless talk, [she’ll] leave. For me it’s not a problem” (448-1). Jason and Medea have arrived in Corinth after their quest, both existing as

outsiders in this land. According to Jason, if Medea performed submission she could live in this land. Her unruly voice, the source of her power and the evidence of her intellect, is the cause of her exile. She is not from here, and Jason suggests she has been proliferating rumors about Creon the king, so she must go. In reality, she has been speaking out about Jason leaving her, because he is forcing her out of the partnership she helped to build. Medea's revelations about Jason's infidelity reject the conditions that Jason set for Medea's existence, so he punishes her with exile. Jason informs her that her exile causes him no "problem", or no strife, and that he will "look out for [her...] and the children" (461). It is evidence of his privilege that Jason assures Medea that he will look after her and the children, by exiling them, and it is painful to watch him call attention to their children that he is abandoning. Medea channeled her power to honor Jason's motives, and she sacrificed her body to honor their marriage with children. His ignorance of her choices, by dismissing Medea for a new female, sets in motion Medea's performance.

Medea explores the pain of her scorned sacrifice in a bold confrontation of Jason. She calls out his attempted punishment by explaining, "I raised the torch of safe return for you ... I chose to betray my father and home ... I killed Pelias ... I destroyed his house" (479-88). She sacrificed for him, she killed for him, she left all that she knew for him. While detailing her services, Medea reveals she understands what Jason expects of her, and that she rejects it. Everything Medea did was "for" Jason, not "with" him. She understands her submission in this phase of their partnership, yet the actions she performed were only completed because of her choices. The threat of exile causes her pain because she chose to use her skill for his agenda, and she is still subject to his consequences. Creon of Corinth exacerbates this derision: he fears her and tells her: "woman, you seem determined to harass me" (337). He makes this claim after Medea begs him for asylum. Medea appeals to him, but Creon dismisses her as "clever and

quiet” (320). Medea is currently powerless to convince a man of her own reputation, because of the damage to it from another man. Jason defines Medea’s existence as a gossip and a crafty and malicious woman. The male collective normalizes the inhibition of women’s identity so much so that the king is able to use fear of Medea’s identity to exile her. Medea’s brief interaction with Creon offers only a glimpse into how Jason’s gossip has created a new reputation for Medea. Because of the extent of the conflict between Medea’s identity and the system, her deviance from it must be intense. Medea is no longer able to exist under these restrictive standards, so she leans into her rebellious performance.

Even though Medea accepts that she can only exist by rebelling against the standards set for her, she is hesitant to misstep. Medea tries to find support among the chorus of Corinthian women. Their support is limited, because they choose to operate to the fancy of the masculine collective, and they cannot relate to Medea’s exile as native Corinthians. Faced with the solitude of her identity, Medea worries, “if they catch me ... I’ll die and give my enemies cause to mock me” (381-3). The fear of mockery is a legitimate response to the choice to express her individuality. The mockery of her identity is violent, because it is an ignorance of her skill in favor of her quiet submission. Medea fears that using her skill to destroy Jason’s new wife and fortune will backfire and that her power will not be taken seriously. She demanded that the extent of her power be acknowledged, which caused her exile, so she must be able to deliver that power in order to break from Jason’s limits on her identity. Medea’s liberation will come from her “greatest skill: use potions to destroy them” (385). These potions are the same that caused Jason to covet her skill, which he tried to quell by making her a wife and sending her away. Medea’s power must transcend that pigeonhole and reject the violence that Jason has imposed on her. She declares, “I’ll take up my sword and kill them. Even if it means my death, I’ll dare it

all” (393-4). She embraces her notoriety, and moves forward, resolute in her plan for her identity expression. Even the audience member that understands and perpetuates the violence of the masculine collective, could understand the sacrifice of everything to achieve a goal. The dramatic extremes allow for a wider base of engagement with ideas that reject normalized oppression. Medea puts her life on the line for her identity, which conveys the necessity that the other be able to perform themselves freely. Nothing can hold Medea back from expressing her authentic self.

Medea confirms the gravity of her choice to create her own identity, and remains confident in her planned performance. After securing residency in Athens under King Aegeus, Medea tells the chorus that she will feel her feelings and then act on “the murder of [her] dear sons, that unholy act [she’s] steeled [herself] for ... To be mocked by enemies is not to be endured” (795-7). Her justification for murdering her sons as revenge against Jason exists with performance-related jargon. She dubs the murder the “act”, which she must get into character for, by steeling herself, so that she can go through with it. Medea’s explanation of her liberation as a stage performance aligns with Butler’s claims about gender liberties on stage. Stage performances fictionalize violence to achieve greater meaning: killing her sons serves as self-liberation from the patriarchy; such liberation allows Medea to defy the oppression of the collective by celebrating her power; and the performance of this liberation as a play allows audiences to grapple with the effects of masculine standards and mockery, and options that the other has to resist them. She justifies this filicide by explaining that she cannot be mocked by her enemies. It is not a crime, but the next scene in the performance of her identity that Jason wanted to delete. The pain that she feels for the loss of her home and husband must endure in her enemies so that her authentic notoriety prevails, and no one thinks to mock her. They must know

the pain that they have caused her, and she will make them feel it through her unforgettable performance. This performance of killing her children is not written into existence by Jason or Creon, but rather it is by Medea and for Medea. It is the only means of expression of female autonomy, of 'other' autonomy.

Despite the power Medea expresses by writing her own rules to the performance, the power of motherhood creates some self-doubt that she must process before acting. Addressing her children, Medea exclaims, "why must I hurt their father with their pain and so give myself double suffering? I will not" (1046-8). Jason created Medea's pain by abandoning their marriage and forcing her out of the land, after she committed herself to him. Her lament here suggests that to lose her children would only exacerbate her own pain, and so she considers cancelling the performance. The death of a marriage responded to with the death of the evidence of that marriage, seems for a moment futile until Medea returns to her script: "But no, what's happening to me? Do I want to be mocked while my enemies go unpunished? I must steel myself" (1049-51). Her turnaround here is immediate. She considers the things at stake: her reputation and her legacy. The marriage is dead and so is Medea's role as Jason's, so the evidence, her children, must die in accordance. She is not simply Jason's wife scorned, and left with his children. She must destroy the possibility of that narrative by killing the children. This return to her plan is the third occasion where she justifies murder on the stake of her reputation. She came into this land a notorious woman, and she will leave it the same. Her lapse in control of the performance is futile, and so she stays on schedule.

Having quashed the male-driven status quo, Medea meets Jason to explain her actions. Jason is hurt after the deaths of his future wife, his father-in-law, and his children of Medea. However, as Jason treated her in the beginning, Medea disregards his feelings in favor of her

idea of her identity as a powerful, magical woman. She rejects his rhetoric and his emotions while justifying her actions: “once you’d dishonored my marriage bed, you weren’t going to mock me and enjoy your life” (1354-5). This union was hers too, and now it exists on her terms. Medea conveys this power shift by claiming the marriage bed as hers. She reminds Jason that everything he has was on her terms, and not vice versa. She is not the submissive wife who lit the torch for her husband, but an actualized woman who ensured the destruction of their bond. In the wake of the destruction of the children and thereby the marriage, Medea acts and stays confident in her actions. Jason is bewildered that she could commit such evil, but she blames his own violence for the manifestation of hers. She will not exist as some scorned woman, some silly forgotten wife, after she lit the torch, left her father and her home, and killed Pelias. She deserves recognition for the power of her performance before and in Corinth, so she grants it unto herself. Her individual liberation, though a stark theatrical act, enables the possibility of a free woman to perform her existence how she sees fit. The shocking nature of the divorce allows her to perform freely, without male-imposed standards or mockery: the men are too afraid to try.

The only way that Medea can break out of her confined role prescribed by Jason is to destroy the evidence of the bond between them. Euripides offered a radical means for a woman to achieve authenticity, in order to placate an audience that expects a woman to remain in her prescribed role. This break from Medea’s sex is jarring, which allows the audience to take comfort in the thought that such things might never happen. However, despite the chaos of her liberation, she was successful. She wrote her own script and performed it boldly, risking a loss in her reputation and ridicule of her identity. The risk pays off: although Medea’s actions are shocking, she still has the support of the gods. Her grandfather Helios swoops down to carry her to safety in the end. It is possible to break out of power structures and create a new reality, as



Medea has done. In full measure, with Medea's success, Euripides left the audience with compelling ideas about the need for violence when changing the status quo. There does not seem to be a peaceful way to break free without collective power. Butler hit on why Euripides and other playwrights choose to explore dangerous concepts on the stage. Theatre is an entertainment and a release, away from a pent-up reality. Offering a woman the space to perform her free identity on the stage both enables her freedom and protects her from real violence. Despite the feat in creating her own gender performance, Early Modern scholars point out the value of the female role. Dusi reviews how before hitting puberty, a young male actor will play the lady role and later "graduate to male parts" (273). The perception is that the female role is a lesser, junior role, because it is not shrouded in masculinity. Despite the freedom the woman might access on stage, the person playing the woman might experience some ridicule for engaging in such hysterical acts. It is important in the performance of drama to consider these women that defy odds to create their own identities. Medea did so with her magic talents and her ability to violently achieve freedom.

Just as Medea has created her own gender performance through violence, Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will attempt to create her performance with intellect and desire, still risking mockery and rejection. Shakespeare wrote her pursuit as nonviolent because this work is a comedy. Unlike Medea's situation, Helena does not have an established reputation or relationship, thereby making her a vulnerable character with less to destroy. Her performance will be more personal: becoming the suitor to Demetrius, her beloved. This quest is dangerous, because the man customarily woos a woman, to marry her for children. Helena's fear of risking her identity causes her to doubt her attributes: "call you me "fair"? That "fair" again unsay. Demetrius love's [Hermia is] fair... you sway the motion of Demetrius' heart" (1.1.184-197).

Like Medea, Helena is initially lost for how to achieve her means, having not yet realized the value of herself. Her self-doubt stems from having had Demetrius' fancy before he fell for Hermia. Helena believes herself insufficient, and this vulnerability is the crux of her fear.

As Medea worried for her reputation, should she perform her authentic gender, Helena fears a second rejection, and a further fall into insignificance. To add to Demetrius' rejection, Helena is the last of the four lovers to speak. She must overcome the role of the place holder, and she cannot hope and wait that anyone will free her from this spot. Per the laws and social norms that the white male collective set, Helena believes and laments, "we [women] cannot fight for love as men may do. We should be wooed and were not made to woo" (2.1.248-9). Her assumption is fair, though limited, because the women in her life have all been wooed by men: Hippolyta by Theseus, Hermia by Lysander and Demetrius. Their genders have been repeated and perfected by social situation that casts them as the females wooed. Shakespeare presents an alternative female gender in Titania. The audience will realize through the existence of Titania that unique woman power is possible, and that a woman can and should choose to woo, if it is her impetus. Until Helena can enter the world of Titania, she exists in Athens where men dictate a female's gender.

Helena, operating in her prescribed role as lover four, starts to plan a break from the status quo to write her own performance. Helena ventures into uncharted territory to write her role as the wooing woman, which is why she moves the action into the lawless land of the forest. She cannot be controlled by Athenian law or the men that uphold it, so she must move to break free. Helena already has the tools to become a wooer instead of the wooed: "through Athens [she is] thought as fair as [Hermia] ... Demetrius thinks not so ... Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind ... Ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne, he hailed down oaths that he was only

[Helena's]" (1.1.233- 250). She understands that she and Hermia are both beautiful, so any work on her appearance would be futile and not evocative of her identity. She needs to make Demetrius understand that Hermia is not available or interested, and then he will ostensibly come back to Helena. She must win him over by expressing her desire and hoping he returns affections. Helena's desire for Demetrius initially causes her to act in the way he has determined: "I will fawn on you. Use me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me, neglect me, lose me; only give me leave to follow you" (2.1.211-214). None of these actions are in alignment with her identity, for none of them are on her terms. However, her attempt to appeal to him by allowing him to mistreat her protects her from mockery if she were to say how she truly felt. Helena currently fawns over Demetrius, who responds with these hateful activities, and it is the identity Helena has accepted. After her unsuccessful plea, Demetrius threatens her with violence should she continue to pursue him. The issue with her current pursuit combines her feelings with her prescribed gender. She cannot both accept her role as woman scorned, and liberate herself by performing as a wooer. Demetrius senses the tread into unfamiliar territory, explaining his violence, which Helena resents: "Fie Demetrius! Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex. We cannot fight for love as men may do. We should be wooed and were not made to woo" (2.1.246-249). Helena's sex aligns with her role as the wooed, and she must break from that idea in order to come into her gender identity. She is still developing her identity, which is why she defends her sex, and her role as the wooed. But also, in defending her honor, she rejects Demetrius' violence and rejects her submission in receipt of his violence. She defies that she is made to be wooed by speaking out against his indecent threats. Medea makes the same type of claim, that Jason cannot pigeonhole her into a divorce and into exile without repercussion. This defiance of Demetrius' words is the crux of her transformation into a freed woman. While Medea performed

her liberation through action, Helena will perform hers through speech. It is an intellectual transformation, so it will adhere to the standards of love that informed her quest for a free gender performance.

Even though Helena is ready to complete her personal performance, her vulnerability causes her doubt in its success. With help from the fairies' magic, Lysander confesses his love for Helena, which she rejects: "do not say so... Hermia still loves you ... be content" (2.2.114-116). Helena attempts to protect Hermia from losing a love, which makes her an advocate for her "sex". This advocacy for female honor drives her quest to liberation. In allying with her sex instead of accepting male pursuit, Helena makes herself vulnerable because she rejects her role. Lysander, though enchanted, persists in forcing Helena into the role of the wooed, which makes her ashamed: "wherefore was I to this keen mockery born ... you must flout my insufficiency?" (130-135). Like Medea, Helena assumes the worst, that she is being mocked by the people who uphold the ideas she tries to escape. Helena does not succumb to her placeholder role, which is her empowerment that she mistakes for insufficiency. Demetrius exacerbates this fear when he tries to share his affection for Helena. She initially rejects him, and laments, "I see you all are bent to set against me for your merriment ... you join in souls to mock me" (148-153). She does not realize her plan has worked, and she has won the affections of Demetrius, through the help of Titania's, or the woman's world. She has achieved her performance, having wooed Demetrius with the help of the natural world, and won his affections in return. Helena is not a placeholder to bear children, she is a free woman that expressed her ideas. Even Hermia cannot support her sex as Helena performs her gender, which causes Helena to think she is being mocked. Helena's individual identity, as an ally to her sex and as a woman who woos, is not replicated in any other woman. She is nervous about her uniqueness, but she has already succeeded in defying the male

collective. The chaos of the green world has confused her untraversed plans, and she assumes failure. Whereas Medea liberates herself by acting, Helena creates her performance with intangible intellect, which makes it easier to doubt. She utilized the support of Titania's world to understand her success. Having won the affections of Demetrius, Helena returns to Athens with her beloved to live their union. She remains speechless after returning to protect her identity and stay in her partnership with Demetrius. The couples witness Pyramus and Thisbe, which confirms the danger that the women face in diverting from the masculine will. Because Helena achieved her authentic performance by choosing her beloved, she suspends her dangerous intellect to safely revel in her success.

In overcoming the risks of mockery, Medea and Helena create their identities and perform them on their own standards. Medea's future is undetermined, but she has the favor of the gods after rejecting the idea of being a submissive female. Likewise, Helena's performance as the wooing woman affords her the partnership she desires, which protects her future because she is married. The difference in their futures is an intentional aspect of the theatre. Medea's mysterious freedom maintains the radical possibility of a female's rebellion. Having left the interpretation to an audience, Euripides freed himself from declaring the impact of the destruction of the masculine order. Shakespeare's Helena returns to the lawful land with a man, in order to conceal his own attempt to upset social norms by not fully condoning the woman's actions. The audience must decide whether to allow free feminine performances in its reality, or to uphold the violent norm that applies masculine mockery to any individual that defies their decreed role. Audiences must continue to decide to uphold or upset the status quo, so that they will keep attending the stage, where the safety of performance remains and the revelation of possibility prevails.

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