The Duality of Τέρας and the *Grotesque* as a Theatrical Vehicle for Cultural Expression

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The Hellenistic Age of Greek Art is characterized heavily by innovation, artistic patronage, the exhibition of lavishness, and unconventional iconography. This leads to the era itself being described as theatrical in nature, allowing for histrionic art to thrive. The fascination present with unusual literary themes and artistic subjects frequented both the worlds of performance and material art. This allows for analysis of "the other" and the depiction of otherness in art as a vehicle for cultural expression. One such depiction common in Hellenistic Greece is the *grotesque.* These sculptures would depict deformed and peculiar body and facial features; in some cases as a study of bodily form, while in others a humorous mimetic representation, characteristic of the theatre and the age of New Comedy. The *Bronze Grotesque* (Fig.1-2) [2nd century B.C.–1st century A.D, The Metropolitan Museum of Art] embodies the latter. The *Bronze Grotesque* epitomizes the intersection of theatre, art, and literature at the height of the Greek Hellenistic period; portraying the other in a manner that wholly encompasses the unconventionality of Hellenistic iconography and the theatricality of the era.

The Hellenistic epoch of Greece brought about rapid cultural change, as a result of Alexander the Great's death leading to the concurrent decline in his cosmopolitan vision for Greece. In the era following Alexander's death, "new forms of politics, science, art and religion emerged, which affected all areas of life. The result of this historical process was not only the spread of the Greek spirit, but also the birth of a whole new civilization based on the interweaving of different cultures, and none of the sources underlying its origin can be precisely defined."[1] Thus, the expansion of Greek culture began and evolved into a decidedly theatrical era of cultural commentary. The ideas of spectacle and comedy reflected the dilation of the Greek cultural lens. Theatre and drama, and theatrical art jointly "approach a more significant

[1] Čiripová, Dáša. "Greek Drama in the Hellenistic Period." Slovenské Divadlo 65, no. 4 (2017): 377. https://doi.org/10.1515/sd-2017-0022.

lightening of themes (comedy surpasses tragedy in presentation), the preference for entertaining theatrical forms, a gradual departure from serious textual levels, and the dominance of nonverbal genres."[2] There existed a formidable emphasis on the visuality of theatricality, as the institution of the theatre became a "living platform"[3] which met the cultural demands of society; while providing a heavily visual spectacle that was accessible to the everyman, and could be understood through masks, music, and movement; even for those who could not speak Greek exceptionally well. Hellenistic literature and drama, as well as the Attic Comedy, "did not want to SOLVE anything. She just wanted to have fun. She didn't want to capture eternity and duration, but 'just a moment.'"[4] This phenomenon lent incredibly well to the visual arts, and the popularity of the theatre only exacerbated the use of theatrical imagery as artistic decoration and creation. The Hellenistic theatre was incredibly colorful and used costume, mask, and stage elements to imitate reality in an aesthetically pleasing manner. It "had to be visually very attractive, so many home interiors were decorated with theatrical decorations."[5] The theatrical mask is, in fact, "the best-known decorative motif appearing on architectural elements, decorations in private interiors and women's jewelry of the Hellenistic period."[6] This is the very type of creation that is the theatrical *grotesque* statuette.

The *grotesque* was central to the exploration of nonconformity and "the other" in artistic representations of Hellenistic Greece, as well as the interest in the theatrical. These statues were examinations of otherness in features of the body and face, manifesting frequently in statuettes of the like of *The Bronze Grotesque*. The work is created of bronze, with various metal inlays. The

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[2] Ibid: 380.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid, 382.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

figure has a disproportionately large head and "a prominent nose, canines and whites of the eyes originally inlaid in silver...The circular area on the back of his head may have been for an attached curl of hair. The close-fitting garment reveals his misshapen body, and he wears sandals."[7] The shoulders are asymmetric, with the head tilted toward the lower shoulder; the gaze directed toward the viewer. The figure seems to wear a sly smile, again involving the viewer and identifying the tone of the work as decidedly humorous and lighthearted. The enlarged size of the head can be attributed to the theatrical association and masks of Hellenistic theatre. The prevailing opinion of the small statuette is that it represents a mime, or theatrical actor; with a recent suggestion that the work depicts "a caricature of an Alexandrian pedant, datable in the early second century B.C."[8] This is a likely hypothesis, as theatrically iconographic jewelry was incredibly common. The work was presumably a private commission of theatrical interest, being created by an artist who would specialize in small bronze figurines. This particular *grotesque* effectively portrays an actor of Hellenistic theatre in the tradition of mask and costume usage, as well as the characterization of the figure. The Attic Comedy of the Hellenistic period used archetypal characters of exaggerated and histrionic proportions, in which "physiognomy and character were interconnected".[9] The New Comedy plays frequently "drew their themes from daily life and the costumes of the actors were close to regular everyday clothes."[10] This lines up with the clothing the *Bronze Grotesque* is depicted in. Likewise, the size of the figure's head and the emphasis on the eye area as defined and large suggests the use of a mask to depict a stock character of Greek theatre. In fact, the "bald, middle aged, beardless παράσιτος ('Parasite') with

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[7] Metmuseum.org. *Bronze grotesque*. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248675?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=hellenistic&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=9

[8] Ibid.

[9] Čiripová, Dáša. "Greek Drama in the Hellenistic Period." Slovenské Divadlo 65, no. 4 (2017): 373. https://doi.org/10.1515/sd-2017-0022.

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its hooked nose and slightly knitted brows"[11]; shows quite a resemblance to the features of the *Bronze Grotesque*.

Not only does the *Bronze Grotesque* encompass the interest in theatrical characters and aspects as decorative and artistic elements; but its connection with the enlargement of cultural exploration present in Hellenistic Greek society, literature, and theatre itself. The Greek culture had a fascination with monsterhood and the features both physical and non-physical that it entails. Stories of monsters of the variety of revenants, phantoms, daimones, and bogeymen[12] permeated literature and children's stories passed down orally. A number of ancient sources indicate that monstrous creatures were "the subjects of stories told by parents to frighten their children into behaving. In Xenophon's Hellenica, the Spartans even use a comparison to such childish fears to mock their allies".[13] Creatures of monstrous and physically "ugly" appearance "appear in the earliest surviving comedies; in Old Comedy, they play a variety of dramatic roles and sometimes they may even have been fully personified and appeared on stage."[14] The use of masks in the theatre would allow for a recognizable "other" appearance on the stage. The masks would have "brought to mind the kinds of characters seen by the audience and, in turn, the facial features of an audience's stunned response. But beyond these adult theatrical associations, the name given to these masks also alludes to another realm where such emotional responses were more frequently experienced, that of childhood."[15] The familiarity of monstrous creatures likely

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[11] Eszter Süvegh. "Hellenistic Grotesque Terracotta Figurines. Problems of Iconographical Interpretation." Dissertationes Archaeologicae: Ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös Nominatae 3, no. 2 (2014): 145. https://doi.org/10.17204/dissarch.2014.143.
[12] Eidinow, Esther. "'The Horror of the Terrifying and the Hilarity of the Grotesque': Daimonic Spaces—and Emotions—in Ancient Greek Literature." Arethusa 51, no. 3 (2018): 210. https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2018.0010.
[13] Ibid, 223.
[14] Ibid, 210.
[15] Ibid, 230

contributed to the patronage and creation of bronze *grotesque* statuettes, specifically the *Bronze Grotesque.* The central focus on monsterhood in the Greek mind is one with the representation of them in the theatre. The masks representing monstrous characters were even hung as means to dedicate or announce a new theatrical production.[16] The construction of each mask "expresses and maintains the radical otherness, the alterity of the world of the dead, which no living person may approach"[17]; and likewise was meant to elicit an emotional response known as kataplexis.[18] This "illuminates the nature of the theatrical experience"[19], and also reveals the nature of the childish fears with which these monsters were associated, and how they were brought to life on the Greek stage. These ideals are encapsulated in the *Bronze Grotesque*; and its existence epitomizes the pervasive popularity of the theatre as a means to spectacularize stories of monsters.

The societal conditions that create the interest in monsterhood and "the other" are grounded in the cultural expansion characteristic of Hellenisic Greece, as well as the Greek interest in the concept of the "monster" as a dual entity; with the word Τέρας comprising the words prodigy and monster. Thus, the "monster" is a simultaneously terrifying, yet attractive individual. The use of the monster in theatre as an instrument of comedy encompasses the duality of monsterhood. To note, there is additionally a connection "between..these creatures and drama via the masks worn by actors in both comedy and tragedy."[20] The use of monstrous characters in

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[16] Ibid, 220.
[17] Ibid, 209.
[18] "Fixation of the eyes"; a term that evokes not just fear, but a horrified, almost frozen fixation on a dreadful vision. The term draws attention not only to the subjective experience it describes, but also to the nature of the sight that prompts it.
[19] Eidinow, Esther. "'The Horror of the Terrifying and the Hilarity of the Grotesque': Daimonic Spaces—and Emotions—in Ancient Greek Literature." Arethusa 51, no. 3 (2018): 211. https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2018.0010.
[20] Ibid, 230.

comedic plays from a previously tragic origin blurs the lines between the genres, and exhibits the ability of comedy to perhaps ease cultural anxieties concerning monsterhood and the manifestation of "the other". Monsters as a significant aspect of Greek civilization, saturating literature and drama of the period can be explained by the codification of monsterhood as a product of cultural anxieties. While the exploration of different cultures greatly characterized the Hellenistic era, rapid societal change produces anxiety in the minds of many. This manifests in the coding of monsters within literature and theatre, and the obsessive tendency to depict them in many artistic mediums. The creation of *Grotesques* specifically indicates the magnitude with which Greek individuals focused on the idea of monsterhood. Verily, comments of the time are seen "concerning the ethnicity of a male or female figure, suggesting that some statuettes show ethnic groups different from the ancient Greeks."[21] Thus, the codification of "the other" as a monstrous being that embodies cultural anxieties about the otherness of ethnic groups. Yet, these figures are used frequently in comedy. Comedy is used as a means to ease the cultural anxieties of the masses, allowing for a more lighthearted tone to be associated with "otherness". This reduces the severity of societal change in the eyes of the individual. The physical space that these figures take up; whether on the stage or in sculpture as the *Bronze Grotesque*, is decidedly comedic. However, the metaphorical space inhabited is used to "characterise those who are somehow marginal or uncivilised...Their distorted physical characteristics were an important aspect of their role onstage or in metaphor."[22] The cultural perception of these monstrous

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[21] Eszter Süvegh. "Hellenistic Grotesque Terracotta Figurines. Problems of Iconographical Interpretation." Dissertationes Archaeologicae: Ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös Nominatae 3, no. 2 (2014): 157. https://doi.org/10.17204/dissarch.2014.143.
[22] Eidinow, Esther. "'The Horror of the Terrifying and the Hilarity of the Grotesque': Daimonic Spaces—and Emotions—in Ancient Greek Literature." Arethusa 51, no. 3 (2018): 226. https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2018.0010.

characters and the mere presence of them in both theatre and art displays how cultural expansion and coding permeated Hellenistic Greece.

The existence of the *Bronze Grotesque* examines the theatricality of the Hellenistic period and how it unites with the interests in deformity, unconventional bodies, and the expansion of cultural understanding. The role of the Greek comedy is critical in the analysis of caricatures such as the *Bronze Grotesque*. Theatre, literature, and art of the Hellenistic period was involved in depicting individuals of theatrical identity; with *grotesques* frequently representing manifestations of coded monsters as a comedic vehicle. The Greek fascination with monsterhood and its congruence with theatre and art is clearly exemplified within the *Bronze Grotesque*. Statuettes such as these exhibit the effectiveness of comedic coding; and epitomize the duality of the Greek word Τέρας.

Word Count: 1,815

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Illustrations



Fig. 1 *Bronze grotesque*, Hellenistic, 2nd century B.C.–1st century A.D., Greek, Bronze, 4 x 1 1/4 x 7/8 in. (10.2 x 3.2 x 2.2 cm), The Met



Fig. 2 *Bronze grotesque* (back view), Hellenistic, 2nd century B.C.–1st century A.D., Greek, Bronze, 4 x 1 1/4 x 7/8 in. (10.2 x 3.2 x 2.2 cm), The Met