

Masque and Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*

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Article Received: 10/7/2022,
Article Accepted: 20/08/2022,
Published online: 24/07/2022,
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.8.12

Abstract

A masque is a type of dramatic entertainment in which the performers wear masks of unusual shapes, suggestive of the allegorical character they play. In order to present a subservient allegory flattering to the patron, a masque included music, dance, singing, and acting inside an elaborate stage design. The architectural framing and costumes may have been constructed by a renowned architect. For the speaking and singing parts, experts in acting and music were hired. Usually displayed in stark contrast to the main masque, the antimasque is a form of masque that takes place before it. Antimasque typically has some sort of macabre comedy or aesthetic. They must to be engaging for the audience and incorporate dance elements. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was one of the few playwrights working in very different theatrical settings. An important part of his work takes place in spaces quite different from those of the typical Elizabethan theatre. Shakespeare studies have revealed that the use of masque in many of his later plays was extensive. It was in the reign of the Stuarts that the grandiose Renaissance masques found their heyday. Many of Shakespeare's last plays include dance in masquerade or supernatural vision or both. This essay would discuss the masque element in *The Tempest*.

Keywords: masque, *Tempest*, Prospero, masquers, intermezzo.

Introduction

A masque is a type of dramatic entertainment in which the performers wear masks of unusual shapes, suggestive of the symbolic character they play. The performers were usually the courtiers. It flourished mainly in England during the career of Ben Jonson. The natural charm of the masques lay in their songs, dances, and elaborate costumes. The dancers were known as 'masquers'.

Masques were very famous during the period of Queen Elizabeth and James I. Fletcher, Chapman, Dekker, Ford, etc. wrote masques for the report. It, however, reached perfection only in the hands of Jonson, whose mythological personages, amidst the most scrupulous preservation of their irrespective attributes, move with elasticity and vigour; and while the dialogue is distinguished by a masculine strength and freedom, the lyrical part of these gay pastimes is clothed with all the richness and luxuriance of poetry. Sorcerers and covert

noblemen were frequently used stock characters in Elizabethan intermezzo masques. Due to the general interest in magic, sorcerers began to appear. Famous playwrights like Shakespeare and his competitor Ben Jonson may have attempted to capitalize on this by writing multiple plays with a witchcraft theme because King James was rumoured to have claimed to be an authority on the subject. It's vital to note that this Early Modern English courtly masque tradition originated in Italy, where the Intermedi gave it an independent and parallel history. They were ornate interludes that were sandwiched between the many acts of the wedding plays, but they had nothing to do with the latter. From 1539 on, the Medici pushed these great shows, which featured intricate technology, opulent sets, and exceptional music and dancing, to the point where audiences valued them more than the plays themselves.

The following are the usual characteristics of a masque:

- Allegories and mythical matters prevailed.
- The characters are generally gods and goddesses of classical mythology or personified traits such as Delight, Grace, Love, Harmony, Revel, Sport, Laughter, etc.
- The number of figures is generally less and is often divided equally between males and females.
- The entertainments were shorter in length as compared to regular dramas.
- The scenes are set up in archetypal places, such as the Hill of Knowledge, The House of Chivalry, The House of Oceanus, and The Fountain of Light.
- They were written in rhymed verse.
- They were performed privately, and the actors and actresses were amateurs.
- Their object was usually to celebrate marriage in high life.
- Costly costumes and elaborate scenery were employed.

Within the masque proper, there is usually a ridiculous masque or 'anti-masque' performed partly by servants, partly by actors hired for the purpose, generally separated from the actual masque by a changed scene. An essential component of the masque's structure, the anti-masque, a peculiar incident intended to draw a stark contrast between the powers of evil and the triumph of celestial harmony, has been assigned to Queen Anne of Denmark. *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* all have elements that are related to the anti-masque. However, the masque form also incorporates characteristics from native mediaeval customs, such as the mystery plays or pageants in Corpus Christi celebrations. The Reformation's new order, which ushered in new civic holidays like Elizabeth's Accession Day and Lord Mayor's Day, suppressed them. Shakespeare utilized all of those dramatic precedents, as we can see in the Pageant of the Nine Worthies from *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare, on the other hand, used wedding masques, pageantry, and the play-within-the-play as acceptable substitutes for the censored rite due to the ban on performing religious ceremonies, but he always gave them a symbolic additional meaning or a comedic twist, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Love's Labour's Lost*. (HERNÁNDEZ, 5)

According to Janette Dillon, what Shakespeare presents in *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* is close to what Jacobean masque presents. There is a move away from revels and towards revelation. At the same time, there is no clear break with the older forms of masking. (Dillon, 67)

Shakespeare always includes a play-within-the-play when there will be an aristocratic wedding. *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are the only four plays in which a marriage tie between aristocrats appears, despite the playwright dealing with marital concerns in many of his works, whether in comedy or tragedy, despite the fact that each one's scheme is unique. The magical masque of Ceres, Juno, and Iris in *The Tempest* to announce the engagement of Miranda and Ferdinand, and a wedding masque in *As You Like It* when Hymen enters to bless Rosalind, the legitimate Duke's daughter, to the knight Orlando de Boys, are the first two examples in which we find a masque. A dancing masque, a pageant, and a dialogued final poem are all included in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Additionally, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedic play performed by rural artisans in honour of the royal pair Theseus, Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, on their wedding day. The play exhibits a masque-like element as a whole. It ends with the blessing from the fairy world, a lovely epithalamia melody. (HERNÁNDEZ 4)

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare's most unusual plays in that follow the rules of classical unity. This unusual acceptance of the neoclassical canon of literary structure can be associated with Prospero's governing appearance and his backing of the values of disciplined rationality. The play's involvement with the Jacobean court masque, under the shadow of Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson, contributes to the importance of this relationship. We learn that King James I watched *The Tempest* on Hallowmas Night, which fell on the first of November in the year 1611, from the Revels Accounts, which recorded court festivities. The intermezzo masque was a common type of entertainment throughout the Jacobean era, especially among the nobility. Because it involved the audience, it was generally well received. Common people participated in it as well, and one of its main advantages was that they could openly critique and satirize politicians, society, and norms while remaining anonymous.

Shakespeare and the Spectacles of Strangeness is a book that was written as a result of how unusual and amazing the play and masques were. Its creator, John Demaray, emphasized many notable aspects of the masque that were included into *The Tempest*, especially its artifice. Shakespeare was affected by masques in more depth by Demaray, who emphasizes how Shakespeare dramatized characters abrupt fifth-act unmasking and their final transition from worlds of artifice, illusion, or dream into the real society of the theatre. (Demaray, 46)

Late 16th to early 17th century English theater history is revered for its vast Shakespearean influence and lesser acknowledged popularity of Jacobean masques at the royal court. A royal license and patent allowed William Shakespeare to perform in London and for the court, but Ben Jonson also had the privilege of writing exclusively for the nobility during the same time. It may be argued that Jonson's unique influence is found between the lines of *The Tempest* through the development of the masque concept of the anti-masque. (Siler, 2019)

The masque, which appears in scene ii of Act-IV of *The Tempest*, is the more typical and better of the two. A careful study would reveal that it has the following features:

- It is performed in honor of a marriage.
- It is written in rhymed verse.
- It takes place out of doors, and the characters are taken from classical mythology. The whole forms a “majestic vision” and is “harmonious charmingly”. Nymphs and Reapers dance, “properly habited” (i.e., handsomely attired). The expressions “baseless fabric” and “insubstantial pageant” and the suddenness with which the vision disappears from view denote some elaborate machinery.

Act III's banquet scene, which Sebastian refers to as "a living drollery," has elements of an anti-masque. Similar to the previous masque, it was a stupid performance with extravagant costumes and decorations in the music and dancing as its major draw. The unexpected disappearance of the dinner with a quaint trick in one instance, as in the other, offers some stage qualities for use in a typical drama from that era.

In research from Joy Siler, it is stated that the “anti-masque” performed for the king and Prospero’s brother can then be interpreted as a harsher punishment and criticism of their deeds, whereas this specific wedding “masque” which is considerably more joyful, is a reasonable reward for goodness and absence of deceit. This furthers Shakespeare’s goal of reversing the Jacobean masque and giving it a much wider context than simply serving as an example of royalty. Instead, it is applied in a contrary manner that condemns the king’s cunning plans and actions and gives all the credit to those who uphold moral principles. (Siler, 2019)

The Tempest not only has masque characters, but it also exhibits a traditional masque story structure, which is a scholastic element of the play. Prologue, protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe are among its features. These action arcs, which were fundamental to Latin plays, were used by Shakespeare and others to pacify erudite theatregoers. While others have vanished into obscurity, “Prologue “is still in widespread usage today. They eventually herald the beginning of the main plotline, the introduction of characters and plot, and the denouement, which may be humorous or spectacular.

The masque is Prospero’s invention, which is acted out by Ariel and the meaner spirits who serve him. These are the “actors” who present a “vision” of goddesses in a speaking tableau, followed by a dance of nymphs and sickle men. Of course, we are not invited to believe that Iris, Juno, and Ceres appear on stage: Prospero describes the entire performance as a “trick” and “a vanity of my art” intended to please the eyes of this young couple, Ferdinand and Miranda (IV.1.37, 40-41). What we see is a spectral show animated by Ariel and “the rabble” (IV.1.37) over which Prospero has given him command. However, as suggested above, the “baseless fabric”; of this pageant is woven with the threads of truth. On the level of intellect as well as of sense, the characters portrayed in the strange masque give their blessing to the “contract of true love” between the young people; furthermore, the goddesses also reflect the most profound processes of human life. They are symbolic of fertile conditions, warmth, and

moisture, which are productive for a bounteous harvest. Vegetable harvests, of course, are analogous to the good which grows to ripeness in one's progeny. Such allegorically conceived goddesses will properly impress Ferdinand with their majesty and harmony (IV.1.118-19).

Prospero's colonization of the island and defeat of the exotic native, Caliban, also bring to mind the English conquest of the New World. His audience, which included Virginia Company associates, was targeted specifically. The initial shipwreck would be familiar to all of them because they were all aware of the recent shipwreck of individuals from the same firm. Every scene in Shakespeare displays his broad vision, and he seems to relish the complexity of masque. Unfortunately, *The Tempest's* masques don't have enough time to develop much of a theme or a story arc. One in particular could only deliver an invitation to eat at the King's supper. At least the goddesses have a narrative. The dancing and storytelling in these masques are examples of courtly masques that include performances. In keeping with the wonderful theme, they also feature mystical characters.

By the way, the English intermezzo is not the only one to contain this aspect of imagination. The continental's; tradition of ballet de cour allowed them to participate in this portion of the masque (the ballets of court). Shakespeare included a number of continental features in his masque, which is primarily performed by the French and is well-known for its range of songs, dances, scenes, and apparitions. In this way, even dignitaries from other countries could watch him play basketball and feel at home. These visitors might have been especially aware of the subplot involving Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano.

In ballet de cour, a typical story trope elevates slightly evil individuals to god-like grandeur. Caliban revered the other two in this instance, notably Trinculo, for their wine and comparative generosity to Prospero. They voluntarily participate in this act. When Prospero puts a halt to it and exposes the con artists, Caliban is left feeling humiliated. The poor servant laments: "I'll be wise hereafter and seek grace. What a thrice-double ass was I, to take this drunkard for a god, and worship this dull fool" (V.i.298-231). Prospero takes this whining in stride and returns the play to its predominantly intermezzo status.

Shakespeare's multifaceted worldview is evident in every scene, and he appears to revel in the complexities of the masque. Shakespeare's use of masque performance is interwoven to tell a much richer story. The wedding masque provides a reward for pure goodness but also is twisted to show the false perfection of the ideal. This can then be a possible reflection on the real court masques of Jonson and Jones. (Siler, 2019)

Unfortunately, the masques within *The Tempest* lack time to build up much of a theme or a story arc. The one accompanying the King's banquet, in particular, could only convey an invitation to eat. The goddesses at least tell a story. These masques—the dancing and storytelling—represent the pieces of courtly masques that contain performances. Moreover, they have magical characters, in keeping with the fantastic theme.

This way, even foreign dignitaries could enjoy familiarity when watching his play on the court. The subplot involving Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano might have been most

apparent to these visitors. A typical plot device in ballet de cour falsely elevates somewhat evil characters to a godlike status. In this case, Caliban worshipped the other two (especially Trinculo) for their wine and relative kindness compared to Prospero. They willingly embrace this charade. Prospero ends it and unmasks the fraudsters, leaving Caliban to feel ashamed of himself. The poor servant laments: "I'll be wise hereafter and seek grace. What a thrice-double ass was I, to take this drunkard for a god, and worship this dull fool" (V.i.298-231). Prospero takes this whining in stride and returns the play to its predominantly intermezzo status.

Conclusion

Shakespeare was incorporating convention and innovation into *The Tempest*, as well as including elements from the masque, which he believed was his duty as a playwright. He was winning over the crowd. Shakespeare's historical notoriety, which continues to make him popular, now, is an undeniable factor in his continued popularity. He catered to a commercial audience that included English people and foreigners, aristocrats and commoners, educated and ignorant people. He was able to incorporate comedy, romance, and tragedy into the same piece. He was skilled at selling out a performance. One is on fairly solid ground when asserting the influence of the court regalement when a direct utilization of the masque, either in part or in plenary, accomplishes in the drama a purport homogeneous to the masque; however, when dealing with the abstract qualities of the masque, the majority of which are shared by drama, the argument becomes quite flimsy. Shakespeare's ingenuity was indubitably sparked by his exposure to masques and interactions with masque writers, as well as by other modern entertainments and more established theatrical traditions. Shakespeare's entire eclecticism and superb integration are what make his inditement so brilliant.

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