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ENGL 305

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Essay 2 Outline

- I. Introduction, claim
 - A. Claim/Thesis Short Paragraph
 1. Only with knowing the historical evidence on masques can you see that
The Tempest criticizes the function of masques as political propaganda by showing Prospero cutting off the masque prematurely, and then delivering a speech on the Of existence and time, etc.
- II. Background Info on Masques
 - A. PDF
 - B. Political propaganda (book)
- III. Short paragraph about *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*
 - A. Evidence
- IV. The play doesn't achieve what Johnsons does. It never politically asserts the power of Ferdinand and Miranda.
- V. Prospero's speech poetically addresses what isn't there and why.
- VI. Conclusion
 - A. This scene isn't arbitrary, but it loses its meaning in the modern day when not placed in the correct historical context.

According to Robert Adams in “The Staging of Jonson’s Plays and Masques,” masques were a specific art form, found only in aristocratic circles, that reached their peak popularity and influence in the early seventeenth century under James I. While masques have a script, scenes, characters, music and dance, they were very much unlike theatrical plays of the time because of their exclusivity and price tag. Masques were only meant for the eyes of the aristocracy in their private parties, many of them performing in the masques themselves, and were incredibly expensive to produce, boasting the height of fashion, literature, and technical scenery. Because of this, they were only performed once, which added to their air of superiority. Furthermore, the specific function of the masque was to spew flattery on the members of the royal family and the general court itself (Adams 314-17). However, this frivolity was not without intention nor ramification. In the introduction of *Masques of Difference*, Kristen McDermott explores the construct of the masque as political propaganda, meant to assert the value and importance of the monarchy. The subject matter of masques were not strictly up to the author, but puppeteered by higher political powers, ensuring that the masque reflected the thoughts and doctrines of the monarchy. As an art form, masques were susceptible to the insecurities of the aristocracy of the time and thus always reflected the need of the court to assert themselves as ultimately superior, wholesome, and god-like compared to the masses of England, using highly thought of classical mythology to do so. Ultimately, these assertions proved to be divisive and are thought to have added fuel to the tensions leading up to the outbreak of civil war in 1640. (McDermott 2-6).

While events such as tournaments and pageants contributed to the evolution of masques Over time these diversions took on an allegorical aspect, often celebrating virtues like modesty and truth. Because of this, masques do not boast a logical plot, but were rather incredibly lavish and expensive productions, portraying performed only once, that featured the aristocrats themselves and were meant to pay homage to the highest ranking person in the room. The use In this way, masques were not only for the entertainment of the rich, but also full of political propaganda.

For example, Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* was meant to flatter and assert the dominance of King James by suggesting he understood both pleasure and virtue, even when great mythical figures such as Hercules did not. Understanding the purpose and functionality of masques, which existed only in the early seventeenth century, is essential to understanding Act IV, Scene i of *The Tempest* which features a masque dedicated to Miranda and Ferdinand. Shakespeare uses the masque not to move the plot along, but to make a derogatory statement on the nature of masques themselves and their purpose of expending enormous amounts of money just to flatter an individual of power.

The masque Prospero initiates for Miranda and Ferdinand in Act IV to celebrate their engagement critiques the function of masks as agents of flattery and glorification for an individual person. Since masques were meant to celebrate the royal and aristocratic, it makes

sense that Prospero would engage in this fashionable trend to honor the Prince of Naples and the soon to be Princess, but he conspicuously cuts off the performance soon after it starts, and embarks on a long-winded and nostalgic speech:

Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1 147-58)

Instead of masques being celebrated as dazzling, one of a kind experiences, *The Tempest* blatantly speaks against the trend, calling them “insubstantial pageant[s]” made up of “baseless fabrics.” After attacking the masque itself, it only logically follows that the function glorifying the aristocratic individual is also debased, a critique made even more potent because Prospero cuts off such a play that was to honor his own daughter. Masques were meant to uplift the individual being flattered to a status above the normal man, like King James in Jonson’s *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, but Prospero asserts that no man is worthy of that status raise.

Instead of heralding the glory of man, Prospero claims they are insubstantial, like “such stuff / as dreams are made on.” And furthermore he stresses the mortality of man, and the great equalizer: death. Since all mens’ lives are “rounded with a sleep” no one man, especially those who already rule over others, should be upheld above all else. These subtle critiques on the nature of masques are often overlooked by readers, and cannot be comprehended unless *The Tempest* is placed in its rightful historical context. When the nature of masques are apparent to the modern reader, *The Tempest* opens up for a whole new level of analysis to take place.

Adams 314-317

McDermott

It was as much of a game show, offering its noble viewers and participants a chance to enjoy each other's beauty, wealth, and dignity and to demonstrate and celebrate at great length their own importance and value. 2.

As expressions of power, masques are, to be sure, highly controlled in content and tone; the language of a court masque is naturally orthodox in subject matter and message...The artists who created the masques were financially and professionally dependent on the patronage of the royal family; rarely would such artists risk a negative response from their sponsors...Masques are the expressions of the monarch’s will, the mirrors of his mind. 3.

The court masque is vital to our interest in the powers that shaped early modern England precisely because it was an art form limited both in production and consumption to the persons closest to those sources of power...3.

The same argument, of course, can be applied to literature, in the sense that a culture's literary artefacts invariably reflect the conflicts and debates current to the moment of their production. 3.

MASQUES ARE TIED TO ENGLISH POLITICAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The English court, representing in its own estimation the English nation, struggled to identify itself not only with the qualities and values it possessed but by those it opposed as well. ...these masques related the court's desire to see its power reflected and endorsed by historical, mythological, religious, and literary elements believed at the time to be not only desirable but absolutely superior to all others.