

Katie Hopkins: Contextual Study Draft Feedback

This is a very articulate contextualization of an *extremely* puzzling scene in the play. I think you make a lot of sense throughout, and deliver a thoughtful reading of the play by contextualizing it in a thorough, well-grounded rundown of the masque culture (with an honest-to-god example!). This is no easy task, and you nailed it. I found myself making a lot of local comments below, but here are some big-picture things to think about to develop this idea further:

- 1) I think you have a solid, lucid introduction—but one that lacks a bit of urgency for those interested in understanding the play. You’re tackling the most foreign, bizarre aspect of the play to modern readers, and you’re also tackling the important question of why Shakespeare taps into this genre only to tap out of it (if you will). You’re also rightly attacking the issue of power—and what the play thinks about it. I think that, in your intro, you don’t really get at these major issues. Or, rather, you do so only right at the end. I might think about the question “who cares?” a bit further, and think about your reader’s most pressing concerns in trying to understand the play. Here, perhaps, integrating others’ critical perspectives might be useful.
- 2) Your argument about how the play critiques masque culture is good-but could go even further. You mention that Prospero explicitly cites the threat of Caliban. Why is that? That seems important, I think, because many masques deploy the “antimasque”—a staged threat (often of “others” like new world natives, Africans, the Irish, gypsies, etc.) that eventually gets tamed or corralled by “higher” forces (i.e. James I). Caliban is a threat like this—but his threat (though buffoonish) is real enough to stop the play-acting.
- 3) IF that’s a reading you want to pursue, you might want to add a bit about the “antimasque” in your background section.
- 4) Finally, as I note below, you’re not *quite* expressing how weird Prospero’s speech is—and why. Consider this: on my reading, he starts by pointing to the masque he just put on, calling it insubstantial. But, somewhere in there, he actually seems to start talking about “we” (your discussion of the antecedent is good here). Why is this? How does he get from point a to point b? What does that have to do with Caliban? There’s more to be said here, I think, in pinning down exactly how this speech is a critique of the court masque.

5)
Katie Hopkins

ENGL 305

Dr. Scheler

February 20, 2017

Masked Meanings: the Historical Importance of Masques and their Role in *The Tempest*

One of the most mystifying passages of *The Tempest* for the modern reader is the engagement masque found in Act IV, Scene i. The passage seems oddly out of place within the plot because of its mythological characters, and a call for a dance of farmers, and thus is easily skipped over by the reader for seemingly having no meaning. However, the reader's disengagement is largely due to the displacement of the text from its historical context, in which masques were an extremely prevalent art form, but have since died out and dwindled from common knowledge. Only by knowing the historical background on masques does it become clear that with the engagement masque, *The Tempest* criticizes the function of masques as political propaganda by having Prospero first call the masque into existence, and then cut it off prematurely in favor of making a speech on the mortality of man.

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

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Comment [1]: Perhaps an overstatement, given the cost of producing one. But your logic here is generally sound.

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Comment [2]: Hm. You might give a quick overview here about the specific knowledge of the masque that you'll establish; that will help your (good) claim not appear out of nowhere.

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Comment [3]: I'd get more accurate about the fact that this is an intro to a collection of Jonsonian masques. You don't even really need to give the title of this section here. But at some point, you might give a sense of who Jonson is (a contemporary poet and playwright, with whom Shakespeare worked occasionally).

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 neither 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 political higher 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. Authors paralleled the aristocracy with 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, and thus their existence was, to say the least, controversial. (McDermott 2-6).

A prime example of the flattery power of masques comes from one of the most successful masque writers of the time—Ben Jonson—who helped to praise many members of the royal family and their endeavors through his literary prowess. For instance, Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* singles out King James as a superior being for being able to unite two seemingly disparate values. The masque parades around characters such as Atlas, Hercules, and Daedalus who represent and discuss the seemingly impossible ability for any individual to understand and command both pleasure and virtue at once. While even these classical characters fail to boast the ability, there is one person in the masque who does: King James, in the form of Hesperus. Mercury singles out Hesperus, the brother of Atlas as capable of wielding both pleasure and virtue:

... It is not with his brother

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Comment [4]: to

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Comment [5]: And this is, as you saw, another collection.

I guess the point here is to just be clear about where you're getting your information from—introductions to anthologies, rather than journal articles or scholarly monographs (a fancy name for "book").

Not a big deal. But sometimes it helps to clarify where your info is coming from.

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Comment [6]: How so?

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Comment [7]: No "H" in Jonson.

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Comment [8]: "The two"

Small point, but by adding "the" it's clearer that you're referring back to "pleasure" and "virtue"

Bearing the world, but ruling such another
Is his renown. Pleasure for his delight
Is reconciled to virtue... (Jonson 159-162)

The “such another,” which Hesperus rules, is classically referred to as the western isles, and blatantly refers to King James, ruler of the isle of England and “pride of the western world.” Since, in this case, Hesperus is King James, this masque transparently asserts that he is able to make peace between two seemingly disparate values. This assertion is essentially political propaganda because it suggests that James is not a man, but a god, able to accomplish what even Hercules cannot and is thus superiorly fit to rule. It must be remembered that this message is coming from the royal court, and is thus an opinion rather than a fact, and like any opinion, it was open to disagreement and criticism.

The Tempest sets up a masque of the same flavor of *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* by beginning with the mythological characters of Juno, Ceres, and Iris, but unlike Jonson’s masque, the engagement masque doesn’t get the chance to truly flatter the guests of honor—Ferdinand and Miranda—and flourish into political propaganda, because it is interrupted before it finished. The most specific reference to Ferdinand and Miranda in the masque comes from Juno, urging the others to join her in blessing the couple: “... Go with me / To bless this twain, that they may prosperous be, / And honored in their issue,” (Shakespeare 4.1 103-5). While this blessing certainly singles out Ferdinand and Miranda to be special enough to receive attention from these “goddesses,” it is not the same as asserting their superiority. The word “may” in this blessing rather suggests that the two have a journey of growth ahead of them before they truly become prosperous and renowned rulers of Naples. Perhaps this masque would have flourished into assertions of their future superiority, but Prospero hastily cuts off the masque that he himself

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Comment [9]: Stylistically, it might be wise to break up this sentence. But grammatically, it’s fine.

Also, I’m floored by your insights and organization. Good work.

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Comment [10]: 4.1.103-5

No space.

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Comment [11]: Don’t use quotation marks unless you’re quoting. At least in this setting. It confuses the issue.

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Comment [12]: I think that it might be worth attending to the language of “honoring” and “blessing.”

You don’t have to force the play’s critique of this mode of thought into the masque itself. There’s plenty of framing language.

called for. Upon remembering Caliban's plot to murder him, Prospero exclaims to the spirits "Well done! Avoid; no more!" and makes them depart during the middle of a celebratory dance (Shakespeare 4.1 142). Because Prospero cuts off the masque when the only flattery that was bestowed upon Ferdinand and Miranda was a blessing, he hindered it from blossoming into a stronger assertion of their dominance, the quintessential function of the masque as an art form.

While the lack of flattery and assertion of superiority doesn't necessarily mean that *The Tempest* criticizes the aristocracy's need for reassurance, the speech Prospero delivers directly after he cuts off the masque does. After ending the revelry, Prospero launches into a long-winded and nostalgic speech about the insubstantiality of man:

... These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
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. (Shakespeare 4.1 147-58)

Calling the performance an "insubstantial pageant," Prospero's insult echoes criticism through the masque as an art form, something that was considered extremely substantial and important to early seventeenth century courtiers. To suggest that the masque "shall dissolve" is to suggest that

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Comment [13]: This could be its own paragraph. A strong "adversative" like "but" or "however" is best reserved to signal a new, contrasting point.

More importantly, it might be worth asking, at some level, why it's important that the threat of Caliban is relevant here.

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Comment [14]: That's definitely the case, at the end. But at the beginning of this speech, he's really pointing out the insubstantiality of "these our actors" and the "baseless fabric of this vision"

Fabric would have been used to make masque sets, btw.

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Comment [15]: Echoes whom?

I think you might have the wrong verb there.

the aristocracy itself will dissolve, since the masque is intrinsically tied to the prideful will of the court. Furthermore, Prospero's suggestion that "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep" pinpoints the two truths of the monarchy that they are loath to admit: their mortality and humanity. While the monarchy may play at being classical gods, their assertions and propaganda are nothing more than a will to feel secure in their own statuses. Whether Prospero's "we" is referring to himself, Miranda and Ferdinand as future royalty of Naples, or humanity as a whole he asserts that every human life is fleeting and any pageantry, wealth, or status one has will disappear with the great equalizer of death.

Instead of what seems like a weak and diverting passage, the engagement masque delivers in a strong voice, a critique against the highest powers in England. When one knows the torrid history of the masque, this scene from *The Tempest* can never again be thought of as arbitrary. This thinly veiled criticism meant to demean the insecurities of the aristocracy, can even provide valuable insights to the actions and insecurities of political leaders today. Humanity today is not much different than the humanity of the past; it is only time and the ability to understand context that separates the two. Without the historical background, the meaning and lesson of this criticism is lost on the modern reader, illustrating the importance of keeping a literary text in conversation with its historical context. While we may think of masterpieces like *The Tempest* as timeless, they are always a product of their time.

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Comment [16]: !!!! COOOOL.

Works Cited

- Adams, Robert M. "The Staging of Jonson's Plays and Masques." *Ben Jonson's Plays and Masques: Texts of the Plays and Masques Jonson on His Work Contemporary Readers on Jonson Criticism*. New York: Norton, 1994. 311-17. Print.
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- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. Ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. Print.