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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, which celebrates the impending union of Ferdinand and Miranda. The passage seems unnecessary and oddly out of place with regards to the rest of 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. This disengagement is largely due to the displacement of the text from its historical context, in which masques were a high-status art form, but have since died out and dwindled from common knowledge. Given its due historical context, the court masque was a medium that essentially translated to political propaganda—entertainments funded and performed by the English aristocracy that championed their own perceived superiorities. But what then does the presence of the engagement masque contribute to *The Tempest*?

Critic Frank Kermode attempts to explain Shakespeare's addition of the engagement masque to Act IV by reading *The Tempest* through a lens of unity and world order, centering around Prospero's ability to control nature and humanity through lofty, Shakespearean-level art. In Kermode's estimation, the engagement masque is simply a literary mechanism to mark Prospero's success in orchestrating the engagement between Miranda and Ferdinand, a union that plays an integral part in the regaining of Prospero's dukedom. Kermode even goes so far as to attribute the premature interruption of the masque to Shakespeare's inability to play out the

scene (Kermode 215-19). It seems unlikely that Shakespeare, a master of plot, would include the engagement masque, which stretches roughly half the scene, without due reason, so Kermode's argument, while truthfully addressing Prospero's mastery of the high arts, does not provide a satisfactory analysis of the masque's presence due to the narrowed focus on unity of the text.

To truly understand the significance of the engagement masque, one must situate the art form fully in its historical context, and only then does it become clear that Shakespeare's masque serves to criticize the function of the masque genre as political propaganda in favor of the elite and against colonial minorities. Although he doesn't address the engagement masque of Act IV, Paul Brown's reading of *The Tempest* aides in informing the passage because it explores the obsessive desire of England to conquer colonial minorities that appear subversive to Western culture and ways of life. Brown too argues for an ordered reading of *The Tempest*, but based on the repeated Western justification of colonialism, an order that he shows to breakdown as it fails to contain its seditious elements. When a colonial power ostracizes a colonial minority, they reveal a desire to eradicate or assimilate the other based on social insecurity, and thus they give the minority power by acknowledging them as a potential threat (Brown 280-92). This argument is critical to understanding the aristocratic mentality of power behind the masque. Above all else the aristocracy desired to show their superiority over all others, and one way by which they did this was through the construct of the antimasque, an internal element of a masque that demonstrated the aristocracy's power to conquer cultural minorities. The colonial minority in *The Tempest*, and thus the symbol of the antimasque, is Caliban, since Prospero is the colonizing power. Prospero emulates the English aristocracy with his creation of the engagement masque and his interruption of it to conquer Caliban's threat, both meant to demonstrate his power, but the speech Prospero delivers directly after his interruption speaks directly against these

aristocratic actions and thus criticizes them. By delivering a speech on the insubstantiality of the engagement masque, which then morphs into a commentary on the universal mortality of humanity, *The Tempest* lays bare the insecurities of the highest powers of England and criticizes the function of the masque genre as political propaganda in favor of the elite and against the colonial other.

In a preface to a collection of Ben Jonson's masques—a contemporary of Shakespeare, who is known to have collaborated with the playwright on a few occasions—Robert Adams tells us that 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). For instance, Jonson's masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* singles out King James as a superior being for being able to unite two seemingly disparate values—pleasure and virtue—when even mighty characters like Hercules are not. James is presented in the form of the titan Hesperus, brother of Atlas, who was classically referred to as the ruler of the western isles, and thus blatantly referred to James as the ruler of England (Jonson 159-162).

The frivolous height of this flattery was neither without intention nor ramification. In her book that explores four of Jonson's masques that deal with England's colonial others, Kristen

McDermott explores the construct of the masque as political propaganda, meant to assert the value and importance of the monarchy. Jonson's comparison of King James to Hesperus isn't just harmless flattery, because by suggesting King James has ability to unite two irreconcilable values, he gives him the status of a god rather than a man, asserting that he is then superiorly fit to rule since he is more than human and more than his subjects. The blatant assertions of power in masques were not strictly up to the author, but puppeteered by political higher powers, ensuring that the masque reflected the thoughts and doctrines of court politics. Consequently, masques were also 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, as well as England's colonial minorities. The demonstration of power over these minorities even had their own internal construct in the masque: the antimasque. Antimasques functioned as comic relief to the lofty flattery, but were also weighty symbols of eradicating any subversive intrusions that threatened the sanctity of the court. While authors paralleled the aristocracy with highly thought of classical mythology, cultural others, like blacks, Native Americans, and the Irish, were associated with all of the things the aristocracy found to be crass: poor decorum, comedic ways of talking and dressing, and physical differences considered to be unseemly. The threat of the antimasque was always resolved, either by the participants being eradicated from the stage, or physically transformed to emulate English culture. Ultimately, these totalizing assertions proved to be divisive and not only forwardly propelled the conquering notions of Western colonization, but 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, 23).

Prospero likens himself to this entire elitist tradition in his thirst for admiration when he calls the engagement masque into existence. Prospero calls upon Ariel to orchestrate other spirits into the celebratory entertainment:

Incite them to quick motion, for I must
Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple
Some vanity of mine art. It is my promise,
And they expect it from me. (4.1.39-42)

Tweak analysis: The masque is a chance for Prospero to show his otherworldly superiority even though it is represented as a celebration for Ferdinand and Miranda. Prospero is performing for the audience of “the young couple” and he seeks to show the “vanity” of his art. The true purpose behind the masque is then not to celebrate Ferdinand and Miranda, but Prospero’s magical ability. And while he says Ferdinand and Miranda “expect it from” him, they never explicitly ask for the masque, or any sort of show. So rather than being a generous host and truly honoring his guests, Prospero emulates the aristocracy by creating self-serving entertainment meant to showcase his own superiority.

While the intention behind the masque then is to illustrate Prospero’s supremacy, it must be noted that the engagement masque doesn’t achieve the full function of a true masque as political propaganda since it is cut off before it flourishes into flattery on the part of either Prospero, or Ferdinand and Miranda. The engagement masque is accurate to the flavor of true masques like *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 instead only progresses to the point of bestowing blessings for future success, blessings called for on the part of Juno::

“... 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. And since Ferdinand and Miranda are not asserted in their superiority, neither is Prospero, since the whole masque represents his ability to rule over nature and his fellow characters.

While the lack of apparent flattery doesn't necessarily mean that *The Tempest* criticizes the aristocracy's need for reassurance through the demeaning of colonial others, Prospero's premature ending of the celebration due to the threat of Caliban, and the speech he delivers directly afterwards does. Perhaps this masque would have flourished into assertions of their future superiority, but Prospero hastily cuts off the masque that he himself called for. He remarks his realization to himself in an aside which then turns into a command to cease the masque:

I had forgot that foul conspiracy

Of the beast Caliban and his confederates

Against my life. The minute of their plot

Is almost come [*To the Spirits.*] Well done! Avoid; no more! (4.1.139-42)

Add and tweak analysis: In a stage direction it says Prospero starts suddenly when remembering Caliban and the others. This suggests fear. His stopping of the revelry in order to squash the threat functions just like an antimasque. Prospero shows his insecurity and his need to dominate Caliban, just like the aristocracy show their insecurity about colonial others through the antimasque.

Prospero's speech goes against his previous actions of calling forth the masque and seeking to eliminate Caliban's threat, acts on par with the behavior of aristocracy, which deliberately calls our attention to what is being said. After ending the revelry, Prospero launches into a long-winded and nostalgic speech about the insubstantiality the engagement masque, and 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)

Prospero begins by speaking about his here and now. He references the spirit-actors who "are melted into air" and the "vision" of the masque. He calls the performance an "insubstantial pageant," curiously drawing the reader's attention, since he was the one to first call up the masque. This phrase ripples criticism through the masque as an art form, since it was something considered extremely substantial and important to early seventeenth century courtiers. To suggest that the masque "shall dissolve" is to suggest that the aristocracy itself will dissolve, since the masque is intrinsically tied to the prideful will of the court.

Further adding to the curiosity of the speech, Prospero departs from speaking about his present surroundings and enters metaphysical territory, a turn that seals the function of the engagement masque as a critique against the aristocracy. 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. 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. To equalize the aristocracy with the rest of humanity is to also equalize them with the colonial other, thus casting a shadow on their practice of belittling other cultures if humanity is universally equal. This statement goes against Prospero's previous inclinations to celebrate his status with a masque and to eliminate the culturally subversive Caliban, an intentional irony that draws attention and gives credit to the critique by obviously portraying the hypocrisy. Prospero is essential to the engagement masque's critique on the aristocracy by transparently making an example out of himself. By pointing to his own hypocrisy, he reveals the hypocrisy of the monarchy, who may play at being classical gods, superior over every other culture, but in reality are just humans guilty of ostracizing other humans in order to feel secure in their own skin.

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 and their habit of steamrolling cultural minorities. When one knows the torrid history of the masque and its internal antimasque, this scene from *The Tempest* can never again be thought of as arbitrary, and is even more intimately connected to the present than the modern reader might initially think. This thinly veiled criticism meant to demean the insecurities of the aristocracy can provide

valuable insights into the insecurities of political leaders today, and how they deal with who they deem to be cultural others. 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 of the masque genre and its surrounding colonizing culture, 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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