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ENGL 305

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March 6, 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, 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*? The key to answering this question lies in Prospero and his emulation of English aristocracy in their affinity for masques, and their fear of the colonial other. Prospero faithfully acts as an elite throughout the masque, but the speech he delivers directly after it calls into question those actions by speaking directly against them, effectively criticizing the masque genre as an aristocratic tool used for self-promotion and devaluing of colonial minorities.

Critic Frank Kermode also uses Prospero to explain the function of the engagement masque, but he explains it by attempting to fit it into a strictly unified reading of *The Tempest*, which centers around Prospero's ability to control nature and humanity through 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). Not only does it seem unlikely that Shakespeare, a master of plot, would include the engagement masque, which stretches roughly half the scene, without due reason, but Kermode also separates masques from their real-world social and political implications to instead equate them to a vacuumed art form. While Kermode's argument truthfully addresses Prospero's mastery of the high arts, it 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 sheds light on one of the historical consequences that the masque genre aided in circulating: the obsessive desire of England to conquer colonial minorities. Brown, like Kermode, 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 that stems from an insecurity which fears difference (Brown 280-92). Brown's argument is critical to understanding the aristocratic mentality of power dynamics behind the masque. Above all else the aristocracy desired to show their superiority over all others through the masque, and one way

by which they did this was through the construct of the antimasque, an internal construct that demonstrated the aristocracy's power to conquer cultural minorities. Since Prospero is the one to call up the masque and thus represents the aristocracy, Caliban is the cultural minority that he desires to oppress, evidenced by the fact that Prospero interrupts his own masque to deal with Caliban's subversive assassination plot. Prospero's emulation of the English aristocracy is directly challenged by himself with the speech he delivers directly after his interruption and in its irony criticizes the aristocracy. By delivering a speech on the insubstantiality of the engagement masque, which then morphs into a commentary on the universal mortality of humanity, Prospero 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 hold similarities to theatrical plays of the time, they differed in their exclusivity and price tag. Masques were only meant private, aristocratic parties, 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 by way of the ability to unite two irreconcilable values isn't just harmless flattery, because it suggests that he is more of a god than a man, and thus superiorly fit to rule. These blatant assertions of power in masques were puppeteered by political higher powers, ensuring that the masque reflected the thoughts and doctrines of court politics and consequently made the genre susceptible to the insecurities of the aristocracy. Masques 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 latter even had a specific avenue for execution: 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 when he calls the engagement masque into existence, revealing his thirst for admiration. 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)

Even though Prospero says “the young couple...expect it from” him, this is not true. There is no mention of the masque before Prospero speaks these lines to Ariel, making the existence of the masque not a product of Miranda and Ferdinand’s desire, but rather Prospero’s. Furthermore, Prospero does not mention the purpose of the masque to be an honor for Ferdinand and Miranda, but rather a “promise” to “bestow upon the eyes of this young couple / some vanity of [his] art,” making the masque more of a self-serving celebration of Prospero’s magical ability that makes him superior to other humans. So rather than being truly honoring his guests, Prospero emulates the aristocracy by creating entertainment that asserts his superiority over others through artistic means.

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, Prospero's premature ending of the celebration due to the threat of Caliban, and the speech he delivers directly afterwards does, which also simultaneously critiques the way in which they do this: through the demeaning of colonial minorities. Perhaps this masque would have flourished into assertions of future superiority, but in the midst of it, Prospero remembers Caliban's plot to murder him. In a stage direction, it is described that "Prospero starts suddenly" and immediately after he speaks to hastily cut off the masque that he himself called for (4.1.138). He begins his remarks 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)

It is clear that the reason Prospero cuts off the masque is to deal with Caliban and his conspirators, since the order to cease the masque—“Well done! Avoid; no more!”—is given directly after Prospero’s remembrance of Caliban’s scheme and its impending imminence: “I had forgot that foul conspiracy / Of the beast Caliban and his confederates / Against my life. The minute of their plot / Is almost come...” The specific stage direction where Prospero is described to “start suddenly” further reveals that there is urgency in Prospero when it comes to stopping Caliban’s murder plot. Even if the threat is not serious enough to invoke fear, and it is perhaps somewhat even comical in the way Prospero dispels it, it is significant enough to Prospero that he ceases the masque, the symbol of his superiority, before it is finished. This action reveals Prospero’s insecurity surrounding Caliban—a representation of not just a threat to his life, but also a possible subversion to his superiority as a colonial other—and his need to dominate that subversion.

In this way, Prospero further likens himself to the English aristocracy through his imitation of the function of the antimasque. Jonson expresses one such antimasque in *The Irish Masque at Court* where the brash, poorly dressed, strangely accented Irish are transformed into well-to-do English citizens by simply being in the presence of James I (Jonson 176-196). What the English court interpreted as threats to their way of life simply because it differed from theirs—different dress, different speech, different standards of beauty—was completely erased through a portrayal of totalizing assimilation. Prospero exhibits this same social insecurity of difference when he seeks to dominate Caliban. Caliban is different from Prospero in skin tone (1.2.325), shapely appearance (284), and education (335-39), and thus, in Prospero’s eyes, represents a threat to his aristocratic way of life. Prospero had no need to kill Caliban when he first came to the island, keeping him in check with his magical ability (372-74), but when he

grew in credibility with the potential to hinder the regaining of Prospero's dukedom, Prospero ceased all revelry of the masque to take care of the problem, demonstrating the same desire as the English aristocracy to squash any possible subversion from colonial others.

After Prospero solidly relates himself to the aristocracy by imitating their need to assert their superiority both generally and over colonial others, he then delivers a speech directly contradicting his aristocratic actions and thus 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 plainly portraying the hypocrisy. Prospero is essential to the engagement masque’s critique on the aristocracy because he transparently makes 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 strongly contradicts arguments like Kermode's that try to reduce its meaning to an inconsequential explanation. Brown's political reading of *The Tempest* helps to reveal that the consequences of the engagement masque 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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