

# The tempest and use of the masque genre

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



During the 16th century, the court masque was a popular form of entertainment, one often used to celebrate the king and aristocracy.

Shakespeare's greatest contribution to the genre was his play *The Tempest*, which masterfully wove the elements of the popular masque right into the fabric of the plot. This drama enables us to examine the inner workings of a masque without necessarily classifying it as a pure masque. In order to truly understand how *The Tempest* was a significant contribution to the masque genre, the reader must understand what the basic elements of a court masque are, and how these different elements were weaved into the creation of *The Tempest*.

The court masques of the Renaissance era were a form of entertainment that combined spoken word, dance, song, and storytelling into an allegorical story of the power of the king and aristocracy. Court masques began to flourish during the 16th through 17th centuries, and reached their zenith at the end of the reign of house Stuart (Frans Van Dijkhuizen). In a departure from the plays and dramas of the time, most of the action during a court masque was taken up by the settings itself. The audience, the actors, the King, and the set were all equal parts of the performance. Attendants wore elaborate costumes and disguises as part of the event. Masques thus blurred the lines between storytelling and reality, as the sitting monarch or aristocrat was a meaningful part of the story, along with the audience. For those in power masques, were not only a form of entertainment but also a demonstration of power, command, and control over society. A masque was a highly political event that was meant to glorify those who held authority.

There were several elements they were particular to the genre during the 15th century. The dancers performing in a masque were not paid actors or dancers, but were rather the political elite of society. It was not rare to see a king or an aristocrat dancing during the performance of a masque. A masque was not just a dance, though; it was the totality of everything that encompassed the performance. Every costume, audience member, and set piece was a part of the masque. All masques had a central motif, called a device, that would bring all of these elements together (Frans Van Dijkhuizen). This device determined what kind of scenery was used, what costumes were worn, and even what kinds of dances were held. At the beginning of the masque a device would be introduced by a smaller, darker, and more grotesque performance called the “ anti-masque.” All of these elements worked together to create the masque genre.

What makes *The Tempest* unique in its contribution to the masque genre is that the work is very aware of what it is. Shakespeare integrated the elements of the masque right into the story of *The Tempest*. The play didn't just contain the typical elements of song, poetry, and dance, but constantly referenced the concept of the court masque within the body of its own action. *The Tempest* takes concepts from the genre and interludes them with anti-masques concerning passion, disruption of hierarchy, and murder.

In Act IV of the play, Prospero demands that Ariel make spirits appear before him to perform a masque in celebration of Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding. Prospero says to Ariel, “ Thou and thy meaner fellows your last service, Did worthily perform, and I must use you In such another trick. Go bring the

rabble, O'er whom I give thee power, here to this place" (Shakespeare IV i 35-39). Spirits and the supernatural were a common theme in masques. They acted as allegories for the power of the aristocracy and kings. When asked by Ferdinand if what he is seeing were truly spirits, Prospero responds, " Spirits, which by mine art, I have from their confines called to enact my present fancies" (Shakespeare IV i. 132). Suddenly, three goddesses appear before Prospero and begin to sing: " Honor, riches, marriage, blessing, Long continuance, and increasing, Hourly joys be still upon you. Juno sings her blessings on you" (Shakespeare IV I 106-108). Masques were commonly thrown for special occasions such as a new ruler or a wedding. These three spirits performed and glorified the new couple as would traditionally be done in a masque.

While Prospero is entranced in the performance of the spirits, he suddenly remembers the plot against his life and bids the spirits away. Prospero says " Our revels now are ended. 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 IV i. 148-158). The way this scene is framed, it gives the audience a look into how a masque would appear to an observer. Due to the nature of how masques were performed, the audience was always an active participant in the performance. Shakespeare framed the court masque within the play in a way that the viewer could see how reality melds with fiction in

the eyes of the participants. At one moment Perspero is captivated by the magic of what is occurring around him, and then the next he remembers that his very life is in danger. He mourns, “ I had forgot that foul conspiracy Of the beast Caliban and his confederates Against my life” (Shakespeare IV I. 130-132). He himself became a part of the magic around him, if only for a second.

Moral instruction was also an important aspect of a masque. While they had little to no story to carry them forward, masques would take a moral ideal and work it into the fabric of the masque as a device. Prospero uses the masque as a moral lesson, and has Ariel tell the wicked Antonio and his fellow conspirators the meaning of the masque being performed. Ariel says, “ You are three men of sin, whom Destiny... the never-surfeited sea hath caused to belch up you, and on this island where man doth not inhabit” (Shakespeare III. i. 53-57). All of these passages take common elements from masques and turn them on their head. The work is not about glorifying power, but instead is an existential work about a person’s place in society as the social hierarchy topples all around him. The play thus appropriates a tool of propaganda and uses it to tell a humanistic story.

With the technology that we have available today, a masque would truly be a marvelous thing to behold. We currently have machines that can create smells, projectors that can create three dimensional images, and the ability to project sound in three dimensions. I imagine that a masque today would look something like Cirque du Soleil, except in a more open area and with more viewer interaction. The technology could really be used to create an

immersive experience in which the audience is actually part of the story that is occurring. If it rains in the story, the theatre can turn on sprinklers; if ghosts appear, then the theatre can use three dimensional projectors.

The Tempest takes concepts from the court masque genre and turns them on their head by interweaving them with antimasque elements and a dramatic story line. Masques were developed as social performances where every single viewer, set piece, costume, and most importantly the King, were an integral part of the act. Shakespeare framed The Tempest in a way that the audience would be able to watch a court masque as an observer. This gave the viewer a unique perspective on how masques are able to blend reality and fiction together. While not directly a masque itself, The Tempest makes a significant contribution to the genre.

## **Works Cited**