Jacobean Masque Theater and Shakespeare's *The Tempest:* The Foil of the Anti-Masque

by Joy Siler

Late 16th to early 17th century English theater history is revered by historians and critics alike for its vast Shakespearean influence and the lesser acknowledged popularity of Jacobean masques at the royal court. What is often overlooked is the connection between the two and the influence from one to the next. A royal license and patent allowed William Shakespeare to perform in London and for the court, but Ben Jonson also had that privilege of writing exclusively for the nobility during the same time. Though masques had been going on since before Jonson's time and could have directed Shakespeare's writing in that way, it may be argued that Jonson's unique influence is found between the lines of the play *The Tempest*—specifically through the development of the masque concept of the anti-masque. The creation of Jacobean anti-masques through *The Masque of Queens* and aspects of their elaborate costuming influenced Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by establishing a foiling plot structure and a connection between the private and public theaters.

To understand the effect of an anti-masque, its original form must first be defined. The 'masque' was an elaborate theater-style performance typically comprising choreographed dancing by disguised actors who portrayed a story or theme to the audience.[1] They were complex, wildly lavish in costumes and color, and greatly enjoyed at court and in the private homes of wealthy aristocrats. This contrasted largely with the other "pageants, mimed tournaments, allegorical dialogues, and interludes" that were common entertainments for the time.[2] Eventually, speaking lines and narration were added for greater spectacle and for a richer plot structure that was directed to give more emphasis to the positive, celebratory motif that existed within the masques.[3] They grew in uniqueness until they came to encompass an entire genre of theatrical performance.

Masques were elaborate and had great popularity in the royal courts for hundreds of years. Court entertainments and customs are essential to understanding the rise of the early masques and the history of this genre of theatrical performance. Royalty and nobles began to join in the festivities through elaborate disguises during the regular performances of licensed acting troupes at court.[4] The theme of the masque therefore had to become more elevated to match the dignity of these higher players.

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[1] Helen L. Hull, Meg F. Pearson, and Erin A. Sadlack, *History of the Masque Genre.* (Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, 2000), Accessed October 28, 2017. http://www.mith.umd.edu/comus/cegenre.htm.

[2] Hull et al., *History of the Masque Genre*.

[3] Hull et al.

[4] Hull et al.

Thus, with greater numbers of the elite joining in the thrall, the masque became a conduit for high spectacle that celebrated the monarchy and the rule of the upper class. It also became elaborate enough to be developed into a literary form and Ben Jonson—the playwright of *The Masque of Queens*—was a key figure in advancing this aspect of the genre from 1605 to 1625.[5] Though performed before the entire court, this genre of performance was exclusive to private theater because of its expenses and purpose. It was "designer's theater" as "no public theater play could be designed as masques could."[6] None of the lower classes would be admitted or allowed to be present. This type of performance later flourished under the Jacobeans as it sought to promote the projected image of the royalty and elites during a time of the rather recent political upheaval.[7] The War of Roses was not far into the past and the death of the celibate Elizabeth I left no heir. Because of this, Elizabeth's distant cousin James came to the throne and needed to solidify his place and rule.[8] The greater spectacle of these masques during this time came to create a sub-genre of Jacobean masques that were utilized more heavily at court.

This historical context describes the rise in popularity of the masques, the historical context for *The Masque of Queens*, and how radical the addition of an anti-masque would be. Due to its young introduction in this specific Jacobean-era of masques, the anti-masque was highly influential, in that all previously had followed a set theme of positive and celebratory events. It "introduces comic or grotesque characters and plot material to act as foils to the main masque or to allow the main masque to provide a resolution."[9] The darker anti-masque of *The Masque of Queens* included witches casting spells to enhance the restorative power of good and the royal queens when they banished evil in the main masque. By doing so, it furthered its primary goal of uplifting the perfected ideal of the monarchy by representing it as a powerful force of peace and prosperity. *The Masque of Queens* premiered near the height of the genre's popularity in the Jacobean court in 1609 and therefore dictated the structure of any masque following, as evidenced by the resulting list of qualities that all others conformed to and that included such a juxtaposition of themes. For the purposes of the argument, when referring to a 'masque' in later sections, this term will be in the definition of a Jacobean masque that includes a contrasting anti-masque.

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[5] Hull et al..

[6] Jean MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres*, (Edmonton, Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1992), Accessed October 28, 2017. https://books.google.com/books?id=nw5QFe4u4KgC&pg=PA227&lpg=PA227&dq=jacobean+masque+costumes&source=bl&ots=z8MOPn0wrU&sig=QsYYyFemYGPQFVv3GgLIRgVHYGo&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj4utupnKbWAhXKxFQKHXchBO4Q6AEIVTAN#v=onepage&q=jacobean%20masque%20costumes&f=fals.

[7] MacIntyre, *Costumes and Scripts*.

[8] Hull et al., *History of the Masque Genre*.

[9] Hull et al.

The original script of *The Masque of Queens* by Ben Jonson—including annotations and descriptions—is very different compared to a normal script, as the masque genre focused on the spectacle aspect of the shows. It begins with the anti-masque of witches that represent the vices that plague humanity.[10] Their sole purpose is to create chaos and call down evil upon everything by reciting incantations. The twelve historical queens then appear to restore peace and banish the witches. These queens represent women of virtue and fame that were immortalized by the old masters and philosophers.[11] This is the point where the resulting foil is depicted by the stark difference in the two groups and the queens' triumph over the evil vices. The annotations from Jonson are the vital sections from the script because of his thorough direction and descriptions for the designs. For the witches, he describes the first scene as "an ugly Hell" with a mix of ragged women, "all differently attyr'd: some with Rats on their Head; some on their Shoulders; others with Ointment Pots at their Girdles; all with Spindles, Timbrels, Rattles, or other veneficall Instruments."[12] Having this input from the creator himself is crucial to depicting the whole accurately and according to the original thought or perspective that he wanted to achieve.

What also makes this piece by Jonson so important is the portrayal of women in *The Masque of Queens.* In an insightful article, Clare McManus of the University of Roehampton in London, who specializes her research on European Renaissance drama, asserts that there is a 'theatrical woman' that is separate from the real women masquers.[13] Men would have been used in the anti-masque to play the female roles, portray disorder, and possibly establish a sort of commentary on the place of women in the masque as a whole.[14] There was caution in giving such subversive roles to women as the witches and the roles represented in the typical anti-masque were made to show "disruptive knowledge…vocality, and sexuality" that was discouraged among the true greater female society.[15] "The visual stage picture engaged with alternating versions of femininity in the replacement of the transvestite anti-masque witches" with the noble women masquers—even including Queen Anne herself—to bring back pure virtue and modesty.[16] Permitting women to take part in such revelries is quite significant as they were typically barred from performing on the regular public theatrical stage, but in the

[10] Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Queens: Celebrated from the House of Fame*, (London, 1609), Accessed October 28, 2017. http://www.hollowaypages.com/jonson1692fame.htm.

[11] Jonson, *The Masque of Queens*.

[12] Inigo Jones, "Queen Artemisia, Queen Camilla, Queen Candace, Penthiselea of the Amazons, Queen Zenobia, Artemisia's Headdress, Zenobia's Headdress," from *Examples of Masque Costume in the Late 16th & Early 17th Centuries,* Accessed October 28, 2017, http://www.elizabethancostume.net/masque/.

[13] Clare McManus, "When is a Woman Not a Woman? Or, Jacobean Fantasies of Female Performance (1606-1611)," *Modern Philology*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2008), 105 (3): 437-474. Accessed October 28, 2017.

[14] McManus, "When is a Woman Not a Woman?"

[15] McManus, 455.

[16] McManus, 455.

roles where they may be "perceived the unruliest," men were used to perform instead.[17] The differences that would arise between what Jonson writes and what would literally be performed also change the effects of the women's roles and positioning as the focus in these performances was the spectacle of it all. However, the insights to the complex social and political dynamics within the masque for women and their placement are intriguing and relatively sound.

To compare with the public theater sphere of William Shakespeare, the masques that are found in his play, *The Tempest*, as will be further discussed, are subject to a similar exile of women from the stage. Men would take on the role of a woman and portray any female part. There would be no allowing of any true woman however, whether they were part of the restorative aspect of a masque or not.

Jonson's right-hand man was the Italian influenced Inigo Jones who designed all the elaborate costumes worn by the revelers. Quite amazingly, primary sketches of Inigo Jones' work have survived.[18] The detailed images are not in color, but are clear enough to accurately represent prominent characters from several masques. His ornate style is displayed and attests to the expense and opulence of the Jacobean court. Of primary interest are five images of costumes made for a few of the queens of *The Masque of Queens*.[19] What is interesting is that no designs of any of the witches' costumes have survived. However, the influence of the other masque characters can provide sufficient examples of Jones' style for design purposes. Included in the collection are drawings of more fanciful costumes that can aid in filling in the gap of information.

Writing and designing for the highest nobles in the land presented challenges and made such work tedious. Key costume practices of masque theater that became evident in other genres were the uses of costumes to 'assume the character' while maintaining their own true 'mannerisms,' just as the disguises of the masque could not entirely hide the royal or noble dancing underneath.[20] Reuse of costumes was typical and economic due to their exorbitant price tags, but was also thought to have influenced the writing of other plays as the company would want to utilize each costume as much as possible. Actors of the time typically had to furnish their own costumes or be sponsored by rich patrons.[21] Therefore, the troupes hired to perform in private theater masques would connect the masques to the public through their costumes being reused. In all, this describes their wider influence on the development and influence on English theater.

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[17] McManus, 455.
[18] Jones, "Queen Artemisia, Queen Camilla, Queen Candace, Penthiselea of the Amazons, Queen Zenobia, Artemisia's Headdress, Zenobia's Headdress."
[19] Jones.
[20] Susan Baker, "Personating Persons: Rethinking Shakespearean Disguises," Shakespeare Quarterly 43, no. 3 (1992): 303-16. doi:10.2307/2870530.
[21] Baker, "Personating Persons."

The chosen designs for the masque queens and witches therefore capitalize on the expensive tastes of the court, while maintaining the stark contrasts between the two factions. A very distinct line would have been drawn for the queens to be presented in a much more extravagant way, not only because of the character's status in the dance, but also because of the Sumptuary Laws that governed all clothing for each class. The crucial aspect of color coordination for characters was key to the audience understanding each character's background as nobility were allowed to wear more sumptuous coloring.[22] This is crucial in comparing it to the lavish court masques and how far Shakespeare would have been able to go to resemble real masque costumes if his actors did not already have them. The queens would have vivid, strong colors and be themed according to Jonson's descriptions. One of the latter queens to enter would be shown more prominently and would have been played by a higher-ranking lady of the court.[23] Thus, her costume would have been the most elaborate and expensive, "made of rich fabrics adorned with jewels."[24] The witches were designed to be drabber and much simpler to resemble their baseness of character and create the polarizing opposition.[25] The textures would reflect the baseness of the witches in comparison with the silks and finer materials of the queens, further depicting the banishment of all evil to be replaced by elegance, peace, and goodness.

Premiering not long after the *Masque of Queens*, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* had distinct masque qualities that mirrored the court performances but gave deeper meaning to both its extravagance and its perceived purpose. To further the connection of masques to the outside public theater productions of Shakespeare, one must turn to the original script of *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* is about an exiled man named Prospero who had his dukedom effectively stolen by his brother and the king. Demanding his revenge, Prospero calls up a storm to strand his enemies on his island of exile. Putting this magic to full use, he also has Ariel, his spirit servant, and others punish the king and his traitorous brother.[26]

The essential parts are these two scenes of magical performances put on by the spiritual servants. One is a darker rebuke directed towards Prospero's enemies for their betrayals of trust when they robbed him of his dukedom. At one point these spirits act out a sort of anti-masque that tortures Prospero's enemies by presenting a bounteous feast for the starving men. The vision of the food remains tantalizingly before them until the spirits turn on them, making the tables vanish and beginning to reveal the men's crimes with torture.[27] The other performance is a blessing ceremony for

[22] Baker, "Personating Persons," 313-316.
[23] Jonson, *The Masque of Queens.*
[24] Hull et al., *History of the Masque Genre.*
[25] Jonson, *The Masque of Queens.*
[26] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, (London, 1610-11), Accessed October 28, 2017.
[27] Shakespeare, *The Tempest.*

Prospero's daughter and the king's son being united in pure love. Amazingly, Prospero does encourage the marriage between the prince and his daughter, by which a celebratory masque is inserted into the play. Several of the spiritual servants then create a spectacle of a Roman goddess descending from above and blessing the union.[28] This scene seems to be very similar to Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* when the masquing queens—also of origin in classical history and mythology—come down to banish the witches and bring back the blessing of prosperity. Eventually, Prospero forgives those who have wronged him so grievously and becomes reconciled to his former status.[29] These two scenes together resemble the Jacobean masque structure of having an anti-masque before the main restoration or revels that reclaim peace and order. The punishment of the wrong-doing by the nobles is contrasted by the chastity and perfection of the young couple's love.

Clifford Davidson, a professor at Western Michigan University, gives an in-depth look into the complexities and meanings behind the characters and structure of the miniature masque that is performed for Prince Ferdinand and Prospero's daughter, Miranda, in *The Tempest*. The significance of Ariel's spirits portraying prominent mythological goddesses plays into the control that Prospero has on the narrative of the play and the lovers' particular relationship. The masque encourages pure love and exalted peace from chastity but contrasts the rest of Prospero's actions of revenge in the ultimate purpose of revealing that it is false, and that real life is truly much darker for all its complications.[30]

This is what gives analysis to the power of an anti-masque and masque combination and the influences that such performances had on Shakespeare for him to use it in this way. The 'anti-masque' performed for the king and Prospero's brother can then be seen as a darker punishment and critique of their actions while this particular, and much happier, wedding 'masque' is a just reward for goodness and lack of guile.[31] This drives Shakespeare's purpose of turning the Jacobean masque on its head and giving it a much broader context than purely exemplifying royalty. Instead, it is used in an opposing way that criticizes the devious decisions and plotting of the king against his own subject and gives all of the glory to those who are morally upright.

The costuming for Shakespeare's men, as previously stated, was subject to Sumptuary Laws and even the individual actor's purse if they were not sponsored. Unlike the official court masques, these actors did not have the privilege of always having everything being paid for by royalty. These laws were made to control behavior

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[28] Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.
[29] Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.
[30] Clifford Davidson, "The Masque within 'The Tempest,'" *Notre Dame English Journal* (The University of Notre Dame, 1976), 10 (1/2): 12-17. Accessed October 28, 2017. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40066643.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A3724cdb4f7ce11bcf2406ec59eae413a.
[31] Davidson, "The Masque within 'The Tempest.'"

and to ensure that a specific class structure was maintained.[32] Therefore, the chosen designs for *The Tempest* would be simpler in many ways and, in the case of the benevolent spirit 'masque,' closer in resemblance to the classic originals of the goddesses portrayed to ensure recognition. However, it would attempt to be as accurate as possible in representation of a true court masque to strengthen the parallel of what the scene is meant to convey, and the actors could have had access to such costumes as those directly from the court.

In all, the connection between the two spheres of private and public English theater can be pointed out in the subtle similarities in costuming, purpose, and the overlap of the intricate celebratory style of masques. Shakespeare's use of masque performance is interwoven to tell a much richer story that gives rise to deeper intrigues of Prospero's plans. The anti-masque that he presents is used to enforce control over his enemies and show punishment for those that commit atrocities. The wedding masque provides a reward for pure goodness but also is twisted to show the false perfection of the ideal. This can then be a possible reflection on the real court masques of Jonson and Jones and provide a subtle commentary on the extravagance and false promises of the monarchy that they celebrate. What may be further researched is how close Shakespeare's world came with Jonson's outside of the literary sphere and how the two may have come into one another's realm of influence. By finding this relationship, a greater revelation into the complexities of *The Tempest* and one of the greatest writers in history can be found through the master of the era's masques.

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[32] Baker, "Personating Persons," 313-316.