The influence of the court masque on Shakespeare's plays

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I. Introduction

When we read Shakespeare's plays, we can find out considerable masque-like elements in some of his early comedies and last plays.

It may be assumed that Shakespeare who was one of the Chamberlain's Men (called the King's Men from James I's accession) whose duties included the provision of entertainment at court, much influenced by the court masque flourished in the sixteenth-and seventeenth-century England, might possibly have attempted to make use of masque-like materials in some of his plays with an idea to respond to the growing popularity of the masque with the courtiers.

In view of this assumption, it may be profitable to consider briefly the masque-like elements in his plays for the better appreciation of them.

II. The development of English court masque

The following Edward Hall's description is about the Italian masque which first appeared in England on Twelfth Night, 1512.

> On the daie of the Epiphanie at night, the Kyng with xi other wer disguised, after the maner of Italie, called a maske, a thyng not seen afore in Englande, they were appareled in garmentes long and brode, wroght all with gold, with visers and cappes of gold and after the banket doen, these

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maskers came in, with sixe gentlemen disguised in silke bearing staffe torches, and desired the ladies to dance, some were content, and some that knew the fashion of it refused, because it was not a thyng commonly seen, . . .[1]

The Italian masque, after its introduction into England, was gradually modified and acclimatized in England, and it developed into the court masque of the Tudor Age. It was a free play to flirtation and love-making for disguisers by choosing out ladies in the audience for their dancing partners, as Shakespeare describes in the first Act of King Henry VIII in which the King, masked and habited like a shepherd, chose Anne Boleyn as his dancing partner.

(The King chooses Anne Bullen)

K. Hen. The fairest hand I every touch'd! O beauty,
Till now I never knew thee! (Music, Dance)
⋮
My Lord Chamberlain, Prithee, come hither
What fair lady's that?
Cham. An't please your Grace, Sir Thomas Bullen's daughter,
The Viscount Rochford, one of her highness' women.
K. Hen. By heaven, she is a dainty one. Sweet heart,
I were unmannerly to talk you out, and not to kiss you.
A health gentlemen! Let it go round. (I. iv. 74–96)

To make love, and to be made love to, masked, was indeed one of the principal sports among the courtiers of the time. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen who inherited from her father, Henry VIII, a delight in every form of revelry took great delight in court entertainments so long as they were not as lavish as those under Henry VIII. They were more varied—there were masques of fishermen, fishwives and market wives, presented on Shrove Tuesday, 1559, and in addition, there was a masque of a mythological type composed by Henry Goldingham and presented before the Queen when she visited Norwich in August, 1578.

Another memorable masque of this type is a wedding masque in celebration of Sir Henry Unton's wedding in 1580. The masquers walk in pairs, separated by Cupids, five white and five black, as torchbearers, with Mercury and Diana in front, and a drummer at the head of the procession.[2] George Gascoigne's wedding masque for Viscount Mantacute in celebration of the double marriage between his son and daughter is also a famous one of this

1) Hall's *Chronicle* (1809), vol. 1. p.40.
2) Enid Welsford, *The court masque* (1962). pp. 155–156.

sort. This one particularly shows a striking feature of the literary development of the masque by introducing a presenter who goes before masqueres and delivers an introductory speech.[3]

After them, several other wedding masques were written in the Jacobean period. Among them, Ben Jonson's masque for Lord Harrington's marriage in 1608 is the most well-known one which still survives. Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* performed at Whitehall on 1 January 1605 was the forerunner of the Jacobean masque which became very popular with the courtiers. They generally demanded rich scenic spectacle, fascinated by Inigo Jones's elaborate masque designs and his marvellous stage machinery. Most of the Jacobean masque were written for the indoor theatre like the Blackfriars where spectacular visual effects were possible. Shakespeare might have tried to modify his dramatic style to make it suitable for performances at court, but it is quite difficult to determine how far Shakespeare's dramatic style was directly influenced by the Jacobean masque.

III. The court masque and Shakespeare's early plays

Shakespeare, in the making of imbroglio plots in his early plays, employs a very popular device commonly known as disguise which was an accepted convention of the Elizabethan stage. As a form of disguise, he makes use of the masque in his early plays, as Enid Welsford once remarked, "The true character of the masquerie was evidently appreciated by Shakespeare, who in his early plays, where the scene is laid in Italy, makes the masque an important social affairs."[4]

The masque, just as other forms of disguise, has the merit of affording occasion for imbroglios, and further it gives opportunity for free play to flirtation and love-making. The following examples from some of Shakespeare's early plays will suffice the explanation of Shakespeare's ingenious application of it.

In the masque scene in Act V. scene ii of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the King of Navarre, Berowne, Longaville and Dumian appear in Russian habits, and masked. The princess of France and three Ladies attending on the Princess are all masked. They change partners and converse apart. Their complicated dialogues drift into mocking merriment interwoven with a series of jokes as we see in the following dialogue between Lord Longaville and Katharine who, masked, pretends to be Maria, the lady of Longaville's choice. This is a mocking dialogue with jokes and quibbles and finally leads to a happy jesting on cuckoldry.

Kath. What! was your visor made without a tongue?

3) W.C. Hazlitt(ed), *Complete Poems of George Gascoigne* (printed for Roxburghe Library, 1869), vol.1. p.77 ff.
4) E. Welsford, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

Long. I know the reason, lady, why you ask.
Kath. O! for your reason: quickly, sir; I long.
Long. You have a double tongue within your mask, and would afford my speechless visor half.
Kath. 'Veal', quoth the Dutchman. Is not "veal' a calf?
Long. A calf, fair lady!
Kath. No, a fair lord calf.
Long. Let's part the word.
Kath. No, I'll not be your half:
Take all, and wean it; it may prove an ox.
Long. Look, how you butt yourself in these sharp mocks. Will you give horns, chaste lady? do not so.
Kath. Then die a calf, before your horns do grow.
Long. One word in private with you, ere I die.
Kath. Bleat softly then; the butcher hears you cry.

[They converse apart]
(V, ii, 243-56)

Katherine has a mocking tongue as keen as the invisible razor's edge and the dialogue seems exceedingly sensible as Boyet comments upon it:

The tongues of mocking wenches are as keen as is the razor's edge invisible, cutting a smaller hair than may be seen, above the sense of sense; so sensible Seemeth their conference: their conceits have wings Fleeter than arrows, bullets, mind, thought, swifter things. (V. ii. 257-62)

The masque scene in Act II scene i of *Much ado about Nothing* is another good example of love-making. Don Pedro, Benedick, and others, masked, enter a hall in Leonato's House, where they meet Hero, Beatrice and others. Don Pedro and Hero converse:

D. Pedro Lady, will you walk about with your friend?
Hero So you walk softly and look sweetly and say nothing, I am yours for the walk; and especially when I walk away.
D. Pedro With me in your company?
Hero I may say so, when I please.
D. Pedro And when please you to say so?
Hero When I like your favour; for God defend the lute should be like the case!
D. Pedro My visor is Philemon's roof; within the house is Jove.
Hero Why, then, your visor should be thatch'd.
D. Pedro Speak low, if you speak love. [Takes her aside]

(II. i. 91-104)

This sort of love-making practice of the masquers was the favorite sport of the time, as

Capulet remarks as follows when he warmly welcomes the guests and masquers to his home:

Cap. Welcome, gentlemen! ladies that have their toes unplagu'd with corns will walk a bout with you.
Ah ha! my mistresses, which of you all
Will now deny to dance? she that makes dainty, she,
I'll swear, hath corns: am I come near ye now?
Welcome, gentlemen! I have seen the day
That I have worn a visor, and could tell
A whispering tale in a fair lady's ear
Such as would please: 'tis gone, 'tis gone, 'tis gone.
You are welcome, gentlemen! Come, musicians, play.
A hall! a hall! give room, and foot it, Girls.
⋮ [Music plays, and they dance]

Nay, sit, nay, sit, good cousin Capulet,
For you and I are past our dancing days;
How long is it now since last yourself and I
were in a masque?
Sec. Cap. By'r Lady, thirty years.
(Romeo and Juliet, I. v. 20–37)

This is Capulet's reminiscence of his delightful experience of love-making in his youth. Other masque-like elements in Shakespeare's early comedies also deserve our attention. The entry of Hymen with marriage blessings at the close of *As You Like It* (V.iv) clearly signifies a wedding masque which was very popular with the Elizabethan courtiers. Another masque-like element which particularly draws our attention is an anti-masque element we can find in the show of Bottom transformed into the monstrous shape with an ass's head for Titania to fall in love with (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III. i), and furthermore, as Professor Allardyce Nicoll remarks,[5] there is almost an anti-masque flavour about the show of the Worthies in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Pyramus and Thisbe playlet in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

IV. The court masque and Shakespeare's last plays

Shakespeare, in some of his last plays—*The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* in particular, displays a masque technique which, compared with that in his early plays, is far more

5) David J. Palmer(ed), *Shakespeare's Later Comedies*, (1971) p. 165.

elaborate and mature. A masque-like structure of *The Tempest* is particularly great. This shows Shakespeare's great concern in the effective use of masque-like materials in his last plays. Shakespeare who performed at court as one of that group of King's Men must have been well aware of the growing popularity of the masque with the Jacobean courtiers since Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* performed at Whitehall in 1605, and it may be conjectured that Shakespeare might have attempted to write some of his last plays in a novel dramatic style for the courtiers.

The following dance scene of satyrs in Act IV, scene iii of *The Winter's Tale* is a good example which shows his novel masque technique:

The Servant enters to announce:

> Serv. Master, there is three carters, three shepherds, three neat-herds, three swine-herds, that have made themselves all men of hair: they call themselves Saltiers; and they have a dance which the wenches say is a gallimaufry of gambols, because they are not in't; . . . One three of them, by their own report, sir, hath danced before the King: and not the worst of the three but jumps twelve foot and a half by the squier.
>
> (IV. iii. 333–38, 347–50)

After this announcement, the Servant makes his exit. He soon reenters with twelve rustics dressed as satyrs. These twelve 'men of hair' dance. It is the dance of goat-feet, which is followed by Polixenes's sudden blaze of anger instead of peace and harmony usually expected at the end of a masque. Besides this anti-masque scene, there is also a masque-like flavour about Paulina's magic scene (V.iii) in making the statue of Hermione live as the outcome of a long deception practised on Leontes by Paulina and Hermione.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare skilfully employs an eleborate masque-like structure on a grand scale which demands the use of subtle stage effects. The anti-masque scene in Act III, scene iii begins with an entry of men of sin—Alonso and his companions, with Sebastian and Antonio. Alonso and his honest old counsellor, being weary of searching for Ferdinand, sit down and rest, giving him up for lost, while Antonio and Sebastian, taking advantage of their frustration in the search for him, weave a plot to murder them. At this point, several strange shapes enter with Prospero placed above, invisible, as a spectator. They bring in a banquet to solemn and strange music, and they dance about it with gentle actions of salutation; and, inviting the men of sin to eat, they depart. To the men of sin, this anti-masque of the strange shapes is a vision. Seeing this vision, they converse:

> Gonzalo If in Naples
> I should report this now, would they believe me?
> If I should say I saw such islanders,—

For, Certes, these are people of the island,—
Who, though they are of monstrous shape, yet, note
Their manners are more gentle-kind than of
Our human generation you shall find
Many, nay, almost any.

⋮

Alonso I cannot too much muse,
Such shapes, such gesture, and such sound, expressing—
although they want the use of tongue,—a kind
Of excellent dumb discourse.

⋮

Francisco. They vanish'd strangely.
(III. iii. 27–34, 36–38, 40)

Next enters Ariel, as presenter of the masque, like a harpy in thunder and lightning. He claps his wings upon the table; and the banquet vanishes. Then he speaks to the three men of sin—Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio from within the masque:

Ariel. You are three men of sin, whom Destiny—
That hath to instrument this lower world
and what is in't—the never-surfeited sea
Hath caused to belch up you; and on this island
Where man doth not inhabit: you 'mongst men
Being most unfit to live. I have made you mad;

⋮

(III. iii. 53–58)

Ariel, at the end of his speech, demands of them:
Nothing but heart-sorrow
And a clear life ensuing. (III. iii. 81–82)

Then he vanishes in thunder. The strange shapes enter again, and dance with mocks and mows, and carry out the table. The three men of sin, excessively afflicted with a sense of guilt, are driven to desperation and rush offstage as Gonzalo says:

Gon. All three of them are desperate: their great guilt,
Like poison given to work a great time after,
Now 'gins to bite the spirits.—I do beseech you
That are of suppler joints, follow them swiftly
And hinder them from what this ecstasy
May now provoke them to.
(III. iii. 104–109)

So the scene ends in the confused rushing about of the three men of sin. After the anti-masque of the monstrous shapes, the harpy and men of sin in Act III scene iii, there follows the harmonious masque proper in Act IV scene i. Here Ariel enters again as presenter of the masque. Ariel, dressed like the goddess of the rainbow plays the part of Iris, messenger of Juno, the queen of the sky. Iris summons Ceres, the goddess of harvest to attend on Juno. The two goddesses, Juno and Ceres, join in song to bless Ferdinand and Miranda that they may be prosperous and honoured in their issue. Their song is of course a marriage song:

Juno. Honour, riches, marriage-blessing,
Long continuance, and increasing,
Hourly joys be still upon you!
Juno sings her blessings on you.
Cer. Earth's increase, foison plenty,
Barns and garners never empty:
Vines, with clust'ring bunches growing;
Plants with goodly burdent bowing;
Spring come to you at the farthest
In the very end of harvest!
Scarcity and want shall shun you:
Ceres' blessing so is on you
(IV. i. 106–117)

This is a most majestic vision (IV.i.118) as Ferdinand calls it, but it is unmistakably a wedding masque. Juno and Ceres command Iris to summon some nymphs and reapers. They enter. Some reapers, properly habited, join with the nymphs in a graceful dance. The union of them in a dance is the symbol of marriage.

V. Conclusion

The Italian masque introduced into England in Tudor times flourished at court. It developed into the court masque which became very popular with the courtiers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Shakespeare who was responsible for the writing of plays for performances at court as one of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and later of the King's Men may be said to have been, directly or indirectly, influenced by the masque; Shakespeare's use of masque-like materials in some of his plays may possibly account for a masque influence upon his dramatic style, but it is difficult to determine.

However, in the masking scenes in his early plays such as *Love's Labour's Lost* (V, ii),

Much ado about nothing (II, i), or *Romeo and Juliet* (I. v), we have vivid representations of impromptu maskings on the stage as Welsford remarks,[6] and besides, in the masking scenes of *The Winter's Tale* (IV, iii) and *The Tempest* (III, iii), we find anti-masque elements. *The Tempest* in particular has a grand masque-like structure. This play which was acted for the King on 1 November 1611 is an extremely elaborate one which demands subtle stage effects. Especially what draws our attention in the masque scene at the end (IV. i) which Ferdinand calls ''a most majestic vision' is that 'one element of the conventional masque, that final stage in which the masquers take out spectators into the dance and make them participants, is lacking here'' as Professor R.A. Foakes remarks in his book entitled ''Shakespeare—the dark comedies to the last plays''.[7]

6) E. Welsford, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
7) R. A. Foakes, *Shakespeare, the dark comedies to the last plays: from satire to celebration*, (1971), p. 161.