

May 2015

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Recommended Citation

Rieger, Gabriel (2013) “A masque is treason’s licence”: Masquing and Mockery in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*," *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol6/iss2013/2>

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**“A masque is treason’s licence”:
Masquing and Mockery in *The Revenger’s Tragedy***

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The court masque is not an easy genre for the twenty-first century reader to engage, anchored as it is in its historical moment, the product of distinct, and remote, social, political and aesthetic dialectics. Beyond this, the court masque is bound in the remote and often discomfoting traditions of aristocratic privilege, pomp, and flattery. For all that we may understand the masque and its conventions intellectually, any authentic experience of the genre must necessarily be denied us. To be sure, this is true of all Renaissance theatre, but it is particularly true of the court masque. Perhaps for this reason, the court masque is all the more fascinating to us when it appears in the commercial theatre, particularly when it appears in satiric tragedy.

Upon perfunctory consideration, the masque seems an odd fit with satiric tragedy, the two genres being, on their surfaces, antithetical. Satiric tragedy is by definition a public spectacle, while the court masque was ostensibly a private affair, the province of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, the court masque was also a state occasion, philosophically of a piece with the “ceremonials” which Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*, the formal spectacles, including public executions, coronations, and the subjugations of rebellious subjects, which display “before all eyes an invisible force” (56). According to Dollimore:

[t]he masque was just one of several symbolic and ritualistic celebrations of royal power; others included royal progresses and their associated entertainments... As Stephen Orgel, Stuart Clark and Louis Montrose (among others) have shown, their capacity to legitimate the power structure was considerable. The masque, a spectacular display of dance, mime and music, came eventually to include its inversion, the so-called antimasque.... The court masque was clearly an ideological legitimation of the power structure, as was the preliminary antimasque (26-27).

If the court masque affirms aristocratic hegemony, satiric tragedy interrogates it. The court masque must “speak in praise of the assembly,” as Beaumont and Fletcher write, while satiric tragedy speaks in mockery (*The Maid’s Tragedy*, 1.1.9-10). The court masque presents the classical

gods acted by the aristocracy, legitimizing that aristocracy as embodiment of the divine order.

Satiric tragedy, as Dollimore again writes, “deconstruct[s]’ providential legitimation,” producing the “contradictory, decentered subject” which mordantly, violently defies aristocratic order. The masque may have constructed the aristocracy as implicitly divine, but even divinity was itself a problematic category in the period so that “because of the way that ‘man’ was conceptualized as a dependent creation of God, to deconstruct providence was also, necessarily and inevitably, to ‘decentre’ man” (*Radical Tragedy* lix).

For all of this opposition, or perhaps because of it, the court masque is a conspicuous feature in late sixteenth and (especially) in early seventeenth century satiric tragedy, figuring prominently in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*, and Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*.¹ Indeed, in the opening scene of *The Maid’s Tragedy*, the poet Strato, musing on the forthcoming masque to celebrate the wedding of the King, cynically delineates the conventions of the court masque, noting that masques “[m]ust commend their king, and speak in praise of the assembly, bless the bride and bridegroom in person of some god: they’re tied to rules of flattery.” (1.1.7-9) Strato’s blunt assessment foreshadows the flattery which will propel the tragedy, but it also speaks to the tension, indeed the instability, inherent in the genre of the court masque; bound within the masque’s aristocratic affirmation is the implicit specter of flattery, of false praise which converts to mockery, exposing the inadequacy of its subject even as it flatters.²

The court masque then shares some features with the classical panegyric, the speech of praise which, in its extravagance, threatens ever to tip into fulsomeness, and thence into satire. Ancient orators understood the possibilities inherent in the genre; by the first century, the genre had itself become a subject for mockery.³

The masque and the satiric tragedy then share affinity with one another; there is ample space for mockery within praise. Few dramatists exploited this affinity to greater effect than did Thomas Middleton, a writer of actual court masques who also includes the device of the masque in all three of his major tragedies: *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *Women Beware Women*, and *The Changeling*.

The first of these (and the focus of my argument) is *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, written (so near as we can determine) in 1606. Middleton had by this time already established himself as a comic dramatist with plays such as *Michaelmas Term*, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, and *A Mad World, My Masters*, Jacobean city comedies which satirize the greed and hypocrisy of urban life. On the heels of these comedies he turned his attentions to the court, writing a scathingly witty satiric tragedy which replicates, in part, the rhythms of comedy which the playwright had by this time perfected. As Brian Gibbons writes:

We may be able to understand the play’s art more readily by first considering the form of the play Formally, the play is related to three kinds of drama then popular: Senecan revenge tragedy, ‘Comical Satyre’ in the style of Marston and intrigue comedy in the style of Middleton. (x)

The blending of these genres is telling. All of the genres share a common rhythm of comedy which lends itself neatly to narratives of castigation and punishment. These disparate elements provide a kind of nexus in which Middleton’s appropriation of the court masque feels perfectly natural.

The Revenger’s Tragedy is a puzzling text for a variety reasons. Its authorship has long been a matter of controversy, having been for several centuries attributed to Cyril Tourneur before more recent textual scholarship all but confirmed Middleton as the author. Beyond that, for all of its comic rhythms, the play itself ranks among the most extreme and bloody spectacles of the Jacobean stage. Writing in 1923, William Archer posed the question “whether such monstrous melodrama as *Revengers Tragedy*, with its hideous sexuality and its raging lust for blood, can be said to belong to civilized literature at all?” He proceeded to answer his own question, declaring “I say it is a product either of sheer barbarism, or of some pitiable psychopathic perversion.” (73-74) This, with few exceptions, was the critical consensus until well into the twentieth century, when critics such as Robert Ornstein began to pay more attention to the “wedding of moral vision and artistic form” in the tragedy (106).

We should not, perhaps, be surprised that the twentieth century should rediscover *The Revenger’s Tragedy*; read in light of the horrors of the holocaust and the ontological insecurity of the atomic age,

Middleton's great tragedy looks less like "pitiable psychopathic perversion" and more like a meditation on the human condition, albeit a blackly comic one. Today Historicist / Materialist readings have displaced what Annabel Patterson calls "the Christian-ethical vocabulary" of the Structuralists and their predecessors, and critics such as Dollimore and Michael Neill have uncovered within the play a rich vein of ideological critique (Patterson 1632). Writing in *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore notes the play's "vital irony and ... deep pessimism" which are linked together, not by the unified sensibility of the Structuralists, but rather by a spirit of "subversive black camp." According to Dollimore:

[*The Revenger's Tragedy*] is sophisticated and self-conscious, at once mannered and chameleon; it celebrates the artificial and the delinquent; it delights in a play full of innuendo, perversity and subversion [I]t exposes the hypocrisy and deception of the pious; through parody it declares itself radically skeptical of ideological policing though not independent of the social reality which such skepticism simultaneously discloses (149).

This is, of course, no longer an especially radical reading. *Radical Tragedy* was first published some thirty years ago, and in the intervening decades Dollimore's reading has acquired the force of critical orthodoxy. For just that reason, it may provide us with a useful starting point from which to consider Middleton's appropriation of the masque.

As Sara Sutherland notes, there are actually three masques in the tragedy. According to Sutherland,

These masques, the one occurring shortly before the start of the play's action and described shortly thereafter and the others occurring together in the final scene, constitute a frame for the play. The skillfully sustained resonances linking these masques are woven throughout the play in such a way that they order its principal action (45).

I wish to argue that this ordering of the principal action is very much of a piece with the project of satiric tragedy, to ironize and invert the aristocratic purpose of the masque, converting it into a vehicle for mockery and, in the hands of the Calvinist playwright Thomas Middleton, a reifying and an inversion of sin.

The first of the masques occurs off stage and is only referenced, in I.iv, as the occasion for the Duchess’s Younger Son’s rape of the Lord Antonio’s wife. As Antonio describes the matter:

[L]ast revelling night,
When torchlight made an artificial noon
About the Court, some courtiers in the masque
Putting on better faces than their own,
Being full of fraud and flattery, amongst them
The duchess’ youngest son – that moth to honour –
Filled up a room; and with long lust to eat
Into my wearing, ...
Then with a face more impudent than his vizard
He harried her amidst a throng of pandars
That live on damnation of both kinds
And fed the ravenous vulture of his lust. (27-45)

Antonio’s language is evocative, and his construction of the court masque foreshadows the masques of murder which will conclude the tragedy. The lord begins his description with the contrast of “revelling night” and “artificial noon,” linking through juxtaposition the menace and the artifice of the masque, both qualities being underscored in his reference to the visors, “better faces than their own.” The phrase “full of fraud and flattery,” given emphasis through its alliteration, makes explicit the criticism, and bespeaks the fundamental instability of the aristocratic privilege which the masque seeks to reify.

Significantly, the Younger Son’s crime is synesthetically constructed in terms of gustatory appetite, *i.e.* the “moth to honour” “eat[ing] into [Antonio’s] wearing.” Younger Son will use the masque as a vehicle for consumption, the crude and violent assertion of his social privilege, violating the autonomy of his subject, Antonio.⁴ What the Younger son eats is the Lord’s “wearing,” *i.e.* the visible mark of his social position, his “honour.”⁵ We see here also the crime of lust collapsed in to the crime of violence; the “pandars,” indiscriminate in their appetites (since they “live on damnation of both kinds”), facilitate rape rather than seduction, and the rapist consumes Antonio’s honour as a “ravenous vulture.” In this brief description, Antonio delineates the symbolic function of the masque which Vindice will violently invert in the tragedy’s final act.

Note also here that the masque does not merely symbolize the privilege of the aristocracy; it facilitates it, indeed becomes it. The Younger Brother uses the masque as a means to enact his rape. The masque has become the thing it represents, and in this rendering it becomes all the more powerful. The playwright will exploit this power in the tragedy's conclusion.

The two remaining masques occur in V.iii, at the climax of the tragedy, after Vindice has avenged his murdered Gloriana and thus facilitated the accession of Lussurioso. In a complicated bit of absurdity, both Vindice the revenger and Lussurioso's brother Supervacuo make separate plans to murder the new Duke at his coronation masque. Supervacuo introduces his intention in V.i when he declares of the new Duke:

He shall not live: his hair shall not grow much longer. In this time of revels tricks may be set afoot. Seest thou yon new moon? It shall outlive the new Duke by much: this hand shall dispossess him: then we're mighty.

A masque is treason's licence: that build upon –

'Tis murder's best face, when a vizard's on. (178-184)

Supervacuo here makes explicit the connection between the "revels" which will inaugurate the new Duke and the "tricks" which will destroy him. In Supervacuo's construction, the masque not only expresses aristocratic privilege, it also facilitates aristocratic destruction. It "license[s]" treason, since it allows for the concealment of murder. Flattery is here collapsed into attack, both rhetorically, in Supervacuo's language, and literally, in his plotted murder. The masque becomes a satiric device.

This notion finds its fullest expression, however, in V.ii, when Vindice defines his own plot, describing the impending masque and declaring that:

The masquing suites are fashioning, now comes in
That which must glad us all: we to take pattern
Of all those suits, the colour, trimming, fashion,
E'en to an undistinguished hair almost.
Then entering first, observing the true form,
Within a strain or two we shall find leisure,
To steal our swords out handsomely,

And when they think their pleasure sweet and good,
In midst of all their joys, they shall sigh blood. (14-22)

Vindice does more than articulate his purpose here; his language expresses his sensibility, turning as it does on matters of fashion and form, mocking the precision of masque costuming, their “pattern,” “colour, trimming, fashion” “[e]’en to an undistinguished hair.” He constructs the entrance of himself and his fellow murderers as a kind of dance, “observing the true form” and choreographed to the music “within a strain or two,” in which the weapons are drawn “handsomely” at a moment of “leisure.” His constructions climax in the couplet, in which the “sweet” pleasure and “joys” of the masque are finally expressed in the “sigh[ing] [of] blood.”

Note how the playwright collapses sensual, and implicitly sinful, pleasure into murderous pain. The “handsome” dancing facilitates the drawing of the swords, while the “sighs,” conventionally associated in the Renaissance with erotic passion, are here expressions of “blood,” implicitly life’s blood, as well as the sin of lechery.⁶ Middleton builds upon the sensual, and implicitly erotic (i.e. generative) association of the masque to form a narrative of destruction. The masque, the vehicle for the highest form of aristocratic flattery, is here inverted to the purpose of consummate mockery, a literal mockery to death.

Vindice has here appropriated the court masque to the purpose of violence, just as Spurio had done in the enacting of his rape, but whereas Spurio’s rape of Antonio’s wife had underscored his aristocratic privilege, Vindice’s act of murder interrogates and inverts it. Vindice has undertaken the masque’s disguise, the “fraud and flattery” which are its hallmark, and deployed them instruments of vengeance, turning the expression of aristocratic privilege, of sin, into a vehicle for retribution in a grim Calvinist symmetry. The sin has punished itself.

In this, his project is not so very different from his murder of the Duke in III.v. In that scene, Vindice paints the skull of the murdered Gloriana with a corrosive poison, and the Duke, thinking that he has been furnished with a prostitute, kisses the skull in Vindice’s words, “like a slobbering Dutchman.” As the corrosive poison consumes the Duke’s teeth and tongue, Vindice stands over him and mocks him, declaring of his teeth that “those that did eat are eaten,” and that the experience will “teach him to kiss closer.” Vindice here reconstructs the remnant of the

Duke's sin, the skull of the dead Gloriana, as a vehicle for ironic punishment by entrapping the Duke in his lust. Thus the Duke's sin is revisited as temptation and finally as punishment, making explicit his damnation and providing a satisfying spectacle of irony. So, too, the masque, the vehicle for, indeed the reifying of, aristocratic privilege, for "fraud and flattery," is reconfigured as a vehicle for bloody retribution.

By including the spectacle of the court masque in his tragedy, the playwright is able to tie into a host of associations with the masque, both traditional and popular, and exploit the instability which attends on it to satiric purposes. He also constructs a narrative of ironic punishment, undercutting aristocratic ideology and exposing the fundamental corruption which accompanies its traditional allegory. In the Revenger's Tragedy, the allegorical disguise of the court masque is cynically ironized and reconstructed as weaponry. The court masque lends itself to ironic reimagining and mockery. For a playwright such as Middleton, with his powerful Calvinist sensibilities, who was nevertheless commissioned to write actual court masques (such as his *Masque of Heroes* and the lost *Masque of Cupids*), this possibility of exposing the "fraud and flattery" inherent in the genre might have had much appeal.

Notes

1. The masque also turns up in a grotesque form in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling*, both of which feature masques of dancing mad men. See also Sarah P. Sutherland’s *Masques in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1983).
2. As Ben Jonson, perhaps the most prominent author of court masques, writes, “Who’er is raised / For worth he hath not, he is taxed, not praised” (“To My Muse” 55).
3. Consider Plutarch’s warning in “*Quomodo Adulator ab Amico Internoscatur*” (“How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend”) in which he notes that:

[I]n attempts at flattery we should be observant and on our guard against prodigality being called “liberality,” cowardice “self-preservation,” impulsiveness “quickness,” stinginess “frugality,” the amorous man “companionable and amiable,” the irascible and over-bearing “spirited,” the insignificant and meek “kindly.” (303)

We see this notion illustrated perhaps most clearly in the *Satyricon*, when Trimalchio treats his dinner guests to a lengthy panegyric in the form of his funeral oration, his fulsome praise becoming increasingly absurd as his oration progresses. *Satyricon* 88.
4. As is conventional in Renaissance tragedy, the crime of rape is constructed primarily as a violation of the husband’s privilege; the wife is permitted only such agency as is sufficient for suicide.
5. For a more extensive consideration of the relationship between dress and “honour,” see also Aileen Ribeiro’s *Dress and Morality* (Berg, 2003).
6. For a further consideration of the implications of the word blood, see also Gordon Williams’ *A Glossary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Language* (The Athlone Press Ltd., 1997).

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