Staging Masques

In the early 1500s Intermedio, the predecessor to the masque, was developed in Italy. They consisted of music and dancing performed in between acts of a play. In the late 1500s and the early 1600s masques began to spread into the rest of Europe and England. They became popular parts of plays and were especially fashionable at court. They were in style in part because it allowed the audience a chance to be involved in the entertainment. During masques was the only time that women were allowed on stage. Adding to their appeal, the costuming and set design were often very elaborate. William Shakespeare was among the playwrights that used masques in many of his plays for a variety of dramatic purposes. These different roles can be seen in the various ways that masques are used in The Merry Wives of Windsor, Much Ado about Nothing, and As You Like It.

Because of the fact that characters usually wear masks, masques can be about hidden identity and with that comes a certain amount of deception. However, what is less obvious is the plot driven nature of the masques. In all of these plays the masque either works to carry on the plot or to resolve it. Either way, they oftentimes serve as a turning point in the plot of the play. By the very nature of masques, some staging concerns are immediately raised. They must be very elaborate and there is often close attention paid to detail. Because all of the characters are
wearing masks it is important that the audience still be able to identify who the characters are but at the same time their identity should still be veiled. These two staging concerns lead to the last one which is that there must be a willing suspension of disbelief on the behalf of the audience. If these staging concerns are addressed, then it is possible for the masques in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *As You Like It* to unveil the underlying themes of the text.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the masque is the concluding scene of the play. In part because of its placement at the end of the play its role is to resolve the plot of the play. John Long states in “Another Masque for The Merry Wives of Windsor” that there are three reasons for the masque in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He believes that it helps to resolve the main plot of exposing Falstaff and making him a fool and it also resolves the sub-plot of Anne Page and the tension between her, her parents, and her suitors. Also, it continues in the comic farce that Shakespeare has set up in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in using outlandish circumstances to create comedy (40). Falstaff is made a fool by being told by Mistress Page and Mistress Ford to meet them under Herne’s Oak at midnight. They tell him to come disguised as Herne, a legendary ghost that rode around Windsor forest with horns on his head. Then they make a fool of him by having children and other members of the cast dress up as fairies and harass him with waxen tapers. Falstaff claims to be reformed when he says, “Well, I am your theme; you have the start of me. I/Am dejected. I am not able to answer the Welsh flannel. Ignor-ance itself is a plummet o’er me. Use me as you will” (MWW 5.5.151-53). Therefore the plot of Falstaff trying to be with Mistress Ford and Mistress Page is resolved. The plot of Anne Page is also
resolved during the masque because her father arranged it so that Anne would wear white and will run off with Master Slender and marry him. Anne’s mother arranged it so that Anne would be wearing green and would leave with Doctor Caius and marry him. Anne and Fenton set it up so that they run off with each other and get married and Slender and Caius end up running off with boys disguised as Anne.

This raises the first staging concern of this scene. There are some discrepancies between the Quarto and Folio which change the way that this scene would be staged. There is the textual problem of who the Fairy Queen is in the Folio. Both Mistress Page and Fenton say that it is agreed upon that Anne is going to play the part of the Fairy Queen, but without explanation, Mistress Quickly ends up being the Fairy Queen (MWW 4.4.68, 4.6.20). Then there is a question of Evans’ Welsh accent mysteriously disappearing but somehow Falstaff still knows that he is Welsh because he says, “God defend me from that Welsh fairy [referring to Evans]” (MMW 5.578). John Long states that the answer to these questions can be solved by using the Quarto instead of the Folio. One of the reasons that he believes that the Quarto is better is that in the Folio “the rollicking spirit of the farce comedy is considerably dampened by the dignity of the masque at a time when the comedy should reach a climax” (40). Thus, one of the major staging concerns is what text to use in order to portray the kind of comedy that the director chooses. If the Folio, the more accepted version is used, then the scene is much more formal and more dancelike. If the Quarto is used, then it is more like a romp and much more comic and disorganized. There is also a possibility of combining the two to create the director’s own version of the scene.
Regardless of what text is used, another staging concern is how the set will look. From the text, the director knows that the scene takes place next to Herne’s oak and on the edge of a forest. The tree must be accessible from all sides so that the fairies can dance around it. It could be suggested that there be a big oak tree center stage with a large trunk that extends almost out of sight with big sweeping branches near the top of the stage. Also, it is necessary to have a bench in front of the tree that Falstaff can sit on with Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. In order to make the scene feel more forest-like instead of simply a tree standing in the middle of a barren stage, it would be good to have a backdrop with hardwood trees, either in silhouette or painted in dark colors because it is midnight. The lighting would be dappled greens and blues to give the scene the semblance of midnight without making the scene look eerie. There is more of a focus on the mystical nature of the scene than making it frightening.

If these staging concerns are addressed, then it is possible to reveal the underlying theme of the play of deception. In the masque, Anne deceives her parents and marries Fenton and Falstaff is deceived for a third time and finally learns his lesson. The staging concerns will be answered best if the theme of deception and the unveiling of deception is kept center to the masque.

The masque of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is very focused on the mystical compared to the masque in *Much Ado about Nothing* which is not mystical at all but is simply a masque ball. Like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the masque in *Much Ado about Nothing* is very important to the progress of the plot of the play. The masque occurs near the beginning of the play and begins Act 2. It signals the first time in the play that deception and mistaken identity occur, which then
continue on to be a central theme throughout the entire play. There are several ways which
deception and mistaken identity are used to advance the plot. The first deception is that the
masque allows is Don Pedro to woo Hero for Claudio by pretending to be him. It allows
Beatrice and Benedick to talk without knowing each other’s identity. Don John is able to try and
cause some trouble, which becomes a reoccurring motif in the play, when he tells Claudio, who
is masquerading as Benedick but Don John knows is Claudio, that Don Pedro is actually wooing
Hero for himself and not for Claudio. This falsehood gets sorted out after some confusion and
moping on Claudio’s behalf.

Because there is so much deception that takes place, an important staging concern is
making sure that the audience does not get confused. This becomes especially challenging when
both Don Pedro and Claudio are false about who they are. It would therefore be important to
have some kind of identifier that they are not who they proclaim to be. This could be done by
having the characters not do a drastic clothing change for the masque and only put on masks,
which may be the most practical solution because there is not much time for clothing changes in
between the last scene of Act 1 and the masque at the start of Act 2. There is also a possibility of
retaining another identity marker such as a hat or by having the characters dress in the same
colors that they were dressed in before they change for the masque. Whatever way it is done, it
is important for the sake of the audience to give them some identifying marker even though the
character’s true identities are either revealed by themselves or other characters it would still be
helpful to make sure that the audience stays with the actions of the characters especially in this
scene because it is here that the plot lines of the stories are launched.
Another staging concern is the blocking of the characters during the masque. On stage are Leonato, Antonio, Hero, Beatrice, Margaret, Ursula, Don Pedro, Claudio, Benedick, Balthasar, Borachio, and Don John. It is necessary that within the scene four different pairs or trios break off from the group and have their own conversations. Because there are so many people that talk in private, it is important that all the stage space is utilized to accommodate them. Assuming the stage is modeled after the Globe Theater, the main areas of the stage would be the main stage, the Arras, and the balcony. One way to accommodate all the different groups would be to have the main party at center stage and the breakaway groups moving to different parts of the stage. The first group to break away is Don Pedro and Hero; they could go downstage right a good distance away from the party. After their conversation was finished, they could move back to the main group and lead them to upstage center to clear the way for more groups. As they are moving, Balthasar and Margaret could have their private conversation downstage left. When their conversation is finished, they would return to the main party upstage center. In order to provide more variety, Beatrice and Benedick could have left the main group while Balthasar and Margaret were talking and the lights would come up with them on center of the balcony. The lights would go down on them when their conversation was finished and come up on Don John, Borachio, and Claudio standing behind the Arras having a secret conversation.

The two staging concerns dealing with costuming and blocking of the characters are important because they help to underscore the deception and mistaken identity of the text. If
they are sorted out, then it will be easier for the audience to see the humor that arises from these themes.

In *The Merry Wives of Winsor* and *Much Ado about Nothing*, the role both the masques is a focus on deception. However, in *As You Like It* the masque is used to conclude the play and there is no deception is involved; in fact, the identity of Ganymede and Aliena is revealed as Rosalind and Celia respectively. The masque is only masque-like in the appearance of Hymen, who is the god of the marriage ceremony. Other than that mystical element, no one is wearing masks and it is simply a regular wedding ceremony dance. Perhaps the reason for the appearance of Hymen is that it “implies that Shakespeare, so to say, metaphorically conceives a metaphysical space close to the play’s world and capable of penetrating it. Such penetration is consistent with—and, in fact, a property of—the mode of allegory” (Hunt 43). That is to say, that the purpose of Hymen is to allegorize the happiness of the couples and their marriages. Rosalind is the one that is actually orchestrating all the marriages but symbolically Hymen is the one behind Rosalind helping her to arrange all the different marriages so that it ends up being a happy ending for eight of the characters. He states his purpose in coming is to show that at their marriages “Then is there mirth in heaven/When earthly things made even/Atone together” (*AYL* 5.4.97-8) also he brings “peace, ho, I bar confusion” (*AYL* 5.4.114). The staging concerns of *As You Like It* in this scene involve Hymen and how to portray him well. He enters with Rosalind and Celia when they are dressed as themselves and no longer as Ganymede and Aliena.

Sometimes Hymen’s part is played by one of the actors that plays one of the smaller roles in the cast (Hunt 44). At other times, Hymen is played by a completely different actor. Whatever the case, it is important to show that Hymen is an allegory for what is going on stage. Hymen symbolically helps to right the social norms that have been upset by Rosalind dressing as
a boy and it being unclear if Orlando knew if he was actually falling in love with Rosalind or if he was falling in love with Ganymede. Also, it rights the fact that Phoebe fell in love with Rosalind who was under the guise of Ganymede. Therefore, he should be portrayed as a symbol of peace and order. He should be separate from the characters and godlike but yet at the same time be similar to them, especially to Rosalind, because he really is representing her and the work that she has done to right the social irregularities that were raised in the play. This could be done with color –the colors that he is wearing could correspond to Rosalind, perhaps not directly, maybe a lighter or darker shade of the color or just highlights of it on his outfit showing that he representing that he helped her to resolve the conflict.

If the role of Hymen can be sorted out it, is possible to see how the play resolves well through the pseudo-masque. The masque allows the play which in it contains “an unorthodox operation of time provides the opportunity for an unorthodox refiguration of space” (Hunt 43) to be reorganized into a quasi-mystical but still realistic, in the sense that it is not fantastical, ending.

The concerns about staging masques in Merry Wives of Windsor, Much Ado about Nothing, and As You Like It when resolved can add dimension to the themes that are present in the masque scenes. If the costumes, set, blocking, and style in the various plays are resolved then the roles of deception and hidden identity may become apparent in the play. With these apparent, then it may help the audience to understand a bit more the comedy and confusion that can be found in deception. The way that the play is staged serves as a kind of statement about their interpretation of the play and thus; the importance of looking at the staging concerns of staging masques, through interpretation is uncovered.
Works Cited


