“This is a most majestic vision”: Performing Prospero’s Masque on Screen

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Since its first adaptation to the screen in Percy Stow’s 1908 silent movie, The Tempest has been shaped by the power of the cinematic medium by which directors have sought to visually investigate the play’s central issues and its interplay with different theatrical and literary forms. Thanks to its foregrounding of spectacle, which involves the insertion of “strange” and “soft music” (3.3.18, 58), “graceful dance[s]” (4.1.138) and songs, as well as a variety of allegorical personifications and elaborate disguises, this play has challenged the stage conventions of both court and civic royal performances produced at the time. Through the dramatisation of different forms of pageantry and its impressive visual and acoustic display, The Tempest discloses its theatrical potential and sets off magic urging the spectator, both on stage and off, to constantly make assumptions.

In recent decades, significant critical attention has been paid to the complex metatheatrical framework of the play and especially to the performative dimension of its betrothal masque which has been mainly analysed in the context of its cultural and artistic surroundings. As is well known, by the time of The Tempest’s first production, the masque had come to be recognised as the standard format for high-profile wedding celebrations at the court of James I. Far from being merely a ‘courtly dancing’, like most of the royal shows performed in the Henrician period, this type of spectacle became a highly sophisticated cultural form and assumed a coherent theatrical dimension. This has prompted scholars to investigate Prospero’s masque in relation to its pre-texts and, in particular, to the thematic and aesthetic features this sequence might share with the staging of some contemporary ‘royal spectacles’. A focus on The Tempest’s ‘magical show’ and Thomas Campion’s The Lords’ Masque (1613), for instance, written for the royal wedding of
James's daughter to the Elector Palatine, has shown that both performances display a mutual celebration of authority constructed upon and perpetuated by the aristocratic and politically inspired marriage, while other studies have explored the betrothal masque in relation to the performative conventions it shares with the Elizabethan and Jacobean masquing culture at large.2

Shakespeare’s appropriation of the masque form, however, should also be understood in the light of the signifying potentialities of this scene. Before analysing how film-makers have dealt with its transposition on the screen, two fundamental questions could be put forward: how does Shakespeare re-elaborate the performative dimension of the masque? To what extent does this play-within-the-play scene dramatise The Tempest’s central preoccupations?

Like the play’s opening storm and illusory banquet set by “several strange shapes” (3.3.19) before Alonso and his companions, the entertainment offered to Miranda and Ferdinand is both produced and interrupted by Prospero’s magical art. In line with the overall thematic structure of The Tempest, the masque conjured up by the Duke-magician and his spirit-servant Ariel belongs to those acts of communication meant to complicate the action3 and increase the theatrical/metatheatrical illusion upon which the labyrinthine dream-like universe of the play is based. At the same time, its staging highlights the ideas of command and control with which The Tempest is deeply concerned. Theatricality and power, in fact, converge most strongly, and reach their apotheosis, in the masque wherein Prospero subtly makes use of his theatrical art as an instrument of control. An emphasis on his rhetorical virtuosity characterises indeed the masque’s beginning and ending as both are equally constructed upon a specific pattern of verbal reiteration that is instead absent in the ‘presentation’ and conclusion of other ‘visionary shows’ in the play. The masque’s opening is signalled by the magician’s command “No tongue! All eyes! Be silent!” (4.1.59) and shares the same iterative and imperative tone of its ending marked by Prospero’s “Well done! Avoid! No more!” (141). While such a mode of presentation and interruption of Prospero’s entertainment seems to classify the betrothal masque as a single dramatic unit virtually detached from the rest of the play, thereby stressing its generic distinctiveness, its staging dramatises the cyclic pattern of movements, from disjuncture to harmony and back, which is at the deepest core of The Tempest. From the ‘harmonious’ vision of “foison plenty” (4.1.110), delighted by “soft music” and by Ceres’s “sovereign grace” (72), the masque, which reaches its spectacular climax with Juno’s and Ceres’s