

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

By Gerald Eades Bentley

The Stuart masques, whose performance Allardyce Nicoll has so brilliantly illuminated for us, were enterprises noble in aspiration but all too often ignoble in their accomplishments. Since, in so many of the extant examples, it is easier for the modern reader to perceive the banality of the flattery, the trivial irrelevance of the humour, and the sometimes vulgar display of the spectacle, it is well to begin by noting those basic conceptions which Ben Jonson saw so clearly and often embodied in his masques, but which were more dimly perceived, and seldom realized, by his fellow masque poets.

The high function of the poet which Jonson envisaged, and which is frequently enunciated or implied in his plays, masques, poems, and prose works, is not unfamiliar. One of the better statements of it is that which appears in his *Timber: or Discoveries; Made upon Men and Matter, as they have flowed out of his daily readings, or had their reflux to his peculiar notion of the times.*

I could never think the study of wisdom confined only to the philosopher: or of piety to the divine: or of state to the politic. But that he which can feign a commonwealth (which is the poet) can govern it with counsels, strengthen it with laws, correct it with judgments, inform it with religion, and morals; is all these. We do not require in him mere elocution; or an excellent faculty in verse; but the exact knowledge of all virtues, and their contraries; with ability to render the one loved, the other hated, by his proper embattling them.

(*Ben Jonson*, ed. Herford and Simpson, VIII, 595)

To the reader of criticism this conception of the calling and function of the poet is familiar enough, but it is not always realized that to Jonson this high responsibility applied equally to the poet as masque-maker and to the poet as play-maker. Perhaps his most explicit assertion of his conception of the form of the masque and the task of its maker is the foreword with which he opens the printed text of one of his earliest and best masques, *Hymenaei*, danced

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on 5 January 1606. This piece had been prepared as a part of King James's celebration of the politically important marriage of the young Earl of Essex to Frances Howard, daughter of the Lord Chamberlain. Union is the theme, and it is characteristic of Jonson at his best that in this creation he carries his idea and its implications far beyond the simple union of the great families of Devereux and Howard.

It is a noble and just advantage that the things subjected to understanding have of those which are objected to sense, that the one sort are but momentary, and merely taking; the other impressing, and lasting: else the glory of all these solemnities had perished like a blaze, and gone out in the beholders' eyes, so short-lived are the bodies of all things, in comparison of their souls. And, though bodies oft-times have the ill luck to be sensually preferred, they find afterwards the good fortune (when souls live) to be utterly forgotten. This it is hath made the most royal princes and greatest persons (who are commonly the personators of these actions) not only studious of riches and magnificence in the outward celebration or show (which rightly becomes them) but curious after the most high and hearty inventions to furnish the inward parts (and those grounded upon antiquity, and solid learnings) which, though their voice be taught to sound to present occasions, their sense or doth or should always lay hold on more removed mysteries. And, howsoever some may squeamishly cry out that all endeavour of learning, and sharpness in these transitory devices, especially where it steps beyond their little or (let me not wrong 'em) no brain at all, is superfluous; I am contented, these fastidious stomachs should leave my full tables, and enjoy at home their clean empty trenchers, fittest for such airy tastes: where perhaps a few Italian herbs, picked up and made into a salad, may find sweeter acceptance than all the most nourishing and sound meats of the world.

For these men's palates, let not me answer, O Muses. It is not my fault if I fill them out nectar, and they run to metheglin.

Vaticana bibant, si delectentur.

All the courtesy I can do them, is to cry, again:

Praetereant, si quid non facit ad stomachum.

As I will, from the thought of them, to my better subject.

(*Ben Jonson*, VII, 209–10)

The composition which follows this introductory statement is a magnificent example of Jonson's deep concern with the soul of the

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masque and his determination to 'lay hold on more removed mysteries'. Union as he celebrates it here is not simply the union of Robert Devereux and Frances Howard, of two great English families, but the new union of England and Scotland, the union of King James and his kingdom, the cosmic union wrought by the power of love. These complex interrelationships are set forth in the speeches, the songs, the costumes, the carved and painted figures, the host of visual symbols and allusions, the ordering of the spectacle, and, one would assume, in the character of the dances. The intricate and learned developments of these aspects of his theme are impressive achievements of the mature Jonson. They have been thoughtfully analysed by D. J. Gordon in '*Hymenaei*: Ben Jonson's Masque of Union'.¹

The scope and vigour of imagination, the extensive and gracefully manipulated learning, the implied control over architect, composer, choreographer, actors, and dancers displayed in *Hymenaei* are characteristic of Ben Jonson, but they can scarcely be expected of lesser masque writers. Not only did their performance fall short of his, but we have little evidence that they shared much of his high conception of the possibilities of the form or his insistence that the characters and their significances be 'grounded upon antiquity, and solid learnings'. This foundation of learning is perhaps most fully exhibited in the heavy annotations for the *Masque of Queens*, presented at court on 2 February 1609. Sixteen months later Samuel Daniel published his *Tethys' Festival*, danced on 5 June 1610, as a part of the festivities for the creation of Prince Henry as Prince of Wales. To introduce the descriptions and text of this masque Daniel prepared a 'Preface to the Reader', much of which seems to be a thinly veiled attack on the pretensions of Jonson. After saying that it is expected that he should publish 'a description and form of the late masque', Daniel continues:

which I do not out of a desire to be seen in pamphlets, or of forwardness to show my invention therein: for I thank God, I labour not with that disease of ostentation, nor affect to be known to be the man *digitoque monstrariet hic est*, having my name already wider in this kind than I desire, and more in the wind than I would. Neither do I seek in the

¹ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, VIII (1945), 107-45.

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divulging hereof to give it other colours than those it wore, or to make an apology of what I have done. . .

And for these figures of mine, if they come not drawn in all proportions to the life of antiquity (from whose tyranny I see no reason why we may not emancipate our inventions, and be as free as they to use our own images) yet I know them such as were proper to the business, and discharged those parts for which they served, with as good correspondency as our appointed limitations would permit.

But in these things wherein the only life consists in show, the art and invention of the architect gives the greatest grace, and is of most importance: ours, the least part and of least note in the time of the performance thereof; and therefore I have interserted the description of the artificial part, which only speaks M. Inigo Jones.

(Grosart edition, III, 305–7)

These testy and pedestrian comments do not reveal the faintest hint of Jonson's high conception of the form and function of the masque, only a jealousy of the man who had propounded them and who had so recently displayed how his ideas were 'drawn in all proportions to the life of antiquity'. Daniel further reveals with commendable frankness his complete subservience to Inigo Jones, a subservience which Jonson saw as the foreshadowing of the decline of the masque. This preface recalls Jonson's remark about the author of *Tethys' Festival*, as recorded by Drummond of Hawthornden, 'Daniel was at jealousies with him'. In the light of Jonson's reiterated assertions of the high and holy function of the poet, the preface also provides grounds for another statement of Jonson's in the *Conversations*, 'Samuel Daniel was a good honest man . . . but no poet'.¹

But the 'good honest man', Samuel Daniel, was by no means unique in his failure to appreciate Jonson's conception of the masque. No one else gives lip service to his ideal, and very few ever approach his accomplishment. Jonson's further judgment, recorded by Drummond, is sound, however arrogant: 'that next himself only Fletcher and Chapman could make a masque.' To Drummond, isolated in Edinburgh from the performances of the great court masques, this remark was no doubt simply a further example on which to base his final judgment of his visitor:

¹ *Ben Jonson*, I, 136 and 132.

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He is a great lover and praiser of himself, a contemner and scorner of others...jealous of every word and action of those about him...thinketh nothing well bot what either he himself, or some of his friends and Countrymen hath said or done. (*Ibid.* 133 and 151)

Jonson's own writings—the 'apologetical dialogue' for his *Poetaster*, for instance—show that Drummond had reason for his estimate of the personality of his guest, yet most of the Jonsonian critical judgments recorded by the Laird of Hawthornden are sound, and as Jonson himself asserted in his pitiful epilogue for *The New Inn* (Blackfriars, January 1629):

All strength must yield.
 Yet judgment would the last be, i' the field,
 With a true poet.

Yet even Jonson, for all his conviction and his belligerent assertiveness, could not continue to live up to the achievement of his earlier masques like *Hymenaei* and *Lord Haddington's Masque* and *The Masque of Queens*. The pressure of court taste and of his many collaborators in the co-operative enterprise of a great court production was overwhelming. Since his architect was a man of the stature and the great court influence of Inigo Jones, the conflict between the two was inevitable—and so was the victory of Jones. It should not be forgotten, however, as all too often it has been, that it was only after the break with his great architect-collaborator and after the humiliation of the lesser masques that Jonson could say in 'An Expostulation with Inigo Jones':

O Shows! Shows! Mighty shows!
 The eloquence of masques! What need of prose
 Or verse or sense t' express immortal you?
 You are the spectacles of state! 'Tis true
 Court hieroglyphics! and all arts afford
 In the mere perspective of an inch board!
 You ask no more than certain politic eyes,
 Eyes that can pierce into the mysteries
 Of many colours! read them! and reveal
 Mythology there painted on slit deal!
 Oh, to make boards to speak! There is a task—
 Painting and carpentry are the soul of masque.
 (*Ben Jonson*, VIII, 403–4)

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The decline from the assurance and idealism of the foreword for *Hymenaei* to the disillusionment of this poem, written after the performance of *Chloridia* on 22 February 1631, is some measure of the decline of the masque in the intervening quarter of a century: the taste of the Stuart court had discouraged the Jonsonian devotion to the 'more removed mysteries' and it had encouraged the excessive emphasis on the anti-masque and the development of spectacle for its own sake. In any endeavour requiring such complex co-operation of poet, choreographer, composer, and architect—to say nothing of the diverse artists and artisans they directed—a single success is remarkable. That such diverse individualists should go on year after year in a smoothly running hierarchy of authority and functioning in an intriguing and back-biting environment like the court of James I would have been miraculous. Of the minor conflicts we know little; the major clash was that between poet and architect.

Between two such titanic and self-conscious artists as Jonson and Jones, continued harmonious collaboration was surely impossible, even had each been endowed with the disposition of a saint, and neither was—certainly not Jonson. For each man his encompassing idea—invention for Jonson, design for Jones—was of overriding importance, and any deference to the other became a betrayal of his art.¹ The wonder is that they managed to collaborate effectively for so long as they did. By the beginning of the reign of Charles I, spectacle is usually dominant, as it had often been in the non-Jonsonian masques (such as Campion's *Lords' Masque*, 1613).

But equally conspicuous in the decline of the masque from Jonson's austere ideal is the burgeoning of the anti-masque. The form itself was not ill conceived; Jonson had used it effectively and harmoniously, and he had pointed out how it should function in the foreword for his *Masque of Queens* (2 February 1609):

It increasing, now, to the third time of my being used in these services to her Majesty's personal presentations, with the ladies whom she pleaseth to honour; it was my first and special regard, to see that the nobility of the invention should be answerable to the dignity of their persons. For which

¹ See D. J. Gordon, 'Poet and Architect: The Intellectual Setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xii (1949), 152–78.

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reason, I chose the argument to be *A Celebration of honourable and true Fame, bred out of Virtue*: observing that rule of the best artist, to suffer no object of delight to pass without his mixture of profit and example.

And because her Majesty (best knowing that a principal part of life in these spectacles lay in their variety) had commanded me to think on some dance or show that might precede hers, and have the place of a foil, or false-masque; I was careful to decline not only from others, but mine own steps in that kind, since the last year I had an anti-masque of boys [*Lord Haddington's Masque*]: and therefore, now, devised that twelve women in the habits of hags, or witches, sustaining the persons of Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, etc. the opposites to good fame, should fill that part; not as a masque, but a spectacle of strangeness, producing multiplicity of gesture, and not unaptly sorting with the current, and whole fall of the device.

(*Ben Jonson*, VII, 282)

Jonson's conception of this preliminary 'spectacle of strangeness' as a closely related introduction and contrast for the main entry of the masquers is dramatically sound, especially in a genre in which visual and aural impressions are even more important than they are in plays. Queen Anne was quite right in her implied perception that 'the nobility of the invention' and 'the dignity of their persons' could well make a masque too uniformly solemn, and she was well advised in her request for a 'foil, or false-masque' because 'a principal part of life in these spectacles lay in their variety'. Jonson's response in the *Masque of Queens* is an excellent example of what can be done with the device; not only do the twelve witches of his anti-masque display qualities antithetical to those virtues which are to follow, but their background, their costumes, their music, their words, and their actions, while all carefully based on the literature of witchcraft, are meticulously planned to present detailed contrasts to the appearance and actions of Queen Anne and the eleven ladies of the main masque which is to follow. Jonson describes the entry:

. . . that which presented itself was an ugly Hell which, flaming beneath, smoked unto the top of the roof. And, in respect all evils are (morally) said to come from Hell; . . . these witches, with a kind of hollow and infernal music, came forth from thence. First one, then two, and three, and more, till their number increased to eleven; all differently attired; some with rats on their heads; some, on their shoulders; others with

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ointment-pots at their girdles; all with spindles, timbrels, rattles, or other venefical instruments, making a confused noise, with strange gestures.

(*Ibid.* 282–3)

After the chanting of their ninth charm, the witches dance, and the descriptions of their actions show how all aspects of the performance—choreography as well as verse, costume, music, spectacle—were controlled in accordance with Jonson's invention:

At which, with a strange and sudden music, they fell into a magical dance, full of preposterous change and gesticulation, but most applying to their property: who, at their meetings, do all things contrary to the custom of men, dancing back to back, hip to hip, their hands joined, and making their circles backward, to the left hand, with strange fantastic motions of their heads and bodies. All which were excellently imitated by the maker of the dance, Mr Hierome Herne, whose right it is here to be named.

(*Ibid.* 301)

Clearly, an anti-masque handled with such scrupulous regard to the main invention served to enhance the beauty of the spectacle and to emphasize the idea of the whole. At his best, Jonson was fertile in creating anti-masques and very skilful in ordering them. But the anti-masque had a fatal appeal to those barren spectators who were often prominent at court. They could scarcely be expected to repress their enthusiasm when their royal master so conspicuously exhibited his own taste. In *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*, danced on 20 February 1613 as part of the celebrations for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and the Count Palatine, the second anti-masque consisted of 'a Pedant, May Lord, May Lady, Servingman, Chambermaid, A Country Clown or Shepherd, Country Wench, an Host, Hostess, a He-baboon, She-baboon, a He-fool, She-fool, ushering them in'. This interlude was so taking that 'It pleased his Majesty to call for it again at the end, as he did likewise for the first anti-masque, but one of the Statues by that time was undressed' (p. 139 below). Even more emphatic was the King's expression of approval after *The Masque of Flowers*, presented at Whitehall by the gentlemen of Gray's Inn on Twelfth Night of the following year:

The masque ended, it pleased his Majesty to call for the antic-masque of song and dance, which was again presented; and then the Masquers un-

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covered their faces, and came up to the state, and kissed the King and Queen and Prince's hand with a great deal of grace and favour, and so were invited to the banquet (p. 171 below).

No more conspicuous advertising of the royal taste could be devised than the King's condescension to the Barber, the Pedlar, the Brewer, the Midwife, the Roaring Boy, the Bawd, the Chimney Sweeper, and the other characters of these two anti-masques from Gray's Inn. It can be no surprise that the writers and producers for the court took note and developed the anti-masque element; in subsequent masques this feature becomes longer and more irrelevant. Ben Jonson himself tended to elaborate the anti-masque in *Love Restored* (6 January 1612), *The Irish Masque* (29 December 1613), and *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court* (6 January 1616). Orazio Busino's long description (pp. 232–4 below) of the performance of *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (6 January 1618) not only shows that the comic preliminaries—including the two anti-masque dances—were extensive, but also indicates how much more elaborate the action was than the text suggests. Jonson's own attitude toward the degeneration to which he was contributing is to be seen in *Pan's Anniversary or the Shepherd's Holiday* (19 June[?] 1620). Here the Fencer has had the Tinker, the Mouse-trap Man, the Bellows Mender, the Toothdrawer, and the others dance their anti-masque in the revealed presence of the masquers above the Fountain of Light. After the dance he asks the Old Shepherd, 'How like you this, Shepherd? Was not this gear gotten on a holy-day?' And the Old Shepherd replies: 'Faith, your folly may deserve pardon, because it hath delighted: but beware of presuming, or how you offer comparison with persons so near deities.'¹

By the time of his *Masque of Augurs* (6 January 1622) Jonson seems resigned to the exaggerated and extraneous development of the anti-masque. Here Van-goose, 'the Projector of Masques', announces that

...me would bring in some dainty new ting, dat never vas, nor never sall be in de *rebus natura*; dat has neder van de *materia*, nor de *forma*, nor de hossen, nor de voot but [is] a *mera devisa* of de brain,

¹ *Ben Jonson*, vii, 534.

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and his device is the bear-ward, John Urson, and his three dancing bears. When the Groom of the Revels protests 'but what has all this to do with our masque?' Van-goose replies:

O Sir, all de better, vor an antic-masque, de more absurd it be, and vrom de purpose, it be ever all de better. If it go from de *Nature* of de ting, it is de more *Art*: for deare is *Art*, and deare is *Nature* yow sall see. *Hochos-pochos, Paucos Palabros.*
 (Ben Jonson, VII, 633 and 638)

Jonson's most extensive development of the anti-masque is in *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*, written for performance at Buckingham's seat at Burley-on-the-Hill on 3 August 1621, and twice repeated elsewhere. Here the anti-masque runs for more than forty pages, and the masquers proper are merely the anti-masquers with their faces washed. It can be argued, indeed, that *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* is scarcely a proper masque at all, since there is no set construction, scarcely any plot, and the cast consisted mostly of Buckingham's family, friends, and servants welcoming the visiting King and court. Yet the piece is eloquent testimony of the strong appeal of the anti-masque, for the number of extant texts, quotations, and allusions surpasses those for any other masque except Shirley's *The Triumph of Peace*.¹

This masque of Shirley's, given by all four Inns of Court at Whitehall on 3 February 1634, was a very special occasion, widely advertised by a splendid procession through the streets of the city, and the large number of texts and references² testifies to the magnificence of the occasion and the procession as well as to the appeal of the masque itself. With all its dazzling effects both at Whitehall and in the London streets, *The Triumph of Peace* nonetheless illustrates the dominance of the anti-masque almost as fully as does *The Gypsies Metamorphosed*. Near the beginning Shirley makes his apologies in the dialogue of the ridiculous Fancy, Opinion, Jollity, and Laughter:

Fancy. How many Anti-masques ha' they? Of what nature?
 For these are fancies that take most; your dull
 And phlegmatic inventions are exploded;
 Give me a nimble Anti-masque.
Opinion. They have none, sir.

¹ See G. E. Bentley, *Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, IV, 645–7. ² See *ibid.* V, 1154–63.