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978-0-521-03120-2 - The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque

Edited by David Bevington and Peter Holbrook

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction**David Bevington and Peter Holbrook*

Masques were often dismissed as mere trifles of entertainment during the Jacobean years when that genre experienced its most remarkable development. Francis Bacon declared ‘masques and triumphs’ to be ‘but toys’. For illustration, he need have looked no further than the featherbrained Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, who ‘delight[s] in masques and revels sometimes altogether’ (1.3.111–12). Even Prospero in *The Tempest*, as deviser of a wedding masque for his daughter, passes the event off as ‘Some vanity of mine art’ (4.1.41).

Writers of masques were of course sensitive to the charge. Ben Jonson, in his *Neptune’s Triumph* (1624), devised to celebrate the return from Spain of Prince Charles without a Spanish bride (much to the delight of most English observers), brings forward a Poet with his tale of woe. Wryly comparing his craft with that of the Cook, with whom he is conversing, the Poet calls himself ‘The most unprofitable of [the King’s] servants . . . A kind of Christmas engine, one that is used at least once a year for a trifling instrument of wit, or so’ (lines 20–2). Jonson was all too aware of what his critics said of his courtly enterprises. Plutus, masquerading as Cupid in Jonson’s *Love Restored* (1612), scornfully characterizes masquing as ‘a false and fleeting delight’, nothing more than ‘The merry madness of one hour’ that is sure to cost its devotees ‘the repentance of an age’ (lines 31–3).<sup>1</sup>

Writers of masques and observers of the courtly scene were none the less at pains to defend masquing. Jonson lauded the masque as ‘lay[ing] hold on more removed mysteries’.<sup>2</sup> In Thomas Campion’s *The Lords’ Masque* (1613), no less an authority than Orpheus assures Entheus (Poetic Fury): ‘Nor are these musics, shows, or revels vain / When thou adorn’st them with thy Phoebean brain’.<sup>3</sup> Bacon’s demeaning reference to ‘toys’ occurs in an essay in which he offered shrewd advice to the aspiring masque presenter. The royal and noble sponsors of these shows took them seriously, to judge by the time, energy and money expended on them.

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[More information](#)

The Poet's acknowledgement in *Neptune's Triumph* of the triflingness of his masque is, in this context, a complex idea. While he drily acknowledges an outward resemblance between his own vocation and that of the Cook, both of whom serve up dishes, poetic and otherwise, to the court's taste, the Poet also takes a sly dig at the Cook. In that person's self-confidence, officious advice-giving and willingness to cater to every taste, Jonson skewers the presumptuous incomprehension of his art by a court that is complacently willing to equate his artistic concerns with those of the appetite and to expect that the court's tastes are to govern every aspect of the artist's production. At the same time, the likening of a Poet to a Cook has a defensive value for Jonson. Through it he can disown any riskily large political intention, and take shelter behind the innocuous role of entertainer from those malicious 'state-decipherer[s]' and 'politic picklock[s]' who plagued him in the public theatres.<sup>4</sup>

The contradictory significances of this exchange between Poet and Cook reflect the difficulties of Jonson's position. For, as author of a masque celebrating the return of the brideless prince, he was in a delicate spot. Was he in effect to celebrate the failure of James's long-cherished hopes of a Spanish marriage for his son, as ecstatic London crowds had done some months earlier?<sup>5</sup> Or was he to insinuate regret at the collapse of the King's plan for peace with Spain – a plan with which Jonson may well have sympathized? Together, Cook and Poet explore the difficult matter of their satisfying, each in his own way, the diverse tastes of their customers:

COOK: Were you ever a cook?

POET: A cook? No, surely.

COOK: Then you can be no good poet, for a good poet differs nothing at all from a master-cook. Either's art is the wisdom of the mind.

POET: As how, sir?

COOK: Expect. I am by my place to know how to please the palates of the guests; so, you are to know the palate of the times, study the several tastes, what every nation, the Spaniard, the Dutch, the French, the Walloon, the Neapolitan, the Briton, the Sicilian, can expect from you.

POET: That were a heavy and hard task, to satisfy Expectation, who is so severe an exactress of duties; ever a tyrannous mistress, and most times a pressing enemy.

COOK: She is a powerful great lady, sir, at all times, and must be satisfied. So must her sister, Madam Curiosity, who hath as dainty a palate as she, and these will expect.

POET: But what if they expect more than they understand?

COOK: That's all one, Master Poet, you are bound to satisfy them.

(lines 23–40)

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

Jonson's pugnacious attitude towards his auditors suggests that he finds them incapable of comprehending his artistic purpose and wilfully determined to be unsatisfied. Yet he also betrays a concern lest he be unable to pick his way among the radically contradictory preferences of this audience. The rueful and bewildered tone of the Poet reflects Jonson's awareness that the factionalized nature of courtly opinion about the Spanish Match, and about foreign policy generally, dooms *Neptune's Triumph* from the start. As David Riggs has put it, 'regardless of what [Jonson] wrote, someone would take offense'.<sup>6</sup> The dialogue between Cook and Poet is Jonson's bid to pre-empt such offence by making explicit the hopelessness of his task. In what amounts almost to an appeal for clemency, Jonson makes it clear that his is the impossible job of entertaining an ideologically divided court with a political entertainment.

The conversation between Cook and hapless Poet in *Neptune's Triumph* encapsulates many of the interpretive problems that bear upon a consideration of the court masque. How weighty, or trifling, were masques? What was the nature of the relation between masque and audience? As to the first point, we may need to ask what 'trifling' actually meant to the Renaissance court. The art of courtliness, Patricia Fumerton tells us, was that of the artful trifle: the sonnet, the miniature, the elaborately designed and lavishly provided-for dinner party.<sup>7</sup> Trifling, in that courtly context, was hardly synonymous with the unimportant; in a world of small-scale, interpersonal power relations, the slightest details of self-presentation – of gesture, deportment, manner, dress – were sure to resonate with significance. The Renaissance court, as Richard Halpern observes, provided a setting in which 'the power of sovereignty work[ed] primarily by making itself visible'.<sup>8</sup> In such a milieu, where the surface was, in a sense, precisely what mattered, the trivial assumed a startling importance.

The case for redefining what we mean by 'trivial' has been eloquently put by Norbert Elias in *The Court Society*. Whereas status in a money economy need not be continually asserted to maintain its effectiveness, Elias argues, status in a courtly society depends for its very existence upon display. Finely nuanced conduct becomes endowed with a special weight:

We are apt to ask today: why were these people so beholden to external appearances . . . to [the] superficial? But . . . this assessment of what was centrally important to court people as 'superficial' springs from a quite specific structure of social existence. We can to some extent allow ourselves today to leave real social differences concealed . . . because the relationships between

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[More information](#)

people mediated by wealth and profession, and the resulting differentiation of people, remain unambiguously real and effective even when not expressed directly in their public manifestations.<sup>9</sup>

In the early modern court, prestige was either visible or non-existent.

The masque, then, considered even in its most superficial aspect – as a spectacular dance party, or what David Lindley has described as ‘an elaborate frame for . . . an aristocratic knees-up’<sup>10</sup> – was none the less socially and politically significant. In Elias’s sense, it was a display of power and standing. Renaissance court culture in all its manifestations could be singularly serious and untrifling about play – in Inns of Court revelling, for example, or in Accession Day celebrations. Festivity took on the function, as Desmond Bland has noted, of a ‘training-ground’ in nobility, and was acknowledged as such by the involvement of monarch, councillors and nobles.<sup>11</sup> Accession Day celebrations were occasions of extravagant, elaborate, and, from one perspective, superficial displays, like the masque; yet they were also attempts to garner, secure and enhance prestige at the heart of power. From a courtly viewpoint, all such entertainments were, if trifling, importantly so.<sup>12</sup>

As the most developed courtly pastime and formal social occasion of the English Renaissance, the masque was thus significant, even if some of its spectators may have been uncomprehending of, or indifferent to, its deeper poetic and scenic meanings.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as ‘the most inherently topical of all seventeenth-century art forms’,<sup>14</sup> the masque was unavoidably and consciously political. The key to its political nature, and hence the key to critical interpretation, lies in its reception. What was the nature of the court audience, and what was its relation to such spectacle? What range of responses did the masque allow for? How far did it permit sceptical or ambivalent reactions? Do we need to think of divisions among an audience, as *Neptune’s Triumph* would seem to suggest? These questions are central to our understanding of the ideological effects of a major English Renaissance symbolic form.

The essays gathered here re-open the question of the ‘trivial’ importance of the masque and related forms of courtly entertainment chiefly in the reigns of James I, and, to an extent, Charles I. In so doing they build upon recent advances in our understanding of the relations between society and culture in the early modern period, and upon the rehistoricized temper of Elizabethan Renaissance studies over the past decade and a half that has directed special attention to the Stuart masque. The present essays take as axiomatic the proposition, advanced by New Historicist critics among others, that Renaissance literature

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

‘did not simply reflect history but in a sense . . . helped to make it’.<sup>15</sup> This proposition is arguably even more true of the masque than of other literary forms in the period, if only because many of the most powerful individuals in the land participated in its elegant rituals. A literary form so devoted to the art of self-fashioning and role-playing in the drama of power has warmly recommended itself to a new generation of critics interested in the arcane processes by which political and social authority invents and replicates itself. As Martin Butler will show, in his essay that provides a theorizing basis for this collection, the ‘entanglements between culture and power’ presented in the court masque have inevitably fascinated New Historicist criticism.

Stephen Orgel, working in conjunction with Roy Strong, deserves to be recognized as the initiator of modern studies in the masque. More broadly, though not a New Historicist himself by any narrow or orthodox designation, he has been an important precursor of a good deal that New Historicism has uncovered in this field.<sup>16</sup> Although, as Martin Butler will explain, the essays in this collection undertake to move beyond Orgel’s early work in the direction of seeing factional diversity at court to which the masque necessarily responded, they do so with full appreciation of the brilliant groundwork that Orgel has provided. In his own contribution to this present collection, Orgel sees division in the court as astutely as does anyone else. To the extent that Orgel’s intent in his original and pioneering work focused on James as king, showing how the masque might be seen to embody Stuart power as the ‘expression of the monarch’s will, the mirror of his mind’,<sup>17</sup> Orgel’s findings remain importantly true even while they need, and deserve, to be enriched by consideration of other, discordant voices in the competitions for power that sought out the masque as a medium of political self-definition. Early and late, Orgel’s ‘thick description’ of the mentality embodied in the masque has illuminated in the courtly context ‘the role of symbolic forms in human life’.<sup>18</sup>

Orgel and others interested in the masque, and in the broader cultural phenomena to which Stephen Greenblatt has given the useful names of ‘negotiation’, ‘circulations of energy’, ‘containment’ versus ‘subversion’ and the like, owe an important and openly acknowledged indebtedness to Clifford Geertz and Lawrence Stone. Geertz, in his anthropological analysis of what he calls ‘the theater state’ in nineteenth-century Bali and in other studies, offers an especially pertinent model for the Stuart masque.<sup>19</sup> His point, in brief, is that the ceremonies and myths of political rule became, for nineteenth-century

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Bali as they do for many other cultures, a kind of self-fulfilling reality in which the leaders of a culture act out roles in ceremonies designed to mythologize those leaders' divine origins and authority. Through ceremonies of music, dance and public display, the leaders essentially become what they have created through their impersonations of power; the medium of the ceremony becomes the reality of political authority. This anthropological approach is a sceptical one in that it sees power as the end product of illusions that are being consciously manipulated. New Historicism in the 1980s, for its own cultural reasons, found this view of politics immensely applicable to the California and then the United States of the Reagan era, whilst the Cultural Materialists in Great Britain found a similar wry solace in a method of analysis so germane to the social and political practices of Thatcherism. The Renaissance court masque flourished in this environment as confirmation that some things in the world of political power never really change. Whether the manipulations of power were perceived quite as cynically in Renaissance England is another question, but examination of the process itself has brought significant new illumination of the cultural context of the court masque.

Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (1965), and his later work, including *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977), have exercised considerable influence on New Historicist critics by arguing that England's great families declined in influence under the Tudors and Stuarts.<sup>20</sup> One result was a scramble for ways in which England's ruling class might maintain the fiction at least of their importance to the nation. An outmoded feudal aristocracy turned to chivalric rituals such as the tournament as a means of mythologizing its function as a warrior class deserving the claim of ancestral greatness. Richard McCoy, Perry Anderson, Anthony Esler, Raymond Southall, Eric Mallen, Paul Siegel and others have further enriched our understanding of this phenomenon by their analyses of ways in which a frantic neo-chivalric cult of honour by the Earl of Essex and other aristocrats sought to idealize an imagined medieval past as an ideological bulwark against what they perceived as an unravelling of the social fabric. Paul Hammer's essay on Essex in this present volume adds still more illustration.<sup>21</sup> Confronted with such a decline, England's aristocracy turned to the masque especially as one vital means of asserting claims of political significance and of sorting out lines of authority. The work of Stone and others thus focuses our attention on a world of frantic courtly emulation in which the masque was destined to become a potent if multi-edged instrument in the negotiation of power.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

This New Historicist approach to Jacobean court politics needs to be seen as part of a larger revolution in historiography of the period, a revolution in which the 'Whig Liberal' interpretation of English history (as seen for example in the work of G. M. Trevelyan), insisting teleologically on an inevitable progression towards civil war and the securing of political liberties under a constitutional monarchy, has given way to a revisionist view concentrating on specific moments of history and rejecting any simplified binary opposition between Tudor or Stuart governments and their critics. This revisionist history has also taken as its premise the omnipresence of rivalry and factionalism in court politics, and has generally seen King James I as a more complex, intellectual and successful ruler than the champions of Whig Liberalism would allow.<sup>22</sup> To dispense with the old notion that civil war was inevitable in the early seventeenth century is to make possible a new view of the Stuart masque; it need no longer be represented as the doomed and empty gesture of a court culture bent on its own destruction, and can instead be viewed as a serious representation of princely power. This present volume aligns itself with the new revisionism to the important extent of arguing that the court was not monolithic, and that the masque, as the principal genre of the court's self-representation, was much more than a simple occasion for self-congratulation. It was instead the site of negotiation over England's most pressing problems and clashes of personality.

In a similar fashion, the 'linguistic turn' in historiographical developments advocated by J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner has redirected attention to the way in which shifts in discourse can announce larger ideological locutions and changes. Pocock insists, for example, that too often, in the more traditional historical methods of analysis that preceded the current revolution in the study of history, 'the coherence of a work or body of political writing, as political philosophy or as political theory, was mistakenly identified with its character as a historical phenomenon'. A historian should not attempt to 'furnish his author with a degree of coherence he did not in fact achieve'. Skinner similarly argues that a basic inadequacy afflicts both those who have attempted to understand a work of the past in the context of religious, political and economic factors, and those who insist on the autonomy of the text as 'the sole necessary key to its own meaning', because both methodologies 'commit philosophical mistakes in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances'. The modern critic or historian must realize that 'it will never in fact be possible simply to study what any given classic writer has *said* (especially

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[More information](#)

in an alien culture) without bringing to bear some of one's own expectations about what he must have been saying'.<sup>23</sup> These strictures, we submit, apply with particular force to the Stuart masque, and require that a new reading of the masque attune itself to a methodology that is as fully aware as can be of its own premises and preconceptions. In a similar vein, we believe that interpretations of the Stuart masque must bring to bear a reconsideration of audience and its place in the discourse of power at court, enriched as well by an understanding of the valences of masque performance.

A corollary of the recent revolution in historiography is that the court masque needs to be viewed as a diverse expression of conflicting arenas of interest within the court culture, rather than as primarily a symbolic ceremony vital to the reproduction of monarchical power. Whereas the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized sovereignty and the power of a prince,<sup>24</sup> in an attempt 'to reconstruct the mentality of monarch-centered power',<sup>25</sup> today's scholarship has begun to move towards an increasingly complex picture. The very title of Stephen Orgel's *The Illusion of Power* (1975) declares his fascination with Clifford Geertz's mythologizings of authority through state-sponsored ceremonials centred on the monarchy. Similarly, Jonathan Goldberg assumes a centrality of monarchical power in his *James I and the Politics of Literature*.<sup>26</sup> Finding ambiguity at the heart of the Jacobean court masque, Goldberg attributes that ambiguity to the divisions of James's own personality and policies; the masque mirrors the struggle in the King himself between order and anarchy. These powerfully resonant theses, we will argue, can be further enhanced if the disjunctions thus noted are also explored in multi-faceted interpretations that stress the role of other court factions than that represented solely by the King.

For some critics of recent years, including Goldberg himself, a potential weakness of New Historicist emphasis on sovereignty is that it may end up reproducing early modern society's ideological misdescription of itself.<sup>27</sup> Jonson's *Oberon* (1611) would appear indeed at first to celebrate a power relationship in which all is seen to flow from an omnipotent prince, represented in this masque by the aptly-named Pan. Yet we would do well to consider that even if Jonson's own agenda impelled him towards a strongly monarchical model, he was not the only deviser of masques for the court; nor was King James the only significant patron. As Martin Butler and Tom Bishop will argue, Prince Henry's political role in the dynamics of *Oberon* is every bit as compelling as that of King James.

Recent studies by Richard McCoy, Leeds Barroll, Barbara Lewalski, Malcolm Smuts and others have accordingly begun to focus on cultural forms, from neo-feudal chivalry to the researches of the Society of Antiquaries into Britain's ancient constitution, that offered an alternative political agenda to the monarchy's claim to mythological greatness.<sup>28</sup> The present collection of essays engages in the debate at this point, adopting what Lloyd Davis has called 'a less sovereign-centred approach to the masque'<sup>29</sup> in order to describe in some detail the complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties of court politics and culture in the early modern period. In our view, the masque, rather than being simply the expression of monarchical power, was available for use by other interests, and functioned at the intersection of rivalrous political discourses.<sup>30</sup>

The court itself in this volume thus often appears as fluid and conflicted. What we hope to have undertaken is a deepening politicization of the masque; and by 'politics' we mean not solely the idealisms of Tudor–Stuart political theology but the actual political processes through which things happened. However much the Tudor and Stuart monarchs may have fashioned images of themselves as absolute rulers, authority in those regimes was less a one-way transmission of power than a complex negotiation – not wholly unlike that of more democratic societies – involving conflict, compromise and exchange. We are interested most of all in the ways in which masques negotiated among a range of commitments.<sup>31</sup> Our focus is on what J. R. Mulryne has recently called the 'strains and contradictions to which masquing texts and masquing occasions testify'.<sup>32</sup> Our approach has been to consider the court less as the organic creation of an all-powerful monarch than as an arena in which competing interest groups jockeyed for position – a court that was dynamic, unstable and volatile, and in which a poet such as Jonson might well find himself in a delicate position.<sup>33</sup>

Our attempt has been to provide a cohesive argument rather than a scattered selection of essays on a topic of mutual interest. We have tried to keep the project whole and unified by selection of subjects, arrangement of those subjects in a continuous line of argument, and communication among those who have taken part. The overarching argument of the book runs as follows:

New Historicism has made a huge contribution to our understanding of the Stuart masque by showing how masques thematized and enacted the Renaissance theatricalization of power. At the same time, the focus on monarchy as a pervasive influence in the creation of the

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[More information](#)

masque has sometimes had the effect of homogenizing the masque into a single-minded instrument of royal policy, and has sometimes obscured the necessary matter of addressing history as process. Even Jonathan Goldberg's analysis of the masque as simultaneously subversive and self-abasing interprets this ambivalence as a reflection of a divided royal will. To the extent that we can discern fractures in place of a monolithic image of absolutism, we can better begin to appreciate the give and take of accommodation and realignment that go to make up a communal event like the production of a masque. *Oberon* (1611) divides its focus between Oberon himself (representing Prince Henry) and Pan (King James) in a form of doubleness that reflects Henry's growing emergence as a 'significant competitor in the arena of power with his father'. These 'colliding priorities' spell trouble for Jonson as author of the text (Martin Butler).

To step back for a moment into Elizabeth's last years and to the Accession Day celebrations of 1595 is to see that the events nominally devised to praise the Queen do more to dramatize, in the debate between Love and Self-Love, the Earl of Essex's predicament as challenger to what Richard McCoy has dubbed the Elizabethan 'chivalric compromise'. That compromise allowed courtiers to flaunt their ambitions in chivalric display while subordinating ambition to royal service. The Accession Day event was so crucial to Essex's campaign of self-promotion that he essentially devised it himself, with the help of Francis Bacon and others. The event was a success if we measure it by what appears to have been Essex's design: 'upstaging Elizabeth on her own special day' of celebration (Paul E. J. Hammer).

James I's pacifist foreign policy was bound to influence his view of how court festivities should celebrate his reign. His was the strategy of a *politique*, balancing off the Catholic powers of the Continent against the Dutch and other Protestant communities. James's policy, advanced for its time, had notwithstanding to contend with a legacy of fanaticism, as well as the crypto-Catholicism of Queen Anne. Strains and equivocations are accordingly evident in Samuel Daniel's *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*, performed at court in 1604. Though commissioned by Queen Anne, who favoured a pro-Spanish pacifism, it none the less reveals Daniel's affiliation with the more interventionist Protestant politics once championed by Sir Philip Sidney and the Earl of Essex. Daniel's successor as purveyor of masques to the crown, on the other hand, was more aligned with James's pacifism. Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609) honours the ideology of peace. Queen Anne appears to