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Martin Butler

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Introduction

This book studies English court festival under James I and Charles I in relation to the changing political and cultural climate of the time. It considers virtually the complete run of royal masques, from Queen Anne's first show at Winchester in 1603 to the last Whitehall festival, *Salmacida Spolia*, danced by Charles and Henrietta Maria in 1640 as the court geared up to confront rebellion in Scotland and the first parliament for eleven years.¹ It presents the story of the form while integrating it into an encompassing narrative of political and cultural transformation. The masques are a vehicle through which we can read the early Stuart court's political aspirations and the changing functions of royal culture in a period of often radical instability.

Masques were not confined to the early Stuart period. They were preceded by a rich tradition of Tudor festivity, which was at its most ostentatious under Henry VIII, and continued, in less ambitious ways, under his children. The image of Tudor monarchy was profoundly conditioned by Henry's Burgundian-style revelry, and by the entertainments associated with Elizabeth's Accession Day tilts and summer progresses into the country. But the Stuart accession in 1603 galvanized Whitehall's festivals, not least because, unlike Elizabeth, James often financed his own masques. This turned them into a cultural showcase for the new court, and introduced a note of competitiveness and conspicuous consumption which bespoke the ambitions of a dynasty keen to assert itself as a major player in Europe.

The sixteenth-century Scottish court had had its own established festival culture. James VI danced in masques and even wrote one himself, to celebrate the wedding of his cousin, Henrietta Stewart, in 1588.² Once in England, James never danced, but he was an occasional tilter and his queen took to the masque floor on numerous high-profile occasions. As the reign progressed, it quickly became apparent that Christmas festivals were to be the grandest annual fixtures in the court calendar, usually culminating with

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an expensive masque on Twelfth Night. Masques became the focus of extraordinary artistic effort and financial expenditure. They engrossed the energies of some of the period's most distinguished artists – poets like Ben Jonson, Thomas Campion, Samuel Daniel, and George Chapman, designers such as Inigo Jones and Constantino de' Servi, musicians like Alfonso Ferrabosco, Nicholas Lanier, and Henry Lawes, dancing-masters such as Jacques Bocan and Thomas Giles, and costume makers who are barely remembered today but whose names often survive in the financial records. The performers included representatives of the court's most entrenched aristocratic dynasties, many of them officials in the royal household, personal servants to the monarch, or aspirants to favour and preferment. Masques were not grossly expensive when considered in relation to the court's total outlay, but they were high-impact and attracted equivalent public attention.

Masques were performed before comparatively small audiences and were usually seen only once. They did not, then, function as political propaganda and information management in the way in which we understand those things today. Nonetheless, their spectators were drawn from the social elites from which the crown chose its officials and magistrates, who sat in parliament, and channelled royal authority into the realm at large. They were thus an important point of contact between the crown and its political class, cementing their bonds of loyalty and outlook. At the same time, masque nights were an opportunity for honouring the representatives of foreign powers, whether extraordinary ambassadors, who were temporarily present at Whitehall, or resident ambassadors who acted as their countries' representatives throughout the year. Although James and Charles tried to avoid using invitations to signal their favour to particular nations, the diplomats jostled ceaselessly for places of honour and their presence underlined that these were international occasions. Masques proclaimed the Stuarts' ability to command attention on the world stage and decked them in the symbolic forms of European kingship. Partly through their very considerable symbolic impact, Whitehall came to look like a centre of power equivalent in prestige to Paris, Vienna, and Madrid. Court protocol and its lavish festivals were signs that the Stuarts were a modern, forward-looking, cosmopolitan dynasty, capable of competing on equal terms with Bourbon and Habsburg.

It is true that spectators went to masques for the sake of other pleasures than the poetry, for the spoken sections took up a comparatively small part of the evening. Most of the time was given over to dancing, and the effect of the music, costumes, and spectacle must have been overwhelming. Ambassadors' reports and domestic feedback suggest that the poets'

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contributions were often misunderstood, inaudible, or ignored. The famous quarrel between Jonson and Jones, over the relative importance of the masques as drama or spectacle, was symptomatic of anxiety on this score. For many of those dancing or watching, the main attraction must simply have been to see and be seen: to enjoy the pleasures of court membership, show off wealth and status, and affirm one's sense of belonging to an elite community. Literary critics frequently write as if the words were central, but commonly spectators must have been less focused on the minutiae of the masque's verbal meanings than on the show of aristocratic display, which affirmed their stake in the Whitehall crowd. Masques celebrated the court as a place with which all of the king's leading subjects could feel a measure of identification. In this regard, the broad social ramifications of masquing were at least as important as its narrowly political meanings.³

That said, it is clear that masques always had some explicit political function. The king's presence inevitably politicized the occasion, and masque inventions usually took their point of departure from some aspect of royal policy or current events. Masque form – which was more variable than literary critics have tended to allow – was dictated by the political relationships between its participants: it changed according to whether the show was a presentation by the king or to him, or was some sort of conversation with him or amongst the family and friends surrounding him. There was often a mechanism to ensure that spectators understood the fable, by distributing printed or written sheets summarizing it,⁴ or by printing the whole text, sometimes prior to the performance. There was also the beginning of an attempt to publicize court festivity beyond Whitehall's immediate territory, through printed texts, manuscript copies circulating from hand to hand, and letters of affairs sent into the country by the network of court correspondents, a process that became markedly more systematic under Charles I. If masques could never function as propaganda in the modern sense, they nonetheless worked to shape the image of the monarch and give prestigious expression to his values and priorities. They sought to underwrite his authority, foster confidence in his rule, affirm his ties with his nation, and invest him with political and personal legitimacy. The expense and time lavished by monarchs on masque preparations ensured that they were always culturally significant events. At the same time, even when the literary component was secondary to the dance and spectacle, it always framed the evening and gave meaning to its symbolism and aesthetic design.

My primary aim is to treat the masques' politics and aesthetics in an integrated way. The common but excessively atomistic conception of the

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form as a simple dyad in which antimasque was set against masque has given rise to a correspondingly simplified understanding of its political meanings. Sometimes masques are associated with a schematic and repetitious politics on the assumption that their form was itself stereotypical and inflexible. Alternatively, a simplified view of their meanings may arise if assumptions about the politics of the period are excessively rigid. This is a limitation of Jonathan Goldberg's remarkable study of Jacobean culture, which, despite its brilliant literary analyses, makes the masques seem stereotypical by adopting a one-dimensional view of Jacobean history, attributing an unrealistic political uniformity to the period, and failing to take account of historical change.⁵ On the other hand, studies which focus on the minutiae of the masques' political functions have to ensure that they do not short-change their aesthetic dimensions. This is the Achilles' heel of Leeds Barroll's ground-breaking book on Queen Anne, which, while valuably contextualizing her masques by recreating their historical milieu in great density, pays little attention to their aesthetic qualities and gives scant impression of them as texts.⁶ The present book attempts to do equal justice to the masques' historical and aesthetic aspects. It uses a methodology of detailed contextualization, locating each masque in relation to the moment of its performance, but tries to give adequate attention to both text and context, developing each in mutually supportive symbiosis, and ensuring that historical and cultural analysis are both pursued to sufficient depth. It aims to read the masques as texts in which the aesthetic and the historical are inextricably entangled with one another, and have equal claims on our attention.

The project of this book is to retrieve the complexity of the masques' politics, which were far more functional and substantive than they are often represented as having been. In part this is a matter of understanding masques as total events. The king was the centre of the occasion, but many people were involved in masque production, and there were many conflicting interest-groups in the Banqueting House. Royal consorts and children played a large part in masques' conception and performance, as did powerful courtiers and personalities such as Buckingham, all of whom brought their own priorities to the dance floor. No less significant were the spectators who, though silent in the texts, had their own distinctive investments in the occasion. Typically the king was the principal addressee, but the nature of the encounters that masques performed depended on who was dancing, who was paying, and whether the show was simple homage and celebration or an act of supplication, persuasion, or rapprochement. Sometimes masques were brought to Whitehall by outsiders, such as

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lawyers from the Inns of Court, and sometimes the monarch was entertained as a guest in spaces beyond his own palace; these occasions intruded new variables into the symbolic economy. Usually masques were constructed as projecting the king's world view, presenting the king for the sake of the king (as it were), but almost always some kind of conversation or dialogue was implicit. Masques stamped the king's authority onto his court, but the terms of that authority were constantly under negotiation.

It is also important to recognize that the stream of public action in which masques participated was open-ended, provisional, and inchoate, and that, by virtue of their location at the very centre of Stuart power, masques could not put complete aesthetic distance between themselves and the historical processes to which they alluded. They did not passively reflect a stable or pre-existing reality but were themselves part of an unfolding political narrative. They were rooted in the as yet unresolved tensions of their moment of performance, their fictions and songs being saturated with reference to matters that were topical or contingent. So although their primary purpose was to legitimate the king, they never inertly proclaimed kingly values, but performed real material functions in the life of the state. They helped to shape Stuart political culture, responding to current issues, inventing symbolic forms that articulated royal priorities, and devising fables which addressed the uncertainties of the moment. They were involved in and contributed to ongoing debates about policy and ideology, about the values and imperatives of kingship, and the court's ideals, aspirations, and objectives. With their conflict-based form, they sought to manage the outlook of their audience, arousing and discharging anxiety, encouraging identification between spectator and monarch, and endeavouring to create a climate of consensus and confidence. And by foregrounding the motifs of sudden transformation and social dancing – which suggested, respectively, decisive intervention or mutual rapprochement – they offered an arena in which symbolic solutions could be advanced for the problems, disagreements, and controversies of contemporary political life.

So my analyses treat the masques as acts of power as much as aesthetic performances, and endeavour to excavate the political work which each performed. They start from the assumption that the court's pleasures always had some political aspect, that their aesthetic design rested on and articulated Machiavellian imperatives. In the early seventeenth century, the idea was often voiced that panegyric ought to have some counselling function and convey advice as well as pleasure, that courtly entertainment should educate its spectators as well as entertain them. As Jonson put it in *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, 'public spectacles either have been or ought to

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be the mirrors of man's life' and should always 'carry a mixture of profit with them no less than delight'.⁷ This moralizing approach has been most fully developed by Kevin Sharpe,⁸ but I shall be suggesting that the masques' justifications as channels of counsel were often at odds with their functions as purveyors of ideology. It is important not to take the masques' idealizing discourse at face value, but to understand how it arose from and intersected with the configurations of power, and to register the ritual and social dimensions of masque performance, the masques' ability to shape attitudes through collective action as well as explicit content. At the same time, the fact that festivity was a collaborative enterprise meant that what a masque did frequently ran athwart whatever limits any one of its producers – typically the poet – sought to put on it. A masque's *raison d'être* was ultimately configured around the monarch in whose service it was prepared, and in this respect Jonson, Jones, or any other participant was only an individual contributor to an enterprise of greater scope. Its meaning has to be triangulated in relation to the total event for which it was created.

On the other hand, what the masques failed to achieve was often as significant as what they accomplished. Much criticism has understandably focused on the masques' drive towards transcendence. The festive ideal was closure: masques emphasized harmony, unity, and consolidation. The aim of most masque fables was to sublimate conflict into aesthetic concord and make the king's will seem irresistible and divine. A magnificent court culture was thus a triumphant expression of royal prestige. But this book is just as interested in the points where that project broke down, the places where masques seem contradictory, unresolved, or embarrassed. At such moments, the tension between a masque's aesthetic objective and recalcitrant circumstance exposes the political gap which each was in the business of bridging. Such moments disclose how far kingly symbolism struggled to accommodate structural strains in the body politic. Seen in this light, the masques, and the political culture to which they belonged, present valuable opportunities for taking the court's temperature as it responded to changing historical conditions across four decades, and evaluating the success or otherwise of the image that the crown sought to sustain. As a series of snapshots taken at regular intervals through the period, each masque is uniquely revealing of the breadth of royal outlook and the degree of competence which, in successive years, the crown was able to project.

Of course, masques were always idealistic: they presented royal aspirations in the best light, and voiced what the monarchy thought it was doing or was capable of doing. This did not, though, make them mere fantasies. The old view no longer holds up that masques were froth on the tide of

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history, misrepresenting reality or distracting attention from it. Rather, the objective of each masque was to celebrate a functioning court, affirming the two-way tie between monarch and subjects, and creating an image of the king which seemed sufficiently in tune with the attitudes of his political elites and underlined the mutual investment that each had in the other. In the long term, that personal monarchy with which masques were identified would not endure; when the basis of Stuart authority collapsed, so did the masques. But in their complex responses to challenging circumstance, the masques uniquely demonstrated the strengths and sensitivities of Stuart government across a period when the crown was at the heart of English political life. And at the same time, their moments of discomfort, awkwardness, and excess point to the institutional weaknesses and political blind spots on which Stuart power would eventually founder.

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CHAPTER I

Spectacles of state

These things are but toys, to come amongst such serious observations. But yet, since princes will have such things, it is better they should be graced with elegancy than daubed with cost.¹

Francis Bacon's famous denial of the value of court masques, even as he begins an essay that lays down rules for setting out a masque as gloriously as can be, voices a contradiction endemic to the festival culture of the early Stuart court. By making space for masques in his 'counsels civil and moral', however briefly and with whatever show of reluctance, Bacon acknowledges the extent to which the serious work of statecraft, which in other essays he analyses with such subtlety and depth, could not be set apart from the apparently casual pleasures of princes. No less than travel, buildings, or gardens (the topics of three other essays), masques and triumphs were, for all their triviality, necessary themes in a complete portrayal of modern court life. Of course, Bacon's complaint, that masques were so far below serious consideration that space could barely be spared for them, is on one level a rhetorical pose. It allows him to approach the subject ironically, as if from the sidelines, and it is contradicted by the evidence of his personal involvement in the festivity that he affects to deplore. He himself wrote speeches to introduce the Earl of Essex on the Elizabethan tiltyard, and in 1614 he spent £2,000 on mounting *The Masque of Flowers* as a wedding gift for James's favourite, the Earl of Somerset.² Clearly, Bacon knew that masques had their uses, that they were intrinsic to the world of power and represented the pursuit of politics by other means. But Bacon's sense that, for all their costliness, masques were essentially toys – that there was a tension between their location at the heart of court life and their status as mere art or triviality – is a perception that recurs across the period, and resonates into the present. It points to a deep contradiction that all studies of masques confront, the difficulty of adequately evaluating a form in which the transcendent meets the contingent, extravagance tips into redundancy, and the

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purposeful and pleasurable are locked in indissoluble embrace. In no other literary medium are the confluences of art and power, imagination and event, quite so unsettling or emphatic.

These days there is little danger of masques being undervalued. Indeed, they have come to be regarded virtually as paradigmatic Renaissance texts, which give uniquely penetrating insights into the dominant cultural and political relationships of their time. Masques were central to the ritual world in which early modern court life took place. They were staged at the very heart of Whitehall, at key moments in the court calendar, and were intrinsic to royal protocol and self-display. With their deliberate and uneconomic wastefulness, they belonged to the systems of spectacle and patronage which Renaissance princes drew around themselves, and contributed to an aristocratic culture characterized by consumption and expense. Their visual and poetic forms introduced into England the symbolic language of modern European kingship, advertising the Stuarts' cultural capital, legitimating their government, and proclaiming the dignity of their new state. Twelfth Night festivals were thus not mere ephemera but showcased the new dynasty's power and prestige, and stood as leading examples of the pleasurable 'work' associated with the early modern court. As today's studies of Renaissance culture have become preoccupied with the power of art and the arts of power, so masques have emerged as exemplary instances of Renaissance cultural production, in which the ineluctable entanglements of pleasure and politics, aesthetics and history are most fully revealed.

Not so long ago such a situation would have been almost unimaginable. For generations of critics, masques were an embarrassment, since their embedment in a particular and known history was so obvious and so compromising. Their frankly political character was fatal to their credibility as art, and prevented them from being read with any seriousness. At best they seemed a superior kind of propaganda, occasionally redeemed by flashes of lyricism and comedy. At worst, they were deplorably self-abasing, tasteless acts of sycophancy or misplaced ingenuity. Even sympathetic critics could not avoid projecting a whiff of disapproval about them. For example, C. H. Herford's thoughtful introduction to the masques in the monumental Oxford edition of Ben Jonson (1925–52) repeatedly pauses to regret that Jonson wasted his energies on 'soulless magnificence' and 'toys so perishable': 'The spectacle remains of the Titan playing with bubbles and butterflies and rainbows, and struggling, not with complete success, yet never with utter failure, to weave enduring art out of these unsubstantial materials.'³ Herford's image of Jonson as a truant genius, squandering his time on unworthy objects, represents the attitudes of many for whom the

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artistic activity of masque-writing was fatally contaminated by its flattery of long-dead princes. His disparaging views were echoed in H. H. Child's review of the Oxford edition's masques, headed 'Embellishing a triviality': 'In his heart of hearts [Jonson] knew that he was attempting the impossible ... Jonson is seen in [this volume] to be constantly labouring to do what even he could never succeed in doing. Within the conventions of the masque he could not make a complete and thorough work of art.'⁴ It would probably have been better, from this perspective, had Jonson written no masques at all. Behind such attitudes one readily detects the formalist assumptions of an older historicism in which the spheres of art and politics were taken to be distinct and antithetical, even incompatible. In such a system, art was not only separate from politics but defined in opposition to it. The artist worked in privacy and freedom, unshackled by political obligations, and the criteria for evaluating his work were purely aesthetic. The great vice was insincerity, and the task of art was to be organic, integrated, and aloof from everyday accidents. Unsurprisingly, this critical tradition could not deal with a form whose political involvements were perpetually on display, impairing what in literary terms could be rated as its achievements. It was impossible to evade the dilemma of having to deplore the poets' flattery of the great while praising the formal beauty and intellectual sophistication which, notwithstanding, masques also seemed to possess.

One necessary achievement of the remarkable critics who in the 1950s and 1960s first recovered the masques for modern scholarship was to make the case for their aesthetic coherence. This was variously seen in their diverse but complementary aspects as literature (expounded in Stephen Orgel's ground-breaking study, *The Jonsonian Masque*), as iconography (exemplified in the essays of D. J. Gordon), and as visual art (in the work of Roy Strong).⁵ Initially this revaluation stayed within formalist coordinates, emphasizing the masques' structural integrity at the expense of, or in spite of, their overtly political dimensions. This was in line with the ahistorical assumptions of the then prevailing New Criticism,⁶ though in fact Gordon and Strong were both products of the Warburg Institute, the scholarship of which did have a vigorous political side: the Warburg tradition sought to put art history onto a sociological basis and was formidably internationalist in outlook.⁷ However, Strong and (particularly) Gordon tended to foreground the arcane aspects of masque symbolism, fostering a corresponding emphasis on their political mysticism and social elitism.⁸ But since that time the firewall between literature and history has collapsed, and the historicisms which have subsequently emerged deny that art has any space which is