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‘Ben Jonson and Masquing Culture at the Jacobean Court’

Although terms such as ‘Renaissance drama’ and ‘early modern theatre’ rightly evoke a sense of ‘public’ theatre (whether outdoors or indoors) it is important to remember that theatre in the period meant far more than the drama of Shakespeare or Middleton as seen at the Globe or the Blackfriars. Indeed, one of the most important forms of theatre was the display and performative nature of court ritual and ceremony. ‘Court entertainments’, then, might include civic entries of the monarch into a city such as London. Similarly, ‘progresses’ (as the court travelled the country and was entertained at aristocratic houses) form another type of elite performance in the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline periods.

However, once James I came to the throne in 1603, after the death of Elizabeth I, it is generally accepted that the early modern English court became more centralised, focussing attention and time more exclusively at Whitehall Palace. This theory is to some extent consolidated by the startling growth in popularity of the court masque in the Jacobean period (the reign of James I, 1603-1625). To summarise, the court masque was a type of performance and was influenced by court theatre on the continent, particularly Italy and Spain. The masque consisted of a series of dances, spectacles, and lavish scenery, costume and display. Although it should not be seen in any way as a kind of precursor to opera, the use of music and dance does allow a comparison at least. Writers such as the poet and public dramatist Ben Jonson supplied the text (in reality a series of speeches and choruses) and the court architect and neo-classicist Inigo Jones supplied the Italianate perspective scenery. Indeed,

throughout the Jacobean period Jonson and Jones were active at court as chief writer and designer (Jones also designed costumes as well as scenery) although occasionally other writers provided the text for Jones's designs. Furthermore, in the Caroline period the two fell out, leaving Jones as the key mastermind behind spectacle at Charles's court.

But in the Jacobean period it is fair to see Jonson was the key theatrical writer for the masques. Crucially, the surviving printed texts show us that the entertainments were not plot-driven, and were very different to the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson for the public stage. Rather, these invitation-only elite performances displayed wealth and extravagance to the court, both in terms of English aristocracy and, perhaps more importantly, to the foreign ambassadors who visited the elite English space of diplomacy and politics. Additionally, because the performers did not, in fact, 'act' but rather danced and took part in the pageantry whilst costumed in luxurious outfits the key difference from the theatre of Shakespeare was the use of aristocratic and even royal performers. Various key male and female aristocrats took their place year after year as masquers whilst members of the royal family also performed. Although James I was always the chief observer of the events, both his sons (Henry and later Charles) danced in various masques, whereas Anna of Denmark, James's royal consort, has been seen in recent criticism as one of the prime-movers behind masquing at the Jacobean court, both in terms of commissions, enthusiasm, and royal performance. Later on, in the Caroline period, the court witnessed not only the masque performances of Queen Henrietta Maria, but for the first time, of the king of England and Scotland.

Clearly, then, the masque problematises our understanding of the early modern stage as somehow 'all-male'. Indeed, the work of critics such as Clare McManus on

Queen Anna and Karen Britland on Queen Henrietta Maria has shown the importance of gendered readings of the masques, whilst the work of Martin Butler and James Knowles helps us to contextualise the masque as part of the politics of court life in early modern England. Key features of historical and critical work include work on performativity and display, costume and ceremony, pageantry and role-play, as well as discussion of patronage, of the importance of who is or isn't chosen to perform, and on the occasion of the masque performance (they were usually only performed once, though this did vary). Furthermore, critics have had much to say about the importance of the courtly location at Whitehall and, to a lesser extent, other royal palaces such as Hampton Court where masques did occasionally take place. But the association of the masque with Whitehall has rightly retained importance, particularly as many of the masques were performed at the various versions of the Banqueting House, including the surviving version by Inigo Jones (not to forget the Rubens ceiling).

Luckily, the Dyce Collection at the National Art Library contains numerous original Jacobean and Caroline masque texts from the period, including many by Ben Jonson (a full list can be provided if requested). Arguably, one of the most important masques was Jonson's first for Whitehall, with *The Masque of Blackness* published as a set with *The Masque of Beauty*. However, it has not been possible to obtain access to this as yet. This is because the Art Library online catalogue points to two copies of the printed text in the Dyce Collection, with one undergoing conservation work. However, upon calling up the other copy it so happens that this is an entirely different masque which has been catalogued incorrectly. Thus *Blackness* and *Beauty* might be revisited once back in the collection at a later date.

Thus, in order to give a flavour of the masques and the ways they could be of interest for the public via display this report focuses upon two Jacobean masques, both by Jonson and in the Dyce collection.

Jonson's *Hymenaei*, London, 1606

- This quarto's title page would be useful for display purposes in an exhibition seeking to go beyond the Shakespeare / Globe concept of early modern theatre. It features the following title:
 "HYMENAEI: OR The Solemnities of Masque, and Barriers, Magnificently performed on the eleventh, and twelfth Nights, from Christmas." As well as offering a full title, this makes clear the occasional nature of the masque (in this case with two performances) and also raises the point that the masque is usually associated with celebration of Christmas entertainments and/or aristocratic marriage at court.
- Secondly, the title-page continues to inform us that the masque was performed "At Court: To the auspicious celebrating of the Marriage-*union*, betweene *Robert*, Earle of *Essex*, and the Lady *Frances*, second Daughter to the most noble Earle of *Suffolke*". This clearly highlights the aristocratic nature of the event as two noble families are united with the blessing of the court and king. However, the marriage would later collapse amid a series of lurid accusations and scandals.
- The title-page names the author as Ben Jonson, and this allows us to see the importance he placed on his own self-presentation as a writer (see report number 2).

- Sigs. A3r – A3v. The first page contains famous remarks by Jonson (continued on to the next page) on the nature and concept of masquing where he refers to the masque and its “remov’d Mysteries”.
- Sig. A4r - we should note Jonson’s learned glosses to the side of the masque-text, as this is clearly indicative of his self-positioning as a neo-classicist. The detailed notes are often a feature of the Jonsonian masque-text, as he describes the action of the performance for both those present or those who can only read about the event.
- Sig. A4r - we can see how Jonson has to retell the action as there is no real plot or narrative as there would be for a public play: “After him a *Youth*, attired in white, bearing another Light, of *white Thorne*, Vnder his arme a litle wicker-*flasket*....”
- On the next page (sig. A4v) we have the first textual remembrance of a Song, including a chorus, and this would be useful as a demonstration to the general public of the importance of song and dance to this type of theatre.
- On sig. B1v - eight dancers who enter to music. Here the text names the actual aristocratic men who performed. For instance, we have “Ear[l] of Arvndell.”
- Similarly, sig. B4v names the eight female masquers such as the “Co[untess] of BEDFORD.”
- On the next page (sig. C1r) Jonson underscores the importance of dance and spectacle: “The Song ended, they daunced forth in Paires, and each Paire with a varied and noble grace; to a rare and full Musique of twelve Lutes.”
Furthermore, “REASON” enters the stage, thus showing the importance of allegorical characterisation to the masque.

- Lastly, on sig. C1v note how nearly the whole page is taken up with Jonson's learned notes, with only 7 lines of poetic text.

Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, London 1609

- Title-page: "THE MASQVE OF QVEENES celebrated *From the House of Fame*: By the most absolute in all State, And Titles. ANNE Queene of Great Britain". The worth of this page is clear in terms of public engagement as the text names the queen as key performer of the masque along "With her Honourable Ladies".
- "White Hall" is named as the performance venue and the exact date of "Febr.[uary] 2. 1609" shows how, just occasionally, we can be very precise about early modern performance.
- On sig. A3r Jonson offers a dedication to the heir to the throne, "HENRY Prince of great Brittain."
- On sig. A4r the text informs us of James's presence as key observer of a masque led by his wife: "His Maiestie, then, being set, and the whole company in full expectation, the part of the *Scene* which first presented it selfe was an ougly *Hell*...." Thus the text reminds us of the scenic nature of Jones's masque designs, a world away from the public theatres such as the Globe or Fortune.
- At the very end of the printed text (sig. F1v) Jonson lists the royal and aristocratic performers headed by "The Qveenes MAIESTY." Thus the masque closes with a reminder of royal and aristocratic performance as well as a sharp reminder of the existence of female performativity and theatrical display.

Additional information: Miniatures at the V&A

NB: The following are obviously known to the museum and the wider public. But they have been selected as all pictures can be linked to theatre for the appropriate department. The members of the monarchy were patrons of early modern theatre companies. Similarly, Lady Hunsdon was the wife of Henry Carey (Lord Chamberlain) and there are also two portraits of female court masquers.

From Microfiche

Nicholas Hilliard:

- Elizabeth I. 622-1857. Fiche 13/D3
- James I. P147-1910. Fiche 13/D9
- Anna of Denmark. P148-1910. Fiche 13/D10
- Charles I. P150-1910. Fiche 13/D11
- Frederick V, Elector Palatine. P151-1910. Fiche 13/D12
- Elizabeth I. M811935. Fiche 13/E5
- James I. P3-1937. Fiche 13/E6
- Princess Elizabeth. P41937. Fiche 13/87
- Elizabeth I. P11974. Fiche 14/A8
- Elizabeth I. P231975. Fiche 14/B1
- James I. P25-1975. Fiche 14/B3

Isaac Oliver:

- Anna of Denmark. FA689. Fiche 19/B9
- Prince Henry. P1491910. Fiche 19/C5
- Lady Hunsdon. P39-1941. Fiche 19/D2
- Masquer. P3-1942. Fiche F19/D6

Peter Oliver:

- Queen of Bohemia. D88. Fiche 19/E12

From John Murdoch, *Seventeenth-Century English Miniatures in the Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum*

- Charles I, by Gerbier, p. 11. 621-1882
- James I, by Palmer, p. 15. P12-1958
- James I, by Hoskins, p. 48. P27-1954
- Charles I, by Hoskins, p. 50. P39-1942
- Masquer, p. 86. P2-1969
- Charles II as Prince, p. 93. P.115-1910

Additional Material: Portraits (not Miniatures)

- Charles and Henrietta Maria, after Van Dyke, 1632. 13421869
- Henrietta Maria, by Petitot, **but 1700**. 6531882. In store