QUEENES AND JONSON’S MASQUES OF MIRRORS

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IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, Jonson’s court masques have enjoyed a new critical revival as Jonsonian scholars attempt to justify the works’ existence in a variety of ways. The crux of the critical issue: Jonson proclaims in his poetry that fame and ambition are “an equal slavery” (Discoveries 8: 1375) and in his Conversations with Drummond that he would not flatter “though he saw Death” (1: 141); why, then, would this arbiter of literary decorum bend his ideals for uncertain reward in a type of royal entertainment known more for display than for literature? Some see the productions as an illustration of Stuart culture and focus on the specific “present occasions” of the masques to explain historically why Jonson chooses the specific images and references in these encomiastic works,¹ while others defend Jonson’s seeming betrayal of his avowed self-sufficiency by pointing out methods he employs to subvert his hyperbolic praise in order to elevate his own position as poet and arbiter of taste.²

Both approaches, I believe, are correct in their emphasis on the specific occasion of the masques and on Jonson’s unique treatment of the event, empowering himself as he exalts and elevates James’s court. But most agree that Jonson empowers himself by dismissing the visual and privileging his literary contribution to the masque form. If that were the case, why would Jonson choose the particular visual/musical/terpsichorean spectacle of the court masque to insert himself in the Jacobean patronage system? How can the Jonsonian masque somehow reconcile its creator’s desire for independence with his desperate need for court favor? Jonson accomplishes this feat by monopolizing on the “mixed media” aspect of the masque, crafting his creation into a visual, philosophical, and literal reflection/correction/prediction of James’s court, a type of “mirror for magistrates.” Monopolizing on the physical and psychological mystique of the mirror image, Jonson creates, angles, and interprets the reflection to include himself in the image, forming his written text into interactive and visual play with the royal family and court. Leading the Jacobean court through a type of Lacanian “mirror-stage,” Jonson retains his independence and dignity while his masque, the
mirror and mediator of his own making, frames Jonson within the privileged reflection of the Jacobean court.

The masque was the best type of court mediator for Jonson because its very form (or lack thereof) is conducive to mediation: historically, it is an “in-between” genre. Part dance, part music, part drama, part poetry, and mostly spectacle—the masque, both before and after Jonson, has earned little but criticism.\(^3\) Because of its combination of elements, the masque form has been likened to other examples of mixed forms, from “theatrical emblems” (Limon, *Masque* 43) to MTV videos (Bohrer), and the form has even been seen as a secular counterpart to the cult of religious images (Norbrook, “The Reformation” 97) and the Catholic Mass (Parry, *Golden Age* 44). More objectively, masques are defined as “dramatic entertainments involving dances and disguises, in which the spectacular and musical elements predominated over plot and character” (“Masque” 628). The use of past tense in this definition helps to highlight the “occasional” and game-like aspects of Jonson’s masques—they are not so much considered a genre of literature as an occasion, a one- or two-time event costing thousands of pounds and epitomizing the ideals and opulence of James’s court at the specific moment of performance. Though any speaking or acting parts were performed by professionals, the heart of the masque was the appearance of a group of noble personages dressed in elaborate disguise to celebrate that particular event and to honor their monarch. These well-known members of court performed specially designed and well-rehearsed dances, resolved any conflicts aided by the presence of their monarch in the persona of some deity, then took members of the court audience to join them in the concluding dance of the revels, in which the idealized fiction of the masque and the reality of the court became one.

Most Jonson scholars take his own comments on his contribution to the masque form as proof of his dismissal of the visual aspects of his masques. After all, the scenery, costumes, and special effects that tended to overshadow Jonson’s text were the province of Inigo Jones, Jonson’s main collaborator and fierce competitor for credit of the success of the Jacobean masques.\(^4\) Critics cite numerous comments that confirm Jonson’s disagreement with Jones’s concept of the masque as “nothing else but pictures with Light and Motion” (Chambers 83), most emphasizing the ephemerality of Jones’s work. Jonson clearly sets out his views in the preface to *Hymenaei*: Jones’s visuals, appealing to the senses, “are but momentarie, and merely taking,” while his own poetic contribution, directed to the understanding, remains “impressing, and lasting” (7: 209).