

A Short Reminiscence of Masque: A Forgotten Genre

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Abstract

It sometimes happens in the history of national amusements that a name survives, while the thing itself is forgotten. This has been remarkably the case with the Court Masques, which combined all that was exquisite in the genre of poetry, painting, music, song, dancing. This happened at a time when the public theatre was still in its nascent stage of development.. But while the public theatre continued and flourished for a long time; without scenes, without dresses, without an orchestra, the court masques displayed scenic and dramatic exhibitions, with exquisite magnificence, imaginative fancy and miraculous art. The grandeur and the magnificence that was displayed in the genius masque by the playwrights at that time is, in some sense unparalleled except for the modern spectacle of the Opera. The present paper proposes to illuminate that part of history which is losing its due significance in this fast forwarding modern world. And to enlighten that spectacular drama form which was the very heart of Stuart court.

Keywords: masque, Stuart court, disguise, per formative art, allegorical drama

Masque as defined by Webster dictionary is a short allegorical dramatic entertainment of 16th and 17th century performed by Masked characters. M.H Abrams discusses it as,

“.. an elaborate form of court entertainment that combined poetic drama, music, song, dance, splendid doffed their masks and were joined by the audience”.(210)

The origin of masque in England came from an ancient custom called humming in which actors have to perform plays without speaking in which they reenact the stories, myth, legends of mainly Saint George .The word murmur comes from the old English word mum meaning silent .This art form which was generally associated with Christmas involved masque players who would proceed through the streets to the great hall accompanied by music and torch lights. For the sake of entertainment of the masses, the disguised players

would make fun of their superiors, but since they were hiding behind disguises, they had no fear of retaliation.

A form of entertainment known as masque first became popular in the court of king Henry VIII and these lavish production starred members of the royal court . These lavish and spectacular dramatic court entertainments were often in verse and usually performed in masque. These masques were often allegorical stories which suggested parallel between the person being honoured or the occasion being celebrated and some mythological personage or event. Henry himself is known to have taken part in a masque performed as part of the Twelfth Night festivities of 1512, and masques flourished and became a regular part of Christmas celebrations throughout his reign. After king Henry's death, his son Edward VI of England took the throne but the young king only lived shortly, dying in 1553. After young Edward died, Queen Mary of the Scots took over the throne, but she was not particularly interested in court amusements and entertainments, hence masque took a back seat until Mary died and queen Elizabeth ascended the throne. The virgin queen was fond of sports and courtly amusements and theatre. Masques were performed during her reign to impress her. The queen's favourite courtier Robert Dudley once spent a great fortune preparing entertainment for one of the queens visits he hired George Gascoigne to create a new masque for Elizabeth George wrote the song of Proteus:

¶ The song of *Protheus*.

from

THE PRINCELY PLEASURES

AT KENELWORTH CASTLE

by George Gascoigne

O Noble Queene give eare,
to this my floating muse:
And let the right of readie will,
my little skill excuse.
For heardmen of the seas,
sing not the sweetest notes:
The winds and waves do roare and crie
Where *Phoebus* seldome floates:
Yet since I doe my best,
in thankfull wise to sing:
Vouchsafe (good Queene) that calme consent
these words to you may bring.
We yeeld you humble thanks,
in mightie *Neptunes* name.
Both for our selves and therewithall,
for yonder seemely Dame.
A Dame: whom none but you,
deliver could from thrall:
Ne none but you deliver us,

from loitring life withall.
 She pined long in paine,
 as overworne with woes:
 And we consumde in endles care,
 to fend her from her foes.
 Both which you set at large,
 most like a faithfullfreend:
 Your noble name be praisde therefore,
 and so my song I ende.

Under the influence of Gascoigne's works, one of the most common themes of masque was of traditional heroes defending their vulnerable women. But this theme was not appreciated by Queen Elizabeth, who referred to herself as a prince. Hence masque still could not reach the same status that it enjoyed. It was the rule of James I of England that saw the return of the masque to popularity. He sponsored the great cavalier poet Ben Jonson for writing masques. Masque achieved its highest level of sophistication and regained its lost glory and its grandeur in the courts of James I and Charles I. It actually regained new heights as it was most favoured by king James who started hiring professional writers to create court masques. One such professional writer was Ben Jonson, who composed more than twenty five masques. The literary genius of Jonson combined with the creative genius of stage designer Inigo Jones, and the masque was transformed into an inspiring and impressive extravaganza. Although masque could not flourish in the modern times and has almost become extinct, but Jonson gave new literary heights to genre which displayed his wit, versatility and contained some of his best lyric poetry. Though Ben Jonson's works were entertaining and remarkable in their literary merit, but his collaboration and relationship with Inigo Jones took masque to a whole new level. Inigo Jones travelled abroad at the end of the century and was influenced by Italian architecture in the early 1600s. He was also a great architect and while designing the masque put his genius and experience to making some innovations in the form. Masques during these times owed greatly to Jones who added an element of grandeur to these performances and Jonson who perfected the literary aspect of this art form. Jonson was the most important and prominent court masque from 1605 to 1625, reflecting James I's and Anne's literary tastes and political awareness. Jonson has unified various elements of the masque into a stronger literary and dramatic form to express the glory of the monarch. This was also the time when it was crucial for the monarchy to strengthen and intensify its authority and hold. Thus apart from entertaining the audiences, masque had a strong political undercurrent and purpose. Since Jonson was hired and commissioned by the court to write masks, he used the form to manifest the wishes of the court and praise the monarchy. The Stuart monarchs used this form to their advantage to foster an exalted conception of the divine right of kings.

While James I did not perform in the masques, Anne did, and she also began to utilize the masque for more political purposes and "diplomatic occasions" in addition to the traditional celebrations of marriages (Barroll 123). Milton's *A Maske* is used in just such a way, to celebrate an official state occasion. Jonson believed masques could both honor the

monarch and instruct him in proper rule. For this purpose, in such works as *The Masque of Queens* (1609), he devised the anti-masque, disruptive intervals which provided counterpoint to the calm order of the masque and which suggested the consequences of vice.

Jonson's elaborate themes were always supplemented by Jones' elaborate designs for presenting visual illusions and wonders which were rare in the times in which professional plays were performed on an essentially bare stage. After the death of James I, Jonson could not retain his position in court but under the patronage of Charles I, Jonson continued to collaborate on masques with a series of poets, including Thomas Carew and William D'Avenant. After Ben Jonson's retirement masque lost their literary value and became mainly vehicles for grandeur and spectacle, losing the essential purpose behind it. It was during this period that the masque reached its greatest degree of extravagance, and presented visions of the grandeur and wisdom of Charles' rule. Puritans were gaining hold in the politics and they protested against masque performances, criticizing it for the excessive amounts of money spent on the productions.

Early Puritan critics of the masque viewed the performances as extravagant and frivolous and also as idolatrous as many masques represented the idea of monarchs as gods. Subsequent historians, regarded masques as works of propaganda, because James I and Charles I were absolutist monarchs and many masques were used to flatter the tyrannical kings. However the twentieth century salvaged the lost reputation of the masques because the critics observed that Renaissance culture highly valued display, performance and both visual and verbal elaboration; from this perspective masques can be seen as rich tapestries of symbols and images. Various scholars have given different interpretations of masques and apart from the spectacular visual arts the masques are being analyzed for their themes. The 20th century critics have found the contemporary themes and influences reflected in various works. For example, Scholars such as Stephen Orgel and Carol Marsh-Lockett have analyzed masques as didactic works that served the purpose of instructing the monarchs on the functions and proper uses of power. Yumna Siddiqi, Marion Wynne-Davies, and others have explored gender and race relations depicted in the masque. The diversity of such approaches to the study of masques proves that have a deeper meaning and value as they offer complex reflections of their age, and project the idealized, if not the actual social order.

In Mr. Gifford's Memoirs of Ben Jonson. The characteristics of masques are for the first time elaborately opened with the clear and penetrating spirit of a dramatic critic, "The Masque, as it attained its highest degree of excellence, admitted of dialogue, singing, and dancing; these were not independent of one another, but combined, by the introduction of some ingenious fable, into a harmonious whole. When the plan was formed, the aid of the sister-arts was called in; for the essence of the masque was pomp and glory. Moveable scenery of the most costly and splendid kind was lavished on the masque; the most celebrated masters were employed on the songs and dances; and all that the kingdom afforded of vocal and instrumental excellence was employed to embellish the exhibition. Thus magnificently constructed, the masque was not committed to ordinary performers. It was composed, as Lord Bacon says, for princes, and by princes it was played. Of these masques, the skill with which their ornaments were designed, and the inexpressible grace

with which they were executed, appear to have left a vivid impression on the mind of Jonson. His genius awakes at once, and all his faculties attune to sprightliness and pleasure. He makes his appearance, like delight 'accompanied with Grace, Love, Harmony, Revel, Sport, and Laughter.'(27)

After enjoying a great vogue, the masque declined rapidly in England, but it survived for another century at the royal court of France and at other European courts. Many of the forms and characters were gradually incorporated into later forms such as ballet, opera, and pantomime.

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