

**Performing Love in Ben Jonson's Masques**  
**Chris Hill**  
**Medieval-Renaissance Conference XVIII, University of Virginia at Wise**

Much scholarship about the court masque emphasizes the extent to which masques are a tool of the court, not of the poet; our masque writer-- Jonson, Daniel, Townshend, Carew--is therefore obliged to use the materials provided to him by the king, and in the way the king wants them to be used. Stephen Kogan emphasizes this fundamental courtly orientation of the genre in its invention as well as its uses: "while the intellectual soul of the masque pointed toward eternity, however, the political content of the genre was directed toward time and history, for every performance celebrated its royal audience and was an occasion of state and majesty. The masque, in fact, was rooted in the world of the monarchy and in the 1630s became the most complete artistic expression of the Stuart court."<sup>1</sup> we find this basic notion repeated in multiple places, and indeed this is our basic template for understanding the court masque of the Jacobean and Caroline periods.

--Because of the specific nature of the genre, our masque writer must accomplish several things at one time. He must make each masque responsive to the occasion for which it is devised and performed; he must make it politically useful; he must entertain and amaze his audience; he must furthermore make the masque morally useful. In short, he must articulate the relationship between the obvious magnificence of the show and the virtue inhabiting and animating that magnificence. In this context, Jonson is often read as

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Kogan, *The Hieroglyphic King* 30.

both praiser and educator: he shows the court what it wants to see in itself, yet also attempts to show the court what it should, by its own lights, aspire to.<sup>2</sup>

The problem is that while everyone knows what masque aspires to, many recognize in masque the overwhelming possibility for abject flattery. There's the famous line from the opening of Beaumont & Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy* that describes masques as tied to rules of flattery, for instance. Francis Bacon famously calls them "toys." Even Samuel Daniel, himself a masque writer, mocks those who try to be overly serious in masque as more or less being too clever by half.

--Jonson's answer is his famous preface to *Hymenaei*, [A] which asserts the high moral usefulness of masque. To most fully explore the "removed mysteries" Jonson invokes here, I would like to talk about Jonson's masques of love—his use of love in masque, and his use of masque to talk about love in this particular context. In doing so, I want to explore how this focus on love allows Jonson to fittingly praise the monarch.

---

But since I started by saying that the masque is a tool of the king, I want to start with King James's particular use for the notion of love, particularly in his understanding of the relationship between the sovereign and his subjects. As we know, love plays an important rhetorical role in much of his political writing. In his *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, for instance, his preferred metaphor for describing the relationship between king and subject draws from divinity and fatherhood: "By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation: And as the Father his fatherly duty is bound to care for the nourishing, education, and vertuous gouernment of

---

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), particularly p. 38.

his children; euen so is the king bound to care for all his subjects.”<sup>3</sup> This bond of familial affection and duty, the king’s provision and protection, is the framework for the king’s proper living-out of his exalted place.

The *Basilikon Doron* uses similar metaphors when discussing the king’s treatment of his subject, focusing on the image of the king as servant-like and affectionate in his dealings. In this context, James’ advice that his son “embrace trew magnanimitie” and “foster trew humilitie” is consistent with the image of king as father-figure—a man quick to show love and concern, but able (if reluctantly) to use strict discipline, and in the end, as James himself puts it, able to “lead and allure them to the loue of vertue, and hatred of vice.” Again, the actions of the king flow out of paternalistic love for his subjects—an affective response by the king that motivates his policies towards his subjects.

Jonson’s 1611 masque *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly* highlights the ways a poet might express fitting love for the monarch; it also shows the usefulness of love as a vehicle for praise. Opening with a “wild music,” then presenting a bound Cupid being led by a sphinx, the antimasque immediately airs a debate between rival definitions of love. The sphinx accuses Love of being a tyrannical, disorderly force, and gloats over the fact that she has shackled such a dangerous entity:

Now they shall not need to tremble  
 When you threaten, or dissemble  
 Any more, and though you see  
 Whom to hurt, you ha’ not free  
 Will to act your rage. (12-16)

---

<sup>3</sup> *King James VI and I, Political Writings*. Ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62.

Love, on the other hand, asserts that he in fact preserves order—"I rather strive / How to keep the world alive, / And uphold it; without me / All again would chaos be" (24-27).

One view depicts Cupid as a dangerous figure—his well-deserved bondage frees spectator and masquer alike from the unpredictable, and irresistible, strike from his arrow. In the rival view, however, his captivity threatens the order of the world; love is necessary, and cannot be discarded, imprisoned, or destroyed without great cost. Which view should we believe? Both are views with strong precedent.

Cupid, meanwhile, must also provide a response to the sphinx's riddle, and though he appeals to the audience for help, none arrives. The riddle occasions some witty back-and-forth between captor and captive, but Cupid cannot answer correctly. The crisis moment comes; the follies menacingly burst forth to tear him limb from limb; and as we know to expect, Cupid is saved from sure destruction by outside intervention.

The point where the antimasque turns to masque teaches an important lesson, to which Jonson offers a clue in an explanatory note inserted just after the dance of the Follies: "This shows that love's expositions are not always serious till it be divinely instructed, and that sometimes it may be in the danger of ignorance and folly, who are the mother and issue; for no folly but is born of ignorance" (211-219, *n.*). Love, while powerful, is not sufficient unto himself; he requires assistance—provided in this case by the priests of the muses, whose song gives Cupid the guidance he needs:

Gentle love, be not dismayed.

See, the muses pure and holy

By their priests have sent thee aid

Against this brood of folly.

It is true that Sphinx their dame  
 Had the sense first from the muses,  
 Which in uttering she doth lame,  
 Perplexeth and abuses.  
 But they bid that thou shouldst look  
 In the brightest face here shining,  
 And the same, as would a book,  
 Shall help thee in divining. (228-239)

And with that, of course, Cupid sees the king, and in seeing the king understands the meaning of the riddle—which is itself the meaning of the masque. King James is the answer to the riddle as well as the means by which the riddle can be answered. High praise indeed. But for our purposes: Love is strong—his power is THE part of the sphinx’s accusation that is true—but his power is unfocused, and he is unable to be fully himself until he is pointed to the king who is the source and focus of true love. Once he is pointed to the right place, the antimasque is resolved, creating room for the revels.

Jonson’s Twelfth Night masque for 1612, *Love Restored*, is probably one of Jonson’s most self-conscious and inwardly focused on its own conditions of production. If *Love Freed* had the luxury of being highly conceptual and unabashedly platonic, rooted in myth, *Love Restored* has many more pressing concerns in its own moment. The problem here is not a matter of love rightly focused, but of love rightly (or even sufficiently) expressed. This careful self-examination is set in motion when the masquerado opening the production reluctantly admits that there will be no masque: **[B]**

In troth, ladies, I pity you all. You are here in expectation of a device tonight, and I am afraid you can do little else but expect it. Though I dare not show my face, I can speak truth under a vizard. Good faith, an 't please your majesty, your masquers are all at a stand; I cannot think your majesty will see any show tonight, at least worth your patience. Some two hours since, we were all in that forwardness, our dances learned, our masquing attire on and attired. A pretty fine speech was taken up o' the poet too, which if he never be paid for now, it's no matter; his wit costs him nothing. Unless we should come in like a morris-dance, and whistle our ballad ourselves, I know not what we should do: we ha' no other musician to play our tunes but the wild music here, and the rogue play-boy that acts Cupid is got so hoarse, your majesty cannot hear him half the breadth o' your chair. (1-16)

To add to the initial confusion and disorder, a figure calling himself Cupid comes forth and excoriates the masquerado ("thou common corruption of all manners and places that admit thee!") for taking part in what amounts to massive waste and expense: [C]

I am neither player nor masquer, but the god himself whose deity is here profaned by thee. Thou and thy like think yourselves authorized in this place to all license of surquidry. But you shall find custom hath not so grafted you here but you may be rent up and thrown out as unprofitable evils. I tell thee, I will have no more masquing; I will not buy a false and fleeting delight so dear. The merry madness of one hour shall not cost me the repentance of an age. (26-33)

The expense is bad enough on its own, but what's worse is that the priorities it betrays could very well prove to be the ruin of the state. Marked by idleness, frivolity, and presumption, masque consumes an enormous amount of resources in the service of a fundamentally ephemeral and inconsequential pastime that by its very nature is wasteful. It is not only a fleeting moment of "vanity," but is itself the occasion for an entire range of other follies. The delight it offers may be real enough, but its costs are simply too high. In addition to a performance that will not take place, then, we are faced with a Cupid that despises and condemns the very thing that gives him life and breath.

This is clearly a very different kind of Cupid than the one we saw in the last antimasque. Indeed, he is apparently the problem. His complaint that masque is too expensive, and that it is more productive of decadence than virtue, marks him as a miser and a moralist. His advice: reverse the moral decay by embracing frugality. Play card and parlor games. Remain at home in old clothes rather than at the revels in new. This will keep him—"Cupid"—from falling into base disrepute even as it rescues the court from the effects of its own excesses. His critique initially sounds powerful, because to all appearances it is uttered from a position of authority: one of the central mythic figures of court mythology and revelry. The masquerado's puzzled response to Cupid's invective—"either I am very stupid, or this a reformed Cupid" (155)—shows that however wild eyed, this Cupid cannot be simply dismissed.

We are also treated to Robin Goodfellow, who has tried all night to get into the banquet hall to see a big production—and in contrast to our Cupid's moralistic rigidity, Robin relishes the expense, the glory. And here are the alternatives the antimasque offers—the riddle to be solved, so to speak. Is the expense, the magnificence of masque,

a good thing or a sign of corruption. The false Cupid's—actually Plutus's—concern about cost seems reasonable, since masques were famously expensive. He therein faithfully echoes moralistic concerns about the usefulness and propriety of courtly entertainments, if in a fraudulent shape and for self-interested reasons. At the same time, surely his complaint about expense misses much about what that expense is engaged for. We must determine if love circumscribed and bound by Plutus's moralistic rule-making is good and true, or if the true love is unfettered, wearing the extravagant face abhorred by the Cupid but embraced by Robin.

In fact, it is Robin that exposes the false Cupid as Plutus, and allows the true Cupid to come forth--the resolution of the antimasque, and the start of the pageantry he came to see. Cupid's first act is to expose Plutus's vociferous moralism as simple greed, then to banish him from the precincts of the court. Love, particularly as manifest at court, should be free from concerns about money—"Thou has too long usurped my rites; / I now am lord of mine own nights." (214-15). Furthermore, Cupid points out, he offers considerably more security and power to the monarch than Plutus ever could:

The majesty that here doth move  
 Shall triumph, more secured by love  
 Than all his earth, and never crave  
 His aids, but force him as a slave. (232-35)

The most convincing argument that Plutus marshaled against the extravagancies of masque is at once swept out from under his feet.

So at least part of the argument is settled: Plutus' place at court is revoked not only because he is fraudulent, but because despite his protestations to the contrary he in

fact lacks the power of love—power to keep the monarch safe and well, power to secure the rest of the realm. Cupid thus takes his proper place at court, while the imposter is rightly banished to the hinterlands to live among the “discontented tribes” (229)—far from the seats of power, influence, and courtly grace. Love of money may have the appearance of virtue, but when compared to true love, it is easily unmasked as greed. And greed—joined with the miserliness with which it so often goes hand-in-hand—has no place at court. But Cupid does more than repudiate and displace Plutus; he also provides a self-contained argument for the significance and high purpose of masque. As Cupid presents the masquers, he in effect shows how and why their presence is so important—why these shows are in fact the most fitting expression of royal virtue: **[D]**

See, here are ten,  
 The spirits of court and flower of men,  
 Led on by me, with flamed intents,  
 To figure the ten ornaments  
 That do each courtly presence grace.  
 Nor will they rudely strive for place,  
 One to precede the other, but  
 As music them in form shall put,  
 So will they keep their measures true,  
 And make still their proportions new,  
 Till all become one harmony  
 Of honor and of courtesy,  
 True valor and urbanity,

Of confidence, alacrity,  
 Of promptness and of industry,  
 Hability, reality.  
 Nor shall those graces ever quit your court,  
 Or I be wanting to supply their sport. (238-255)

The ten courtly ornaments—each embodied, in a significant and unmistakable gesture, by a particular courtier—are called forth individually, to make sure that each virtue is given its due. And indeed, what we notice is that these are specifically courtly virtues, related intimately to the internal workings of the court itself, and ending significantly with “reality,” or loyalty. Yet Cupid takes special care to articulate and reinforce the harmony between all of the various ornaments. Love subordinates, guides, and places each virtuous quality so that there is no hint of competition or discord between them—as is fitting for servants of the king. Guided by love, they are able to join in “measures true,” signifying the art of dance and the sense of moderation and proportion that makes each single virtue a component part of a harmonious whole.

And it is masque alone that can demonstrate the crucial connection between love and virtue in such a way that the virtues are recognized in their essence. When Cupid presents the masquers as the courtly virtues, he also takes great pains to point out the link between the virtues and the music and dance that shows them in their proper proportions and relationships. When Robin is able to direct the “powerful beams” of the king’s virtue so as to free Cupid from his fetters, he also frees notions of the king’s virtue from any tie they may have had with his personal wealth. He does not depend on “so earthy an idol” for his status (180-187). And indeed, in the list of courtly ornaments, wealth does not

appear. The center and source of masque, whatever its extravagancies, is the virtue and light embodied in the monarch. The only response to that virtue and light is love, and love's manifestations may or may not include great expense. To be overly concerned about the expense, or even the profitability of the proceedings, is to place a limitation on love when it should be expressed in its full liberality and extravagance—magnificent love befits a magnificent ruler.

*Love Freed* shows that love is most powerful when rightly directed, and offers the king as its proper end and focus; *Love Restored* shows love rightly expressed in its relation to communal courtly values. Both masques end in praise: these manifestations of love have as their object the bestowal of praise on the monarch, even as they use debates about love's aims and expression to show the ways he is worthy of that praise. Love provides, in other words, a positive rationale for the praise—other than the most basic generic concern mandating that praise and masque go hand-in-hand. This perhaps solves the most basic question—i.e., how Jonson justifies masque and makes it meaningful: he does so by showing how masque illuminates love's relationship to the good and the virtuous, and thereby makes his praise for the monarch worth something.