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Teaching and Contesting Royal Obedience: The Case of the Stuart Court Masques

Effie Botonaki

The Stuart court masques were staged to present James I and Charles I as wise, virtuous, powerful, and divinely appointed rulers. Although the official purpose of these masques was to construct and promote idealized images of the Kings they were written for, often enough, they reveal precisely those aspects of the Stuart government that had to be concealed, excused or beautified. Furthermore, masques fail to contain the subversive ideas they occasionally give voice to, and eventually bring on the royal stage the conflicting viewpoints that circulated at the time regarding the position and power of kings. For the reasons above, masques demonstrate the gradual decline of monarchical power – a process that was completed in 1649 with Charles's execution on a scaffold erected outside the Banqueting House, where the most illustrious court masques of his reign had been staged. As this essay will conclude, the Stuart masques were caught up in an unresolved contradiction: while trying to teach blind obedience to an infallible monarch, they actually challenged all royal claims to absolute authority.

Court masques were a popular form of royal entertainment during the reigns of James I and Charles I. These performances took place in the palace and had an exclusive audience: the royal family, select members of the court and, on several occasions, foreign royalty and ambassadors. Professional actors and musicians held the speaking and singing parts, whereas the key but mute roles were played by courtiers or members of the royal family. These mute protagonists, dressed in outlandish, expen-

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sive costumes, usually represented glorious mythological or allegorical figures, and performed carefully choreographed dances. At the end of their performance the masquers “took out” members of the audience to dance with them in a dramatic gesture symbolizing and reflecting the union and harmony that supposedly characterized not only the court but also the kingdom.

Regardless of the official theme of each masque, the underlying meaning of all these spectacles was the glorification of their patron and prime member of the audience, the King. Masques celebrated James I and Charles I as wise, virtuous, powerful and divinely appointed rulers, and there are reasons to assume that both Kings, to some extent at least, consciously used these court entertainments to promote imposing images of themselves. This is the main reason why masques were overlooked for centuries: they were read simply as exaggerated glorifications of the Kings for whom they were written and were thus dismissed as naive forms of monarchical propaganda. The attention that masques have received in the last few decades, however, has exposed this view as oversimplifying. Stephen Orgel, David Lindley, Jerzy Limon, David Bevington, Peter Holbrook, Clare McManus, Martin Butler, and Barbara Ravelhofer, among others, have revealed the complexity and interpretative wealth of these texts. As this essay will illustrate, the Stuart court masques were sites of contest between monarchical and anti-monarchical ideology, participating thus in the heated political debates of that tumultuous period. Contrary to what we might expect, these grand spectacles often allowed their audiences glimpses of kings who were far from perfect. While masques might have been thought to have tried to teach blind obedience to the “infallible” monarch, indeed, in several cases they unwittingly presented the King as unworthy of the people’s respect and submission, cancelling in this way their didactic purpose and function.

During the masque performances, the King and some of his most distinguished guests would be seated on a raised platform facing the stage, which was called “the state”; the King himself was sitting on a throne, under a canopy. The rest of the audience were placed on two sides, facing the stage and the platform where the King sat. The monarch was therefore the focal point of the performance – at once the most privileged viewer *and* the centre of both the players’ and the audience’s attention. Furthermore, the King was in visual control of everyone in the room and could take advantage of his privileged position to approve or disapprove, direct, and *teach* both the masquers and the spectators. The King’s placement within this spatial arrangement, coupled

with the status and power conventionally attributed to him by the theme of the masques, turned him into an actor too. As Helen Cooper has commented, in these performances “the action emanates from the chair of state – it begins when the King takes his place, and describes the conditions brought about by his presence” (137). Let us not forget either that sometimes there was a more overt interaction between the stage and the King: the chorus made direct addresses to him, the masquers offered him gifts, or underwent beneficial transformations just by being looked upon by him. The theatricality of the King’s presence in these spectacles was reinforced by his placement on a raised platform, which was a kind of stage itself; this reminds us vividly of what James had written in his *Basilikon Doron*: “A king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly do behold” (qtd. in Kernan 19). James’s statement reveals his awareness that his position was very similar to that of an actor playing his part in front of an audience. In court masques, though, it was not “all the people” that beheld the king, but only his favourites, and this inevitably limited the potential impact of the monarch’s “performance.”

James was more keen on theatrical performances than his predecessor, Elizabeth, and this is proved not only by the large number of such entertainments in his court, but also by the amount of money he spent on them. During James’s reign, thirty-seven masques were performed in his court and their extraordinary cost was a constant cause of friction between the King and his Council (see Sullivan Ch. 5). James did not seem to be particularly interested in the artistic aspect of the various masques he sponsored, but rather in what his involvement in their production signified, and what role they could play in his self-fashioning: the new King apparently realized that by supporting these performances he would promote himself as a patron of the Arts, and he could also use them to project upon himself the image of the ideal monarch. As Graham Parry has argued, James, and later on Charles too, “felt the masque to be indispensable to their concept of state, for they continued to fund these shows well beyond their means . . . they knew that ‘to induce a courtly miracle’ was to vindicate the mysterious power of majesty that still held men in awe” (“Politics of the Jacobean Masque” 115).

The performance of these “miracles” in front of the court audience, members of which were often masquers themselves, made the spectators not only witnesses of but also participants in this magic. The masque performances made projections not only upon the King, but upon the masquers and audience too. If the monarch was an earthly God, then his subjects/believers, who were made in his image, were

capable of developing some of his perfect qualities too, on condition that they submitted to his authority and followed his teachings. In this respect, masques did not only try to idealize the King but his followers too, attributing to them characteristics that they did not necessarily have, but that they *could* have, if they were obedient to him.

Masques frequently presented James as a Sun or a bright star which diffuses its light and beneficial influence across the whole realm. One of the first masques staged in James's court, Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* (1605), presents the King as a "bright Sol," "who forms all beauty with his sight" (5, ll. 166, 171). In this masque the daughters of Niger travel from Ethiopia to Britain to be rid of their black colour by the cleansing rays of the British ruler; James will perform this miracle just by looking at these "luckless creatures" (4, l. 142) since he is "a sun/Whose beams shine day and night, and are of force / To blanch an Ethiop and revive a cor'se" (5, ll. 224-226). James was presented in a similar manner in later masques too: in Campion's *The Lord Hay's Masque* (1607) he was depicted as Phoebus (26, l. 316), in Chapman's *The Memorable Masque* (1613) as a "Briton Sun" (91, l. 643), and in Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), as "Hesperus," "The brightest star" (121, ll. 166, 167). The Sun metaphor was taken up by James himself in his discussion of the qualities and function of monarchs; according to James, the "glistening worldly glorie of Kings is given them by God" so that "their persons as brighte lampes of godlines and vertue may, going in & out before their people, give light to all their steppes" (quoted in Kogan 43). Masques also employed mythical figures to stress James's supposed beneficial influence upon his people and, especially, his divine status: he was described as "an earthly deity" (Chapman 87, l. 523), an omnipresent king who acted as Jove "bear[ing] the thunder" (Jonson, *Golden Age Restored* 102, l. 5). This representation of James echoes once again the King's own ideas about the divine origin of Kings, which he repeatedly elaborated upon in his writings and speeches (see Odom 373-375).

Masques painted a flattering picture of James throughout his reign, but in the first years after his succession, claims that he was a virtuous and wise ruler were particularly strong. The first Jacobean nuptial masque, Jonson's *Barriers at a Marriage* (1606), for instance, claimed that the King's "innocence" was "without spot or gall" and that "his rule and judgement" were "divine" (17, ll. 282, 280). This representation was facilitated by the peace and prosperity that characterized the beginning of Jacobean rule. The King's care to avoid military confrontations with rival countries was seen by his advocates rather as proof of his divine wisdom than a sign of weakness, and enabled him to boast that he had

brought peace and harmony in the united, under his rule, kingdom. Such views are present in Jonson's *Love Restored* (1612), which argued that James's court had always been, and would always continue to be, characterized by "harmony . . . honour . . . courtesy, True valour . . . confidence . . . industry," and that these virtues were diffused throughout Britain (72, ll. 235-39).

Equally frequent in masques was the claim that the people not only acknowledged and appreciated their King's positive qualities, but that they also loved him. As the years went by, however, there were increasingly frequent signs that Jacobean rule actually had many flaws. In the eyes of his contemporaries, James turned into a King who would rather occupy himself with pastimes like hunting than with affairs of the state, leaving important decisions to be made by others (Ashton 9). He also squandered vast amounts of money on masques, banquets and expensive gifts to friends at times of great financial strain (see McElwee 172-176). James's financial mismanagement estranged the City merchants and the Puritans, and exacerbated the decaying image of his court. Significantly, masques encapsulated all the "evils" that were attributed to the King and court in the final years of Jacobean rule: they were self-complacent, elitist and extravagant spectacles, meant exclusively for the pleasure of the King and his court and, as such, they underlined not what united the King with his people, but what separated them. An excerpt from a contemporary ballad, for example, illustrates both the decaying public image of the King and the negative opinion the common people had of masques:

At Royston and Newmarket
He'll hunt till he be lean.
But he hath merry boys
That with masques and toys
Can make him fat again. (Quoted in Thomson 176)

As years went by, court masques could not entirely circumvent making mention of the people's growing displeasure with James's policies, despite the fact that their ultimate aim remained praise of the King. As Russell West has remarked, Jacobean court drama "was increasingly pulled in two directions: on the one hand, towards the perfection of reified myths which constructed the monarch as the embodiment of classical virtues, and on the other hand, towards a complicated engagement with versions of a tarnished reality" (81). According to West, masques "could none the less not afford to admit openly" this reality. I would argue, however, that there were masques that made quite overt

references to social disorder, even if they downgraded these conflicts by presenting the resolution of the relevant troubles as effortless or miraculous. Jonson's *The Golden Age Restored* (1616), for example, was one of the first masques that made the problems of the Jacobean reign its theme. By the time of its performance, the prevailing public opinion of the King and his court was that both were immoral and corrupt, and this is precisely why the controlling idea of the masque was that James would restore justice and fight corruption.

The Golden Age Restored was performed right after the trials over the murder of Thomas Overbury, while the prosecution of James' former favourite, Robert Carr, and his wife Frances Howard for their part in the crime was awaited. As David Lindley has remarked, the relevant trials "were presented as a triumph of James' love of justice over the claims of favouritism and high birth" (Lindley, *Court Masques* 243). *The Golden Age Restored* acknowledges that "the great" were taking advantage of the "weak" and that the latter had been "made / A prey unto the stronger" (102, ll. 7, 8, 8-9); Jove, however, as a just and magnanimous God, "can endure [this] no longer," so he intervenes to restore the order for the sake even of "offending mortals" (102, ll. 6, 3). On the other hand, although this masque seeks to present the King as almost omnipotent, it reminds James that his power is conditional upon the acknowledgement of his authority by his subjects; when Astraea and "Golden Age" wonder "But how without a train / Shall we our state sustain?" (105, ll. 105-106), they indirectly invite James to ponder on how much power he can actually have if he has no followers – no "train." Lastly, the most uncomfortable as well as inevitable question the masque poses is that if James had actually been as good a ruler as the masque argues, then the "Golden Age" would not have been a condition of the past that had to be "restored".

Jonson's *Neptune's Triumph* (1624) is another masque that makes mention of unrest and points to a discrepancy between an idealizing vision and political reality. In February 1623 Prince Charles secretly left for Spain, escorted by the notorious Duke of Buckingham, to promote the negotiations concerning his marriage to the Spanish princess, a prospect that was not at all popular with the English people. Jonson wrote this masque to celebrate Charles's return and presented the young Prince as the people's "general joy" (139, l. 104), but both the Prince's and Jonson's plans were frustrated. When Charles returned to England without a Spanish bride, there was public rejoicing over the failure of the marriage negotiations; these developments initially forced Jonson to modify the text in order to "obfuscat[e] the reasons for the journey (and

the disgrace of the return)" but eventually the performance was cancelled (Lindley, *Court Masques* 256). This cancellation can be seen as symbolic not only of failed royal policies but also of the rising power of public opinion. From this point of view, the final wish of the chorus to see that the King is dutifully obeyed highlights the clash between the King's desire for absolute authority and the increasing tendency of the people to question and resist the established regime:

And may thy subjects' hearts be all on flame,
whilst thou dost keep the earth in firm estate,
And 'mongst the winds dost suffer no debate. (146, ll. 368-70)

Neither James nor Charles later on seemed to worry about their subjects' complaints, as they apparently believed that they could rule with a firm hand, without the consent of the "vulgar" (Jonson, *Neptune's Triumph* 139, l. 116) or the "inferior sort" (Daniel, *Tethys' Festival* 64, ll. 410-11).

Some masques opened with "anti-masques," i.e. spectacles in which the roles were held by professional actors, who, unlike the main masquers, had speaking parts. Once more in contrast with the main masquers, the antimasquers were bizzare- or ugly-looking, and their dances and songs had no harmony, order or beauty. They usually represented evil or ridiculous figures, and the central theme of their show was conventionally the disastrous effects of disorder or rebellion. One of the first anti-masques to be produced was written at the instigation of Queen Anne and was included in *The Masque of Queens* (1609); as its author, Ben Jonson, explained, "because her Majesty, best knowing that a principal part of life in these spectacles lay in their variety, had commanded me to think on some dance or show that might precede hers, and have the place of a foil or false masque" (35, ll. 9-12). Jonson could not but obey his Queen and patron and "therefore . . . devised . . . a spectacle of strangeness" with "twelve women in the habit of hags or witches, sustaining the persons of Ignorance, Suspicion, Credulity, etc., the opposites to Fame" (35, ll. 14-16); these hags also represented the opposites to all the positive qualities the Queen and her ladies had in their roles as main masquers. Although the female antimasquers had many of the characteristics generally attributed to witches, they were not meant to cause fear to the audience, but rather laughter; their repulsive appearance and weird dances, "the repository of all that was un-courtly" (McManus 24), aimed at their ridicule and the building of a sharp contrast with the lofty, elegant spectacle the Queen and her ladies would

present shortly afterwards with their appearance on stage. This was actually the conventional function of the anti-masques throughout the Stuart period: to give “much occasion of mirth and delight to the spectators” (Jonson, *Haddington Masque* 112, ll. 146-147), not to cause them anxiety by implying that the chaotic world of the antimasque could become a social reality. On the other hand, antimasques “gave the opportunity for scenes of barbaric anarchy to be played out in the court,” taking on “an uninhibited and uncouth violence that unleash[ed] wildness close to the seat of majesty” (Craig 177). Such an encounter of the King and his court with a world of misrule not only disrupted the harmonious universe the masque sought to conjure up, but temporarily also deprived the King of his power to control the spectacle unfolding in front of him.

Antimasques presented the “other” that had to be contained and defeated, but, in the utopian world of such spectacles, this victory was achieved painlessly and bloodlessly: the antimasquers would not make a respectable exit from the stage but would be either scared off by the approach of the main masquers, or they would stay just to suffer some form of punishment and humiliation by the latter. In *The Golden Age Restored*, for instance, when the main masquer, goddess Pallas, appears on stage, she turns the antimasquers, who represented evils like “Avarice,” “Fraud,” “Slander,” “Pride” etc., to stone. Immediately before doing this, she explains that they were punished for daring to think themselves “equal” to “the gods,” i.e. the King (104, ll. 72, 71). Despite the eventual defeat of antimasquers in Jacobean masques, the troubling issues introduced by their appearance remained, destabilizing the idealized world that was so carefully structured by the main masque. It is probably for this reason that antimasques reached their climax towards the end of the Jacobean reign and then began to decline; as Lesley Mickel has suggested, Charles’s political absolutism left little room for the uneasy questions the antimasques put forward (157).

Antimasques were meant to cause laughter and offer dramatic variety to the otherwise lofty, and to some degree predictable, spectacle of the masque. At the same time, they often subverted one of the main functions of these entertainments, i.e. the idealization of monarchy, by exposing its weaknesses. Such is the case with the antimasque in Jonson’s *Love Restored* (1612). In this particular antimasque, the central figure is Plutus, god of wealth, who voices opinions associated with the Puritans and attacks the court masques and their audience. His reviling of these entertainments occupies several lines and includes all the contemporary arguments that enemies of both masques and the wider court might well have put forward. For opponents, masques represented everything they

objected to in the Jacobean court and government: “superfluous excess,” prodigality, idleness, and folly (69, l. 144). Plutus’s arguments are, in fact, so compelling that the modern reader is impressed that they were stated in front of the very audience they were directed against. In the eyes of Plutus, masques corrupt the court as they are not only “the sower[s] of vanities in these high places, but the call of all other light follies to fall and feed on them.” As if speaking from a superior position, Plutus then announces: “I will endure thy prodigality nor riots no more; they are the ruin of states. Nor shall the tyranny of these nights hereafter impose a necessity upon me of entertaining thee. Let ’em embrace more frugal pastimes!” (69, ll. 129-34). Few spectators would have been able to argue that such a description of masques was inaccurate; they themselves were repeatedly eye-witnesses of the costly sets and costumes, and some of those involved, including the King, ran into debt in order to finance their elaborate spectacles. Furthermore, the spectators of masques would have no doubt seen the “riots” mentioned by Plutus – the disorderly conditions that often followed these orderly and graceful spectacles.

The appearance of Plutus in this antimasque leads to an unwitting critique of the Jacobean monarchy for an additional reason: many of the flaws for which the Puritan Plutus is condemned and ridiculed are, ironically, the same as those attributed to James himself: “Tis he,” it is said of Plutus, “that pretends to tie Kingdoms, maintain commerce, dispose of honours, make all places and dignities arbitrary from him . . .” (70, ll. 158-160). Plutus, like James, “walks as if he were to set bounds and give laws to destiny” (70, ll. 165-166), but, in fact, he is an “earthy . . . idol,” an “insolent and barbarous Mammon” (70, ll. 176, 174). As for the mortals that “worship” Plutus, they are called, “fools” (70, l. 167). One might argue that most of the masque’s negative comments against Plutus were not likely, of course, to remind the royalist spectators of their King; only anti-royalists would have been able to see him as representing James’s failed efforts to convince his subjects of his divine right to kingship and absolute power.

It is particularly interesting that the attack on Plutus is offered by Robin Goodfellow, an antimasquer who represents a “harmless,” “honest plain country spirit” (67, l. 50). Robin resorts to all sorts of funny tricks and disguises to enter the palace and watch a masque, but he is repeatedly turned away by the guards, who do not hesitate to use both verbal and physical abuse. Robin’s wit and lofty language underline the incongruity between his social position and the ideas he expresses, as his speech was not likely to be articulated by a contemporary, illiterate,

lower-class person. If we try to explain Robin's political alliances, we are led to the conclusion that *Love Restored* most probably reflected the court's assumption that the common people, despite their inferior status, were on its side. At the same time, this masque suggests that the King and his court held people like Robin in contempt: despite his innocence and royalist sentiments, Robin becomes a target of ridicule for his passionate and hopeless efforts to enter the palace, and watch a masque next to his social superiors and his King.

Although James was aware of the power of self-display, he had an aversion for any public appearance that would bring him close to crowds. The earliest manifestation of this attitude was his conduct during his first formal progress in the streets of London. When the historian Arthur Wilson (1595-1652) described the progress, he made a telling comparison between the new King and his predecessor:

He was not like . . . the late Queen, of famous Memory, that with a well-pleased Affection, met her People's Acclamations . . . He endured this Day's Brunt with Patience, being assured he should never have such another, and his Triumphal riding to the Parliament that followed: But afterwards in his publick Appearances . . . the Accesses of the People made him so impatient, that he often dispersed them with Frowns, that we may not say with Curses. (qtd. in Ashton 64)

Unlike James, Elizabeth had skilfully manipulated her public appearances to present herself as a powerful yet tender ruler who was in turn loved and willingly obeyed by her people. Elizabeth had thus encouraged her subjects to believe that she was both literally and figuratively close to them, and this illusion of proximity enabled her to develop an arresting and influential public image. The relevant comparison the Venetian ambassador, Nicolo Molin, drew between the two monarchs is revealing:

[King James] does not caress the people nor make them that good cheer the late Queen did, whereby she won their loves: for the English adore their Sovereigns, and if the King passed through the same street a hundred times a day the people would still run to see him; they like their King to show pleasure at their devotion, as the late Queen knew well how to do; but this King manifests no taste for them but rather contempt and dislike. The result is he is despised and almost hated. In fact, his Majesty is more inclined to live retired with eight or ten of his favourites than openly, as is the custom of the country and the desire of the people. (qtd. in Ashton 10)

In the light of this evaluation, it should not be seen as accidental that Elizabeth had a taste for outdoor entertainments such as progresses, whereas her successors preferred indoor court masques instead. Given James's fear of crowds, court masques constituted an ideal form of entertainment, and one that enabled him to display himself in glory without compromising his safety or requiring him to tolerate disagreeable multitudes. The safety and comfort that the court masque offered to the monarch, however, came at a price as the relatively limited audience of these performances necessarily lessened their impact as a form of propaganda. That the glorification of the King attempted by the court masques could not reach a wider audience was of no mean insignificance; as Graham Parry has argued in his discussion of court masques, "the Stuart line was to be less secure as a result of the limited proclamation of its virtues" (*Golden Age Restored* 62). Furthermore, while the Elizabethan progresses had "sustain[ed] the myth of a unified, basically, feudal society" (Chibnall 81), Jacobean court masques dramatized the King's increasing spatial and ideological detachment from the common people and the expectations of the latter. As Keith Sturges has noted, the production of masques "within the protective atmosphere" and "enclosed world" of the court invites us "to see the theatre of the Stuarts as an index of the loss of the common touch the Tudors had pragmatically and skilfully cultivated" (164). Unlike Elizabethan progresses, Jacobean masques could not successfully evoke the myth of a united kingdom; and, if the former had strengthened the ties binding the monarch to the people, the latter only severed them.

Like his father, Charles was aware that his public image as a monarch was of grave importance. At the same time, although he appeared to have better social skills than James, he continued to keep the court entertainments indoors, staging most of the masques of his reign within the walls of the newly built and illustrious Banqueting House. The result was that these entertainments confined the monarch's self-display within a relatively small circle of favourites and allies, and failed to spread the intended political messages across a wider audience. The Caroline court masques thus continued to symbolize the King's unwillingness to be in touch with the common people, as well as his inability to influence and inspire them.

When Charles succeeded his father to the throne, the debate over the royal prerogatives had become more heated. At the same time, Charles did not think of his supremacy as something questionable or negotiable and his absolutist ideas were vividly reflected in the court masques of his reign. In this respect, it is not surprising that the eleven

years Charles governed without a Parliament (1629-40) was the period that these entertainments flourished. As Roy Strong has argued, Inigo Jones, the architect-engineer of these masques, undertook to “set forth the politico-religious theories of the first two Stuart monarchs” (223). The relevant masques are in fact “so pure an expression of this decade” that, to understand them, “it is necessary to forget totally what happened after 1640” and “view these productions solely through the eyes of an optimistic King and his Surveyor of Works as they annually celebrated what they foolishly believed to be the triumphant rule of a monarch by Divine Right” (Strong 224).

Unlike his father, Charles did not restrict his role in the court masques to that of the privileged viewer, but appeared in several performances as a key masquer. By leaving his elevated position on the “state” for a masquing role on the stage, the King could actually occupy an even more central, dynamic and potentially didactic position. Furthermore, Charles would read (and approve of) the masque texts before the performance and would supervise the masque designs. As Erica Veevers notes, there is evidence that “after 1630 the King himself became Jones’s chief collaborator” (110). There is similarly evidence to suggest that Henrietta Maria, who also appeared as a masquer, worked closely with Jones for the staging of these performances too. The active involvement of the royal couple in all the stages of the masques’ production implies that they saw these spectacles as much more than entertainment. Charles and his Queen obviously thought that court masques, if managed appropriately, could play an important role in the enhancement of their images, and the promotion of their political agendas. Contrary, however, to what Charles may have expected, his dynamic participation in these shows and his occasional dominance over the masquing stage did not mean that he could fully control the meaning of these spectacles, as these would often accommodate ideas that contradicted his absolutism and exposed the weaknesses of his rule.

Continuing the Jacobean tradition, Caroline court masques frequently compare Charles to the Sun or a star. The innovation is that they do the same for the King’s wife, who is also attributed divine status: she is a virtuous “bright Deity” (Carew 190, l. 965) with “Divine Beauty” (Townshend 164, l. 323); Henrietta looks upon the earth from above and with the “beams” of her soul “she doth survey” the people’s “growth in virtue or decay, Still lighting” them “in Honour’s way!” (Davenant 211, ll. 379, 380-81). Henrietta’s representation in masques is such because, in contrast with his father, Charles was a loving and devoted husband who apparently wished his wife to have her own share of

praise in these spectacles. Furthermore, the celebration of the royal couple's marital happiness in masques had a political meaning too as it presented "their ideal love as a benign image of the personal rule" (Hoxby 77).

In several court masques Charles and his Queen appear together as "Bright glorious twins of love and majesty" (Carew 167, l. 38), personifying the Neoplatonic union of virtue, love and beauty. This harmonious relationship of the royal couple is shown in turn to have miraculously transformed their country: the King and Queen "have turned this age to gold" (Townshend 161, l. 238), and they are so perfect that "no worth / Is left for after-ages to bring forth" (Carew 192, ll. 1024-25). More importantly, their "exemplar life" has not only "transfused a zealous heat / Of imitation through . . . [their] virtuous court" (Carew 167, ll. 52, 53-54), but has affected the whole realm: "And as their own pure souls entwined, / So are their subjects' hearts combined," claims the figure of "Homonoia" in Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* (192, ll. 1032-33). Even in the final masque before the Civil War, the Chorus praises the King and Queen because their love can miraculously defeat their enemies' passions: "All that are harsh, all that are rude, / Are by your harmony subdued" (Davenant 212, ll. 425-26). As David Lindley suggests, in masques "the theme of love . . . as the platonic love between Charles and his queen . . . became a politicised emblem of the harmony of court and nation" ("The Stuart Masque and its Makers" 385). Furthermore, this harmony is described as a result of the royal couple's genuine concern for their people; in most masques Charles and Henrietta appear to treat their subjects the way tender parents treat their children: they use "no awful frowns / To fright" them, but with "calmer eyes" "Shed joy and safety on their [subjects'] melting hearts / That flow with cheerful loyal reverence . . ." (Carew 167, ll. 41-42, 43-44).

The contemporary debates over the position of kings within a state often found their way into the Caroline court masques too. Carew's *Coelum Britannicum*, "ostensibly the most complete celebration of the court of Charles and Henrietta Maria" (Lindley, *Court Masques* 263), includes a number of antimasques which make various comments on the government of kingdoms. Although the aim of the masque (and its antimasques) is to support Charles's absolute rule, there are lines that invite alternative interpretations. An antimasquer who represents "Fortune," for example, appears wearing a skirt decorated with "crowns, sceptres . . . and such other things as express both her greatest and smallest gifts" (181, ll. 625-26) and, in the conclusion of her speech, she claims:

The revolutions of empires, states,
 Sceptres, and crowns are but my game and sport,
 Which, as they hang on the events of war,
 So those depend upon my turning wheel. (182, ll. 662-65).

Fortune's final words stress her absolute power over the fate of everyone and everything: "I rule the game" (182, l. 669, my emphasis). The repeated references to sceptres and crowns in relation to Fortune's power cannot but attract our attention. On a surface level the relevant comments suggest that the fate of "empires" and "states" is actually determined by chance; at the same time, they also remind us that in hereditary monarchy a king's accession to the throne is essentially determined by chance too – one's birth as a royal heir. The last Caroline masque, Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia* (1640), once more unwittingly, makes a similar comment. Charles is told by the chorus – his people: "Since strength of virtues gained your Honour's throne, / Accept our wonder and enjoy your praise!" (209, ll. 337-38). As Charles did not owe his enthronement to his "virtues" but to a sequence of entirely accidental events – the death of his elder brother, Henry, and his own birth as James's second son – the above statement could be easily reversed to mean that he deserved neither his throne, nor the people's respect and praise.

William Davenant's *Salmacida Spolia*, with which I am going to conclude, was the last masque before the Civil War. It is also by far the most important masque in terms of political meaning, and this perhaps helps to explain why critics have disagreed about its interpretation (Lindley, *Court Masques* 269; see Butler, "Politics and the Masque"). This masque was performed at a turbulent time, when Charles, faced with the Scottish rebellion and in serious need of money, was forced to recall Parliament after eleven years of personal rule. What makes this masque still more interesting is that it captures with uncanny accuracy the problems Charles was to encounter several years later.

The King is once more presented as a gentle and benevolent ruler and, in an obvious effort to reinforce this representation, Charles appears in it as an actor himself, impersonating "Philogenes" – lover of the people – a good but misunderstood king. Britain continues to be described as a happy isle which enjoys the kind of harmony that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. A "Fury" in the antimasque thus complains:

How am I grieved the world should everywhere
 Be vexed into a storm save only here!
 Thou over – l lucky, too-much-happy isle. (203, ll. 113-15)

On the other hand, Davenant's comments on this scene do mention conflicts: "The allusion is, that his Majesty, out of his mercy and clemency . . . seeks by all means to reduce tempestuous and turbulent natures into a sweet calm of civil concord" (202, ll. 90-92). Later on it is openly admitted that the King is facing potentially serious problems; "the Genius of Great Britain" begs "Concord": "Stay then, O stay! if but to ease / The cares of wise Philogenes" (204, ll. 164-65).

While *Salmacida Spolia* tries to portray Charles as an appreciated and successful King, it makes overt references to underlying conflicts, and implies that Charles may have been unpopular even within his own court. What is particularly interesting is that some of Charles's fellow masquers were courtiers displeased with his policies; in this respect, the co-existence of these courtiers and the King on the stage could have been a means of bringing about a reconciliation. At the same time, *Salmacida Spolia* allows glimpses of the King's contempt for his enemies, who are accused of having "weak common ears," easily "infect[ed]" by "Murmur" (209, ll. 326, 325). As "the Good Genius of Great Britain" complains, "the people" are ungrateful:

I know it is the people's vice
 To lay too mean, too cheap a price
 On every blessing they possess;
 Th' enjoying makes them think it less. (204, ll. 150-53)

The King, on the other hand, shows "mercy" and does not "punish vulgar sickness as a sin" "like monarchs that severe have been" (209, ll. 329, 332, 330). Charles is praised for being magnanimous and wise enough to avoid taking conflicts to extremes:

Nor would your valour, when it might subdue,
 Be hindered of the pleasure to forgive.
 Th'are worse than overcome, your wisdom knew,
 That needed mercy to have leave to live. (209, ll. 333-36)

The portrayal of Charles's model of rule in these lines was clearly not an accurate description of the King's policies at the time. Charles did not seem to have taken into serious consideration his opponents' objections and his subjects' complaints; worse still, he appeared much readier to

“subdue” his enemies than to “forgive” them. In his discussion of *Salmacida Spolia*, Martin Butler has convincingly argued that “the masque as a whole showed few signs of compromise” (*The Stuart Court Masque* 345) and that “Charles’s forgiveness was underpinned by the threat of what he could do were he so minded” (346). From a similar point of view, Lesley Ferris has remarked that this masque “was an exorbitant final theatrical display of defiance of the revolutionary reality enveloping the court” (67). Despite its effort to attribute to Charles a conciliatory attitude, *Salmacida Spolia* suggests that he was too rigid and too self-righteous to negotiate his rights and accept a compromise, even when he was faced with the strongest opposition.

Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, what makes *Salmacida Spolia* particularly interesting is that it proved to be prophetic of Charles’s tragic future. The antimasquer playing the part of the “Genius of Great Britain” begs another antimasquer, “Concord,” to “stay! if but to ease / The cares of wise Philogenes” (204, ll. 164-65). “Concord” agrees to stay but notes:

I will! And much I grieve, that though the best
Of kingly science harbours in his breast,
Yet `tis his fate to rule in adverse times,
When wisdom must awhile give place to *crimes*. (204, ll. 166-69, emphasis added)

The “Genius of Great Britain” and “Concord” then sing:

O who but he could thus endure
To live and govern in a sullen age,
When it is harder far to cure
The people’s folly than resist their rage? (204, ll. 174-77)

In the light of King Charles’s death on the scaffold nine years later, the references to the King’s endurance and the people’s “rage” and “crimes” acquire a special meaning. The same applies to the end of the masque, when the King’s delay to appear on the stage makes the chorus exclaim: “Why are our joys detained by this delay?” (208, l. 289). The chorus then wonders about the possible reasons, hinting at the troubles Charles is having:

are you slow 'cause th'way to Honour's throne,
 In which you travail now, is so uneven,
Hilly and craggy, or as much unknown
 As that uncertain path which *leads to heaven?* (208, ll. 293-96; emphasis added)

The above lines portray not only the King's difficult position at the time but also anticipate the problems he was to encounter in the future; his death would be seen by Royalists as another ascent to Golgotha, which the King bore with Christ-like patience. The hagiographic accounts that described Charles's execution draw parallels between the King's conduct before his beheading and Christ's conduct on the cross. Charles is believed to have consciously adopted such an attitude in his final days, and especially while he was on the scaffold, where he appeared fearless of death, composed, magnanimous and forgiving even towards his enemies (Williamson 133-146). At the same time, in the speech he addressed to bystanders, Charles was bold enough to reiterate his rigid views on the superiority of kings and the exclusion of the people from government:

For the people, truly I desire their liberty and freedom as much as anybody whomsoever. But I must tell you their liberty and freedom consists in having government – those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own. It is not having a share in government. That is nothing pertaining to them. A subject and a sovereign are clean different things and therefore, until they do that – I mean that you do put the people in that liberty as I say – certainly they will never enjoy themselves. (qtd. in Williamson 143)

Charles remained an absolutist King until the end. Even in those final moments before his execution he stubbornly refused to accept his defeat, since in doing so he would have proved the whole course of his life and rule to have been wrong. Like the authors of the Stuart masques, Charles continued to envision an idealized world where a monarch would “suffer no debate.”

The Stuart court masques were not “unequivocal, unambiguous celebrations of royal power” (Greenblatt 63), but interpretively fluid and self-contradictory representations of a monarchy in crisis. As I have argued, while these entertainments sought to construct and promote idealized images of the Kings for which they were written, they often exposed the very aspects of the Stuart government that had to be concealed, excused or beautified. Furthermore, these spectacles failed to contain the subversive ideas they occasionally gave voice to, and eventu-

ally brought on the royal stage the conflicting viewpoints that circulated at the time regarding the position and power of kings. For these reasons, instead of teaching the spectators to accept and respect their King as a divinely appointed ruler, the court masques ultimately illustrated why absolute monarchy had no chances of survival.

The end of this model of rule was dramatized in 1649 with Charles's ultimate public performance, this time on a scaffold erected to stage his execution, outside the Banqueting House – the building that had hosted the most illustrious court entertainments of his reign. In contrast with the consistently happy ending of the Stuart masques, this spectacle ended not with Charles's triumph over his opponents, but with the victory of his enemies, and the decapitation of his "sacred head" (Jonson, *Neptune's Triumph* 144, l. 288). What a lesson!

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