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THE JONSONIAN MASQUE AS A LITERARY FORM

By DOLORA CUNNINGHAM

Jonson's masques have generally been considered as fanciful mixtures of spectacular and dramatic elements, characterized by a heavy display of learning and, for modern democratic taste, a troublesome flattery of the king. They have seldom been accorded the dignity of serious literary efforts; and yet if one looks twice at the author's own comments upon his work, one is struck by the unusually wide discrepancy between what Jonson thought he was doing and what critics have told us he was doing.¹

A masque, as Jonson himself conceived it, is a form of dramatic entertainment in which the logical working out of a central idea or device provides the action. The particular kind of action proper to the form resides in the symbolic representation of contrasted conditions, usually of order or virtue as opposed to disorder or depravity. It consists of "one entire body or figure," as Jonson puts it, comprising distinct members, each expressed for itself, yet harmonized by the device so that the whole is complete in itself. The nature of the device is explained by language at times dramatic and at times narrative, and the whole is further illustrated by music, spectacle, and symbolic characters in a sequence of dances. Each member is brought in separately, for its own sake, in the parts of the work, but each contributes to the illustration of the whole. Each has meaning in terms of the device, which turns on a sudden change—involving discovery of the masquers, transformation of the entire scene, and recognition of the virtues embodied in the king—and arouses wonder and respect in the spectators. By these means, a masque accomplishes its purpose of honoring magnificence, in the ethical sense, and of

¹ For a summary of the criticism, see *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), Vol. II, pp. 249 ff. The two basic books on the English masque are Rudolf Brotanek, *Die Englishchen Maskenspiele* (Leipzig, 1902) and Paul Reyher, *Les Masques Anglais* (Paris, 1909).

inciting in the beholders a conscious moral imitation of the virtues embodied in kingship.

This definition has been derived from Jonson's remarks about his aims and methods in writing masques and, of course, is modelled on Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy. The relevance of the formal definition to Jonson's masques can, perhaps, be clarified by calling to mind the three broad principles on which he based his whole theory and practice of the masque: the principle of decorum, the principle of hierarchical unity, and the principle of profit conjoined with pleasure—all familiar in various ways to students of Renaissance literature.

Although the notion of decorum is variously complicated, there are certain obvious applications which bear directly upon a proper understanding of Jonson's intentions. Most important of these, perhaps, is the stern precept that the device, the central idea of the masque, must express what is proper to the occasion:

The nature and propertie of these Devices being, to present alwaies some one entire bodie, or figure, . . . where also is to be noted, that the *Symboles* used are not, neither ought to be, simply *Hierolyphickes*, *Emblemes*, or *Impresses*, but a mixed character, partaking somewhat of all, and peculiarly apted to these more magnificent Inventions: wherein, the garments and ensignes deliver the nature of the person, and the word the present office. Neither was it becoming, or could it stand with the dignitie of these shewes (. . .) to require a Truch-man, . . . but so to be presented, as upon the view, they might, without cloud, or obscuritie, declare themselves to the sharpe and learned,²

Again in his notes to *The Masque of Queenes*, Jonson explains:

To whome they all did reverence, and she spake, uttring, by way of question, the end wherefore they came: which, if it had bene done eyther before, or other-wise, it had not bene so naturall. For, to have made themselves their owne decipherers, and each one to have told, upon their entrance, *what they were*, and *whether they would*, had bene a most piteous hearing, and utterly unworthy any quality of a Poeme [ll. 98 ff].

Decorum, then, motivates both the selection of the central idea

² *The Entertainment at Fen-Church*, ll. 243 ff. In all references to Jonson's masques, including his prefaces and commentaries, I shall refer to lines only; all of the references are to Volume VII of the Herford and Simpson *Ben Jonson* (Oxford, 1941).

and the manner of working it out, determining also the kind of dialogue and action and the type of decoration to be used. The device together with its illustrative parts must be appropriate to the dignity of poetry in itself and to the dignity of the royal audience whose honor is the primary concern of every court masque.

Since the masque, as Jonson practised it, is a form having its own purposes and conventions, to impose the techniques of the regular drama would be improper. It is true, however, that Jonson introduced the materials of comedy into several anti-masques and that the established order of progression in his masques is from disorder to order as in comedy. But he did not confuse the two forms. We know from his prefaces and commentaries and from the masques themselves that he kept certain distinctions clearly in mind. He used comic materials and characters in the anti-masque, for example, to give variety and to act as foils to the noble persons who performed the main masque. In *Oberon, The Faery Prince*, where the Satyrs of the anti-masque are opposed to the Fairies of the main masque, the connection lies in their being opposites, as in the *Masque of Queenes* Ignorance is the opposite of Fame. In *Oberon*, Silenus strengthens the connection by intervening in both anti-masque and masque: as "prefect" of the Satyrs, he rebukes their goings-on, and after they have been silenced, he speaks the praise to the state which marks the beginning of the solemn main masque (ll. 335-57).

Love Restored is the first of Jonson's masques where the comic actions and dialogue, which originally introduced the grotesque dance, have taken over entirely; it is also the first in which the characters of the anti-masque speak in prose, as though Jonson would emphasize the contrast between what is proper to these undignified personages and what is proper to the persons of high estate who perform the main masque and speak in verse. Although the grotesque dance was not to be entirely excluded from future anti-masques, in other respects the anti-masque did become much like a scene of prose comedy.

In *Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, Jonson adapts to the masque material he had already used in comedy. In *The Alchemist*, he had satirized the alchemists' pretensions

to make gold and had mocked the illusions of their dupes; here he satirizes, primarily, the imperfect, mutilated creatures of the alchemists' laboratories, who are contrasted with the excellences of nature. To handle this varied material, which paralleled the various types of extravagant people often found in his comedies, the formal device of the double anti-masque dance was at hand. This made it possible for Jonson to present separate grotesque dances, first, the "troupe of threadbare Alchemists" and, then, their "imperfect creatures, with helmes of lymbecks on their heads." His contempt for the two is conceived and presented within the convention of the masque, and what in *The Alchemist* was material for comedy is here found to be as aptly material for a masque.

Jonson's originality in developing the anti-masque is, nevertheless, guided by the three principles which he explained in the preface to *The Masque of Queenes*: contrast, continuity, and variety. The anti-masque is not a masque but a spectacle of strangeness; it is not magnificent, where the main masque is by definition magnificent, but it is strictly accordant with the device of the main masque. Its main function is to provide a purposeful variety within a given masque and the variety of novelty with respect to past entertainments:

I was carefull to decline not only from other, but mine owne steps in that kind, since the last yeare I had an *Anti-Masque* of Boyes: and therefore, now, devis'd that twelve Women in the habite of Hags, or Witches, . . . , should fill that part (ll. 14-19).

In *Oberon* he will have Satyrs; in *Love Freed*, a brood of Follies; in *Mercury Vindicated*, alchemists and their creatures. By adapting the comic induction to the purpose of anti-masque, he avails himself of new materials to support the demand for variety.

If we think, as many of us apparently do, that the comic induction endangered the masque and that by comparison the main masque is a colorless rudiment,³ it is because we cannot see the latter. Literature bulks larger in the first part, and we have thereby a clearer picture of the induction, whether comical or otherwise, than we have of the ceremonious main masque.

³ Herford and Simpson, Vol. II, p. 297.

We must reconstruct its movements from Jonson's descriptions, which were written for precisely this purpose. But such necessity does not justify our taking a part for the whole in order to condemn the author for writing comedy instead of masque or masque instead of comedy. Where in a comedy can we find the equivalent of the main masque, which concludes with the unique dance participated in by the audience? The simple fact that the induction is more vivid to us does not prove that it was so to Jonson's audience, and, indeed, most of the contemporary references are largely devoted to the dancing and beauty of the main masque.⁴ It does, however, seem to support Jonson's point that literature is the formative principle and soul of masque and alone can give it life.

In a comedy, moreover, there is not necessarily a pattern whereby one set of characters representing the violation of accepted standards is followed by another set representing their observance. In a masque it is not enough that fools and monsters be vanquished or held up to scorn; they must be both vanquished and supplanted by the representatives of virtue and order.

For the characters in Jonson's masques are symbolic rather than dramatic. They are means of illustrating the general device, so that any change in character is dependent upon transformation, as, for example, in *Lethe*, where the lovers only think they have died for love when they have simply lost their wits. The Fates insist that they are not dead, that Love, though he often subdues other states, cannot subdue the Fates. Mercury bids the lovers to drink of Lethe's stream that they may forget Love's name, and then to rise up and shake off the shadows which made them mistake themselves for dead (ll. 118-21). Or, a change of character might depend upon a complete change of setting and persons, as in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, where legitimate Pleasure must banish Comus before it can be reconciled with Virtue; and in the second anti-masque Virtue must defeat the degenerate Pigmies before the princes can profit from the reconciliation. In other words, the forces of chaos must be defeated before the representatives of order can be

⁴ See, for example, Bacon's remarks on "Masques and Triumphs" in *A Harmony of Lord Bacon's Essays*, ed. Edward Arber (London, 1871).

displayed to complete the contrast. The lesson seems to be that before we can have a sane and ordered society, we must get rid of the enemies of reason and virtue. Although such an undertaking necessarily implies conflict, it is here different from ordinary dramatic conflict.

The hierarchical structure which Jonson sought in the masque is concisely defined in his notes to the *Entertainment at Fen-Church*:

The nature and propertie of these Devices being, to present alwaies some one entire bodie, or figure, consisting of distinct members, and each of these expressing itselfe, in its owne active sphaere, yet all, with that generall harmonie so connexed, and disposed, as no one little part can be missing to the illustration of the whole (ll. 248 ff.).

The various formal elements should be carefully arranged around the central device, for the whole must have the unity of a work of art and uphold in all its various parts the current and fall of a single device. The function of spectacle, for example, is to make known whom a person represents and the function of speech to explain his place in the whole scheme. The parts do not blend into each other to form an organic unity; each part exists rather for its own value and expresses itself in its own sphere but is so disposed and connected as to make a clearly defined contribution to the illustration of the whole.

Although carefully distinguished from the main masque, the anti-masque is always in accordance with the idea which controls both. Jonson makes sure of the anti-masque in *Lethe*, for example, by having the same persons assume the roles of frantic lovers and intelligent lovers. This identity of persons quite naturally makes for continuity between the two main parts, but more than this, it involves progression of character, which is something quite different from modern notions of character development. Mercury and the Fates discover, through dialogue, the condition of the lovers and are responsible for their transformation. The conflict between Mercury and Cupid and their reconciliation are responsible for the final restoration of the lovers to a condition of balanced humanity, and this change in condition is motivated by definable external causes. In the

process of restoration, all of the diverse arts are used, each of them contributing something to the ultimate end. The anti-masque dance expresses the way the lovers had lived in love and is, as Mercury states, the means of shaking off the shadows they had moved in before drinking from Lethe's stream. Their transformation is brought about through the joint efforts of poetry and dancing and not by a sudden change of costume or scene. Their return to an harmonious exercise of their human faculties is encouraged by the Chorus, so that the music expresses their conversion from disorder to harmony as it introduces the ordered dances of the main masque. When Cupid appears to praise the refined motions of the first dance, his speech is expressive of the dance, which in turn is expressive of the lovers' changed condition and therefore of the idea on which the entire invention turns.⁵

A corollary of hierarchical unity is Jonson's law that no one element is to infringe on the duties proper to another. This corollary is derived by the principle of decorum, and maintains that spectacle should not try to do the work of poetry, or poetry of spectacle, for this is to violate order and destroy the unity of the masque. In the preface to the *Masque of Blackness*, Jonson explains:

The honor, and splendor of these spectacles was such in the performance, as could those houres have lasted, this of mine, now, had been a most unprofitable worke. But (when it is the fate, even of the greatest, and most absolute births, to need, and borrow a life of posteritie) little had beene done to the studie of *magnificence* in these, if presently with the rage of the people, who (as a part of greatnesse) are privileged by custom, to deface their *carcasses*, the spirits had also perished (ll. 1-10).

The dignity of poetry must be given due recognition; the literary part must not be forced to yield place to other elements, particularly the spectacle of Inigo Jones; the poet must not be the mere servant of the carpenter and scene-painter.

⁵ Jonson's comment on the dance in *Hymenaei* (ll. 310-15) supports the interpretation: "Here, they daunced forth a moste neate and curious measure, full of Subtily and Device; which was so excellently performed, as it seemed to take away that Spirit from the Invention, which the Invention gave to it: and left it doubtfull, whether the Formes flow'd more perfectly from the Author's braine, or their feete."

For these things are mortal and fade away, and literature alone can keep the masque alive. The description of the spectacle and the explanation of the various devices are important, also, because they make it possible for posterity to reconstruct the actual performance, to reproduce those elements of scenery, dance, and music which make a direct appeal to the senses and are in large measure responsible for the desired effect of magnificence.

But Jonson was very jealous of the dignity of poetry and, if it were to have anything to do with the masque, it must have a higher role than that of mere reporting. Conversely, the masque form, to be worthy of poetry, must be stabilized and improved. This improvement, Jonson firmly believed, could be realized only through the contribution of the poet, who would furnish the soul of the form:

It is a noble and just advantage, that the things subjected to understanding have of those which are objected to sense, that the one sort are but momentarie, and meerely taking; the other impressing, and lasting: Else the glory of all these *solemnities* had perish'd like a blaze, and gone out, in the *beholders* eyes. So short-liv'd are the *bodies* of all things, in comparison of their *soules* . . . This it is hath made the most royall *Princes*, and greatest *persons* (who are commonly the *personaters* of these *actions*) not onely studious of riches, and magnificence in the outward celebration, or shew; (which rightly becomes them) but curious after the most high, and heartie *inventions*, to furnish the inward parts: (and those grounded upon *antiquitie*, and solide *learnings*) which, though their voyce be taught to sound to present occasions, their *sense*, or doth, or should alwayes lay hold on more remov'd mysteries.⁶

The theory of literature set forth here rests upon the familiar Christian dualism—of physical and spiritual, transitory and eternal—, which is reflected in the two levels of literal and symbolical meaning which should be present in a masque. For Jonson clearly regarded the masque as a literary form in much the same way as he regarded tragedy as a literary form. He carefully distinguished the various elements and specific purposes of the traditional masque and attempted to make each of these cooperate in a final unified structure, the central hinge

⁶ *Hymenaei*, ll. 1-20.

of which is the idea having its basis in a philosophical-ethical concept. Consequently, the particular nature of the device must be such that the shift of scene in the spectacle would have meaning in terms of the device and that it would be capable of being illustrated by a sufficient number of symbolic figures who could reasonably be supposed to enter into a sequence of dances. All of this is to contribute to a certain definable effect: respect for magnificence, which is the ethical virtue especially appropriate to royalty.

It was by way of magnificence that Jonson's masques achieved the traditional goal of profit conjoined with pleasure. In his preface to the *Masque of Queenes*, Jonson explains:

For which reason, I chose the Argument, . . . : observing that rule of the best *Artist*, to suffer no object of delight to passe without his mixture of profit, and example (ll. 5-9).

And again in the preface to *Love's Triumph*:

Whereas all Representations especially those of this nature in court, publique Spectacles, eyther have bene, or ought to be the mirrors of mans life, whose ends, for the excellence of their exhibitors . . . ought alwayes to carry a mixture of profit, with them, no lesse than delight; Wee, . . . resolved on this following argument (ll. 1-7).

The invention should exhibit moral truth and be grounded solidly on learning, by which Jonson meant largely, though not wholly, the learning of antiquity. It is fairly obvious, for example, that his conception of magnificence owed a good deal to Aristotle's definition of the virtue:

The magnificent man is like an artist; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully. For, . . . , a state of character is determined by its activities and its objects. Now the expenses of the magnificent man are large and fitting. Such, therefore, are also his results; for thus there will be a great expenditure and one that is fitting to its result . . . And the magnificent man will spend such sums for honor's sake; for this is common to the virtues . . . And he will consider how the result can be made most beautiful and most becoming rather than for how much it can be produced and how it can be produced most cheaply. It is necessary, then, that the magnificent man be also liberal . . . The most valuable possession is that which is worth most, . . . but the most valuable work of art is that which is great and beautiful (for the contemplation of such a work inspires admiration, and so does

magnificence); and a work has an excellence—vis. magnificence—which involves magnitude. Magnificence is an attribute of expenditures of the kind which we call honourable, e. g., those connected with the gods . . . and all those that are proper objects of public-spirited ambition (*Ethics*. 1122a19-1122a20).

The effect of contemplating magnificence is admiration, which in turn, according to Jonson's directives, should give rise to such activities as understanding, respect, and moral imitation. The masque is intended to arouse in the spectators respect for the king and the traditional virtues of kingship, respect for and faith in the established social order. Since the aspect of kingship most often honored is magnificence, the means of honoring royalty must, according to the principle of decorum, be magnificent; they must be proper to their end. The masque, in order to praise this virtue adequately and gain the desired end, must be magnificent in all its parts. Jonson tells us explicitly, in his preface to the *Masque of Blacknesse*, that the end proposed for the whole is magnificence:

But (when it is the fate, even of the greatest, and most absolute births, to need, and borrow a life of posterity) little had bene done to the studie of *magnificence* in these, if presently . . . the *spirits* had also perished (ll. 3-9).

And in *Love Restored* the contrast on which the device turns is actually between niggardliness and magnificence, between the meanness of mind represented by Plutus and the largeness of mind symbolized by Love and his followers. But all of the various mean characters in Jonson's anti-masques are made to contribute, by contrast with the nobles of the main masque, to the magnificent purpose of the whole.

Since James I was preeminently the man of high birth, great expenditure on public occasions was becoming to him.⁷ To spend lavishly for the production of a masque was virtuous in these circumstances, and such expenditure, both in its activities and its objects, met all of Aristotle's requirements for magnificence. By definition an attribute of royalty, magnificence is expressed and honored in the Jonsonian masque so as

⁷ *The Masque of Queenes*, according to E. K. Chambers' account, cost the Exchequer three thousand pounds: *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923), Vol. I, p. 384.

to achieve the specific effects of admiration and respect, which, though clearly related, are nevertheless distinct.

Admiration is, of course, a technical term in Renaissance ethics and literary criticism. The complex history of the term with special reference to tragedy has been traced by Professor J. V. Cunningham, who summarizes the traditional notion of wonder as an end of poetry:

Wonder in Shakespeare is the effect of tragic incident and tragic style, as well as of the marvellous turn in events. But this does not exhaust the complexity of the notion of wonder; one more strand at least remains to be unravelled. For the notion derives not only from the tradition of literary criticism, as the proper effect of marvellous events, and the tradition of rhetoric, as the proper effect of marvellous eloquence, but it derives also from the tradition of philosophy, in which wonder is the primary cause of learning.⁸

Speaking in the role of spectator, Jonson describes the effect of *Hymenaei*:

Such was the exquisit performance, as (beside the *pompe, splendor*, or what we may call apparelling of such *Presentments*) that alone (had all else beene absent) was of power to surprize with delight, and steale away the spectators from themselves. Nor was there wanting whatsoever might give to the *furniture*, or *complement*; eyther in *riches*, or strangenessse of the *habites*, delicacie of *daunces*, magnificence of the *scene*, or divine rapture of musique (ll. 568-76).

Surprise, delight, and self-forgetfulness are all effects proper to wonder, which, Jonson characteristically emphasizes, depends not so much upon splendor in "the apparelling" as upon grace in the execution, effective speech, and harmony of all the parts.

Although Jonson was not the only writer of masques who aimed at wonder, his means of securing it helps us to distinguish the Jonsonian masque from the work of others who, in general, depended largely upon spectacle. Campion, for example, relied upon fantastic transformations and music, and in his *Lords Maske*, Prometheus, the patron of mankind, is asked to

. . . fill the lookers eyes
With admiration of thy fire and light,
And from thy hand let wonders fly tonight.⁹

⁸ *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy* (University of Denver Press, 1951), p. 96.

⁹ *Campion's Works*, ed. P. Vivian (Oxford, 1909), ll. 30-32.

Prometheus promises that the stars, which he has stolen from heaven to contribute to "this night's honor," will be transformed into human figures—that is, he will "let wonders fly"—and that he will have Orpheus apply his music, "for it well helps to induce a Courtly miracle." Where Campion used music to achieve these spectacular miracles, Jonson, although placing considerable faith in the unifying force of a central device, insisted that each element must contribute to the over-all effect.

Directives to the spectators, as in Elizabethan drama generally, are to be found throughout Jonson's masques. In the *Masque of Blacknesse*, Oceanus' amazement at the appearance of the Ethiopian river is the cue to the audience:

My ceaseless current, now, amazed stands!
To see thy labour through so many lands (ll. 115-16).

They are to be amazed at Niger's presence and their amazement is to be an incitement to knowledge; as they wonder at the sight and how it came about, so Jonson fulfills his general purpose of letting no object of delight pass without its due mixture of profit.

Hymen's first speech in *Hymenaei* is preceded by "some signs of admiration" which lead him to question the cause of "the more than usuall light" inspiring his admiration. After Reason has banished "The foure untemp'red Humors," they retire "amazed" while Hymen orders the ceremonies of the main masque. Towards the end, as the champions of Truth and Opinion prepare for battle, "a striking light seem'd to fill all the hall," and an angel appears to exhort the hearers:

Princes, attend a tale of height, and wonder.
Truth is descended in a second thunder (ll. 880-81).

In *Oberon* the dance of the lesser Fairies is preceded by a Song which embodies an explicit list of wonder's causes and effects:

Seeke you majestie, to strike
Bid the world produce his/James'/like.
Seeke you glorie, to amaze?
Here, let all eyes stand at gaze.
Seeke you wisdome, to inspire?
Touch, then, at no others fire.
Seeke you knowledge, to direct?
Trust to his without suspect.

Seeke you pietie, to lead?
 In his foot-steps, only, tread.
 Every virtue of a king,
 And of all, in him, we sing (ll. 370-81).

The magnificence of King James strikes and amazes all eyes, and this wonder, in turn, incites the spectators to contemplate the other kingly virtues of wisdom, knowledge, and piety, by which they are to be inspired, directed, and led.

This relationship between wonder and its virtues is further clarified in *The Vision of Delight*, where Wonder speaks to describe the beauties of the main masque and Phant'sie's reply proposes pleasure and knowledge as the two effects proper to wonder:

How better then they are, are all things made
 By WONDER! But a while refresh thine eye,
 Ile put thee to thy oftner, what, and why! (ll. 167-69).

After the masquers are discovered as the glories of the spring, Wonder again inquires into the causes of so much glory: "Whose power is this? What God? And Phant'sie gives the promised explanation:

Behold a King
 Whose presence maketh this perpetuall Spring,
 The glories of which Spring grow in that Bower,
 And are the marks and beauties of his power (ll. 200-04)

In this recognition scene, the masquers are directed by the Quire to express their homage in a dance; their knowledge of the source of wonder, that is, leads to an expression of respect. Nothing could be more explicit than this personification of the effect which Jonson sought for the masque.

The proper response of the audience is, moreover, governed by the all-pervasive principle of decorum. In *Oberon*, after a song in which James is called "the wonder . . . of tongues, of eares, of eyes," the Sylvane rebukes the Satyres of the anti-masque (ll. 310-22); although their antics have been delightful, they are not properly respectful and must give way, because they are incapable of experiencing the respect which the main masque should arouse in them. The Sylvane goes on to say that Oberon with his knights have come to "give the honor

of their being" to the king, and Silenus, the moderator of the Satyres, replies:

And may they well. For this indeed is hee,
 My boyes, whom you must quake at, when you see . . .
 He is the matter of vertue, and plac'd high.
 His meditations, to his height, are even (ll. 336-42).

Jonson obviously took great care to remind his audience that the wonderful was to lead them not merely to a fatuous delight but to knowledge and respect. In the closing songs of *News from the New World*, he speaks complimentarily but precisely:

How ere the brightnesse may amaze,
 Move you, and stand not still at gaze,
 As dazeled with the light;
 But with your motions fill the place,
 And let their fulnesse win you (r) Grace.
 Till you collect your sight.
 So while the warmth you doe confesse,
 And temper of these Raies, no lesse
 To quicken then refine:
 You may by knowledge grow more bold.
 And so more able to behold
 The bodie whence they shine.
 (The first Dance followes.)
 Now looke and see in yonder throne,
 How all those beames are cast from one.
 This is that Orbe so bright,
 Has kept your wonder so awake;
 Whence you as from a mirrour take
 The Suns reflected light.
 Read him as you would doe the booke
 Of all perfection, and but looke
 What his proportions be;
 No measure that is thence contriv'd,
 Or any motion thence deriv'd,
 But is pure harmonie (ll. 320-45).

The dancers are not to be stupified at the vision of majesty: Even though temporarily blinded by the light, as Dante in Paradise, they are not to neglect those acts of respect which will win them grace. By the perfection of their motions, they confess the power of this grace in them, which is also the means by which they may achieve knowledge of its source and the strength to emulate the perfection embodied there.

Admiration, or wonder, as an effect of a Jonsonian masque has, then, four aspects: it gives pleasure; it is a motive to knowledge; it is an incitement to respect; it is a basis of moral imitation. As spectators we admire and so understand; we respect and so imitate the king as the model of perfection. Wonder and respect, as specific effects, are to masque as pity and fear are to tragedy.

When I accord the praise of royalty this central position in the masque, I realize that I am asking for disagreement; for most critics seem certain either that we must look upon the complimentary element as inexcusable flattery or that we must patronize Jonson for it by citing historical circumstances to excuse his bad taste. Among the commentators, Professor D. J. Gordon is to my knowledge practically alone in taking seriously these characteristic passages. Writing of *The Masque of Blacknesse* and *The Masque of Beautie*, he very rightly concludes that there is profound substance within the convention of praising royalty:

The central idea of these two masques is clear and simple: The King's presence turn Blackness into Beauty . . . Compliments in this vein were, of course, quite in order . . . But more is involved here than the formal, stereotyped gesture of the panegyrist; we are dealing here with notions more "remov'd" than the everyday apotheosis of the Crown. A grander apotheosis is adumbrated, in which James is given the position and function assigned to the Sun in the theory of Beauty held by the Florentine Platonists.¹⁰

Since I am chiefly concerned here with the fact that Jonson defined and practiced the masque as a literary form, I am not able to undertake a detailed analysis of recurrent imagery. Certainly the concept of kingship is frequently worked out in terms of the Sun-light symbolism, and Professor Gordon is altogether correct in recognizing its importance. For the present, however, I should simply question the wisdom of interpreting this symbolism solely in terms of neo-Platonic doctrines. Is it necessary to posit a strict parallelism with the Platonic commentaries of Pico della Mirandola and Ficino? Such termi-

¹⁰ "The Imagery of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blacknesse* and *The Masque of Beautie*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, VI (1943), 129. See also his article, "Hymenaei: Ben Jonson's Masque of Union," *Ibid.*, VIII (1945), 107-45.

nology as "most formall cause of all dames beauties," for example, is not exclusively Platonic; and even if it were, was Jonson altogether dependent upon the compilations of Pico or Ficino for such knowledge? My brief analysis of the compliment to the king in *News from the New World* indicates what seems to me a more historically sound approach to the interpretation of the Sun-light imagery. With respect to the masques of *Blacknesse* and *Beautie*, it can, I think, be profitably argued that the transformation process is analogous to that Christian transformation of fallen human nature which was traditionally accomplished by the grace of God, whose special agent the ruling monarch was generally acknowledged to be in Medieval-Renaissance political theory.¹¹

But whether or not one agrees with Professor Gordon's interpretation of particular passages, one must applaud his service to Jonson criticism in undermining the unhistorical and altogether unsupportable prejudice against those praises of kingship which provide the ethical substance of the masque. For it may be said that the virtue of princes is to masque as the fall of princes is to tragedy.

To emphasize another very likely point of disapproval: I have argued that Jonson's use of comic materials was carefully regulated by the specific conditions of masque and was governed by clearly defined formal principles. I know it has been fashionable to see only another expression of Jonson's arrogance in his spirited defense of poetry against the demands of Inigo Jones's scenery and, consequently, to blame Jonson for the decay of the masque.¹² But I believe such an approach to be only another attack of critical arrogance upon Jonson's character. His prefaces and descriptions prove that he was fully alive to the respective beauties of spectacle, dance, and music; and his insistence upon the supremacy of poetry in the hierarchical arrangement of the several elements, far from breaking down form, was literally the only means of controlling the various materials and of shaping them into a meaningful and coherent whole. Jonson's preference for poetry is quite

¹¹ See, among many discussions of this subject, L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Johnson* (Chatto and Windus, 1937) and Alfred Hart, *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (Melbourne University Press, 1934).

¹² Herford and Simpson, Vol. II, pp. 297 and 311.

simply the logical outcome of what the masque is, for the appropriate effects of wonder and respect obviously cannot be achieved by spectacular stage sets. And, of course, Jonson thought highly of poetry in itself, though his critics often have not.

It is impossible for me to do battle here against the post-Romantic conviction that the truly poetical can have nothing to do with mere learning or with morality. Certainly neither Jonson nor his contemporaries shared this irrational view of poetry or this contempt for learning. And, in common with most of his old-fashioned compatriots, Jonson took for granted the ultimately moral purpose of all literature. To accuse him of pursuing the moral at the expense of the literary is only to reveal one's own confusion of ethical substance with overt didacticism and one's own failure to perceive that Jonson remained true to his form through symbolic development of a central theme.

It is certainly in order to urge that many currently held notions of the masque be subjected to careful study and revision in the light of what Jonson himself had to say. If we are to have a body of Jonson criticism worthy of its subject, the historical and aesthetic principles on which he worked must be taken seriously. For these principles—of decorum, of hierarchical unity, and of ethical purpose—are the principles of most Elizabethan literature and, according to his evidence, form the theory which Jonson followed in his efforts to establish the masque as a literary form.

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