

ИСТОРИЯ НОВОГО ВРЕМЕНИ

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THE MASQUEAS A POLITICAL TOOL AT THE COURT OF JAMES I

Before James I's ascension to the throne, the English monarch ruled over England, Wales, Ireland, and (until 1558) parts of France. James I brought Scotland into the union and in October 1604 proclaimed himself the king of Great Britain. He was the first to introduce «Britain» as a unifying name for the English dominions. In spite of apparent intolerance of the alien cultures and superior attitude to «backward» nations, peaceful negotiations and just rule were emphasized by James I as a priority in domestic and foreign affairs. The political persona assumed by James I was that of a wise Solomon, a peacemaker, and a negotiator in European conflicts. In 1601, he reestablished control of Ireland and made peace with Spain in 1604. At the same time, James I was more interested in colonial ventures than Queen Elizabeth, and «colonial expansion blossomed in James's reign» (*Hadfield A. The English Renaissance 1500-1620. Oxford, 2001. P. 30*). The East India Company was established in 1600, and the Virginia Company emerged in 1606; the first successful colony in America was founded in 1607. The rapid expansion of international contacts brought England closer to the world outside but it inevitably caused prejudice and xenophobia in the country. James I understood that the policy of uniting Wales, Ireland, and Scotland under British crown as well as his colonial endeavors needed publicity.

Court masques became for James I one of the vehicles for establishing and reinforcing the image of himself as royal power, and also for communicating his domestic and foreign policy to his court and to the world. Besides amusing the ruler and his entourage, those spectacular performances had a very special agenda in Jacobean England. In her article «The Queen's Masque,» Marion Wynne-Davies argues, «The masque was, above all, a political construct» and a «display of

power» (*Wynne-Davies M.* The Queene's Masque: Renaissance Women and the Seventeenth-Century Court // *Masque. Gloriana's Face. Women, Public and Private, in the English Renaissance.* London, 1992. P. 81). And David Lindley, introducing the book «Court Masques» supports the idea when he writes that «at bottom a pretext for costly (and sometimes disorderly) aristocratic knees-up, the masque displayed the magnificence of the court to itself and to the foreign ambassadors who competed for invitations» (*Lindley D.* Court Masques. Jacobean and Caroline Entertainments 1605-1640. Oxford, 1995. Title page). Among their various political missions, masques were a powerful means of declaring and confirming James's intentions to create «Great Britain»; in artistic form, many of them negotiated differences within his kingdom and the disagreements with the foreign nations. Following the conventions of the genre, masques created a flattering image of the royal power; they glorified James as a mighty king, a promise of emancipation for backward nations. At the same time they were «subtle and careful statements of court politics» rather than «simply... the mouthpiece of absolutist ideology» (*Ibid.* P. XVI), which allowed for a non-violent solution of the multicultural issues in the emerging kingdom of Great Britain.

Ben Jonson's masques emphasize King James's peacemaking persona and his capability to conquer evil by mere presence. James is presented as *le roi soleil* defeating darkness, a transformative power, which turns infidels into Christians, brutes into gentlemen, and ugly women into beauties. Interpretation of the world through the binary oppositions of good and evil was typical of the Renaissance thinkers (see Clark), and for Ben Jonson «the concept of transformation [was] the heart of the genre» (*Briggs J.* This Stage-Play World. Texts and Contexts, 1580-1625. Oxford, 1997. P. 245). It is reflected in the metamorphoses that characters undergo in *The Masque of Blackness*, *The Masque of Beautie*, *The Masque of Queens*, and *The Irish Masque at Court*. To reinforce the image of James I as a peacekeeper, the element of resistance is absent from these masques; they all represent the changes as voluntary and the difference/otherness not conquered but annulled by the royal presence. In each case «otherness» of the characters is of a different kind, but the tension is resolved in a similar manner: the alien elements are cancelled and the court is reestablished in its consistency.

In Jacobean culture, «demonic allegiance was necessarily associated with disobedience and its consequences» (*Clark S.* Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft // *Past and Present*, 1980, № 87, P. 119). By showing the defeat of witchcraft, a symbol of misrule, *The Masque of Queens* articulates royal intentions to maintain an ideal political situation. Dame, the ruler of witches, complains that Virtue (apparently James I) will overcome evil and «retrieve her Age of Gold». Witches «hate to see these fruits of a soft peace» and try to disturb the established order, to «mix Hell with Heaven» and to «cause the ends run back

into their springs». The inversion of the divinely established world order presupposes unjust rule, tyranny, and witchcraft. For King James's contemporaries «a tyrant was simply one who turned every rule of political life upside-down». Thus *The Masque of Queens* may be read as an allegory of the struggle between the tyranny, or disordered state, represented by the witches' sabbats, and James I's just and virtuous rule. According to Clark, «the argument about the ability of royal courts to bring order to the world [in *The Masque of Queens*] could not have been put more effectively» than by showing that «the bruit of the royal reputation (a single blast of «*Loud Musique*»)» is enough to conquer the witches (Ibid. P. 129,132,135,137,112,125).

«The qualities and duties of the prince, deduced from the theological and moral postulates, were portrayed in terms of the perfectly virtuous man governing in an ideal situation» (Ibid. 112), and the masques fulfilled, albeit aesthetically and imaginatively, the dream of an ideal monarch and his court. The transformed, virtuous characters of the masque that were played by the courtiers (unlike evil characters, usually performed by the professional actors), «descended into the hall and invited the audience to dance, thereby allowing them to participate in the fulfillment of an idealized subject position» (Wynne-Davies M. Op. cit. P. 82).

It is remarkable that in prefaces to the printed versions of *The Masque of Queens*, *The Masque of Blackness*, and the *Masque of Beautie* Jonson acknowledges Queen Anne's co-authorship. According to Jonson, she invented the image of the transfigured blackamoors in *The Masques of Blacknesse and Beautie* and the antimasque of witches in *The Masque of Queens*. Hardin Aasand interprets such involvement of the Queen with court spectacles as an intention to negotiate her «ethnic, religious, and feminine estrangement from accepted convention». According to Aasand, Queen Anne appears in the masques as the «Lady of Misrule,» mocking the orthodox ideology and manifesting her subversive power. Marion Wynne-Davies supports the image of Anne as subversive in her theatrical endeavors; she sees the masque as «a collective cultural construct which allowed the women of the court, and specifically the Queen, access to a politically resonant discourse». It seems that the very nature of the masque, complicated and allowing for multiple interpretations, invited marginal voices to use it as their mouthpiece. Although theatrical performances were not enough to undermine the real political power, and occasional and sanctioned subversion only reinforced the existing power structures, it was still possible for the muted subjects to announce their presence in Jacobean culture if only through public entertainment events. Then it seems entirely credible that Queen Anne «utilized the masque form to act contrary to the King's wishes, as surely as the hags danced 'contrary to the customs of Men'» (Ibid. 272,276, 80, 86).

And still, no matter what Queen Anne's intentions were, she was doing a favor to her husband by encouraging masques that discussed difference and otherness. James I, himself a stranger at the English court, felt the need to come to

terms with his own familial and ethnic background, and he succeeded in it through intelligent political self-representation. James erased his suspicious connection with rebellious Mary Queen of Scots when he declared Queen Elizabeth I his new mother. He also legitimized the presence of a Scottish king on the English throne by uniting English dominions in one kingdom and proclaiming himself the King of Great Britain. But it was still necessary to confirm these political tour-de-forces in public consciousness. Court spectacles, which attracted vast audiences of domestic and foreign aristocracy, were a perfect medium for negotiating and reconciling antagonistic tendencies caused by James I's political ventures.

James succeeded in establishing Scottish and English union, but «there were strangers... within the realm» (*Hadfield A. Op. cit. P. 33*). Irish resistance undermined James I's intentions to unite the British Isles lands under his crown. Unlike Wales that was readily accepting James's rule, Ireland was fighting for its independence. In 1601, though, James succeeded in pacifying the militant Irish, and Ireland was on its way to become a part of Britain. The Irish Masque at Court (1613) addresses the issue of this internal conflict in James's kingdom as it «fictionalizes Ireland as a bifurcated colonial arena where inferior Native Irish traits are opposed by superior English cultural practices' (*Smith J. M. Effaced History: Facing the Colonial Contexts of Ben Jonson's «Irish Masque at Court.»// ELH , 1998. V. 65.2. P. 301*). The Irish are shown as vulgar and uncouth, speaking in a harsh accent and having no manners. The story is that of Irish ambassadors who suffer shipwreck on the way to the Earl of Somerset's wedding. Their footmen arrive first and tell the courtiers, «Te villainous vild Irish sheas have casht away all ter fine cloysh, as many ash cosht a towsand cowes». Apparently their «courser manners» are not welcome at the court and the Gentleman tells them to «seeke some place / fit for their wilderness». The «imbasheters» appear at the king's court covered only by their Irish mantles. Upon manifesting their intent to comply with the king's colonial policy, they drop their mantles and are then seen dressed in conventional masque attire, «offering an idealized portrait of Ireland's incorporation into the nation state» (*Ibid. 73-74, 151-152, 298*). Their rough accent disappears and the change into refined gentlemen is absolute. In this way The Irish Masque communicates the intent of the British Empire to homogenize its subjects and deny them their distinctive political or cultural characteristics, which are depicted as inferior to English culture.

The issue of otherness was at its most intense in relations with people of different color, and it is a frequent subject in the literature of the English Renaissance. Blackness was viewed at the time as a sign of evil nature and blackamoors were generally treated with suspicion in Renaissance England. «Since the medieval period, blacking up was a central part of the representations of the grotesque, the evil, or the exotic» (*Loomba A. Shakespeare, Race, and Topics. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford, 2002. P. 17*). However, trade interests called for peaceful negotiations with people of different color, and the literature of the time often seeks to reconcile the mistrust of foreign nations with the necessity to

deal with North Africans and Turks, the most common representations of people outside Europe, and with the natives in America, the inhabitants of a newly appropriated land. Montaigne's «Of Cannibals,» translated by John Florio into English in 1603, suggested the legitimacy of European intervention into native societies to correct the savages' wrong ways of living. At the same time, Thomas Harriot «made the connection between the people who had once occupied the British Isles and those who now peopled the New World, emphasizing a common humanity» (*Hadfield* A. Op. cit. P. 29). The plates in Harriot's *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590) depicted people and land of Virginia and also ancient Britons and Scots, suggesting a connection between two worlds.

In «Shakespeare, Race, and Topic», Ania Loomba notices that «skin color produced so much anxiety in Shakespeare's time [probably because] the assertion that it signified a deeper human essence was always challenged by its uncanny ability either to vanish or to show up in unwelcome ways» (P. 3). The *Masque of Blacknesse* (1605) and *The Masque of Beautie* (1608) reflect on the issue by representing blackamoors as good but uncomely and willing to change their color. The daughters of Niger in *The Masque of Blacknesse*, though their father thinks that «in their black the perfect beauty grows», travel to the land «Whose termination (of the Greeks) / Sounds TANIA» to «leave / Their blackness, and true (emphasis mine. - *M. F.*) beautie to receive» (*Beautie*) from the sun of Albion, King James I, who «refines / All things, on which his radiance shines» (*Blacknesse*). In the speech of *Aethiopia*, *Britania*, which is the country the Negro princesses seek, is proclaimed «a world divided from the world». Thus the uniqueness and unity of *Britannia* is confirmed, and the power of its ruler to change ugliness to beauty is glorified.

In *The Masque of Beautie*, the transformation of the dark daughters of Niger into white beauties is finally accomplished. They survive the wrath of envious dark Night, «mad to see an *Aethiope* washed white», and find a home on «the glorious Isle». Their blackness is completely annulled and they are granted inclusion into the world of true beauty and light, the royal court. Jonson resolves the issue of otherness through establishing the hierarchy of beauty. The Negro princesses are beautiful but theirs is not the 'real' beauty. To achieve it, they must reject their blackness completely. Thus *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beautie* communicate the colonial implications of Jacobean foreign policy: aliens have to accept the European cultural paradigm to be equal partners in the political relationship with Britain.

The masque, imported from France by Henry VIII, had never been as popular as at the time of King James I's reign. Ben Jonson's sophisticated poetry together with the intricate stage machinery and magnificent decorations designed by Inigo

Jones challenged even the most powerful imagination. Outstanding entertainments, which combined dances, music, poetry, luxurious costumes and amazing stage effects, attracted vast audiences that competed for invitations to the performances. Immense popularity of the masque made it a significant tool of royal politics, a medium through which the King communicated to the court and foreign ambassadors his domestic and foreign policies and negotiated various tensions in his expanding kingdom of Great Britain. A masque «would often move from a representation of civil or moral disorder to its transformation, and finally to scenes of homage to or apotheosis of royalty» (*Clark S. inversion. Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft // Past and Present, 1980, № 87, P. 114*). In artistic form, the masque reconciled antagonistic tendencies within James I's court and in British foreign relations, and alleviated some of the anxiety about the growing necessity to deal with outsiders. But although alien elements, such as blackness, «cultural backwardness,» misrule and disorder, were represented as cancelled in the end, their existence nevertheless received recognition, which gave marginal voices the possibility at least to attempt at subverting the dominant political paradigm.