

CHAPTER 14

*Valediction
In which,
the scene closed up and the revels ended,
the masquers take their leave*

Leah S. Marcus

Here, at the end of our revels, in this instance a multidisciplinary and international collection of essays devoted to revelry itself, it is appropriate to look back in reflection upon our recent fascination with the Tudor and Stuart masque. Why has the form become so interesting of late? Because, as someone once said of climbing a mountain, it is there? Because, having run ourselves dry in more traditional literary studies, we yearn for a subject that still feels fresh and untrammelled? Because, with the new fluidity of traditional disciplinary boundaries, we are finally free to move outside the limits by which canonical drama has been set apart from less clearly 'literary' forms of entertainment? Because we have become secretly or not so secretly fascinated with Tudor–Stuart displays of power?

As the present volume's editors have suggested and the foregoing essays amply demonstrate, there has been a revamping during the past decade and a half of the implicit political paradigm adopted by scholars studying the masque. The paradigm has changed in response to the recent work of revisionist historians – who have complicated the idea of early modern 'royal absolutism' sufficiently that the phrase has for the most part been replaced by the less monolithic 'royal prerogative powers' – but also in response to the end of the Cold War, which the work of revisionist historians may be said to have anticipated. For scholars of the postwar era, the masque was made visible by the path-breaking work of Stephen Orgel. He gave the masques of Ben Jonson accessibility and definition through his important critical study and edition. Along with Roy Strong, he posited the arch-Artificer Inigo Jones as co-author of the masques whose surviving vestiges are reproduced in two sumptuous volumes entitled *Inigo Jones*. Perhaps most important

of all as a bellwether of the times, Orgel insisted in *The Illusion of Power* (1975) on the centrality of absolutist ideology to the structure and meaning of these seemingly frivolous entertainments. In the United States at least, during the mid to late 1970s, amidst the many post-Vietnam upheavals that restructured many elements of university life and thought, those of us who wrote on the masque felt obliged to defend ourselves against the implicit charge of irrelevance. The early modern court masque seemed important to us in part because its spectacles of state displayed government power in ways that eerily resonated with the public posturing and polarization of the Cold War era. Appropriately for the decade, the Stuart masque seemed profoundly polarizing and bivocal, offering through its miniature worlds a clean divide between the disruptive nay-saying subversion of the antimasques and the orderly containment of royal vision in the main masque. Very much in the manner of the centrifugal and centripetal models of cultural community promulgated during the same decade by Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault, the masque was a ritualized performance by which the monarch at the centre of the community expelled negative elements and remade the nation at least symbolically in the image of his own ideals. Stephen Orgel's work (which I have oversimplified here and which has by no means remained within the straitjacket parameters I have sketched out for it) made the court masque a subject of fascination for a whole generation of scholars. Given the Cold War environment of the nation at large, there was an uneasy but compelling congruence in perspective between the absolutist model proposed for the masque and dominant Anglo-American attitudes towards the threat of post-Stalinist communism. To what extent, some of us secretly wondered, might our interest in and at least implicit vindication of Stuart rituals of state relocate a fascination with less artful and more contemporary displays of power?

The absolutist model of the 1970s gave us access to detailed correspondences between the seemingly trivial pleasures of a night of revelry and major policy initiatives of James I and Charles I. Indeed, the masque as a form may be said to have aided in the *creation* of a myth of Stuart absolutism – both for its contemporaries and for us looking back upon the age – through its display of instant, vast transformations wrought through the exercise of the royal will. This bipolar model works well for some of the entertainments designed specifically for James or Charles, but less well for masques designed for other members of the royal family or for a politically divided family, as in Jonson's masques during the 1620s. I vividly remember the frustration

I myself felt as I tried unsuccessfully to extend the style of topical political-allegorical interpretation I had used to elucidate and unify Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* and *The Vision of Delight* to later masques, which the same interpretive techniques seemed to fragment rather than unify.

What was needed, of course, was a new, less centripetal model, being provided even then by revisionist historians, quickly adapted to literary study by innovative scholars like Martin Butler, and reflected throughout the present volume. As befits the modesty topos, Butler's contribution in this book underplays the importance of his own work to more recent developments in the field. What Orgel was to the seventies and early eighties, Butler has been to the nineties. He has insisted on the absence during the early Stuart era of the totalitarian imagination as we have observed it in various regimes during the mid to late twentieth century; he has redefined the masque away from the bipolar model that seemed so attractive in the 1970s and toward a less constricting, multiple and multiply-centred vision of its political rhetoric; he has remodelled the form as a site for the intersection and interplay of numerous personal and political agendas. That is not to suggest that there is no room left for interpretations of the masque based on the idea of a single historical individual as instigator or imaginative centre of any given entertainment. More could still be made of Kevin Sharpe's provocative suggestion that Charles I used the masque as a confessional. More work of the kind Leeds Barroll and Stephen Orgel have done here on Queen Anne as patroness and central figure of *The Masque of Queens* and *The Masque of Blackness* still needs to be done for Charles I's consort, Queen Henrietta Maria, who, like Anne, had her own political and cultural interests separate from those of the King. Of course, Butler's decentering of absolutist ideology works better for some masques than for others. It is perhaps noteworthy that most of the essays in the present volume concentrate on the same handful of entertainments. Nevertheless, the revitalizing shift in political paradigms goes along with a massive alteration in our perceptions of the West in relation to the rest of the world, not to mention a concomitant alteration in our view of the place and importance of women as subjects and political instigators in their own right. Although many scholars of my generation appear not to have noticed its passing, the myth of Stuart absolutism has been successfully dismantled by recent historians along with the confrontational subversion/containment mentality that helped to nurture it. Masque study has survived, indeed renewed itself, amidst

the dispersal of what was perhaps the strongest single impetus behind its fascination for its mid to late twentieth-century practitioners: its seductive, lethal display of absolute power.

As the essays gathered here and in David Lindley's *The Court Masque* (1984) bear witness, it is no longer taboo for historically minded scholars to be interested in aesthetic effects. Moreover, it is now possible for scholars studying the masque to imagine the form as aesthetically successful and nevertheless eclectic and even fragmented in terms of its range of political meanings. Although the introduction to the present volume makes a gesture towards the by now traditional defence of the seriousness of the masque, one of the liberating agendas of this book is that for many of its contributors, the loveliness, rarity and delicious refinement of the masque can be acknowledged without apology alongside its (perhaps multiple and conflicting) political purposes. The category of the aesthetic has, at least to some degree, been disentangled from its disreputable imbrication within a myth of early modern royal power. We have in some ways gone back full circle to Enid Welsford's pioneering *The Court Masque* (1927), in which English entertainments were interpreted (with little need for apologia) as spectacles of wonder with many debts to French or Venetian or Florentine shows and revels. Were English masques understood by their contemporaries as part of a vaster, pan-European interplay of visually encoded political rituals? Surely there must be compelling reasons why the English, as reflected in newsletters and pamphlets of the period, seem to have hungered for even minute details about foreign entertainments. Little of Welsford's interest in the masque's transnational eclecticism is reflected in the present volume, but the groundwork is laid here for new work on continental sources and echoes of the Tudor-Stuart masque. English 'quotation' of foreign originals may have signalled continuities and alterations in foreign policy in the same way that, as Nancy E. Wright's essay here demonstrates, the Jacobean court masque and London civic entertainments not only borrowed each other's imagery for purposes of rivalry, but also engaged in a free and fruitful interplay of mutual gratulation.

There are other ways, less clearly visible in the present volume, in which the breakup of the absolutist paradigm that underlay earlier masque criticism has opened up the field to new interpretation. What about masques apart from court? The sole examples offered here, in Barbara Lewalski's essay, are *Arcades* and the often-discussed *Comus*, but what of other, similar productions that may have been launched

elsewhere? What of the possibility (unearthed among the many local records made newly available to us through the Records of Early English Drama project) that another masque featuring Comus (or perhaps the same *Comus* as Milton's) may have been performed during the 1630s before the Earl of Bridgewater's fellow in office, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, Lord President of the Council of the North? With the discovery of previously unknown masques and entertainments, even if the records are sometimes disappointingly fragmentary, we are primed to expand the vision offered in this volume of the political and geographic multivalence of the masque as a form beyond the milieu of the court. And what of the new, revisionist work on Elizabethan progresses (in London and elsewhere) in which the Queen appears less as an instant quick-fix for the economic and social ills of a region and more as a player among others in a vaster pattern of meanings that she did not control? Paul Hammer's essay here on the Earl of Essex's upstaging of Elizabeth in the Accession Day celebrations of 1595 provides a splendid paradigm for revisionist work on the 'local' meanings carried by other entertainments, tilts, May-games and civic shows diverse and sundry. During the 1970s, it seems to me in retrospect, masque studies operated under a Puritan (or Jonsonian) interdiction of pleasure: they were acceptable only insofar as they unmasked unrecognized forms of royal hegemony. Now, the power to be unmasked, or rather acknowledged, in all such cultural forms is the more fundamental human power to lift life out of the everyday and bring it into resonance with mysterious and portentous significance beyond itself.

Two decades ago, if someone had suggested to me that fundamentally the masque was about beauty and harmonious interaction among diverse political and social entities, I would have secretly written off the approach as hopelessly retrograde and morally troubling in its evasion of the disturbing realities of Stuart power. But now, with the dispersal of some of the highly charged binaries that gave containment culture such moral hegemony even over those of us who thought we were resisting it, an interpretive agenda that postulates at least limited autonomy for the aesthetic as a shaper of culture in its own right seems new again, and newly promising. As Ben Jonson recognized, even though he profoundly mistrusted the visual spectacle of the masques, these entertainments, whatever else they may have accomplished, brought their audiences into contact with 'more removed mysteries' – infused the often sordid life of the court with harmonic reverberations that seemed to partake of the uncanny and to promise

healing and rejuvenation. For all our overt resistance to it and despite the local political meanings that we have revelled in here, I suspect that most of us who have taken the trouble to write about the Tudor–Stuart masque are more susceptible to its aesthetic power than we let on. In the masque, an ordinary grove can become a temple peopled by satyrs or priests or goddesses; looming rocks can dissolve into light and motion; seeming chaos can crystallize in an instant into exquisite form. Whatever the masque and its kindred entertainments may accomplish in terms of rhetorical persuasion and whomever it may celebrate, it also offers the promise, as seductive now as ever, that the future can be made to conform to our hopes for it, and that the past can be reimaged to fit our desired image of it. It offers the seductive and not-so-hidden promise that life – for fleeting moments at least – can be lived as art.