

Lauren Shohet, *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 304 pp. £55.00. ISBN: 978-0199295890 (hb).

What was it like to attend one of the early modern spectacles that we know as masques? There have been few modern attempts to recreate the experience – odd amateur performances here and there, often execrable, several of *Comus*, which is hardly typical, productions of *The Tempest* of course (a magical one in Stockholm recently, for example) including films of the play, again hardly typical, otherwise very little. One exception is that the wonders of YouTube have recently brought back from oblivion a remarkable 1989 Channel Four TV recreation of the Florentine Intermedi from *Una Stravaganza Dei Medici* with Japanese subtitles (my thanks to Stephen Orgel for the reference), which re-imagines the musical interludes of a wedding celebration, with many of the ingredients of masques apart from spoken dialogue. You may have thought you got some idea from the performances in Roland Joffé's brilliantly imagined film *Vatel* (2000), but to judge from this book, quite apart from the differences of Louis XIV's and English courts, that would be far from the mark. Shohet trawls through masses of contemporary documents, including letters and newsbooks, in order to show us how the English masque may have felt, and it does not sound as if a very wide audience these days would tune in. Music, yes, but dialogue and staging? Silly.

Masques have excited scholarly attention in recent years because of renewed interest in the connections between literature and representations of political power. Shohet reviews this scholarship in thorough, informed and sometimes surprising ways while presenting her own approach, which is to interpret masques from the point of view of their impact or reception. This in turn leads to one of the book's most important moves, the linking of masques with other genres. Vulgar ballads and aristocratic masques quote each other, and this is an important discovery. Minor details are also reported in contemporary letters, given the widespread fascination with a genre so popular at court. The prince (Charles, newly installed as Prince of Wales following his elder brother Henry's death) 'excelled them all in bowing', we learn about one performance, and 'cut a few capers, very gracefully', but the king became bored with the dialogue and interrupted: 'What did they make me come here for? The Devil take you all, dance!'

There is necessarily a lot here about Ben Jonson, though many contemporaries get equal time. Indeed, the book begins with an analysis of Davenant's *Britannia Triumphans* and returns to it several times. Though it was presented before Charles in the Banqueting Hall, its performance also involved much 'negotiation' with the interests of the merchant classes in the city – necessarily, given that the performance took place at the height of the Ship Money crisis in 1638. Sea-nymphs praise Britanocles as a naval ruler, and the masque devotes the 'greatest amount of stage-time and the most stunningly spectacular special effects' to the image of the great fleet that moors in the hall while the court dances. Representations of the kingdom within the masque, such as 'English houses of the old and newer forms', are suggestive not so much of absolutist pretensions, according to Shohet, as of a conversation among various models of

authority. Indeed, given that the apparent function is an effort to shake money loose from the good burghers of London, it is hardly surprising that the display of power is made to seem open to negotiation.

Not all masques were quite so political, or regal. *Cupid's Banishment* was performed by the girls of Deptford Ladies Hall School at Queen Anna's Greenwich Palace in 1617, directed by the schoolmaster Robert White. How exactly White would have known what a courtly masque entailed is an interesting question, but the sponsor was Lucy, Countess of Bedford, who would have known very well. Masques refer constantly to other masques, so within a few months Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* was alluding to this one, but coming to an appropriately different conclusion for the pleasure-loving King James: we must put a stop to any conflict, says its Mercury, 'Twixt Vertue and hir noted opposite/ Pleasure'. (This, nonetheless, is the masque that so tried the king's patience that he asked for dancing instead.) Some members of the audience attended both performances, and there is no reason to assume, Shohet claims, that Jonson was trying to upstage the poor schoolteacher. Rather the two masques together offer 'ethically alternative arguments' just as they present variant assumptions about what constitutes a courtly setting, and indeed the masquing space itself.

Shohet ignores the possibility that previous scholars have proposed of including Milton's *Comus* within this specific intertextual framework. Instead she locates *Comus* within a group of temperance masques performed in the 1630s, even including Davenant's *Britannia*. It is not clear whether Shohet thinks Milton's actively influenced the others, as it may have done. Rather in this context Milton's 'Reformist masque' is made to seem much less peculiar: it joins in a 'dialogue across social boundaries' and is 'rather of a piece with its decade'. Surprisingly perhaps, its ideology is not far at all from that 'courtly, Catholic cult of Neoplatonic love, an esoteric investment of Queen Henrietta Maria's'.

Masques have what Shohet calls 'event horizons' that stretch beyond their own often rather exclusive worlds to appear in many other contexts when they are 'imitated, reported, or evoked'. The horizon of the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and the Elector Palatine obviously includes the three masques written to celebrate the occasion but also the concurrent civic entertainments, like *The Tempest*. It extended to other wedding festivals, such as that of Francis Howard and Robert Carr, newly promoted Earl of Somerset, which are likely to have been attended by members of the same audiences. The same or revamped masques could be performed on related occasions. The one that bored the king was nonetheless performed again a few months later, with a revised antimasque included, and when Jonson published it, he claimed that it 'pleased the King so well, as he would see it again'. Whether the tone of the claim is bravado or irony is unclear.

Eventually the masque form was reinvented near the end of the century by the new kind of musical drama called opera. And at the same time, in a bizarre and overlapping moment of literary history, Shakespeare became the heroic national poet 'Shakespeare'. The leading example Shohet offers, however, in a section entitled 'Did the Masque Make Shakespeare?', is the line from Davenant's *Macbeth*: 'double, double, toil and trouble', now fondly recalled, she says, as one of the bard's inventions. That work, however, is not a masque, still less an opera, however distant it may be from

Shakespeare's original, and even though Pepys saw a production in 1667, and liked its 'variety of dancing and music'. Moreover, unfortunately for this book's farewell fanfare, those memorable words are indeed the bard's witches' – or they occur in the Folio at least, our only text for the play.

An instance of the importance of the form is that newsbooks show a keen interest in what happens in masques, and in who performs. This book has very little on spectacle (there are very few references to Inigo Jones), though it does include such music as survives, but its best feature is probably the way it justifies its analysis of the texts of the genre. Reading masques, the author argues, was as much an aspect of their reception as performance, and this leads to illuminating discussion of publication, and its history, of who read what. Many, like Milton's, were published separately, but many more, again like Milton's, were included in collections of other poetic or dramatic works. There was a market for these texts, and not only because they provided a means to connect, however distantly, with the court. Jonson himself felt that only the reader could see the effect as it was meant to be instead of as it was. The same may well be true for the reader of this excellent book.

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