

Political Implications of Wonder and Charisma in Ben Jonson's Court Masque around the Year 1611

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Introduction

Luxurious masques are among the most distinguishing courtly performances of the Jacobean time. Although the financial situation of the Stuart court was critically unstable, the masque had to be sumptuous enough to give the royalty an appearance of affluence and splendour. As Leah Marcus points out, for King James I, masques, as well as theatre performances, were essential means to enhance his royal authority. Claiming the royal prerogative over the court and theatres, King James used theatrical arts as political tools to display and impose his inviolable authority and royal power to his subject-audiences.¹⁾ Masques, often notorious for their extravagancy, were among the most important ones, and they had to be grand and regal for this purpose. In the court masques, the royal characters are used as marvellous figures who can restore peaceful order to disorder, and those scenes are often accompanied with wonder, an essential artistic element first emphasised by Aristotle.

According to Aristotle, wonders are “incidents arousing pity and fear” to the audience.²⁾ He argued that those feeling aroused by wondrous things allows the audience to achieve “Katharsis,” a proper sense of closure after being emotionally stimulated by tragedies. It influenced Italian drama and then English drama, and in early modern Italy and then in England, wonder became an essential element not only in tragedies but also in other genres including comedy.³⁾ J.V. Cunningham and Peter G. Platt note that the sense of not knowing how to understand wonder astonish and numb the spectator at first, and of the same time will stir the demand for explanation. Then, “with this explanation his emotion subsides and order prevails, as on the stage at the close of the play order prevails in the state” (Cunningham 244). This sense of order-restoring and awe-inspiring aspect of wonder is related especially to the king in the court masque. In the court-masque, the king is often represented as a source of wonder or sometimes wonder itself. As King James I claimed his divine right, the effect of wonder might be useful for him to create an illusion of his serene imagery and authority.

Wonder first numbs the audience with its absurdity, and then restores order in the audience's mind, which becomes filled with pleasure of catharsis because of this restored serenity. This order-inspiring aspect of wonder was beneficial for James's purpose of playing since wonder stimulated by the splendid masque intensifies the admiration for the king. As Tom Bishop emphasises, the masque was not a mere performance but an occasion where political issues were cautiously addressed. The masque had to be magnificently extravagant to construct an effective image of royal

authority even if the financial situation was disastrous. Equally important as to show off the royal splendour, in the court masque, the king as well as courtiers had to show their technical skills such as choreography to justify their position in the court hierarchy. Courtiers had their ideal images of political personality, and they needed to enact them with their dancing and marshal skills to convince their legitimacy of their position. This ability of convincing and controlling their political imagery was considered as “charisma” (Bishop 89–91).

Although the importance of showing charisma and wonder in the masque have been emphasised, they have often been discussed separately. I argue that only the synergetic effects created by both charisma and wonder allow the king to establish his power. In this essay I would like to discuss the political use of wonder in the court masque in relation to the royal charisma.

The first chapter examines the social and cultural circumstances that surrounded the masque and the increased usage of wonder and romantic themes in the Jacobean performances. As wonder often involves supernatural phenomena such as magic or miracle, using romantic themes is likely to intensify wondrous effects of the play. Romantic themes might also have been thought useful in instilling courtiers with chivalric virtue. The second chapter examines the characteristics of wonder in Ben Jonson’s court masques in relation to the royal authority. Although Jonson’s representation of the king was well received by the court audience, the royal splendour was not only highlighted by the poet’s elaborate lines, but also by the king himself who was also expected to take an active role for the purpose of showing political wonder. The last chapter examines the function of charisma for the royalty and the risks associated with using splendour of wonder in the court masque. As King James I was aiming at centralising his state, theatre and courtly performances were not just a pastime, but political tools to authorise his prerogatives, and the masque was very crucial because it was the most distinctive occasion where his charisma and splendour could be publicly displayed.

1. Cultural and political circumstances of the Stuart court masque

Being an ardent patron for theatre companies, James I considered dramas had a close relation to his monarchy. As dramas had been a traditional pastime for early modern people regardless of their classes, it was important for him to control them to maintain his royal power. During his reign in Scotland, James actively tried to lure English players to come to his court, which met a sullen opposition of the Scottish Kirk. The latter enacted the ordinance against the plays because of its “profanatioun”, yet James I made the ordinance be withdrawn after much altercation with them. A spokesman of Kirk argued, “We have good reasoun to stay them from their plays, even by your owne acts of parliament,” to which the king answered, “Ye are not the interpreters of my laws.”⁴⁾ For James, public morality was not so much a

matter of concern, as the royal prerogative was. In 1604, the king claimed the sole authority to license and keep London players by proclaiming the statute of royal monopoly over the plays. Although James I “seemed not to relish plays in performance as Queen Elizabeth had,” he invited many players to the court as he seemed “genuinely to have believed that his sponsorship of the theatre would ‘keep up’ royal authority” (Marcus 25).

Of those plays which the king tried to keep under his patronisation, the court masque most directly displayed the splendour of the king. The masque was more costly than any other drama, and there were quite a few remonstrances that such extravagance would eventually ruin the kingdom. Yet for the king and his apologists, “the masque’s elaborateness was justified as a manifestation of the glory of the monarch and therefore of the power and splendour of the nation. Masque was a ‘liturgy of state’ that kindled foreign respect much as the Anglican liturgy was to inspire reverence toward the Church” (Marcus 26). Thus the luxurious masque became one of the most distinguishing features of the Stuart court performances, and became the most important occasion for the king to display the royal power.

Although the court masque was one of the most elaborate performances of the Stuart court, it stems from popular pageants of old festivity. Whether in courtly or civic performances, music and dancing had always been popular on the English stage, and the English audience were familiar with them since the old festivity of Catholic England. Elizabethan popular plays were often accompanied with music and ended with jigs, which some of the audience enjoyed the most in the whole performances.⁵⁾ Although these local popular festivities and plays were often vulgar, their dance and music were largely inherited by the court masque. The masque then adopted Italian art to its dance and music to develop in a different way from the secular entertainment. At the same time, the masque was also accompanied with medieval romantic motifs. Helen Cooper observes that what characterises romance is the usage of romantic motifs: exotic settings, distance and looseness of precise time and place; subject-matter concerning love or chivalry; the existence of high-ranking characters; quests; magic and the supernatural (10). These romantic motifs were ideal for the court’s atmosphere, as the archaic air increases the fantastic air that enables wondrous world that the masque aims to create, and were also useful for emphasising the justifiability of the royal authority because their main topics were often related to idealised loyalty towards kings and about moral that people should follow.

The first English court masque was performed on Twelfth Night of 1512, when Edward Hall records the new entertainment with Italian fashion “called a maske, a thyng not seen afore in England”. During Elizabethan time, the masque was occasionally held at the court only on special celebrations, while it became more frequent under the patronage of Anne, queen of James I. In 1605 Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones collaborated on their first masque, *The Masque of Blackness*, in which

Anne took part as a Daughter of Niger's. Jones copied both Italian and French models when designing his masques and made the most of the spectacular effect by using elaborate machineries. This masque is about a quest, one of the main motifs in romance, where Niger's daughters travel to Britania in order to transform their dark face into fair with the aid of the wondrous power of King of Britania.

Another romantic motif that was revived through the vogue of masque was chivalry. In *Hymenaeæ*(1606) and *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers*(1610), masquers performed barriers. Since Prince Henry favoured chivalry, the masque writers praised his prowess in the masque. *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers*(1610) and *Oberon the Fairy Prince*(1611) were written especially for Prince Henry for the celebration of his enthronement as Prince of Wales. The motif of chivalry was already revived in the Elizabethan period, but the one in the Jacobean court had different intention from the one in Tudor. The Elizabethan tournament accompanied chivalric combats of courtiers, through which courtiers showed loyalty to Elizabeth, who was the symbol of adoration of knights. As well as showing obedience by displaying heroic gallantry and courage, which was considered as a highest form of loyal service, the act of battle was also used for releasing aggressive energies of courtiers so that they would not rebel against the throne.⁶⁾ In November 1595, on the celebration for Queen Elizabeth's thirty-eight yeas of reign, a tournament of chivalry was performed by a troupe of English knights in arms which was beautifully designed by Inigo Jones, the master of stage designer of court masques in the Stuart court.⁷⁾ For the royal performance, the spectacular effect was also important, and Jones's design of sophisticated and extravagant arms contributed a great deal to the revival of romance.⁸⁾ In James I's court, chivalry was not only used to show loyalty towards the monarchy, but to show Prince Henry's prowess. By displaying his martial talent, the prince aimed to impress courtiers with his legitimacy over the throne. As romances' protagonists were often royal figures, and were often accompanied by supernatural phenomena and fantastic atmosphere, they were optimum for court performance when the court masque's purpose was to praise royal figures as well as to provide wonderful spectacles.

At the same time, the revival of romance was not occurring only in the court. Acquiring the indoor theatre, the Blackfriars, the King's Men increased more masque-like spectacular performances to utilize its sophisticated machinery as well as to answer the growing popularity of court-like masques.⁹⁾ On 29 October 1610, a romantic pageant was held by London Merchant Taylors' Company in the city streets. This pageant included Nine Kings and a magician Merlin. The route of the pageant included the River Thames, whereupon Merlin and nine Kings, all sitting in the rock floating, which was effective in emphasising the magical power of Merlin.¹⁰⁾ Thus while being a useful tool for the monarchy, romantic motifs were also becoming popular in both popular and court performances.

2. Wonder in Ben Jonson's court masques

The splendid court masque of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones with its profound poetical beauty and the spectacular effect of Italian theatrical machineries was a great success and became popular entertainment in the early Stuart court. Their first masque, *Masque of Blackness*, startled the contemporary audience because it was "at once the most abstruse and the most spectacular masque England ever seen".¹¹⁾ With the brilliant settings of genius stage designer Inigo Jones, Ben Jonson's court masques were among the most influential performances in the Jacobean times. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, for example, we can trace a certain influence from *Oberon*, in the dance scene at the sheepshearing (6. 6) which resembles the dance of satyrs. Jonson's masques brilliantly manipulated both poetic and spectacular marvels, and apparently inspired Shakespeare when he created the romance plays especially for Blackfriars Theatre.

One characteristic of the court masques is that their themes were "always about the resolution of discord" and that "antitheses, paradoxes, and the movement from disorder to order are central to its nature" (Orgel 3). Wonder in a masque was often evoked by the king, who was the symbol of harmony and of supreme authority. *Oberon, the Fairy Prince* was performed on 1 January 1611 for the praise of Prince Henry, who was installed as Prince of Wales on June 1610. In *Oberon*, wonder is always evoked in relation to Henry or James. When satyrs find the shining palace of the fairy prince, they express their admiration:

Look! Does not his palace show
Like another sky of lights?
Yonder with him live the knights,
Once, the noblest of the earth,
Quickened by a second birth;
Who, for prowess, and for truth,
There are crowned with lasting youth,
And do hold, by Fate's command,
Seats of bliss in fairy land. (100-108)¹²⁾

In front of the splendid settings of "bright and glorious palace, whose gates and walls were transparent"(96-97), Silenus is impressed with the "Proper watch" and eloquently admires the prince, praising him as a reincarnate of the legendary Arthur. Although it is not directly explained, the audience is given instruction on how to perceive this marvel before they start to wonder if the light is something of magic or religion. The audience is told that the light which comes through the "transparent" wall of the palace reflects the splendour of the royal virtue of the Fairy Prince, or Prince Henry. This splendid spectacle and the poetic praise suggest to the audience

how they should understand the wondrous figure of the prince and help to impress them with royal splendour.

The most imposing marvel comes immediately after the antimasque, which represents disorder of “childish mischief-makers who are capable of reformation and integration into the world of the masque itself, presided over by the young Prince as Oberon”.¹³ After satyrs wake up Sylvans, the guards of the palace, they sing a crude song, then they fall “suddenly into an antic dance”. The antimasque is a dramatic element of Jonson’s masques which is associated with boisterous dance of masquers and represents the condition of disorder. This vulgar antimasque is immediately soothed with the entrance of the prince. The marvellous opening of the palace scene effectively impresses the splendour of the prince. The audience is first mesmerized by the dreamy sight of “the nation of fays”, which represents the beauty of British kingdom governed by James. The scene is followed by singing fairies and the distanced sight of “the knights masquers sitting in their several sieges” and finally enters Oberon, “in a chariot, which to a loud triumphant music began to move forward, drawn by two white bears, and on either side guarded by three Sylvans”. The prowess of Prince Henry is especially emphasised by the fact that he tames the polar bears, which are the most ferocious beasts that the contemporary could wish for. Thus chivalric performance, once used as a token of obedience to Queen Elizabeth as well as the release of rebellious power of the courtiers, is used here to show the prince’s legitimacy of ruling the courtiers and the kingdom. As this scene includes two figures that should be wondered at, Prince Henry and King James I, Jonson puts heavier emphasis on the King.

Melt earth to sea, sea flow to air,
And air fly into fire,
Whilst we, in tunes, to Arthur’s chair
Bear Oberon’s desire;
Than which there nothing can be higher,
Save James, to whom it flies;
But he the wonder is of tongues, of ears, of eyes.
Who hath not heard, who hath not seen,
Who hath not sung his name?
The soul, that hath not, hath not been,
But is the very same
With buried sloth, and knows not fame,
Which doth him best comprise:
For he the wonder is of tongues, of ears, of eyes. (*Oberon* 211-223)

As shown in the lines above, the king is the most important figure for the marvel, as

this conjunction of wonder and the king was the very purpose of holding a masque at the court. Although this masque was meant for the praise of Prince Henry, the ultimate wonder should derive from the virtue of the head of the court, the king. Perhaps this could also represent a delicate problem of the conflicting political opinions between King James I, who preferred milder harmonious situation, and more agreed with Jonson, and Henry, who was more belligerent and therefore becoming more popular than his father. Jonson considered that wonder should be achieved through the royal virtue and harmony by that wonder.

Jonson's aesthetic idea about art and wonder which is associated with the royal supremacy is described in the preface to *Hymenae*(1606):

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 momentary, and merely taking, the other impressing, and lasting. Else the glory of all these solemnities had perished like a blaze, and gone out, in the beholders' eyes. So short-lived are the bodies of all things, in comparison of their souls. And though bodies oftentimes have the ill luck to be sensually preferred, they find afterwards the good fortune when souls live to be utterly forgotten. This it is hath made the most royal princes and greatest persons, who are commonly the personaters of these actions, not only studious of riches, and magnificence in the outward celebration, or show — which rightly becomes them — but curious after the most high and hearty inventions, to furnish the inward parts, and those grounded upon antiquity, and solid learning, which, though their voice be taught to sound to present occasions, their sense or doth or should always lay hold on more removed mysteries. (1-13)¹⁴⁾

Jonson considered that wonder should be evoked not through spectacles, because the amazement evoked through “bodies” lasts only for a “momentary” and “the glory of all these solemnities perishes like a blaze, and gone out, in the beholders' eyes”. Poetry, on the other hand, is “impressing, and lasting” to “inward parts” of the audiences' senses. He believed that wonder should be grounded on “antiquity and solid learning”(11-12). He also considered it was the poet's obligation to conduct the audiences to the understanding of the marvels of the masques in the way the author intended. The poet even argues through Silenus' voice how the audience should see the king:

And may they well. [*Indicating James*] For this indeed is he,
My Boys, whom you must quake at when you see.
He is above your reach; and neither doth
Nor can he think, within a Satyrs tooth;

Before his presence, you must fall, or fly.
He is the matter of virtue, and placed high.
His meditations, to his height, are even,
And all their Issue is akin to heaven. (250–267)

These lines determined not only how the audience should regard the royalty but also how they should react: the audience “must quake” when they see the king.

As Aristotelian wonder was supposed to be elucidated at the ending so that it can restore order into the play, wonder in Jonson’s court masques was explained through the restoration of order as achieved by the royal power. Thus court masques were not only spectacularly awe-inspiring but also instructive since they were meant to teach court audiences the proper behaviour towards the king.

3. The needed charisma for creating wonder

Spectacular and poetical magnificence of court masques was effective in intensifying royal grace, creating the illusion of wonder as a royal figure accompanied a certain risks. Since the masque was not just a pastime which the courtiers could enjoy as onlookers but was an occasion in which all the courtiers were meant to participate, the failure of displaying decorum in the masque might have meant the failure in showing his political authority. As Tom Bishop states, the masque was “a formal and kinetic event whose politics are not simply uttered, but enacted”.¹⁵ According to Frank Whigham, as politics at the court stems from the courtiership, Stuart courtiers were obliged to locate themselves in a group whose head was the king, by enacting rhetorical performance. This rhetorical performance is generated out of a dialectic of tradition and novelty. As a group, the courtiers had to manipulate the dialectic of rhetoric so that they can keep themselves within the group and others out, and within this dialectic of “new and old, change and stasis,” the court kept a subtle balance (Bishop 90). The courtiers were required not only to keep the traditional status, but also to show a certain novel skills, or new and technical skills in choreography, to impose their ability. In the masque, the king and courtiers were given images of political impersonations and their positions rested on whether they could successfully display those images by enacting them by themselves. This convincing skill that enabled to match their body into the political image of the person was considered as the courtier’s “charisma” (91).

The typical of those charismatic skills were marshal arts and also talented choreography, which was considered to need a deliberate intelligence. Thus a masquerade was on one hand was the occasion when courtiers were allowed to enter the wondrous world, and each one of them was interpreted as a graceful character of the masque, but on the other hand was a tense ritual where political trade was being made. This dance had to be new. “It was not enough merely to prove that one was

a good dancer... it was also necessary to be seen offering newly devised, preferably challenging, choreographies, painstakingly rehearsed over weeks and now performed without false step, as though the easiest thing in the world” (Bishop 97). The elaborate and intellectual dance of the king and courtiers are contrasted with vulgar and plain dances of anti-masque, and when the dance is successfully enacted, the wonder of the king is all the more highlighted. This way a successful masque brings the pleasure of achieving the restoration of royal order.

In the dance of Oberon, however, King James I seems to have failed to create an illusion of royal charisma in his dance. According to the note of Trumbull MS, Prince Henry took “the Queen to dance, the Earl of Southampton the Princess, and each of the rest his lady. They danced an English dance resembling a pavane. When the Queen returned to her place the Prince tooke her for contanta... and then the gallarda began, which was something to see and admire. The Prince took the Queen third time for *los branles de Poitou...*”¹⁶) While the prince gathered the courtiers’ admiration with his choreography and his surprising stamina, the king was “somewhat tired” as it was about midnight and “sent word that they should make an end.”¹⁷)

Thus emphasising charisma in the court masque would have been effective when elaborate skills were successfully shown, but it also accompanied a risk of losing dignity if one failed to prove skilful. Still, as it has been discussed in the previous chapter, the splendour of royalty was not achieved only by his charismatic skills, but also by wonder that was generated through the grand atmosphere of the masque’s stage setting and through poetic decorum. Even though the king was not able to physically impress courtiers, royal wonder was actually shared with courtly attenders of the masque because the core sense of wonder in Jonson’s masques was something that is felt when the audience actually participate in the masquerade with the king. As the climax of wonder is always followed by masquerade where all of the courtly audience were expected to join in, the division between the audience and the stage is not clear. There, wonder is not a mere show which dissipates when it ends, but something they can actually enter. Even after the masque is over, wonder does not diminish because the source of wonder in the court masque is supposed to be King James himself. Therefore, as long as the king stays, wonder is never dissipated and stays as a real sense.

At the same time, as Jonson was concerned that Inigo Jones’s spectacular “bodies” would affect audiences’ “senses”, the grandeur of the masque’s stage setting was also very effective in impressing the royal power on courtiers. Although the king was ideally expected to be charismatic in his dancing, he was already presented as impressive figure in the masque thanks to the spectacular marvels of Inigo Jones and poetical decorum of Jonson. This elaborate combination of spectacular and poetical wonder in the masque supplemented the insufficiency of the needed skills to be regarded as legitimate king, and made him successfully charismatic, the person who

has an ability to prove and enact his given ideal image.

4. Conclusion

The monarchy of King James and the theatrical and courtly performances had a close relation with each other since the latter was used to defend the former. Extravagant court masques of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones were used as one of the most important political means to display splendour of the king, and were also the occasion of political trade by itself. There, romantic motifs and wonder were utilised to emphasise the royal authority as well as to instruct the required reaction of courtiers.

The romantic motifs were used to bring back the idealised loyalty of knighthood into both Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, requiring the courtiers to show admiration and obedience to the royalty. As romantic motifs involve miraculous and magical atmosphere, they were also useful in reducing the inappropriateness of the representation of supernatural incidents, and were effective in impressing the audience with royal splendor. Wonder first numbs the audience with marvel, and then brings the pleasure of catharsis to the audience's mind with the explication that the figure of wonder is the king himself. On wondrous scenes, Jonson's writing tends to be explanatory as he understood the royal purpose of displaying royal power and educating the courtly audiences, as well as Jonson himself, had an intention to display his poetical authority bringing beautifully harmonious control over the whole play. The sophistication of Jonson's elaborateness, accompanied with spectacular splendour of a utopia-like romantic world created by Jones, played one of the most important roles in displaying the legitimacy of the king's prerogative.

Yet poetic and spectacular wonder created by the collaboration of the two artists was not enough to convince the audience of the royal power. As masquerade scenes in masques required the courtiers to participate in the world of masque through dancing, they provided actual occasions where not only kings but also the courtiers had to display their choreographic talents that were required for their own charismatic images given through the masque. By showing elaborate performance, the courtiers politically traded their position in a group of courtship. Ideally, the king was also expected to perform his charismatic dance, but as he was represented as a very figure of wonder itself, masquerades required less skill for the king. Rather, they presented themselves as more tensed occasion for courtiers to survive within the court, and thus demanded them to focus on their own skills rather than that of the king.

At the same time, participation in the masque was a delightful moment for court audiences. Already mesmerised by Jonson's poetry and marvellous spectacle of Jones, the audience became more than ready to participate in this magical fairy land of the masque. Dance was the only way for the courtiers to bask in the wonder of the royalty of the idealised world, and this wonder was never diminished as long as

the king, the very wondrous figure, was there. And through dancing in the utopian romantic world which had its model in Renaissance chivalry, the courtiers were instilled with the harmonious pleasure of being loyal to the wondrous king. This combination of poetical and spectacular wonder indicated James I and actual dance allowed the king to convince his charisma, a skill of enacting an ideal imagery given as a royal head. Thus Jacobean court maintained and extended its power with a quite subtle balance of political game of charisma and magical art of wonder.

Notes

- 1) Marcus 24–63
- 2) For Aristotle’s definition about wonder, see Aristotle 1452a₁ff.
- 3) James V. Mirollo. “The Aesthetics of Marvellous: The Wondrous Work of Art in a Wondrous World”. *Wonders, Marvels, and Monsters in Early Modern Culture*. Ed. Peter G. Platt 24–44.
- 4) This conversation is cited in Chambers, 2:267–69, from David Calderwood’s *Historie of the Kirk of Scotland*.
- 5) For the popularity of jigs in popular performances, see Wiles. *Shakespeare’s Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse*.
- 6) For chivalry in Tudor court, see McCoy *The Rites of Knighthood*.
- 7) Strong. *The Tudor and Stuart Monarchy: Pageantry, Painting, Iconography, III. Jacobean and Caroline*.
- 8) Strong 112
- 9) For more detail about the Blackfriars Theatre, see Smith. *Shakespeare’s Blackfriars Playhouse*.
- 10) Wiggins
- 11) Cited from Orgel’s introduction in *The Complete Masques*. 4.
- 12) Citations from Jonson’s court masques are from Ben Jonson. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*. Eds. David Bevington. et al.
- 13) Cited from David Lindley. “Introduction to *The Speeches at Prince Henry’s Barrier*”. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*. Vol.3.714
- 14) Lindley 667–668.
- 15) Cited from Bishop “The gingerbread host: tradition and novelty in the Jacobean masque” *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*. 89
- 16) Cited in Orgel 738 n.333 in *The Complete Masques*
- 17) Orgel. n.354

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