**“IN THE HEAD OF THE WORTHIEST WOMEN”:
AMAZON QUEENS AND PERFORMING HEROINES IN
JACOBAN COURT MASQUES**

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Abstract: Queen Anne of Denmark’s role – as actress and patroness – in emancipating womanliness onstage by direct performance is strictly connected to the emerging trend of fashioning masques in the early Jacobean court. My paper will focus on the connection/contamination of this dramatic phenomenon with the current imagery of acting warlike heroines, conflicting Anne’s policy for entertainments with masculine and royal anxieties.

Keywords: Amazons, Ben Jonson, Jacobean court, masques, Queen Anne

THESEUS Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,
And won thy love doing thee injuries;
But I will wed thee in another key,
With pomp, with triumph, with revelling.

(William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I.i.16-19)

In Act I scene II of *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare – probably with Middleton’s collaboration – introduces on stage his sample of disguised Amazons as masquers for upper-class entertainment. During the banquet, a group of dancing ladies, halfway between modern showgirls and classical prostitutes, enact a licentious spectacle of flattering sensuality before the euphoric Timon, while Apemantus’s asides condemn them as emblems of the corrupt debauchery of contemporary Athens, since he perceives contact with their revelling bodies as an infective source of physical and moral contagion

for society (Fulton 1979:288-90). There are no stage directions or textual details for their costumes and specific movements during this teasing show, but the routine prejudice against female performers for displaying their moving (theatrical) bodies as magnets for pleasing male gazes seems here partially lessened by the fact that actually these Amazons, apart from the dramatic diaphragm provided by the stage, were not women at all (in Jacobean revenge tragedies by Webster and Middleton, female characters attending court festivals and masquing revels are often charged with over-indulgence in dissolute pastimes and sexual incontinence. Cf. Butler 2008:128-29).

Indeed, in English Renaissance drama all female roles were canonically filled by professional male players suitably cross-dressed: formally, the acting stage was forbidden to real women, who did not at that time put their own identities and reputations at risk in common playhouses in order to attract attention as theatrical artefacts, even if within a fictional context. Their appeal as fetishised objects of male desire proved to be less tangible in theatres precisely because of the concrete absence of real female bodies on display.

This angle, projected towards theatrical seduction, proves to be further complicated if we consider that Amazon imagery already includes many ambivalent elements that lie on the borderline between genders, often with implications of repulsion (Carney 2003:117-18). Commonplace sources, ranging from classical mythography to Early Modern accounts from exotic lands, describe them as unruly women committed to transgress those formal codes imposed by men on their sex, subverting a (supposed) natural and patriarchal order in exercising male prerogatives. Thus Amazons were generally portrayed as aggressive un-domestic women, cruel devotees of hunting and war, fiercely proud in their self-seclusion from male communities, and free to exercise their androgynous chastity or brutish lust without men's consent. Their femino-centric attitude was commonly branded as a barbarous instance of rebellion against the precepts of a traditional civilisation which was still dependent on the ideal paradigm of passive women, subjected to male control and bereft of "performative" places to exhibit their warlike virtues through an antagonistic stance.

During Elizabeth I's reign this paranoid bias against the unwomanly monstrosity inherent in Amazonian tropes had been reduced by the crucial impact of a powerful

female ruler - remembered as *divina virago* for her celebrated speech at Tilbury on the eve of the battle against the Spanish Armada, and retrospectively depicted as an Amazonian queen (during her lifetime, probably to avoid any allusive inconvenience, Elizabeth I was never officially compared to, or associated with, Amazon warriors, both in panegyric works and public entertainments).

These bellicose masculine elements related to Elizabeth's virtues enhanced her popularity, yet without impairing her womanly identity. Amazons no longer met with scornful overtones, while their militant heroism was progressively rehabilitated through oblique correlations with the Tudor sovereign (Jackson 1988:49-52). In this period diverse entertainments offered as official tributes to Elizabeth featured Amazons in a more favourable light, though their roles were still performed by male actors as in public theatres (Schleiner 1978:163-68).

James's accession to the English throne by 1603 – as a king well-known for his misogynistic attitudes and strategic hostility to war – justified the tendency to invert this process, and Amazons were increasingly re-perceived as a symbolic threat to ruling male sovereignty, and accordingly condemned for being agents of disorder/subversion who fostered male anxieties about gender hegemony through their illegitimate appropriation of manly privileges – as well as evoking by parallel the nostalgic spectre of Elizabeth's militant heroism, so dangerous for James's policy of self-propaganda (Orgel 1990:123-26).

Theatrical Amazons in Shakespeare and Fletcher's Jacobean tragicomedies, after a riotous preamble of conflict, are conventionally tamed to be re-shaped as respectful consorts, subaltern to their triumphing husbands and rulers (see, for instance, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1614) and *The Sea Voyage* (1622), once they have shed their inborn warlike attitudes to fulfil a romantic happy ending of familial reconciliation and incorporation (Carney 2003:121-26). The first relevant encounter between Shakespeare's drama and mythical Amazons, however, dates back to his comical production in Elizabethan period. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character of the warrior-queen Hippolyta anticipates that condition of obedience to her husband (Theseus) recurring for Amazons in future tragicomedies. (Cf. Carney 2003:119-21)

Those who try to resist this scheme are doomed to ill-famed banishment giving way to self-destruction, as in the tragic case of Fletcher's Boadicea, the martial Queen of the Iceni fighting against the Roman occupier, protagonist of *The Tragedie of Bonduca*. Her defiant and Amazon-like attempts to subject the enemy (male) soldiers to an emasculating form of disarmed captivity turns out to be condemned even by her countrymen as an immoral war crime; militant heroism seems here to repel women's deviant intromission into warfare, previously regarded as exclusive territory for male authority (Crawford 1999:362-66). Obviously, this attitude, once transposed from the stage to the contingent self-assumption of kingship, could properly conform to James's absolutistic and misogynistic perspective of patriarchal rule, imposed as a norm on all his subjects, including his restless wife (formerly princess of Denmark, and Queen of Scotland when her husband had reigned there as James VI) Queen Anne. Nevertheless the queen consort – the first after more than fifty years in England, and actually James's first loyal subject and closest courtier – did not acquiesce in submissively accepting this position, and now and then reacted to this autocratic male policy with strategic acts of resistance, more or less implicitly, always circumventing a strenuous posture of overt antagonism.

The first auxiliary channel elected by Anne to counterbalance a super-imposed male-centric scenario at court consisted in the cultural activities promoted by her own private circle and household, a centre of influence and political identity alternative to that of the King. The Queen was surrounded by eminent scholars and artists in her private court; she was universally renowned as a patroness of culture, extending the promotion of her power and dignity through the renowned contribution of cultural innovation. This dynamism could be plainly ascribed to the contingent interplay between different circles within the Jacobean court which, far from being a monolithic structure of uniform interests, actually involved a complex network of factions competing for primacy in influence and lustre. Furthermore, during their years in England, Anne gradually lost a conspicuous amount of James's esteem and attention – carnally too – becoming gradually detached from his private life, to be replaced by his male favourites, and barely tolerated for her meddling in the King's public affairs. In this context of increasing distance and disaffection she sponsored a particular type of dramatic entertainment to voice her

(female) authority and disturb, without a direct offensive, the rhetorical monologue of James's masculine assertiveness (Lewalski 1993:19-23, 43).

By 1603 the court masque was a theatrical genre still uncoded and open to experimentation. Being considered an instrument for royal propaganda, whose task consisted in allegorically celebrating the royal majesty at suitable annual festivities and state events, these court entertainments were commonly deemed direct emanations from the throne, liable to mirror its inherent priorities within a context of stately revels. Nevertheless, Queen Anne strove to modify this implied canon, aiming primarily to promote her royal *persona* in opposition to previous standards, taking part in a radical re-contextualization of conventions for masques which can be seen as evidence of female influence over court activities (Wynne-Davies 1992:80-82).

The usual formula of court masque provided a dramatic interaction between professional actors playing speaking parts and mute gentlemen disguised as masquers. Elaborate dances and songs matched their acted performances, which canonically culminated in inviting the noble audience to an inclusive ritual of revels, alongside the feasting banquet. Generally, the initial section of these ceremonial exchanges between playing characters and the noble audience respected a specific gendered etiquette: each gentleman masquer took from the onlookers a (pre-selected) noble lady – married or not – to involve her in dancing, according to the eminence of their position or factional partnerships (a complete analysis of the ritual scansion of masque in specific choreographic phases is discussed in Barroll 2001:84-88, 94-97).

Beyond political concern, this ritual of union symbolically celebrated the prolific alliance between the two sexes, a harmonious instance of heterosexual integration projected to symbolise fertility and social continuity through generative conjunction. The official occasions for masques were also often associated with strategic marriages among the prominent members of the nobility (Lanier 1999:328-31). The first source of sensual desirability in this practice, however, depended strictly on the exclusive ability of masquing lords to show their bodily skill in extremely refined dancing – reserved to male courtiers – and combined with the elaborate pomp of their theatrical costumes: the overall extent of female display, in this case, was overshadowed by the Lords' performative

preeminence, and circumscribed barely to complement this affected parade of male masquers, through the modest hubris of a deferential attitude (Ravelhofer 2009:108-11).

When, as main patroness, Queen Anne appointed Samuel Daniel and Ben Jonson as official dramatists for writing court masques, this fashion evolved into an innovative multi-gendered perspective during the following decade, the period remembered for Anne's leadership in court entertainment. This cycle began with Samuel Daniel's *The Vision of Twelve Goddesses* (1604), the first court masque – and likely also a public theatrical work in Renaissance England – to include a group of women playing a series of female characters. Differently from England and according to the sixteenth century tradition of Scottish court entertainments, female performers were already tolerated on public occasions, which James and Anne directly enjoyed during their regency in Scotland. (Cf. McManus 2002: 68-90)

These performers weren't ordinary courtiers, but the choicest ladies of the Queen's circle, playing the part of twelve ancient deities – among them Venus, Diana and Astraea – before an audience composed of the highest ranks of the kingdom along with eminent diplomatic guests (McManus 2002:101-105). Anne chose for herself during the staging the independent role of Pallas/Athena, the warlike and virginal goddess reputed to represent wisdom and learning: she deliberately rejected the part of Juno, queen consort of Jupiter in Olympus, to give specific emphasis to her autonomous image, once disconnected from the ordinary conjugal subtext intended to celebrate the royal couple.

In his dedication to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, Daniel did not omit to illustrate how worthily Pallas's part was played by 'the magnificent Queen' also remembered for her 'heroicall spirit' (Daniel 1981:25) in embodying this mythical figure. In the main masque, moreover, her praiseworthy profile is enhanced by the description of the armed Anne/Pallas, as viewed by her charmed audience, who shows off onstage supplied with all the symbolic paraphernalia typically related to this goddess, including veiled allusions to the Elizabethan imagery of the warrior queen, whose militant aura Anne seems here to inherit as figurative echo. Probably Anne adapted for this masque an old dress from Queen Elizabeth I's wardrobe as costume for Pallas, exactly to express a sign of female continuity inside the English court by re-embodying the features of her illustrious predecessor. (See McManus 2002: 107-109)

She feels more inclined to be inspired by the previous Queen's divine attributes than to mirror any simplified version of male heroism within a womanly dramatic body:

Next war-like Pallas, in her helmet dressed
With lance of winning, target of defence:
In whom both wit and courage are expressed,
To get with glory, hold with providence.
(*The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* , ll. 294-7)

No longer marginalised to (co-)operate merely as ideological support for complementing royal male agency, through Anne's involvement, the noble ladies in the guise of silent performers achieved an unprecedented centrality in court entertainments by exposing onstage their moving bodies to signify their self-sufficient priorities and virtues evoked by a female-only pantheon. This opportunity permitted them to establish a physical contact directly with spectators' senses unprecedented for court gendered theatricality, upsetting even the traditional sequence of taking-out for revels, because in this case ladies were assigned to invite their lords to dance. Moreover, this re-arrangement of masquing roles enacts a dual display of performance never allowed to noblewomen till then: at once they could both interpret a fictional part and represent their own stately identity as illustrious ladies in public events of lofty prestige (Gossett 1988:96-97).

These features were significantly expanded and amplified by Anne's creative partnership with Ben Jonson for his first exploits in the composition of court masques. Prefaces and dedicatory addresses to the Queen are explicit in the published version of these scripts: Jonson himself declares that Anne's contribution to the dramatic invention was determining as an agent of inspiration for topical choices (on Anne's self-assumed authorial agency over the text, contrasting with the exclusive notion of male writer/printer, see Wynne-Davies 1992:79-80; and Bernadette 1999:247-49).

No inert patroness limited to raising funds for the staging, the Queen became involved in conditioning the parameters of theatrical representation, adding new ideas and imprinting her personal contribution of female authorship on the overall production: her interventions in the conceptualisation of masques ranged from the supervision of

scenery, theatrical properties and the styling of costumes to the selection of players and the tactful policy of official invitations. Anne's scrupulous regard for these spectacles is further substantiated by her personal involvement in the rehearsals and scenic tests before the "debut" of her masques (Lewalski 1993:36-37), signalling the crucial weight of a successful exploit in these events for the Queen's renowned status, which clearly also depended on the theatrical arena of court entertainments produced by herself.

The first outcome of this fruitful collaboration with Jonson took place at Whitehall, in the Banqueting House, for *Twelfth Night* 1605 (see also Barroll 2002: 99-104). In the *Masque of Blackness* the Queen and her ladies are downgraded from Daniel's goddesses to the semi-divine degree of fair Nymphs of the River Niger, who introduce themselves onstage with a distinctive remark, self-evident at first sight: by explicit order of Anne, all the Nymphs appeared disguised as blackamoors, their faces and skin painted with dark makeup to embody exotic origins from sunburned lands.

Needless to say, this provocative novelty was planned to disappoint the traditional expectations of the audience, by stirring their routine sense of decorum coupled with the aesthetic agenda of court entertainments: is it legitimate for a woman, especially for the Queen, to embody the signifiers of ambiguous "otherness" as ciphers of her royal beauty before a public of illustrious guests? Does it seem appropriate to show off her arms and shoulders naked to express freely the fertile sensuality of the royal consort's body – six months pregnant during those weeks – in a black hue? Dudley Carleton's contemporary response, in his famous epistolary accounts of this masque, witnessed the occurrence of anxious and hostile perceptions in reaction to such an innovative stance. Carleton associated the lady masquers more with dissolute courtesans than with pure nymphs, and finally turned to blame the ugly sight of blackness as unworthy of noble individuals, above all if they were representatives of the English court before visiting diplomats (Carleton 1972:68).

Apart from prejudicial embarrassment about gendered etiquette, Carleton's remarks signal the difficulty of digesting Anne's unorthodox approach to theatrical femininity, which implies a provocative transgression of codes here defied by new forms of aesthetic misrule imposed by a (ruling) woman, who compensates for the denial of speaking parts with the eloquent rhetoric of mute bodies, put in evidence onstage by their

spectacular revision of female beauty. Instead of a mannered form of Amazonian bravery, the *Masque of Blackness* proposes a thorough management of womanly – and unstable – beauty as a major resource/weapon for stating the militant voice of highborn ladies outside a male-only chorus of agreement (Aasand 1992:278-80). In Anne's dramatic project of self-fashioning, femaleness thus collides implicitly with previous representation of royalty and, besides, thanks to their emblematic entry, her mute masquing ladies collapse the canonical dichotomies of beauty (black/white, exotic/native) to put into question even the central authority of male personifications in a context where female expressive energy tends to prevail (Bernadette 1999:252-56, 264-67).

Finally, the miraculous Sun, as allegory for the King, is theatrically ineffectual and removed to the margins: he doesn't bleach the Nymphs' skin as promised, and leaves their problematic quest for definitive beauty unresolved. Moreover, as usual in Jacobean royal masques, James didn't establish any bodily contact during the final revels because he refused to dance in public, thus showing, as static observer, his different condition from the Queen's multimediatic poetic, fulfilled by means of visual agency and kinetic measures of dancing. The key characters and living celebrities onstage remain therefore women playing other women, who generously lavish the spectacle of their polymorphic grace within a theatrical frame.

Three years later, a new masque sponsored by Queen Anne and written by Ben Jonson was staged at Whitehall: the *Masque of Beauty* (1608) takes up the same Nymphs as the previous scenario, who this time appear already whitened, completing their progress towards another form of beauty applicable to their flexible royal status. The cathartic process of bleaching has occurred off-stage and the effective merit has been ascribed to the moon goddess Aethiopia, who prevailed over envious Night in a single-gendered conflict between female deities which, even if not represented, represents the turning point in the dramatic structure of this entertainment verging on the redemptive force of chromatic metamorphosis. In her essay about confessional dissimulation and chromatic disguising in masques, Molly Murray intriguingly argues for a metaphoric connection between cosmetic mutability and masking of religious sectarianism – above all considering Anne's recent (and delicate) conversion to Roman Catholicism (Cf. Murray 2007: 437-43; and Schwarz 2000:119-20).

To confirm women's dramatic priority in this sense, in one of the closing songs, Jonson emphasises the dignity of the masquing ladies by commending the importance of female performance within that cosmic harmony here theatrically adumbrated:

SONG

Had those that dwell in Error foul,
And hold that Women have no Soul,
But seen these move; they would have then
Said, Women were the Souls of Men.
So they do move each Heart, and Eye,
With the World's soul, true harmony.

(*The Masque of Beauty*, ll. 307-12; see Jonson 1969:73; for all quotations from Jonson's masques in this essay the reference edition is Orgel's complete collection reprinted in 1969).

Each gentleman masquer has to acknowledge his dependence on the prestigious contribution of women for the dynamics of court society: only impious people may believe women have no souls, while it is repeatedly demonstrated that, by permeable influence, they represent men's soul instead, out of their faculty for inspiring lively movement and noble vocations. This ideal faculty can be translated figuratively to the dramatic body of the Queen's masques as well, where woman's acting constitutes the animating principle, the proper soul of masque, that gives life to magnificent delight and "moving" the senses of the involved audience with the appeal of performative transport (Tomlinson 2005:19-20, 29-30).

A more striking approach to gender issues is exposed in Jonson's third contribution to the Queen's masque, entitled the *Masque of Queens* and presented for Candlemas 1609. Anne asked Jonson for a 'spectacle of strangeness' for the sake of variety, a grotesque prelude of (attempted) disorder and subversion working as introduction to the virtuous queens impersonated by her ladies; something similar to a foil conceived to exalt their positive qualities by contrast. This successful formula, baptised as antimasque, from then on became an indispensable element in the structure of court masque. In this case the antimasque features a meeting of ugly witches trying – rather ridiculously and vainly – to subvert natural order and conformist ethics to disrupt the king's official celebrations. Their bizarre movements and deformed appearance,

although purposely unrealistic, disclose that utmost degeneration of female dignity much feared by the other sex in a preposterous milieu (Ravelhofer 2009:190-94).

As conventional for speaking parts, all the roles in this antimasque were assigned to professional male actors, fitly cross-dressed in the frightful guise of twelve malicious witches as emblems of chaotic indecorum. What Jonson combines here through the *Masque of Queens* – for the first time in English court entertainments – is a duplicitous stance of femininity that takes place onstage, where the negative pole is figured by lower class players disguised as women, with their systematic abuse of dramatic license in their manners or speeches. On the other hand, facing this theatrical turmoil, the ideal paradigm of positive femininity belongs exclusively to the real cast of aristocratic ladies performing historical and mythological Amazon-warrior queens, although without speaking parts. This strategy of theatrical juxtaposition contributes to complicating any standard perception of a single femaleness, whose fluid exegesis reveals, nonetheless, how the different representations of gender have been fluidly interpolated by the artificial filter/layers of those dramatic devices – intensely encouraged by the Queen – the audience is fully aware of, but fascinatingly perplexed by as well.

To enact a brief interlude of male intervention between these (seeming) polarized extremes of femininity, as well as to exorcise womanly hegemony in this masque, Heroic Fame appears onstage in the garments of Perseus, who does not miss the chance to vaunt his execution of Medusa – as embodiment of archetypal feminine Terror to be obliterated by masculine heroism. This linear form of implicit triumph, however, does not succeed in concealing all the ambiguities pertaining to Perseus's alleged single-gendered victory when untied from womanly influence. On the contrary, the classic myth demonstrates how Perseus mediated between two greater forms of female power only to strengthen the more virtuous one (about Perseus's troublesome relationship with female paradigms of power in mythology, see also Orgel 1990: 128-9; and Butler 2008: 139-40; for the feminine implications of the Gorgon's archetype, see Meskill 2005: 198-202).

Accordingly, he was usually portrayed as mere human agent of the will of Pallas, who presided over the achievement of his mission; after slaughtering the Gorgon, he offered the spoils of Medusa's head as a votive gift to Pallas, and it promptly became an

emblem of female power once it was appropriated by Pallas and incorporated into her powerful shield – the *Ægis* (Schwarz 2000:122-23).

Heroic Fame/Perseus's dramatic task in the *Masque of Queens*, analogous to a theatrical scarecrow, consists of dispelling the anarchic Sabbath imported by the witches, in order to make room for introducing the majestic setting of the House of Fame, where the twelve heroic queens reside, whose epic reputation has been declared sublimate by male poets and historians. The names of these queens evoke glorious deeds over the centuries: it is her Majesty's grace to offer their Amazon-like spirits the chance to revive onstage by pervading the acting bodies of twelve illustrious ladies, including the Queen herself.

The composite array of these heroines heralded by Perseus includes, among the eleven women monarchs, the evocative name of Penthesilea – the proud Amazon Queen – whose fame still resounds as leading figure amongst the Trojan army for her brave duel against Achilles; Artemisia, militant regent during the absence of her husband, and always celebrated for her chaste fidelity; the noble queen Boadicea, eulogized for the tenacious defence of her people's freedom in wartime; the bold Valasca, legendary queen of Bohemia, leading the rebellion of a triumphant female-only army against male unjust tyranny. The (pseudo)historical nature of their deeds precludes a restrictive reading of these figures limited to the allegorical dimension of masque: the evidence of narrated facts testifies to the eminence acquired by the queens, whose belligerent and androgynous spirit has bereft men of their typical sphere of rhetorical exercise in warfare (Lewalski 1993:37-39).

The sum of these exemplary queens is achieved by the twelfth one, Bel-Anna, the ultimate reference for all heroic queens, the all-embracing embodiment of womanly majesty epitomised in the actual uniqueness of the living Queen Anne, who here interprets herself as repository of female militant virtues and great contemporary myth – at James's expense, even when, 'far from self-love', she is described as honouring her husband's solar magnificence as primary dispenser of her radiant worth:

PERSEUS. These [*Queens*] in their lives, as fortunes, crowned
Of womankind, and 'gainst all opposite voice, [the choice
Made good to time, had, after death, the claim

To live eternized in the House of Fame.
Where hourly hearing (as, what there is old?)
The glories of Bel-Anna so well told,
Queen of the Ocean; how, that she alone
Possessed all virtues, for which one by one
They were so famed.

(*The Masque of Queens*, ll. 386-96) Jonson 1969: 136.ⁱ

After Perseus's announcement the last scene begins, during which the Queens proceed descending from the House of Fame to sanction directly their celebrative grandeur. They mount three chariots drawn by fanciful beasts and by the witches, now yoked to the service of the Amazon sovereigns, but taking part in the general revelling thanks to Bel-Anna's fascinating power, which seems here able to conflate into a single collective form the negative feminine, associated with these inoffensive witches, and the noble womanhood of warlike queens, by incorporating low class players of antimasque – still disguised as horrible hags – into the final dances without a hint of conflict or challenge (Tomlinson 2005:31-33). This inclusive instance of silent, and heterogeneous, sisterhood materialises into a theatrical vision the moving outcome of women's political agency in the masque, when all surface polarisations of femaleness are dissolved to allow the coexistence of disturbing factors coalesced against patriarchal conformism (Cf. Wynne-Davies 1992: 84-65; and Orgel 1990: 131-34, for an interpretation more in accordance with James's final (and fulfilled?) need of preponderance over womanly self-assertion, at the closure of this masque).

The suggestive import of transgression enacted previously by the witches does not disappear at last, but turns out to be inherent within the frame of heroic queenship which, on the other hand, has already displayed its predisposition to visual sensationalism through the conscious eroticism of the noble ladies' Amazon-like bodies, clad in see-through dresses embroidered with martial symbols.

It is interesting to discern in these masques the controversial position of Ben Jonson, a dramatist well-known for his misogynistic satire, and pressed at court between James's – who was anyhow his principal sponsor for those entertainments not organised by the queen consort – and Anne's concerns for theatrical control of masque content (and

styling). Jonson afterwards attempted an inconsistent policy of partial mediation to contain Anne's theatrical exuberance by suppressing some gendered elements that had seemed to him too conflictual during the performance to be tolerated again, especially in the published retrospective of these masques. His prevailing textual stratagem here consisted in subtly erasing part of the ladies' visual magnificence in order to endorse James's obscurantism about female worth.

As already said, being silent characters, the lady performers had to circumscribe all their signifying stances on the figurative plan. Yet, while masque-writers such as Daniel and Campion reserved detailed descriptions of rich costumes worn by gentlewomen during masques as organic to their solemnity – either textually in their authorial report of the show, or by the indirect accounts by speaking characters within the masque – Jonson put to silence these fashioned elements by employing only brief and deferred hints about the ladies' acting bodies or wardrobe, the extant information about which today is deduced mainly from Inigo Jones' graphic sketches or from the reports written by viewers who attended the performances. In place of women's meaningful clothes, Jonson's descriptive sections focus more on stage machinery, symbolical devices and allegorical tropes. This restrictive unease appears more problematic if we consider how much attention the Queen and her ladies devoted to selecting materials, garments, colours and the style of costumes to personify their figurative priorities onstage (McManus 2002:122-33).

What is more, a biographical and scholarly summary, with notable deeds and worth of the Amazon-like rulers in *The Masque of Queens*, is barely appended to the margin of the edited text in the form of erudite footnotes and glosses: in practice, during the performance, their heroic depth was only slightly – and intuitively – inferred by their legendary names, but no detailed allusion took place in the dramatic speeches. All the martial narrations related to their virtuous acts remained actually unbreathed and implicit during the staging, which rather relied on the audience's cultural background and swift aptitude in meta-historical associations.

For almost a decade Queen Anne's theatrical "alliance" with masque writers tried to resist a male form of despotism in taking over the management of court entertainment: yet, James's notorious homoerotical fondness for gentlemen highly skilled in dancing

represented a continuous threat for women's agency over dramatic spectacles. It is not a coincidence that the increasing influence of royal favourites over James, such as Robert Carr and George Villiers, contributed to gradually suppressing the presence of female performers within court masques. After 1612 the Banqueting House, as main location for court masques, became the sole property of a homosocial coterie celebrating the King's delight, whose emasculated priority took pains to remove from the Whitehall stage the masculinised and Amazonian valour of performing ladies, now displaced by the effeminised rule of the King's "pet" courtiers.

Queen Anne's gradual withdrawal from court entertainments proceeded parallel to the twilight of her political and cultural influence. Daniel's *Tethys' Festival* (1610) and Jonson's *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly* (1611), both patronised by Anne, still contain noble ladies as masquers: their main function in these spectacles, nevertheless, consists in honoring Prince Henry's official investiture into the world of adults, or in eulogising James's redeemed ability as ruler of his country (Butler 2008:36-37). The claim for womanly self-sufficient authority onstage was subordinated to the contingent (but illusory) sense of a united royal family.

Nevertheless, a few masques featuring noble ladies as performers were staged after Anne's climatic zenith, although, in these cases also, their topical pattern was not oriented to a militant *revanche* of female theatrical heroism. Thomas Campion in his *Lords' Masque* (1613) included eight female statues brought back to life by an almighty male *deus ex machina*, whereas Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, the Queen's chambermaid and performing lady in Anne's previous masques, paid homage to her – here remembered as Pallas again – through a masque written by Robert White and entitled *Cupid's Banishment* (1617). This spectacle, which emphasised the chaste beauty of gentle love, was exceptionally enacted by the students of the Ladies' Hall, in Deptford, generally considered the first girls' school in England: its staging took place at Greenwich Palace, the country residence of Queen Anne, a more informal and private location than Whitehall court, as an alternative site of factional authority dislocated from James's theatrical regimen of supervision. Probably *Cupid's Banishment* featured the first dramatic verses spoken in public by an English woman – Ann Watkins in the role of

Fortune (for an exhaustive study of *Cupid Banishment* related to Anne's involvement, see McManus 2002:188-201).

The same year Lady Lucy Hay proposed a *Masque of Amazons* – now lost – featuring a mainly female cast for James's court, but it was preventively censored so as not to alter the outline of new royal male-centric festivals, for which Jonson had to become the chief dramatist in the matter of court entertainments for all the remaining years of James's reign.

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