

TRANSFORMATIONS OF COURTLY ENTERTAINMENTS: RESTORATION ODES

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Court odes are one of Restoration musical-literary genres. As it seems to be customary with other kinds of literary output produced for the celebration of the court, these pieces have been neglected by contemporary criticism. A minor genre built on music and sycophantic texts, panegyrics and ephemeral, is now analysed in musicological terms only. In their time, however, court odes were regarded as innovative, although clearly associated to Jacobean, Caroline and French courtly pageantry and musical forms. An account of the development of the genre and of the multiple cultural influences it absorbs will help to place it in the context of Restoration England. On the basis of the frequent occurrence of the genre throughout the period, this paper seeks to study the composition and performance of these works in the light of the cultural politics of the new monarchy, i.e., their function as political vehicles to celebrate the restored court and monarch. By comparing this new type of pageantry to former early 17th-century court performances this analysis will try to demonstrate the experimental nature of the ode and, more generally, courtly entertainments, as well as their ability to transform and suit various cultural circumstances within the history of English monarchy.

The Restoration of English monarchy in 1660 introduced many important changes in the cultural system, both courtly and popular, of late seventeenth-century England. The reopening of theatres and the active dramatic life associated with it was but one of the transformations supported by the pleasure-seeking king. There appeared other minor dramatic genres which have been customarily neglected by modern criticism because of their dubious literary quality and extremely specific, at times unknown, context of production and performance. One of these was the court ode or song, a genre built on music and sycophantic texts, panegyric and ephemeral, written as a tribute to the king in three determined occasions: his birthday, 1st January, and his return to London after his annual autumn visits to Newmarket and Windsor.

The fact of being composed of music and poetry has resulted in a common interest of musicologists, who regard the ode as a small cantata, and has precluded the literary critics from studying it because of its musical nature¹. There is only one serious work on English court odes which is not exclusively musical, that of Rosamund McGuinness, though her approach is too formal and avoids a cultural analysis of the genre. She offers a rather tenuous definition of its textual component when she writes that they are “lyrical in expression, stately in structure, and serious in tone”, to conclude with “they have a considerable gnomic element, a prominence of myth, and an emotional unity” (McGuinness 1971: 2). Because of its sheer overgeneralization, this formal definition departs from the understanding of the ode as an important agent in the creation of a monarchical mythology. Its apparition in this particular period and its long existence throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries prove meaningful enough as to analyse these texts in terms of their quality as cultural vehicles of royalty.

According to McGuinness the origins of the ode can be traced back to the Jacobean period, when they originated in Ben Jonson’s ode *A New-yeares-Gift Sung to King Charles*, which was extracted from his masque *Pan’s Anniversary* written for King James I in 1620. Jonson’s composition of occasional poetry is not surprising, but his connection with the ode is closer than this almost anecdotal instance. In the context of Jacobean political propaganda, the odes composed by Jonson were similar in nature (sycophantic texts celebrating monarchic absolutism), though not in performance, to the fashionable masque. In this light, it seems more advisable to approach Restoration odes as the direct successors of the Jacobean and Caroline masques, rather than as original and innovative works based on them.

Thus, this paper aims at analysing the development of Jacobean courtly pageantry into the Restoration as a continuous movement, even without any gaps during the Interregnum. For that reason, instead of tracing with detail the likely formal antecedents of the ode, which has been successfully achieved by McGuinness, it is more necessary to find out the performance conditions and circumstances of court productions in both periods.

Most of the early seventeenth-century court productions were centred in the annual performances of masques: lavish entertainments where the courtiers and even the royal family took part as main actors. They all shared similar characteristics: a complex fable that supported a symbolic eulogy addressed to the king, which was accompanied by ritual dances, songs and revels. This form of celebration of royalty coexisted with minor productions reserved for either less powerful courtiers, or acted exclusively during some uncommon economic, political or simply practical circumstances, which limited the performance of an ordinary masque. Progresses, festivals and entertainments offered in private

1. Recently some articles have appeared dealing with either musical aspects of the genre or its literary and political dimensions within the cultural context of the Restoration: Adams, Walking, Spink.

houses and odes could be found among these pageants.

The radical changes brought about by the Commonwealth and, above all, the extinction of the very context of the royal court, cut off the natural development of these productions. A few of them continued to be performed during the Interregnum either in the houses of some members of the gentry or former courtiers, or in public hospitals and schools; all these supposedly 'illegal' performances set the mode of the forthcoming Restoration masques at court. Indeed, some of the most outstanding playwrights who wrote in the Interregnum, would continue their work into the Restoration: James Shirley, Richard Flecknoe and William Davenant among others. These variously called *Interregnum pieces* resembled the Jonsonian masque in their complex interaction of poetry, music and elaborate scenery, although the allusions to the king were, obviously, missing.² However, this trend was absorbed during the Restoration where the few plays called masques, even if they were performed by the royal family itself, did not spin around the figure of the king as the main compositional element in the fable. This short historical account of the evolution of early Stuart pageantry serves as a starting point to discern, by comparison, the situation of court performances after 1660.

Used to dramatic performances while in exile in France, Charles II had a determined and politically profitable love for theatre. The re-opening of the stage clearly proves that, but his interest in festivities and thirst for pleasure modified the royal demeanour expected in an anointed and sacred monarch. This shift in attitude reflected a clear metamorphosis both in his natural and his body politic. Contrary to all of his immediate predecessors, Charles did not hesitate to visit the public theatre that, though its audience was mainly composed of courtiers, provoked a humanisation and vulgarisation of the symbolic image of the king. He seldom attended his own theatre at court, the Cockpit-in Court, and undoubtedly preferred the public spaces. Nevertheless, as it was customary in the previous reigns of his father and grandfather, some of the plays acted at court were also performed in the public theatres. In any case, there existed a very specific arena devoted to the enactment of the theatricality of royalty, one of the mechanisms supporting the emblematic system of absolutist monarchy, that is, the space where the court reflected itself rhetorically. In the Restoration this is found in a few pieces written and acted for, at and, sometimes, by the court. Here two hybrid genres arise with some importance: the multifaceted reformed masque, which relied on poetry, stage machinery, dance and music, and the court ode, mostly composed of music and poetry.

The term *Restoration masque* presents a different definition from that of its antecedents. Whereas early Stuart masques were mostly performed at Whitehall, with the courtiers as actors and with the unavoidable presence of the king, those of the Restoration appear mainly in the dramatic operas and plays of the

2. Masques, moral representations, dramatic pieces or even operas, are but some of the titles Interregnum authors gave to their dramatic works. Cf. Dale B.J. Randall, especially chapter 9 on Mungel Masques, pp.157-183.

public stage, and in a few recorded works acted privately at court. Nicoll lists a small number of these pieces,³ though only two belong to the court: John Blow's *Venus & Adonis* and John Crowne's *Calisto*. *Venus & Adonis* is, in spite of its very title, an opera, and the reason why Blow called it a masque might be connected to its mythological plot and characters, rather similar to those of *Calisto*. The important difference lies, apart from the all-sung text of the former, in that the performers were the royal family and courtiers themselves. It seems that throughout the Restoration the genre of the masque implies a dramatic production, which involves any of the following: mythological characters, a heroic plot, highly formulaic language and music. The apparition of monarchs as main performers, the defining factor of all previous masques, is transformed into an accessory circumstance.

The fragmentary nature of the masque and its ability to stretch out of the limits of either literary genres or political and artistic spaces contrast with the more fixed ode. Recently, Andrew R. Walkling has considered that "during the Restoration, the strategies by which political messages were both concealed from and revealed to their audience became far more elaborate and complex than in earlier reigns" (Walkling 1995: 53). Although he only proves his statement with *Dido and Aeneas*, an opera which he defines as masque, he avoids other forms of political messages, such as the ode that stands for a more straightforward and evident herald of the crown's politics.

Although there are extant odes dating as early as 1660, those set to music by Henry Purcell will be analysed here. Purcell started his compositions in 1680, during Charles's reign, and kept his post as royal composer until his death in 1695, under William. His work as a musician has helped to gather about twenty-five odes, which stretch over the three reigns of the Restoration. The number of pieces written for each monarch varies. He wrote five welcome songs for Charles II, three for James II and six for Mary's birthdays. He never wrote the music for any New Year's ode, although he composed a few for Saint Cecilia's Day. In any case, those odes concerned with the monarchs seem more suitable for this study, since the New Year's odes are far more general and less sycophantic.

The texts of the odes share a varied stock of topics dealing with the monarch and England. Following the premises of epideictic discourse, and in McGuinness

3. In "Handlist of Restoration Plays" in *A History of English Drama*, Allardyce Nicoll introduces seven entries of masques. He does not distinguish between masques performed at court and at the public theatres, though this may be inferred from the fact that some of them are accompanied by the name of a play, which, obviously, contained it:

John Blow: *Venus & Adonis* (1680-7)

John Crowne: *Calisto* (1675)

John Dryden: *The Secular Masque*, in Vanbrugh's *The Pilgrim* (1700)

Sir Francis Fane: A masque made at the request of the late Earl of Rochester for the tragedy of *Valentinian* (1685).

P.A. Motteux: *The Loves of Mars and Venus*, acted with Ravenscroft's *The Anatomist* (1696).

Europe's revels for the Peace: Dialogue from *Post Boy* (1697).

Anon: *The Rape of Europe by Jupiter* (1694)

The Rectory (1673)

wording:

In all odes each monarch is THE ONE of whom the Delphic oracle and the Druids spoke. Each is divinely chosen; the Best, and in this sense, the FIRST; Perfection personified, possessing all virtues known to man. Each rules over ALL things, chief among them Nature, and all things of Nature pay tribute to each one. Each will be the most famous in times to come and therefore will, and indeed MUST, have eternal life [...] Each monarch is represented as a Father-figure and is more often than not identified with Caesar, Augustus, or Jove, and equated with the sun. (McGuinnes 1971: 64-5)

Examples of this complete stock of absolutist flattery can be found in all odes written for the three kings. Each of the two occasions involved in the odes, namely, the king's return to London and his birthday, are celebrated with several commonplaces. Far from the subtlety of Jacobean and Caroline masques, the monarch is addressed literally as the embodiment of all virtues and power. One commonplace not recorded by McGuinnes depicts the king as the foremost need of English people. In the ode written for James's birthday in 1687, *Sound the Trumpet, Beat the Drum*, the anonymous poet shows this need:

Let Caesar and Urania live,
 Let all delights the stars can give
 Upon the royal pair descend,
 Let discord to the shades be driven,
 While earth and sky our song attend,
 And thus our loyal vows ascend:
 O, O preserve them, Heaven!

Another common cliché in both birthday and welcome odes is the constant view of the restored monarchy as a fragile system, continuously threatened by rebellions, but fortunately in the hands of Charles, James and William who are its heavenly safeguards. In the same ode is written:

While Caesar like the morning star
 Our British sphere shall grace,
 No more alarms of rebel war
 Shall Albion's beauteous soil deface.
 His arms did first the rebel host confound,
 His godlike mercy next the conquest crowned.
 His fame, like incense, mounts the skies,
 While never, never more to rise
 Pride and Discord headlong go
 Down to the deep abyss below.

This apparent fragility functions as a poetic device to enhance the beneficial qualities of the monarchic regime, which elsewhere is metaphorically depicted as a Golden Age, the new Great Britain surpassing all nations. In 1682 another anonymous poet wrote a Welcome song for Charles II in which Britain's revived glory is asserted.

Ah! Had we, Sir, the power or art
 To grant the wishes of our heart,

Your long and glorious reign should be
 One entire piece of harmony.
 No day should an ill aspect wear,
 But, smooth as seas when calms appear,
 All hearts should smile as at that hour
 When you from exile blest our shore,
 And the ill omens o'er us placed
 Should vanish with the time that's past.
 Then would we conclude that our Isle, which of old
 Was the Fortunate called, had her name but foretold
 By some learned bard, who in times past foreknew
 How in ages to come she'd be happy in you.

Many other examples could offer similar accounts of the flattery and highly politicized contents of odes. On the basis of the frequent occurrence of the genre throughout the period, it appears that its ultimate aim lies in its success as informing the necessary existence of monarchy. Though many doubts have arisen about the actual performances and circumstances of their composition, the texts clearly signal their function as political vehicles to celebrate the restored court and monarch. In this sense, these works stand for new means of celebration within a long English tradition. It has been considered that the odes, as voices of royal propaganda, resembled those of the French court. But, as McGuinness puts it, “the writing of court odes was not simply a custom borrowed from the French court where Charles II was supposed to have heard and seen literary and musical forms glorifying Louis XIV” (McGuinness 1971: 2). Whatever French elements court odes may have, and these are more evident in the musical scores, they are typically English celebratory programmes, standing as the recipients of the traditional courtly festivities originated in the fifteenth century.

The celebration of monarchy becomes an essential issue in order to continue and support absolutism. However, both the historical and political events, which transform the politics of monarchy, as well as the changes in taste, are mirrored in court festivals. The ode glorifies the king in a way similar to the masque. But, in so far as the masque loses its celebratory capacity and is adopted as a public dramatic entertainment, there appears a vacuum in the machinery working to preserve the mythological and symbolic system of monarchy. During the Restoration the customary masque, which survives with similar splendour although without kingly referents, is replaced by the ode in this function. Nevertheless, the circumstances of the performance of court odes also varies greatly with those of early Stuart and even Restoration masques. This might reveal the minor involvement of the courtiers in them, which, on the other side, proves a practical issue. Lacking dances and symbolic acting, the odes require, more than any other court-biased production, only professional singers and musicians. The figure of the king is only needed as recipient of the celebratory discourse, but it is no more pivotal in the construction of the performance. These encomiastic addresses resemble the common trend of political texts in terms of their being complete and meaningful themselves. The references to the king are the *raison d'être* of their composition, but their performance is not necessarily linked to the

monarch's presence. The audience's expectations are fulfilled in the very verses of the odes which, besides, could be read as simple poetry independent of the musical score. Music seems to serve a two-fold function: it embellishes the poetry and, in a way, enhances its meaning; but, unlike in masques, its inclusion could be regarded as more incidental.

The metamorphosis of the Jonsonian masque into the ode illustrates the experimental and multiple nature of this kind of celebration. The comparison between this new type of pageantry with former early seventeenth-century court performances has tried to demonstrate how the ever-changing nature of the ode and, more generally, courtly entertainments, possesses an ability to transform itself and meet the needs of various cultural circumstances throughout the history of English monarchy.

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