James Knowles. *Politics and Political Culture in the Court Masque*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp vii, 288.

RICHARD ALLEN CAVE
Royal Holloway, U. of London

Early Theatre 19.1 (2016), 172–4
http://dx.doi.org/10.12745/et.19.1.2903

This monograph is a remarkable achievement both for the originality of its approach to the study of the masque and for the breadth of scholarship that is required to meet the demands of that approach. Investigations of the masque have proliferated in recent years but the focus of these volumes has tended to be specialized: the contribution of dance or of music and song; the poetics involved; scenic apparatus and the mechanics of staging. Essays have been devoted to ascertaining the political ideologies underlying particular examples of masque, and to studying these ideologies in their precise historical contexts. Knowles chooses to address the politics of masquing by examining how individual masques are situated by their authors and sponsors in relation to politically inflected aspects of culture at the time of composition. He argues that masques are politically multivalent and shows how this can be determined not only from literary aspects of the texts but also from the choice of venue for their presentation; the re-scripting that often accompanied repeat performances in different venues; the composition of audiences, where known; and the selection of performers for specific roles and of dancing partners, when required. Intertextuality abounds within the songs and dialogue of the masques, and one of the strengths of the study is Knowles's pursuit and interpretation of the many levels of cross-referencing that become apparent once one reads masques in relation to other current forms of political literature: private correspondence, tracts, libels, news culture, royal and parliamentary edicts, poetry, the increased publication of masque texts and their collection into private libraries, and, most importantly, the contemporaneous performance of masques by playwrights of differing ideological persuasions. In consequence, this becomes a profound study of reception, which challenges many orthodox assumptions that tend by comparison to pursue (on Knowles's showing) rather simplistic oppositions and binaries, where authoritarian pronouncements are seen as suppressing dissent and radical questioning, as the masque-proper radiantly eclipses the darker elements of the anti-masque.

Knowles argues cogently and persuasively that intertextual strategies, by giving space, playing-time, and a voice to opposing viewpoints on the nature and expected duties of the king and senior courtiers, were a means to give such viewpoints status whether within masque or anti-masque: these opposing viewpoints

enjoyed a definite hearing before audiences, thereby demonstrating that the issues presented in the masque were open to discussion. Masque in this interpretation becomes less a toy for regal delectation than a prompting to urgent debate. The range of materials currently available for that discussion is laid out to view for the perceptive spectator, even if the finished performance seemingly privileges one (kingly) view over the many. A spectator who had been subtly alerted to such complexity of perspectives on the central argument of a masque would in all likelihood respond to any flashy rhetorical triumphalism in its ending with an element of unease or dubiety, however conservative his or her personal values might be. Despite the pressures of the form seeking to impose the sense of a particular, ordained ending, an audience of *understanders* (to use Jonson's term for his ideal spectators) would clearly have experienced no such sense of absolute closure. Knowles interprets that tension rather as a product of the difficulty within court culture under both James and Charles of offering well-reasoned good counsel without being deemed impertinent, rude, and uncivil, or accused of offending codes of honour, courtesy, and obedience. Masquerado's observation at the start of *Love Restored* expresses the dilemma precisely: 'Though I dare not show my face, I can speak truth under a vizard' (4–5). Endings in this context are to be viewed repeatedly as canny negotiations between honesty and tact, given what Knowles demonstrates was a deep-seated uncertainty about the limits of free speech.

Knowles makes good his approach by studying in considerable detail a selection of texts and performances that relate to five major political disturbances within court culture: the libelling and demise of Cecil while attempting to mediate between king and parliament over royal finances and to determine what constituted sufficiency (*Love Restored* of 1612); the marriage of Robert Carr and Frances Howard and the intricately ambivalent sexual politics this fostered (*The Irish Masque; The Somerset Masque; The Challenge at Tilt;* and *Hymen's Triumph* of 1613–14); the advent of news culture and with it an increased potential for scurrility and sedition (*News from the New World in the Moon; The World Tossed at Tennis* of the early 1620s); George Villiers's meteoric rise to prominence through royal favour (*The Gypsies Metamorphosed* at Burley and at Windsor in 1621); and civil harmony versus martial preparedness (*The Triumph of Peace* in its two stagings in the Banqueting House and in Merchant Taylors' Hall in 1634). What emerges from these discussions is the growing sophistication of the masque as a form and as a performance text in incorporating an ever-increasing plurality of ideas, concepts, and ideologies as responses to a chosen theme. Reception for spectators seems continually to have involved sharpening their powers of discrimination to enable them (ideally) to take a wider, detached view of political circumstance that

avoided the biases of factional manoeuvring. This approach sees the masques as encouraging flexibility by promoting openness to changing modes of political awareness rather than threatening exclusion for failures in right-thinking (in both senses of the word 'right'). All this supposes audience members with a sufficiently quick intelligence to pick up intertextual allusions, some perhaps only fleetingly experienced in the lyrics to a song. This might have been a stumbling block for Knowles, but he takes care in each chapter to analyze the wealth of printed and widely circulated materials available to literate spectators that would seemingly have shaped (or at least coloured) contemporary responses to masques in performance. He interprets the masques as they might be viewed by *knowing* spectators and shows the form as respecting audiences' diverse political sensitivities even while proffering debate as a viable form of progress rather than protest.

A felicitous by-product of Knowles's approach is the light it sheds on Jonson's ability to re-shape masque form as he grew more familiar with its potential. Two examples must suffice here. *The Irish Masque* is quite stark in the requirements for its staging compared with many of its predecessors: there is no scenographic coup, and the climactic transformation here is a matter of changing attitude and effected as a willed choice on the part of the characters involved. *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* works to a similar scheme, but its agenda is more teasing and subversive, since one is left uncertain where the anti-masque ends and the masque proper begins or whether there is any significant distinction between those component elements. A change of costume reveals Buckingham's clan as the former gypsies, but are the courtly costumes the sum of the transcendence here? Are the performers always role-players whatever their exterior appearances, defined only by the material concupiscence that motivates their actions? To read Knowles's accounts of Jonson's works is to see the playwright interrogating a form he has largely created, often in response to rigorous and satirical dismantling of that form by the likes of Middleton, and pushing at the limits of its expressiveness, as if wrestling with the opposed demands of patronage and his own creative integrity. For Knowles, masque is to be seen as an expanding and expansive form in consequence of its engagement with the changing political culture of its time and its search for informed and intelligent debate. His conclusion is admirably substantiated by the foregoing analysis that the masques under review not only question 'the idealised consensus of Caroline culture' but suggest 'the subtle, suave, yet strong ways' to 'articulate difference and even dissent' (209).