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Theatre dance in the private and public domains of Stuart and Commonwealth London, 1625-1685

Anne Daye

Charles I and Charles II shared a love of drama and dance, and both used their position to encourage development in the theatre. As a result of very different political conditions, one pursued patronage within the private sphere of the court, while one collaborated with the public theatre. Although this sharp contrast was precipitated by the Civil War, it was also symptomatic of a shift in political and cultural life from the private domain of the seventeenth century into the public sphere of the eighteenth.

Charles I and Henrietta Maria

The court of Charles I was very sensitive to the distinctions of private and public. A court combines the functions of a private residence and a public resort, so that setting the boundaries between ready access to the person of the monarch and access limited to the select few is a crucial procedure. Charles had raised sensitivity by setting tighter parameters on this aspect of court protocol, and making access to the most private of the public rooms, the Privy Chamber, more restricted, whilst withdrawing behind locked doors into the Privy Lodgings beyond, to enjoy a private family life. While this may have suited him personally, it also served to heighten the mystique of the monarchy, and to render private access to his person a sought-after privilege.

As well as valuing the outward display of State magnificence, Charles and his consort Henrietta Maria demonstrated a genuine love of drama and dance. Their enjoyment of drama depended on the contribution of the public playhouses. Plays were selected from the repertoire of the companies enjoying their patronage for private command performances in one of the large halls of the palace. However, they both took a great interest in the public stage, befriending playwrights, discussing plots, and making occasional (very private) visits to performances in the most select playhouses. Charles pursued his interest to the extent of having a building at Whitehall converted by Inigo Jones into a court playhouse. This was the Cockpit-in-Court, which provided for the first time from 1630 a permanent auditorium and stage for plays only. Henrietta Maria's interests were more radical for the English court, as they led her to perform plays with her ladies. While these caused some concern, Charles minimised scandal by hedging such performances around with increased privacy, typified by limiting access severely and to mainly women, whilst ordering a long delay on the publication of the text to shield the performers from public scrutiny.

In contrast to the situation of drama, the court masque was the only independent dance theatre in existence, and was presented by the courtiers themselves. The central activity was the dancing in two or three specially choreographed figured entries by the most accomplished dancers, followed by the long episode of social dancing between the masquers and a select number of the audience, called the revels. A particular moral or general representation of harmony was proposed and accepted by these two activities. Such performances were possible because the occasion was only public within the privacy of the court. The invited audience comprised their peers, and the personal identity of the dancers was concealed behind the disguise of costume and vizard. Masquers were not required to make any mimetic actions like actors, so that the expression of an idea was conveyed through the group dance.

Throughout the reign, the courtly masquers headed by the king and queen retained their prerogative of dancing. This was despite the marked increase in the number and scope of antimasque entries by professional performers. Again, decorum protected the courtly dancers from the taint of the common players: the antimasquers never occupied the scene at the same time as the masquers, and probably performed on the stage only, placed at the lower end of the hall distant from the State. The group of noble masquers passed through the stage, descending to perform in the dancing space. However, while the antimasquers could not invade the realm of the masquer, and never mingled in the court entries, the noble dancers experimented with performing antimasque roles, albeit in separate entries from the professionals. These are a prominent feature of *Luminalia*, the queen's masque of 1638, marking an important shift of court sensibility.

Charles' investment in dance theatre was also demonstrated in a building project. It was his father who had ordered the construction of the Banqueting House as a permanent masque and ceremonial space. Its use had been compromised by the embellishment of the ceiling with the Rubens paintings in 1635. The solution was to build a wooden Masque House in the courtyard nearby on the same dimensions, to provide a theatre for dance only. This was used from 1638, and a few indications suggest that the seating and stage were left in place between performances.

Within the private domain of the court, innovation in drama and dance had taken place under the aegis of the king and queen: women had performed plays; the nobility had undertaken mimetic roles in antimasque entries; the dancing of the professional performers had been increased and extended in scope. Above all, the court had recognised that dance and drama were two independent arts worthy of the dignity of specialised performance spaces.

In the public playhouses, dancing was incidental to plays. There was no independent dance theatre and no sign of an organised profession of dancers. However, during the 1630s the quantity and scope of dancing increased, in step with the professional entries in the court masque. This expansion was entirely associated with the companies patronised by the royal family, the King's Men and Queen Henrietta's Men, who also provided the actors and dancers for the masques. The growth in the presentation of dance was a feature of the private playhouses rather than the public ones. The private playhouses were indoor theatres, charging higher prices to limit access, and seeking to attract a more genteel and exclusive clientele. The enrichment of performances with scenery, music and dancing modelled on court presentations was a key attraction.

Furthermore, this elite branch of the profession developed a masque genre of its own: the moral masque. While the first exemplars were devised in the 1620s, in the 1630s these had revivals alongside new texts. Moral masques were rare but special productions, and all enjoyed a marked degree of court patronage. Their tone and structure varied, but essentially they were a hybrid of the morality play and the masque, with more plot and dialogue than the court event, but enriched with song. Dance was not incidental, but a key part of the meaning, serving to embody and intensify the moral truth. Character and action dances occurred at a pivotal point in each Act, but then the final message was driven home in a serious but splendid figured dance. However, unlike in the court masque, the dancing throughout was presented by the professional players, either as mute dancers or as dancing actors. Thus, the professionals were able to develop a mastery of the noble entry, from which they were barred in the court masque. The moral masque provided a model for didactic dance entertainments in schools and colleges. One example was mounted in the Middle Temple in entertaining the Elector Palatine in 1635, during which the gentlemen members played both antimasque and main masque roles with pride.

As the 1630s drew to a close, there was clearly plenty of work for dance specialists within the companies of the private houses, arising from increased dance scenes in plays, the moral masques and the requirements of the court.

With the outbreak of civil war, the court dispersed and the theatres were closed. Developing initiatives in dance were suspended, while the dancers, both noble and common, followed the fortunes of war. With the resumption of government by the Commonwealth, the erstwhile private citizens now in power had to present a public face to the country and its allies. In May 1653, nine months before being declared Lord Protector, Cromwell entertained the Portuguese ambassador in pursuance of a peace treaty. To mark the importance of the occasion, Shirley's masque *Cupid and Death* was presented. The structure, didactic fable and dance content denote this a moral masque rather than an incomplete court masque. It was danced and acted by gentlemen, and arose out of Shirley's practice as a schoolmaster, rather than his career as a playwright.

Meanwhile the public drama continued clandestinely, despite the surveillance of the military power. In trying to restore a legitimate theatre, William Davenant realised that an educational agenda with an emphasis on music and dancing rather than text would be more congenial to the authorities. Using the shelter of the private houses, he first presented opera in 1656 and 1657; then two plays at the Cockpit in Drury Lane: *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* of 1658 and *Sir Francis Drake* in 1659. The didactic content of both showed the triumph of Protestant virtue over Catholic vice in one of the proudest periods for Protestant England. Dance entries were used to heighten the moral content, with a concluding Grand Dance to drive the message home.

Charles II

Charles II, during his exile in France and the Netherlands, was a witness to the ballet de cour as it took fresh energy from the young king Louis XIV. He accompanied his mother to see *Les Noces de Pelée et Thetis* in 1654, in which his sister Mary danced the role of the muse Erato, and his brother James danced the role of a Coral Fisher alongside Monsieur, the king's brother. He observed that the king took a variety of contrasting roles: Apollo, a Fury, a Dryad, an American Indian, and finally the epitome of War. He also saw the professional dancers, such as Beauchamp, join the king in the same entries. Despite mingling with professionals and adopting mimetic and grotesque roles, the king's status was enhanced in the eyes of the court by his dancing skills.

At the Restoration, Charles sought to re-establish the arts of music, drama and dancing in England, and to introduce as much of French culture as possible. He granted Davenant and Killigrew patents to open public theatres and form companies under the patronage of himself and his brother. Revived plays, new plays and incidental dancing were offered in the style of the former private houses. An extra zest was added to playgoing by the contribution of female performers, who replaced the boy actors with complete success. A close connection with the court was maintained for roughly a decade, the company members being liveried servants and also performing in the Cockpit-in-Court,

whilst the court violin band strengthened the music in the public playhouse. Amongst the revivals was Heywood's moral masque *Love's Mistress*, also known as *The Queen's Masque*, based on the story of Cupid and Psyche. This enjoyed several performances in the 1660s, attracting favourable comment from Pepys, and being described by an Italian visitor as 'a well-arranged ballet ... after the English manner ... ' (Hogan 1968, 347).

The restoration of the court dance culture was far more problematic. Not only had the War and Interregnum disrupted the practice of dancing, but the French style was new to England. Charles observed in despair in 1663 that there wasn't a single man capable of making an acceptable entrée. He hoped to make a start with the queen and her ladies, remembering the contribution of his mother to court dance, but made no significant headway. The scattered references to masques at court in the 1660s use the term loosely, as well as the terms 'masquerade' and 'ballet'. The little evidence available suggests that no true court masque comprising the three elements of antimasque by professionals followed by masque and revels by courtiers was mounted during the Restoration.

While skill may have been lacking, particularly amongst the gentlemen of quality, the greater problem was finance, as Charles was kept to a tight budget by Parliament. The Masque House, the dance space built by his father, had been dismantled by the Commonwealth government and the timbers sold off, to settle the king's debts.

The only significant dance work presented at court was the so-called masque *Calisto* of 1675. It was presented by the young daughters of James from his marriage to Anne Hyde assisted by ladies of varying quality and the Duke of Monmouth. A team of French dancers was also employed and Mr St André as choreographer. This entertainment was more a play with danced episodes, plus a dance Prologue, and lacked a revels section, hence resembling the moral masque of the 1630s. *Calisto* was a significant but costly enterprise, and one that Charles could not rise to again.

He had more success with patronage of dance in the theatres. In 1673 he encouraged the performance of the French opera *Ariane ou Le Mariage de Bacchus* at the Theatre Royal, with French dancers. This also served two purposes of his own: a celebration of the marriage of the Duke of York (the future James II) to Mary of Modena and the launch of the English Royal Academy of Music, which immediately sank without trace. The opera had a successful thirty-day run.

Meanwhile Charles continued to encourage theatrical entrepreneurs to introduce French opera to London. Shadwell, Dryden and Davenant combined to present *The Tempest* in 1674 with dance entries to enhance the plot. French dance rhythms of gavotte, courante, sarabande and minuet were employed. They followed this production with Shadwell's own interpretation of the *tragédie-lyrique Psyche*, using the French master St André to devise the dances. The king and court attended the first performance, while the second one was dedicated to the duke of Monmouth. John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* was presented to the king in the public theatre, also following the model of French opera enriched with dancing.

Charles' last venture in encouraging the dance theatre was *Albion and Albianus*, written to please him by Dryden. This was a celebration of Stuart power and its triumph over adverse forces, the two heroes figuring Charles and James. While described as a *tragédie en musique*, it has a strong resemblance to the moral masque in laying out the progress of a life of virtue. It combined vigorous dance scenes in the English style with French entrées. Thus, in Act 1 a dance of watermen in the liveries of the king and his brother was entirely reminiscent of antimasque dances, and in Act 3 a mocking dance of sectaries plotting against the king, falling into a fight and being defeated evoked the action dances of the 1630s. Sandwiched between them in Act 2 was a pure French section of danced chacons alternating with either a sung trio by two sea-nymphs and a triton or a full chorus. Charles gave his approval to the work in rehearsal, but sadly died before it was ready for the stage. Dryden presented an apotheosis of Albion to update the story, leaving England in the safe hands of Albianus. The final scene was set against a vista of Windsor Castle and employed 24 dancers as heroes in a dance to the full chorus, blending both English and French elements. Following the premiere at Dorset Garden, any hoped-for run was cut short by the outbreak of Monmouth's rebellion and the resurgence of anti-French feeling.

These varied entertainments of music, song and dance called masques or operas drew significantly on French models and had the support of French dancers. Yet the political climate readily became anti-Catholic and anti-French, which was not conducive to consistent development. French dancers did not linger in London, and they were probably too expensive a commodity to be retained. Little is known about English dance specialists, but common sense suggests that they would have experienced a similar fate during the War and Interregnum as their colleagues in music and acting, with dispersal and death taking their toll, and the training of youth interrupted. Even the youngest of them would have been in their fifties by this time. However, the strong thread of the moral masque and the English elements in these entertainments suggest some continuity between the dance theatre of Charles I and that of Charles II. Nevertheless, they now had to survive in the commercial environment of the playhouses, and once Charles and James had gone, royal patronage diminished markedly.

The failure to restore private court ballet undermined the prestige of stage-dance, and the English persisted in placing greater value on social dancing throughout the eighteenth century. Without

the model of the expressive court dancer, the stage dancer was considered low and common. When he danced in a grotesque vein, this was self-evident, and when he danced in a noble vein, he was aping his superiors and being disgustingly French. The severance between the two spheres also weakened the notion of dance's power in embodying moral truths. It seems that political events destroyed English theatre dance, and left it subservient to the spoken drama and opera and at risk of the vagaries of public taste.

Buildings for dance and drama

Nowhere is this more evident than in the buildings that have formed the background to this story. The two specialist spaces of Charles I's court, show the contrasting requirements of dance and drama, where the audience primarily went to hear a play and see a masque. The Masque House would have been fitted out as in the plans for *Florimène*, with a stage 27 feet deep and 40 feet wide, linked by steps to a dancing space of about 20 feet wide by 21 feet deep. The king's state was placed at the centre front of the seating. All members of the audience had a clear, if differing, view of the three-dimensional figured dances (Orgel & Strong 1973, 638-9). The Cockpit-in-Court had a demarcation between stage and auditorium, with a fairly shallow stage of 16 feet deep and 34 feet wide. The king's state was placed centrally, and the seats in front placed at angle so that no-one turned their back to him. This suggests a space for listening rather than viewing (Foakes 1985, 69). The stage of the Cockpit in Drury Lane, also called The Phoenix, was 23 feet wide by 15 feet deep, but had seating on both sides, so that a good view was obtained of any dance. The sense of an aristocratic auditorium was increased by placing the pit benches on a curve with a central gangway, leaving a clear view for a royal visitor seated in the centre of the gallery. For the select audience, this playhouse served both dance and text (Foakes 1985, 64).

The playhouses of the Restoration used a large proscenium stage instead of the dancing space. The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, designed by Wren in 1674, had a proscenium of approximately 20 feet in depth, fanning out to 20 feet in width. Most of the action took place here, in front of the proscenium arch, maintaining the same intimacy with the audience as in the earlier theatres. The space in front was now the pit, but the seats were covered in green baize, reminiscent of the dancing floor of the masque theatre (Leacroft 1988, 95). The subsequent history of theatre architecture concerns the slow retreat from the proscenium into the scenic stage. The loss to dance was noted by Colley Cibber in 1740, who pointed out that on such stages as Wren's Drury Lane, not only were the voice and facial expression better served, but that '... every grand Scene and Dance [was] more extended' (Leacroft 1988, 91). Theatre dance has never again been presented in a purpose-built three-dimensional space, but has adapted itself to the two-dimensional frames of drama and opera.

To conclude, the Civil War broke out at a critical time for theatre dance in England. The protection and resources of the private court entertainment had led to significant development up to 1640. This was matched by innovation and expansion in the private houses of the public theatres, with exemplars and patronage derived from the court. Given peace and modest prosperity, the two spheres would have come closer, to create a rich and lasting dance theatre culture, as they did in France in the 1640s and 1650s. As it was, court theatre dance could not be restored with the monarchy, and dance in the public theatres remained impoverished and marginalised for three centuries.

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