

Jonson, Ben: Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue

(1618)

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Genre: Masque, Play. Country: England.

Ben Jonson's masque

Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue

was first staged before King James I in the Banqueting House of Whitehall Palace on 6 January 1618. The event marked the acting debut of Prince Charles (the future Charles I), who also served as the masque's official sponsor. The performance famously failed to impress King James. Jonson composed the text and Inigo Jones designed the scenery and costumes.

The scenic design is dominated by an anthropomorphic Mount Atlas, made to resemble the head of a grey-haired man. The action opens with Comus, the god of festivities, entering surrounded by his supporters. This is followed by the first anti-masque, which features dancing bottles and a cask. Hercules, the demigod and hero of many ancient legends, appears and denounces the decadent spectacle, but soon falls asleep. Pigmies dance in the subsequent anti-masque and eventually wake Hercules up. This sequence symbolizes the dilemma faced by Hercules as he is being pulled in opposite directions by the contrary forces of pleasure and virtue. To underscore the masque's central conflict, pleasure and virtue appear after the first anti-masque as allegorical figures seated by Mount Atlas. Subsequently, Mercury enters and informs Hercules that pleasure and virtue can in fact be reconciled; he will show him how this is done through twelve princes, whom "Virtue brings forth" (270) and "trusts with pleasure" (271). It is also revealed that one of these princes will be Prince Charles

himself:

One and chief of whom
Of the bright race of Hesperus is come,
Who shall in time the same that he is be
And now is only a less light than he. (270-71)

The masque proper then opens with the twelve princes emerging from the top of Mount Atlas, guided by Daedalus, the architect of the legendary Minoan labyrinth. Daedalus sings three songs, which describe the reconciliation of pleasure with virtue as both an intellectually and physically challenging task, akin to solving an intricate labyrinth or performing a complicated dance. One of the songs informs the dancers that since “all actions of mankind / Are but a labyrinth or maze”, they should let their dances “be entwined” (272). But Daedalus also adds the qualification that the dance should not be so complicated as to confuse the audience, telling them “Yet not perplex men [who] unto gaze,”

For dancing is an exercise
Not only shows the mover’s wit,
But maketh the beholder wise,
As he hath power to rise to it. (272-73)

Daedalus’s songs are followed by the revels portion of the masque, in which some of the spectators would have joined. The show concludes with a song by Mercury, who reiterates the importance of virtue in the final lines:

Strive to keep her [virtue] your own;
‘Tis only she can make you great,
Though place here make you known. (276)

According to Orazio Busino’s first-hand account of the masque’s initial performance, King James at one point

lashed out at the tired masquers for pausing. The King's current favorite, the Duke of Buckingham (George Villiers), leapt onto the dance floor and performed a series of impressive dances, which apparently appeased the irate monarch. Negative reactions to the performance from a number of other spectators survive, labelling both the original show and the revised version as dull, underwhelming, and even farcical. Due to budgetary constraints, the costumes, sets, and special effects were less spectacular than those in earlier collaborations between Jonson and Jones. It is also likely that some read the masque's allegory as an inappropriate critique of King James's hedonism and of the excesses of the Jacobean court in general. Prince Charles's appearance in both performances nonetheless received a positive response.

Because Queen Anne was too ill to attend the original show, Jonson was asked to rewrite it and stage the new version on 17 February 1618. The revision featured a new anti-masque entitled *For the Honour of Wales*. This version replaces the two anti-masques with a single anti-masque featuring a group of Welsh visitors to the court (Griffith, Jenkin, Evan, Howell, Rhys, as well as two unnamed women) and the Welsh mountain Craig Eryri (Mount Snowdon) in place of the Libyan Atlas. In contrast to the visually-oriented presentation of bottles, casks, and pigmies, the new anti-masque relies mainly on dialogue and song to enact the move from chaos to order customary in the genre. The Welsh protagonists start out by denigrating the exoticism of the previous version's two anti-masques and then move on to an extended celebration of Wales, including the country's geography, history, culture, and agricultural output. They speak and sing mostly in a Welsh dialect of English, with a small number of interpolated lines in Welsh. Although three of the Welshmen are explicitly identified as gentlemen, all the Welsh characters are scripted as clown-like figures with a penchant for using slapstick

humor, hyperbole, and malapropisms.

Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue was first published in the so-called second folio of the *Workes of Benjamin Jonson* (1641); *For the Honour of Wales* appears in the same volume as a separate masque. Both texts also survive in manuscript form, specifically in the Chatsworth Manuscript, which was transcribed in 1618 by Ralph Crane for Sir Dudley Carleton, probably from a copy owned by the King's Men. This manuscript (or another version, now lost) provided a source for John Milton's masque *Comus* (1634). A detailed eyewitness account of the first performance of *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* is recorded in Orazio Busino's letters (an English translation of the Italian original is available in *The Calendar of Venetian State Papers*, xv, pp. 111-14, and has been frequently excerpted elsewhere).

Two drawings by Inigo Jones based on the original performances survive: one depicting *Comus* with this train of followers and the other showing two Welsh dancers from the revised anti-masque. Their reproductions are available in Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, eds. *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*. Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973 (pp. 276, 284-85).

Works Cited:

Orgel, Stephen, ed. *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975