

Shohet, Lauren. *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. xii, 288 pp. \$99.00.

Stuart court masques became an object of intense interest to scholars of British Renaissance literature in the early 1970s, inflected by New Historicist assumptions about courtly and monarchical assertions of power. More recently, as Lauren Shohet notes, masque scholarship has taken a “revisionist turn” by exploring a wider range of masque venues, patrons and interests served, and political and factional investments articulated, than the former view of the genre as “monolithically royalist” allowed (4). However, like the original New Historicist work, revisionist studies had concentrated on the intentions of the patrons and producers of masques, and the form and contexts of performance. Shohet is the first to examine seventeenth-century masques from the standpoint of reception studies, asking not what “masque patrons and producers might *want* from masques,” but “what audiences and readers can *take* from them” (5).

Her examination of masques in print and of accounts and adaptations of masques in newsletters, ballads, and plays in the public theaters greatly expands our sense of the possible uses of masques and the range of audiences they would have reached. She explores print traces of masque productions beyond the published texts, including reports of the spectacle and other paratextual materials, such as circulation of lists of participants and reports in letters and diaries. She undertakes to extend our sense of the lifespan of the genre, from experiments during the Protectorate through Carolean productions up to John Dryden’s *Secular Masque*.

One axiom of her approach is Roger Chartier’s assertion that “even in politically constrained societies, ‘principles of coherence [are] far from being brutally dictated’” (8). This axiom reminds us that whatever the masque producers may have intended to convey, audiences and readers--particularly, it would seem, readers not part of the original audience, whether in a court or in another context--might exercise considerable freedom in interpreting and using the masque reports or texts they received. Shohet’s Chapter 1, “The Horizons of the Masque,” complicates our sense of the masque’s venues, kinds, intertextual dialogues, and possibilities for contestatory interpretation. James Shirley’s *The Triumph of Peace* affords what Shohet calls “a suggestive palimpsest for reception-oriented critical practice” (67). It was performed twice, first at court, then in the City, at the Merchant Taylors’ Hall, “extending the masquing space” even further by a “progress” of both the antimasquers and the masquers through the public streets (71). If no simple explanation of the seemingly disparate venues, contemporary assessments of purposes, and interpretations is possible, the reception record of Shirley’s piece demonstrates that “The Horizons of the Masque” are broader and more complex than most critics have allowed.

Shohet recognizes that we must sometimes rely on inferences and speculation about motives and purposes, based on slender, ambiguous, or contradictory historical facts and evidence. But even if, as in the case of *The Triumph of Peace*, the comparison of the strands of historical evidence simply leaves us with a much more complicated puzzle, Shohet’s study makes a strong case for examining “the notion of *reception* as a locus . . . situated in history, but not completely or reductively determined by history--where meanings are made” (10).

Shohet’s second chapter, “Reading,” is both the most original and solidly argued and the one most students of reception theory will want to turn to. If the first component of reception study is the tangible form in which texts reach readers or audiences, this chapter brings together a remarkable survey of primary and secondary sources in support of broad and original conclusions. Shohet surveys the ways in which knowledge of masques was disseminated, the

cost and wide-spread availability of printed texts “bridg[ing] elite and popular audiences,” the records of ownership of masques, the roles of print and manuscript circulation, and the length and breadth of public interest in specific masques. She addresses the problems of cataloguing so-called “ephemera” and the difficulties presented by the sparseness of marginalia in masque texts. Shohet’s considerable expansion of our sense of the available evidence and the variety and size of the readership for masques conduces to the subsequent reflections on “Readers as Interlocutors and Users,” “Implied Readers” as deduced from prefaces and authorial marginalia, and “Thematizing Reading”--that is, explicit acknowledgment in printed masque texts that the experience of reading the text in privacy is different from witnessing the public spectacle, but in some respects perhaps superior, allowing “private evaluative scrutiny,” reflection, rereading, and the opportunity to “‘dwell and converse’ with the text” (115). However, Shohet cautions that these “traces indicat[ing] multiple modes of encounter . . . cannot definitively delimit what past readers actually made of what they read” (119). Material presentation does not automatically produce an authorially desired response in the reader; readers do not simply “[submit] to textual machinery” (119-120).

Having thus opened up the possibility of subversive readings of masque texts against the manifest intentions of the patrons and scriptors, Shohet moves into a phase of her argument presided over by Jurgen Habermas’s concept of an emergent public sphere. Her examination of the uses of masques focuses on politics and the public sphere in Chapter 3, “Interpreting,” which examines how masques and their printed traces present “readable moments” in historical time by “juxtapositions of assertions, figurations, and contexts” (126), as well as Chapter 4, “The Masque and the News,” and Chapter 5, “Politics, Epistemology, and Public Theater.”

Some of the least satisfactory treatments in the book arise from attempts to present sophisticated challenges to simplistic absolutist interpretations. The examination of the radically different subtexts invoked by different recent critics of Ben Jonson’s *Irish Masque at Court* amply demonstrates the difficulty of prioritizing which of several competing, possible historical political contexts and topical controversies should ground an interpretation of the masque’s “meaning” for its original audience and readers. However, Shohet’s claim that the printed Irish dialect of the published text inverts the masque’s display of English mastery over the Irish, forcing the English reader to “submit” to the “discipline” of mastering “an alternative linguistic system” (138) seems a sophistication beyond the “horizon of expectations” of seventeenth-century English readers. Equally extreme is the claim that Jonson’s transcription of Anglo-Irish serves (paradoxically) by its contrast to stabilize English. The explorations of Derridean metonymy and *supplément* in this chapter seem tangential to the solid reception-oriented study of historical contexts and material mediations that are Shohet’s most valuable contributions in other parts of the book.

Drawing on the increasing scholarly interest in the rise of news media in seventeenth-century England, Shohet argues that this role of news, including news of masques, constituted “an essential component of the public sphere” (155). Most important, the widespread avid collection of reports and texts of masques suggests that “when masques encoded political information . . . non-courtly audiences [were] sufficiently in the know to decipher it” (168). Against Habermas’s view that Enlightenment philosophy and bourgeois civic structures like coffee houses were necessary pre-conditions for the emergence of a public sphere, *Reading Masques*, by using reception studies to “examin[e] the question of public culture from the bottom up, rather than from the top down,” provides a great deal of evidence of an earlier “‘invention’ of public opinion as a political force” (186).

The illustration of the emergence of public culture dominates the argument of Chapter 5, which seems more diffuse and less tightly argued than earlier sections, perhaps because the genre and its uses are mutating. Her emphasis here falls on “oppositional masques”: “Watching or reading a masque becomes an opportunity to anatomize the tools of power and representation alike,” she insists (206). The material covered in this last chapter presents particularly interesting examples of “residual and emergent models,” both generically and politically. The discussion of masques by James Shirley published in 1646 as part of a collection of Shirley’s poetical works implicitly raises a question about who bought these octavos, but Shohet does not attempt an answer. Instead she explores the ways John Crowne’s *Calisto* (1675) and Dryden’s *Albion and Albanus* (1671 and 1675) and *A Secular Masque* (1700) illustrate “the stutters in nomenclature that cast evolving late masques as failed early operas” (232) and raise questions of canon formation and the refusal of chronologically transitional works to conform to conveniently defined generic models and markers, pointedly illustrated by the adaptation of masques and masque conventions in public theater plays, including many much-decried Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare.

Shohet’s extensively researched and wide-ranging reception study is more valuable in its broader conclusions about the dissemination and uses of masque texts and reports than in some of its oddly selected close readings. However, despite some diffuseness of focus, her book amply illustrates its claim that “masques exceed their moments of origin” and “persist as circulating, usable entities, whether in print, in revival, or as a source for adaptation,” thereby operating as “a medium of full historical participation” (242).

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