

TRANSGRESSIVE TITTIES:  
FEMALE EXPRESSION AND TRANSGRESSION IN THE  
JACOBAN COURT MASQUE

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In 1512, at the court of Henry VIII, courtiers and the King performed, in disguise, in a spectacle, that was described as “after the manner of Italie, called a Maske, a thyng not seen afore in Englande” (qtd. Parry 196). The masque had no dramatic plot, but included choreographed dance, spoken verse, and music intended to celebrate the monarchy. Theatrical entertainments at court continued under Elizabeth I, though she preferred the professional theatre of London. Under the English reign of James I, the court masque flourished into a lavish, expensive spectacle performed during times of festivity. James occupied a passive role as spectator, while his consort, Queen Anna of Denmark, acted as the leading performer, commissioner, and producer. In Early Modern England, women were forbidden from performing onstage in professional theatre. However, Anna and her ladies enjoyed leading roles in the court masques.

The Jacobean court entertainments were “actively femino-centric,” displaying a shift from the monarch as patron (as in the Elizabethan period) to the consort as patron (Butler 130). The “substitution of queenly for kingly authority” indicates Anna’s extraordinary power over the court masque (Curran 132). Because James I did not perform, Anna embodied monarchical power on stage, allowing the masques to be “usurped by the women” (Butler 133). These performances, isolated in the royal court, allowed “privileged spaces where new kinds of female agency could be developed” (Butler 130). After witnessing a court masque, the Venetian Ambassador wrote in 1608: “so well composed and ordered was it all that it is evident the mind of her Majesty, the authoress of the whole” (qtd. Pilhuj 30-31). Anna’s agency in the production of these masques is also evident in writing by designer Inigo Jones and playwright Ben Jonson. Jones and Jonson were commissioned many times by Anna; each expressed a willingness to please her Majesty, promising to alter their work at her request. The masques were heavily

focused on movement and less on spoken verse, giving the emphasis to the courtly women's silent presence on stage. Alongside professional male actors who spoke the text, the Queen and her ladies danced silently in lavishly designed costumes, often exposing their breasts. Much recent scholarship examines Queen Anna's transgressive role in the Jacobean court masque, which she often utilized for her own political agenda. For this presentation, I will focus on the presence of the naked female breast as the embodiment of female expression and transgression in the court masques. I will argue that the act of exposing the breasts was an example of Early Modern proto-feminism, resulting in a uniquely transgressive expression of the female soul through the female body.

Of course, Queen Anna was not the first to exhibit female authority. In fact, Anna derived much of her power from the Elizabeth I. In *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, Clare McManus extensively examines Queen Anna's transgressive role in courtly performance. According to McManus, Queen Anna reused Elizabeth's old clothing, a common practice for royalty, as a conscious assertion of her "status as Elizabeth's heir" (107). Costumes constituted a powerful sign system and the courtly audience would have recognized Anna's metaphorical transfer of female power from Elizabeth I through costume (107-108). Early Modern scholar, Anne Hollander, classifies costumes as either dramatic or theatrical: the dramatic costume "transforms performer into character," while the theatrical costume "expands a performer's own self" (qtd. Ravelhofer 170). Because court masques did not rely on a dramatic plot, the costumes revealing the breasts mainly functioned as theatrical costumes by highlighting the presence of the female performers. Anna's ladies were said to be very spirited and assertive themselves, especially Anna's closest friend, Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford (Parry 200; Butler 33). The

extraordinary female agency Anna and her ladies exhibited is documented and also seen in the court masques.

While Anna continued the tradition of female power, her body as Queen consort possessed a different function than Elizabeth's body as Queen regnant. As Queen consort, Anna was responsible for "providing heirs to the nation," a more corporeal responsibility than Elizabeth I's divine sovereignty (McManus 110). In Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* in 1605, Anna danced pregnant with blackened skin, her breasts visible under sheer gauze. Anna's performance, aided by her theatrical costumes, emphasized her fertile body. The celebration of her fertility also suggested a transgressive, exotic female sexuality (McManus 11).

Early Modern women's bodies were subject to censorship, including the covering of the legs—bare legs signified masculinity as strongly as facial hair (Ravelhofer 179). Visible limbs of women were considered a usurpation of and threat to masculine power. Queen Anna and her ladies' costumes often exposed their ankles, which would have been more scandalous than the exposure of their breasts. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century treatise, *On Wifely Duties*, Francesco Barbaro articulates the perceived threat of the female body and voice: "It is proper [...] that not only arms but indeed also speech of women never be made public; for the speech of a noble woman can be no less dangerous than the nakedness of the limbs" (qtd. McManus 6). While female shoulders, ankles, legs, and voice were often restricted, the baring of breasts did not pose a threat to masculine power, as they signified a uniquely feminine function.

Extremely deep necklines were fashionable in the Elizabethan and Jacobean court and noble women's breasts were often exposed in isolated contexts as a symbol of fertility (Jones 42). This fashion translated to the court masque as well, evident in the costume designs by Inigo Jones. However, the display of the female breast always possessed a potential eroticism. Only

when displaying youth or fertility was the visibility of noble breasts considered virtuous and acceptable (Jones 45). “The fidelity and fertility of women were all political concerns” in an era that producing an heir was a primary concern for the stability of a new British monarchy (now governing England, Scotland, and Ireland) (Gowing 814). Interestingly, while the breast signified fertility, noble women rarely breastfed their own children (Yalom 85). However, Anna once wrote, “Will I let my child, the child of the king, suck the milk of a subject and mingle the royal blood with the blood of a servant?” (Yalom 85). Anna and many other noble women argued for breastfeeding, asserting the female body’s power, reclaiming the breast’s function, and exemplifying a proto-feminist attitude toward the female body. While courtly social codes carefully restricted women’s bodies, the breast was a loophole because only women possessed breasts, which were not considered a threat to masculine power. Yet, female representation in the Jacobean court masque demonstrates the powerful transgressive expression possible through the open breast.

The Renaissance began to overshadow the maternal representations of the breast with eroticism, due to the prevalence of the male perspective in art (78). However, evident in writing by women, Early Modern women considered their breast the locus of their spirit, a function beyond the maternal or erotic. Elizabeth I’s poems equate her breast with the heart, “offering an internal and emotional, rather than external and sensual, view” of the breast (Yalom 83). Despite male imposed eroticization, breasts signified for women inner emotion and spirit. Therefore, the exposure of the breast is empowering if the expression was by a woman. Queen Anna’s documented authority renders the court masque an empowering female expression, with the open breast as a tool for asserting and redefining feminine agency in the Jacobean court.

Indeed, anxiety over the exposure of the female breast existed. While allowed as a virtuous representation, it also risked signifying a threatening female sexuality. Yet, the display of noble breasts under certain circumstances was accepted and the English nobility were largely “indifferent to the topic of cleavage” (Ravelhofer 173). Many firsthand accounts by men at court refer to the bare breasts of Anna and her ladies (McManus 127). Venetian chaplain Buzio Orsino wrote of Anna’s “bosom bare down to the pit of her stomach” (qtd. McManus 127). Sir Dudley Carleton said of the female masquers’ costumes in the *Masque of Blackness*: “Their Apparell was rich but too light and Curtizan-like for such great ones” (qtd. 1). Patrick Hannay, a commoner, expressed surprise at seeing Anna’s “large, low, open breast,/ Full, white, round, swelling, azure vain’d” (qtd. 130). These descriptions suggest the potential reception of the open breast as an erotic display. Yet, the context of the isolated performance by nobility for nobility allowed for the exposure of the breast.

Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens*, performed at Whitehall under commission by Queen Anna in 1609, exemplifies the transgressive power exerted by Anna and demonstrates the potency of the naked breast in the court masque. In his Preface to *Queens*, Ben Jonson describes Anna’s request for a “foil or false Masque,” resulting in his creation of a “spectacle of strangeness,” to contrast the ladies’ performance (Jonson 345). The spectacle depicts “hags and witches,” representing various vices, falling into a “magical Dance, full of preposterous change, and gesticulation” (350).

Interrupting the witches’ grotesque dance, music introduces the entrance of the *House of Fame*, a scenic element designed by Inigo Jones, occupied by the twelve Queens. In Jonson’s extensive footnotes, he explains the preceding vices are born out of goodly values represented by the twelve Queens. This demonstrates the duality of femininity, potentially being both virtuous

and sinful. The virtuous Queens transplanted from the past and foreign lands, portrayed by Anna and her ladies, are introduced by a male actor:

“*Penthesilea*, the brave Amazon, Swift-foot *Camilla*, Queen of Volscia, Victorious *Thomyris* of Scythia, chaste *Artemisia* the Carian Dame, And fair-hair'd *Beronice*, Ægypt's fame, *Hypsicratea*, Glory of Asia, *Candace*, Pride of Æthiopia, the Britain honour, *Voadicea*, The vertuous Palmyrene, *Zenobia*, The wise and warlike Goth, *Amalasunta*, And bold *Valasca*, of Bohemia” (Jonson 351).

These are renderings of Inigo Jones' costume designs for *Masque of Queens*. It should be noted that not all of Jones' designs for this masque include exposed breasts and no full costume design labelled as Queen Anna's survives, though from these renderings we get a sense of what Anna may have worn. Ben Jonson describes the queens in detail in the text, but the record of the performers' physical bodies exist only in Jones' costume designs. It seems Jonson's omission of descriptions of the women's performances indicates “an anxiety over the relationship of the female body to performance” (McManus 113). Nevertheless, evident in Jones' costume designs, the female masquers confidently exude a militaristic spirit usually equated with noble masculinity. Contrasted with the masculine stances and hard edges of the corsets, the floating softness of the fabric and the visible breasts exhibited the tension between duality of transgressive feminine spirit and traditional feminine virtue. Anna clearly desired her ladies to embody a transgressive, militaristic, queenly identity through their costumes in order to match their characters. As discussed before, the costumes' theatrical function highlighted the performer's self, but the dramatic function of these designs also effectively transformed the performer into character.

Through Jones' costumes, each Queen exemplifies feminine heroism and sovereignty. In the longer version of this paper, I provide close readings of each Queen and her costume, though for now I will focus on two. Jonson describes *Penthesilea*, performed by the Countess of

Bedford, as “Queen of the *Amazons* [...] present, at the War of *Troy* on their part, against the *Greeks*” (352). Penthesilea’s masculine stance, helmet, and breastplate place her in a masculine role, contrasted by the visibility of her breast. Jonson describes Artemisia as “the Queen of Caria [...] a Woman, a Queen, without a Husband,” who “embarked” on a war, “occasion’d by no necessity, but a meer excellence of spirit” (Jonson 352). An especially transgressive figure, Artemisia is unattached to a King, displaying a masculine aptitude for governance and desire for war in her own right.

The celebration of each Queen’s spirit, sovereignty, and legacy, concludes with the fictional queen, Bel-Anna, played by Queen Anna. Jonson writes: “The twelv’t’h, and worthy *Sovereign* of all, I make *Bel-Anna*, Royal *Queen* of the *Ocean*; of whose dignity and person, the whole *Scope* of the *Invention* doth speak throughout” (353). In the text, Jonson acknowledges the audience’s potential question: how can these Queens, separated by time and place, convene in the theatrical space to “join the living with the dead?” (353). Jonson answers with: “Nothing is more proper; Nothing more natural. For these all live; and together, in their *Fame*; so I do present them.” Anna found it natural and fitting to gather eleven renowned Queens in order to celebrate a tradition of powerful, female monarchs— the epitome of all of them was Bel-Anna, “Royal Queen of the Ocean.” This is the only surviving rendering of Anna’s costume for this masque. This ornate headdress probably would have made her the tallest queen, judging by the other costumes.

Following the Queens’ entrance, the masquers then danced “with no less spirits, than of those [Queens] they personated” (353). According to Jonson, the dance spanned “almost the space of an hour,” as the women invited men from the audience to join in their dance (353). As the masque emphasized movement over spoken word, the agency of the female performers was



elevated through their movement, despite their silence. Their movement created what Clare McManus refers to as a “physicalization of language” through dancing (119). Sarah E. Johnson further explores the “Early Modern view of dance as a form of rhetoric” in her article “The Female Body as Soul in Queen Anna’s Masques” (357). In the court masque, the rhetoric of dance was more potent than the spoken text. Johnson argues the female masquers subverted the traditional “body-soul divide” between the genders through movement. Traditionally, women possessed the body for producing heirs; men possessed the soul capable of thought and expression (364-365). Johnson argues female masquers occupied the expressive role of the soul through movement, usurping that role from men.

What resulted was a female representation more complex than mere virtue or vice, celebrating “intellect, prowess, and agency” and collapsing the “body-soul hierarchy” according to Johnson (Johnson 371). The female presence onstage was intended to highlight fertility and “simplify” the physicality of the female body, but this goal failed (16). Instead, what resulted was a tension-filled, transgressive performance, destabilizing gender roles in court by allowing female expression. Because, as I have argued, the female breast signified both the fertile corporeality and inner spirit, the naked breast in fact goes beyond collapsing the divide and fusing the female body and soul together. This complex female representation allowed women to express through performance the body and soul, an example of early feminism indeed.

Transgressive female performance in *The Masque of Queens* demonstrates the fusing of the female body with the female soul. Female expression through performance continued to grow, resulting in the first English female actor, Ann Watkins, speaking text in a court masque in 1617 (McManus 182). Queen Anna’s successor, Queen Henrietta Maria of France, exerted the same authority over the Caroline masques. During the reign of Charles I, female expression in

the court masque strengthened, including both movement and speech (Ravelhofer 178). Queen Henrietta Maria was also subject to criticism for her performance in and expenditures on the court masques: William Prynne condemned “women-actors – notorious whores” in his 1633 tract *Histriomastix* (qtd. McManus 209). Yet, the female transgression would eventually result in professional women actors on the public stage after the English Restoration (Butler 130). While the expenditures for courtly entertainments factored into the removal of the monarchy in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, these notorious whores and their breasts successfully transgressed traditional gender boundaries of artistic expression.

THANK YOU

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